

one.

The first time Joel Benjamin had sex with a man, he expected it to leave a permanent mark, something he could point to years later—like a scar, or a tattoo—and recount how he'd gotten it and who'd given it to him. He was twenty-five years old when it happened in the fall of 1985 at the NCTE Convention in Philadelphia. In the middle of it that first time, he'd thought he would never forget even the tiniest detail: not the stiffness of the hotel sheets or the woodsy smell of the other man's skin and hair, the way his mouth tasted like the beer he'd drunk, mixed with something sweet, or how he wanted to trace designs and connect the moles across the other man's chest and shoulders.

His memory of that man, Dwight, remained untarnished by time: Marlboro Man good looks, tall and well-built, almost athletically so, which struck Joel as odd for an English professor. Dwight spoke first, to ask if Joel followed the Mets, and Joel stammered a polite response that wouldn't insult the guy asking, but that made it clear he knew nothing about baseball. To his relief, Dwight confessed he didn't really follow baseball either, he was just trying to strike up a conversation. Then they laughed and glanced from one another to their beers and back again. "I'm in town for the English teachers' convention," Joel confessed.

"Same here," Dwight said.

They sat at the bar and talked until it was obvious the bartender wanted them to pay and leave so she could close down. They argued over who would pay. Joel insisted, and Dwight relented, then suggested they go to a place he knew. Something about those words, the way Dwight said them, touched something in Joel and for the briefest of instants he was afraid. Not for his life, but the way Dwight whispered it—*"this place I know"*—sent a signal to his brain that felt like premonition. He searched his mind for a reason he couldn't go—he was tired, he needed to call his wife, anything. Dwight insisted, and he wasn't rude about it, so in the end they went. It was close enough that they walked, and when they arrived, Joel would have been unaware of its existence had there not been a drag queen standing at the door checking IDs.

A curious lump of dread settled in Joel's belly as she gave their IDs a cursory glance and waved them through. A gay bar. Dwight had brought him to a gay bar, and as he stood so his eyes could get accustomed to the dimness, he tried to decide how offended he was. Who the hell was this guy? What the hell was he trying to say, bringing Joel to a place like this? Hadn't they just spent over two hours talking about their wives, their kids, and all the other stuff married men talk about when they get together in hotel bars away from home? Then Dwight handed him a beer, smiled and winked, and Joel relaxed. They were in this together, that wink said: two men trapped in unsatisfying marriages who had traveled—Joel from Atlanta, Dwight from Iowa—to this place at this time, found one another, and though Joel's heart beat so hard he imagined it could be heard over the pounding of the music in that place he would never remember the name of, he vowed to make his first time in a gay bar something he would never forget. So, when Dwight took his hand and led him into a corner and kissed him, clumsy and wet, he assured himself that it was the most natural thing in the world.

They kissed more than they spoke, and held hands like they were longtime lovers. Dwight asked Joel if he wanted to dance and of all the things he did that night, the concept of dancing in front of this strange man terrified Joel the most. Later they went to Dwight's hotel room and Joel stood, transfixed, as Dwight undressed. Then he took his own clothes off and they stood there, and when Dwight touched him, Joel trembled like he had palsy. "Are you okay?" Dwight asked him.

"I'm fine," Joel lied. He alternated between an immense desire to explore every inch of Dwight and a profound shame at what he was doing. He thought he might throw up, and when that didn't happen, he thought he might pass out from the thrill of it all.

Then Dwight kissed him again and Joel stroked the golden hair that covered Dwight's chest and somehow, he got through it unharmed. Afterward, Dwight asked him again, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Joel said, and wondered if he would be okay later. Like, would he regret it and would that pang of conscience expose him. He bolted upright in the bed, Dwight's hotel bed, which smelled of their lovemaking, and was not sure what to do with himself.

Dwight stroked his back. "Relax," he whispered. Joel tried. "Lie back down."

In the morning, Joel dressed and they didn't speak. Dwight saw him to the door and kissed him before he left. Joel had no idea what to say. "Thanks," he said, and immediately felt like a fool. Later, though, as he flew home to Atlanta, to his wife and his children, he felt it was the most appropriate thing he could have said.

Now, thirty-four years later, Joel was ready to come out of the closet. He just wasn't sure how to go about it. There were days where he was convinced of his purpose, and he stood in front of the bathroom mirror and rehearsed the words he wanted to say and how he wanted to say them. The next day, that certainty would vanish and he would be in emotional agony. It always looked so easy in movies and on TV, or in the tabloids when actors and singers came out: for years they were straight, they married and they divorced, and then one day they were coming out and people talked only of their courage, their strength. He couldn't understand why he was having such difficulty with it. He was fifty-eight years old. He wasn't getting any younger and it was time, so on one of those days where he was sure of himself, he called his daughter.

"Dad! Hi! Is something wrong?" Since the death of his wife six months ago, Amy made a habit of asking him this any time he called.

Joel laughed and gave her the same reply he always gave. "Nothing's wrong, honey. I can call you when nothing's wrong, can't I?"

"Well... yeah, of course."

"Are you busy? I can call back later."

"No," Amy said, though Joel heard activity on her end and knew she was at work. She was a hairdresser—or, she always reminded him, that was an old-fashioned term and conjured images of beehives and bubble flips, and Amy insisted that he understand she was a *stylist*.

"I'll make it quick, then," Joel said. "I want you and Ethan to come over for dinner on Friday. I'm calling your brother, too."

Amy was silent on her end. "I thought you said everything was okay," she said at last, and her voice had already risen several octaves.

"Everything's fine," Joel said. "Really. I swear. It's just dinner." Only it wasn't, and he felt the whole thing derailing already.

"And Adam's coming?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm calling him as soon as I hang up with you."

More silence from Amy. "And you're sure everything is fine...?" She did not sound convinced, and she had every right to be doubtful. He and Susan had called them together almost four years ago to announce her cancer diagnosis and prognosis, and Joel was kicking himself for not having practiced this phone call better.

"Honey, it's just dinner," he said again. "It's just dinner. You and me and Ethan and Adam. Just the four of us. And we'll talk."

"About what?"

"Just...nothing. Everything. Anything." On his end, Joel waved his arms even though she couldn't see. "It'll be nice. We haven't seen each other in a while..."

"I saw you last weekend," Amy pointed out.

He heaved a sigh. "I meant we haven't all been together in a while."

Then silence. Joel listened to the bustle in the salon on Amy's end. Someone talked about bangs, someone else asked about a good shampoo for curly hair. "You're sure nothing's the matter?" Amy asked, finally.

"Positive," he lied.

"Okay," she said. And again: "Okay, fine. We'll be there. What time? What do I need to bring?"

"Seven o'clock," Joel said, "and you don't have to bring anything."

"I'll bring something."

He shrugged, as if she could see it. "Okay. I'll see you then. I've got to call your brother."

"What's the matter?" Adam asked when Joel called him

"Everything's fine," Joel said. "We'll talk. It'll be a nice time."

Adam was still suspicious. "About what?"

"About whatever."

Like Amy, Adam recalled the last time their father called to invite them all to dinner, it was so their parents could deliver the news of his mother's life expectancy and her final wishes. Adam clearly remembered Joel saying they would talk about "whatever" then, too. "Okay," he said, reluctantly. "What should I bring?"

"Nothing," Joel told him. "Just bring yourself."

"I'll bring something," Adam said, and immediately started to worry about what it would be. Probably a loaf of supermarket challah.

"Okay. I'll see you Friday, then."

Adam called Amy after he hung up with Joel and it went to voice mail, which meant that she was probably with a client, and he understood that, but it did nothing for his anxiety. He left her a voice mail: "Dad just called and I assume he called you, too, and he's inviting us to dinner on Friday, and I'm sure you already know that, and he says it's just to talk, but that's what he told us when he invited us to dinner to tell us Mom was dying, and I think he probably has cancer, too, and he just isn't telling us, so I need you to fucking call me back as soon as you get this. Bye."

Then he paced, made an effort to straighten up his apartment, started a load of laundry, and stepped out onto his balcony to smoke. He took one drag, then texted her.

Call me. Then, I left you a VM message. Then, I think Dad has cancer. Or something. Then, Call me. Fuck!!!

He'd finished the cigarette, scrubbed his toilet, transferred the laundry to the dryer, and was lighting another cigarette while he typed out another text message when Amy finally returned his call.

"What the fuck, Amy?" he barked.

"Damn, Adam, I was with a client. It was a triple process."

"Whatever," he said.

"And Dad is *not* dying."

Adam rolled his eyes as he lit the cigarette.

"Are you smoking again?" Amy asked.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"I heard the lighter."

"Not that," he said, and waved a dismissive hand. "Yeah, I'm smoking again. So what? How do you know Dad's not dying?"

She sighed. "Because he didn't sound like he was dying." That won a laugh from Adam. "What's so funny?"

"What does cancer sound like, Amy?"

"Oh, for shit's sake, Adam. I've got to go, I've got another client waiting, just... it's been a while since Mom died, and Dad's getting older and he's probably feeling lonely, so he's inviting us all over for Shabbat dinner. That's all. He's not dying."

Adam grunted.

"And I thought you said the Chantix was working."

"It did, but I started having nightmares where everything was nuclear war, and I'd wake up all freaked out, so I'd smoke." He exhaled. "I'll quit again, I'm sure. This makes my fifth time quitting so far. I'm getting good at it."

Adam knew his sister was probably right. Joel wasn't dying. They'd gone to lunch a month ago, and Joel was fine. Sad, yes, and like Amy said probably lonely, but not dying. They went for Thai food and talked about nothing important, except Joel seemed more interested in Adam's love life than before. "Are you seeing anyone?" Joel had asked, and Adam peered at him across their bowls of pad thai, wary.

"No." He said it slowly. "Why?" They'd never had the kind of relationship where Adam could discuss his love life with his father. With his mother, yes, and he had done so regularly, but Joel had always kept that part of his son's life at arm's length.

Joel shrugged. "Just wondering."

Adam stirred the noodles in his bowl because he needed to focus on something that wasn't his confusion about his father suddenly asking about something he'd never cared about before. He supposed, now that his mother was gone, his father felt he needed to step in and monitor his children's love lives, so he softened some. "I mean, there was this guy, but he's not interested."

"What do you mean he's not interested?" His father's reaction was so overwrought that Adam had to catch himself before he laughed. It was like his father's interpretation of the way his mother would have responded learning someone wasn't interested in one of her children.

"Just that. He wasn't interested." Adam shrugged.

Joel was aghast. Then he was furious. "Well," he huffed. "His loss. I mean... I don't know this guy, and maybe I don't want to know him, but if he can't see what a catch you are, then..." He trailed off, waved a hand, dismissed any further thought or discussion of this unnamed cretin who would so roundly reject Adam.

"It's really no big deal, Dad."

"You're right." And Joel gave a firm nod. "Forget him."

Afterward, they strolled next door to a store called Midcentury. Adam was further confused. Joel had never seemed interested in the design of the house or the furniture that went into it; those were his mother's core competencies.

"I'm looking for a lamp," Joel explained. "I've never really liked that lamp in the foyer. You know... the big green one? Looks like someone made a genie's lamp out of an avocado? Thought I might replace it with something less... heavy."

"Oh." Adam had no interest in antiques and couldn't understand anyone else's interest in them either. He shoved his hands into his pockets and stood, awkward, pretended to study a console table against one wall. "This stuff's pretty expensive." He shopped at thrift stores and tended to furnish his apartment from yard sales and the Salvation Army store.

"Well, they're midcentury originals," Joel pointed out.

“Yeah.” Adam had only the vaguest idea what made that a good thing. He heard people talk a lot—old ladies and fussy gay men, for the most part—and knew that midcentury was really trendy, but other than that, he didn’t get it. He didn’t really understand the whole attraction to antiques at all. To him, they smelled like old people, and the thought of paying such ridiculous prices for something that wouldn’t even be on the market if someone hadn’t died and had their entire life sold away by their children in an estate sale seemed morbid.

“I’m thinking about updating the whole house, actually,” Joel said, more to himself than to Adam. He picked up lamps, studied their bases, their cords, the price tags.

For some reason he couldn’t articulate, the remark angered Adam. He opened his mouth to question his father, maybe demand why the house needed to be redecorated now, maybe suggest waiting so it didn’t seem so insensitive to his mother’s memory, but he caught himself and bit back whatever might have come out. “Are you really gonna buy one of these?” he asked, and nodded to the selection of lamps. He found them all hideous for one reason or another.

“I don’t know...”

A man stepped up, smiling, his hands clasped in front of him like he might recite Shakespeare. He was dressed like a lumberjack, Adam thought, and was roughly the size of one. “Do you gentlemen need help today?” Adam would have found the man attractive if they were in a bar and not an antiques store.

“I was looking for a lamp,” Joel said, smiling a little too broadly.

“Well, you found them!” the guy said, then he and Joel laughed like neither had ever heard anything so funny. Adam wished he were anywhere else in the world.

Several weeks after the lunch with Adam, Joel had gone onto Grindr.

It was late, he’d had a few glasses of wine, and he thought why the hell not? He’d used it before with varying degrees of success and always some measure of shame, but he tried to stay off it during the worst of Susan’s struggle with cancer. It had been close to a year, and it took several tries to recall his password.

His forays into the world of dating apps were always a mixture of optimism and hopelessness. At any given time, night or day, there were more men online than seemed reasonable, but he learned long ago to ignore the profiles that revealed nothing about the person on the other side of them. Names that suggested sex or penis size, too. Joel himself got the cold shoulder a lot because his own profile did not reveal his face, so finding anyone interested took longer than it should have, since everyone assumed he couldn’t be trusted. It was frustrating, and he often gave up. People were assholes and he just didn’t have the energy to deal with it.

Still, sometimes he got lucky, and this was one of those nights.

A guy whose photo showed only his chest hair and a glimpse of a ruddy beard messaged him almost immediately. A general issue screenname, KentATL, like Joel’s, with no hint of anything brazen.

—Hi.

—Hi.

Then a lengthy silence, which Joel hated more than being told outright that he wasn’t what the other person was looking for.

—You looking?

That thrill of possibility made his pulse quicken. He felt his stomach flutter.

—Yeah. U?

He immediately regretted shortening *you* to just a letter, like a teenager.

—Yeah. What U looking for?

Joel relaxed and the conversation progressed quickly to the decision of where to meet. Joel offered to host—he had been drinking and did not need to get behind the wheel of a car—and Kent (he assumed that was the guy’s name) agreed immediately.

—Great. I'm in Midtown. Where R U?

This was the other part that Joel dreaded. So often he would tell guys he was in Dunwoody and they would immediately lose interest because it was too far to drive. Or they would just stop responding at all. But he told the guy and waited.

—Great. I can B there in 15 mins.

—Perfect.

They exchanged numbers, then texts and face pics. Joel thought he looked familiar but couldn't place him. For all he knew, they'd already had sex, back when Susan was alive and the contact that Joel had with men was furtive and so fraught with peril that he could rarely recall their faces or names the next day.

When he arrived, Kent looked around in awe at the house and furniture, like he was there as a potential buyer and not as a trick. "Your place is amazing," he told Joel, who mumbled a polite thanks. "I own an antiques store, so..." Then it clicked where Joel had seen him before: the day he'd been looking for lamps. Kent admired the original knotty pine paneling, the vaulted ceilings, and the original bar separating the kitchen from the dining area.

Joel led him downstairs to the spare bedroom in the basement—it was Adam's when he lived at home—where he'd been sleeping for the last three years of the marriage. Kent inspected the paneling closer as he unbuttoned his shirt. Joel stared at him, then at the bed, then at the floor. On Grindr, he was intrigued by that peek at Kent's auburn chest hair and when they chatted, the prospect of a quick romp with such a burly specimen had certainly aroused him.

"My wife just died," he heard himself say.

Kent stopped scrutinizing the paneling, turned slowly. "Okay," he said, not looking at Joel where he stood across the room. He looked everywhere but at Joel, like he suspected Joel might have Susan's body lying in state somewhere in the house.

"Recently, I mean," Joel added, to clarify. "In February."

"Oh."

Then silence.

Kent finally said, "We don't have to do this if you don't want to..."

So they ended up at Waffle House drinking bad coffee and commiserating. Kent had been married before, in his twenties, and was just out of a ten-year relationship with a man. "He developed a thing for twinks," he said, and blinked his astonishment. "I guess that's a thing now: older, bigger, hairy guys who are into young, skinny guys who shave their entire bodies and vice versa, the whole dichotomy of it, I guess..."

Joel guessed it was a lot like men who marry women even though they're attracted to men. He knew better than to marry Susan, but he did it anyway, then sought sex elsewhere. To be honest, he understood it perfectly. "Tastes change," he suggested, to make Kent feel better.

Kent shrugged. "I guess..."

"I should apologize about tonight," Joel offered. "For wasting your time." He paused. "I don't know what I was even thinking, really..."

"To be honest, neither do I," Kent said, with a laugh. "I mean—and please don't take this personally—you're not exactly the type of guy I'm attracted to. I tend to go for bigger guys with beards and hair."

"You're not mine, either," Joel confessed. "I usually like guys more like myself. Or younger," he added, sheepishly.

But they both knew why they went onto the app and what they were looking for: a connection with someone, anyone. Kent knew, and Joel suspected, that the majority of the men on those apps and websites were doing the same, though none would ever admit it.

And when you got lonely enough, or desperate enough, even sex with a stranger you weren't attracted to was better than being alone.

"I'm still new to this."

Kent was confused. "New to what?"

Joel waved a hand. "*This*. Being out. I mean... I don't even know if I *am* out. I'm just... doing some things more openly than before." He stared hard at his coffee cup, his hands wrapped around it, thought how pink they were and wondered if they had always been so pink and dry. "Like inviting someone over for sex."

"Ah," Kent said. "Well, we've all been there."

They ended the night with a handshake, but a couple weeks later, Kent called.

"I'm sorry," Joel said. "Who?"

"Kent... we were supposed to have sex, then we didn't. We had coffee instead."

"Oh. Hi."

They met again for drinks and Joel was still confused until Kent explained himself: he figured Joel could use a friend who had been through something similar, who was gay, and who could be there to lend moral support and answer questions.

Joel met Kent's friends and heard their stories—of coming out young, of marrying young and then divorcing and coming out, of staying married and having sex with men—and Joel, at last, did not feel like he was the only gay man in the world going through what he was going through. One of the men—a flamboyant man named Gregory (*not* Greg)—had grown children, too. "Honey," he told Joel as they sipped mimosas on Kent's deck one Sunday afternoon, "you will be amazed at just how little your kids care about you being gay. I certainly was."

Joel tried to imagine a scenario where Gregory was married and people had no idea he was gay. It seemed so obvious to him, and then he felt a tiny flare of panic as he wondered if maybe Amy and Adam already knew and he was making a problem out of something that was a nonissue for them. He wondered if the same could be said of himself—was he as flamboyant as Gregory? Was his homosexuality as obvious? But what he said made Joel feel less like a heel and helped make his decision to tell Amy and Adam easier.

"You're sure you want to do this?" Kent asked him. Joel had asked him to lunch, just the two of them, to lay out his plan.

"You think I shouldn't?" Joel asked, and for the first time doubted himself.

"I didn't say that. I just asked if you were sure you wanted to do it."

"Well... I think it's time," Joel said, more to convince himself than Kent. "It's been time, really. For a while." He paused. "So, yes... I'm sure."

"That's good," Kent said. "And you think they're ready? Because, really... that's the important part." And he went on to explain that Joel had known about, and had been acting on, his sexuality for years, even though he'd told no one. So, while he might think the admission was overdue, for Amy and Adam, it was going to come out of the blue. To them, Joel was their father, their mother's husband, not the man who met other men on the internet and in out-of-the-way hotels to have sex. "So, it seems very cut and dried, but it isn't. And that's what I meant when I asked if you were sure."

And Joel wasn't sure all of a sudden. "Well..."

Six months had passed since that conversation and he still hadn't told them. Now, almost a year since Susan's death, he had decided it was time. He wanted it over with. He wanted to stop worrying how they were going to respond and let them react however they were going to so that he could get on with his life. They could take as much time as they needed to come around—or not—but he was not getting any younger.