

Prologue

Love is a phenomenal experience. For some, it's merely a passing fanny while for others, like myself, it is the end of a long and often painful, if not embarrassing, journey into adulthood. I used to find it difficult to believe in true romantic love the way I found it difficult to believe in God, mostly because I'd never experienced either or thought I hadn't in the case of God. Now...now I believe in miracles and God because of love, but it didn't start out that way, not even close.

It seems ironic to me now that I never caught on to all the signs about my sexuality that appeared to me early on in life. Then again, maybe it isn't so ironic after all, especially with the way society feels about gays. I think I was too young to understand names and labels and religious beliefs dictating right from wrong in areas where only a fundamental fear of the unknown existed. It's universal for people to fear and lash out against what they don't understand. Homosexuality is no exception. Of course, rap music wasn't accepted by society for awhile either, so maybe there's hope after all.

The only unknown mysteries in life that I cared about back when I was growing up were what episodes of *Johnny Sokko & His Flying Robot*, *Ultraman* and *Battlestar Galactica* were going to be on TV that week. A few years after that, the mystery of what made my body feel good became a fixation as it did to many other young boys my age. However, that's said to be natural and normal and experimentation can be chalked up to boys just being boys. No harm is really done as long as it doesn't exceed a certain age where those curiosities are supposed to end and new ones begin.

That new age of curiosities was when I think I began to run into trouble because the old one never quit. I still somehow managed to repress acting them out and tried to focus on women instead. Essentially, that went nowhere. The harder I tried to make myself interested in the opposite sex, the further I distanced myself from everybody, *including* myself, and I was only in Junior High at the time!

My true search for love, that one thing I'd never had or felt before, didn't begin until after my first year of college while on a trip to California. I don't think I was really ready to begin my quest before then and I certainly wasn't prepared for what I found. The sum of my experiences early on in life forced me to reach out and become someone I had the potential to be as opposed to the wisecracking smartass I was; but, in doing so, it also forced me to come to terms with my

true sexuality.

Who knew that my life would change forever in six days?

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Hi. My name's Andy. Not Andrew or anything foreign, just Andy. It isn't the greatest name in the world, but it certainly isn't the worst. My parents liked the sound of it, but I prefer to think that I was intentionally named after Andy Taylor, the really cool Duran Duran ex-guitarist. There are certainly worse people and worse things to be named after. I knew a kid from Illinois whose name was John. Not Jonathan, just John. He swore up and down that his parents wanted a daughter and named him after a urinal out of spite. His parents were bitter that way. Still, John had to admit that things could have been worse. Neither one of us is named Richard.

When I think about how things started, I don't believe I wanted to "come out" at all. I wasn't happy — and, in all honesty, I wasn't exactly the most likeable person at times — but that didn't bother me as much as having to admit to myself that I was gay. I couldn't do it, maybe because I equated it with finding out from the doctor that I had some nasty disease, that I was going to be branded by society as an undesirable and be a victim for the rest of my life. Slowly but surely, I came to the realization that I was indeed gay and it didn't seem nearly as bad as I'd first thought.

Wasn't I still the same sarcastic son-of-a-bitch, if not a bit happier? Wasn't I looking for someone to share my life with and wake up next to in the morning on a more permanent basis? *Wouldn't it be nice if they remembered my name for a change?* And didn't I want to live beyond my meager means and pay for everything by credit card? *Yes!* I wanted all the things that every heterosexual male did, so imagine the irony I felt when I was branded by society as an undesirable and had to fight to *not* be a victim anyway. Funny how that works, isn't it? Yeah, well, so is Viagra.

A lot of straight people wonder how someone "becomes" gay or if they were really born that way or even if it has something to do with their environment. Good questions. I'm an only child and I have always been close to both my parents. I wasn't sexually abused and never lusted after my mother. For that matter, I never lusted after my father. I really didn't need to say that, but it never ceases to amaze me what questions people will actually think of when there's a gay man or woman around. Let me just get some of the answers to pat questions out of the way now; I don't molest children, I don't look at guys in the shower, I don't stare at guys' crotches at

the gym and I don't walk into a room and start picking out guys to try and seduce. Ideas like that only add to existing problems and misconceptions about gays.

I was never big into sports, but I did enjoy reading and playing with my Legos, *Star Wars* toys and Atari video games. This seems to be a pretty normal childhood to me. I do have a number of cousins on both sides of my family who are gay, only I wasn't aware of it back then. Heck, I never even met them since they lived out in California and my grandparents never spoke about them. In light of all this, I find it difficult to believe that I was somehow *influenced* to become gay. One final idea that straight people have about gays is that they're looking for acceptance of some kind and that ultimately steers them into homosexuality. Yeah, right. Ultimate acceptance through ultimate disapproval? And a sane person thought this up?

What I can tell you about my childhood is that I liked having friends who were girls. I've always felt comfortable talking to women and tended to make a better friend than date. Too, I liked having guy friends and I can remember pursuing friendships with guys who I found to be attractive and wanted to experiment with, even as far back as grade school. Kids are curious at that age, only I was *really* curious. There was Jim in third grade, Andrew in fourth, Scott and Mike in fifth and Randy in sixth. With my blue eyes and blond hair, they weren't too difficult to convince. Still, I was too young to be called a slut and too stupid to realize what this was all pointing to. I had two more experiences, one in 8th grade and another in 9th, and then it ended. Most of the people I'd had these experiences with had moved away by the time I entered 10th grade, so I wasn't in too much danger of my classmates finding out. I was still worried, though. The mere possibility of being found out was enough to make me insecure and an easy target to abusive peers.

Just to be on the safe side, I did date girls during those years to make it look like I was "normal." I started dating a girl when I was a sophomore who was genuinely special and who treated me very, very well. I can remember riding my bike over to her house a number of times and watching a movie or playing on the computer with her. When we weren't together, we talked on the phone for hours and it didn't matter what we were talking about as long as we were talking. At school, I met her each day at her locker and then between classes when they were actually close enough. I was, in essence, everything the perfect boyfriend was supposed to be and she was everything the perfect girlfriend was supposed to be.

I began to worry as the relationship progressed about where it would ultimately lead. We

liked each other well enough, but there were some deeper desires that seemed to be awakening in her that never woke up in me. I was scared to death to tell her that I was attracted to her in every way except sexually and the closer she tried to get, the further I pushed her away. I think she thought I might have been a bit of a prude, but I didn't have to worry about it very long. In the end, she decided that she wasn't going to wait around for me to lose my morality and virginity.

She had a new boyfriend within a few weeks who had her in bed experimenting with handcuffs and flavored lubricants. I was so shattered from losing the closeness that I had shared with her that I didn't date again until I was a senior. Even then, that relationship only lasted a few weeks before I got dumped for a pizza boy. He was apparently willing to deliver the kind of pepperoni I wasn't. Suffice to say that neither of these experiences did much for my self-esteem.

Dating was just entirely too depressing to deal with after that. The loneliness and bouts of depression during some months were worse than others, but I got through it and graduated. Most of the 400 students in my class could have gone to hell and it never would have fazed me. In fact, I often told them to since I was also known for being a smartass. I have a very simple philosophy about just this matter; I was born a dumbass, have since become a smart ass and one day aspire to be a wiseass. It used to get me into a lot of trouble because my comments bordered on downright cruelty and bad taste, but that was because I was using them to cover up my own insecurities by exposing others'. I wanted to be nicer, but it's just that there wasn't a great deal of opportunity for a person to change or evolve into someone other than what one's peers perceived them to be. That's why I was looking forward to college so much.

While others went off to places like Michigan State, U of M, Western, Eastern, a few to Northern — nobody ever seemed to go to Southern, I chose a university in the cornfields. My reasoning for this was simple; there was a smaller student/teacher ratio than at the elite schools and my parents had met there. They weren't such bad people, so maybe I could straighten my life out there like they had, come to my senses and find some nice young woman to settle down with. Unfortunately, aside from that motive, I really didn't have much of an idea of what I wanted to do professionally. I wondered if procrastination was a major. Well, that decision could wait. Another thing I didn't realize was that I was moving to an area of West Michigan termed "the Bible belt" and the people in this church-going farming area disliked sinning college students (which was basically *all* college students in their minds), alcoholic beverages other than the wine at church, stores open on Sunday, people doing work on Sunday and McDonalds.

Why McDonalds? Well, it went like this: the people in the little town the University was located in fought to keep all fast food restaurants from within their city limits because they felt it would bring the town down. Apparently, eating fast food meant one had fast morals. I would have thought that after smelling cow shit for an entire day, a Big Mac would really have hit the spot, but apparently I was misguided. McDonalds just happened to be the one franchise being persistent in trying to obtain a permit. In response, the townspeople started a boycott against this heathen chain. Like that was really going to hurt them.

The first semester of my freshman year turned out to be hell. I was homesick, my roommate was rarely around, I was still in denial, and I ended up on academic probation because I failed chemistry. Oh yeah, now there's a worthwhile class. It ranks right up there with Theories of Adult Pornographic Videos. I would no more sit down with friends and discuss why the director chose a specific noir lighting technique on the woman's breasts than I would what the delta heat of some varying degree on a stalactite might be. Between that class and others, figuring out a major and listening to the preachers who roamed the campus telling us all that we needed to be saved, I didn't have much time to think about romance or even sexuality in general.

On a positive note, I did take my first writing class. Dr. Lockman essentially geared it towards working on smaller papers about ourselves and then combining them to create a single autobiography. I hated English and had low self-esteem, so imagine the pleasure I derived from writing about myself.

I did learn three major things in that class; first, what a comma looks like and how to use one; second, that I had been taught how to write a paragraph incorrectly in high school; and, third, that I really could write. In a sea of core classes designed to give me a well-rounded education, like chemistry, I discovered that I not only enjoyed writing, but was fairly good at it, too. Before the semester ended, Dr. Lockman recommended that I jump a level and take a literature class instead of another "write a new paper each week" class. His enthusiasm and support convinced me it was the way to go. I finally had some direction.

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Second semester was much better than the first. I started going out to see comedians, movies and concerts that the University sponsored. Hell, I was even social and talked to someone next to me once in a while. Aside from that, I also began writing a music column for the campus newspaper. It didn't pay much and the hate mail was considerable, but I was writing

and expressing myself in a rather uncensored and often unpopular fashion. I didn't have a great deal of money to go out every week and buy a new album, but it was easy to tell what people were listening to since one could rarely sleep during the weekends with the sound systems blaring to cover up the number of one-night stands going on. I just listened to what they played. As for sexual encounters of the college kind, the guys on my floor were particularly notorious for that sort of thing. All they had to do was look at a girl once and they could tell what kind of night she was going to have. My notes on their pickup lines and nonverbal methods of communication are extensive.

The Lit. class that Dr. Lockman suggested I take turned out to be one of the best classes I could have taken to continue my interest in writing. The catalogue listed our Professor's name as "Staff," which of course just meant that they hadn't assigned an instructor yet. The man who walked through the door that first meeting was a kindly gentleman in his forties who seemed very open to different interpretations of literature and writing. Much to our amazement, the name on the syllabus he passed out was indeed "Professor Staff", which meant he either had a sense of humor or that was actually his name. Either way, he had us all wondering and I received my first look at his true colors a few weeks later when he was handing back our first papers. A group of us had been slaving over them for two weeks, helping each other as much as we could, and really looking forward to seeing our grades. Wasn't that stupid? My paper was on William Wordsworth.

The Professor, as he politely insisted we call him, passed my desk and handed me my paper with a twinkle in his eye. The moment had arrived and, considering the look he gave me, the prospects for a decent grade looked fantastic. There in my hand lay the fruits of my labor for the past two weeks. Here was where my writing really took off! I took a long, deep breath and flipped to the last page. A few comments were written down...blah blah blah... *There it was!* Or, rather, there it was... I felt my stomach drop and my lip curl. B-. Wasn't *that* quaint?

"Son-of-a-bitch." I uttered just under a whisper. My own mother would have been hard-pressed to hear me and she'd had years of practice.

"Andy?" The Professor was looking at me. "Why don't you stay after class and we'll talk about your grade?"

I couldn't believe he heard me! It was both unexpected and unsettling, mostly unsettling and I thought about just how good a chemistry class would be right now compared to the horror

of having been heard swearing by the man who made or broke my grade. Bile rose up in my throat on more than one occasion and my stomach began doing flip-flops while I was waiting for class to end. The minutes passed by with my insides in agony until it was finally time to leave. Maybe I could play like I was stupid or an inbred child from the south here on a scholarship. Hey, they gave them to everybody else. Just the other day I'd seen a kid who couldn't even spell his name and *he* had a scholarship. Of course, my roommate told me later that the kid was dyslexic. Apparently there weren't enough minority students enrolled at the university with *that* ethnic background. Still, just because he has a foreign heritage didn't mean he couldn't learn how to spell.

"I take it you weren't happy with your grade?" The Professor looked at me with kind eyes. If he was upset or angry, it didn't show.

"I was just kind of surprised. A group of us worked together pretty hard and I thought I'd done better." So much for the inbred act. "It, uh, probably wasn't the ideal paper for straight up, cut and dry factual statements with the appropriate observations in the analytical style and accepted APA format, but that's because I hate writing something dull and didactic. I end up adding personal commentary, but try to keep it from influencing or hampering the general narrative structure too much." For God's sake, I was practically giving him the formula for glue instead of just telling him that I liked to make quirky little comments for no good reason other than for my own entertainment.

"Well, I want you to know that I can appreciate that kind of writing and I think that commentary does liven up a piece, but you should also know that there are going to be instructors here who don't." He paused as if pondering if he should say anything further. At least I felt like we were making some kind of one-on-one connection. How many students at Michigan State could say their instructors knew *their* name? "If you would like, I'd be willing to help you develop your writing skills for this and other classes so you *could* get away with what you're doing." I was starting to like him. "You have some talent in writing, but it's raw yet. You need to strengthen and hone it, though. If you want." I did.

The rest of the conversation was uneventful, but I left with a really good feeling. My stomach wasn't acting up like it had before our talk and, for the first time, I was starting to see the possibility of being adopted by someone who would act as my mentor and guide me in the strange and mystical ways of the Writer. Or whatever. It was back to beating chemistry again.

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I went from there over to the Commons and after an extremely unsatisfying dinner back out to the campus library. I doubt I will ever forget how exhilarating it is to smell the scent of freshly thawed fertilizer silently wafting its way over the campus from the neighboring fields. Thanking Mother Nature for this unusually warm day wouldn't have come out very nicely. Then too, there is a saying in Michigan: "if you don't like the weather, just wait five minutes." It's true and at least I now knew the reason my roommate had asked me to look up some topic for him that he had to write a paper on. I think he was still probably enjoying his dinner at Burger King or wherever in Grand Rapids he went, wonderfully ignorant of what I was going through.

Since the computer system in the library was probably the quickest and most convenient way of looking up my roommate's subject, I found a machine that wasn't occupied and sat down. I typed in "Youths in Asia" and when the computer came back with "No Subject Found", I typed it in again anyway in case it was mistaken. It wasn't. I tried every single spelling combination I could think of until I was a smelly, sweating ball of frustration. Why was it so damn difficult? I mean, what the hell did Asia call its youth anyway? It followed that Asians would be found in Asia, not like that entire Canada/Canadian thing a friend played with my mind about. Because of her, I could never keep them straight. Basically, she told me that if I went to Canada, the people there would be called Canadans. Consequently, if I was among Canadians, wouldn't I have traveled to Canadia? This is one of those reasons my parents tried to dissuade me from drinking at college. They knew, with the friends I had, that my young and naive existence would be confusing enough without alcohol.

I ended up leaving in disgust and headed back to my dorm.

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Why some parents ever complained about guys and girls living together in the same dorm building is beyond me. It wasn't like we were on the same floor and sharing showers and bathrooms or anything like that. Large metal doors separated the two sexes at all times, yet that never really seemed to matter when it came time for the two sexes to partake in a little sex, but that's beside the point for the moment. Guys and girls living together created a balance. One floor smelled like old sweat socks mixed with Old Spice and the next like perfume and potpourri room fresheners. One floor looked like the remnant of a World War II battlefield and the next the Rainbow Bridge. The whole thing evened out and I came to think of it as like the collegiate

version of yin and yang. Of course, the guys were constantly trying to stick their yang in every girl's yin. Then too, many of the girls were using their yin to get all the cute guys' yang. This effectively cut me out of the entire rat race as I was neither interested in any girl's yin nor good looking enough, in my opinion at least, to attract one. I was also resolved to ignore any impulse towards any guy's yang. Again, it was a strange balance.

The lobby of the dorm was a flurry of activity when I walked in. Going on were some intense study groups in one of the well-lit alcoves, drug deals being made in the dimly lit one, three guys bragging about a recent female score and realizing they'd all had the same girl one right after the other, a Resident Assistant complaining to the building manager about a dead rabbit found impaled on his door with a hunting knife, two people bitching about the latest music review in the paper, seven people trying to get the combination locks undone on their mailbox and one girl on the phone bragging to her friend that she had just slept with three guys one right after the other and, unbeknownst to them, given them crabs.

I didn't know how I wanted to remember my college years, but this definitely wasn't it. There was no way I could blend in with these people, at least not at this stage of my life. Hell, I was still a virgin and it wasn't as if I wanted to be one. It's just that I never went out of my way in the past to make myself physically desirable, like Fabio, so why should I do it now? It occurred to me that if someone was going to like me, then they should like me for who I really am. While I thought that was a very solid and honest philosophy to live by, it certainly didn't get me many dates or even much interest. In fact, it made me wonder whatever happened to my charm or at least the persuasive nature I used to have in grade school through the first part of high school. Of course, that was with guys and that time of my life was forever over with.

Truth be told, I guess I was still a bit curious about other guys, but decided to keep it to myself since that kind of curiosity was no longer considered innocent. Hell, it could get the crap kicked out of me and that thought alone was enough to make me continue burying my feelings. Weren't there people out there who remained curious too? Was I the exception to the rule in still being who I was while having these feelings? I certainly didn't resemble in any way the kind of stereotypical "fag" used as the butt of a ton of tasteless jokes, so I couldn't be one. This was fine by me because I liked being who I was, the type of person I had potential to become, and there was no room in my life to be one of those limp-wristed, lisping, feminine looking and acting queers laughed about and resented so openly. If that's what being gay was all about, then I

wanted no part of it. I didn't want any part of it anyway. I may not yet know *exactly* who I was, but I did know who I wasn't. My uncertainty about sex merely stemmed with never having been with a woman. Once that happened, I would come to my senses. It was just that simple, or so I thought.

My head hurt and I wanted a shower more than anything else. I wanted to step under the rush of hot water and feel all the negative thoughts and energy wash from my body and disappear down the moldy drain on its way to the Commons. There was too much negativity in the world. Society needed to be a little more nurturing, a bit more caring. People needed to be a little kinder and respectful to each other.

"You smell like shit." Todd, my Neanderthal and negative roommate, informed me matter-of-factly when I unlocked the door and stepped into the small dorm room.

"Oh, bite me."

Todd laughed and tossed me a bag of cold onion rings from Burger King. Actually, he wasn't so bad and I'm not saying that just because he brought me food. Most of the time, one never knows what kind of person he or she will be paired up with in a dorm. I lucked out because Todd respected my privacy and the items I had brought with me from home as I respected his. We got along well enough too since we were different enough to make for some interesting conversations and alike enough not to argue over what to watch on TV. Sometimes I proofed or wrote some of his papers and he paid for a movie in Grand Rapids or bought me a CD. He got what he needed and I got what I wanted. It was a beneficial arrangement. The food he brought didn't hurt my opinion of him either.

"I hope you earned the onion rings." He wondered out loud and then pointed to my backpack. "What did you find?"

"You may want them back," I offered him the bag, "because I couldn't find a thing." He declined. "The computer didn't have anything on them."

"Them?" Todd looked at me, confused. "What do you mean 'them'?"

"Well," I rolled my eyes, "the youth in Asia or youths in Asia. *Hello?*" Sometimes he was a bit slow. "I mean, I tried every combination, but it either told me that there was nothing to be found or that I needed to narrow my search."

"Youths in Asia?" He was staring at me now in disbelief.

"Uh, I think I just said that." I didn't feel so bad about eating his onion rings now.

Sometimes I had to talk very slowly and in small words to get him to understand something.

“Which part didn’t you understand?”

“Which part didn’t *you* understand?” he countered. “I said euthanasia.”

“Youth in Asia, youths in Asia, what’s the difference? I still came up empty.” I watched as Todd put his hand up to his forehead in mock gesture of surrendering to an idiot. “What?”

“E-u-t-h-a-n-a-s-i-a.” He spelled it out for me.

“Euthanasia?” I spoke the word out loud and he nodded. “Well, what the hell is that?”

“That,” Todd smirked at me, “is what I needed you to find out. Didn’t you ask one of the librarians for help?”

“Huh?” Was he kidding? I stared at him and shoved two more onion rings into my mouth. It was hard to tell at this point which one of us was the bigger moron. At least neither one of us knew what euthanasia was, so in my mind, that made him the more moronic. From his view, however, I should have known what it was since I generally prided myself on knowing more than he did anyway. With that point foremost on his mind, that made me the more moronic one. The only thing we would agree on is that we would disagree, so it was stupid for either of us to continue the conversation.

“You had a call earlier. Just some girl.” His voice was even, as if relating events that occurred regularly.

“Really?” It *was* a rather unusual occurrence. A girl calling me? It had a nice ring to it. There was a girl in Professor Staff’s class named Tina who was pretty cute: blonde, nice green eyes, pleasant voice, great body, vacant look on her face, perfect sorority material. What the hell would she be doing calling me? “What did she want?”

“Just to say that your latest music review sucks, Roxette sucks and, according to her, you do, too.” He paused as if in deep thought. “She didn’t leave a name or number.”

It definitely wasn’t Tina.

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Classes came and went daily and homework took up a sizable chunk of time during the week, but that was mostly because I didn’t want to do any of it on the weekend. I probably should have saved some of it because I tended not to do much on the weekend anyway.

My writing really started showing signs of improvement and I was aching to try my pencil at some short stories and maybe even a novel. My other classes went well and I knew that

I was in no danger of being on academic probation again. The Dean might not know my name yet, but the Expulsion Committee wouldn't either. It was a fair trade. All I had to concentrate on now was finals.

Todd's finals finished on a Tuesday and mine finished that Wednesday. He was moved out an hour after his last exam, but came back the next evening so that the two of us could get drunk together before moving on to "greener pastures". He called it that because he was from the west side of the state and really *was* moving back to fields and pastures and all that farmer stuff. That last night I spent with Todd was very special. He was extremely patient and gentle with me, especially since it was my first time...getting drunk that is. When I could no longer feel my legs, he let me put my arm around his neck for support while I puked. When I could no longer feel the rest of my body, he held my head up so I didn't make a mess on the floor.

My parents arrived the next morning, but Todd had already left. I vaguely recall through my stupor a death threat if I ever became a writer and wrote about him unless it was published in Penthouse. Mom and Dad were both happy to see me and glad that I was confident I hadn't flunked out of school and wasted all their money. Aside from inquiring about my exams, the only questions they had were why I insisted that they speak very quietly and why they had to leave the "damn" curtains closed. After all my stuff was safely packed away in the van, I went back upstairs for one last look around the room. So much had happened and changed since I'd first arrived. God only knew what would happen in the fall, but before I could get to that, I had to survive the summer.