

## HIDING: AN ESSAY

I believe to this day, with a conviction so ardent it is probably akin to that which motivates religious radicals, domestic terrorists, and Kanye West, that I did not, as my mother asserted that evening in 1995 or 1996, choose the flashlight because it was pink. In fact I am fairly certain that the flashlight in question *just happened* to be the first one hanging on the rack and that I didn't even notice it was pink until my mother pointed it out to me. I'd simply grabbed it because it was the most conveniently located and we were in a hurry. I'll concede that I was a pretty queer kid<sup>1</sup>, but kids learn quickly how to survive in the world, especially the queer ones, and at age ten or eleven, despite never having gone to summer camp before, it seems unlikely that I didn't know better than to take a pink flashlight with me.

That the flashlight was pink, however, was the first thing my mother noticed. The summer camp had sent in the mail a list of items I'd need to bring with me. The flashlight was on it, and things like tennis shoes, bug spray, "modest swimwear," and shortly after arriving at the Target on South Bend's south side, my mother ripped off the bottom half of the list and, handing it to me, sent me in search of the supplies listed thereupon. I quickly found the batteries, the hiking socks (surely the first intimation I'd caught of the possibility of such an activity, otherwise it's hard to believe I'd have agreed to the whole summer camp thing in the first place), plastic disposable poncho in case of rainy days spent out of doors (likewise), and the flashlight. Certain she'd be pleased at how expediently I'd completed my tasks, I rejoined my mother, somewhere between the coolers of frozen pizza and microwaveable dinners and the first aisles of the Sporting Goods section, delineated by the pup tents and inflatable mattresses in their oblong boxes, proudly bearing my spoils. Instead of the glad tidings I'd expected, however, I was met with a disapproval so fierce and abiding I confess it troubles me to this day.<sup>2</sup>

"What are you thinking?" she railed at me. "You already get made fun of and here you want a pink flashlight?" I looked at her, stunned, silent. I was near dizzy with the belief that I hadn't chosen it *because* it was pink, that I didn't "want" a pink flashlight. My stomach turned with the sickening rage that accompanies any false accusation. Yet I couldn't defend myself, or provide what I knew was the true and perfectly

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<sup>1</sup> I remember once waking up from a nightmare – sweaty, breathless, in tears – wherein my older brother was destroying my cassette copy of Mariah Carey's *Daydream*. Naturally, I went wailing of the terror into my mother's bedroom, demanding that she wake my brother and make him swear that such an atrocity he would never commit. I was requisitely chastised for my "dramatics" and sent back to bed; my brother slept undisturbed.

<sup>2</sup> I have hyperbolic tendencies, so you should know that when I say it "troubles me to this day," what I most likely mean is that I think about it sometimes.

logical explanation. I couldn't, because there was a subject that breathed always just beneath the surface, a truth unexpressed, seemingly inexpressible, that in moments like this bubbled dangerously to the top. I couldn't, because there was no way to talk about the flashlight without talking about that other thing, however obliquely.

My mother removed the flashlight from the shopping cart, thrusting it at me as if it were a dirty and soiled thing, and sent me to find one more appropriately hued. I returned a few minutes later with one that was blue.

If my mother's verbiage sounds cruel, let me assure you that her point was not wholly unfounded: I *did* get made fun of. A lot. In seventh grade, Eric Kelter and Ryan Strong and some of the other "popular guys," a "friend" told me, nicknamed me Banana Eater<sup>3</sup>; Ed Snell in ninth grade P.E. was fond of calling me by the names of gay celebrities, hurling "Elton John" or "George Michael" at me with pejorative force; Donald Mackey, after watching me race a group of four classmates around the track sophomore year, had greeted me at the finish line with the inquisition, "You a cake? You a cake ain't you?"<sup>4</sup> I escaped the academic identity of The Bullied for two reasons: 1) I was mostly unafraid to come to my own defense, usually with some retort as snappily generated as it was cruel, but resorting to fisticuffs when necessary, and 2) there really wasn't such a thing as "bullying" in the 90s. Kids were just kids and some of them were assholes.

From a certain perspective, I did the absolute most to make myself an easy target. That's what my mother was teaching me with the pink flashlight, and if her rhetoric seems misguided her intention is understandable in a way I couldn't, truly, until many years later, as I watched a group of three year olds ignore my nephew in a McDonald's PlayPlace. I can't imagine it's pleasant to hear daily the many ways in which people had been cruel to your child, or see, as clearly as my mother did, the things about her child that made him subject to those cruelties. She was trying to help: if I didn't want other campers to make fun of me, she was saying, perhaps I shouldn't take a pink flashlight to camp. If I didn't want Marcell Peterson to ask me nine times a week if I was sure I didn't have a pussy, or for Leon McCray to spit slurs at me in the cafeteria line at lunch, then perhaps I should *not* do my best Jessica Rabbit, singing "Why Don't Do you Do Right?" for the entire class during free period. Perhaps I should *not* know all the dance moves from the 2001 *Lady Marmalade* music video – or at least not perform them, wholly without irony, at Ben Cusk's sixteenth birthday party. After all, those were not compulsive, uncontrollable behaviors but very calculated<sup>5</sup> performances I enacted with complete agency, and,

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3 Long before I'd ever, *ahem*, eaten my first banana.

4 I confess that it was many weeks before I figured out that Donald meant "Cake" as an abbreviated version of "Fruitcake," and, as it struck my impressionable fifteen year-old mind as a rather creative neologism, I found I could only be mildly offended. This as well happened in gym class, which is basically a master-class in the enforcement of patriarchal ideals of manhood.

5 And, it has to be said, expertly executed. Incidentally I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize, sincerely, to Ben Cusk, if my antics hampered your birthday festivities.

though they happened a few years after the incident with the flashlight, they are nevertheless emblematic of my general hijinks. Recalling them leaves me as tempted as anyone toward viewing my situation with a well-damned-if-he-wasn't-asking-for-it attitude. But I was bothered by it. I think of the times I stayed home sick when I wasn't, or the passing periods I spent nervous-vomiting in the bathroom, or the nights my anxiety was so bad it kept me awake, mentally going over the ways I could be better, pressing the dome of my head methodically against the headboard so that it hurt just a little.

I've often wondered if being an effeminate guy might never have bothered me quite as much if I weren't gay also. An effete nature is not a prerequisite for being homosexual, certainly, but in some circles, many of my characteristics read as indicative of same-sex desire, and that desire is what they were always objecting to, the flaw they were really pointing out. It didn't matter so much that I "ran like a girl" or "talked like a girl" or that I listened primarily to music by women or had a fondness for movie musicals – things few traditional males would have much truck with. What mattered for the people in my life – for Donald Mackey, for Ed Snell, for my seventh grade math teacher who more than once euphemistically chided me for being "too charismatic" – was that these peculiarities weren't so much reading "feminine" as they were reading "gay." And if I didn't care if that they thought I was girly, I did care that they thought I was gay, because I was gay,<sup>6</sup> and, moreover, I didn't want anyone to know.

Maybe that I was gay wasn't why I "ran like a girl," or why I liked "girl music," or might have chosen a pink flashlight, but it was the terrible secret those things threatened to disclose. My body, that treacherous thing, and the things I made it do, my interests, habits, tastes – absolutely everything about myself, it seemed – constantly betrayed the only secret I wanted to keep. Secrecy equaled survival, so, albeit with a lack of success that belied my true ambition, I tried to be a man: I practiced masculine postures in the full-body mirror on the back of my bedroom door, lowering and broadening my shoulders and training my hips away from their tendency to jut out to either side whenever I stood idle. I watched the men and boys I knew, studying the way they walked – slower than I, I noticed, at once more causal and controlled, their hips hardly moving. My entire torso seemed to sway when I walked, and I suffered backaches and constipation training it to do otherwise. I studied male characters in movies and on television and tried to emulate their natures and speech patterns and mannerisms. I spent more time with my brothers and less time with my sisters, and started going to the baseball games and wrestling meets my father officiated on the weekends, as if the problem all along was that I was simply spending too much time around women. Yet any sustained effort to modify my behavior was, I discovered, ultimately failed, not to mention exhausting. I tried, bless my little heart, but the cold truth was that I just wasn't any good at being a dude. I would not be able to hide there.

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6 SPOILER ALERT: Still am.

We find other ways of hiding. Because I wasn't and felt that I'd tried and couldn't be traditionally masculine, I became obsessed with masculinity. If I couldn't appease its mighty strictures with my life, I could, perhaps, mollify it with my ethics.

This line of thinking manifested itself in many ways, most prominently in my habit of "dating" only "straight acting" guys. These were guys who were masculine in the most typical ways: sloppy dressers, careless groomers, video gamers. Because they were all, like me, in their early 20s, they skewed toward un-showered skateboarders or the type of guys who went around dressed as if they were always on their way to the gym. We had very little in common, but that seemed beside the point. What mattered about these guys was that they were successfully masculine.

When I was with them I could imagine my father liking them. I could imagine them getting along with my brothers, all of them huddled in front of the television some Sunday talking about football – never mind that I could hardly get these guys to go to Burger King with me, let alone home meet my parents. But if I could have, I knew that they would have been included in ways I was not, because I didn't follow sports and didn't have the vocabulary to participate in the conversations, didn't know anything about cars, wasn't in a poker club, wasn't interested, and these things, too, snatched of my gayness. Being with a veritable "man's man" seemed like a vicarious sort of masculinity, like if I couldn't be it I could at least find some validation in possessing it. And even as these relationships happened largely in both the literal and metaphorical dark, even as "dating" these fellows very rarely entailed actual dates, I relished knowing and telling my friends that the guys I slept with were routinely as butch as football quarterbacks.

And yet, it wasn't just that they were masculine. It was the privilege that masculinity allowed them. I liked that they could engage in homosexual acts in private and still be whomever they wanted in public. It wasn't the first thing people asked them. It wasn't an attribute people noticed from across the street, as it was for me, like a leg ravaged by Polio. It didn't have any bearing on them as a person.

To be sure, there are perfectly masculine gay men in the world, even if you don't see them on television, and while my "boyfriends" ran a spectrum of sexual identity from strictly-dickly to inconsistently straight, they tended toward the latter. It's no coincidence that many of them were closeted and that the ones who weren't lost some of their appeal each time they referred to themselves as gay. By the time I got to college I was beginning my coming out process, which was incremental and longer than necessary. I spent a long time one-foot out, testing the waters, unsure that I wanted to get wet. Those were heady times and things were very enmeshed: because my masculine failures had always left me exposed, masculinity and heterosexuality had become synonymous. That these guys were masculine meant they could be gay without it disturbing their lives very much, and, as long as we didn't go out in public, my life could be undisturbed as well. There was nothing wrong with the honest

attraction I felt for these guys, even if it was purely sexual, but beneath its lusty veneer, motivating it, there lurked a sinister self-doubt, if not self-hatred, that liked these men *solely because* their behavior coded masculine, because they “passed,” and not because I liked *them*.<sup>7</sup> I knew those connections would never amount to anything deeper than the exchange of basic banalities and bodily fluids. They weren’t even connections; they were a way of staying in the closet, of denying myself an authentic life.

Full disclosure: I still like masculine guys. The acknowledgement does not necessarily portend rectification. My preference is still and will probably always be for guys who are slightly rough around the edges, slightly muscled, able to navigate a toolbox, and there’s nothing wrong with that. We are to a certain extent mere slaves to our tastes, wily as they are, and too-close analysis turns up more inconsistencies than followable logic. However, I work now to remember that I wasn’t merely finding delectation in my proximity to masculinity, but justification, exculpation, absolution. At least, I thought I was finding those things. I realize now, with the clarity that comes only from hindsight, that what I found there was not amnesty but further abjection. In those guys I “dated” and the things about myself I tried to change I wasn’t finding the clemency I didn’t truly need: I was finding a place to hide.

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, I’m quite certain I resolutely hated two or three of them, and at least one of them was a downright deplorable human being.

