

Aiden Steinle
Bob Bednar
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From The Other Side

“When did you know?”

It’s a question I get often, especially now that I’m putting myself out there and trying to meet new people. Usually I respond with a quick “Umm, I’m not sure,” and look away. If they press, I follow up with an “I just knew,” and change the subject. It’s the truth that doesn’t require an explanation. For the longest time, that was the only one I knew.

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It was going to be a great weekend. That Friday, after a little wheedling and a stroke of luck, I was set to be the MC at the John Jay High School Talent Show. Admission: Free. I would tell jokes, introduce acts, and be up on stage the whole time! To my friends, the job of MC was a joke. The talent show was even more of a joke. I took it as my “senior moment to shine,” something I had earned after three years of watching and waiting.

I invited all of my best friends. There was Matt the Merchant, the dude who sold sodas and candy for a dollar when the teachers weren’t looking, Crystal, the girl who sat next to me in Latin who always had a vine to share, Emma, the girl I kept reminding myself that I had a crush on. And, of course, there was Calvin. We were doubles partners on the tennis team, Varsity #1 and #2. It varied who had which spot. Each week we would challenge each other and each week we’d crown a new champion. He was my best friend.

I practiced my terrible jokes all week before the show, until my teachers begged me to stop. I had hundreds of index cards, each joke worse than the last.

“What’s brown and sticky?”

Nobody wanted to know.

“A stick, of course! What did you think I was going to say?”

The jokes usually elicited a few laughs and groans. I thought they were wonderful. It was going to be a great time.

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Back then, I lived for tennis. At the end of the school day, no matter what else had happened, there was always tennis practice to look forward to. It was a chance to release the pent-up frustrations of the day while being part of something bigger than myself. Calvin and I eagerly anticipated our weekly challenge matches to see who had improved most. The seniors would hang out afterwards, spreading gossip and talking trash. It was wonderful.

After practice one day we started talking about relationships: who we liked, who we’d want to be with. I listened awkwardly, not hearing anything. A silence opened around me, expectantly. I looked around. It was my turn. Hesitantly, I said what I always told people who asked: that I “liked” Emma but hadn’t said anything. That I was going to ask her to the Prom. It was enough; the attention passed.

It had been our agreement, since sophomore year, that Emma and I would go to Prom together. Whenever I was confused or had concerns about things, I would tell myself that I liked her. That’s how crushes worked, right?

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Sure, I had the Terrible High School Girlfriend Experience™ that so many others share. Two freshmen too nervous to hold hands, we would give each other odd looks and walk to our respective classrooms together. After a week with an even mix of pining and ambivalence, a kiss was attempted. I did not initiate and I was not prepared. Among mumbled apologies, I managed to explain that I didn't want to “date” anymore. That was the end of that. We stopped trying to hold hands and stopped walking together. We didn't talk after that. I was relieved.

Then there were the locker room moments. Quite different from those nostalgically experienced by some more well known personalities, mine were filled with moments of tension. Ever aggressive towards the tennis team, the soccer boys would play “pranks” on us, stealing our shoes, stuffing our lockers with garbage, or just pissing on our clothes. The coaches didn't care, we were just boys being boys. Once, as we made our way in to change after practice, a few of them were waiting for us.

They were hooting, howling, screaming together, all of us in a cage. I visited a simian research facility for a field trip once. It was unbearably similar.

“You know you want to look, fags.”

“Bunch of gay ass bitches. Y'all wanna see our dicks don't you?”

They were naked, standing on our benches, climbing on our lockers. We didn't look. We left, slipped back outside to the daylight so they wouldn't do anything worse.

“You know you want to! Come back...”

I hadn't looked. Had I looked? I didn't think so. That means I'm not a queer, right? I definitely hadn't looked. But had I wanted to look? Does that matter? I couldn't remember.

After that, we avoided the locker room as much as we could, wearing our uniforms underneath our regular clothes and not changing after practice.

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Once we had our own cars, Calvin would meet me in the parking lot after practice most evenings to talk about stuff and share Gatorades. I kept a stash of them in my trunk, in a false floor above the spare tire. I called it my “smuggler's compartment,” after the hidden storage pods on Han Solo's Millennium Falcon.

We grew closer our senior year, and I began to feel attached in a way that I found confusing. I brushed it aside. That's how friendship worked, right? I would tell him about Emma, and he would tell me about Andrea. Things were great.

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The day of the talent show was a blur. I don't remember any classes that day, but I do remember snippets of the show. Peeking from behind the curtain, I could see people trickling into the auditorium. Tens if not dozens of parents had paid the exorbitant free admission to see their children perform trap dance remixes and sing solo covers of Adele. What I didn't realize is that they hadn't paid \$0 to hear a nerdy white boy tell jokes that were never funny.

Flushed with excitement, I stepped out onto the stage and let the audience know that it would be a few more minutes. Scattered murmurs. I slipped back behind the curtain. We were waiting for a piano to be set up for the first act. The scheduled time to begin came. It passed. I couldn't handle it anymore.

“I'm just gonna go out there,” I told whoever would listen. “Once everything's ready let me

know. I'll keep them entertained until then.”

There were no discernible objections, so I stepped back out.

“Hi everyone! Goodness, those lights are bright! I’m Aiden, I’m your host for the talent show this evening. Our first act has a piano in it! We’re trying to set that up right now, but in the meantime I have a question for you: if we dropped that piano down a mineshaft, what would you get?”

More murmuring.

“A flat miner! You know, like the note..?”

Groans. A few laughs.

I couldn't make out any faces, but I hoped my friends were there.

Eventually it was time to begin the show. I introduced the acts, followed up with a few of my corny jokes. It was going well.

Towards the end, a tired parent shouted at me that they were here to see the performances, not hear my terrible jokes.

“Well, it seems that some people here don’t like my jokes,” I said, somewhat bemused. “I’m trying to be cheesy here, but some of y’all are just laugh-tose intolerant.”

That was it. My best joke. I walked off the stage.

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After, in the parking lot, Calvin and I shared Gatorades. It was dark now, the sun had set during the show. The amber streetlight dully lit families ambling to their vehicles. The cicadas screaming in the trees muffled the highway a few blocks away.

Lingering nerves and excitement from the show began to build again in the silence between us. We had laughed and we had talked. What else was left?

“You could come over to my place,” Calvin said, looking over at me.

I was shocked. This wasn’t something we did. This wasn’t something I did. Sure, I had friends, but those friendships usually operated between the bells. I didn’t go to people’s houses.

“I’d have to call my parents first,” I hesitated.

“We could watch TV,” Calvin said. I listened closely, anticipating. “Or... we could play Minecraft.”

He had me.

I called my mother, explained how my friend’s house was so much closer to school and how very tired I was after the show. Yes, I would be back in the morning. No, I didn’t have a toothbrush. No, that doesn’t matter!

“I can go.”

“Sweet! Let’s head back!”

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We had our own cars so we drove separately. The quiet, dark roads to his house gave me space for reflection. I was excited. Yes, I was excited because I would be hanging out with my friend. Is that the only reason? Or was it something else? What else could it be? Nothing else, obviously. Frustrated, I turned on the radio. Adele. Two different people had covered this song at the talent show. Overplayed and overwrought, the song’s lyrics began to twist themselves into my thoughts.

After that I was no longer alone. Adele and I made our way to Calvin’s house in the dark, each willfully ignoring the other.

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When we arrived, it was late by high school standards. We went straight up to his room, quickly but silently. Once inside, I saw the LEGO helicopter I had given him for his birthday. There were Halo figurines, artifacts from childhood and adolescence, and vestiges of the person I knew. He hopped on his bed and turned on the TV.

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Sifting through old memories can reframe others. Letting them slip through your mind, each a glimpse into a past version of yourself, illuminates connections you didn't know existed before. I see it now, in the confluence of floating memories. Why couldn't I see it then?

Revisiting his room in my mind, I feel as if I am trespassing. This is a place that I shouldn't be. This is Forbidden. It isn't mine. I was only there once, but it feels like I'm there again. I don't want to leave.

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We opened a whole new world that night, just the two of us, right there on his Xbox. Using the split screen feature we could both play at the same time, him on the left, me on the right. We worked together to build a shelter into a home. During the days I'd scavenge for flowers and seeds. I made a farm and began to grow melons, making sure we had enough to eat. He'd delve into deep caves, searching for coal and iron and later gold and diamond. Things were great.

I began to think about why I might be so happy. I decided it was this analog for life, spending time with a close friend, working together in a world we'd built together... It was too much. I decided I needed to sleep.

"Aren't you tired?" I asked. "I'm usually asleep by now."

"Eh. I guess we can wrap it up. I'll save the world. If you come back, we can keep going."

I realize now that I never did. The save file likely hasn't been opened again. I doubt the Xbox works anymore. Fittingly, that world began and ended that night.

He told me that I could sleep on a futon in the guest room. He told me that if I needed anything, I should just ask. I felt shocked, then confused by the sudden emotion. Why was I surprised? What had I expected? It was obvious, that's what the guest room was for. I was a guest. That's where I went.

Alone with my thoughts in the guest room, I had time to process. Why did I feel such excitement when he invited me over? Why was I surprised and offended when he offered me a guest room? What had I expected? The answer was there next to me, in the emptiness of the bed and the silence of the guest room. I had been denying it for so long. It was time to accept myself.

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From the other side, I can see it now. It all fits together, tied together with a nice bow. But that's not how it was then. Often, it's hard to understand the meaning behind certain feelings and events while they're happening. Once the paradigm shifts, however, and the rules are revealed, it feels obvious. How could I have not known?

So, looking back through some of these memories, perhaps there was a moment that I knew when I hadn't before. If I had to pick one, it would be when I was there, alone with my thoughts on the futon. But if someone were to ask me what it was I learned, could I tell them?

I reconsider the question.

“When did you know?”

“Then. It was then.”

Before the response, I ask:

“What about you? When did you know?”

Author’s Note:

I like to think of myself as a student of many disciplines - math, art, technology, writing - but I struggle to understand who I am as a person. Things aren’t always what they seem. As I’ve tried to come to terms with my identity, it always seems to shift under my feet.

Reliving this somewhat inconsistent collection of memories makes what took years to understand obvious. Listening to the popular Adele song now, I’m confronted with the emotions I felt then. But they don’t feel bottled. The new context makes them fresh and still sharp. I see parallels everywhere; memories, lyrics and feelings blend together and I’m left in tears by a song I never liked.

None of our actions were out of the ordinary. Friends hang out and play video games all the time. But the pining. The longing. I didn’t know what it was at the time. With hindsight I’m able to recontextualize the details. I can put things together in a way that makes sense. As I lived through those moments, however, it was different. It was innocent.

If I could reach out to myself then, I’m not sure there’s anything I could say. It’s something you have to experience for yourself.

This has been an interesting class. Out of my three assignments, this definitely required the most introspection. Opening up to myself and my classmates was odd at first, but it was definitely worth it. This was a great exercise in narrative writing and, in some ways, it was the easiest because I only really had to be accountable to myself. I would have liked to use my second article since I thought that it was my best work, but I can understand why Marta wanted to keep that evening off the internet. I understand that letting some of those more intimate moments exist on the internet can be scary.