

## Coming Out in Slow Motion

Autumn leaves fell past the window of Josh's office. *The Fall of Freddy the Leaf*, he thought, and frowned at the memory. They had read that little kids' book at Eddie's funeral Mass years ago; it had been one of Ed's favorite books as a child. Josh remembered that Eddie was only 20 years old when he died. "Still a child," he thought. Ed's surprise diagnosis of leukemia, followed by a brief, months-long struggle to hold onto life, had been a wrenching experience and even now Josh could feel the icy fingers of grief grab at his insides. The cold in his guts registered in his eyes, but not on his face. Josh's features remained frozen in place, but inside he felt broken into jagged pieces.

"Cancer can be a cruel teacher," he mused.

Lifting his eyes to look through the window, Josh remembered where he was. "Pull yourself together, old man," he muttered. It had been a while since he let himself wander in that past chapter of his life. "Stay focused."

Today was one of those crisp autumn afternoons in Boston. Josh loved the sound of dried leaves gyrating in the wind, the crackle and shush of multi-colored brush under foot, the pungent smell of fireplace smoke. It evoked a kind of melancholy in him and got him thinking about times past.

Born in late November, he had always loved this time of year. It was his favorite. When the sounds and smells mixed with the scent of burning cedar, maple, or oak from a hundred neighborhood chimneys, as it did this past afternoon, the sensation was magical. Walking back from the "T" after his errands, Josh was already in a kind of wistful reverie, a more frequent companion now in his later years. In a counter-intuitive move, he had retired and moved back to Boston, shunning the surf and sand of Florida or the warm desert of New Mexico. He had returned to the comfort of familiarity and remembrance. The Charles River always felt more like home to him than the Maryland hills along the Susquehanna where he grew up. He had first fallen in love with it from the moment he entered Boston's city limits on the way to freshman year at MIT. That's where he met Eddie.

"There ya' go again," he thought. "Eddie died long ago, after the leukemia had ravaged him. His smile is lost forever." Josh frowned again. He had named his middle child after Eddie, both acknowledging and holding on to his lost affection for the boy. He used that name as a kind of remembering. Josh admitted to himself that he had been infatuated with the boy; Eddie's was a fond, if sad memory. He was buried now on that cold windy hill in western Massachusetts.

Slipping out of his hoodie, Josh laid it neatly over the back of his deskchair and sat down. He stretched his legs and tried to get comfortable. Picking up a newly sharpened #2 pencil — he always thought better with a soft lead pencil, preferring pencil to pen — Josh wrote the sentence that had been gnawing at him all afternoon:

"Kevin was my first full-on crush." Long before Eddie, it had been Kevin.

Snippets of long-passed memory tumbled in: Kevin, a year younger than Josh, and eager to take those Polaroids at the watering hole where they often went summer skinny dipping together. Kevin, playing drums with the rest of his teenage band at local venues, after which the two would go home for a weekend sleepover. Kevin, standing with Marci in that picture Josh took on the front porch of his house before a dance, standing with that "I'm all that" expression and auburn hair formed into one long bang across his forehead. It was Marci, along with Kevin, who suggested that Josh and Kathy join them for double-dates. This became their "thing." It was clear now in retrospect that this arrangement helped to normalize what was happening between Josh and Kevin, his "best friend," the boy Josh loved but for whom he couldn't quite admit his true feelings, let alone broadcast them.

It wasn't until years later — after Kevin had died in that damn War — that Josh could even acknowledge to himself the depth of their affection for one another. More than friends, more than brothers, more even than "lovers," they were soul mates. But in those days, in small town America, who could even recognize or acknowledge the feelings they had. There were no words... at least none that were permissible. Theirs was a love that "dared not speak its name."

Josh felt his insides quiver. Yes, Kevin was his first crush. And the memory stirred him, causing an old familiar longing from the past to wake up with a visceral reaction. His heart fluttered, his groin aroused, but it was only from long-past memories. Why didn't he recognize his feelings back then, he thought? Why didn't he give them voice? He had first felt a similar attraction at 9 or 10 years old, watching television and having feelings for one of the younger male actors. As he got older, he never lost his appreciation for boyish beauty, or his inner conflict about those feelings.

Even after years of clinical practice, psychological research, and neuroscience savvy, it was remarkable to Josh how sights, sounds, and even smells could trigger moods and long-forgotten memories that stimulated the body into reacting with physical responses like that semi-erection he felt growing down below. He remembered that just hearing a favorite piece of music from the past could begin a cascade of memories from riding together in his car, *The Max*, or sitting on the front porch during a lazy summer afternoon. Josh could sit for hours on the dock at the lake house, listening to music and surrounded by images and visions from times past.

"The past is never really gone," he mused. "We can be haunted by it at any time, anywhere. Even when the mental pictures have gone fuzzy, the feelings and reactions are still alive. The body keeps score." And, it's not always clear whether gratitude or an exorcism are needed.

Josh lowered his head slightly. He recalled that Kevin never heard him say "I love you" before he died in that steamy jungle. This was a recurrent regret that nagged at Josh in times of remembrance. In all his 70-plus years, this was one of his biggest regrets. Banishing it seemed

impossible at this moment, and so he gave in and silently watched the leaves drifting outside his window.

"Did he think of me as he lay dying?," Josh wondered.

Dusk settled in.

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Josh met Kevin Flynn in high school. Kevin's older brother, Matt, was a classmate. Recently moved in from a small town down the road, Josh started hanging out with Matt. He and his siblings were "townies," already well-known and popular with their peers. Josh and Matt started to hang out and joined the local scout troop together. Kevin wanted to go camping with the older boys as well. He enjoyed being part of the "in crowd" with his brother and his new-found friend.

For his part Josh quickly became infatuated. The younger boy's self-confidence and humor were infectious; later Josh discovered that those same traits masked an empathy and emotional intelligence that adults often described as having an "old soul." For Josh those traits were irresistible. As with most things, however, Kevin was modest and unpretentious about his finest attributes. And, it didn't hurt that Kevin was easy on the eyes. He possessed a quiet and unassuming beauty. He didn't know how attractive he was. Josh was beguiled and fell hard for him.

Kevin and Josh began hanging out more and more frequently. They would find excuses to be together. They often talked on the phone during school nights when they couldn't be with one another. Even though Josh was a grade ahead and had different classmates, they were never at a loss for words. Being mates easily flowered into something more.

Kevin rode to school with Matt and a few other friends in Josh's car, *The Blue Max*, named after the World War I movie starring George Peppard. (Didn't everybody name their cars back then?). The boys were part of a pack in those days and often traveled together to school, or scouting events, or football games, or gatherings at local diners after the movies, or bowling, or mini-golf. Bequeathed by his grandfather, *The Max* had quite a reputation in Josh's hands; it could go from 0 to 60 in a hot second and the brakes were a great asset, especially when Josh took *Max* through a red light at high speed, backwards. That story made the rounds at school like lightning.

The sleepovers began one long early spring weekend before Josh's senior year. After watching *I was a teenage werewolf*, a classic horror-thriller movie and their favorite, the boys brushed their teeth (who watches movies without soda and popcorn?), got into Josh's double-bed, and after some horse play, finally settled down. In the dark Kevin rolled over and asked,

"Josh, you jerkoff, right?"

Josh was caught off-guard; it was as if Kevin had spoken out loud his own thinking. The idea of revealing his desires scared him and turned him on at the same time.

Josh hesitantly replied: "ye...yeah... sometimes." He was curious to see where this would go. But he certainly was NOT going to tell Kevin that he often did it, picturing him.

"When was the last time you did it?"

"Two or three days ago." Now Josh was really curious.

"Have you ever done it with another guy?" Kevin asked.

"Not really. No. " (Obviously, not quite true.) "Why, Kev?"

"Do you want to do it now?"

That simple inquiry led to many nights of mutual pleasure and, as their hormones opened the door to even more intimacy — to time spent sharing dreams and desires, and the kinds of secret confidences that come with teenage companionship and yearning — their bond thickened and grew.

Josh delved more deeply into Kevin's heart; he was enchanted. Josh found himself confessing his own travails of living with parents involved in a civil war at home. He had found someone to share his unspoken pain, and surprised even himself with these revelations of soured love and loneliness. Slow to trust, he found sharing private secrets with Kevin oddly comforting. It was like ripping off a bandage and redressing the wound with soothing medicine. Kevin was an open and attentive listener; his deep hazel eyes reflecting the shared ache he felt for his mate.

If anyone could have seen and heard what was going on in these intimate conversations, they would have known that the boys were falling in love. But, the world around them could not recognize their relationship for what it was without socially acceptable labels. Their burgeoning love remained closeted, even from themselves. The times and social conventions conspired to keep their mutual love hidden. "Oh, yeah, they are best friends," others would say. "Everybody knows that." But Josh and Kevin were inexorably becoming more. They were moving beyond the labels they had at hand.

And so, when Josh eventually graduated and moved to MIT in Boston to study civil engineering on a full ride and Kevin joined the Marines a year later, they accommodated to traditional expectations by writing cautious letters to one another. Included within brief parentheses, scattered throughout their newsy sharing of information about previous classmates and former teachers, were veiled allusions to deeper emotions. Sometimes they would refer to past events with cloaked and suggestive references. It wasn't ideal, but they could cope this way until Kevin got leave and could visit Boston.

A little more than one year later, during Kevin's first deployment as a Marine, he was killed by a Vietnamese sniper's bullet. Josh's heart was shattered. He had seen Kevin off to boot camp, full of anticipation. They had a brief, hurried visit before Kevin went to Camp Lejeune and then on to Vietnam. It all happened so fast. And then he was gone.

The news of Kevin's sudden death came in a late night phone call from Matt, who was alerted by his dad. Since graduation, Josh had stayed in contact with Matt and his family, and answered the call on a shared phone in his dorm room. He just stood there blankly with the receiver to his ear. Stunned, Josh said nothing; his mind was frozen. He just could not process the news. Josh slow-walked through the military funeral and tried to comfort Kevin's siblings and parents. But grieving does not always provide comfort, or healing, or forgetting. After a while, Josh numbly moved on and the hole in his heart was covered over with thick scar tissue. All he had left was memories... and a few fading Polaroids.

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After graduating from MIT as a talented engineering *wunderkind* with ideas about stress-resistant constructions, Josh had been hired by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. He made a name for himself as the go-to guy for designing and building underground bomb-proof bunkers. The Army assigned him under contract to lead a classified project halfway across the world in the deserts of Iraq, working for Saddam Hussein. The U.S. was supporting Saddam back then as a backstop against the Iranian mullahs. (Ironically, years later during the air war over Iraq in Operation Desert Storm, Josh would help to locate and destroy the very bunkers he had built).

Josh met — or actually re-met — Bobby when they were assigned together on a side project. They had met briefly at MIT — Bobby as an undergrad, Josh as a graduate teaching assistant — and then lost touch. Now they worked easily together.

At MIT Bobby was just as innocent and eager as Kevin had been but the relationship with Josh was more impassioned and blatantly sexual. They were well matched in their desires and needs. The relationship advanced quickly, aided by a common work schedule and copious amounts of alcohol. Josh came to understand that he, himself needed the heat between them; it helped him to feel alive again. Josh craved the feelings that came when he was with Bobby, and the post-climax deflation they shared always came as a relief. The physical release was an added bonus. The let-down was gentle and the after-glow snuggles were warm and comfortable.

Sometimes he was the big spoon, sometimes the little one; always the whispered small talk in hushed tones was soothing. But something, he knew, was missing. Now he could almost say the words. But, a breathless "I love being with you this way," isn't quite the same as "I love you." It was, however, more acceptable. Neither one pushed to define the relationship. They were content simply to enjoy the closeness and let it unfold. There was no impulse to find or define

labels. Josh didn't think of himself as "closeted." His sexual needs were more likely to be satisfied with guys, but he also found women attractive.

Working in the Middle East, in an ostensibly Muslim nation, required a kind of invisibility. Those around Josh and Bobby assumed they were heterosexual friends. There was nothing to disabuse them of this inference. In effect, their invisibility became like a superpower. They could hide aspects of themselves in plain sight, and they never really acknowledged, even to themselves, that they were "straight-passing." For all its advantages — and with a kind of covert exhilaration — this superpower came with a price.

Josh didn't realize this for a long time.

Josh now knew that queer people existed in the world, although they were few in his line of work for the Pentagon. He had several as good friends, some soldiers, some civilians. But, their experience didn't fully match his. Josh found their "guy talk" boring. They rarely talked about women in positive or affirming ways. And their more obvious "flaming" friends annoyed the hell out of him. He never thought about himself in these ways, so the labels "gay" or "queer" never seemed to fit.

He also found the company of smart young women enticing. Jennie, for one, was a hottie and aware of her effect on others. She was also, like Josh himself, an expert in constructive materials and designs. Bonus. He found her insights, work ethic, and quick wit exhilarating. She could think through complex problems with stunning speed. Working alongside her was a delight. And as her boss, he appreciated her worth. Closeness to her could quicken his emotions, he even fantasized about her sometimes in private moments. But, his attractions to young men, Bobby in particular, always resurfaced and drew his attention. Sometimes, sitting at meetings, his mind wandered to images of Bobby's body or even mental images of random guys he saw walking to work. He never saw Jennie or other women as potential romantic interests.

The relationship between Josh and Bobby lasted a long time, off and on. Sometimes they could meet up and spend intense days together. Infrequently, they would join together on smaller projects in the same region of the world and could be together on a more extended basis. Sometimes their work-related distance allowed only brief, abrupt, but still physically satisfying encounters. They found it easy to talk about mutual friends or work, but always found their way to a bed, or a shower, and a familiar casual routine.

Ten years passed this way. When work was particularly frustrating, or loneliness settled in, a few drinks would kindle his desire for sex and then he would reach out by phone and fuel the anticipation of meeting and drinking again with Bobby.

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When Josh left the Engineers and moved on into the private sector, he began travelling in different circles. He and Bobby gradually lost touch.

A long intimacy dry spell ensued, but Josh was comfortable alone. Perhaps he had finally grown up, he thought, although he doubted it. Perhaps middle-age was having an effect. He had been proud of his body when younger and maintained his weight playing racquetball two to three times a week. But Josh conceded that in later years he hadn't kept working at his physique. The signs of advancing age were creeping in, a slight paunch here, grayer hair there. Maybe he was just tired, or mildly depressed and inertia had taken over, he allowed, but Josh was comfortable and didn't want to do anything about the situation. Life was what it was, and he was content.

Then, in his mid-40s, he met Grace. The lilt in her laugh and perpetual smile in her eyes turned his head. She won his heart. She was much younger than he, smart and full of life. Josh knew he was a "goner" early on, but resisted. He wasn't even sure why. He was glad that he had become sober, that alcohol had been put in its place. That was one complicating factor he did not need in their relationship.

Eventually, Josh succumbed to the inevitable and they were married on a warm summer day in June. Whatever suspicions he'd had about himself, whatever flirtations about identity labels he had, Josh put away. He was in love. The sex was great. The companionship was satisfying. He could now wear "normalcy" like a comfortable pair of jeans. Why overthink the obvious? He was married and living his best life.

Children followed, initiating a wondrous time of celebrations, play dates, children's tv shows — *Handy Manny*, *Blue's Clues*, and *Dora the Explorer* were favorites in their house — along with other festivities of young parenthood and family living. Josh was older than most of the dads in their friend group, but enjoyed the social gatherings, picnics, and Trick-or-Treating in one another's neighborhoods. Visiting with Grace's family and his own siblings — his own Mom and Dad had died — was supportive and rewarding. Grace was the love of his life and they built a future on that love.

She was a natural care giver and a great Mom. When Josh was ready to discuss it, Grace fully supported his desire for a career change. He had excelled as an engineer, but believed that he had done his bit in that arena and felt a call to be more involved with helping people directly. His friend in the Counseling Department at the local university encouraged Josh to look into a change. Again, with Grace's support, Josh began a graduate degree in counseling with a focus on chronic illness and addiction. The specific degree was in Medical Family Therapy and Grace volunteered to do more of the child care. This freed up Josh's time for school. They made it work.

Josh had a personal and family history with alcohol, and knew that misuse of substances, and other pathological behaviors, like gambling or internet gaming addiction were chronic conditions and needed to be addressed that way. "Managing" care was the issue in achieving recovery, not cure. His life-change morphed into a doctoral degree and new career path.

Over time Grace and Josh grew into a comfortable middle age together. The kids grew up, successfully launched, and began to consider having kids of their own. Josh and Grace settled into a comfortable life and Josh's career change proved to be very satisfying.

Then, Grace noticed lumps in her left breast. She didn't think much of it at first; she had experienced several benign cysts in years past and chalked up these new ones as similar in nature. They weren't. Besides, Josh was working toward tenure, the kids were doing well, Grace had begun taking classes in gardening, and news came that a first grandchild was on the way. The urgency to schedule an unpleasant procedure got put off for too long. By the time she scheduled a mammogram, Grace had developed a worrisome, nagging cough.

Grace and Josh's long-time family physician revealed the news first. Late Stage cancer is a terrifying phrase and came as quite a shock, but Grace seemingly took the news with her customary optimism. "We will walk through this together," she reassured Josh with a grim smile. He agreed, and gathered her in with his arm protectively. But, he had misgivings. The doctors said that the lumps had grown quickly and further scans revealed infiltrates into the chest wall. Josh had had brushes with tragedy before, and this felt like the approach of another one. That first night of Grace's diagnosis he lay awake in their king sized bed, watching her breathe. This event would be repeated many times in the months following. The rise and fall of her chest seemed relaxed, and he could almost convince himself that it would all be okay. But the knot in his stomach told a different story. Over years of working in stressful situations, he had learned to trust his gut.

Wary and cautious by nature, Josh was already starting to grieve within weeks of the diagnosis. Early on, Grace began to lose weight, not noticeably, but almost immediately. Her appetite, never hearty, seemed to dwindle. She complained of multiple pains and ongoing soreness throughout her body. She did not tolerate the chemotherapy well and other alternative treatments were ineffective. Even the powerful pain meds would work initially and then lose their efficacy. Her overall mood deteriorated, although she tried to put up a brave front. Unabated chronic pain haunted her eyes. Eventually, when he watched her breathe at night, he noted how shallow and ragged her breathing was, as though the effort to inhale cost too much.

Josh covertly felt the kind of abandonment he had experienced when Kevin and later Eddie died. He knew that these feelings were irrational, but who could he tell about them? He could not tell Grace that her approaching death felt like a betrayal, that he was being abandoned all over again. He could not confide in his children about past loves and losses, and relationships he had never fully acknowledged. He had loved and lost before, but had kept it all close to the vest. He could do it again. And so, Josh resolved to keep it all inside.

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Except for times like these, alone and years later, upstairs in his attic office, when the grief bubbled up without warning.

The autumn chill brought remembrance and a bittersweet feeling of sadness. Looking out of his home office window, watching the leaves being blown about in the gathering darkness, he identified with the leaves. Sorrow, unresolved memories, mourning, conflicts about identity, all twisted in the wind. His gloom became palpable. He tried to slough it off, but it clung to him and would not let go. He felt trapped in his chair, his body refusing to move.

Josh felt the rising unease. "Stay with the feelings," he told himself. "Do not distract yourself. Don't flee or move away too quickly. Let yourself feel the feelings." This advice from his past clinical mentors served him well in this moment.

When he lost Grace, he knew that a powerful tonic had been removed from his life. Their love and marriage had rescued him, he believed, and set him on a path. She grounded him. Their life together was his rock. He could be his best self. Now, turning his thoughts back to Kevin and Bobby, he realized that their love also revealed something critical about himself.

He felt ready to confront his bisexual longings and practices. They were right there from the beginning, ready to be acknowledged and explored, but he had never looked at them directly. In all his long years, with all his education and experience, he had never connected the dots; he never claimed his desires or fantasies as his own. Now he could. The veil of invisibility began to lift. His life experience was punctuated with same-sex practices and longings, he acknowledged, but he had also been married and faithful to a woman he deeply loved and fathered children whom he loved as well.

The clinician in him stopped looking away from the evidence. His experiences over many decades argued for a diagnosis of bisexuality, that is emotional, romantic, and sexual attraction to both genders. Not necessarily at the same time but sometimes with the same ferocity. The longings were there throughout his life, even if he did not act on them. He never acknowledged what they were and the available labels never really matched his experience. He thought that he could live with that realization. This epiphany felt right to him. And this time he did not shy away. Now a label did fit the bill. Josh understood more clearly why he never grabbed at the label "gay." Not only was there no social support for that label in his early life, but the designation never really fit. He could not accept it or identify with it. He was bi-sexual. This was his truth. To have accepted the label "gay" would have foreclosed a deeper exploration prematurely.

At the same time Josh resisted the idea of "coming out" publicly. Too many people were involved. Too many would be affected. And, after all, why was "coming out" such a thing? Why was it only queer people who had to publicly state their private identity to be legitimate? Wasn't the idea to be "authentic"? But, for whom? In whose eyes? His life was the poster child for bisexuality, but while that label was authentic for him, it could easily be misunderstood. Let people assume what they would. "Straight passing" was still serviceable for him; he knew the truth of the matter.

He was finally coming to terms with himself and his past. Weren't the insight and self-acceptance enough? What would broadcasting the label add? He had advised a number of counseling clients through the process of "speaking their truth," but with mixed results. Sometimes there was acceptance, but one could not predict how others might respond. Sometimes consternation and misunderstanding were the result, sometimes a feeling of liberation but always with some confusion, potential derision, and some pain. He did not see the value of inviting this for himself. And bi-erasure was still a thing, he knew, even in the overall queer community. Rather than being "not gay enough" or "straight enough", he thought of himself as simply "enough." And that was the end of it.

Kevin was his first crush. But he was not the only or the last one. Peering back into his history, Josh realized that he had had three great loves in his life: one deeply passionate in his youth, one carnal and oddly sustaining in early adulthood, and one a mature and deeply committed, generative love affair that fostered other loves. Which was most important? The truth was that each was salient at crucial times in his life. Each had grounded him at important moments. He would not — could not — renounce any of them. More than most, he concluded, "I am a lucky man!"

Josh wondered whether he was being a coward for not shouting his good fortune from rooftops and pointing out a path that might benefit others. Perhaps. But at this moment he was comfortable with his own history and sexuality. For today, at least, that was enough.

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