

Raspberry Beret

A Little Background

As a kid I always had this innate need to stick to the background and not stand out. I guess I was never comfortable in my skin. For a reason, unknown to me, I was an “odd one out”. I wasn’t friendless, but I never had best friends, like a lot of kids had. I just blamed it on the fact that my family was dirt poor, my dad was a schemer, and everyone knew it. I knew that they knew something. I knew that I felt *different*.

I didn’t have the ideal life growing up. Honestly, growing up in rural Minnesota for anyone in the 1970s and 1980s sucked, big time. Sure, maybe some people’s lives were like “The Breakfast Club”, but mine sure as hell wasn’t. This is probably due to, if were being psychoanalytic here, my upbringing. My father, Lester, was an abusive parent and my mother, Anne, couldn’t give less of a shit about her kids. Lester cared more about putting hooves on his shit horses than putting shoes on his five kids, and Anne couldn’t make a single good batch of mashed potatoes to save her soul.

I had grown up in a world that was not meant for me, or any child for that matter. I knew my parents didn't like me from the start.

Les was shitty. He dreamed of producing the next Secretariat. He would often take a, already genetically disposed piece of shit, horse to a trainer. Well, when it came time to pay the guy he had no money, so he decided to give the guy my saddle. Let me also add, he shot my dog Charlie, just because. I didn't want to be a poorly bred boy whose sire was Les and dam was Anne, I didn't want to lose my saddle, and I didn’t want my dog to die.

In some ways I felt like a genetically disposed shit horse.

I felt like Les and Anne knew something about me that I didn't. I felt like they were especially cruel to me. It's hard to explain. It's like going your whole life calling something by one name and thinking that's right, while everyone else makes fun of you because they know you're wrong.

I had three other sister who swear up and down that Les and Anne were trying their best to get by and that was their excuse for cruelty. My brother, though, saw right through the bullshit like I did, but he minded his own and left Minnesota as soon as he graduated high school.

My sisters weren't particularly kind either. They'd like to make fun of me for how I combed my hair or how I composed myself. I was just being myself. They would make fun of me and say I had an obsession for Greg from "The Brady Bunch". Yeah, I liked Greg, but I wasn't obsessed with him. It was normal to have boy crushes, so I thought. Girls get to have girl crushes, so why can't I have a guy crush? I wanted to be like Greg. Greg reminded me of one of my friends, Jack. Jack was suave and had an air of manliness. He got all the girls. Getting girls made him popular and fit in.

I wasn't very macho and girls weren't very attracted to me. I was 6'1", underweight, had a pimply face, and my hair was naturally greasy. I suppose girls weren't attracted to my type. I wasn't attracted to girls really either or the burden of having a girlfriend. I began to notice that all my friends were getting girlfriends and they began to notice my lack thereof. They'd say, "Paul, you gotta get yourself a girlfriend," and "Paul, if you don't get a girlfriend, everyone is gonna think you're a faggot."

1986

Well, I was 18, I graduated high school, where even the shop teacher thought I'd be a nobody. I was glad to get out of high school. Kids were cruel and there was always a need to fit in, and if you didn't, there were consequences. I remember this one time a kid named Will had really greasy hair and everyone made fun of him for it. A girl sat behind him in math class, and, well, she wanted to see if William's hair would start on fire. It did. These were the people I had to look out for on the daily. Luckily, I dodged most of these cruelties with my acute sense to stay in the background.

A Realization

I needed to do something. I needed to get away from Les and Anne. I needed an education or an outlet, but even in the 80s college wasn't cheap. So, I needed money and I surely wasn't going to qualify for a loan on my own. At the time, the Army was paying kids and paying for their college, and that sounded like a hell of a deal. One thing a *man* would do is join the Army, so that is exactly what I did.

It wasn't really in my planned future to join, and if I could have it my way I would hunt ducks every day, but hunting ducks doesn't make money. But I said *fuck it* and drove to the recruiting station in Mankato and signed up.

I've seen the recruiting posters that the army had posted around town, and boy did the men in those photos look cool. They were buff and manly. Everyone knows that a man in uniform is seen as the ultimate lady killer. I thought that I would look like *man* in uniform and everyone would only know and respect me for it.

Men in the Army were everything I wasn't. They were everything a father could want their son to be. I was scraggly and more feminine than masculine. Years working in fields had done nothing for my physique. I knew in my mind that I wasn't meant to be a Greg or a Jack, but I could sure as hell try.

Basic training was in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. The great thing about basic was that they had food, good food on top of that. Hell, I was so skinny when I joined, the sergeants made me stay after mess hall hours to eat more food. When I joined I was 140 lbs, had one pair of shoes, one pair of pants, and two shirts that I could swap between during the week while the other was in the wash. I had nothing.

The day when I was getting on the bus to go to basic, the sergeants dumped out all of our sacks and made us throw out things that were unnecessary. Well, I had the easiest time packing my shit back up. There were a few guys crying *oh, I miss my mama*, and *sarge, my mama packed that for me*. They didn't give a fuck.

"You wouldn't be in the Army if your mama gave a fuck about you," I heard one sarge say. They were right. Mamas wouldn't let their babies join the Army if there was even a slight prospect of their sons getting shot up at the end of the road. If there was one person in this world that I had to pick as least giving a shit about me, it'd be my mom. I had no mom to miss and no one to miss me. Although this was somber to think about, it was also very liberating. I could be who I want with no one to hold me back.

This was going to be good. The Army gave me everything I needed and more.

Ft. Leonard Wood

Basic was a *different* experience. I didn't mind the stray woodticks that would find their ways into my ass crack or onto my ballsack, but the heat sucked. Summers in Minnesota are hot, don't get me wrong, but the swamp-ass of an August day in Missouri does not compare. One time, although this happened on multiple occasions, we were doing some long outdoor training and I hadn't taken my boots off for three days straight. When I eventually did take my boots and socks off, a nice thick layer of skin came off with my sock.

I remember my first night at basic and it was very surreal. It was dinner time so everyone was gathered, eating and joking. There were rumors spreading around the tables about a guy who already got kicked out that day. An officer in the mess hall made an announcement. I don't really remember the whole speech except for the last part.

The sergeant joked, "we don't allow faggots in the Army, and well, if you think your one, you best hop the next bus for San Fran!" There was a loud roar of laughter from everyone after that one. I guessed San Francisco was a hub for gay people. The guy next to me nudged me, he realized I wasn't really amused.

"Don't you think that shit is funny?" he giggled. His breath reeked of garlic and his teeth were as brown as pig shit.

"Yeah, but I don't really get it. What's wrong with gays being in the Army?"

"Man, they all got AIDS! You may think their nice but they'll trap you in the shower and we all know what happens when you accidentally drop the soap."

"I don't know. They're normal people just like the res--"

“No, they’re fucked up,” he lowered his voice, “don’t stand up for them. Everyone will think you’re a faggot.”

I ended the conversation there. I just didn’t get it.

I surprised myself. I was actually doing well in the Army and we were only a couple weeks into basic. A lot of people complimented me for doing so well, and they respected me. Even though people were noticing my achievements, I mainly stuck to my own. Everyone kind of stuck to themselves, except the occasional convict that found another convict and decided to run amuck through the barracks.

I found myself in the medic’s office often. Although I was doing well, I was often getting myself in a situation where the medic was needed, whether I was bringing someone to the medic or I myself was going to the medic.

The medic was a tall black man, named Ed. His skin glistened in every light like melted chocolate and his voice was deep and warm. It was smooth like he was always talking in a rhythm. He was from the south so he had a nice drawl.

I don’t remember when going into the medic’s office became a result of an accident to on purpose. Ed was always kind and we became good friends. He didn’t treat me like he knew some secret about me. He didn’t know anything about me. He didn’t know anything about Les or my lack of girlfriends. It didn’t matter to him. We got closer and we would spend down time together whenever we had it. He would show me the letters and photos his family would send

him and would vaguely suggest that maybe I would meet them someday. I didn't get any letters, so it was nice to see his. I just thought of how nice it would be to be Ed or be a part of his family.

One evening Ed and I were hanging out, and Ed was telling me how much he missed his family.

"Paul, do you miss your family, or I suppose you have a girlfriend that you miss," Ed asked.

"I don't really have a family or girlfriend to miss. What about you? I bet your girlfriend looks like Janet Jackson," I laughed.

"Ha. I, um, I'm more of a Prince fan." Ed's tone changed. I could tell he was nervous and I knew what he meant.

"Maybe you can borrow my raspberry beret sometime," I said trying to keep a straight face. He reached out and grabbed my hand. He laughed and everything felt right and I let my guard down. I felt a weird feeling in my stomach, it was nice. I thought to myself *this is what it must feel like to be Greg.*

I started to get weird looks from guys around the barracks. I could tell that they would look at me and whisper something to the next guy. No one would compliment me on my jobs well done or even try to make small talk. I was outcasted.

At some point people reported to the sergeant of getting "weird vibes" from me, weird vibes between Ed and I. At least that is what was disclosed to me. They felt like they needed to put me through testing, again, just to make sure all of their information was correct. Everyone was acting strange, very hostile. The physical didn't last long and it was virtually painless. I felt

numb. They made me feel as though I had done something wrong. Like I was a disease they didn't want to catch.

There wasn't a thing in this world that I can think of that would deserve this kind of treatment.

Well, eventually I got the news. I was being discharged. Their reason? I no longer met the standards of the United States Army, sexual psychosis, or in other words, I was gay. I didn't even know. I mean, I knew, but I didn't know that everyone else did.

Charlie

Charlie was the best friend I had. He was a beautiful springer spaniel and was the smartest dog I had ever known. His fur was soft and feathery and he was the best companion to have around when I would go set traps out in marshes, around lake shores and various other places where muskrats could be dwelling. Charlie wasn't aloud inside, but I would be lying if I said I had never him in when Les and Anne were gone.

Many days were spent in the fields, whether I was trapping, hunting, or bailing hay. Although I would get a little money from the rare rodent I would catch, it wasn't sustainable enough for me as a kid. I had no monetary means where I could buy Charlie treats or food and I kept asking Les to buy some dog food. He just wouldn't buy Charlie food, and Charlie started to starve. So, as any dog would do, he found some food, but it was a couple of our chickens. Les wasn't happy about that so he grabbed his rifle and killed him. Les didn't understand. Sometimes when people and animals aren't treated right, they do things they wouldn't normally do. And sometimes people kill things without trying to understand them.

It didn't matter now. Charlie was dead and so now was Paul Danielson. Les killed Charlie because Les was ignorant and I needed to kill Paul to become me. So, I changed my name to Charlie Springer and hopped the first bus from Fort Leonard Wood to San Francisco.