

Motorcycle Man or Hell's Angel of Death

After I told my mother that I was gay, something changed for me as well, although I had known it for five or six years already. At the age of thirteen, I noticed that my eyes were attracted to the naked men on the dirty pictures I somehow managed to lay my hands on, rather than to the nude women. I must be gay I thought, only to immediately hide it in a distant corner of my mind. But now that I had openly confessed it, me being gay became a 'fact'.

Sitting at my desk that evening, relieved that my coming-out had not gone down badly so far (although my stepfather, still ignorant of me being gay, might cause problems later), one question all of sudden, unexpectedly posed itself. It flashed in my mind in the form of big bold neon letters: WHAT NEXT? To my surprise and disillusion, the days following my coming-out were no different than before. The subject was not touched upon in the few words that we exchanged between us, mother, brothers and stepfather, every day. Ours was a silent family. We did not talk about feelings, hardly ever expressed joy or sorrow, even in the most emotional of circumstances. So what did I expect? The situation at home was as if nothing had ever happened, which made me feel desolate. Why had I made the effort to come out of the closet at all?

I was at a loss at what to do. Tell my fellow students at university? But how? There didn't seem to be a natural way to do this. Stand up in class and announce 'Hey you guys, I am gay'? No way. It would be easier if I had a boyfriend, but how was I going to find one if no one even knew I liked boys? In exasperation I decided to write down a provocative declaration on the back cover of my agenda, there for everyone to see: 'Proud to be Gay', the slogan of a current militant equal rights group. These were courageous people. I, for me, was a coward. When during lessons I had to write down an appointment, I hesitantly took the agenda out of my suitcase, kept it as close to my body as I could and put it flat on the table in front of me. After a few days of hiding the text, I rubbed it off. A shameful defeat.

One day, I noticed a memo on the message board at the university. Two senior students of sociology were requesting gay students for a conversation group, to discuss what it meant to be gay, to share our coming out experiences, etc. In my distress, not knowing what to do or where to go next, I decided to phone. Even now, after many years, I can still picture myself in the university phone booth (I did not have the guts to make the call from home) dialling the number that I had nervously copied on a piece of paper torn from my agenda. My fingers were trembling and I heard myself breathing anxiously into the receiver, hoping someone would answer, praying they would not. When, finally, somebody answered, and I declared my willingness to join the group, I had the feeling the whole world was listening in and now knew about me: that guy is gay!

A few days later, coming home from afternoon class, my mother told me someone had called and said that I was expected to come to a meeting on Friday evening. She gave me a curious look but didn't ask what it was all about. I never left home in the evenings, so this must have been a surprise for her. Did she suspect that it had something to do with my confession of late? We looked each other in the eye for a moment but remained silent.

Friday evening I left home, still not disclosing where I was going. I ignored the cynical remarks and annoying questions that my stepfather, ever ignorant of what had happened, fired in my direction. His words stuck in my skin like poisonous little needles, but I did not answer. He wasn't surprised by my evasive behaviour: I and my brother had learned to ignore him all the time and to always act as if he wasn't there, a situation we would have preferred highly.

While cycling the eight kilometres to the venue, I avoided coming near groups of youngsters going out to enjoy their weekend in city centre. I was afraid they might tell where I was going, who I was clearly written all over my face: GAY.

Apart from the two sociology students, the group consisted of five guys, most of them slightly older than me. One of them, with long curly brown hair, a big moustache, wearing a leather jacket and very tight jeans, immediately started to eye me, making it clear right from the start that he fancied me. The atmosphere in the group was relaxed and getting to know (for the first time!) other guys that were just like me meant a huge relief. I no longer felt the need to play the prescribed role of an effeminate man and to adjust my natural behaviour, attitude or even character in order to be considered a real gay. It was possible to remain who I was and still be gay. The identity struggle that had confused me for months dissolved into thin air, without a stir, just like that. I could hardly believe it.

At the end of the first meeting, the leather & jeans guy came after me and suggested that he would bring me home on his motorcycle. 'But what about my bicycle?' I stuttered, not knowing how to fence him off. He pressed on but I remained firm, more out of fear than out of conviction. In the end, he drove off alone, but he continued his conquest during the following meetings. The last meeting was held at his home. That evening I noticed to my astonishment that I had developed feelings for him and the urge to go and sit on his lap almost took hold of me. Still, I managed to resist my urge. Then all of a sudden the meeting ended, we all said goodbye to each other and that was it.

I never saw my motorcycle man again. I still think about this period every now and then and only recently came to realize that I may have probably escaped disaster by a narrow margin. The Aids-virus was not yet discovered at the time, the late seventies, but was already spreading among the gay community, silently preparing its devastating attack of a few years later. I now wonder what might have happened if I had accepted to take a ride with my motorcycle man. Would I still have been alive today? Or would Aids have killed me? Is he still alive? Or is he only a memory now? What role was he destined to play in my life: that of my Motorcycle Man or my Hell's Angel of Death? In the end, he became neither and I still don't know whether to rejoice or to mourn.