

I never remember a time when I didn't know Him. We grew up together under the searing Phoenix sun. He was my neighbor, my playmate, my best friend. For 18 years we shared everything: our dreams, our fears, and our lives. He knew me better than anyone and I Him.

Our parents used to say that we were joined at the hip. We carpoled through fifteen years of school, spent every afternoon together after classes, and if He didn't spent the night at my house on the weekends, I stayed at his. Our relationship was dynamic – always changing. It matured as we did.

When middle school drew to an end and high school loomed ever closer upon the horizon, we began to change. Not just us, but everyone our age. With the budding of puberty comes the dawning of sexuality and personal awareness. It is a time when we, as human beings, begin to question who we are. It is a time when we begin to mature not only physically but mentally, as well. We begin to cast aside society's version of the "norm" and form opinions and beliefs of our own. It is an exciting time in the life of a young man, but for me – for us – it was also a time plagued with growing pains.

The summer before our freshman year in high school we began to look at each other through slightly different eyes. We were still the best of friends, but something was different. Through all the years that we had spent together, our sexuality was something that we had never discussed. I liked boys and so did He. We both knew it, but it had remained unspoken. But now, suddenly and without reason, our relationship was altered. We had been dealt a new hand, and this game was going to take some getting used to.

I was beginning to see more than a buddy when I looked at him. I began to realize the feelings I had for Him had grown beyond friendship. I no longer felt I could be myself around

Him. He was the one person in the world I could always open up to, but felt like we had become strangers.

I was terrified; this wasn't supposed to happen. It's hard enough growing up, knowing your whole life that you are gay, but to fall for your best friend is completely unacceptable. As the Arizona sun burned hotter with the coming summer, I grew cold around him. I began to withdraw into myself; I put up walls between us that were stronger than steel. Despite his pleas to get near me, I shut Him out. I alienated the one person who meant more to me than anyone in the world.

I wouldn't speak to Him for weeks. It was strange; I had no idea how lonely I would feel without him always near me. I knew He was only a phone call away, or a few steps out the door for that matter, but something always stopped me. I had worked my whole life to win his trust, and now I felt as though I had violated it. That summer I learned that emotions are not something to be controlled or made sense of. I had been taught to listen to my heart when I was unsure, and my heart was telling me that I wanted to be with Him.

Then it happened. The shit hit the fan, and the wheels were set into motion. A girl we had known in middle school finally lost her long battle with leukemia. She had been close to us and part of our circle for several years. It was a time of grieving in our small community of friends. It didn't make sense that someone so young would be denied the chance to live, to experience everything the world had to offer.

It was the first time many of us had ever experienced death, and we didn't know how to deal with it. For the first time in over a month, I allowed Him to get close to me. I let Him hold me that night as we both cried and tried to make sense of what had happened. The night wore

on, and eventually our tears began to dry. By the first light of morning, we had fAlan asleep in each others arms. It was the first time we had spoken since the school year had ended.

I don't remember who woke up first. It was a few hours later but still very early in the morning. He asked me if I was all right and called my bluff when I told Him I was. He took me in his arms and hugged me tightly. Then his eyes met mine. At that moment there were no more secrets. Without a word He placed his lips upon mine and kissed me. To say it was anything less than magical would not be giving it the credit it deserved.

It was few minutes before we came up for air, but it seemed like hours. Without speaking a word, we had come out to each other, and our feeling had been expressed. They could not be denied any longer. In a moment's time, my best friend had become so much. The beauty of that moment lives on, even today, in my heart.

Neither of us had any idea where to go from here; this was uncharted territory. We had only couples of men and women to model our relationship after, but we did our best. We learned as we went along; everyday became a new adventure. Sex did not come right away. It was a few days before high school started when we decided it was time to explore the physical side of our relationship. To say that we fucked would be vulgar, but to say we made love too strong of a phrase. There was intimacy that night, however, and as He lay sleeping in my arms, spent after our conquest, I knew this was right. If there had been doubt in my mind, it had disappeared, only to be replaced only with a sense of tranquillity and wonderment.

We started high school that year. We were growing up before each other's eyes, and joined at the hip no longer seemed to be a strong enough description of our relationship. As it had been for the last fourteen years, we shared everything. Together we learned to drive, and

together we learned that cigarettes are far more addicting than we had believed. It seemed like the whole world was before us, all we had to do was reach out and grab it.

Not far from our houses, there was a hiking trail. We had been hiking there for years before we discovered an area invisible from the beaten path. Behind boulders and dense shrubbery, we escaped to our own special place, away from the realm of reality. It was there where the world was right – no prejudice, no fear. We went there as often as time permitted. We went there to talk, to listen, to hold one another, and to be intimate. I never thought two people could be a part of one another the way that we were. Our relationship blossomed and grew serious.

That seriousness was something that we tried very hard to keep under wraps. It was uncertainty that silenced us – the uncertainty of losing friends, losing family. We played it cool, though, trying to give no indication that there was something going on between us. As time went on, our secret became harder to keep, and by the time our junior year came around it was all but lost. Friends who had been wondering for years if we were more than best friends began to confront us. Slowly, we began the long process of coming out. By doing so, we learned true friends are accepting; they understand. We also learned it wasn't hard to let go of the ones who had turned their backs on us. Coming out to our friends had been much easier than we had expected. Family, on the other hand, was a different story.

We used to talk a lot about telling our parents – discussions that moved in circles. The parents who had raised us to become men had a right to know, but we knew it wouldn't be an easy thing to say. We finally decided there was no hurry. Our parents would find out in time or not at all if we deemed it that way. It ceased to be an issue. Our relationship was by no means perfect, but we were happy. He was good to me, and we fell into a comfortable routine living

our lives without too much care. After a while, however, that routine became too comfortable, and we got a bit careless.

Sometimes parents come home from their weekend getaways earlier than planned. You can imagine our surprise when my parents found us sleeping intertwined on their living room couch. We woke up with a start to find two sets of eyes staring down upon us with shock. I could feel his heart pounding next to mine. He was scared, and so was I. But the shock that my parents wore turned quickly into amusement. The world had not ended. Parents will surprise you; mine did. Years later, I learned that they had suspected this all along. But they had known that we would tell them when we were ready, not before. I guess we were ready.

We told his parents under very different circumstances. I remember sitting at the kitchen table, trying to figure out a way to broach the subject. After beating around the bush for several minutes, the truth came out all at once. They were not as prepared for it as my parents had been. They had put the thought out of their minds long ago and were more than a little surprised to hear it from us. Nevertheless, they got over it by the end of the day. They had known me almost as long as they had known their own son. They loved us both, and they quickly realized that there was nothing wrong with two young men who cared for each other the way He and I did.

Senior year crept up before what we knew it. It was time now to start planning for the future and give thought to what was ahead. We were legal adults by the time second semester rolled around. Childhood had ended; it was time to start thinking like men. College loomed around the corner, and we had to decide where we would be in a year.

His love of science drew Him to the University of Arizona in Tucson, a hundred miles to the Southeast. My passion for literature and the English language pulled me to New York

University. The thought of leaving scared us both, but we put it out of our minds as long as we possibly could. We took life one day at a time, and lived for every moment that we had.

In May, we graduated with honors from the high school that had given us so many memories. We attended the parties that ensued and promised everyone that we would spend time together over the summer.

I worked weekdays filing documents for a lawyer, while He supervised lifeguards at a local water park. We looked forward to the evenings when we could be together and tried not to think about the departure that was inevitable. To an extent, we alienated the rest of our friends, but we could not bear the thought of spending a free moment apart.

The summer came rapidly to an end. We spent the last few days apart, packing, getting ready to leave, and trying to comprehend what was happening. The day before I left for New York City, we went hiking one last time. The August afternoon was less blistering than usual. Clouds filled the sky as the monsoon approached in the distance. The temperature had dropped below one hundred degrees, but the humidity hung thickly in the air.

By the time we stopped to rest, sweat was pouring down our backs. Our faces were wet, too, but not from perspiration. Silent tears rolled down his face as He tried to tell me everything that was on his mind. With my finger, I silenced his lips. I took Him in my arms without a word and held Him as tears fell from my own eyes.

After a few moments, our tears stopped flowing, and our sadness turned slowly into passion. We made our own heat that afternoon, behind the brush on the soft bed of grass that we had come to know well. We knew each other's bodies inside and out, and we knew exactly what was necessary to bring the other the most pleasure. It was different this time, though. It went

beyond the simple thrill of getting the off. This time, it meant something more. This time, it was for keeps.

We rose to the height of passion at the same time, and as we did, three words escaped from our lips. At the same moment, we confessed the only thing that had remained unspoken: “I love you.” For the first time in eighteen years, I said what it was I had longed to say, and I heard the truth I had always known. We had made love for the first time.

We dozed quietly for the next hour. We woke up in time to see the beautiful desert sunset we had come to take for granted. We dressed without a word and walked home in silence. He laid with me in my bed that night. We slept very little; there were too many things we wanted to say.

Mention of our confessions was not made. It was beautiful, but it had come too late. There was no time for it, now. Neither of us could leave if we acknowledged that we were carrying any excess baggage. We promised that we would keep in touch – three letters a week and at least one phone call. It would be all right; we had come this far. As dawn shined its first light through the window, sleep finally came.

The ringing of the alarm a few hours later brought to reality that the day had arrived. Against my better judgment, I let Him come with my parents to the airport. I kissed Mom and gave Dad a hug as I told them goodbye. But I couldn’t say goodbye to Him. It was too hard. Instead, I took Him in my arms and let Him kiss me tenderly on the lips before I boarded the plane.

I was numb all the way to New York. There was too much shit running through my mind to think or feel anything. I barely noticed when the plane landed seven hours later. I collected my bags and found a cab that would take me to the dorms, my new home. I met my roommate

that night. He was a nice guy, and we seemed to get along all right. He was from New Jersey and was familiar with the sights and the sounds that the city had to offer. We had a few days before classes started, so I let him take me all around the city.

My love of culture should have made the trips we took exciting, but the only memories I have of those days are the photographs I barely remember taking. There was too much on my mind to enjoy what the town had to offer. I missed Him more than I ever thought I could. It was hard sleeping in a new bed without Him next to me, in a new town thousands of miles away. I didn't know what to do. My roommate offered as much comfort as he could, but he was only human. There was nothing human about the ache I felt.

I got a letter from Him the day before classes started. It was simple; He told me the campus was nice, He liked his roommate, and He missed me. At the bottom He signed it with the adverb *sincerely*, not *love* or *I love you*. I would have given anything to have read those words, but at the same time I was grateful that He had not used them.

I was relieved when classes started. I was able to concentrate on something other than my broken heart. I threw myself into my studies and aced every class I took that semester. I still wrote Him now and then, but three letters a week quickly turned into less than three letters a month. We spoke on the phone occasionally, but things were not as they had been. Our conversations were cold, sterile. There was no longer the comfort we had become used to, and I hung up the phone every time with sigh of regret, glad that it was over.

As the semester progressed, I started thinking less and less about him. I began seeing the city around me and all that it had to offer. I immersed myself in the culture that flowed like water and found beauty in the diversity that surrounded me. I loved New York and the university. My grades soared, and I finished in the winter with a 4.0 average.

Snow was falling as I boarded the plane home. In my suitcase were Christmas gifts for my family and for Him. I still missed Him, but I had forced myself to move on with my life. He wasn't at the airport with my parents this time. In fact, it was a few days before I saw Him at all.

On the surface, neither of us had changed, but in our hearts we had grown into very different people. We spent some time together over the holidays. He told me about school, and I shared my pictures and tales of the city I now called home. There were moments when it felt like old times, but those moments were few and far between.

I had not been with anyone since I had left Phoenix, and the few times that we were intimate that month I began to question the reasons for my chastity. I left to go back to New York a week and a half after the New Year. This time we said goodbye. With one word, we admitted failure. There was nothing more talk about. We couldn't get through this; we couldn't make it work. We parted with a hug and a few meaningless words about keeping in touch.

It was easy to go to New York this time. I didn't hurt too badly, but I had never expected our relationship to end like this. If I had been asked two years before, I would have said that He and I would be together forever. It was sad, but I had spent too much time the previous semester in mourning. Now was the time to start living my life.

I returned to school and the city that I had come to adore. The spring semester started without much fanfare, and I was back in a comfortable routine before long. Between classes and spending time with the friends that I had made, I began to look for someone whose time I could share in more intimate ways.

In the last four years I had been with only person, and I turned into a man on the prowl. I wasn't looking for love or long term this time. I simply wanted to find someone whose company I could enjoy and whose body I could explore. In a city like New York, it didn't take long.

What followed was a string of men with whom I spent anywhere from one night to one month with. I was finally experimenting with something I had always known existed, but had never before wanted or needed.

A few months later I was back in Phoenix for the summer. Second semester was over and so was my first year of college. I only saw Him occasionally that summer. We went to dinner a few times, made idle conversation, and tried to be adult about our situation. Things had changed between us. He was no longer someone who I could talk openly or share deep, personal feelings with. In the course of a year, He had gone from my lover to an acquaintance I barely knew. It was sad, tragic almost, but it goes to show that people really do change. We had.

I couldn't wait to start school in the fall. The only thing left for me in Phoenix was my family. New York had become my home. The semester progressed normally and was over in what seemed like no time. The year went on, Christmas came and went, spring break showed up in March, but I didn't even bother visiting Phoenix – there was no reason to. I came home that summer, but it was the last time I did. When my junior year began in the fall, I moved into an apartment with two friends, got a job, and decided I was never going to call Arizona home again.

I didn't think about Him much anymore, and when I did, the memories only made me smile. I wasn't bitter. The past was the past. I was living for the moment at hand, and I was happier than I had been in a long time. There were people in my life constantly; I had made many new friends in college. We went for coffee and to see Broadway shows as often as time and money would allow, and occasionally, my free time was shared with one of the men I dated from time to time.

It seemed as though I graduated with my bachelor's degree in no time. I decided to stay at NYU to complete my master's degree and began teaching introductory classes of English 101

and 102. I realized then why they assign those classes to be taught by graduate students, but it was fun, and I had no complaints. I heard that He had finished his undergraduate studies and had been accepted to the University of Arizona's medical school. He had always talked of one day becoming a doctor, and now He was finally making that dream a reality. I was proud of Him, even though He was no longer a part of my life.

When I completed my master's degree two years later, I decided to leave New York for Washington D.C. to begin my doctoral studies at Georgetown University. I still taught beginning English classes, and enjoyed it so much I decided to make teaching my profession. Five years and grueling dissertation later, I received my Ph.D. at age 29.

To my great delight, I was offered an assistant professorship for the next semester at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. Without hesitation, I packed up all of my things and headed west. Teaching suited me, and it showed. My lectures were full every semester. My love of literature and the written word inspired my students, and a few of them inspired me as the years began to pass by.

The summers I wasn't teaching I began to travel the world. I saw sights that I had only read about and visited places that took my breath away. Sometimes I went alone, sometimes I did not. My personal life remained casual, as it had for nearly fifteen years. I had been scared of commitment since college, and I was not prepared to have that mindset changed. But as I had learned years ago, some things happen when you least expect them.

I met Alan at a book signing in downtown Vancouver. We began talking while we stood in line and decided to have coffee when we left the bookstore. For reasons I didn't immediately comprehend, Alan was different than any of the men I had dated in the last fifteen years. I felt

comfortable with him. I realized later, that was the difference. I was thirty three years old, and I finally decided that it was time for me to settle down.

Alan was a business man—one of the best in the city. We dated for nine months before we decided to move in together. It was a first for me, one of the few that remained in my life. I had already been everywhere and tried everything, now it was time to be a grownup.

Three months later, on our one year anniversary, he told me he loved me. I was surprised by his words, but even more surprised when I heard their echo from my own mouth. It wasn't a first, but it came in a close runner up. It was only the second time in my life I had told a man I loved him.

For the next two years we shared everything. We bought a house on the outskirts of town and loved each other the best way that we knew how. I never told Alan about Him. Perhaps it was wrong of me, but that was the one thing that I couldn't share with anyone.

As Alan and I began to grow closer, I began thinking about Him again. Sometimes at night, after Alan had fallen asleep, I would sit outside on the patio and think of Him as I smoked. There was no reason for it, but I couldn't help it. As far as anyone could see, including Alan, I had everything. I had a nice house, a job that I adored, and a man who loved me more than anything in the world. The only thing that was missing was Him. It sounded awful to say, so I never did.

He was always in the back of my mind, but I did not let it cloud my thinking. I threw myself into the life that I had worked so hard to build, and I was happy. I couldn't deny it, and I didn't. I loved Alan, so it didn't matter that I didn't have everything. I had almost everything, and that was enough.

Time passed quickly, as it always does, but life was good. A few weeks after our third anniversary Alan and I decided to take a drive up the coast of Washington State. The weather was gorgeous and the conversation sparkling. It was only a drunk driver that spoiled the mood. Our car was hit head on and went off the road. I remember waking up with the airbag in my lap. The car had landed right side up after rolling over.

I was pretty banged up, but I was alive. I looked over at the driver's side and noticed that Alan was not moving. It was too late when the paramedics arrived twenty minutes later. They took us both to the hospital where Alan died a short time later. I was kept overnight for observation despite my pleas to go home.

My mother flew in from Phoenix the next day to be with me. We took Alan's body back to Vancouver and began making arrangements for the funeral. He was buried in the city he had loved a week later. I was still bruised from the accident, but it was nothing compared to the pain in my heart.

Mom stayed with me for another week and helped me take care of insurance and legal matters. I didn't feel anything that week; I didn't allow myself to. I learned before my mother left that He was back in Phoenix and practicing medicine not far from where we had grown up. As much as I was suffering, I still wanted to know. I hadn't heard anything about Him in years, but He had never left my mind completely. According to what Mom said, He had moved to Texas after medical school but returned to the valley two years ago after losing his lover to AIDS.

It was all very interesting, but this was not a time to wonder about what might have been. I took two weeks off from work, but was happy when I returned to teaching. For a few hours of the day, I could think about something else. I could immerse myself into literature and be happy

in its warm embrace, though I still came home to an empty house every night and cried myself to sleep. As much as I wanted to move on with my life and forget about what I had lost, there were too many memories around me.

The city that I had grown to love now seemed cold and ominous. It seemed there was no place I could go that didn't conjure up some memory of Alan. I knew my wounds could never heal while I stayed in Canada, so I made a decision. I finished out the year teaching at the University of British Columbia and submitted applications to numerous universities across the United States.

Though it was not my first choice, Arizona State University, located in the suburbs of Phoenix, offered me the position that I wanted: associate professor of literature and a significant salary increase. I put the house on the market and made arrangements to move back to the Southwest. It felt strange leaving Vancouver and even stranger going back to Phoenix. It was as though I was coming full circle, 360° back to where I had started.

It didn't take me long to get back into the swing of things. Moving back was the change I needed. I still missed Alan, but I finally felt that I was moving on with my life. I grew to love Arizona State in a very short time. I had never really missed Phoenix, but it felt good to be back. I made new friends and reconnected with a few old ones who were still around. I got stronger as time went on, and my pain finally started to subside. I thought about Him once in a while, but I never had the balls to call and see how He was doing. I had always lived with the belief that the past was past, and after Alan's death I was trying very hard to stick to that belief.

In high school, He and I and many of our friends spent much of our time at a little coffee shop in the center of town. Back then it was a place where we could go to talk and hang out. In the year that I had been back in Arizona, it became a place where I could unwind and think. Old

habits die hard. Maybe I shouldn't have been surprised when I saw Him there one Saturday evening, but I was. Phoenix is a big city, even bigger than it had been twenty years prior, but I had never expected to bump into Him.

But there He was, sitting across from me, sipping his coffee. He didn't notice me at first, and I began to study Him. He looked a bit older but otherwise unchanged. Like myself, there was grey in his hair, and his eyes showed a man who knew the ways of the world. I wasn't sure how I should feel. Part of me wanted to run away, but another part forced me to stay in my seat.

I looked away when I saw Him raise his eyes. I pretended to read over my students' essays, but it was too late. He had already seen me. My heart began pounding, and I didn't know why. Fear kept me glued me to my chair, fear that grew rapidly as I watched Him get up and make his way to my table.

Without a word He sat down next to me. We sat in silence for a few moments, looking over each other, remembering. It had been nearly twenty years. So much had changed. We were no longer the carefree youths I still remembered so well.

It took only a few minutes before we were no longer chatting about the weather and had changed the topic to our respective moves back to Phoenix. It was sad the reasons that had brought us here. I shared with Him the story of Alan and me, and He told me of his lover Michael. He and Michael had started a serious relationship that had lasted over ten years. It wasn't until Michael's HIV claimed him a few years earlier that He thought about coming back to the valley. When Michael died, He was left without the disease but with too many memories to stay in Texas. He abandoned his practice and, like me, fled to the safety and comfort of the place we used to call home.

In the two hours we spent at the coffee shop that night, it seemed as though time had been turned back two decades. He opened up to me that night, just like He used to. In all of my experiences with people and lovers in the last twenty years, I had never found anyone else who I felt as comfortable with. It surprised me to find that He still could evoke the same sense of understanding despite the gap of time.

We left the coffee shop and took a walk through the warm Arizona night. He chided me for still smoking – a habit that He had given up in medical school, and I teased Him about his occasionally use of improper grammar. Around midnight we went for a drive, back to the old neighborhood where our parents still lived. We parked under a streetlight and got out of the car.

Without either of us speaking a word, we headed toward the hiking trail. It had been twenty years, but it was exactly how I remembered it. We walked without talking until we reached our special spot. There were so many things that I wanted to say, but for the first time in years I was speechless. I was relieved when He finally broke the silence.

“For twenty years I’ve kept in my mind the words that were spoken the last time we were here. It breaks my heart to think that we never talked about them, but I know the time wasn’t right. We were at the point in our lives when we had no time for love. There have been a few moments since Michael died that knowing that you loved me, even once upon a time, kept me going. I loved Michael with all my heart, but there was never a time that I didn’t wonder what might have been. That’s what tears me up inside to this day. What might have been? What would have happened if we had tried just a little bit harder?”

He spoke with such eloquence; it took me a moment to respond.

“During my relationship with Alan, I tried to keep the same thoughts you just spoke of out of my own mind. I knew that they would tear me apart if I ever let them in. I have shut you

out for twenty years because I couldn't allow myself to wonder what might have been. The phrase, 'I love you' has always been one that had been hard for me to say. But every time I've said it, I've meant it.

"I still love you. I've wanted to tell you for twenty years. Time has changed many things. I've got grey hair, and I can't eat spicy food or drink milk anymore, but time could never change that one fact. I don't know what tomorrow holds, but I would be content if tonight lasted forever. What we had is something that I've never been able to find with another man, no matter how hard I looked."

"So what now?" He asked.

"I have no idea..."

"I have one," He said. And with that, He took me in his arms. For nearly an hour, He held me. As the night grew deeper, we lay in each others arms and let tears fall – tears of sadness, tears of joy. As the first rays of morning came, He kissed me. It was a few minutes before we came up for air, but it seemed like hours. Without speaking a word, our feeling had been expressed. They could not be denied any longer. In a moment's time, a person with whom I had not spoken in nearly two decades had come to mean more to me than ever before.

Our kissing rose into passion, and we made love for only the second time. The sun was already brightening the sky before we dressed and headed back to the car. I drove to my house without asking if He wanted to come. I knew He did.