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## Friendships Between Men: Masculinity as a Relational Experience

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Friendships Between Men: Masculinity as a Relational Experience

by

Matthew L. Brooks

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Communication  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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Narrative

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my son.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my advisor, Art Bochner, without whom this dissertation would not have been concluded successfully and artfully. I also thank my committee members—Ken Cissna, Carolyn Ellis, Stacy Holman Jones, and Jim King—who lent creative and critical support along the way. My most gracious thanks to all my peers, whose conversation in the hallways between classes sustained me. Finally, to my best friend and wife, Kimberly, for always living with me through the pits and pinnacles of writing and researching; I love you.

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# Friendships Between Men: Masculinity as a Relational Experience

Matthew Brooks

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an auto/ethnographic account of close friendships between the researcher and other men. The various narratives contain intimate dialogues about being a man, having friends, and the process of resisting and succumbing to orthodox masculinity. The purpose of the research was to investigate and artfully depict the communication and development of close friendships between the researcher and other men, in hope of gaining more knowledge of the difficulty forming and maintaining male friendships given the strictures of orthodox masculinity.

The research combines methods of autoethnography and dialogic conversations with four male friends. In the first chapter I set the stage with a review of the scholarly literature on male friendship and masculinity. In chapters two through six and nine through eleven I present two sets of dialogic conversations I had with four men. Chapter seven provides a theoretical tour of the method. Chapter eight consists of monologues about friendship given by three participants. Chapter twelve concludes the dissertation with personal reflection and analysis.

The analysis draws links between the author's experiences of friendship with each participant, grounding research on masculinity, as well as research on male-male friendship. In male-male friendships, the performance of masculinity, especially proving one's manhood, reverses the order of expected dialogical tensions in interpersonal relationships. For example, to be a man requires demonstrating invulnerability before allowing vulnerability. Forming close personal bonds, however, requires demonstrating vulnerability from the onset, something that runs counter to precepts of orthodox masculinity. This observation demonstrates the double bind many men face when first forming friendships. To counter this bind, I argue for the need of a reflexive turn at level of self to provide the necessary gap in self-knowledge that allows for dialogue and redefinition of orthodox masculinity between men.



## Foreword

As I drive west on Highway 60 toward Tampa, I see the sun peek over the horizon behind me. The flash of light in the rearview mirror breaks the trance of the road. I'll be in town soon, so I begin thinking about my best friend, Bert, who I'll be meeting later in the day. If it weren't for my dissertation, I probably wouldn't get to see him at all today, and we might not have become so close. It is hard for me to believe that we have known each other for five years, and we love one another.

*And wasn't that the point.*

For my dissertation research, a project I began in the fall of 2002, I wanted to figure out what counted between men—what mattered when it came to establishing and maintaining close male friendship, and what research method was best suited for examining those relationships. What method could help me get close to what I needed to know about friendship between men? For that matter, what did I need to know? Why was I drawn to research about masculinity and friendship?

My desire to know other men has been a desire to know myself and to call into being the kind of man who values openness, vulnerability, empathy, care, tenderness, emotionality, affection, intuition, self-disclosure, and a host of other behaviors that have been, unfortunately, deemed feminine by popular culture and thus naturalized as unmanly. In my early teens, I struggled to come to terms with

what I perceived was a fundamental difference between myself and other boys. Around twelve, I lost interest in typical boy activities, especially sports. I began keeping a journal, writing poetry, reading literature, and talking with girls; I had an easier time drawing girls into the kinds of conversations that fascinated me then, particularly conversations about the treacherous turns life sometimes takes (Heasley, 2005).

On too many occasions during these formative years, other boys reminded me violently of how different I was from them. At first, my own father struggled to teach me how to fight, how to protect myself with my fists, how to stand up and be a man. But *I* failed. I can still remember the night dad and I danced around the backyard throwing punches at each other; how, in his eyes, I saw adoration; and how, as our shadows stretched across the dry grass, I promised to make him proud. But that promise only compelled me to hide my difference and ultimately my self. I was drawn to this research project out of the anger and outrage I suffered through as a boy, and because I lived in a culture that seemed to hate boys like me. No wonder I learned to hate myself (Heasley, 2005).

I am drawn to this research because at the end of my undergraduate days, a professor, a man, helped me to go from asking what is wrong with me to what is wrong with the culture in which I live. This shift in perspective began my journey into masculinity studies. Later, during my Ph.D. program, another mentor inspired me to ask, not what is wrong, but *what is going on*, something that makes it easier to love myself and also easier to live a just life within a culture that I co-construct with others. He shifted my perspective from victim to survivor of

orthodox masculinity. As a survivor, I can now contribute to redefining masculinity. Surviving and contributing is something done alongside significant others, a journey best shared with friends. Thus the dissertation, the act of researching, talking, and writing, is highlighted as a relational experience where, like any good friendship, we are in it together—participants, researchers, mentors.

My questions—even my quest—bend toward my self; my *self* and all the doubts about other males that have burdened my heart since childhood: doubts about my father, doubts about my companions, but most of all doubts about *myself*. Could I love, truly love, another man? Is that something I really needed? Maybe, like many other people, I hadn't yet learned to love myself. Even though I have a loving wife and adoring son, why do I sometimes feel something is lacking? Do other men feel this lack? How do they cope? I wanted to learn why I longed for a male companion and almost always ended up turning to the woman in my life to fill this need. Did other men feel this way too? Maybe I'm too demanding of my self. Maybe I'm asking too much, while demanding nothing at all. Maybe I'm too much like my father, while fearing I'm nothing like him at all. Maybe I'm not man enough and too much of a man.

The pressure to prove my manhood began with my father. For a military man, he was gentle and understanding. Though my father failed to assuage my fear and anxiety, he stood ready to accept me, a son who, from an early age, struggled with the question: *am I normal? Am I gay?* As a boy, associating being gay with being abnormal went unquestioned and, looking back, I see how this blind link was used as a weapon to enforce the homophobia prevalent in the

performance of orthodox masculinity (Sedgwick, 1986). Being emotional and needing to explore and express my feelings, seemed unmanly. Abnormal. Feminine. *Gay*. These labels fed a fear of being found out, of being deemed unworthy by the important males in my life at that time. While growing up, everywhere I turned I was confronted by stoical males who preferred activity to talk, brutality to tenderness. And I felt compelled to hide my sensitivity, my need for deeper, emotional connections (see Heasley, 2005).

Undoubtedly, my desire for a deeper connection with my father translated into a need for deeper connection with my friends. What I couldn't get from dad, I sought from other men. But proving my manhood, being manly enough, performing within the strict confines of a heterosexual and orthodox masculinity seemed to always get in the way of being close friends and almost always left me frustrated and unfulfilled.

As I grew older I wondered: What *did* it take for a heterosexual man to get close to another man—to stay close? Why was it important? Should I reexamine or change my perception of masculinity even going so far as to be more like a woman, as many pro-feminist scholars claim (see Connell, 1995; Farrell, 1993; Kimmell, 1987; Miller, 1983)? Or, should I embrace the sacred masculinity promoted by scholars associated with the mythopoetic men's movement? (see Bly, 1990; Cardelle, 1990; Keen, 1991). Although I identify with pro-feminist men, I am also attracted to the warrior-like images of man created by mythopoeists such as Sam Keen. Why am I compelled by two seemingly contradictory images of manliness?

My mind goes blank and the silence of the road quiets me. I don't know the answers to my questions. I turn on the radio and press the seek button. The digital display blinks through myriad numbers and static spits from the speakers in my car before erupting with the sound of a familiar Prince tune. This man, this artist with a strong but ambiguous masculinity compels me—seduces me. As a boy, I admired Prince almost as much as John Wayne...almost. It seems as though my masculinity is like being in the same room with these two men. Since childhood, these dueling images of masculinity have fought to possess me as I struggled to earn the praise of my father and to fit in with the other boys I wanted as friends.

As the song ends, a blinking traffic light on the horizon calls me back from the timeless bubble of my thoughts. I turn off the radio. Being on the road, writing, feels like stepping outside of time. I am out of time. But the time and timing of this dissertation confounds me. When did it really begin? I could point to several seminal moments in my childhood that matter in big ways. Reading Shakespeare for the first time when I was a teenager and wondering at the pitiable and contemptible fathers like King Lear, Claudius, and especially Polonius who reminded me of my own dad. The bromides they mutter are as maddeningly true as they are impossibly annoying.

*To thy own self be true*, says Polonius to his son Laureates who is about to leave home. I can hear dad saying these words to me and, almost an adult, almost a man, I know the importance of this advice and recognize the ways my “old man” sometimes failed to walk the walk. And being young, I am smug. But I do

not hate dad for his humanity; I love him even more. I want to push. I want to talk about myself. We avoid talking about ourselves. We always talk about other things, my dad and I. The immutable silences of our relationship remind me of a Raymond Carver (1989) story where a son, who is being tucked in, says to his father:

Dad? You'll think I'm pretty crazy, but I wish I'd known you when you were little. I mean, about as old as I am right now. I don't know how to say it, but I'm lonesome about it now. That's pretty crazy isn't it? Anyway, please leave the door open. (p. 33)

To protect the son, the father shuts the door. And like that son, I am lonesome, even wounded by how this simple distance between my father and me—this difficulty talking about ourselves—carries over into my friendships with men.

*Speaking of beginnings...* When does it end? The amount of time I've allowed to elapse since finishing "data collection" is staggering, but necessary. More than a few years have slipped by while I've pondered my work—and ponder it I have—almost every day. Even without the life events that have taken me away from this project—the birth of my son and the taking on of more work to support my family—a lengthy bit of time was vital; it afforded me opportunities to be with participants and myself in ways not possible within a strict research schedule.

*And still I am filled with self doubt.* How do I justify my recognition that this work is so personal to that it may be too unique to be reproduced? Similar undertakings can be made but what I have accomplished is an act of creation, an

act of self—aimed at self—understanding. Does that mean my effort is egotistical, or that it will have no significance for others?

*No.* While I have born most of the agony and pleasure of putting this dissertation together, no creative act is done alone, in a vacuum. Self discovery is not, I have learned, an individual act, and my method may have begun as a desperate search for the self, but scholarship requires more. Friendship requires more. Like friendship, good scholarship moves me from the inside out (Holman Jones, 2002). That outward movement is important because creativity is a co-constructed endeavor. Everything that I have ever read is in my work somewhere, at least implicitly (I like to think of them as “the dead in my head”), as are the relationships I’ve had with mentors (Art—in more ways than one—being *penultimate*). Most of all, the participants, my friends, had—have—a big part to play. But I am the main character and my method, such as it is, requires reading me like a book. *I*, in real life and on the page, am a performance with beginnings, middles, endings, and digressions, where language—the stuff of communication—permeates the space between us to invoke conversation in hopes of becoming old friends. And like a book, *I*, as an author, have taken time and care with my words just as I have taken time and care with my friends. And even more like a book, *we*, as friends, struggle to live beyond our time where endings cease to matter.

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From the beginning of this project, I sensed that my method for approaching the questions of masculinity and friendship between men required

the conversational skills of dialogue (Cissna & Anderson, 1994)) and the introspective work of autoethnography (Ellis, 2004). “Dialogue,” according to Bohm (1996) comes from the Greek *dialogos*—which literally translates *through the word* meaning flows among and between us. The spirit of dialogue can be attained in a variety of contexts. It can be experienced alone, between two people, or in larger groups. Moments of dialogue in each of these contexts: between self and self; between self and other; and between self and group are vital connections or “peak experiences” (Maslow, 1962) in the performance of identity offering unique opportunities for self awareness.

Dialogic moments are also crucial to understanding and unsettling canonical narratives such as orthodox masculinity. Other kinds of talk—the kinds of conversations we have every day and forget about every day—make up a hegemonic discourse where our assumptions tend to uphold the status quo and mostly go unnoticed or at least unchallenged, like the kind of talk where two men reduce a woman to “a girl” and a girl to a sex object. These conversations are highly political, yet tend to be experienced as neutral or apolitical often resulting in a feeling that this sort of gendered conversation is natural and inevitable (see Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Fortunately, the meanings associated with the status quo are seldom, if ever, settled once and for all. Engaging in dialogue opens up the possibility for men to acknowledge the way their personal lives contribute to and are affected by a masculine discourse. Dialogue also creates a space for feminist men like me to recognize how easy it is, when I am among male friends, to slip back into canonical narratives. Being a “good man,” living a “good life,”



demands continually negotiating the way the story of masculinity comes between men and is shared among us.

Autoethnography is a second methodological tool used in my work. Autoethnographers endeavor to *explore* rather than simply *explain* human experience, making their mode of writing more than a simple means of representation. Autoethnography, like dialogue, is a moral discourse that favors the messy contingencies of life (see Ellis, 2004) and is most keenly attuned to self-discovery. Autoethnographic writing is also a project of self-discovery that takes place among and with others. Though it is a practice that requires solitude, it is a practice that begins and ends in being together with other people.

In this study, I chose friends by asking men I had known for some time to participate. I also asked several men I had just met. I told them I wanted us to talk about our personal experience of our bodies, masculinity, and friendship. I told them that I had a hunch these experiences were interrelated and had a significant impact on living a good life. I was especially interested in how our own relationships ran counter to the norm and, through conversation, validated alternative ways of being men.

Because I didn't seek a random sample, I ended up including men who were similar to me in many ways. Rawlins (1992) says that "friends tend to emphasize the personal attributes and styles of interaction that make them appear more or less equal to each other" (pp. 11-12). Thus, it is not surprising that all of the men I contacted were Ph.D. students. All of us are heterosexual and in long term committed relationships. One man, like me, is a "military brat." Though our

socioeconomic backgrounds range from working class to upper middle class, we come from different regions of the U.S., and two are a different race from me, we experience each other as being more alike than not.

The number of participants I included was intentionally small. I was inspired by Henry Greenspan's book *On Listening to Holocaust Survivors*, where he says that rather than interviewing 50,000 people one time, he would prefer to converse with one person 50,000 times. I was attracted to Greenspan's privileging of depth over breadth because it reminded me of the communion possible between two people, a communion I longed for then and long for now.

To be sure, the terms used to describe method trouble me. I feel compelled to adopt a social science vocabulary, but such words hardly fit me. I hardly fit them.

*And hasn't that also been the point?* The terms I gravitate toward are soft and sensual: imagination, inspiration, passion, play, creativity, communion, and joy.

*Words, names, labels trouble me.* The "data collection" phase (see what I mean about vocabulary...where is the elegance in words like data and phase?) of this project is both simple and difficult to describe. The simple version is that I conducted two tape recorded conversations between me and each individual participant. I also had each man record a private monologue where I asked them to discuss their friendships with other men and aspects of masculinity. These conversations and monologues were transcribed, a process that took me about a month. From there, it should have been a simple matter of analyzing the

transcripts and writing up conclusions. However, I've always felt the simple version was a token effort to appear scientific (note I didn't say rigorous), something that has confused me from the start, probably because I don't think of myself as a scientist or even a social scientist. I like to think of myself as a poet auto/ethnographer, which means that I am self conscious of my writing as a performance that enacts dialogue in an attempt to transgress norms. It also means that I am attuned to, or on the lookout for, the detritus of life that, when written down, sparks something sublime. A good example is how songs have wended their way into this dissertation. I had no intention of using music to bolster the narratives; but, and perhaps eerily, the right song had a way of playing at the right moment. Without meaning to, this dissertation has a soundtrack. And I am reminded that I play music in the same way I hope my writing gets read—sometimes to comfort, sometimes to express life's meaningful moments.

However, if I begin at the beginning and cleave the bulk of personal history that informs my research, I move into the realm of the ordinary. And that's not so bad. Like any relationship, the initial stages of the project involved mostly small talk. During these exchanges, I gauged each man's enthusiasm for being involved in research, focusing on their bodies and body image in male friendships—something uncomfortable for many heterosexual men because of the homophobia inherent in attitudes during primary and secondary socialization (see Garfinkel, 1985; Kupers, 1993; Miller, 1983; Nardi, 1992; Osherson, 1992; & Tejrjian, 2000). Many of these conversations took place in computer labs reserved for graduate students, while we hung out checking e-mail, printing last

minute drafts, making phone calls and other everyday activities. As a communal hub it was also one of the main places for socializing among graduate students. In such settings, I made initial plans to meet each man and conduct an informal unstructured interview with a desire for deep conversation. We decided on one-hour blocks of time and various places to meet.

The conversations typically lasted two hours or more and took place in a variety of locations: an office, an apartment, an alcove outside another building on campus, and a restaurant. I tape recorded each session. At the end of each conversation, I expressed an interest in having a follow-up conversation. Over the next several weeks, we re-visited what happened during our initial conversations whenever we bumped into one another in the parking lot, in the hallway, or in the computer lab. In these post-interview conversations, I expressed my sense that our talks felt therapeutic—a sentiment shared by the other men. During those several weeks, I transcribed every conversation and gave each man a copy. I began to see that we had experienced some degree of dialogue in each conversation. The powerful connection experienced in these dialogic moments fueled my desire to continue the conversation, and I realized that not only talking mattered but also the *way* we talked. Although there are typical male conversation styles at work when we talk—we sometimes try to intimidate, dominate, interrupt, or control each other (see Burleson, Holmstrom, & Gilstrap, 2005; Coates, 1986; Tannen, 2001), there are also many atypical moments where we self-disclose, validate, show affection, smile at, or open up to one another (see Brooks, 2006).

For the second round of conversations, I wanted to approach participants in a relational context that promoted dialogue, a form of communication that invites reflexive awareness of self and other (see Goodall & Kellett, 2004). Also, I wanted to think of myself as a friend *and* a researcher, even going so far as to think of friendship as a method (see Tillmann-Healy, 2003) and my *self* as a subject of the research (see Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Making such an autoethnographic move, I thought, would reveal the powerful ways friendships sustain, reproduce, and potentially transform gender performances.

The follow up conversations took place a couple of years later. My role as researcher during that time diminished as I settled back into the routine of being a friend to and with these men. During that time, my relationships with the different men changed. I spent more time writing and less time relating. To protect the identities of the men who participated in the project, I changed their names and fictionalized some of the events that took place. In the pages of this dissertation the reader will be introduced to Bert, Sidney, Kirk, and Jack. Each of these men holds a special place in my heart. With one, I became very close. With another, I maintained. With the third, I became disappointed and distant. With the last, I completely lost touch.

Does that matter? Is this so unusual? Ideally, friendship is a fluid set of possibilities, maybe nothing more than a never ending journey, an invitation to talk, to think, to be, and—to write.

\*\*\*

I approach the exit that will lead me to the University and reach over to turn on the radio. I am tired of driving, tired of thinking. I just want to groove. The speakers erupt with the deep belch of a male voice, a typical radio jerk dispensing rude advice about sex and women. I press the seek button several times before a familiar note stops me and Marvin Gaye croons, “what’s going on, what’s going on.”

And, in time with the beat, I too ask, *yeah, what’s going on?*

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In Chapter One, I unpack the scholarship informing this dissertation. I juxtapose existing work on male friendship from various disciplines, work that overwhelmingly concludes that men seldom have the skills necessary to form and maintain close relationships, with communication research like that conducted by Rawlins (1981, 1983) that seeks a more neutral and dialectical approach. From there, I tie in literature on masculinity, identity, and the male body that sees these junctures as a powerful social narrative that motivates individual men to adopt and perform a repressive form of manhood. I then return to the literature on male friendship, emphasizing work like Osherson’s (1992) and Miller’s (1983) that seek a therapeutic turn in understanding and promoting those relationships.

In Chapter Two, I describe two early encounters with Bert, encounters that took place before the project began and we became friends. I attend to the details that attracted me to him in an attempt to capture and release the emotions of first contact. I also introduce the idea that the researcher is sometimes an unreliable narrator thus necessitating and anticipating the reflexive turn of the dissertation.

Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six give a narrative account of my first conversations with Bert, Jack, Kirk, and Sidney, respectively. These conversations focused on issues of masculinity and the male body and took place during the fall of 2002.

In Chapter Seven, I trek through the theoretical underpinnings of the dissertation's method. Appropriately, given the title, this elaboration happens from within a conversation with my self.

In Chapter Eight, Bert, Kirk, and Sidney present their monologues on masculinity and friendship.

Chapters Nine, Ten, and Eleven provide a narrative account of my second round of conversations with Kirk, Sidney, and Bert. These conversations focus on masculinity, my friend's monologues and relationships with other men, and our attempts to meta-communicate about our own friendship.

Chapter Twelve concludes the dissertation. It is important to note that the foreword, Chapter Seven, and Chapter Twelve take place on the same day, a summer day a couple of years after the second round of conversations. The concluding chapter is primarily a personal reflection on the four friendships, an author's monologue of sorts. My personal insights are also folded into a scholarly conversation, especially with Miller (1983) and Rawlins (1983) to provide an analysis of *what's been going on*. The conclusion also suggests that in some small way, perhaps because of my friendships, I have come to love myself, to accept myself, to be, perhaps, more than a man—to see myself as only human.

## Chapter One: Necessary Baggage

Doubt creeps into my mind whenever I think about my relationships with other men. I fear that I haven't always been a good friend, and the thought of voicing these doubts only heightens my anxiety. How do you tell another man—even your best friend—that you not only feel close to him, you want to feel closer? How do you tell him that you want to honor your past together and strengthen those bonds for the future? (see Miller, 1983). Outside of the various institutions that support a particular form of brotherhood (sports teams, the military, or fraternities), how do straight men express and cultivate their love for one another?

These questions arose while surveying the existing scholarship on friendship between men. Most of the research suggests that men lack authentic friendships with other men (McGill, 1985; Morman & Floyd, 1998; Miller, 1983; Osherson, 1992; Wagner-Raphael, Seal, & Ehrhardt, 2001). Osherson (1992) points out, “Research on men’s lives reveals that male friendships are often noteworthy more for their absence than their presence” (pp. 293). Furthermore, researchers claim people need intimate others in order to lead a more fulfilling life; while a spouse may satisfy this need, researchers also recognize the necessity for friends—especially of the same sex (McGill, 1985; Miller, 1983; Morman & Floyd, 1998). In researching same-sex friendships, scholars have predominantly shown that men not only lack close friendships but also lack the skills necessary



to begin and sustain such relationships. Accordingly, this lack results from societal pressures to perform orthodox masculinity—such a performance emphasizes competition, strength, invulnerability, dominance—behaviors identified as counterproductive to sustaining close relationships (Coates, 2001; McGill, 1985; Miller, 1983; Morman & Floyd, 1998; Wagner-Raphael, Seal, & Ehrhardt, 2001).

However, this academic discourse, as Wellman (1992) points out, tends to treat men's friendships as inferior to those of women because much of the conversation is about helping men adopt behaviors, like self-disclosure, typical of woman-to-woman relationships (see Balswick, 1988; Baumli, 1985, Farrell, 1993; Kimmel, 1987, 1995). As such, many studies of male-male friendship present a monolithic view on masculinity and deny the possibility that there are many ways to be a man (Coates, 2001; Morman & Floyd, 1998; Wagner-Raphael, Seal, & Ehrhardt, 2001). Moreover, most studies of men focus on a narrow range of traits deemed masculine; in other words, men are usually understood only as competitors or aggressors. Rarely have researchers looked at how men *do* feel or experience intimacy and emotionality in their relationships with other men.

Eschewing a prescriptive approach, avoiding a point of view that already sees men needing reform when it comes to close personal relationships, a communication scholar like Rawlins (1983) takes a dialectical approach that identifies contrasting or contradictory behaviors as necessary to forming and maintaining friendships. Rawlins (1983) states, "the potential oppositions produced by the functioning of communication place the experience of

contradiction at the center of relational life” (pp. 255). For example, relationships may teeter between talk that is expressive and protective, candid and restrained. Understanding how relationships determine the degree of each contrasting behavior can yield insight into a communication process that affects quality of life. As Rawlins (1983) claims, “these tensions constitute subtle and covert dilemmas that must be managed effectively if a relationship is to flourish” (pp. 256).

Although Rawlins (1983) doesn’t automatically see men as lacking, his research doesn’t account for how performing orthodox masculinity might place unique demands on men when it comes to defining these dialectical forces in their relationships with other men. Furthermore, it seems possible that his observations and choice of examples stem from a perhaps unconscious gender bias. Consider his observations of dependence and independence.

Of dependence Rawlins (1983) says, “If one individual becomes too dependent upon another or insists on the person’s excessive availability, this other may feel that his/her voluntary renunciation of autonomy has acquired a compulsory quality that violates the ideally unconstrained nature of their bond” (pp. 263). An example of people who value autonomy comes from a male-male example where one of his respondents, John, says:

I believe when you see too much of one person, you’re in trouble. Keith and I don’t. We see each other and we have fun together but we’re not always together and I think that’s what’s helped us. (pp. 263)

The example of an overly reliant relationship, on the other hand, comes from a female-female relationship. Participant Lana says of her friendship:

And a lot of times because the relationship was so intense, um I had to get away. You know I had, when we left for the summer, it was like a rejuvenation period for me. And it wasn't that constant [pause] intensity that our relationship has. That's why sometimes when we see each other for a couple of days, we have to take a couple of days off. You know. Because we just, we talk about absolutely, you know, just about everything we feel and that's very intense. And that's, you know, you can't do that all the time or you go crazy. You know, you end up feeling, you know, shooting yourself [sic], I think. (pp. 263)

Rawlins (1983) concludes "such intensity can be as debilitating as it is liberating" (pp. 263). I think it's interesting that too much dependence is negatively characterized while too much independence is seen as more positive a relational context. Why?

Interestingly, the examples Rawlins (1983) culls from his study to illustrate the necessity of independence in a relationship, to the extent that such independence is demonstrated by long separations, are entirely male-male and summed up by Dave, a participant, who says of his friend Ed:

Even though at certain times I might not have seen him for three months at a time, we were still friends and I knew I could call him and he knew he could call me, and that's when something was important because we knew each other so well we just had an understanding of what the other person needs. (pp. 261)

How? This unspoken understanding, an understanding arrived at through actions, through demonstrating care over the course of the relationship, between these male friends is repeated in several other examples. What action and what care are never stated and I wonder whether Dave's sentiment is wishful thinking, or, at

best, whether he can call on Ed only if the need involves something utilitarian like fixing the car or building a deck. Matters of the heart, emotional troubles are, perhaps, off limits. Asserting independence in male-male friendships seems to demand avoiding potentially uncomfortable situations as Dave says of Ed:

And even the friendship with him, why it's lasted is that the most, the hardest things to do for someone who you are friends with or someone that you love is to let them alone so they can hurt themselves if it's necessary, or do what they want to do. But it's hard for a person who cares for another one to let them do something that they know is going to hurt them but not to interfere, because I know every person has to grow and experience it for themselves. (Rawlins, 1983 pp. 260)

Although this relationship seems to require distance or separation during troubled times, Dave also points out that he would “be around later if [Ed] wanted any help to pick up the pieces” and Rawlins (1983) concludes, “leaving the other alone can be evidence of caring” (pp. 261). While Rawlins doesn't identify this behavior as a male tendency, I wonder if it persists in a majority of male-male friendships. I wonder if it will come up in my conversations with participants.

While reading Rawlins (1983) and thinking about orthodox masculinity, several questions come to mind: Must men first show strength to allow weakness? Must men first prove invulnerability to allow vulnerability? Must men first show restraint to allow candor? Must men be at a distance to be close? To be friends, must men first assert that there is no need for the other? In other words, is a real man, who is also a good friend, tough enough to go it alone? These contradictions or dialectal oppositions seem powered by the intersection of orthodox masculinity with the personal lives of individual men.

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Numerous studies of masculinity focus on the social and cultural meanings of the male body (Bordo, 1999; Dotson, 1999; Holmund, 2002; Thomas, 1996; Tuana, Cowling, Hamington, Johnson, MacMullan, 2002; Wienke, 1998). Little, if any, of this research pays attention to the lived experience of men as a context from which the significance of cultural meanings associated with the male body is played out. Still, a few scholars have turned their attention to the everyday lives of men as a way of understanding how those meanings are understood, struggled with, accepted, or rejected. Wienke (1998) for example, explores the meanings of the male body as “both a cultural and lived object” (pp. 255). His study attempts to illustrate how men respond to societal norms regarding their bodies and how men develop complex coping strategies for articulating those norms in their everyday lives.

Wienke’s (1998) study addresses the meanings behind the various cultural images of the male body and how men interpret and feel about their bodies. These body negotiations are connected to whether and how men map self-identity on the power grid of orthodox masculinity. The muscular body, according to Wienke (1998), is the cultural ideal and carries with it all the privilege associated with orthodox masculinity; thus, the closer a man identifies his body to the cultural norm, the easier it is for him to fulfill that orthodox script in his everyday performance of self. Put another way, the more muscular identified a male is, the less likely he is to engage in the “soft” forms of friendship proscribed by many as necessary for a full and rich life. In the orthodox view, muscular males are more likely to find expression for their friendship needs in contexts such as sports

teams, the military, or fraternities with their hierarchical structures and often violent and brutal initiation practices. While this argument stretches the stereotype—all muscular men are not necessarily so easily pegged—Wienke (1998) does make a persuasive case for the importance of body image in a man's expression of self-identity which, in turn, informs a man's attitudes about things like masculinity and friendship.

Indeed, other scholars have shown that how men talk or don't talk about their bodies is important to performing not only masculinity but also friendship (Bordo, 1999; McGill, 1985). How men use their bodies with other men is especially important to consider given cultural prohibitions on intimate touching between straight men (Morman & Floyd, 1998; Osherson, 1992; Rabinowitz, 1991) and the connection of touching between men to homophobia (see Abbott, 1990; Baumli, 1985; Cardelle, 1990; Farrell, 1993; Garfinkel, 1989; Kimmel, 1987; Kupers, 1993; McGill, 1985; McLean, 1996; Miller, 1983; Morman and Floyd, 1998; Nardi, 1992; Osherson, 1992; Rabinowitz, 1991; Tetjirian, 2000), one of the chief barriers to close personal relationships between straight men. While images of the homophobic, non-affectionate males may abound in popular culture, I wonder about our interpersonal relationships? What about fathers, who almost certainly initiate sons in the practice of keeping other men at a distance, a distance that, in my experience, translates into male-male friendships?

In comparison to the vast literature on masculinity as a cultural text of power, and recent work on the male body, the literature on male-male friendship is quite small. The research that does exist plays up the difference between men

and women (Coates, 2001; McGill, 1985; Miller, 1983; Morman & Floyd, 1998; Wagner-Raphael, Seal, & Ehrhardt, 2001). Friendships between women are considered talk based while those between men are activity based. Just how men understand or experience activity-based relationships rarely gets attention. McGill (1985) documents that talk among men is dominated by sports and sex and is rarely personal in nature; Indeed, according to McGill (1985), “the focus is almost always on externalities, things that happen ‘out there’” (pp. 160). The lack of self-disclosure of a personal kind is viewed as an interpersonal deficit that is perpetuated by conforming to orthodox masculinity. Thus, most research focuses on barriers to male friendship imposed by orthodox masculinity.

One frequently discussed barrier to male-male friendship is homophobia. Attitudes about homosexuality can be located historically. According to Nardi (1992), a shift in the values associated with friendship occurred in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Previously, friendship in Western culture was male-centered and valued traits such as bravery, loyalty, duty, and heroism (Hammond & Jablow, 1987; Newell, 2003; Rotundo, 1993). Over the last thirty years or so, close personal relationships, including friendship, have been rearticulated along lines commonly associated with women: intimacy, trust, caring, and nurturing (Sapadin, 1988). This shift, Nardi (1992) explains, opened male friendships to questions of homosexuality and resulted in a variety of mixed messages for contemporary men. Nardi claims that men are raised in Western culture to value emotionally rich and intimate friendships and face the contradiction of being labeled homosexual if they appear too intimate or too emotional.

Intimacy between men, however, wasn't always stigmatized the way it is today. Rotundo (1993) argues that in 19th century America, young men developed romantic friendships with each other that today would be mistaken for homosexual relationships. They wrote "love letters" to each other, slept in the same bed, held each other physically, and confided intimate details of their lives to each other. Moreover, these romantic friendships were widely accepted by both men and women.

Nardi (1992) also points to the medicalization of same-sex relationships at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a starting point for shifting attitudes about male-male friendships in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; for example, the term homosexual was identified in the emerging field of psychology as a mental disorder. As psychoanalytic terminology made its way into popular culture, the association with homosexuality stigmatized behaviors like affection between men and set the stage for talk of homophobia in contemporary studies of friendships between men.

Morman and Floyd (1998) elaborate on homophobia as a barrier to male-male friendships. Their research suggests that three variables in particular may influence the perceived appropriateness of affectionate communication between men. First, men who are related, such as brothers, may be less subject to the proscription against male-male affection than are non-related men. Men avoid expressing affection to their male friends, out of fear of being seen as homosexual. Brothers are less bound by this rule than are non-related men. Second, men may find it more appropriate to be affectionate with same-sex others in situations that are emotionally charged such as a wedding. It may be more



appropriate for men to hug or say they love each other, though they may consider these behaviors to be inappropriate in other, less ritualized contexts. Third, context makes a difference—private displays of emotion are less appropriate, because private affection implies sexual intent.

Over and over again, research argues that the culturally ingrained aspects of orthodox masculinity inhibit men from expressing affection for each other even when they feel it. Rabinowitz (1991) documents this inhibition in his observations of embracing between men, noting that even in a support-group environment, men often experience noticeable psychological distress while hugging other men. He notes that reports of this distress are echoed in interviews with men conducted by numerous researchers, whose respondents reported high degrees of cautiousness about expressing affection either verbally or nonverbally to their male friends, to avoid giving them "the wrong idea." Osherson's (1992) work with men's therapy groups sustains Rabinowitz's findings but also points out that in spite of this fear, men "often do feel a sensuous wish for contact and touch with other men, though such wishes usually go unnoticed and unacknowledged" (pp. 297).

As young boys, we are for a short while able to relish physical closeness with a man. I have a memory of my father's gentleness that is as vivid as it is vague and fleeting—his lips kissing my forehead, the smell of old spice and coffee, the rough cotton of his olive green uniform. I do not know if this image is real or only a dream, because, as I grew older, my memory of such displays is almost entirely absent. Today, physical contact between my father and me is

limited to burly bear hugs that usually cut off the blood supply to my brain, as if being gentle or meek might make us uncomfortable. Even in these hugs, however, I sense an earnest need to forget manly things.

Osherson, as well as Price (1999), maintains that intimacy and the fear of physical touching is especially heightened in friendships between gay and straight men. Both conclude that talking, getting things out in the open, helps to alleviate some of that fear. Osherson remarks, “as a heterosexual therapist, I find that when I work with gay men, one of the common anxieties for both of us is that affection and warmth and emotional intimacy may lead to sexual intimacy.” He goes on to say that, “often just bringing that anxiety to the surface together, talking about it, can help to dilute it” (pp. 298). Similarly, Price (1999) observed that in friendships between gay and straight men, where talk about their differences was an important part of the relationship, less anxiety was experienced. Conversely, where there was little or no talk about their differences, anxiety levels increased and revolved around experiences of heterosexism and homophobia. Such observations suggest that talking about homophobic feelings in the context of straight male friendships may aid in overturning such attitudes and open the pathways for more intimate exchanges, something that I pursue in my conversations with men in this dissertation. The challenge for studies of male-male friendships is to describe the “homoerotic” elements present in such relationships in a way that compels men to revise their attitudes about physical closeness. However, cultural prohibitions against touching persist.

Osherson argues that being “held” by another man isn’t necessarily a physical activity. He explains that holding is also an emotional activity involving words and gestures that indicate a person is seen, valued, and understood. As Osherson (1992) says, “You can feel held by being listened to closely and responded to in a way that legitimates what you are feeling” (pp. 283). However, being “held” in even a non-contact way can raise concerns about a man’s sexuality with other men, as well as, his dependence. Osherson (1992) points out, “too much connection seems ‘effeminate,’” but recommends, “being held by another man has little to do with sexuality and much to do with self-esteem” (pp. 283). He concludes that for many men the conflation of intimacy and sex blocks men from deeper connections with male friends. Regardless of barriers like homophobia, Osherson remains hopeful that men can make significant contributions to each other’s lives, something he addresses in his group therapy sessions where he shows men actively navigating such a barrier to form closer bonds with each other.

Cementing these bonds in a cooperative environment, according to Osherson (1992), is crucial to men forming a broader view of men *as* men. Such a cooperative approach helps dispel what men have experienced all their lives— hierarchical and authoritarian environments that stress the characteristics of orthodox masculinity like aggression and competition. In such power laden environments, friends must choose who “is being the dominant one or the subordinate; there’s not any middle ground” (Osherson, 1992, pp. 294).

Finding this middle ground of cooperation is crucial to reforming orthodox masculinity and carries with it a variety of benefits. First, men within a cooperative frame can learn to contain their anger. Osherson (1992) tells a compelling story about a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. This Vet was unable to communicate his rage about the war to his wife out of fear of hurting her. He calls a buddy up, and during a night out drinking, is able to disclose his pain and anger saying, “When I saw my school buddy, I knew that he could take my rage, that there was little chance of wounding him like I might have wounded [my wife]” (pp. 284). Osherson (1992) advises:

Many of us, not only vets, struggle with rage and anger at the burdens of manhood, what it costs us, and worry about whether that anger and resentment will wound those we love or wound us: drive them away, make us seem unworthy in their eyes, or force us to flee from our own sense of shame. Male friendships often offer men a chance to both express and master their rage. (pp. 285)

Another benefit of friendship and the cooperative environment of men’s therapy groups is the joy of companionship. Osherson (1992) shares a personal anecdote about moving out of a shared office into one of his own as part of upgrading his psychology practice. The woman he shared an office with before had taken on the responsibility of furnishings and decorations. The empty space of his new office threatened his ability to pick out simple things like carpet, chairs, desks, etc. He explains that this ambivalence had more to do with a struggle over autonomy and self-sufficiency, which caused his spirits to sink, something his friend Steve noticed. Over lunch, they joked about going shopping together and how Steve would act as a consultant. Of course, they never went shopping together; however, Osherson viewed Steve’s joking offer as a gift

claiming the offer of companionship legitimated his anxiety. He says, “by naming my fear and joking about it, [his friend] made it less oppressive and dominating” (pp. 287).

A third benefit of friendships, especially as they take on the cooperative frame of the therapy groups he describes is the nature of information exchange. Osherson (1992), in agreement with McGill (1985), claims that men are typically good at exchanging nuts and bolts information. However, Osherson disagrees with McGill about a man’s desire for other types of communication saying, “[men] are often more curious about the richer, more textured exchange of feelings about shared struggles and common pain” than previously suggested even while experiencing anxiety about losing self-control, “a belief that it’s not manly to open up a heartfelt question without also having the answer” (pp. 287-288).

I agree with Osherson (1992) that in order for men to develop a broader view of men as men, they must seek out contexts where “other men listen attentively, respond appropriately, confront and cajole each other” (pp. 288). However, these contexts are more than exercises in comfort. Friendships, as well as the therapy groups Osherson (1992) describes, offer an opportunity to stay with discomfort. Osherson quotes one man as saying:

The men’s event was so good because we could have lots of feelings without resolving them immediately. It was important for me to see that men can stay with discomfort: We are so quick to change the subject, move onto something else more manageable, go in and solve it. Here I could see that it was better if you don’t solve things too quickly, that confusion can be productive, and that has really helped me deal with those I love. I have less tendency to come on as an authority with all the answers and drive everyone away. (pp. 288)

According to Osherson (1992), the work of men's groups continues beyond the weekends in the context of male-male friendships. Further, this continuation helps relieve women of doing all the emotional work for men, and Osherson argues, "there is a valid need for men to be able to find a place to talk without worrying about having to posture for or take care of women." However, he offers this caveat, "it does not become an excuse to exclude women when men cannot take the next step and find a way to talk honestly to women and include them in their self-exploration" (pp. 289).

As I draw this review to a close, I want to consider some of Osherson's (1992) closing remarks. First, *it is important for a man's emotional well being to give more priority to male friends than is typically supported by contemporary society*. Making time for another man is crucial and, as Osherson (1992) says, small things matter a lot. Just going to lunch rather than cranking out more work can make all the difference. In addition to making time for that other man, talking about or meta-communicating about the friendship creates a nurturing context that Osherson (1992) says is important to countering the sporadic and less verbal qualities that typify male friendships. He argues that making it clear to the other that you hold the friendship close to your heart will help sustain the relationship over great distances and unanticipated, prolonged absences. Finally, men should not forget that their responses, whether they're to express regret or excitement about something, have a big impact on friends. These may seem like common sense rules but the reality of male-male friendships, if I've learned anything from

reading the literature, have a way of defying the common sense in more ways than one.

Second, notwithstanding the many cultural barriers to male-male friendships, men have struggled to remain close to one another. I am reminded of the men who came to visit my father-in-law while he was in the hospital recovering from major surgery. One man drove over twenty miles to pick oranges from a special grove of trees before the season ended. Another sat with him on a Sunday afternoon watching a football playoff game, something that noticeably raised his spirits. There are many more examples of human kindness evidenced by these men. Their behavior suggests, as Rawlins (1992) points out, that males define intimacy differently than females. Furthermore, the social class of these men (upper-middle class) brings to mind barriers to male-male friendship other than or in addition to attitudes about homosexuality. Time is one prevalent barrier to such relationships. My father-in-law has been a friend with these men for more than forty years. They all live in the same community, belong to many of the same clubs, are active in the same church, and in some instances attended the same schools growing up, all of which probably provided opportunities for cementing close bonds. In a global economy that emphasizes mobile labor, these kinds of close-knit communities and the friendships they afford may become a thing of the past (Miller, 1983; Wellman, 1992; Newell, 2003; Epstein, 2006).

Third, I want to emphasize Siedler's (1992, 1997) claim that men learn to do *without* friends, which is reverberated in the literature. How or why is it that men *learn* to do without friends? Part of answering this question would seem to

require some combination of gender constructions with economic realities. Behind this question is the notion that men can also *learn* to be and have friends. Perhaps another important idea to consider is how “friendship” is socially, culturally, and historically constructed. Researchers have already identified masculinity as a social construction (Kimmel, 1987). The term friendship is too often taken for granted and is seldom defined adequately by researchers (see Epstein, 2006) who focus on men’s lives and behaviors. For example, Coates’s (2001) study of story sequence in talk between males never gives a clear indication of why her participants can be called friends. She says, “in all cases [her participants] were friends: in other words, recordings were made of groups or pairs of men who had a well-established relationship” (pp. 83). What it means to be a friend or how the men really understand that term is not taken into account. Nowhere does she consider how depth in a friendship matters in how men share stories. Rather than take it for granted, friendship should be explored for its various meanings across multiple contexts.

According to Siedler (1993) modernity compels us to think of friendship in possessive and quantitative terms. One can have lots of friends in that a person can point to a number of people in their life but lack a qualitative language for determining whether or not these friendships are “good” friends, a qualitative distinction. Siedler says, “having learned to think of wants and desires in utilitarian terms, men rarely learn to think of the deeper ways that we are nourished by our friendships” (pp. 26).



I found Miller's (1983) book, *Men and Friendship*, intriguing and useful because of his sustained and in depth analysis of men's friendship and what it means to be a friend. Social scientists have probably shied away from such inquiry because the important dimensions of friendship, as Miller employs the term, are not easily codified and studied quantitatively. The question of deep and authentic friendship, a qualitative question, is more likely to be found in poetry and philosophy than in social science.

In his book, Miller (1983) provides an autobiographical account of his search to understand authentic friendship between adult men. During his search he conducted nearly a thousand interviews with men from various social backgrounds. He also probes his own personal relationships with men even going so far as to start friendships for the purpose of his work. Miller claims that friendship is not only a taboo topic among men, but it is also inherently shallow. His numerous interviews demonstrated to him that men found the subject of friendship unutterable, ineffable. Research published by Osherson (1992) and McGill (1985) even suggests that men do not know their friends at all. McGill (1985) states, "the most common male friendship pattern is for a man to have many 'friends,' each of whom knows something of the man's public self and therefore a little about him, but not one of whom knows more than a small piece of the whole" (pp. 157). Miller's (1983) work is about his attempt to connect with and to wholly know a few men.

Miller laments that the interviews he conducted and the books he read tend to leave out the emotional realities of men's lives. He found that the subject of

male friendship was unspeakable to most people. He blames this silence on a lack of poetry in the lives of most men stating, “they do not have the words for such a subject” but notes that speaking about friendship is also difficult because of the “taboo against looking at something so sacred,” as well as, “a reluctance to look at something so painful” (pp. xv). He concludes that in order to get close to his subject, he would need to become involved as more than just an author.

Miller (1983) and I share this desire for a personal turn in research on male friendship. I too am motivated by a desire to “understand in detail the blockages and obstacles; to chart the micro-contours of experience from which male friendship is constructed; to register the unremembered acts of kindness and of love, the little daily risks, even the forgotten or squelched moments of rage or disappointment at a telephone call not returned” (pp. xvi). Central to Miller’s (1983) journey is the question: “Can adult men—men in their thirties and older, most married or otherwise coupled and busy at careers, men in the mainstream of modern urban life—find the comradeship, the succor, the joy, and devotion of true friendship with at least one man?” (pp. xvii). I believe how we experience this question and the stories we tell about friendship along the way cuts across the social construction of men, masculinity, and the male body.

## Chapter Two: Details, Desire, Names

*6:30 P.M. August 29, 2002*

“Hi, my name is Bert,” the man across from me says. His eyes laugh when he speaks. I have heard so many routine introductions marking the first day of class that I am not even listening to the words coming out of his mouth through even rows of white teeth and past lips that seem permanently upturned; instead, I am admiring his perfect skin, which reminds me of a warm cup of coffee with an ample dollop of heavy cream.

At the request of our professor, Bert tells a story to our narrative theory class about how his mother would introduce him. The details wash over me without sticking. His voice captivates me; it’s a welcoming tenor that punctuates, like a soundtrack, the rising action, climax, dénouement, and eventual end of his story. Although he is more than a decade older, I perceive him as someone much younger, someone closer to my thirty than his forty-seven years.

*Bert seems so damned happy, I think, and not the kind of happy that is in denial of the world around him.* It’s as though he’s reached a comfortable place inside himself, something that invites me to move closer and for the briefest second our eyes meet across the distance of the conference table; I feel drawn to him.

“Would he want to be my friend,” I wonder? Can friends meet, like lovers, from across a crowded room? I withdraw into the recent past as the

woman sitting next to Bert takes her turn. “Hi my name is...” and her words fade from my perception.

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*6:00 P.M. August 26, 2002*

We finish the routine introductions that mark the first day of class and the professor for our qualitative methods class assigns us a partner, someone she wants us to interview. Afterwards, we are to write up our findings and present them to the class.

*Dread.*

I dread the assignment not for its difficulty but because I have begun to question my desire to continue. *Do other graduate students ever feel like quitting?* I wonder.

*Alone, stuck.*

*Even in the most qualitative place in the discipline, I write in my journal, I do not belong.*

*I should be writing fiction. I am writing fiction. I wish I could apply to MFA programs, I scribble. And I want to quit, but I keep moving forward—there are too many people with expectations, myself included.*

Chagrined, I play along.

My peers are filing out of the room delighted to assume the mantle of ethnographer. *I want to be a writer*, I scratch illegibly in the left hand corner of the page. Is there a difference? I continue doodling in my journal and my pen

runs out of ink. “Shit,” I mumble as a perky blond woman approaches me. She must be my research participant, but I do not feel like participating today.

“Hi, you’re Matthew, right,” she says.

“Uh huh,” I nod. I can’t remember her name. We march out into the hall, and I head to my office without asking for her preference. I need a new pen. She follows me and stands in the doorway while I rummage through my desk. She is staring at the velvet Jesus picture sitting on top of the bookshelf. The savior’s features have been darkened to suggest Middle Eastern origins.

“Inherited,” I grumble, “it keeps people guessing.”

“What? Oh, the picture. Fascinating,” she replies and scribbles something in her notepad.

“Why don’t we get this over with,” I say and point at the empty chair. She sits; pen ready, and we start.

When the talking stops, I usher the blond woman out of my office and watch her disappear into one of her own a few doors down. After she closes the door, I tip toe over and check the cardboard sign with her and another new Ph.D. student’s name on it.

“I have a fifty-fifty chance,” I whisper and fish a coin out of my pocket. I spend the next half hour writing a story about my encounter with *Gertrude*, and then return to class. Everyone is waiting and because I am standing I volunteer to go first.

Near the door and ready to make a quick exit, I begin to read in a monotone voice, “Gertrude Who?” And I pause to look at my expectant audience before continuing.

“The right questions escape me. And today, I want to be invisible. I am not paying attention during the introductions. I zone out; I fantasize about the glory of a finished novel, what I am going to eat for dinner tomorrow, and any number of other mundane things. I am not interested in the particulars trundled out during these moments. Nor am I feeling a need to compose my own bit of clever babble,” I say with a sigh and look up at my audience.

“Ethnographers have doubts. Ethnographers even have bad days,” and I make eye contact with a small, older man who is nodding his head.

“But everything you have learned,” I continue, “may suggest otherwise. Why? Because we write it up that way? We lie. And bad days and doubts become something else to use: more data. Positive results are what matter. So,” I utter pointedly, “here I am, sounding like the rest of you, as though I have something to prove. I didn’t catch her name during the round table and am too embarrassed to ask for clarification. We go to my office because I need a different pen. I observe that she is dressed in a professional manner, which probably means she either taught class during the day or works in the private sector,” I state objectively and wink my eye before moving on.

“She is barefoot—perhaps a sign of uncomfortable shoes. She is eager to get started but isn’t sure how to proceed. What matter these details? What matter her name,” I pause and look at the perky blond woman whose good posture

refuses to succumb to my parody. She remains confident and unflappable as though she knew all along that my wit masks a tired heart.

“Gertrude,” I say, “her name is Gertrude. I figure it out by looking at the name card on her office door. She suggests we divide our time evenly. First one person asks questions and the other answers, then, after a while, we switch.”

Again, I pause and look around the classroom. No one is smiling except for the small, older man. I hold his gaze for a moment to help calm my nerves. He seems open.

“I don’t want to do that. I hate interviews. Why don’t we just talk and see what happens?” I say.”

“Well, I uhm...” she sputters.”

“I don’t care about your background what we usually tell about ourselves on the first day. I want to know something interesting. Something juicy,’ I taunt.”

“The expression on her face says she is dauntless despite my unorthodox behavior. She is going to get through this experience, even if I don’t cooperate. It is her first day as a Ph.D. student, and she isn’t about to let me ruin it. After an awkward silence, we fall into the routine pattern of an interview. And I want to cry.” The small, older man on the other side of the table is writing something in a pocket-size notepad, the biggest grin on his face. His eyes are like dandelions and suddenly I want to know him. Then I continue with my story:

“She has a background in English and has taught at a community college for ten *odd* years. She taught public speaking for the first time today and tells me

about walking from the Sun Dome parking lot to Cooper Hall in high heels.

But she's not complaining. She explains, 'Complaining is easy; it gets into your mind like an infection. Negative thinking makes more negative thinking.'

"Gertrude is all about the silver lining. She will wear flats in the future. She will make it through with a smile on her face, everyone else be damned. I—FEEL—LIKE—PUKING," I say, pronouncing every word with mock disgust. My peers laugh at this last line, but like responding to a racist joke, the laughter, though conditioned, is uncomfortable. The smiling, older man is writing something else in his notepad.

"She asks me questions like, 'What is the weirdest thing you've ever done.'"

"I struggle to answer as honestly as possible. No matter how hard I try, I can't lie. I want to lie. But I don't tell the truth; it is too embarrassing. She takes lots of notes. I write nothing. After an uncomfortable amount of time talking about me, I reciprocate. I listen. But I can't remember the questions I ask or the conversation we had except for the story she tells me about her houseboat. I had, after all, demanded juice."

"She lived in Atlanta when her mom died, and she decided to do something strange. She bought a houseboat. When she was finished teaching for the week, she'd drive to St. Petersburg where it was docked."

"I wonder about the long drive and try to imagine the music she played. Jimmy Buffet? Or maybe the Indigo Girls? If it were Merle Haggard..." I stop and see the small, older man with the twinkling eyes. Is that adoration I see? My



words repel some and attract others. I am using a flippant tone to counterpoint the serious lesson I *think* I've learned. Even while pretending not to listen, I listen. The unreliable narrator is often the most reliable. Without saying it, I suggest something about ethnographers: what we observe might as well depend upon a red wheelbarrow, and, considering William Carlos Williams, I wonder whether concrete details are all that matter, that, when it comes to writing: *there are no ideas but in things*. Still, who chooses the concrete details or things of a life? Who endows them with meaning? And I continue:

“I should ask but don't. I want to sit next to her in the passenger seat and let the experience of grief and unanswered questions wash over me, to experience what she feels. Nothing she says will help me to know. I need to go there. I need to go on the trip. Even then, it will not be the same.”

““Why did you make this trip?” I ask. Her words drop from her mouth like Easter eggs. And she says ‘*I went there to work at living.*’” This last phrase resonates with the smiling man. She didn't say it. I made it up, but that is what she did. Gertrude is nodding. And the grey haired man is also nodding and bouncing in his seat as though inspiration had seared him too. And I go on:

“She spent the next year refurbishing the boat, and she knew nothing about boats.

She learned.

And stripping away the rotten parts of the boat and replacing them with the strong and new smoothed out her raw insides.

““Did you keep the houseboat?” I ask.”

“No,” Gertrude replies.

“She didn’t keep the houseboat. It wasn’t necessary. When she was done with the work, what mattered was not the thing—it was bound too tightly to the past. It remains where she left it. What matters *is* right in front of her—this person named Gertrude,” I finish on a contradiction and look up at the other students in the room and know from their rapt expressions that I have lived up to my reputation among them as the Raymond Carver of ethnographers.

And I want to cry.

And we move on.

Another hour slogs by and class is finally over. Many of my peers are crowding around the professor. They love her. They need her guidance. I am too proud to acknowledge my needs. I half smile, remembering my own enthusiasm of two years ago. Head bowed, I slip out of the room and back to my office. I am restacking the mess of papers on my desk when the smiling man appears. I hadn’t caught his name either and am embarrassed by my lack of attention to details.

“Hey,” he says, “that was fabulous. You’re a *real* writer.”

“I guess so. I don’t know. Maybe,” I respond sheepishly, “thanks.”

“I hope we work together this semester.”

“You never know,” I say. He excuses himself and walks over to the open elevator across from my office. I notice his crisp blue jeans and almost new penny loafers. His grey IZOD tee shirt is tucked in. I watch him and two other graduate students enter the contraption, then the doors close. And I wish I knew his name.

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*7:00 P.M August 29, 2002*

“Would Bert want to be my friend,” I wonder? Gertrude has finished telling a story about her father as a way of introducing herself to the narrative theory class and maybe the people in the room know her a little better. It’s a beginning. I am watching Bert—the smiling man—listen to the words floating from her round mouth. With images of a different class still waxing in my brain, I think today is also our beginning, because I will ask him to join me. I have an idea for a class project and my ebbing enthusiasm is renewed.

“Hi my name is...” the man sitting to my left begins. His words are already trailing off into space. Who can possibly hear them? When it is my turn, and I am last to go, I deliver a poem scribbled in my notebook. My voice is detached—monotone with a hint of Texas on my tongue. I cast my eyes downward in mock embarrassment. My shoulders hang in a deferential slump and in the voice of my mother I begin to read:

*They told us he wasn't very bright.  
He'd never go to college or amount to much.  
He's a good kid—mostly.  
He used to show me strange poems.  
I think he's troubled, but we don't talk about that.  
He eats his peas.  
Hi, my name is...*

And silent, I end without giving my name. I assume everyone in the class already knows it and my name isn’t the most important detail about me. Bert, as always, is smiling. Our professor invites us to reflect on the narratives we’ve

shared, and I withdraw. I am thinking about how to approach Bert after class. Most people see me as confident and extroverted but I feel shy and reclusive. Making friends is painful for me, which is why I prefer to let people come to me—there is less risk involved.

When class is over, I shut my journal and walk over to where Bert is sitting. Everyone else is leaving or crowding around the professor.

“Got a minute?” I ask.

“What’s up?”

Self conscious that I am being watched, I ask, “Will you come to my office?”

“Sure.” And Bert finishes packing up.

We walk out of the conference room and he says, “That poem was wonderful.”

Again, I am embarrassed and flattered by his compliment. I unlock the door to my office without saying anything and go inside. After Bert enters, I shut the door part way—aware that my behavior is conspiratorial.

“Would you be open to talking about your body?” I ask and sit down.

“What!” Bert says leaning against my officemate’s desk and away from me.

“For my project in our Qualitative Methods class, would you talk with me about your body image and relationships with other men?”

“What do you mean *relationships*?”

“Friendships. Not romantic. I’m assuming you’re straight,” I say and add just to make sure he knows, “like me.”

“Why me?”

“Because you’re handsome,” I explain not even aware that I am being blunt, “and I think we can be friends too. That personal connection is important to me.”

“Thank you. I’m flattered,” Bert responds and then says, “I’d love to help out.”

“Great,” I say relieved that he has agreed to participate.

“Tell me more.”

“I want to have a conversation. Not just any conversation but a dialogue. How do men relate with one another, especially around their bodies and body image?”

“We don’t.”

“Maybe. Many books I read this summer agree (see Abbott, 1990; Balswick, 1988; Chesler, 1978; Farrell, 1993; Kimmel, 1995; McLean, 1996; Miller, 1983; Nardi 1992; Osherson 1992) and even claim that men *can’t* relate with one another or that our friendships are characterized by thinness and insincerity. We *can’t* be true friends because performing masculinity gets in the way. We’re required to be too competitive, too macho. And masculinity is a social performance *of* and *on* our bodies. What better place to observe the nuances than from within a relationship? What better place to assert change?”

“Sounds ambitious for a class project,” Bert states.

“Maybe I’ll turn it into something bigger,” I respond fantasizing about a possible dissertation.

“I hope you do. No one asks us to think about our relationships with other men or our bodies, let alone talk about it. I’m not sure we can; it goes against our nature.”

“We’ll see,” I say, “We’ll see.” Unexpectedly, Bert reaches out, touches my shoulder, and squeezes. An electric shock reverberates to my core. I am touched and can’t say anything. I close my fluttering eyes.

### Chapter Three: Touched

*High Noon September 9, 2002*

I open the north door of the student union and walk inside, and the frigid air gives me goose bumps. I need to buy a tape recorder and silently curse myself for waiting until the last minute. Bert agreed to meet me at the food court and I have less than a half-hour. I trudge up the steps of the university bookstore to the second floor and gaze around for anyone in a uniform. Spotting a man restocking printer cartridges, I hurry over and ask:

“Have you any handheld recorders?” He looks confused. “Something I can record an interview with?”

“Oh. Yeah. Over here,” he says and motions for me to follow. Several rows later, I am standing in front of a too large selection of miniature devices.

“Digital or analog?”

“I didn’t know they came digital? Can it download onto my computer?” I ask.

“Don’t know,” he says and walks away. I begin reading about each one trying to pick the best for my purpose. I choose a digital recorder with a forty-five minute storage capacity. I like its small unobtrusive size. Satisfied, I buy the compact machine and some batteries.

At the food court, I sit down and unpack my new toy, then insert the batteries.

“Testing, testing. 1—2—3. Testing,” I say into the device, then play it back.

“Testing, testing. 1—2—3. Testing,” It mimics crisply. Happy with the results, I walk over to the trashcan and throw away the box and receipt. I turn away from the waste and see Bert ambling into the student union from the west door. His lazy gait mirrors his nonchalant attitude. The photo-grey of his glasses are still dark from being outside. I stand in place and watch him, wondering when he will recognize me. Thirty feet, twenty feet, ten feet and I wave. Bert sees me and bounds over. Delighted, he grabs both of my hands and shakes. It’s as though we are best friends already, and I am touched for the second time since we met.

“Why don’t we go somewhere less crowded,” I suggest.

“I know this spot in front of the theater building,” Bert replies, and we head out of the student union.

We arrive at our destination and sit down on some steps. I fumble with my new recorder, while Bert finishes the story he’d been telling me about the English Department’s lack of involvement in an upcoming play. I hit the record button. A tiny red light blinks on and an awkward silence takes over. For a second it feels like the conversation is over and an interview has begun. Bert looks at me across this quiet divide waiting for my lead.

“I only have some rough ideas. Why don’t we start by talking about the relationship you have with your body now,” I say.

Bert looks up at a cloud and ponders my statement for a few seconds and then says, “I’m comfortable with it, though I was chubby as a kid. At some point



I started working out and lost a lot of weight but never had the dedication to turn myself into a living tree stump. Now, I'm a hedonist when it comes to the body. I grew up reading Greek mythology and see myself as a wild Dionysian spirit and like to dance nude in front of the mirror."

"I'd say that demonstrates a high degree of comfort with one's body."

"I was happy to find out that Olivier would perform in the nude for himself. I think it's healthy to celebrate the body that way, to be able to move it around without inhibition. I'd like there to be a lot more nudity in life," Bert says.

"Right, a lot more nudity," I agree and we both laugh though I doubt we are imagining the same nude scene. I push the image of flopping flaccid penises from my mind in order to control my mirth.

"I know it's necessary to have clothes to protect us from the elements and some people may want to cover up parts that are less than perfect, it's not like we're all Playboy models," Bert says.

"Right," I agree, "The pimples. The roles of fat..."

"Yes," he says, "that soft pudginess around the middle that never seems to go away."

"Can you give context for this comfort with your body? Or is it something you've always had?" I ask.

"I can't remember a time when I wasn't comfortable with my body and wanting to be as nude as possible. There are not a lot of opportunities in society to go nude except maybe at the beach. Growing up in Florida without air

conditioning probably helped. My parents never gave me any horrible signals about my body. I did go to Catholic school though.”

“Seems ironic,” I laugh.

“Actually, the cliché is that Catholic kids are the most sexually active,” Bert grins.

“I was thinking that your body comfort might have something to do with being an actor,” I inquire.

“That’s a good point. Many people go into theatre because it seems to be a socially acceptable place for exhibitionism and outrageous behavior. But I think the theatre, like the myth of Dionysus, acts as a stopgap for our wilder emotions,” he says.

“Can you remember a time when you felt more profoundly aware of having a body?” I ask.

“That’s interesting,” Bert says. He leans forward contemplating the question, “can you give me an example?”

“I remember playing truth or dare with a group of neighborhood kids. I must have been in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I don’t know how it happened, but we all ended up naked. I have a curved penis and it was getting hard. One of the girls looked over at me and said, ‘your thingy is broken.’ And I froze. I felt embarrassed for being deformed. I had never been so painfully aware of my body before. I think it’s in these moments—and they don’t have to be negative—that we start thinking about what our bodies mean or how they matter. Can you remember a time like that in your life?” I ask.

“Wow, and the girls got to see it and everything? Wow, I’ve never had anything like that happen,” Bert replies amazed and maybe with some disbelief.

“We were just kids. Curiosity, you know, just playing doctor,” I stumble over my words a little embarrassed. It hadn’t occurred to me that other people might not have had such encounters, and I am reminded that we often normalize our own lives as a way of making sense of our experiences. “Like I said it doesn’t have to be negative. Sometimes a moment of pleasure can cause us to feel more profoundly aware of our bodies,” I try to explain, “like the first time you jacked off.”

“I don’t know if this relates,” Bert begins, “but when you were telling me about this project the other day a particular anecdote came to mind. It was Memorial Day weekend about ten years ago. I would have been 35. I was taking a walk with my father. We wanted to see the area around the beach house that he had rented and on the way back there was a lot of high school or undergraduate kids hanging out on a balcony. This cute girl comes out and says to me, ‘Hi,’” Bert imitates a very flirtatious greeting, “and I looked up at her and said, ‘Hi,’” he delivers it sensuously as well then pauses before going on, “I’ve never forgotten her. It was the greatest feeling in the world that she thought I was cute enough to say hi to. There was an obvious ten or fifteen year difference in our age. I had gray hair by then so probably seemed even older. It’s the greatest feeling in the world...”

“Being recognized as sexually desirable?” I interject.

“Yes, though nothing ever came of it. It’s great to have a woman show attraction to your body. It’s always the man; it’s always me going after them, not them coming after me. To be caught in the female gaze to flip around the stereotype affirms my status as a vulnerable human being. I realize that some women have a problem with being looked at by men, but I think that the majority of them don’t. I certainly don’t mind being looked at. The equivalent might be if a man were to look at me that way. It kind of makes me uncomfortable, but is still a validation that I’m a sexual creature,” Bert says. I notice some discomfort in his expression of these ideas. We are both aware of the feminist and queer discourse on the male gaze, and he is probing me to see where I stand. When I reflect on this moment and subsequent interactions with Bert, I sense anxiety about how we perform our masculinity within the context of the academy where many scholars across various disciplines recognize relationships of power as gendered (see Bingham, 1994; Bordo, 1999; Brownmiller, 1975; Butler, 1993; Connell, 1995; Horrocks, 1994; Kimmel, 1987; Lehman, 2001; MacKinnon, 2003; Mulvey, 1981 & 1989; Murphy, 2001; Pfeil, 1995; Tasker, 1993; Thomas, 1996; Wienke, 1998). Neither one of us wants to deny the story told about the patriarchal order; at the same time, we prefer to resist any rigid interpretation of how we experience and express our manhood. I feel we struggle with fitting our individual lives into a social frame that considers us “essential” beings. In that respect, we are taught to ignore close personal relationships between men.

“What about your relationships with men?” I ask.

“I don’t think body image was ever really a factor. A friend of mine once told me I had put on a few pounds. His tone went through me like an arrow and said I looked fat. I lost weight immediately. I’ve done a lot of diets and tried fasting. I look in the mirror a lot and never weigh myself. I just look to see if I’m smoothing out or puffing up. I think that everybody has a threshold of fat. I only let myself go so far and then try to nip it in the bud,” Bert says.

“Do you spend a lot of time at the gym or working out?” I ask.

“I haven’t worked out religiously for years, but the best thing that ever happened to me was that summer I lost all the weight. I went to the Y all the time. I signed up for a couple of classes—one in the morning and one in the afternoon, so I’d have to stay there all day. In no time, I had lost a lot of weight. I was most aware of my body in the locker room. It’s an opportunity to surreptitiously compare your self with others,” Bert answers. In my other conversations for this project, I discover that looking at and comparing ourselves to other men is a common experience. However, I question whether the reasoning or results behind these actions were the same for each of us. My training in feminist and cultural theory urged me to read this behavior as a system of control where looking at one another unfolds along ideological lines (see Butler, 1993; Mulvey, 1981, 1989; Murphy, 2001; Pfeil, 1995; Thomas, 1996). The male gaze emerges as a coercive tool that demands adherence to a specified norm. To see our bodies as only inside this web of power, this hegemonic masculinity, is to deny the agency that *does* exist in the moment.

And I say, “Locker talk performs the irony of the male gaze. The banter we make controls the way we think about our bodies in relation to other men. I remember lots of gay jokes during gym class. My cohorts used the body as a way of ‘one-upping’ each other. Things like penis size and pubic hair seemed to matter most or whether you jerked off or got laid. To be cool you had to have a big, hairy dick that you stuck into as many ‘chicks’ as possible.”

“That went on with me too, but I can’t remember anything extraordinary. Most of the jokes seemed to be about girls, and we always had to have at least one joke for the bus ride to school. I don’t remember much banter about homosexuality, but I wonder how much being in theatre diffused that.”

“Were you in theatre during Junior High?” I ask.

“Yes. There was acceptance of that in the theatre. In terms of the body, we were exhibitionists. We liked showing off the body. But you get into the theatre because of the girls not because of the guys. Changing clothes in front of each other was a thrill. I can remember wanting to show more than I could show. The hip ones were the ones who didn’t really care.”

“Everyone enjoyed showing their stuff,” I say.

“I remember doing *Hello Dolly* and there was a freshman in the chorus. It was time to do the dress rehearsal, and we were putting on make-up, when, all of a sudden, I hear this wild scream. Then, this guy comes running out of the dressing room. People are trying to restrain him, and he looks as if they were tearing his arms off. He’s terrified that people are going to put make-up on him. He thought it was queer for a guy to put on make-up. It’s funny, because people

have impressions of what you can do on stage, but the tradition of the cross dressing man goes way back,” Bob replies, and then adds, “I’ve never dressed as a woman for theatre, but I come from a background where there’s lots of homophobia.”

“You mean being Latino?” I ask.

“Yes. There are lots of issues with machismo. I used to draw superheroes from comic books, and I wanted to get better, so I bought this muscle man magazine. It had these beefcake guys wearing things like jock straps. I’m sitting in the family room drawing these men when my father walks in. He asks me, ‘Why are you looking at that magazine?’ And I tell him because it had pictures of strong men. Then he asks me, ‘If I give you the money you spent for that magazine, will you give it to me and promise to spend it on comics and not get anymore magazines like that?’ I’m like, ‘Hell, yeah!’ So, he gave me the money, and I gave him the magazine. I watched him; he took it into the back yard and burned it. I didn’t know it at the time, but it was a popular gay magazine. I told my father this story yesterday, but he didn’t remember it. It’s etched in my memory though,” Bert says.

“What, I wonder, was your frame of mind while that was happening?” I ask.

“It never crossed my mind while I was looking at them that it was gay. There wasn’t any sexual activity, just a bunch of guys posing,” Bert says.

“It reminds me of the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*, but maybe less sexy because the women are posing in ways...”

“They didn’t have a flirtatious look that said I want to have a sexual encounter with you,” Bert finishes for me. I am reminded of John Berger’s little book *Ways of Seeing* (1972) where he makes the claim: *Men act and women appear*.

“Is there a cultural frame where men posing can be understood as a sexual advance?” I ask.

“I think the same criteria apply to male photos as to female ones. I’ve investigated pornography and to me a direct gaze has something behind it like an open leg says look at me sexually. Of course, if the penis is erect that’s a signal,” Bert laughs.

“I’d say that’s a clear sign of sexual desire. You can’t see a woman’s arousal like you can see a man’s. We are visible in different ways. Sexual excitement is harder for us to fake.” I say.

“That’s a good point,” Bert replies.

“How do we translate cultural images into a sense of our bodied self? You mentioned comics and superheroes earlier. Their bodies had to define a norm to the extent that most people weren’t buff like them. I wonder if there are any connections between those images and how we define manliness or manhood?” I ask.

“I remember Clint Walker in the cowboy show *Cheyenne* appearing with his shirt off a lot. He had a natural looking chest. It wasn’t ripped like they are these days. It was well formed, and it had hair, lots of hair. Today, everyone is



shaved. His whole way of being personified manliness. He had a deep voice but wasn't really verbal. He was the strong silent type," Bert says.

"He was physically imposing?" I ask.

"Physically imposing—emphasizing deeds over words," Bert answers.

"As a boy, what were you identifying with most in this man?" I ask.

"Strength and invulnerability. He couldn't be easily hurt. With superheroes it was the power to do anything you wanted. I've got a picture from when I was a kid flexing my muscles. It said I'm a man. I'm strong. Don't mess with me."

*Don't mess with me*: the last words recorded by the digital machine. Its forty-five minute storage capacity proves inadequate and our conversation continues for another couple of hours.

Our conversation felt like...electricity...a wild fire. We time traveled. We revealed many of our past sexual experiences. We talked about old friends. We talked about being in the shadows of our fathers. What happened to us happened in an instant—and our talk went from being an interview for a class project to a conversation between friends. He was my friend even if we hadn't muttered the word or asked the question. Something had passed between us and *it* was like falling in love with my self, because I could see and admire the best parts of who I am reflected in this other man.

Our shadows grew long on the concrete in front of the theater building. I knew it was time to wrap things up. We both had other obligations. I looked at my watch and Bert said, "Oh, it must be getting late."

“Yeah,” I said, “and I’ve got to prep a lecture and get a bite to eat.” I was reluctant to stop—to leave when we were feeling so good, but I stood up anyway. “I’m parked over there.” I pointed to the north and west.

“I’ll walk you to your car,” Bert said. I don’t remember what we talked about, mostly odds and ends. Maybe we went silently, too caught up in each other’s presence to need more words. I was full. I know that much. I was ready for anything. When we got to my car we stood there looking at each other as though we had come to the end of a first date and that awkward moment of a first kiss is decided. He was inside my personal space mere inches from my skin.

“I guess this is it,” I said.

“We should get together again, and soon,” Bert replied and stepped closer to me. I reached out and pulled him close to me. We hugged for a long time. It felt good. It felt free. And it was the third time we touched one another in a way that mattered.

*3:00 P.M December 5, 2002*

Friendships seem to be subject to a strange almost inexplicable sense of timing, of being in the right place with the right set of experiences. Men may story these first contacts as fateful such that the day takes on a mythic quality. This phenomenon is not unlike two lovers who ascribe special significance to their own first days. Except with friends, these events are seldom celebrated ritualistically like anniversaries. Instead, there is randomness to how these stories are told and retold—if they are told at all.

I chose Bert, perhaps out of vanity. He walked up to me after class and said to me, “You’re a writer, a *real* writer,” as if everyone around us merely pretended. Earlier in the week, he had complimented me after our Qualitative Methods class too. I had written a provocative piece based on a peer interview. His praise undoubtedly stroked my ego. But he eased my self-doubt and confirmed one of my dreams, not that I would be a writer someday, but that I was a writer now. He reminded me of the narrative turn my graduate work had taken and how I spent most of my time working on creative fiction (see Bochner, 2001, 2002; Coles, 1989; Ellis, 1993; King 2000). At the end of the semester, Bert caught up to me in the hallway again. He handed me an elegantly wrapped gift and I blushed.

“What’s this for?”

“Just something to get you on your way, a token,” my friend replied. I sat the present on my desk not wanting to open it in front of him. I felt overwhelmed. A man had never given me something as a token of friendship. In fact, I hadn’t gotten a gift from a male since I was maybe nine and it was for my birthday. I swallowed my emotions and said, “Thank you. Thanks. I don’t know what else to say.”

Sensing my awkward feelings, Bert pulls me into a hug. We stand together in the hall like that for a long time.

After he leaves, I go into my office and shut the door. I sit down at my desk and look at the small, decorated box in front of me. I run my fingers along its edges not wanting to open it, afraid that maybe I’ll be disappointed. What

could be inside? I untie the ribbon and gently pull the flaps of the wrapping paper apart. I remove the cardboard box and slowly slide the top off. Inside the box is a set of designer blue ink pens by Pierre Cardin.

They're perfect.

And I am being touched again—this time from a distance. I will think of Bert each time I use the pen and remember that he saw in me my essential need to write.

## Chapter Four: Hair, Muscles, and Orgasm

*9: 30 A.M. September 12, 2002*

I'm early. To ease my excitement I take a quick stroll around the apartment complex and scout the location of Jack's home, which ends up taking several minutes longer than expected because all the buildings look exactly the same—asphalt roof, red brick, white aluminum doors. There are no landmarks and the black paint of most building numbers has faded under the pressure of heat and time. I panic. Before my insecurities take control, I notice a multi-colored jalopy—one I've ridden in many times—it belongs to Jack. His apartment is the one on the right. I approach the metal door and tentatively knock.

“Hey,” Jack says opening the door with a big grin on his face.

“How's it going?” I ask.

“Fine, fine, good to see you.” Typical of his good nature, Jack hugs me as I enter his home. He smells fresh from the shower.

“I hope I'm not too early,” I say.

“No. No. Come in. Sit down,” he invites. I met Jack during orientation week a couple of years earlier. Since then, we had hung out many times and were friends of a sort, the kind who had shared some of the tribulations of graduate school together. I want to get to know him better and hope this conversation will bring us closer. We walk into his living room and I plop down on a ragged sofa. I begin rummaging through my satchel and he sits in a chair at a right angle from

me. He picks up a bottle of lotion off the coffee table, squirts a glob into the palm of his hand, and begins gently working it into one of his smooth, tanned legs. He's wearing loose fitting shorts and as he massages his muscular thigh; I produce a small digital voice recorder. I indicate my intent with a nod of my head and Jack silently assents, so I push the record button and a tiny red light blinks on.

“How do you feel about your body now?” I ask knowing he needs no further explanation as we had talked about my project earlier in the week when I had asked him to participate.

“I've always been okay with my body, but not truly thrilled with it,” he says. “I often reinforce the mind/body split—it's something I inhabit. I'm good to it. I eat well most of the time. I exercise regularly but I'm never content with how it looks. I played football in high school and even the serious conditioning that involved didn't shed the bit of fat around my middle. I've probably tried 500 different exercises since then.” He pauses to see if I understand. Before I can reply, the doorbell rings.

“That must be Billy the maintenance guy. He's here to fix my fridge,” Jack says as he strides across the room. I push pause on the recorder and watch as the two men head into the kitchen. They chat for a few minutes before my peer returns.

“The funny thing is,” he says looking into the kitchen, “it's the food too. I overeat sometimes. I'm hurting my body. I'll indulge myself at the expense of the body. I can feel it happening—feel it taking over but I've had tremendous luck my whole life, never any serious illnesses or injuries just a few scrapes.

Sometimes, men think of the body as a machine.” Jack pats his torso, “my body is a good car. It’s never been the new car or the most expensive car but the reliable one. I wish I could have the really expensive car,” he laments.

“I feel the same way, maybe a little worse,” I reply.

“How so?” he asks.

“I’ve always been self conscious about my body. When everyone was hitting puberty, I was still packing on the baby fat. For most of junior high and high school I looked like a cherub,” I say.

“You still see yourself that way?”

“Not exactly. But puberty happened fast for me. One summer I went from being the shortest person in my family to the tallest, but I didn’t believe it. I couldn’t see myself as six feet tall,” I say using my hands to demonstrate my quick change in body size.

“It took time for your body image and self identity to match?” he probes.

“Yes, but I can’t say I have positive regard for my body. I’ve just never been very athletic,” I say.

“I was always athletic, but feel I could look better. I constantly imagine that I can get rid of what’s around my waist,” he says and lifts his t-shirt to show me the slightly loose skin hanging from his gut. It reminds me of my own much bigger stomach.

“This pouch has been there since I was fifteen,” Jack continues, “When you’re asking me about body, are you asking me about physique?”

“Yes, but I’m also interested in the contexts where physique matters— how our body image influences our relationships with ourselves and other men,” I say. Jack sits silently and contemplates my words for several seconds. He is a handsome man in his late thirties, and it’s hard for me to believe that he feels any inadequacies about his body. Yet, this bit of information comforts me. I am not alone in my struggle with appearance.

“I’ve always been just average size, about five-nine, and I feel self-conscious when talking to taller men wondering if they’re looking at me going, ‘this dude’s small.’ I can feel the testosterone rising, so I make up for size difference with personality, especially vocal control. I generate presence verbally, even with those I’m closest to,” he leans forward and straightens his back, a posture that seems to add to his authority.

“The word presence is very interesting,” I say tentatively and cock my head toward the ceiling. “I don’t necessarily want to assign a negative value to our need to exert a presence around other men, but perhaps my feminist training causes me to automatically see patriarchal norms in such a performance. I see it as a way of avoiding vulnerability. I ask myself, ‘Is there a better way to story this experience; is there something else going on?’ but I get stuck with the idea that many men are divorced from the emotional content of their relationships either with each other or with women. I can’t help seeing our fear of vulnerability as situated in the body and it has to do with that need for presence you mentioned. I’m hesitant to say that there is no emotional content in our relationships or that there isn’t an emotional exchange.”



“Internally or externally?” Jack asks interrupting my musings.

“Both. It’s just that we haven’t allowed ourselves to understand that an emotional exchange is happening and I could be wrong but,”

“It’s worth thinking out loud about,” he finishes for me.

“My instinct is to say that men are not out of touch with their emotions; it’s just that men experience their emotions in particular ways and we haven’t learned to talk about them with each other,” I say.

“I think that it *is* contextual. I can show my emotions around certain men or women. I can open up over a glass of wine or a fine meal but at other moments I feel less confident. Like when I go to the beach my body is more on display than at other times. I’m not wearing a jacket and tie or a nice pair of shoes,” Jack slumps back in his chair, a little deflated, then says, “I don’t perceive myself as looking good and I catch myself making comments to my partner about feeling fat and looking fat. I don’t think she sees me as fat. I don’t think anybody sees me as fat except myself and it’s all tied to my belly. I like to think I’ve maintained that I’m even more muscular now than I was twenty years ago, but I can’t let go of the nagging need to improve.”

I contemplate my bulky stomach and can’t help thinking mine is bigger than his, a claim that for one part of the body would be a source of pride.

“I know,” I respond.

“It’s all tied to my belly. I’ve changed directions a couple of times,” Jack says about his choice of topic.

“That’s fine,” I say.

“When I was in my twenties, bodybuilding wasn’t as big a deal as it is now. People didn’t go to the gym five days a week. When I was an undergrad, our school gym could have fit in this living room,” he looks around and gestures at the confined space,” In my late twenties, the fitness craze hit and I started comparing myself unfavorably to men in my age group. As I reach forty, people frequently comment on my youthful appearance and that makes me feel one up on men my age. For instance, the guy who just came in to fix the refrigerator is probably about my age but looks ten years older, but why think that? I don’t know what that’s about—am I in competition with him?” Jack relates.

I begin to imagine the stomach I’d like to have, rather than the one I see everyday. What would it feel like to have a six-pack? Nothing on my body is hard. Everything is soft and squishy. I’m about ten years younger than Jack and he’s in better shape. After a few seconds of silent contemplation, Jack continues, “By U.S. standards, as a man, I am well below the norm especially in other status areas. I don’t own a home or drive a nice car. I wonder if some of my anxiety about my body is from not paying attention to those other aspects. As a graduate student I have little control over my financial situation. I want to improve to be seen as more masculine and having a good physique a six-pack...”

“I’m sure neither of us wants to work that hard, not when we already put too much time into our brains,” I add.

“But, I would never consider surgery—calf implants, pectoral implants, or liposuction and all those other cosmetic things men are doing these days. I prefer

an organic approach,” Jack says, “though Donna Harraway (1991) says that we are all cyborgs.”

“Some people may be cyborgs because they drive cars as that’s a mechanical extension of the body,” I respond.

“I wear contact lenses. I guess that makes me a cyborg too. Conditioning and shaping your body by virtue of technologically advanced equipment is also cyborg activity.”

“Right,” I agree.

“A couple of semesters ago we joked in feminism and performance that when men stand naked in front of the mirror they say, ‘Hey, yeah, not too bad.’ Women never do that. I guess I’m not a generic man because when I look in the mirror I often feel unattractive.” The repair guy, Billy, waltzes into the room interrupting Jack’s thoughts.

“It’s fixed,” he beams. Jack’s food is saved and he escorts Billy to the door. I push pause on the tape recorder again and wait to continue our conversation.

“Where were we?” Jack says when he returns to his seat.

“You were saying that when men stand in front of the mirror they’re more likely to see themselves as attractive in comparison to women engaged in the same activity. That has not been my experience either; I avoid mirrors. I don’t like what I see but as you suggested there are other avenues of status available to men. I can be short, fat, and have hair in funny places and still attain status through money or education. My looks are less of an issue because men haven’t

faced a long history of objectification. But isn't that changing? I'm thinking about my fantasies of the male body. I'll flip channels on the TV and there are lots of infomercials about diet and fitness. I'll sit and watch them and linger over the male bodies thinking, 'I want that body,' wondering what it would be like,"

"To be in that body," he interrupts.

"Because the men they show are,"

"Incredibly ripped," Jack finishes.

"Oh, they're gorgeous bodies. The muscles are nice and the skin is so smooth and even, not like mine," I describe.

"You may have noticed when you got here that I was putting lotion on my legs. I trim body hair almost weekly because that beautifies and maybe makes it more feminine. I don't just let it grow. I keep just enough underarm hair to remain masculine, which is a joke; women grow hair there just as easily as men. I go to the beach and tan as often as possible maybe once every three weeks to attain that caramel look of health. I imagine I'm emulating those bodies on television though they don't have strange patches of hair on their stomachs like I do. I'm also constantly changing my look," Jack relates.

"We both do that," I say.

"Yeah, we both do," Jack agrees, "Yesterday, I shaved my beard but I'll eventually let it grow back. I want to remain interesting but I won't do anything drastic like shave my head, which is a blatant way of gaining attention."

"I shaved my head," I retort.

"Oh, that's right," he remembers.

“I enjoyed doing that. I loved the feel of my naked scalp,” I say.

“You have a good head for baldness,” he complements.

“When I grew my hair back most of the women in the department were glad. They kept coming to me and commenting that they like me better with hair.”

“I think that’s scary for women,” Jack assumes.

“I wasn’t sure how to interpret that but I will probably never shave my head again because my partner is opposed to the idea. She doesn’t even like me growing a beard. Our desires define to some extent what we can do to our bodies. Kimberly likes it when I spend time plucking my eyebrows and other cosmetic things we do to fit the fantasy. I know it’s a way of pampering the body but when I do some of those things like exfoliating my skin I feel self-conscious like I’m—”

“Deviant,” Jack states with a naughty grin on his face.

“Yes,” I draw out the word a little longer than necessary playing along with the strange turn of the conversation. I was going to say ashamed and am glad my friend’s word choice shifts my perspective. “Most of the men I was around during my formative years were blue collar, and the idea of shaving body hair would have been queer to them.”

“For me hair trimming is very autoerotic,” Jack replies, “like masturbation.”

“It is a sensual experience,” I add.

“My partner is very intimate with my body and knows all its subtle changes as I would with her body. She asks me, ‘did you...’ I don’t shave my chest but I’ll take my beard trimmer and set it on low and give it a quick lawn mowing,” Jack says and we both laugh, “Still, I also know she will be accepting and not think it abnormal, which gives me permission in a way. If I were with a woman who found it feminine or odd, then I wouldn’t do it. My partner tells me her preferences too. She loves my beard. It’s amazing the kind of women you attract with a beard. When I grow my beard I get comments from African American women all the time, which I wasn’t expecting. I get looks from lots of women my age or older, but younger women don’t like the beard,” Jack conveys.

“It makes sense that in U.S. culture younger women hate beards, because hairless men are more prevalent in the media than ten or twenty years ago,” I say.

“Look at us,” he points at my head, “we both have long hair. Even after my hair-cut.”

“Yeah, you did cut your hair. I just noticed,” I break in.

“It’s still long. You see these guys with buzz cuts—I could never do that to my hair. Then again, I do value youthful qualities, but I’m married to my generational norms.”

“Hair represents an age gap. When it comes to facial hair, twenty something men are limited to goatees, soul patches, or flavor savors,”

“And the sideburn thing,” Jack adds.

“Victorian inspired facial hair,” I suppose.

“I’ve noticed that with facial hair, when they have it, that it’s cross racial that black men and white men between eighteen and twenty-five maintain similar styles, which is interesting and even encouraging,” Jack replies.

“I’ve had this fantasy about using NADS one of those hair removal products you see advertised on TV. A few months ago my partner bought some and we started using it on my body. It was actually very—”

“Freeing,” Jack interjects.

“Annoying,” I correct.

“Oh.”

“It was taking too long and the hair wasn’t coming off because it was growing in so many directions. I imagined it would come right off like in the commercial and it would be silky smooth,” I relate.

“It doesn’t?” he asks, making a mental note.

“You have to keep working at it,” I complain.

“There was a fantastic presentation at NCA last year about body hair. The men on the panel performed eight-minute pieces about their relationship with body hair and one guy was hairy, hairy. He had thick tufts of hair on his back and I can’t remember what he used. He may have shaved it or used Nair. I don’t remember but he developed a rash whatever he did,” Jack says.

“That happened to me too.”

“He developed a sadomasochistic relationship with his hair. He knew he was going to get the rash but removed the hair anyway. Like I said before, I think my relationship with hair is autoerotic,” he finishes.

“I feel embarrassed about hair removal. I don’t enjoy it; I avoid it. But you embrace it as a sensual experience something pleasant you do to your own body,” I say.

“It is and related to that is how much I weigh. I was 172 for much of my life. There is something about that number that I attach to youthfulness and what’s funny is that I weighed 172 all those years but my jean size went up regularly. Now I weigh at least 182 and sometimes 186 or 7, which I know on this body is 13 pounds over. I don’t feel heavier or sluggish or slower, but I know I’m overweight. I worry about whether the fat is around my middle or somewhere else and how I’m going to get rid of it,” he says.

“I dread going to the store to shop for pants, because I know there’s a possibility that I’ve changed size and at my best, which would have been in high school, I wore a 32. Right now, I’m wearing a 38. Over the years it has been going up and up. This summer I reached size 40. I felt bad and joined Weight Watchers. I looked like shit,” I say.

“I dined out last night with some friends and we had this conversation. I don’t diet, but if I eat cheeseburgers and fries four days in a row, then I feel sluggish and I switch to soup and salad. I don’t think the burgers make me go from 185 to 195 and certainly the salad doesn’t bring down my weight, but I wish I could go somewhere and someone would say, ‘You eat all these foods that you like,’ in other words, someone would give me a diet of food I already enjoy and told me that eating them for six months would drop my weight to 172, I would do it. That number is youth to me, and it wouldn’t matter if my waist size were 31 or



34. I hate that Levi's advertises measurements on the back of your jeans," Jack says.

"Yeah, you can't blot it out with a black magic marker or use a seam ripper to remove the patch," I say.

"I don't buy Levi's. I buy Old Navy or something that doesn't tell the world my size. I don't get that," Jack continues.

"I have Levi's on right now; my preference is usually for that brand because they fit me better. But like I said, I dread going to the store to shop for clothes because I'm never the right size. Everywhere I turn all I see is youth and beauty," I say.

"I know when I look in a magazine I can count on being presented with young attractive men," Jack states.

"They use older men who are rugged, which is another self criticism. Even though I look young, I am too soft or gentle in appearance. I fantasize about being more like Clint Eastwood or the Marlboro Man," I say.

"It's not just the desire created by images in popular culture either. It's also your perception of how others are looking at you," he theorizes.

"You don't want them to see you as soft," I state.

"That reminds me about this performance class I visited not long ago. One of the groups asked me if I'd do a part in one of their skits—the role of a drill sergeant chanting Marine Corp Jodies, 'I don't know what I been told,'" Jack imitates before going on, "I was looking over the script and one of the women said, 'you don't look tough enough.' She wasn't insulting me just pointing out

that my face looked too soft to play the part. I said, ‘Just you wait. I’ll transform. I will not smile. I will not twinkle. I will be cruel and loud and scary.’ I realized that I do that sometimes—adopt a menacing persona. Sometimes a situation requires a rugged masculinity like when I go to the mechanic to have my car looked at. I don’t go in with a big smile. I’ve started doing that in airports. When I go through the checkout counter I’m not cheery anymore. I adopt a more masculine persona facially. I also change my posture. I was teaching a gender class and asked students about what is and isn’t appropriate body language for men. I stood up and put my hands on my hips,” Jack stands up and walks across the living room provocatively swaying his posterior, “and the guys are like, ‘that’s not good.’ Or I sit like this,” he falls into his chair and crosses his legs as though he were wearing a dress.

“I sit that way a lot,” I say.

“I do too. It’s more comfortable,” Jack says.

“I resent that we’re limited by the conventions of our gender.”

“Absolutely,” Jack agrees.

“We better check the time. I feel like we’re running out and I don’t want you to be late,” I say. I would surreptitiously check my wrist but don’t want to send the wrong signal. I don’t want to appear bored or impatient; rather, I am genuinely concerned about my friend’s obligations and know we’ve been conversing beyond the agreed sixty minutes.

“What time is it,” Jack asks.

“10:18,” I say checking my watch.

“We’re all right then,” Jack replies.

“I wonder about specific locations and our relationships with other men. Is there something about a place that contributes to our performance of masculinity?” I ask.

“If I said to my class that I go to the grocery store across town because I want to get checked out by gay men, they would question my heterosexuality; but places create opportunities to look and be looked at and I like leaving the grocery store feeling good about myself even though I don’t pay nearly enough attention to men’s glances as I do to women’s glances, especially from women I know. I wouldn’t notice if you got a hair cut. Nor would I be able to tell you all the men I interacted with yesterday and what they were wearing. I could tell you they weren’t wearing tank tops but—”

“You’d only remember if it were an extreme difference from the norm,” I interject.

“Right,” Jack concurs.

“The male gaze is something influenced by place I suppose.”

“And the men you hang with,” he says.

“Those others, especially significant others, are what matter to me. When hanging out with male friends, I sometimes sense coercion about certain things,” I reply.

“Like looking at women?”

“Yes. Because of my training I feel embarrassed when I notice women for their body parts but I still find myself looking,” I say.

“I don’t apologize for noticing attractive women. I think what I find reprehensible is when you go to the gym, for instance, and an attractive woman walks through and men will stop what they are doing and turn in pairs or threesomes to stare at her. That affects her power,” Jack explains.

“Most of what happens between us in that moment is completely nonverbal. We confirm a societal norm with a raised eyebrow and a smile,” I say, “It amazes me how men can carry on a conversation with one another and dissect a nearby woman at the same time. We’ll use facial expressions to say, ‘Hey, check her out.’ Most of the time I don’t say anything and will resist turning my head. It’s—”

“It’s intrusive,” Jack adds.

“It feels wrong,” I respond.

“We’re projecting our power over her through collusion,” Jack says.

“I’m more uncomfortable when that happens with a man who is my friend,” I lament.

“Absolutely,” he agrees.

“I like you, maybe even adore you, but staring at someone’s boobs together troubles me,” I say.

“It makes you feel terrible,” Jack sighs.

“It makes me feel bad about us as pals. I’ve had friendships break up over the act of objectifying women. If the only thing between us is our capacity to critique ‘tits and ass,’” I make the scare quote gesture to emphasize my use of vulgar language, “then I’m not going to keep spending time with you. However,

what you were saying about not apologizing for looking reminds me of my hypocrisy. I do sometimes remember a woman I saw yesterday. The details of her flesh remind me that I've been socialized by the media and by other males from infancy that it's okay to gaze," I say.

"Me too," Jack agrees, "I can remember a woman I was sitting next to while eating diner the other day. I could tell you what she was wearing or how her hair was styled. I could tell you that she had a pretty, oval face and c-cup breasts, but I didn't make her feel self-conscious or take power away from her by noticing."

"A more surreptitious look," I comment.

"I do what women do," he explains.

"They look at us too but in an unobtrusive way?" I ask.

"That's right," Jack answers, "and if I wanted to flirt, I would let her know that I saw her."

"It's a game of letting each other notice that you're noticing without being overt or domineering. I've never been able to pull off the subtlety. Maybe I'm too accustomed to the more blatant exchange that happens between men," I say.

"I like your question about men and relationships. I try to think of the relationships I have. My brothers and I have had this conversation about body size and body style. As family, we've watched each other age from kids to teenagers and so on—something that's not true with any of my adult friendships. I've known Brian since August '97 and he would be delighted to know that I don't think he's aged at all in the last five years. He probably thinks he looks

older. My other friend James is extremely comfortable with his body. He's a little taller than I am—about 5'11"—and when I first met him he was lanky. Now he's got a forty-year-old body with a beer belly. It's enormous but the rest of him is still thin. He looks like he's carrying a basketball around under his shirt. When we go to watch a football game, he likes to take off his shirt. He's pasty white and not attractive to look at, but he doesn't care. I envy him his comfort," Jack says.

"I wonder if there are other experiences worth exploring where men look at other men?" I ask.

"I play basketball regularly with a couple of guy friends. Afterward, we go to the locker room together, strip down, and shower together. These two guys are much hairier than I am. They have what you would call stereotypical uh—"

"Hairy, hairy, hairy," I interrupt.

"Hairy backs, hairy chests, hairy genitals. That's another thing. I'll look at men's penises in the shower," Jack reveals.

"I think most men do that," I say.

"I don't stare but I do a quick mental calculation to see if his is bigger than mine."

"I find myself looking at men's hands," I joke.

"There's a great moment in *The World According to Garp* (Irving, 1978) where Helen Holmes notices how weak men look when naked and un-erect. I read that book 20 years ago and have never forgotten it. Sometimes, when I get out of the shower and am in a sexual context with my partner, I feel soft and

unattractive, but, in the bedroom, in the act of making love, I don't feel that way. Enacting confidence is another area of compensation. I don't have a magazine quality body, so I compensate by paying attention to how well I am reading my lover's body and making the right moves and that kind of thing," he says.

"I think a lot of attractiveness is the way we perform our imperfections," I muse.

"That sounds like Goffman."

"Perhaps, but the idea of vulnerability and invulnerability keeps coming to mind. The bow-flex body we see on TV performs invulnerability something that we may desire; yet we may recognize that such a performance doesn't make for profound relationships. A more vulnerable sort of body or vulnerable presence makes for more meaningful relationships," I say, "because intimacy won't happen otherwise."

"Absolutely," Jack agrees, "vulnerability is necessary for intimacy."

"In that respect our bodies put us at an advantage, because we can perform vulnerability far easier than the man on the TV with the bow-flex body. When you see a massive, physically powerful man, the assumption is that he's tough not a teddy bear. That body has a much harder time performing vulnerability," I surmise.

"That's a good point. I think that's a major realization. It makes me feel a little bit better about myself. I can be vulnerable. It's easier for me. I hadn't

really thought of that until now,” Jack replies. I look at my watch again and indicate that time is running short.

“Why don’t we go into my bedroom? We can keep talking while I get dressed for class.” He stands up, and I follow him to the back of the apartment.

“I wonder if women can say the same thing,” Jack wonders as he strips out of his t-shirt and shorts. He has an even tan. His body is well toned except for the slight pouch of skin around his middle. It is also covered with uniform length blond hair. I snap my eyes to face level purposely refraining from gazing at his crotch.

“I don’t think so. Regardless of their body type they are rendered vulnerable by the cultural narrative of objectification,” I respond.

“They’re already vulnerable; they can’t perform vulnerable,” Jack says.

“I remember that when I was younger I incorrectly interpreted women’s experiences based on a limited understanding of my own body—probably still do. I couldn’t figure out why one girlfriend always wanted to have sex with the lights out. Or why another wanted to have breast augmentations because they sagged and were small. Not to mention the eating disorders, I couldn’t understand until I was able to step back from my own self-conscious feelings about bodies. I appreciate the cultural pressures more these days, especially because my own body is becoming more and more subject to those pressures,” I say.

“The first woman I was intimate with was considerably older. I was seventeen and she was twenty-six. She wasn’t self-conscious about her body. There was nothing I didn’t find attractive about her from her wide hips to her



sagging breasts. She was sexy because she never revealed any discomfort about body. Of course, I was feeling fortunate just to be naked with a woman,” Jack says as he pulls fresh clothes from his closet.

“I know what you mean,”

“I had a similar experience. I was seventeen and she was twenty-one and a junior in college,” I reply.

“Might as well have been forty,” he observes while pulling on a pair of Old Navy jeans.

“I had just graduated high school and it was summer and we were working at the same movie theater. That’s how we met,” I say.

“I was working at a restaurant,” Jack adds.

“We spent the summer together. She had a serious boyfriend back at school,” I say.

“Mine had a husband,” Jack reveals while lacing up his shoes.

“That experience changed the way I looked at my body,” I say.

“I don’t think I even experienced my body in that context. I just experienced orgasm,” Jack says while tucking in his shirt, “I didn’t have a body. I just had a penis. It occurs to me that over time my interactions with women have contributed to my body image. What they tell you makes a difference. Your skin is soft. You have nice hands. I like your broad shoulders that sort of thing. It sticks with you,” Jack says and we meander back into the living room. I pick up my satchel and follow him to the door. We’re standing at his car reluctant to end our conversation.

“It does stick with you. After that summer, I saw myself as a stud. I was good in bed because I could get an erection just from saying ‘sex.’ I had incredible staying power too. She would thank me over and over afterward. It was kind of embarrassing but for a seventeen year old who had never had sex and had just reached puberty,” I say rapidly.

“Very intense. Very satisfying. Mind altering,” Jack lists off.

“Yes, but it made me overconfident. Even though I had a few one-night stands over the next couple of years and that image of my self was sustained, it didn’t last. I met a woman my junior year and we got serious. We dated for nine months before we had sex. It didn’t work. I had difficulties getting erections. When I did, I’d orgasm in about three seconds. I didn’t understand it. I was devastated,” I relate.

“I had a relationship like that too,” Jack says.

“It was very crippling and we eventually broke up,” I reply.

“And you didn’t pursue other relationships for awhile,” Jack comments.

“I was afraid.”

“I had a girlfriend who called me in front of a lot of people, ‘quick-draw’ that was during my freshman year, but oh it’s time to go,” Jack says looking at his own watch.

“I know,” I say a little disappointed that our time has run out.

“Later, I met a woman who was more experienced and patient. She taught me that lovemaking had little to do with the penis. She also said, ‘you have a nice

penis.’ She thought it was attractive. What a difference that made. I’m late. I have to totally go,” Jack finishes.

“I’ll e-mail you later to set up those other meetings,” I add.

“Sure thing. Take care,” Jack says.

“So long,” I reply. We hug each other and he gets into his car. I watch him back up and pull out of the parking lot.

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In the last few minutes that we are together, I sense a therapeutic turn in our talk and recall the repair guy’s statement: *It’s fixed*. I’m not sure that, unlike Jack’s refrigerator, anything has been repaired. Rather, I feel the conversation set the conditions for healing the wounds of a narrowly defined masculinity for me, for Jack, and for other men. Our sharing, without judgment, intimate details about our bodies—our lives—validates my and Jack’s difference from the orthodox script of manliness. Though we talked about hair, muscles, and orgasm, topics that seem to have the itch and scratch of a real man, we approached these subjects of the body with a degree of vulnerability that allowed for intimate self disclosure. We talked openly about the ways we cared for and sometimes did not care for our bodies. We revealed our disappointments about struggling to fit into the image of a perfect male physique. We divulged details about our relationships with women that, with more time, could move from a focus on how well our bodies performed in erotic practice to how much our hearts work in love, a shift that for most men moves them away from bragging about their exploits toward

sharing experience that helps *us* all live better lives. In this way, the texture of our conversation sidesteps the norm.

## Chapter Five: Assuming Old Habits

*11:00 A.M. September 13, 2002*

I wake up before Kimberly, as usual the lovebirds that had been a part of my dawn rituals are now outside our home in an aviary I built for them back in July. While checking e-mail and drinking coffee, I see the sun rise and am greeted by the whistling of the birds. I open the shades next to my desk and peer out the window at them. The birds seem happy, and I go about the business of getting ready.

My fiancée is not a morning person. She requires gentle coaxing from our bed. I wonder how she got out the door before we met and know that being in her life I have changed her routine as she has changed mine. Our relationships make new people out of us, but the custom is to forget and to use the culture's clichés to label the other. She is a night owl. I am anal. She is ditzy. I am a curmudgeon. None of these categories are true, but we find ourselves living in them anyway.

"I am a man," I think to myself while sitting in the bathroom reading a copy of *Elle* magazine, "and the habits of my gender are inscribed on my body." One article, I notice, reveals the top ten secret sexual fantasies of the male species. It intrigues me, but I am disappointed after scanning the bold face list. These are not *my* fantasies. Nor are they the *Man Show* extreme I expected: No threesomes with twin supermodels or fellatio with buxom women wearing

Catholic schoolgirl uniforms. Who would have thought men like spooning and having sensual words whispered in their ears?

“What are these magic words,” I wonder as I flush the toilet, and then wash my hands. My mind already changing subjects, I head into the kitchen to prepare breakfast, and, while I am scrambling some eggs for Kimberly, I am amused by the different meanings implicit in the phrase “take care of someone.” Though I would never kill anyone, least of all my fiancé, I am fascinated by the notion that the routine of care can be psychologically deadly. As a man, I often resist care, because I falsely believe such kindness impinges on my sense of individuality.

“I can take care of myself,” I think and am overwhelmed by the irony of the thought. Would I kill myself for the sake of being a man? What if something happens to me, and I need other people in ways I never imagined? As I approach my thirtieth birthday, my body already shows signs of decline and its inevitable demise. Like many Americans, I am overweight from too much fast food and too little exercise. No one would protest if I named these for what they are: bad habits—habits that have contributed to lower back pain, high blood pressure, and now, maybe, aching feet. Can I change these habits?

What about being a man though? Gender is, after all, a socially inscribed practice that is not always entirely good for my health physical, mental, or spiritual. *Quit your whining and take it like a man*, a voice in my head admonishes. More clichés: *silence is golden*. Whatever happened to the promise:

*I've got your back*—it's a phrase men like to share that has more to do with protection than with care. Who do I need protection from? Other men?

There is also a double meaning hidden in these phrases that reveals the dependence of our manhood on a perceived threat of homosexuality (see Murphy 2001). I am reminded of a scene from the war movie *Full Metal Jacket* where the drill sergeant says, "Your soul may belong to God, but your ass belongs to me." Why are the violent contexts of orthodox masculinity so inextricably linked with the anal? Could it be an issue of control? Like potty training in our infancy, being a man means keeping our shit together.

Yet, I do care *about* my male friends even though I usually avoid giving such a sentiment voice. I have never considered the possibility of caring *for* them—they would probably say the same thing, "I'll take care of myself, thank you very much."

But accidents do happen. Life sometimes overwhelms us and while buttering a couple of slices of toast, I wonder: what *are* friends for? Maybe I expect too much from myself and from the men in my life. Shouldn't the activities that fill up our time be enough?

I am suddenly aware of the fine line between taking over a life and helping with life. As men, we are socialized to take charge, such a stance is hierarchical, and care, if anything, should be reciprocal—at least, most of the time. I, of course, do not take care of Kimberly in so far as taking over her life. To be sure, we take care of each other, but I wonder about how the men in my life help me—how do I help them?

When I am done cooking breakfast, I pour a cup of coffee for my still slumbering lover; I know the exact chemistry of her preference and it is one sign of our shared intimacy: two tablespoons non-dairy creamer and three tablespoons of sugar. Thousands of such details make up our life together. Do male friendships have these details? Are such details even necessary?

The rest of my morning runs like clockwork. Kimberly is out the door and on her way to work. I putter around the house cleaning up messes and getting meat out of the freezer to thaw for supper. I read a couple chapters in a novel. When I am ready to leave, to cross town for an interview with a potential friend, I look out the window and see my motorcycle, something that symbolizes a particular male fantasy of being cool and in control. I haven't ridden in months. I've settled down. I've changed. But the old habits beckon me, and, in an instant, I am changing clothes; I am grabbing my blue jeans, long sleeve shirt, boots, and leather gloves.

From lack of use, my bike is covered with cobwebs. I wipe off the cobwebs and some of the luster returns to the red machine in front of me. As I'm cleaning, I'm also checking break lines, tires, anything that might fail and result in a crash. When I am done, I pull my helmet over my head and swing my leg over the side then knock the kickstand up with my left heel. I push the key into the ignition and switch it on. I open the choke and press the start button. The engine sputters then reluctantly roars to life. I give the throttle a few squeezes and inhale the familiar blue exhaust.



I ride through the neighborhood checking the operating condition of my long dormant bike. Satisfied that everything is working properly, I head for the interstate. My blood rushes in anticipation of speed as I turn onto the entrance ramp. After a moment of hesitation, I rocket through the gears 1—2—3—4—5.....zero to ninety in a heartbeat. Cocky from the quick acceleration, I gun it past a hundred, my mind clear, focused.

I'm not in the habit of taking risks when I ride and conscious that I am screaming toward malfunction junction, I ease off the throttle. I find a comfortable cruising speed and settle into the routine of second guessing the cars around me. When I ride, I don't zone off or get lost in thought the way I do when driving a car. My mind is on one thing: staying alive. Hyperaware, my senses take in the details of the road noting all imperfections for future rides. Absorbed by the operation of my motorcycle, I forget about my research and enjoy myself for the next quarter hour.

I ride into the parking lot of the strip mall ten minutes ahead of schedule. Over the years I've learned to stop and take a closer look at these ugly inventions of modern architecture and have been rewarded with good, cheap eats. Most of my favorite restaurants are housed in these disposable complexes—disposable because no one would protest their demolition. These buildings do not fit into the narrative on historical value that has swept through the old neighborhoods of south Tampa where 1920s bungalows have become something of a gold standard. The temporary quality of these shopping centers reminds me of my friendships with men.

I find a spot under a tree and cycle to a stop. I sit on my bike thinking of possible questions to ask *my* research participant. I laugh at this linguistic construction that suggests I own the person I am about to interview. I want to let go of this social performance. I want to give up some of my authority and make a personal connection during this session. I have already completed a couple interviews and prefer to think of them as conversations, and my method as friendship. I agree with Tillmann-Healy (2004) that such a method allows me to be in the world *with* others instead of a world *apart* from others. I understand that being *with* others closes the distance created not only by the role of a traditional researcher but also that of traditional masculinity.

A passing car interrupts my thought process and I look up and see something unexpected: Kirk parking a black SUV. I had imagined him driving a vehicle more in tune with his hippy persona. I wonder what my motorcycle says about me. What if I had driven the GEO Metro? Am I sizing him up? Why do I feel the need to be cool? Why do I want to appear powerful? Kirk draws out my competitive nature probably because he is an athlete. I am wary of athletes. While growing up, I suffered too many humiliations at the hands of jocks. I pull off my helmet and strap it to a hook below the seat. I slide my satchel off my back so that it hangs casually from my right shoulder. As I walk toward the building, I wave to Kirk who smiles with recognition.

“Hey buddy,” he says in a voice that stretches out words as if they are floating through honey; it gives the impression of being earnest and profound at the same time. “Glad to see you,” he continues, and we embrace.

I smell patchouli wafting from his skin, conscious that my own reeks of exhaust. With a strong grip, he holds me for a moment at arms length, his penetrating gaze cutting chunks out of me. I want to pull back and am unnerved by the closeness of our bodies. We hardly know each other. Who is this man? He vibrates.

I untangle my body from his and we enter Trang's, a Vietnamese restaurant. The restaurant is loud with people eating lunch. The manager seats us at a table in the middle of the room. I would prefer a booth in the corner out of sight and feel like I am sitting on a bull's eye. While we are looking over the menus, a server pours two large glasses of water dropping a lemon wedge in each. I pluck the wedge from my drink and squeeze its acidic juices over the top of the clear liquid. Raising my fingers to my nose, I sniff the tart aroma the fruit left behind. This simple pleasure calms me and I reach into my satchel to find my tape recorder. I press the record and play button before nestling it between two bottles of unlabeled brown sauce. Later, when I listen to what the little machine captured, I will feel mesmerized by the rhythmic clanking of glasses and the muffled buzz of other peoples' conversations.

In the moment, as seconds tick by, and we finish the routine of ordering food, the rest of the world begins to melt away. I focus on the man sitting across from me. He has shoulder length blond hair that is thinning on top. My own hair is thick and full, something that reassures me, probably because it is a sign of strength and virility. When Sampson lost his hair, he lost his guts.

Kirk's body is lean but not skinny. Though he is only a few inches taller than me, his erect posture gives him a towering appearance. He reminds me of a short basketball player. If we were to touch, our skin would contrast greatly—his is a pale white and mine a deep tan. I am uncomfortably aware that I am checking him out—something the role of researcher seems to allow. My eyes roll over the contours of his body longer than is usual for two straight guys. If he were a woman, he might start flirting with me or give me a look that says mind your own business. I avert my eyes like I do when standing at a urinal next to another man. There is a momentary silence before I begin to speak.

“What comes to your mind when thinking about your body? What strikes you as important to talk about?” I ask.

“My perception is,” he stops for a second, looks up at the ceiling, and then continues, “one of spiritual healing. My body has been through a number of surgeries. I've had four knee surgeries, two stomach operations, and an elbow surgery. They corrected my physical problems, but I felt violated afterwards. The way I held myself in my body changed. I lost control over its use. It's hard to explain to someone who hasn't had injuries.”

I am shocked by this list of surgeries and a little embarrassed by my sizing him up like just another predatory male. Because he is or was a jock, I have a hard time giving him credit for being human. I would have never guessed that Kirk suffered from any serious health issues. When I look at him, he seems fully capable of scaling Mount Everest. I am reminded of my own physical ailments something that helps me make sense out of what Kirk has just revealed. It's about

losing something you take for granted. I had hurt my knee a couple of years ago and since then have had to be more aware of what I am doing with my body more tentative about the way I move. As I am thinking about my own declining body he continues to speak:

“It forced me to think about how I go about my daily life. How I breathe—I’m in tune with minute fluctuations in my body’s rhythms, you know, the Chi,” he says while closely examining my reaction to the spiritual context established by using a word like Chi. I nod that I understand and Kirk continues his explanation, “There’s a strong belief that the body has an energy coursing through it and that it interacts with all the moments of your life. When I talk about a spiritual awakening it’s more like trying to tap into my energy source in the world where I function. As I’m going about my daily life how my energy is interacting with you, the food I eat, the people that I’m around, the stress that I feel and my awareness of it is very important to how I experience things. Is that a place to start?” he asks.

“That’s definitely an interesting place to start and it’s also an issue that hasn’t come up—the spiritual sense in which we are or are not grounded in our bodies,” I reply. I am also thinking about one of the books I’ve been reading for pleasure recently: *The Art of Happiness* a story detailing a conversation between the Dalai Lama and Howard Cutler, a distinguished psychotherapist. In it, Dr. Cutler examines the differences between Western medical practice and Eastern religious practice when it comes to understanding an “injured” mind. I am reminded that there are multiple contexts that govern our perceptions of reality. I

am aware of a conflict of perception happening within me as we speak. I am attracted to different spiritual doctrines and want to take some things on faith but the academic in me seeks rational explanations as though anything could be explained if it is observed long enough—if enough data is crunched. I know better, but think these are ideas and conflicts Kirk is trying to provoke in me as we speak.

“Let me ask you this: During your day are you aware of your body’s rhythms? Do you pay attention? I’m not talking about going to the bathroom or blowing your nose; I’m talking about being in touch with how you feel, are you up are you down? How are you feeling internally as you go about your day?” He asks.

In a few short minutes he has become more of a researcher than a participant. Is this the natural habit of a graduate student or is it a man thing I think as I reply, “Much of the time I am hyper-aware of depression, which is perhaps different from you having surgery. But, it’s still an awareness of my body in a physical sense in that it’s a lack of energy, a feeling of being exhausted. Sometimes it takes a conscious effort to leave the house to go somewhere and interact with other people.” I’m not sure if we are talking about the same thing.

“Is this happening right now?” he asks. I am reluctant to say yes, because I don’t want him to feel as though he is somehow a cause of this emotional state. I am also self-conscious that the conversation has shifted focus away from his personal experience to mine. I don’t want this conversation to be about me or even him; I want it to be about us.

“Often times I feel very exhausted after social situations. At the same time, I do sometimes feel energized by conversations like the ones I’ve been having for this project,” I answer tentatively.

“Why is that?”

“I’ve been wondering about that too. Not wanting to jump to conclusions, but from my first conversation I noticed a therapeutic element in the process, a heightened sense of connection. The context of these talks as research may push us to a more personal level faster than usual. Just saying that we are having a dialogue alters what is happening. We are not just having any old conversation.” I am shying away from the negative and am not elaborating on my statements about exhaustion, and I experience another moment of anxiety. I fear the conversation may be more for me rather than for us. I am also aware that the man sitting across from me has training as an ethnographer and may be adopting the role of researcher out of habit. Like me, Kirk can’t help being analytical and curious about others.

“Do you wake up and before you start your day is there a sense that you know how things are going to evolve based on how you’re feeling. That’s what happens to me. Within five minutes of waking up I have a general sense of how I feel and that sense impacts the way I react to the rest of my day—the way I read, the way I interact with people, the way I work out at the gym, the way I talk to my mom on the phone. Am I going to be more engaged or want to be left alone? Does that ever happen to you?” He rephrases his inquiry.

“Let me clarify something. When you say feeling—”

“Am I talking about how I feel emotionally?” he interrupts.

“Are you’re talking about your stomach bothering you or that your knee aches?” I continue my thought.

“Not necessarily, I mean do I feel up or do I feel down and that may not be emotional. I think it’s your body’s rhythms based upon interactions and past experiences all coming into play at a particular instant each day and how that impacts the way you react with the world around you,” he tries to explain.

“I’m having a hard time understanding, because, at least to some extent, what you describe sounds purely emotional to me. But you’re grounding that state of mind in a couple of different contexts. One is in terms of one’s biochemistry, one’s muscles and bones and how they physically feel but then you are also pointing to a relational quality, which is in terms of substance or physicality; it’s harder to put our fingers on. It’s a memory. I guess I have a hard time thinking of memory as a physical thing,” I say.

“But maybe what I’m getting at is that I’m basing my experience and interaction with myself and with others upon things that have happened to me either in the past or with other people. I’m talking about the physical and communicable activities that have taken place in the way I deal with my body. Now you’re talking about depression and I’m wondering, and I don’t know that much about depression, your depression might be something that is genetically based. Mine, on the other hand, is the result of interacting with people. My perception of self and how I hold my body is constantly influenced by my relationships with others. When I talked to Joy yesterday, she touched me on the



shoulder. Touch is huge and not necessarily sexual. But she had never touched me before, and after doing so, I hugged her. Her touching my body impacted me. I hadn't connected with this individual before and it made me aware of how I was feeling toward myself. I wondered how it made her feel. We're jumping all around the place now," he says.

"That's fine," I encourage.

"I don't know," he says thinking.

"You're talking about a bodily experience," I prompt.

"Yeah."

"As having an emotional content?" I ask.

"That's how I see it. I can never escape the emotion. I think the body and the emotions are one and the same," he says.

"Right." I agree though I'm not sure we've understood one another fully. Sensing my uncertainty he continues, "They're constantly influencing one another. My emotional state is dependent upon how I feel. Now you say, "feel" and what do I mean by that and how do I feel internally. Is it, well, maybe you are correct that I need to distinguish between am I having a stomachache or my knee hurts and how that affects my emotion. Maybe you're right; boy, I just know that when I wake up in the morning how I feel impacts the way I emotionally respond to others during the day, and how they respond to me impacts the way I feel about my body."

"I would agree with that. What I'm seeing as a distinction is, take your stomach for example, that there are two ways that it is experienced. One is purely

physical. My stomach hurts and it affects my mood and my ability to do work that day. And that's different from how I feel about my stomach in relationship with whomever, say your fiancé—”

“Meaning my physical...”

“In that sense, damn it, I feel bad and I'm angry, because my stomach is fucked up. It's a barrier to an experience; you see what I mean? Where one experience is pre-relational and the other is post-relational,” I say with conviction even though I don't know for sure that I believe what I am saying. I am thinking out loud letting our conversation pull words out of my brain spontaneously.

“Let me see if I can think of an example. After I had knee surgery, I was unable to walk. I played sports, and my body was my temple up until the age of 23 when I injured my knee. I was playing baseball on scholarship. *My life was my body.* I could do some amazing things. I grew up in an athletic family. My father played major league baseball. My mother went to college as a track star. I've been told I could throw a baseball before I could walk. My mind wasn't a concern. I firmly believe that I'm in graduate school getting my Ph.D. because of the injury. Up until the age of 23, my mind wasn't a concern, but my body was. How I could perform in sports mattered more than how I could engage in mental activity. Hurting myself, I had to disengage from a part of my life that was central from birth to age 23. It was everything. It was all I thought about. I started lifting weights when I was 14. When I had surgery, and I wasn't able to do the things I used to do, I lost connection to certain parts of my body. It was a cleavage that I didn't want. I missed it. My knees are so bad, I cannot run. I

could not go on a quarter mile run. It physically cannot happen. I could dunk a basketball. I could do some amazing shit that not everyone on this planet could do. I considered it to be a gift. There are some things that I can't do anymore and that tugs on my emotional and mental state. Have I been able to substitute for it with my schooling? No. I haven't been able to find the same sense of inner peace using the mind as I could when I was engaged in physical activity. No. I see them as two totally different entities," he finishes.

"What happened? How did you hurt yourself?" I ask.

"I blew out my knee. It was my sophomore year. I was going to start at 3<sup>rd</sup> base. It was the week before school. I had been up there for two weeks working out with the team and a friend of mine asked me to play in a volleyball tournament. I'd grown up on the beaches of Southern California, so I'd been playing volleyball since I was a kid. I went out and played and in the second round I went up and came down on my leg. All my weight was on one leg and it had nowhere to go. My knee blew out and I dropped," Kirk says and stands up to demonstrate. He also lets me feel the hardware under the scars in his knee.

"Not human," he says.

"Cyborg," I reply.

"Yeah, I'm a cyborg. I was out for a year rehabilitating." He leans in closer, his face intense and eyes unblinking. In a quieter voice he says, "But there is a metaphysical side to the story. I was elevated out of my body by the injury and recovery. I'd never had a spiritual experience like that, but after that day my life changed. I wasn't able to be as physically rigorous and that changed the way

I perceived my body. I didn't work out as much as I used to. I became disenchanted with my body. I was frustrated with myself. For years I was depressed." He sits back in his chair and lets out a deep breath. "I was driving home last night and I saw some people playing softball."

"Doing things that you wanted to be doing?" letting him know I understand.

"Yes, and I'm like, shit, you know, I'm not going to be able to do that. It's hard," he says, and I can see a feeling of deep loss and pain contorting his face.

"It sounds hard," I agree but begin thinking out loud again and avoiding the kind of physical contact that may be possible in this moment. My emotions, my desire to care for someone makes me aware that we could be watched. I am self-conscious of the people around us thinking two guys hugging or crying in public is weird and I continue speaking, "One thing that occurs to me is the kind of relationship you had with your body before that accident also guaranteed having particular kinds of relationships with men," I theorize.

"You mean that because I was an athlete I was going to have a relationship with other athletes?" he asks.

"In a sense, yes, that that way of being in your body was grounded in the way you could be and were with other people. Thinking about that person before the accident and the way you related to that body and who you related with to the person after that accident. Do you have the same friends? Not necessarily immediately around the time of the accident, how many years has it been?"

“Seven.”

“Seven years later how do you see differences in the people you interact with?” I ask.

“I was more physical with my friends and everything that I did with people before I hurt myself was physical. We would go running together, play sports together, workout together. After the accident, I didn’t have that interaction. Now this,” he indicates the conversation we’re having “is my interaction. I go to class. I have conversations with people on academic issues. I don’t know. Maybe, I don’t understand the question,” Kirk sighs.

“Obviously, there’s a change in how you are able to relate with other men. Before the accident, your mode of relating and the way you sought to relate was bodily—doing activities that being with one’s friends was working out at the gym or playing a sport—a very physical way of relating. I think it has its own emotional content different from say this conversation in the way that it gets performed. After your accident, you don’t have that same way to relate to other men.”

“I guess I learned to talk, to engage in conversation. I learned to be sensitive to other people’s feelings. In sports, I just wanted to be the best and I was very intense. It happened off the field too. After that, I lost my intensity in a way. My interactions with people used to be more jocular, now they’re more personal—when you’re out on the field it’s not really personal even though you’re working for a common goal but you’re not talking...”

“But you had a bond with those men,” I strongly suggest.

“Oh, I had a bond with those men,” he agrees just as strongly.

“It’s often an unspoken bond,” I say cautiously, almost as a question. “For me, it’s taken a long time to recognize that depth existed in some men, especially athletes. In high school, I was the complete opposite. I wasn’t an athlete. I didn’t hit puberty until almost my senior year and that makes a big difference in being able to play sports. So, I had a much different experience than you. My way of relating was already mental. At that time, and even up until recently, I was prejudiced toward jock types. I tended to think of them as stupid, you know, the stereotypes. In being more aware of how men relate, I’ve been changing my mind; I’ve been grappling with the emotional content of our lives. There are a lot of research studies, as well as, media messages that say men are cut off from their feelings or that they don’t have emotional lives at all. I think these claims are untrue,” I say.

“But, as men, do we buy into that because we hear it all the time?” Kirk asks.

“To some extent it is a self-fulfilling prophecy. I don’t think we are as simple as we are often made out to be in some research done on masculinity. We lead complicated lives. We are held by emotional, spiritual, and physical boundaries that are not always easy to access conceptually. It is also difficult to acknowledge how men are as trapped as women by hegemonic masculinity (see Heasley, 2005),” I say watching Kirk eat an egg roll. I’m self conscious of the need to fill time with words. I cannot quietly observe this man working on his lunch. Partly, I am afraid that if silence fills the space between us for too long an

interval, then any magic we've summoned will be lost. And for me there is always with some men a desire to stay in control. I continue:

“In the story you were telling me, before your accident, you had a way of relating with other men that you were probably not even aware of—it was something you just did. In relating that story there is also a sense of nostalgia for that state of just being. What came after the accident is somehow second best, not as good, which is opposite from how I might have thought of it. At the same time, I was wondering: how could we story the accident as a gift? Is that something you would even want to do?” I ask.

“That's a question I deal with often. I like to tell people that it's just your knees. Look at all the other things you can do with your life. Think of growing up with this capacity to think like a genius, to achieve great things with the mind, and then one day taking half of that brain and saying you can't have it. What's he going to do now? He can't do what he used to be able to do. That's what happens. I used to be able to do things. Was it a gift? I'm still trying to answer that question. In some ways, yes, it provided me with the opportunity to look at life with my mind. I think that's important, because a lot of men, at least the jocks I grew up with and still talk to, continue looking at the world through their bodies and not their minds—I think that can be dangerous. I think a lot of the men who run the world do so with their bodies instead of their minds. They're just physically aggressive and taking that desire out on easy targets. I am stronger and will kick your ass and be number one. I think of being physical as being very

one-dimensional. In terms of ideas there are things I just couldn't do living in a physical world," he says.

"I've been thinking, as we've been talking, about integrating those aspects of our lives. It's not like after the accident you don't have an embodied life. Obviously, it's radically different in that you're not leaping tall buildings in a single bound, but you still have a relationship with your body," I say.

"It's a relationship that I've repressed. I no longer make physical activity my primary goal and being the best that I could be. Looking good was only a byproduct. I can tell you now though that after not being an athlete, I have started to pay more attention to how my body looks rather than what it can't do."

"So, in a sense, you were not as self-aware," I say.

"I was not self-aware. And this is while going through high school, a time when your body is a big deal. I was in incredible shape. I had less than 3% body fat. I was fucking ripped. But I didn't pay attention to it. I was going to the beach everyday in the summers and the girls and all that stuff didn't worry me," he says.

"Dare I take my shirt off? That wasn't something you were thinking," I say.

"But, now, when I go to the pool, I think about it all the time," Kirk laments.

"That's a very big difference between us. When I was in Junior High, I was very aware of my body being less than ideal and then going to high school



and not hitting puberty and not hitting puberty and not hitting puberty oh my god that was tough,” I say.

“I couldn’t imagine.”

“You end up being that person everyone dumps on, which is a very different sort of experience from yours,” I say.

“Talking about the mind and the body, do you think your depressive state was occurring before this physical awareness of not meeting up to the social standards of your peers?” he asks.

“I was depressed at a very early age. I was always a sensitive boy, and it was easy to hurt my feelings. When I was in high school, I tended to isolate myself. I spent more time in my mind. Sometimes, I wonder if being crazy isn’t being out of one’s mind as much as being out of one’s body. I had no desire to be in my body—this body,” I say gesturing at my chest. “By high school I spent most of my time upstairs,” I knock on the side of my head and say, “I had a very rich fantasy life.”

“Amazing. I spent no time up here until I hurt my knees.” Kirk’s voice is sincere astonishment.

“By avoiding the physical, I have developed few close relationships with other men. You told a story earlier about being touched by a classmate and it being a very bodily expression that pays attention to more than one’s physical attractiveness. It communicates a lot of things. I think it *is* a physical expression of desirability even when the people involved are of the same sex. Desirability has many different avenues beyond just sexual attraction. It’s also, ‘I like you’

and being in your presence and talking to you and being friends with you needs physical expression—something interesting to look at in heterosexual men. How are we physical with each other? I know that affection is often worked out in the way we play together, you know, doing sports, going to the gym, that sort of physical activity. This is the socially acceptable way that men often do affection on a daily basis. I don't think that's necessarily bad. Maybe, playing one on one basketball can be the same as two women hugging? You're not usually playing one on one basketball with someone you hate. It's with someone you like and it's a very physical experience that equates to the touch you talked about earlier."

"I don't know how to respond," Kirk says.

"That's just me thinking out loud again. I could just be full of it." I say this and am not aware that my words are a way of seeking confirmation from my friend.

"No you're not," he replies. For a moment we grow quiet not sure where to go.

"The direction of our conversation seems to be toward that point in life where we become more aware of our body—at what point is it about how it's perceived? How does that impact an individual's self-awareness?" Kirk asks.

"I think it's not just one moment. I think there are multiple experiences that make us aware of our bodies and each one takes us down a path of self-awareness. A very early experience for me was being aware of my penis. I think that's a pretty universal experience in this culture, especially around Junior High.

I remember being obsessed with the size of my penis and measuring it every day to see if it had grown. It was around the time we started dressing out for gym class, and I couldn't help notice the difference between me and the other boys. I'd make comparisons and start having those conversations about girls. I can remember being with different groups of boys at different times—I moved around a lot, so it wasn't always the same boys—but penises came up a lot as a topic of conversation. Penis size, whether you were doing things with your penis or not, there were tons of jerk off jokes. At that time you discover that you can..."

"Get some self-pleasure," Kirk interrupts.

"Yeah, get off and it was supposed to be this negative thing. It was always a cut down to be told you jerked off. This seems to be universal too. I can't think of too many guys who haven't had those kinds of conversations—I wouldn't even call them conversations—that kind of talk with other boys," I say.

"There are three instances that stick out in my mind. First was when I was 13 and going to a psychologist during my parents' divorce. During the course of our conversation he says to me, 'Are you beating off?'" Kirk pauses and we both recover from laughing. He continues:

"That was the first time anyone had ever asked me that question. I didn't know what to make of it. Had I been prior to that? Probably for a year but nobody ever asked me about it before. Three years later I'm a sophomore in high school and my baseball coaches are two college kids. They're 23 or 24 and I'm 15 or 16. They openly say they beat off and I should too. Not only that, I should be open about it. I'm like: What?"

Again we break out in laughter over the seeming progressive attitude of these young men and I say, “The gym coaches I had were over 50 with huge guts and wore those ugly spandex shorts. They probably couldn’t even see their dicks let alone talk about them.”

“It was great having two men publicize their comfort with beating off. They’d say, ‘I did it three times today; I want you to do it six times tomorrow you mother fucker.’ Then there was the first time a woman saw my penis. That was fucking huge.” Not necessarily his penis but the experience of sharing it with a woman. I contain my desire to laugh again as Kirk continues his story, “I was sixteen and she was my girlfriend. It’s one thing when you’re looking at it or your parents saw it when you were little but this was somebody from the outside. That’s when I became super aware. I mean *super aware*,” he says.

“In that moment when a woman sees your penis for the first time and all those conversations about size you had with the other boys leading up to that moment.”

“Yeah, I’ll never forget it,” Kirk says.

“It’s like you want confirmation. You want her to say it’s plenty big enough.” We both break out laughing again before I can finish my thought and finally say, “Can I get verification, will you sign this document?”

“It’s so true. If anyone ever accuses me of being too small, I’m going to whip it out and show them,” Kirk says. He means the piece of paper not his penis and it’s curious to me that a woman’s confirmation about our penis size is somehow more important than its actual size. After all, I could just pull out my

penis and measure it. I have the physical evidence within arms reach. But I am reminded that the cultural narratives about “The Penis” (or the phallus as symbolic organizer of hegemonic masculinity) will always be bigger than an actual male member, because, as a symbol, the phallus wields all the authority of manliness available through the patriarchal order. How could any one man compete with that? And this symbol of power maybe a basis for the fundamental lack men feel when performing their gender (see Bordo, 1999).

“I do think some of our first awareness of our bodies is sexual in that way. The first time we ever masturbate or have an orgasm we can’t help but notice our body. Gee, something just happened. What was that? Can I do it again?” I say with a sly grin.

“Oh yeah; oh yeah,” Kirk says as if remembering something vitally important and then says, “I didn’t read about it in a book. My parents didn’t tell me about it. I don’t know how it happened. It was like my hand was just attracted like a magnetic force.”

My mind is racing trying to recall some early childhood experience. I know the exact moment and details of my first ejaculation but withhold that information, my memory moving further and further back in time.

“When I was like six or seven I’d touch myself all the time through my shorts or jeans. It just felt good. I remember being outside playing once and some adult male probably one of my father’s friends saw me. I remember him saying, ‘don’t touch your peewee like that; it’s bad,’” I say, thinking this is one of my first conscious occurrences of guilt associated with my body. Many

experiences are spinning around in my head and I begin relating another, “I also remember playing truth or dare with some neighbor kids once. We were stripping naked and rubbing our private parts; I got a boner. One of the girls pointed at it and said, ‘Your thingy is broken.’ I have a pronounced curve and that was probably the first time I ever thought my body might be deformed.”

“Wow,” Kirk says in shock and disbelief.

“I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade at the time,” I say.

“Wow,” He says with even more shock and disbelief. I begin to realize that my experiences may be uncommon and not universal to all little boys. Feeling a little like a pervert, I say, “But I do think for most of us, men and women, that that sort of self-awareness is adverse and is a painful discovery of our sexual nature.”

Then Kirk says, “And how society tells us to perceive that awareness.”

“I could make the argument that potty training is one of the first self-conscious and social moments with our bodies but most of us probably can’t remember that training. When you think about it, obviously we were being made intensely aware of our bodies and what they do and how we ought to police them.”

“That’s a good point,” Kirk interrupts my train of thought and says, “Our awareness has a lot to do with how our family helps us see our bodies, especially in how open we are with and to our bodies.”

“No doubt. After all, who else is going to teach you where to pee and shit? Even sexual knowledge or lack of it is of importance. I don’t know when

your parents divorced and what your father's habits were, but most of the fathers I knew, mine included, had pornography. I found it when I was five."

"My father's pornography was what stimulated me to jack off in the first place," he replies.

"Me too. But that's a time when a lot of boys start getting their knowledge about sex and it is done secretly. I was thirteen almost fourteen when my dad gave me this book about sex. At that point, I had already been looking at and reading porn for almost ten years. I had a lot of sex knowledge but some of it was also misinformation. Not really knowing exactly how babies were made is probably the scariest lack of knowledge, especially when I think about some of the things I was doing when I was nine, ten, eleven years old."

"You don't always put two and two together," he says.

"I think at a societal level that 'father son talk' is more myth than reality. We don't all get that talk and those of us who do don't always get the same talk. I didn't get a talk; I got a book."

"I didn't get a talk *and* I didn't get a book. I was self-taught mostly; my peers also taught me a lot," Kirk adds.

"I remember kids saying it was okay to have sex as long as you didn't French kiss. The girl who said my penis was broken was letting boys put their penises in her and..."

"Oh! Sixth grade?" Kirk asks, shocked.

"Fifth, and she said she wouldn't let me because my penis was broken."

"God! That's incredible."

“And I can remember her saying—somebody had knowledge that that was how babies were made—and somebody asked if she was afraid of getting pregnant. She said, ‘No, you have to French-kiss.’ I imagine, when thinking about it now, that she probably ended up pregnant at an early age. I can only speculate, because my family moved to a different state not long after this experience,” I say.

“Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow,” Kirk repeats.

“I’ve had lots of experiences like that with neighborhood kids. There were always different degrees of age among the kids involved. My first sexual experience was when I was 5.” Relief washes over me as Kirk begins to reveal an all too familiar childhood sexual experience, “I had one when I was 5 too. It was with my friend Billy Bailey. We were rubbing penises and he was much more domineering. I had no idea what was going on. We were the same age. He was like let’s do this. We went in the backyard behind the shed and his mom comes out and finds us. She said, ‘You can’t be doing that.’ When I think about it, my first two sexual experiences were when I was 5. A few months later, I walked up into his mom’s bathroom and she’s got just her bra and underwear on. I was taken aback and turned to walk out. She said, ‘No, no it’s all right you can come in. It’s only natural.’ On the one hand, I was being told, ‘No I can’t be with a guy,’ but at the same time, ‘it’s okay to see a woman naked.’”

“When we’re young, we’re what Freud calls polymorphously perverse, which has to do with pleasure. The pleasure we take from our body is not differentiated culturally yet. We take pleasure in a non-sexed way. Things like



eroticism are learned and there's little to nothing natural about it. The only thing that seems natural is our urge to procreate but even then the social conventions around it are total constructs. The same "nature" could be accomplished even if we did social relationships differently. Who's to say we couldn't live separately from women and only come together once a year to mate? We could spend the rest of our time in homosexual relationships. But at that early age we don't have that cultural awareness of the body. You just do things because they feel good and if something feels good you want to keep doing it."

"So, when people tell you no—," Kirk interjects.

"I don't think it's necessarily bad that people tell you no. In order to be socialized, you have to be told no, especially if you buy into psychoanalytic theory. Most times it's very sexist, but I do think we are socialized through a series of being told, "No!" It doesn't matter who tells you—mother or father. Some one has to tell you "No!" you can't keep putting crap in your diaper when you're thirty. You have to put your crap here instead." I jokingly point to my notebook that is sitting on the table next to me, and continue, "You can't go around touching yourself all the time—that's just not very productive. 'No, you can't slurp your drink,'" I say accusingly pointing my finger at Kirk, "I know it's fun but it's just not acceptable, that's just not the way you do it," I say in a terrible *Father Knows Best* impersonation. I feel delighted by the turn of events and use the opportunity to continue flexing my intellectual muscle, "That 'no' is necessary. I don't think Freud thought it was bad that we repressed or sublimated our 'natural' urges. What Freud allows us to do is question the repressed as

socially and relationally constructed. We have to have some inhibition; otherwise, I'd be walking around sticking my dick into everything. Self-knowledge is predicated on the different ways we become aware of our body in social settings or the context of different relationships. Those moments when we are with other boys or we're with a woman for the first time or how our parents potty trained us, matter in how we come to terms with our self-knowledge and body image."

"I wonder if that body image is—I'd say that image is constantly changing and amorphous. Is it adaptive or is it stagnant?" Kirk asks.

"I don't want to say it's stagnant or that it's just a free for all. It's like a phantom limb you still have within yourself: your body image before the accident. It is 23 years of lived embodied experience. Twenty years from now when you have a vast storage of different body experiences, it's going to overtake and outrun this other one. The other one is going to become less significant as you grow older. It's how I feel about my own body and my past relationship with it as a boy in high school. I'm 30. It's been about 15 years since I was that prepubescent kid who got picked on all the time. I hit puberty when I was almost 17 before the start of my senior year. I tend to see my adult self more now when I think of my body than I do that kid. For a long time, when I thought of myself, I saw that chubby, cherubic boy. When I hit puberty, and this is an interesting moment, I wasn't even aware of the fact that I had gotten much taller. I was made aware of it because one day in my senior year my dad was looking at my sister and me with an odd expression on his face. I was like, "What?" He said, "You

know what? You're taller than your sister." I had never been taller than my sister. Even a few years later I didn't feel taller. I didn't have this taller image of myself. I still felt small. Another experience in my senior-year gym class I remember. I mean I actually got big, as big as I am now. I shot up to this size in six months. I had literal growing pains. It was very painful; I can remember my bones aching. So I don't know how I wasn't aware of it. My whole body hurt. During my senior year, no one bothered me and I can remember having this conversation with a guy in my gym class who was a total muscle dude. He worked out all the time. He wanted to be an Army Ranger. I don't know how the topic came up but we got to talking about bullies and I wondered why people weren't picking on me anymore and he said, "I wouldn't want to mess with you. You're big." It was amazing to me. I'm not big. No way. I mean I'm not huge. I'm 6 feet. But that's not short. And that was just bizarre to me because the image that I had was of a little 5'2" prepubescent boy. That image stuck with me through much of college."

"My dad is 6'2" and I'm 6'3". At 14 I hit puberty. I grew from 5'7" in 7<sup>th</sup> grade to 6'3" by the end of 8<sup>th</sup>. I can remember noticing it in a picture my mom had taken of 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduation and I saw myself as taller than my dad. Even though we had been physically eye-to-eye over the last year, I had never realized it. He never said anything. He's very dominating. I had been working out and it was junior year in high school and he came to the gym to talk to me. There was a machine I was working my pecks on and I said, 'come on dad do a couple.' I assumed he could do it and he couldn't and I thought yeah I could kick your ass.

I could probably do it physically but whether or not I could do it mentally,” he pauses for a second for effect and says, “I think to this day my dad could whip my ass, even though I’m taller and stronger because mentally I fear him,” Kirk discloses.

The revelation of this fear is startling to me. My gut says this fear is a common feeling many boys have for their fathers. Not respect but *fear*. I think to myself that when more boys do not fear their fathers the world will have undergone a significant paradigm shift.

“I was the same way with my dad, but I was physically smaller than him for most of my childhood up until my senior year in high school. He’s in the military and was a football player in high school so he had a much different physical sense of his body than I did of mine. He never used it against me other than being physically imposing, you know, the look and his voice.”

“Yes, yes,” Kirk agrees.

“I can remember my dad saying once that no matter how big I got he could always take me out.” Both of us laugh and our loud guffaws cover over the pain I know we both feel about the relationships we have with our fathers. The threat our fathers represented may be experienced as a joke but is also deadly serious. And that fear often stoked our competitive natures.

“Ah shit man,” Kirk says letting me know he’s with me. “Growing up that was the other thing that motivated me. I wanted to be bigger and stronger than my dad. I didn’t only want to be the best athlete; I wanted to be bigger and better than my dad. I lifted a lot of weights and I ran a lot. When my dad threw the

baseball at me, I wanted to see how much harder I could throw it back. When he pitched to me, I said throw it as hard as you can. I wanted to know if I could hit it out of the park. My relationship with my dad became very physical, not play wrestling like when I was a child but it was all about the competition and I'd say that translated over into my physical relationship with my other friends. Am I stronger? Am I bigger? Am I faster?" Kirk states.

"I was always lazy and didn't like working out. I tried a few different times when I was at that age but I never kept it up. I would rather read a book. My preferred activity next to masturbating was reading books. Although I still harbor fantasies that I'm going to have that body, going to get off my ass and go to the gym, I'd be happy to just lose ten pounds. But maybe just maybe I'll start going to the gym five days a week," I say.

"Is that you saying that or someone else?" Kirk perceptively asks.

"That's a hard thing to separate. There is status to having a body like that and, whether we're willing to admit it or not, we all want a certain amount of status. It gives us confidence and power in the world. It gives us choices. I think those reasons are inextricably tied up to wanting to have *that* body. I still have a hard time seeing myself as attractive even though I've been told differently by lots of people. You can't be told often enough that you look good, especially if you were someone who never felt physically appealing. I've always been on the heavy side. Last year, I was even heavier. I've been losing some weight mostly for my fiancé and her mother, because they have certain ideas about THE

wedding. Everybody wants you to look your best. I had to buy all new clothes because they weren't fitting," I complain.

The server drops off our checks and the spell of our conversation is broken for the moment. I look around and notice that the once crowded restaurant is now nearly empty. Kirk smiles and says, "I'm not sure you can ever escape your body awareness. It always affects you. How do I look in relation to others? Can I make a choice about my physical stature? Should it matter?"

"I think it's important to strive for self-acceptance. But I don't want to be so accepting that I gain 500 pounds. I guess that's a mean thing to say, but I don't want to get that big. Do I see myself getting that big? Gosh yes, because I love food. It wouldn't be hard for me to put on a lot of weight. I lead a sedentary life *and* I like to eat. You sit four Big Macs down in front of me and I'll devour them," I say with conviction.

"My friends and I call those cholesterol highs," Kirk jokes. He picks up his tab and looks it over before fishing his wallet out of his back pocket.

"I don't eat fast food as much as I used to. I don't like how it tastes, but when I was in high school, I could easily sit down and eat four Big Macs, a large fry, and a large coke. The funny thing was that in my senior year in high school, I wasn't that heavy for my size. I was about 175 and 5'11" hardly abnormal. But I saw myself as abnormal. I couldn't believe it when I started dating this gorgeous woman right after high school. I couldn't believe she wanted to date me," I say.

"So you couldn't believe that this woman wanted to date you or that you were taller than your sister. You couldn't believe you wouldn't be bullied even

though the guy in gym class said otherwise. What does that say about the self and society...if society is telling you one thing and you're feeling something else..." he trails off.

"But that experience wasn't familiar to my body and that's what I was saying earlier about outdistancing your body image. It requires time. I don't feel like that person in high school anymore, even though I still have body issues, especially about my weight. As far as being small and being afraid, no, I'm not afraid of other guys. If it came to it, I could hold my own in a fight. I practiced Tae Kwon Do for two years while getting my master's degree. But at our age that sort of thing doesn't happen as much. You don't get into fights unless you go looking for them. I know some people may do that kind of thing but whatever."

"I think it's a class thing," Kirk says.

"I agree. I might not get into bar room brawls but I still take people on, especially other men. I do it with ideas. We're good at beating up opponents with our words," I add.

"I've done that too but I'm changing."

"We're trying to listen more," I say and the server returns without change. My recorder clicks off. I have run out of tape (having replaced my inadequate digital one with an analog one). We sit at the table in silence for a moment both of us reluctant to get up and leave. It's almost 2:00 pm. And Trang's usually closes for a couple of hours before reopening for dinner.

"I guess we better go," Kirk suggests.

"Yeah," I agree.

“I had fun,” he admits.

“Me too and I hope we can do it again sometime—soon,” I say. We get up and head for the door. We stand in the parking lot, the heat of the afternoon steaming up my glasses. I take them off and use my shirt to warm them up and Kirk says:

“You know—we’ve made a connection today. We touched each other. Tomorrow, we will be different people.”

“I know. And I appreciate it.”

Kirk puts his arms around me and squeezes hard. The man-hug threatens to cut off my circulation and though it might be said that this all too familiar embrace denies the gentleness of a true hug, as it is absent of tenderness, today I feel that we are trying to hold onto something—a fragile spark—and hoping that our talks—our connection—continues. I squeeze back even harder.



## Chapter Six: Opposites

*3:30 P.M. September 24, 2002*

I am tired—too tired to have a great session. I’ve been dealing with two unruly students, males. For public speaking classes, I often assign a speech where students interview and introduce one another. These guys thought it appropriate to introduce their buddy by giving an oral history of their sex life that included a list of “MILFs” (Mothers I’d Like to F\*\*\*). After I got over my shock and they were part way through their raunchy and degrading tale, I told them both to leave. That had been Thursday—four days later—the following period—today—I had the class form dialogue circles and discuss the ramifications of their peers’ disrespect. Neither guy had shown up. Part of me was thankful, but it took all I had to give emotionally to get the students to take the matter seriously. These two guys were examples; they clearly demonstrated the kind of behavior that friendship between men often condones and encourages: that it is acceptable, even necessary, to objectify women.

The class went well, but I needed to unwind. I should cancel, but time, as always, is a precious commodity. I don’t want to waste my friend’s precious moments. I am sitting in my office waiting for him to arrive for our scheduled conversation and my next to last meeting with participants this go around.

*I’ll suck it up and push through, I think.*

Sidney and I have been friends for two years, which is one of the reasons I asked him to join my project. We've always gotten along and have had some good times together. Of all my male friends, he is the one I do "normal guy things" with. We go to the gym and work out. Some weekends, we go canoeing at one of the nearby State parks. Like me, he recently married, and we both participated in each other's wedding. Luckily, our spouses are friends, which means, we often engage in coupled activities. We go to the movies, we go out to eat, we get coffee and we hang out at our homes playing board games.

One thing we have in common is that both of our fathers are retired military, something we learned about the other the first time we talked. Where you from—a question that always reveals a Brat's lack of roots—is, after all, a typical conversation starter between strangers.

*Where you from?*

"Nowhere," I remember saying, and "Everywhere."

"Yo' momma," he said with a toothy grin, a grin that sat on his face like a guardian angel; it disarmed me. But, I learned later, his grin is also a protective mask of wit and often as not accompanies a wry remark. It invites me in and keeps me at a distance, and I can't help feeling is part of a double consciousness developed to protect my friend from the sometimes harsh realities of being a man. Big boys don't cry.

*No, they don't cry.*

Ironically, our differences are what drew me closer to Sidney. Where I exude doubt, he radiates certainty. While I embrace irrationality, my friend is the

most rational person I know. I am messy and he is neat. Sidney is an athlete and I have an ample paunch—he is hard; I am soft. I’m liberal and he’s conservative. I fill my office with original collages and his is Sparta to my Athens. We are opposites and I admire our differences. Sometimes, I wish I were more like him. I realize that is something I think about most of my friends.

I am lost in thought when Sidney walks into the office.

“Wool gatherin’” he says.

“Hey, yeah,” I say in way of greeting. Sidney puts his worn brown leather satchel on the desk opposite mine and sits in the empty chair.

“Rough day?”

“You could say that. I’ll tell you about it later. Let me set up my tape recorder.”

“Cool.” My friend waits patiently while I dig around in my backpack. I notice that he’s dressed in uniform—plain long sleeve button down shirt, khaki Dockers, and a pair of well worn Dexters—business casual with lots of starch and polish. I’m wearing a t-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. There’s at least three days growth of beard on my face and my hair is a mop reminiscent of the 1970s. Sidney takes great care in his appearance; I take great care in seeming like I don’t.

Despite my too casual dress, I feel formal and tight about starting the conversation. I flip though my notebook and glance at some questions I had written there. I turn on the recorder. The silence in the room is palpable; I gulp, and then ask, “When you think about your body now, how would you characterize that relationship?”

“It’s good. I spent the majority of my life playing sports, and I can walk a flight of stairs without losing my breath. I monitor my body to make sure I’m not gaining weight or getting flabby. And if I do, I get on the treadmill or lift weights. I know my physical fitness is above average even though I don’t work out competitively anymore. If I were to take a fitness test now, I’d still do pretty well,” Sidney replies with confidence. Why is his cocksure attitude so attractive, I wonder?

“How would you link that to how you present yourself in relationships,” I ask.

“Even though I’m not competing anymore, I try to watch my weight and look decent. I think it makes a difference in how people look at *you*. Some people are fastidious about the way they dress or comb their hair. For me, it’s maintaining a certain appearance in terms of my fitness. People may look at *you* as a whole person, but *you* can look at someone’s body and it may not tell *you* everything but gives an overall impression that this person has it together. It’s impression management,” Sidney says.

Why does Sidney switch point of view when talking about how people look at bodies. It’s as if, linguistically, he avoids the fact that people are looking at his body, sizing him up. I’m aware that I’ve been sizing him up. He is a tall and muscular man—physically imposing. Good looking. At least, I think he’s good looking but it is something that I would not easily say to his face, I wonder why not?

“*You* try to shape how people are going to look at you because they’re going to do it anyway. So, *you* can have some input,” Sidney explains further.

“It’s about having some agency in how you get defined,” I add.

“Yeah,” Sidney remarks, then says, “In terms of impression management, I accept that there are cultural norms that people fit into and take a pragmatic approach, because I know people are going to make conclusions based on those stereotypes. You try to create equilibrium between how you feel about yourself and how people see you. Maybe it’s easier for me because I fit into a positive category. It would be harder if your body doesn’t fit into the norm. If you weren’t the best kid in gym class lets say, you take that to heart and feel bad. Women deal with this a lot more than men,” Sidney says.

“What kind of feedback have you gotten?” I ask and my friend grins.

A little embarrassed, Sidney laughs then says, “When I was in high school, I used to run track. The girls in gym class jogged slower and waited for me to come by to look at me. You get the idea that your body is all right. When I was in college, I had friends in art class who asked me to pose for them. I never did, but the fact that I got asked suggested to me that I’ve got a body they wouldn’t mind looking at.”

“How did you feel? I’m assuming you were flattered.”

“Yes, it’s flattering.”

We fall into a moment of silence. I know my weariness is making it hard for me to get into the flow necessary for good dialogue. After a few more

seconds, I finally say, “I’m curious about instances where you can recall identifying issues with body image.”

“When I was younger, I was toothpick skinny and short. I didn’t grow height wise until my sophomore year in high school, but you could see every bone in my body. All my veins stuck out and people were like ‘you need to eat.’ I didn’t look attractive back then. In high school, I grew taller and in college I filled out. Over time, my body grew into the athletic norm,” he answers.

“Can you recall any other time when you felt more aware or conscious of being in your body,” I ask.

“When I was an undergrad, I was conscious of being in my body because it was so different from the norm. In the northeast the norm was shorter more stocky and, being a tall guy, I stood out. I was also conscious of being skinnier next to these stocky guys. Even though mine was still good, it was not the norm and not what most women were going to look for,” Sidney replies.

“Do you feel that you acted differently toward yourself,” I ask.

“I think it impacts confidence. If you’re the kid who had glasses and clothes that aren’t so great but then someone gives you a make-over... Your friends are shocked and people start to notice you. After awhile, you notice that people pay attention to you. In our culture people defer to you because they like the way you look. As you become conscious of it, it can become a tool. As a guy, you may feel more confidence,” Sidney offers.

Again, I notice my friend shifting point of view and ask, “Have *you* ever used *your* body as a tool?”

“Oh yeah,” Sidney laughs, “In sports you step onto a field and people look. As a guy, you use it to deter conflict. If some one is going to push an issue or something...” he trails off but has an intense look on his face.

“You can be physically intimidating, menacing,” I add.

“Being a big guy, you don’t have to fight. Not that it happens so much when you reach a certain age, but you can intimidate without really doing anything to some one,” Sidney says.

I’m well aware of how men use their bodies to threaten one another and wonder if we every consciously use it for other purposes and ask, “Have you used your body in a way you might characterize women using it?”

“Not all women do it but many use their bodies for seduction. I don’t knock anyone for doing that. I don’t think I’ve done that very much because it doesn’t work as much for a guy. For me it’s more a deterrent to physical conflict. As far as wooing someone, no, not really, I don’t think it comes into play for a guy as much. It’s stereotypical, but I tend to think that women are better at that sort of thing than guys are. I think most women look for other qualities in men besides the way they look.”

“Can you think of when you became aware that it’s different for women than it is for men?”

“If you’re in college and you’re hanging out with friends and you want to go to a club and my friend she smiles at the bouncer and everybody gets in free—Smile at the bartender and we all got free drinks—where as, I can smile all I want and even if there is a woman at the door it’s less likely to work for me. I have had

some instances in which I've gone into a store and noticed that people smile back and stuff like that. In retrospect, if you notice that every time you go into this one burger joint and this one woman always gives you the large size, even if you didn't order the large size..." Sidney lets that thought hang in the air for a moment while nodding his head forward and raising an eyebrow, "That's not a major thing but it does show that people tend to place an emphasis on what they find attractive. It's not like you earned it or anything, but you accept it as a given."

Again, the conversation lapses into silence. I'm not sure what to do with this information. All my other sessions had been so much easier. I had energy. I flip through my notes again and ask, "What kind of figures did you identify with growing up?"

"I liked to run so for me it was Jesse Owens, which was picking a body type that resembled my own. Runners are small weight wise, but muscular. There are things they can do with their body that other people can't. The ideal body type I strived for was Bruce Lee. To look at the guy, he is not Sack Diesel, but there is no one who will look at him and say he's nothing. This guy is strong and quick and, to me, that was a body type that combined everything," Sidney answers with little pause for consideration.

"What about in terms of the way you played as a kid?"

"We used to play King of the Hill as kids, and girls, at that age, were bigger so it became Queen of the hill because she's stronger than you," he replies quickly again.



“What was puberty like?” I ask just as fast.

“I didn’t find it dramatic. I just grew. I went from being skinny with all my bones sticking out. I was taller. I was always athletic so I was stronger than most people.”

“It was gradual for you?”

“I remember that I was always above average. I was one of the best athletes. I was always the fastest runner. I was always setting records but there wasn’t really anything else that differentiated me from other kids. The only thing that I remember is that what I did remained the same, I just got bigger. So, before, people were amazed because he was a little kid. But as he got older it became expected because the body he possessed was more in line with what people expected it to do. Suddenly, you have a body that said you could win a little easier.”

“Thinking about those expectations, when you got to the point where you were expected to win, was there anything there in how you related to yourself? You did have to face defeat at some point,” I say.

“I always liked underdogs. When there are eight kids out there running and you ask, ‘who do you think will win,’ I have no doubt people weren’t picking me. I think there is more pressure once people start identifying you. It’s probably the same expectation that a tall person gets when they try out for basketball and then people realize they can’t shoot. You realize that you wasted your pick. You can’t always pick on how people look. You could be lined up next to someone half your size and they can beat you but people don’t always see that. So, if

nothing else, you put up a bit of a defensive posture because you know you're going to have to explain if you don't win," Sidney explains.

I realize that my weariness has made it difficult for me to add my personal experience to the conversation and that with Sidney I had to also be quick to get a word in. His mentioning of the games we played as kids brings up painful memories for me. I try to ease myself into revealing something personal and say, "I can remember those days in gym class where that getting picked thing was so important. It seems like a canonical narrative for boys in this culture. We all had that in elementary and Junior High. Not wanting to be the last one picked or even the first one picked for the same reasons you point out. There is some sense that you have to win."

"It's being the number 1 draft pick," replies Sidney.

"It brings up a memory for me from gym class where I was picked to play goalie. It was known that I refereed soccer, and the captain said that I had to be goalie and there was some expectation that I would be good at this for whatever reason. I was terrible at being a goalie, and I can remember the two sports-nut kids wanting to fight with me because we lost. They kept shoving me to the ground all the way to the locker rooms and the coaches didn't do shit." There is another long pause, and I'm not sure what else to add, so decide to shift the topic toward friendship and say, "I wonder in terms of one-on-one-relationships how body image and sense of self comes up, especially for someone who is more athletic?"

“It may actually be a detriment in a way. It’s advantageous at first, but over time it’s a detriment. If you have an average body type and someone likes you, you figure that they like you as a whole person. If you’re really attractive, you’re not really sure if they like you or the way you look. If that’s high on their list of why they like you and should that go...but if it wasn’t really a big deal you’re not going to worry about it...but otherwise there is an expectation to maintain a look. So, in some ways it works backward for you.”

“It’s like you were Joe Stud when we met but now, yeah,” I pause, chagrined that he shifted away from men, and ask, “do you think there’s a gender difference in that respect.”

“I think women have more items in their box to check from. You may not score high on looks, but maybe you’re athletic or funny or rich. With guys there are fewer boxes. Looks score high with most guys and even if it’s not high for one guy it is for other guys. So ‘what’s the deal? Why are you with her?’ I think that a guy with a lot of money who is not very good looking can marry a beautiful woman and that is more accepted. A woman who is really wealthy and not very good looking and an attractive guy marries her, people think,” Sidney goes quiet for a moment as if he’s contemplating a past dating experience and the jibes of his friends, “well that’s not what most guys select for. I think there’s an emphasis on looks when selecting a woman partner. I just don’t see a group of guys in a locker room and they’re like ‘who are you going to the prom with’ and they’re like ‘her!’ and you say ‘she’s really smart’ and most guys aren’t going to accept that without ragging on you.”

“I know what you’re talking about,” I agree.

“Even though that is a good reason for liking a person and they may be more interesting than the person who looks like a fashion model and you can have a conversation with them, but it’s not as accepted,” Sidney adds.

“I’m not as interested for this project with how guys view women so much as how they view themselves or other men. I would rather talk about the ways the body affects our relationships with other men. Can we rewrite those stories so we can relate differently,” I ask, taking a more direct approach.

“I guess it happens in puberty, especially if your friend hits it first or even if you hit it at the same time. You ask yourself, ‘Are my muscles growing as fast?’ I think it is part of establishing a norm to see if you are at least average. After awhile, I’m not sure how much it matters if your friend has a weight lifter’s body and you’re skinny. I have friends with all different body types. When you select guy friends, how they look isn’t a factor. I realize that when you see people in groups they tend to look similar, but I think that has more a social context—what they do—as opposed to what they look like. If you play sports, you’re probably going to have more friends who are athletes,” my friend replies and I am aware, again, of our very different bodies and in some ways I would prefer to have his.

“As a teenager, there are the jokes about shoe size and who has the biggest hands,” Sidney starts off—looking at me to make sure I got the dick reference—then he says, “I guess for me, as far as my body goes, it could always play sports. It didn’t matter if you were muscular, I could still beat you.”

His mention of penis size makes me think about sex and I say, “I guess another thing is how we learn about sex or gain knowledge of ourselves as sexual beings.”

“For me, I knew there was no stork when I was 5. I probably had more knowledge about that than most kids my age.”

“How did you get that knowledge,” I ask.

“My parents never lied about those kinds of things. You ask, they tell. We had a neighbor who got pregnant. We didn’t get specifics, but we knew mommies had babies. By the time I was in middle school, there was a lot of teen pregnancy. There was lots of discussion among teen guys about how things were done. My parents were always open about those things to counter all the misinformation, because it was dangerous not to. By the time I was 9 or 10, I knew people had sex. By the time most kids in my neighborhood were 12, they were practicing. By the time they were 14 or 16, they had at least one kid,” Sidney relates.

“What were the conversations like when you were 12 or 14?”

“All kinds of myths about how not to get pregnant.” He goes silent again.

“There’s a difference between the mechanics and eroticism. I think eroticism has a lot to do with body image. Some of that knowledge—”

“I think that is cultural even regional,” my friend interrupts. “What my friend finds attractive and I find attractive are so entirely different.”

“We all have an idea that there is a norm but when we start to talk about it, it breaks down.”

“We know that most people don’t look like fashion models. For whatever reason that small sphere has been embraced as the ideal,” Sidney says.

“I wonder how that translates into practice. Even if we both grew up on the same street what I find attractive may still be different from what you find attractive.”

“It could go back to how your parents look,” he offers.

“It seems that norms are grounded in our specific experiences too. So, Sidney may have a foot fetish because of his unique experience and I might like big boobs but...”

“It’s like testing based on averages. You use this average to test things like cars but I’m 6’2’ and those dummies they use are average. The norm is just an educated guess and it doesn’t really tell you anything about me.”

“How do we take that analogy and apply it to how men talk about their bodies? Does the body get in the way of our relationships?”

“It depends. It’s contextual. I think it’s interesting that I’ve spent more time contemplating my relationships with other women rather than with other guys. There are lots of books about male-female relationships but not male-male. Relationships with guys are, well, they just are. I’ve spent more time trying to develop relationships with women. With guys, we just sort of hang out. It’s our interests that keep us together,” Sidney says.

“If you go to the self-help section of any bookstore, you’ll find plenty of material on how men can improve their relationships with women, but not how to

improve relationships with other men. It's taken for granted," I agree and ask,

"How do we make relationships with other men more meaningful?"

"If I want to meet people, I join a club or engage in an activity I like. This interest will determine the kind of people you meet. If I want to meet people who have an interest in art, then I'll go to an art gallery," Sidney answers and avoids the question.

"For forming acquaintances that works well, but what about the friendships that stand out, the ones we have over a long period of time? I'm sure you have some of those. How do you think about those relationships," I ask with passion in my voice.

Sidney laughs and grins, perhaps a little uncomfortable with my emotional display, then he says, "When you're separated by time or space, you aren't always going to be able to do the things you were doing. It's no longer a matter of hanging out on a Saturday night or whatever."

"When we do have that time or space, what is getting communicated? How is it getting communicating? I'm inclined to believe that we do not lead emotionally devoid lives with other men, but—"

"It probably has some to do with personality. To me, if they want to understand how I feel about a given person, watch what I do. I'm like Missouri, the show me state. I'm not one of those people who really talks about feelings, it's what I do that counts. I can be mad, but if you want me to do something, and I'm mad at you, but I care about you, I will do it. It's in the action, to me, that shows the strength of the relationship," Sidney replies.

“It’s easy for me to rely on stereotypes and say that men relate to one another through action and women relate to one another through disclosure,” I pause.

He jumps in with, “Words are important but it’s sometimes harder to do. It’s like the politician who promises the world but doesn’t deliver. I think some people are very good at talking and promising. Tell me now but show me later.”

“Talk the talk and walk the walk,” I add.

“It’s easier to fabricate one than it is the other.”

“Perhaps,” I tentatively agree.

“My guy friends have always been based on connections to certain things like sports or classical music or art. If I want to go to a pop concert, I call a different crew. I have different sets of friends for different activities,” he says.

“When I think about the things we do as friends and the different topics we talk about—it seems almost ritualistic that the two of us talk about our teaching and the classes that we are taking—a lot of that is part of our shared reality,” I say and fill him in on the dynamic duo from my speech class, then ask, “What do you make of that?”

“That’s messed up. It would’ve never occurred to me to act like that. And none of my friends are that vulgar. Sounds like you handled it well though. Me, I’d march their butts back to my office and chew them out.”

It’s funny how my friend always puts up the front of taking a hard line in the classroom. Deep down, I know he’s a softy with most students, at least the ones I’ve talked to anyway. But the two of us almost always talk about our use of



authority over students, and it reminds me of my father's days as a drill sergeant, I joke, "I'd like to take'em out to the backwoods."

Sidney grins at my violent suggestion, "Yeah, that'd be fun."

The tape recorder clicks off and alerts me to the time. I wish we could get a burger or something. Take it easy. We'd both open up more if we just relaxed a little, but we both have other obligations and need to leave.

"Say hi to Melissa," I say.

"Sure thing, tell Kimberly hello for me." Sidney gathers up his satchel and shuffles toward the door.

"Bye," I say.

"See you later," he says over his shoulder and is gone.

## Chapter Seven: No Method but the Self

I'm walking through the Borders on the south side of Tampa browsing through the literature section. I take a copy of Harold Bloom's *How to Read and Why* (2000) from the shelf and open it. The first words I see are, "There is no method but yourself" (p. 19). I close the book, a tingle of electricity radiates through my body from a low point in my spine—an event that for me signals a connection with the sublime, what Goodall and Kellett (2004) refer to as "peak experiences," a term they borrow from Maslow (1962). It is something I sometimes doubt and think of as ridiculous, as delusional. It is only by accident that I looked in this book, a random coincidence. This one phrase Bloom wrote, who knows when or where, resonates with me and can't be explained—doesn't need to be explained. It just is, and it burns.

My gut cannot be codified and rendered into something easily used by others, especially scientific others—there is a touch of madness in my method. But is what I do so idiosyncratic as to be completely beyond replication? Not necessarily. But this struggle with rationality, maybe even a struggle against rationality, is a part of who I am as a researcher and as a person.

While I am brooding, I am also pacing around the store. My eyes are glazed in thought. Anyone who sees me, if anyone is looking, probably thinks I'm loony. Eventually, I wander into the café to sit, to think, and to write. I sit down with my journal and think of Bert. *He smiles when he sees me*, I write. *He*

*always smiles.* It's a look that makes me feel like I can do anything. I need his smiles today.

*What's the matter with me?* I write.

"I dunno," I reply to myself, "I'm trying to work out my method section for the dissertation but can't seem to find the right way to express what I've been up to."

*Why don't we talk about it?* I scribble. *Talking has played a big role in the project after all.*

"Do you talk to yourself," I say.

*You mean do I hear voices?* I write.

"No. But as far back as I can remember I've talked to myself, even going so far as to create a pantheon of characters in my head to help me keep lines of thought straight."

*Do they tell you to do things?* I jokingly write.

"I'm not nuts, no, it's just play acting. But these monologues or self dialogues are crucial to what I've been doing, a kind of talk that is introspective and oriented—perhaps selfishly—toward the self. To do what I've been doing begins and ends with solitude."

*Seems ironic in a project about close friends.* I comment in my journal.

"I spend more time with my good friends when I'm alone than I do in person," I say to myself.

*That's absurd.*

“No. No it isn’t; sad maybe, but not absurd. I think about my friends all the time. I fantasize about them, about things we might do—creative projects we could undertake if we had the time, whatever. Reality almost always falls short of the fantasy and maybe that’s the way it has to be, but even before we became friends, I held them, especially Bert, in my mind this way. I pretend about my dissertation too. Part of preparing the mind for a project like mine is being able to play, to imagine.”

*A playful mind strikes me as a necessary quality for reaching the plateau of a good dialogue, and dialogue has been part of the talk aspect in my dissertation.*

“Yes, as has writing and a greater understanding of both might help me to understand better what’s been going on. While dialogue is an ongoing goal of my research, I am sometimes doubtful about whether anyone, my self included, can make it happen. Goodall and Kellett (2004) describe the communion possible during dialogue as a ‘peak experience’ not unlike the one achieved while jamming jazz or creating art. The problem is that these sublime occurrences seem spontaneous and can’t be learned—they just happen. The irony is that like a good friendship, dialogue can’t be forced. These things, at best, are happy accidents.”

*But don’t folks like Goodall and Kellett claim that a person can train themselves such that those ‘peak experiences’ are more likely to occur.*

“Yes. I think of the term dialogue, as a special type of conversation that profoundly enacts the erotic, emotional, ethical, and spiritual possibilities of a close personal relationship. These are all things that we practice through a

process of trial and error in the hope of improving our act,” I think to myself.

I am no longer talking out loud but interacting with myself in thought and written word.

*But sometimes it doesn't work out—you fail.*

“You live with it—through it, maybe. Even in failure, something has been opened up, the possibility to change or, if you like, stay the same. And I showed up to the talks with no expectations beyond having starting a conversation, opening up the possibility for change. I know that much of who I am is still the same as a result of the conversations. But I have also changed. I question my subjectivity, my masculine persona a little more as a result of the conversations. Still, had I been trying to change my friends, I probably wouldn't have connected with them as much.”

“I think one of the things that attracted me to Bert was his apparent self love. He didn't seem embarrassed about being a guy. But, he was not a manly man. He was not an alpha male. He is, despite some chauvinistic leanings, in touch with his feminine side. He probably thinks I hate being a man. I don't hate being male but have always doubted the essentialism weighing me down. As soon as we ascribe gendered language to our behavior, we are stuck in a patriarchal trap of sorts. My relationships sustain that trap and I can't help being in my relationships. The desire to please and be pleasing to our friends is strong. I can't resist it anymore than the tug of family. I had hoped that dialogue would make the gender conflict in a male-male friendship easier to negotiate or bypass. And maybe it has, because I am able to cherish my relationships more openly and

easily, something difficult for many men because human experience has been given gendered terms.”

*But I didn't force that on my friends. To do so is antithetical to dialogue, right?*

“Yes and no, I entered the conversations and the friendships with no predetermined outcome in mind, but I did have hopes. Cissna and Anderson (1994) describe what I'm getting at as *immediacy of presence* or a need to enter conversation without a fixed agenda. The idea is to have purpose without *absolute* purpose. I might enter a conversation with a goal of discovering something about masculinity, but I would let go of my urge to direct the conversation along specific lines. In talking with my friends, the conversations did not stray far from the topic of masculinity and the body but much of what we shared was completely spontaneous.”

*I wonder if my friends revealed more than they might have if I had been doing straight interviews. They also, sometimes, asked as many questions as I did.*

“I liked that questions evolved in process, something that stresses the creative potential of talk. As a creative act, dialogue sometimes produces unexpected outcomes or what Cissna and Anderson (1994) call: *emergent unanticipated consequences*. This quality anticipates the unpredictability inherent in most forms of communication. I could not have foreseen the strength of my emotions the first time I hugged Bert after our initial conversation.”

“My willingness to share intimate details of my life was surprising to me. The weird energy of the talk excited me and felt like some of late night bull sessions I’ve had with old friends. I made an instant connection with my participants—dialogue would seem to foster that experience.”

*These outcomes could not have been predicted or controlled.*

“As a matter of fact, the experience of connection, I think, enables another characteristic Cissna and Anderson (1994) ascribe to dialogue: *recognition of strange otherness*. They argue that ‘although the dialogue partner may be a lifelong friend, one is willing to be surprised by the fundamental strangeness—the unfamiliarity—of a position that is not one’s own’ (pp. 14). So, to enter into dialogue requires the risk of being uncomfortable and possibly unsettled. Such a risk emphasizes the potential in personal relationships of resisting the expectations of social performances like masculinity.”

“A good example was when I discussed with Bert how men look at women and a project he did for a class that featured photos of nude women. I reminded him that the kind of exchanges I have with other men matter to how I look at women and that power is always an issue. My friends and I still like looking, but we also see better how men reduce women to objects. Bert is not convinced that his love of the female body is wrong, but can understand why many women object. It’s not comfortable questioning our own behavior.”

*A good dialogue creates relational support and makes it easier to bring up sensitive issues later in other contexts.*

“My research has been directed toward these moments that these exchanges between men and their implications go unquestioned at the source. It’s not easy for me to bring up my own problematic behavior. But if I am going to be a better person, a better friend, then shouldn’t I be willing to endure a little anxiety? It’s still a self interested process, one where I figure out much about who I am by being with significant others.”

*My method, no matter how selfish, is relational.*

“I think there are connections between the kind of talk we achieve in dialogue and the kind of writing I’ve done. Both are experimental and promote a relational attitude toward doing research. The ‘I’ of my texts is an ironic ‘I,’ because, as much as ‘I’ appear to be center stage, it is always a collaborative *I*.”

*Then, as I said earlier, even in solitude, I am with friends.*

“I like to think so. I hope so. Otherwise, I am just alone most of the time. Our dialogues have connected us across space and time, which is why, maybe, we feel as though we pick things up where they left off even after several months have passed. I am a stranger but not a stranger. I know that men who have gone through intense experiences together express as much. My father feels that way about his Vietnam buddies. Not long ago, he reconnected with a fellow after an absence of twenty nine years. He said it was like they’d been together only yesterday. They easily slipped back into their old habits. Now, they regularly correspond over the internet. I know he loves this other man.”

*Wouldn’t it be nice if those intense experiences were, more often than not, life oriented practices like dialogue instead of war?*



“Yes. But I think there is nostalgia for the old intensity at work here.

In those past experiences, there is somehow the feeling of being more alive—a quickening of the heart. Most of the time, life is pretty boring. I get up, go to work, come home, and go to sleep. These activities don’t seem to matter. That is why I miss my friends. Why I even miss my wife, even though I see her everyday. We don’t experience this intense connection all the time, but we carry it with us wherever we go. And it only waits to be reawakened.”

“Perhaps nostalgia can be a good thing. It occurs to me that some of the characteristics I’ve been pointing out are important to recognizing that I am actually in a dialogic moment. Maybe recognition that I’ve been there is an important part of preparing the mind to more easily experience dialogue or make it happen.”

*Goodall and Kellett (2004) say as much. There are also other characteristics.*

“Actually the relational ‘I’ I spoke of earlier reminds me of *collaborative orientation* (see Cissna and Anderson, 1994). It is important to realize that collaboration through dialogue is a joint sense-making project involving struggle. Although conversation can be passionate, it is not oriented toward winning and losing; rather it is oriented toward a deep concern for self and other. A collaborative orientation dispenses with the need for defending one’s position in favor of opening to the possibility of being wrong. It requires some degree of vulnerability.”

*Vulnerability allows change.*

“It is also a characteristic of dialogue, and perhaps the therapeutic beginnings to social change.”

*Seems to require risk too.*

“Absolutely, and dialogue also involves *mutual implication* or the interdependent construction of self and other simultaneously with talk. I would add to that the ‘polyphonic voices’ that turn toward the social context surrounding speaker and listener. Perhaps Bakhtin’s (1981) development of a theory of heteroglossia in a text or any discourse involving dialogue was done with the intent of infiltrating the social context with various forms of critique. In my mind, to be mutually implicated is to be simultaneously oriented toward the world *right here* and the world *out there*, which leads to the idea that self-identity and the social world are constructed out of relational communication (see Bateson, 1972). Identity is thus not a causal process so much as it is a comparative one that gives way to our mutual implication in the construction of meaning.”

*That’s a mouthful.*

“It’s idealistic and not really measurable. I know my relationships sustain the status quo but how much do they change anything.”

*I am the most pessimistic optimist I know or is that optimistic pessimist.*

“Depends on which day of the week, anyway, the seventh characteristic of dialogue, as discussed by Cissna and Anderson (1994), is *temporal flow* whereby ‘dialogue emerges from a past, fills the immediate present (and thus is experienced as ‘wide,’ ‘deep,’ ‘immersing,’ or ‘enveloping’ by participants), and anticipates and prefigures an open future’ (pp. 15). Dialogue, or any

conversation, cannot be reduced to only its parts. The difficulty in studying communication in personal relationships is being unable to perceive its wholeness. My discussion of self and other so far would seem to imply that to know the self is to know a universe of others.”

“Temporal flow, then, plays up the processional quality of dialogue, personal relationships, sense making, and a bunch of other things.”

“Ironically, as a process, maybe even dialogue sometimes happens in fits and starts. But even when there is awkwardness, there is still a sense of *genuineness and authenticity*. This characteristic for dialogue is an experience vital to building a relationship. Dialogue from my point of view requires *relating to believe*. I cannot enter into dialogue, if my objective is to unmask the other as inauthentic. To do so is to move back into a competitive framework of winners and losers.”

*It requires a leap of faith.*

“Maybe, and all of these elements are interconnected.”

*From working through these various characteristics it would seem there is a qualitative difference between dialogue and any old conversation.*

“I think the biggest difference for me is in terms of creativity and change. I see conversation as the primary way in which personal relationships uncritically maintain the status quo; in that respect there is little or no creativity or change.”

“Even so, conversation is a necessary part of everyday life and need not be considered negative. If we were positively oriented toward creativity and change all of the time, we might go mad.”

“Human beings need to be confirmed in their sense of self in order to develop ego stability. Ironically, creativity is, in part, a disconfirming process, because it requires instability in the system. However, the instability at work in the creative process is usually or hopefully oriented toward a return to momentary stability. The creative experience and change depend upon a certain amount of tension, what Goodall and Kellett (2004) call ‘dialectical tension,’ and identify as the heart of many peak human experiences including dialogue. Ordinary conversation does not spark this way of being with another person. Dialogue in comparison to conversation could be called *extraordinary*. Goodall and Kellett (2004) associate this *extraordinary* moment with a number of creative acts from lovemaking to playing music—all of which ‘reflect a definitive human urge to ‘get beyond’ the gray everydayness of relational routines, phatic rituals, and often boring, repetitive, relatively meaningless interpersonal encounters’ (pp. 161). I sometimes experience this *extraordinary* quality when I write too.”

*I’m curious about the role of writing in my dissertation. Maybe I could pick up there in a bit, and I hate to stop, but I need a potty break.*

I head off to the restroom contemplating my conversation so far. I see the various characteristics I’ve talked about as a list of prerequisites for beginning and sustaining dialogue, as much as a way of describing dialogue. Awareness of these characteristics can also help prepare the mind to more easily achieve dialogue. But it’s important to acknowledge that dialogue is not easily reached and sometimes not reaching dialogue, especially when it is a goal of research, can feel like a failure. Such a conception can fuel a performance anxiety state of mind and

shift the focus of conversation from a relational mode to an individual mode.

In my own experience, I went from asking *what is going on with us* to *what is wrong with me*. This simple, seemingly innocuous act, sets the stage for future disappointment and, also in my experience, is a habit difficult to break.

When I return from the bathroom, I write, *I still feel glum*.

“I’m fine. But I think there will be mixed feelings about my writing.

Some will think my work well-written and interesting but not social science or ethnography.”

“I think people will see a lack of analysis and an over-emphasis on self that borders on self-absorption.”

“There are other people’s experiences in each chapter but they are, really, my take on things. I also wonder if my writing will add to the literature on masculinity, that some might fail to see the main point and wonder what to take away from the different chapters. And I’m still concerned that there is no systematic method apparent in what I’ve been doing, that I also avoid drawing conclusions beyond my personal experience.”

“All valid concerns, but in rereading much of my work, I feel that it will be an asset to the field of qualitative inquiry and autoethnography in particular. I am vulnerable right now and not fully confident in the risks I take in my writing. Actually, I’ve been avoiding my work because of that uncertainty. Not that doubt is bad but too much doubt can be debilitating.”

*And sometimes I worry that no one cares as much as I do about the emotional nature of qualitative research.*

“Carolyn Ellis (2007) does.”

“Ever since I became a student of her work, many of my attitudes have changed in how I evaluate ethnography and other qualitative methods. I realize from reading her numerous articles that the academy’s emphasis on the rational, more scientific, side of research limits my access to truth.”

*Much is left out in privileging only quantitative work.*

“How can scholars fully access the human *being* when we only see it deductively or causally? Varela and Shear (2002) argue that exploring life includes a first person dimension. They ask, ‘Why deprive scientific examination of this phenomenal realm?’ Doing so, they say, ‘amputates human life of its most intimate domains.’ Such a focus only allows researchers to explain human behavior based on methods like statistical analysis and surveys. The goal of such research is to objectively predict and control reality. From this vantage point, a researcher assumes reality is finite and measurable, that knowledge is found and received—an approach that over-simplifies lived experience. I think qualitative inquiry, especially in communication studies, emerges as a *feeling* that something is missing. Perhaps qualitative work really does begin in the gut. I think people like Ellis remind us that the human experience is messy. In order for ethnographers to grasp life’s nuances, we need a more interpretive method for understanding truth (see Ellis, 2004, 2007). I can’t ignore the fact that knowledge is also arrived at inductively. Human life is often very particular and not easily generalized. To appreciate how people negotiate life’s problems, practitioners of qualitative methods try to live in the worlds of their participants and pay close

attention to their place in the relationships they observe. Such a way of doing research assumes reality is constructed in our interactions with others.

Knowledge is something people create together. When I look at the world with a qualitative lens, I anticipate ambiguity and complexity.”

“Maybe it would be helpful if this conversation shifted to include the various issues facing qualitative approaches like autoethnography. In discussing its history, proponents, critics, claims, justifications, and goals, we might alleviate some of your bad feelings. Who knows, I may generate some new ideas along the way.”

“It couldn’t hurt. I’ve already articulated much about dialogue and its role in the conversations I experienced for this project. Writing is, perhaps, even more important than the conversations I’ve had.”

*Some might consider writing a necessary evil in conducting research, an activity that is just a formality and, beside the point.*

“Writing is not just a formality. In my case, it often takes center stage. But that comment reminds me of Wolcott’s, (2002) ‘Chapter Two Problem.’ In terms of my dissertation, for example, will many professors develop a set of assumptions about how it should be organized? When something strays from the norm, our immediate desire is to correct the aberration. The expectation is that chapter two should in some way deal with literature, method, or theory. Wolcott says this attitude is unnecessary, ‘there is no law governing the contents of chapter two any more than there is a law that dissertations must be boring’ (pp. 92). The implication is that our assumptions turn into laws for governing these

kinds of things, forcing our thoughts into narrow ruts we need liberation from.

It's probably a good thing experimental work comes along and challenges these assumptions."

"Like Ellis's and Bochner's entry on autoethnography and personal narrative in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*. They write the text in such a way as to defy traditional handbook form. In using the techniques of autoethnography, they write something far easier for readers to comprehend and enjoy than what is typically found in such texts. There is a continuum of qualitative work, 'ranging from an orientation akin to positivist science to one more akin to art and literature,' identified by Ellis and Ellingson (2000) in *the Encyclopedia of Sociology*. My work falls toward the latter."

"I shouldn't forget that my qualitative traditions include artistic modes of expression. Fortunately, the last couple of decades have seen great strides in developing qualitative work that is more impressionistic and interpretive rather than realist. Typically, this work is written as stories with an eye toward the conventions of storytelling. This kind of work is interested in meaning and how it is both constructed and lived. Such research recognizes the multi-voiced nature of reality alongside unique, one-of-a-kind experiences. Writing becomes a privileged part of the research process and concerns itself with the persuasive quality of truth making. When doing such work one can't ignore the relationship between author, text, and reader. Authority is necessarily questioned. After all, who is going to benefit from making this truth? Of course, this kind of work is much harder to judge, because the criteria for such judgments are, in many ways,



highly personal. Can scholars really develop a common way for knowing whether or not a story rings true? That's why I think there is much fear and anxiety around artistic qualitative work. What resonates with me is unlikely to resonate with others. So, how do we know an article or book is worth publishing? The criteria appear to be arbitrary and always up for grabs. At the same time, editors can't just publish anything and everything, right?"

"Criteria for evaluating qualitative work are likely to keep changing alongside the various uses of narrative. Yet, some issues never seem to go away no matter how much effort is spent in trying to debunk them. For example, I'm bothered by my fear of self-indulgence or self-absorption. My writing fits into the category Ellis describes as *heartful* autoethnography. I use 'sociological introspection,' which I understand to be a systematic turn toward analyzing the self in the context of human experience."

"I often make use of techniques like 'stream of consciousness' in order to tap into my memory of past events. I begin by free writing, which approximates the clinical use of things like free association. For example, I'll think of smelling a cheeseburger and that sensory detail will conjure an entire episode of binge eating. I'll see a grass stain on a pair of Levis and remember being assaulted by a kid at school. I transcribe that experience as quickly as possible without stopping to edit. What happens on the page is almost entirely improvisational and even fictional. My most poetic phrases result from this process. Later, though I am often reluctant, I go back and make changes for the sake of readability. However, I don't let systems of writing rule me. I believe, as King (2000) does, 'writing is

at its best—always, always, always—when it is a kind of inspired play for the writer. I can write in cold blood if I have too, but I like it best when it's fresh and almost too hot to handle' (pp. 153)."

"I'm reminded of Slatterly's (2001) words about his work on educational research. He compares his research technique to the painting of Jackson Pollack. By working on the 'artist within,' Slatterly attempts to reconstruct past memories of his body and how various contexts regulated that body. He sees his project as autoethnographic and concludes that through his art's power to, 'evoke memories and illicit insights,' he creates an opportunity to take his body, 'back from those who regulated it' (pp. 398). Unfortunately, Slatterly's art is overshadowed by a dense though well written essay. The process behind the paintings has been so thoroughly explained, I didn't even need to look at them."

"My preference has always been for work that doesn't attempt to explain itself. You might call such work a 'narrative of self' as Richardson (1994) describes in *Writing a Method of Inquiry*. In many respects, it 'holds back on interpretation' so readers have a chance to 'relive' the experience from the body, as well as, the mind. It does this by using many of the methods Richardson ascribes to autoethnography: strong imagery, unusual phrasings, puns, subtexts, allusions, flashbacks, flash forwards, tone shifts, dialogue, and interior monologue. Ironically, my fear of self-indulgence gives way to an appreciation for concrete details and my poet's eye."

"But I'm still not convinced about the problem of self-indulgence. Sparks (2003) finds the term misleading and wonders why scholars don't use other terms,

‘self-knowing, self-respectful, self-sacrificing, or self-luminous’ (pp. 210) to name a few. I think part of the problem is audience. Both Barone (2000) and Richardson (1994) argue that writing differently makes our ‘findings’ available to more diverse audiences. The charge of self-indulgence is one that claims there is but one audience for the text. Wouldn’t that make traditional forms of scholarly writing self-indulgent? In ‘Breathing Life into Work,’ Bochner advises Rushing that her, ‘theory overwhelms the women’s narratives’ she is trying to write about. Too often, academic writing is more about showcasing theories of the world rather than sympathizing with the people living in it. Bochner reminds us, in *The Moral of Stories* that, ‘human life is storied life’ and stories, ‘make our experiences meaningful (pp. 73).’”

“It’s funny but I often see parallels in the literary tradition and social sciences especially when it comes to ethnography and autoethnography. Some of the best work straddles both worlds like that of Zora Neale Hurston. The emergence of autoethnography reminds me of the Romantic reaction against Classicism. The Classical penchant for strictly adhering to form felt stifling to many Romantic writers and artists. Those tensions helped create a context for the poetry of William Blake and Walt Whitman. As an autoethnographer, I feel a rudimentary knowledge of the literary tradition makes the history of qualitative methods richer and more satisfying. Generational tensions are often moments of important change in any writing tradition. One gap is that men have dominated the academic and literary worlds for centuries and emotional writing is too often seen as sentimental and weak. When someone calls a text self-indulgent they are

usually saying it's emotional rather than logical—feminine rather than masculine.”

*I believe as Behar (1996) does that if writing, 'doesn't break your heart (it) just isn't worth doing' (pp. 177).*

“Without feminist and postcolonial scholars like Behar, intimate writing wouldn't even have the small space of recognition within the academy it has today.”

“Reed-Danahay (2001) identifies three genres of academic writing that push for greater intimacy on the part of researchers' disclosing details of self in our relationships with others: native anthropology, ethnic autobiography, and autobiographical ethnography.”

“Of those, I identify myself most closely with the third but with a slight difference. Reed-Danahay (2001) sees this genre as writing where researchers insert themselves into their ethnographic texts. However, the subject of those texts, from what I can tell, is not the self—but rather the self in relationship to the subject being studied. In autoethnography, then, the self becomes a focus of study much like a native anthropology with the additional obligation of also seeing that self in relationship with participants; thus, forming an extra reflexive layer in the research and writing. One criticism of autoethnography is that it gives voice to an already privileged voice, whereas native anthropology gives voice to people who were previously unheard.”

*I'm back to the claim autoethnography is a self-indulgent art.*

“I am struck that many scholars argue for an autoethnography that moves from the inside out, uses the self to make social critiques, and are still operating within a value system defined by objectivism; in other words, the researcher is still supposed to be a self-less creature. As a student, I don’t feel the same burden of privilege as my professors. I’m still struggling to find my voice, to make myself heard. Much of the writing I have done for classes and even this dissertation has been a struggle to give voice to an unheard boy still trying to be a man. I feel possessed with a need to understand that boy’s life. If I write for anyone, I write for the boy inside me. Is that a selfish act? I don’t know how to answer that question. I know I’m still angry about the violence I endured as a boy, because I was perceived as different and I need to make something positive out of that anger and those experiences.”

“Brison (2002) claims, ‘saying something about a memory does something to it. The communicative act of bearing witness to traumatic events not only transforms traumatic memories into narratives that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world, but it also reintegrates the survivor into a community, reestablishing bonds of trust and faith in others,’ (pp. xi).”

“I believe the same can be said of ordinary events, and the restoration of an individual into the community is a powerful moment of social change.”

“I am fond of the Buddhist story of a butterfly taking flight on one side of the world, whose flapping wing starts a chain reaction leading to a typhoon on the other side.”

“Aren’t the criteria used in evaluating qualitative work a matter of value differences anyway?”

“Didn’t Bochner claim, ‘Criteria are found rather than made?’”

“This notion puzzles me. Does his statement imply criteria exists naturally some how? I know that he, along with Clough (1992), believes too many rules place an emphasis on policing texts rather than understanding texts. I think his statement means criteria emerge while reading a text. Such an approach relieves me of preconceived notions. It allows me to enter a text with an open mind. Such an approach to reading keeps with Behar’s (1996) argument that ethnography is, ‘about forming relationships,’ it’s a search for connections.”

*That reminds me of how I might enter this dissertation.*

“I believe, like Denzin (1997), that good autoethnography should push us toward cultural criticism. We should be reminded of the larger context of individual experience. I think Holman Jones (2002) may have said it best, ‘autoethnographies move from the inside of the author to outward expression while working to take readers inside themselves and ultimately out again’ (pp. 53). She believes these texts create a charged atmosphere that uses the energy of emotions to move our attention from our own relationships to the culture at large.”

*Such a text could hardly be self-indulgent.*

“Autoethnography is self-confident in the belief, as poet May Sarton (1973) writes, ‘each person *counts*, counts as a creative force that can move mountains’ (pp. 19).”

“She also claims that when reading personal narratives, ‘One must believe private dilemmas are, if deeply examined, universal, and so, if expressed, have a human value beyond the private,’ (pp. 60).”

“As much as autoethnography is about the self, it is also *always* about the community the author and reader lives in. Embedded in all autoethnographies is the question: how is community implicated in an individual’s experience? By looking closely at an individual’s experience, I can gain insight into the communication processes that underlie phenomena like male friendships. I may even gain insight into how I might change my behavior in those relationships in order to make a difference in the life of the individual and the community.”

*What is your obligation for cultivating and presenting insights? Should you sacrifice a straightforward explanation in order to satisfy aesthetic concerns? Is the absence of a conclusion too much of a burden for the reader? Is a good story enough when it comes to communicating about and exploring complex social issues? Stories often pose more problems than they solve. While such a thing is great for stimulating conversation, is it necessarily practical in regard to how one should live one’s life?* I write in my journal.

“Stories allow us to work through problems at our own pace. What is often unclear becomes apparent to us upon further reading and experience. Yeats referred to this as ‘the magic’ inherent in all writing—a connection created between author and reader that taps into the sublime repository of human consciousness—what Jung called the collective unconscious. There is something to be said for allowing these connections to emerge as if unaided. In part, this

phenomenon is what makes a co-constructed narrative out of a ‘single’ authored text and is reminiscent of the arguments made by Foucault and Barthes about how meaning is the rightful bailiwick of the reader. Many of the issues of qualitative methods and autoethnography emerge from inquiry into who and what is being privileged. We often forget that readers are perhaps the most important participants in a text. Perhaps, it is my responsibility to allow for what Finely and Knowles (1995) calls, ‘multiple entry points’ into a text. According to them, innovative forms, especially ones that, ‘reject the logic of traditional sociological writing,” should allow readers to join, ‘the fray,’ (pp. 111).”

*My work is a passionate invitation to think and write.*

“I still wonder about the future of autoethnography and what is in the best interests of readers. Ceglowski (1997) agrees with Denison (1996) who suggests researchers verify the accuracy of their depictions with participants. Though I somewhat agree with this line of thinking, I experience anxiety about sharing my work with participants.”

*But I’ve shown participants many things I’ve written for this project. I’ve also given them transcripts of the conversations.*

“Simply showing my work and getting a participant’s stamp of approval isn’t enough—nor is rejecting anything they identify as ‘wrong.’ For example, participants may balk at unflattering interpretations of themselves even if those interpretations are accurate from my point of view. Sometimes using the self as subject is easier, because I’m not afraid of showing my own warts as opposed to someone else’s warts. Is accuracy even the proper goal of autoethnography? I



have an obligation to my self and my readers as much as I do my participants, and it's not always easy negotiating between the three.”

*Good qualitative work struggles to please without making it a priority to please everyone all of the time. Actually, I think friendship works in similar ways. And even if I feel as I do about seeking approval, I know from experience I go out of my way to make sure the other men are not compromised or hurt. I do keep things off the record when asked.*

“But if some of the more embarrassing things my friends and I shared with one another were vital to my research, I would try to convince them to relent. Or I might fictionalize that information and keep it in anyway.”

*I think I am moving into a discussion of friendship as method and ethics.*

“Yes, but there are some things I might discuss first as a lead in. I am reminded that good qualitative work, according to Lincoln (1995), requires critical subjectivity, which is, she says, ‘the ability to enter an altered state of consciousness for the purpose of understanding with great discrimination subtle differences in the personal and psychological states of others’ (pp. 283). I would include, of course, self-awareness.”

*Then, dialogue, autoethnography, and friendship, as qualitative methods, promote reflexivity or a hyperawareness of the multi-relational quality of being?*

“And my work attempts to promote reciprocity.”

“Lincoln calls that an ‘intense sharing that opens all lives party to the inquiry to examination’ (p. 283-84). She sees good research as a kind of ‘lover-model’ where a deep sense of trust, caring, and mutuality is developed.”

“But lovers quarrel and sometimes betray one another. I know that as hard as I may try, I’ll eventually fail—if I haven’t already—myself and the other men invited to participate in this project.”

*Not on purpose. I’ve known myself long enough and believe I hold an almost sacred feeling for my work and for those involved.*

“Lincoln also acknowledges sacredness as an element of good research. Developing sacredness means having the ‘profound concern for human dignity, justice, and interpersonal respect’ that emerges from a ‘deep appreciation of the human condition,’ (p. 284).”

*Again, much of what Lincoln describes sounds like the elements of a good friendship.*

“Some researchers are beginning to identify friendship as a method for doing qualitative ethnographic work—notable among them is Tillmann-Healy (2003) who not only coined the phrase but also reminded us that ethnographers negotiate many roles while trying to gain entrée into the worlds they wish to study.”

*Doesn’t being a researcher get in the way of being a friend?* I ask in my journal.

“The tools of research are not necessarily antithetical to forming friendships; they may even be instrumental in deepening those relationships. Tillmann-Healy (2003) believes, as I do, that entering into research contexts as a friend adds emotional and relational layers to one’s study. In addition to the typical tools for gathering data, the ethnographer can utilize, according to

Tillmann-Healy (2003) ‘conversation, everyday involvement, compassion, giving, and vulnerability’ (pp. 734).”

*Thinking about the earlier conversation, I can see why dialogue and autoethnography fit well with friendship as method. But aren’t these dual roles difficult to negotiate? Why make it so hard on myself?*

“Yes, it’s hard, but those roles require me to learn new ways of communicating. Becoming immersed in someone else’s life often means coping with the challenges, conflicts, and losses specific to that person. Goffman (1989) characterized ethnographers in their role of participant observer as a kind of ‘fink’ (p. 125). The notion of ethnographer as ‘fink’ carries a very different ethos than one characterized as ‘friend.’ Relationally speaking, an ethnographer as ‘friend’ imagines future contact between researcher and participant. In fact, the friendly ethnographer often thinks beyond the categories of researcher and participant. On the other hand, an ethnographer as ‘fink’ sees no future in the relationship. In this configuration, the participant is useful only as a source of data (see also Brooks, 2006).”

*If my friends were only a source of data, I wouldn’t concern myself with what our relationship means after the project is over.*

“When engaging in ‘friendship as method,’ I am painfully aware that relationships continue beyond the page. Actually, what our friendship means after the project is over is as much a part of my well being as it is of the participants.”

*I think I am keeping this project undone so I don't have to face that possibility.*

“Maybe,” I say out loud, half seriously, and glance quickly at my watch. I've been sitting in Borders talking with myself for several hours. It's a little after five, and it is time for the long journey home.

*I wish I didn't have to leave.* I write in my journal before closing it.

“Me too,” I think and get up from the table and walk to the parking lot. Not long ago, Bert and I stood in this parking lot in front of my car for several long, silent seconds gazing at one another's face. I am almost done with my dissertation and wonder if it will be the last time we meet for fun. We've had many great conversations at this bookstore, and every time I've come to town over the last year, I always make time to see him and he reciprocates. Besides defending my dissertation and graduating, I won't have other reasons to come to town. Will we endure? Maybe because of or even despite my method, I love this man. When we hug on that day, I hold him a little longer than usual not wanting to let go, and whisper so no one else can hear, “I love you.”

## Chapter Eight: Participant Monologues

### Bert's Monologue

*July 2004*

Friendship...

This word is used too liberally, and we say it even when someone is an acquaintance. A friend is interested in hanging out with me just to be with me—call it mutual pleasure in co-presence. There doesn't have to be any specific activity, and it doesn't have to be role related either, like a job or school. I always thought a good test of friendship was if we could be silent together. If we are constantly chattering, it suggests neither of us can relax with the other. If I can relax and be myself that is more of a friendship.

Expressing our authentic self or at least our perception of an authentic self is a primal need. I categorize different relationships based on how much of myself I can reveal. We all wear masks for one another, and with friends I wear thinner and thinner masks possibly no mask at all, though I'm not sure if that is possible. I'm not sure if human beings are capable of such unconditional love. It is a great ideal to strive for, but I am not sure such love exists, especially between men. Men *take too much care of themselves* so there are limits. But you can't force this authentic self. Sometimes a friend may push me too far and I say, "Forget it!"

I think friends can be more themselves with one another than with family members. Our behavior determines what or how comfortable a friend is in opening up to us. If I'm overly critical, I'm going to close off areas for that friendship to develop. For example, my friend Tom is very critical of the things he enjoys—he doesn't like bluegrass. He prefers German opera to Italian opera, and he is quick to cut someone off when venturing into these subjects. That limits how much I can share with him. I can't share my love of bluegrass or Italian opera with him. I like to be open to as many things as possible, which lets me be in conversation with more people.

I don't believe in the "best friend" concept. We have these a lot when we're younger, but I don't have them now, because either I'm a friend or not a friend. And the best friend is someone I can hang around with of my own free will not out of obligation. I think friends free each other. They allow me to *be*. And I can express all of my character, something that I am not able to do in other relationships. The more I allow a person to *just be* the more of a friendship we have. I don't subscribe to this whole obligation thing that because I'm your friend I have to do this or that. If I'm looking for my friend to be someone to do all these chores for me or to support me through thick and thin, I just don't think that qualifies as a friendship. Mutual respect, there should be no other requirements than that. Let me be myself. Don't hold my personal quirks against me.

Male friendships: how do I define it?

To start—it's not the same as relating with females.

Relationships with women are usually fraught with sexual tension.

Sometimes that tension isn't there, and that's a blessing, but, most of the time, it's an obstacle. Sex is always on my mind—most men's minds—maybe not coitus but some kind of physical aspect: the neck, the arch of the back, her toes. That sort of thing isn't there with males. If I were homosexual, then the equation is probably reversed. Of course, we all have bisexual tendencies but deny them and purport to be 100% hetero and macho. I believe these values are primarily formed in relationship with parents and to some extent other people, especially other men and certainly fathers.

My father was always there. He was never absent. He was strict, especially when I was much younger. He could be indulging too. But when he felt it was going too far, he would tighten his grip, which was kind of confusing. He was and still is a strong figure in my life. And approaching 49, I am still more dependent on him than I'd like to be. I wish I were more independent. I still find myself saying, "Well, my dad says...wow I'm 49, and I'm still saying 'my dad says.'"

My two cousins were an influence on how I perceived friendship and masculinity. My paternal cousin Frank was three years older, and I always looked up to him; I saw myself as his sidekick. He usually took the lead and could be domineering. He always made me laugh though and I'm sure he enjoyed that. My younger cousin David is 6 months younger and that makes a big difference when your 5 or 7. I was more dominant with him, because he was more subservient not in a derogatory sort of way. I was forced to be the leader. He looked up to me. But I always did better following along rather than being in the lead. In cases

where there seems to be a need for a dominant person, I'm usually the sidekick. In other words, I will relinquish leadership to someone who needs it.

Specific friends...

Being an only child, I was a loner and learned, at a young age, to amuse myself. Although I liked being alone, I was never lacking in friends. There was one time when my family moved up north and I was lonely and depressed. It didn't help that the climate was different; it got dark at 4:45 *and* I was going through puberty.

A lot of my early friendships were location based...usually a next-door neighbor. When I lived on LaSalle Street, first through seventh grade, Roland and Ernie were my friends. We'd get together, ride bikes, and play baseball that sort of thing. We also went to the movies and slept over at each other's homes.

Roland was dominant and Ernie was a puss. I was a terrified young kid. My cousin prepared me and Roland took up the slack.

All in good fun...

One time, we got into a fight, and he told me to go home. He shooed me out of his house. I remember swallowing my pride and taking him some left over candy from Halloween and apologizing. It was a milestone for me, because it was an effort to swallow my pride and he accepted and we played.

Roland had a color TV and we watched superman and batman a lot. His family was richer. That was a friendship based on location but somewhat the other criteria too. We were just kids.



In high school, Al was my main friend. He's a depressed guy...very serious and distant from his father, who worked 7 days a week. I can remember when Al first started acting. We were at his house rehearsing and his dad came home from work. He looked at Al and said, "You want to be a bum; be a bum!"

You could say we were best friends. We had theatre and writing in common and did plays together. Drew cartoons and did lots of projects together. We could talk about anything and would spend long hours talking. He'd come over and we'd have coffee and talk all night long until we'd realize it was morning, then we'd go get breakfast at the diner.

I dropped the ball a lot with him. He'd give me things to read, but I was lazy and didn't always read them. I didn't give him the feedback he needed but that's what I was like at that time. I went away to college and Al stayed home. I felt like when I was away, I was away. And he was like let's keep up the friendship. I've seen that as needy. I'm an out of sight out of mind person. We've actually been out of touch for a long time.

I've been wrenched away from friends because of circumstances. I meet people and circumstances take us apart and it hurts and one of the ways I get over it is to forget about it and make new friends, I've only got so much time.

It's a marvelous blessing to have a slew of friends, but I can't always manage it, especially to develop a deep, open, receptive friendship. That kind of relationship can only be developed by spending lots of time together.

I had another friend in high school who was the antithesis of Al.

Jeff was materialistic and happy go lucky, something I needed then because I was getting too serious and filled with teen angst. We'd just hang out or drive around in his Caddy or go to the diner and flirt with girls. We talked a lot about girls, and I got him into listening to opera.

The three of us didn't pal together though. We had separate relationships. Al and Jeff didn't mix.

Jeff was more emotionally available.

Al was guarded more reserve.

Jeff was more open not as closed as Al. Jeff could cry. In fact, when we said good-bye and I was going to college, we were sitting in his car. Jeff started to cry and I couldn't handle it. I still can't handle it—my father cried one time at dinner, and I felt uncomfortable. I wanted to stop him from crying, so I changed the subject to cheer him up. Same thing with Jeff...he started crying and I got nervous and started trying to get out of the car. But he put his hand out to me to shake and I shook his hand. I feel bad about it to this day, because I didn't allow him to cry about me going away. I didn't think it was that big of a deal. We'd see each other at the next holiday, so it wasn't that big of a deal. But it was to him...and I couldn't deal with it.

The further away someone is the less you hang out with them. Hanging out is crucial to being friends. But it's a big deal for me just to go across town to hang out.

I've done things a friend shouldn't do.

I met Tom in college in the dorm. He's easy to get along with, and we became friends right away. Tom's a Princeton Oxford preppy guy.

We were good friends.

When I graduated college, I went away and he stayed. I left abruptly and didn't say goodbye. We lost touch for thirteen years, and I missed him. Later, I found his address through the Internet, and we reestablished our friendship.

When I moved back to Tampa and was in the family business I met another good friend: Art. He's a tai chi kung fu master. Having a business and a wife, we didn't get together as much as I did with past friends. We talked about Taoism a lot.

My employees were not friends. When you don't see someone outside the context of work or school, then you are not friends but acquaintances.

I have students that are like friends, a guy named Joe, for example. We get together just to talk. He's a hard worker, unlike me, he's driven. I'm lazy and like to take it easy.

Adam I don't see so much because he's busy. He'd come for no reason just to talk with me. We talk about everything, books, life, etc.

Of course, I have you.

Interestingly, all of my friends have initiated the relationship, including you. I think I send off signals that say I am open. I'm always curious about what people see in me. What they like or why they are drawn to me? Do they like the way I think? My personality? What?

I rarely initiate friendships and I don't know why...

I don't do that with women either...

I love contact with humans...

But I love solitude...

A friend is someone who goes beyond necessary encounters.

He seeks to be with you for the sake of being with you.

And I can tell when a person enjoys being in my company...It's a precious thing.

I appreciate that there are people in this world who care to spend their free time with me, told my mother that the other day, and she said that it shows low self-esteem.

I don't think so.

I count it as a blessing that I have at least one person in my life that cares about me enough to want to be with me for its own sake. Just being with a friend is enough.

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### Sidney's Monologue

*July 2004*

I'm making this tape at the request of a friend of mine who asked me to discuss my ideas about masculinity as well as the types of friendships I've had with men.

I'm not quite sure where to begin.

The notion that men have about masculinity or what it means to be a man involves force, the assertion of one's body, the use of it—be that through sports in

competition with other males or sometimes violence like fights—it could even be one’s voice from speaking loudly to stand up for one’s self. In our culture, performing masculinity and even femininity falls into extremes. For a man who finds reading, art, or music pleasurable is to call his masculinity into question and it’s a sad thing.

It’s sad because it shows our conceptions of being a man are narrow and that it doesn’t allow for a continuum in regard to what people can be or find interesting or the types of feelings or emotions that they can express. I do believe that race plays a factor in that because I am a black male and our conceptions of masculinity are much narrower than even the community at large. I think of the sad state of what is considered the hip hop culture in which thuggish behavior, criminal behavior is celebrated.

The opinions that people put forth about women are bifurcated where they show respect for their mothers or grandmothers and at the same time women as peers are put down, called names like Ho.

In friendships with other males, I was a smart kid. I always did well in school. I liked music. I liked to write. I also played sports and there was a certain bonding that took place there. But interestingly enough, as I’ve grown older, sports don’t hold the same connection for me that they once did. Although I enjoyed the bonding experience of being around my teammates, I preferred the activity of playing the sport. I’m not the kind of person who wants to memorize all the stats or to watch someone else play unless it’s the championship game and I’m watching the best of the best. I won’t follow the whole season on ESPN or

have a favorite team. I don't really care that much. It's a generic conversation like talking about the weather. I know the format and some people get very passionate about it but I don't really care about it. It's a joke. You have grown men getting paid millions of dollars to play a child's game.

I'll stop there for a second.

I'll talk about my friendships with men. I've always had male best friends, and I've always had female best friends. And that makes a difference in my understanding of what it means to be a man and relating to women because I'm not overly masculine. If I want to know something about women, I ask women. They know more about themselves than we do. I don't spend a lot of time asking guys about women. Women are probably more introspective about themselves than guys are so how much could a guy really tell you about a woman? Other than some stereotype they heard from another guy who knows even less than they do. That may sound foul, but really most of my male friends aren't really like that. My closest male friends aren't the ones I played sports with. They had other interests: classical piano, sculpture, art, people who like to write or are interested in science, physics—people who really had thoughts. I find those people more interesting on the whole.

Most of my close male friends are like me. Though I have the ability to play sports, I don't value it as much as I do the ability to do intellectual things, which explains my background—working toward a Ph.D. I intentionally have sought out things that would broaden my intellectual horizons. They have more value and though they may not in our culture seem like masculine things as

opposed to playing a sport or becoming a rapper. Hip hop things don't interest me, so I really consider myself different.

When you ask me about being a man or masculinity the answers you'd probably get are different than what you'd typically find. I honestly find conversations with women more interesting than those with most men. The men that I do talk to or relate to are rare and atypical.

Three of my closest friends share the exact same personality type which is common to only 1% of the population if that tells you anything.

Male friendship is always a little detached. You're not going to cry around your male friends. When a guy cries around another guy it shows vulnerability—he's really on the brink. It's not something that men tend to do around other men. There's a lot of posturing, a need to be cool. And it's a lot of crap. Unfortunately, the relationships that men have with other men bleed over into their relationships with their wives or children. Especially, the crap they teach their male children about being tough.

This over emphasis on not showing emotion really screws us later on in life. Was this person taught to be compassionate early on in life—no—because those things are associated with being feminine? God forbid that the kid should actually show emotion. He's a sissy or a fag or whatever. It really limits the types of experiences we can have or the type of person we can be. You end up with a person who is more like a robot.

I'll stop there for a second.

I would say that men do need to work on changing the types of relationships that they do have with one another. It will be a difficult thing to do. The types of projects that I see people in the Communication Department work on such as Jay and Matt are important. I'm not sure how many people understand the nature of or the importance of that work but over time people will because it is necessary.

Men do need to change men but unfortunately it gets associated with a men's movement where people go out in the woods and bang drums and hugging and stuff like that. It gets a bad rap because it's seen as extreme.

I think a middle ground needs to be found in regard to how we relate to each other.

Me, I've had relationships with males outside of friendship, the mentoring ones—male teachers. I had the football coach who was also an English teacher. He recommended books for me to read. He was a person who encouraged me to keep up my scholarly endeavors. I've been fortunate in that my mentors have been friends to me and given me ideas about different ways to live and be, especially as an African American man where the ideas of being a man are even narrower.

I also think that I've been fortunate in regard to birth. My grandmother raised me and I've had two wonderful parents and a great stepmother who have taught me to be respectful of other people's culture to want to learn about them. To understand ways of being a man that are not so patriarchal that necessitate domination. I, like other males, can and do portray those roles, but I am more



cognizant of doing it. To be able to step back is crucial. The person who has had the most influence in the type of man I've become, the way in which I understand manhood, is my father.

Although my father was a military man, he is someone you'd say the still waters run deep. Though he did live and work and breathe in this very hierarchical culture, my father is also a very gentle man. He is not a man who is afraid to cry or show compassion. He is very loving and very family oriented. Morality and ethics are a priority for him. Those are things that I have always admired about my father and he's tried to teach me over the years. That made a big difference for me.

I can say I had a father figure.

I'm very proud of him and hope to make him proud to have characteristics that he displays. Being an African American male it can be more difficult because you might not know who your father is or never spent much time with him. I've got to wonder how that affects our relationships with other men and even the women in our lives.

I didn't grow up in a household where I heard bad things about my dad. Many guys I knew had mothers who bad talked their fathers. I never heard that, I always heard that my father was a good man and living with him I saw proof.

As far as how I see the world changing—I'm not really sure a plurality of men are going to see it as necessary to change the way in which they relate to each other. It takes something bad happening and then, and only then, do they see a need for change. Not to place the burden on women, but I think it's imperative

for men to learn a great deal from them. Men need to have a movement for themselves but they have to listen to women more.

We need a woman president. I'd vote for one.

We need to see larger ways of being in the world and being ourselves. We need to go beyond the money thing, the dog-eat-dog world we seem to live in, to see other's needs connected to our own. If these kinds of qualities have come to be more associated with women, then fine, we need to learn something from women and that these things are assets to human beings not just women.

As guys, we need to learn to listen more, to try not dominating conversations. Just watching other guys talk—and I'm guilty of this—it's a competition. We talk loudly. We cut each other off. We don't listen the way women listen to each other and truly respond to what the other is saying. Even something as simple as that would go far in changing the types of relationships we have. It would give us a deeper understanding of each other as people in times other than crisis.

Since this guy's world is so screwed up, it's ok to hug him now to show compassion and vulnerability—if we learned to do those things sooner we might save someone or ourselves from coming to bad ends.

I am hopeful that it can be done, but I place more faith in generations to come because it's difficult to teach an old "dawg" new tricks; literally these people become set in their ways. They're not interested in change.

We've got to get over our obsession with sports. We need to teach young men to do things that are helpful to people. Search for the cure for cancer instead

of working on your jump shot. To shift our focus from creating bigger, faster “toys”—cars, planes, and so on. How does this help? What we do with our lives shapes what we are and as long as those choices are narrow you will have narrow people. Beauty is something to be appreciated. Doing that instead of watching movies where destruction is valued. That would be a start. Men possess these qualities; we just ignore them.

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### Kirk's Monologue

*July 2004*

I met Leonard my freshman year at university. We were roommates. I'm 18 years old and struggling with my parents' divorce, dealing with chronic stomach problems, facing a long distance relationship with my girlfriend at the time, and I had never lived away from home.

Ambivalent. I was ambivalent.

Like me, Leonard was moving away from home for the first time. We were both green and uncertain about our identities. The first six months of living together were spent figuring each other out.

We got along.

But it's hard being forced into a relationship and whether you come to love this other person or you hate them.

Thrown together under new and mystifying experiences bonded us. And we changed.

Two essential breakthroughs happened to Leonard and me our second semester: We dabbled in drugs and experimented with sex.

We bought our first bag of weed from a guy who lived on our hall. He loaned us a bong too. Then we went back to our room and smoked it all. When you're high, you relax. You can open up.

Doped or sober, we talked and talked about sex. Leonard was the first person I really communicated with on the subject—especially masturbation. I admitted to jerking off and even said, "I love it."

He was shocked at first, but then we started talking about it: how we masturbated, when we started masturbating, where we masturbated and how we hid it from our parents.

You know...the standard talk.

One day we even masturbated together. He under his sheet and me under mine. We didn't ejaculate—we were too nervous. But we measured our penises at full erection. It was funny comparing and who knows if we were telling the truth. I probably added inches to my dick.

These moments established vulnerability and honesty that has been emblematic of our friendship. We've been friends now for twelve years.

By the end of our first year at school you could say Leonard and I were...in love...enamored.

We had taken classes together and struggling with them trying to explain our thoughts and feelings to one another.

Girls, of course. We talked a lot about girls.

Talking about our parents was, perhaps, more meaningful. And those twelve months of being together were ripe with possibility for expressing ourselves. He and I shared our feelings about who we were as individuals and who we wanted to be.

Openly.

Frequently.

We spent our next year off campus in a house with two other people who ended up not being close friends.

Honestly, I don't remember much about that year, because I tore ligaments in my knee and had to have reconstructive surgery. It was a traumatic and emotional time for me. When I think back, I don't remember much about that year.

I know Leonard was there. He lost his virginity in that house. I still hadn't had sex. That was a big moment for me living vicariously through his experience with women.

Though we continued to progress as friends, my body troubles put me into a reclusive mood.

At the end of the second year, we decided to drop out of university and move home—maybe go to a Jr. College. He lived about an hour south of where I grew up...

He didn't tell either of his parents. I told my mom but not my dad. We drove back together stopping off in a few places on the way. Leonard stayed with me at my house for a couple of days, and then I took him to the train station.

I remember wondering if our friendship would survive and hoped we would find a way to see one another. Over the summer he visited and we played golf. We went to the beach one day too. At the end of the summer, after talking with my father, I decided to apply to another university.

Leonard stayed home and went to the community college. This decision didn't alter our relationship but it changed the direction of our lives. I went far away. I met lots of cool people. I met my future wife. I did a lot of drugs. All without him.

And I changed. I evolved from being introverted to being extroverted. The drugs helped me to express myself. I felt more confident in my identity.

I invited Leonard out several times and he was amazed by my drug use. He was also interested in joining my ball game so to speak.

We did mushrooms.

Drank a ton.

Smoked enough weed to kill an elephant.

Played Frisbee.

He loved my friends. It was really a good time.

He eventually transferred to another university. By the time I graduated, he was a few years behind me and still living at home. Leonard did a ton of drugs too—his parents oblivious in the other room. I don't know how he pulled that off.

But Leonard is a fickle and frugal individual. When it comes to money he likes to do whatever he can to prevent himself from opening his wallet book.

That was probably his main reason for staying home even though I know he hated it.

(Long pause—the tape shuts off)

Back to it.

The seminal moments in my relationship with Leonard revolved around drug use and masturbation, as well as talking about women and fornication. I think it's fascinating. It might be common; it might not be. But it certainly set the tone for our relationship.

Although I think these are common experiences among male friends, at least early in a man's life, they do not always sustain that friendship over time. For some reason my relationship with Leonard has lasted.

The most important times have been our camping expeditions. Leonard is a huge outdoorsman. He was raised in a family where being outdoors was a vital part of living. Before I met Leonard, I had done two or three outdoor excursions, but they were minimal. Leonard and I did some extreme hikes up in the mountains—16,000-17,000 feet.

Massive climbs.

Pushing each other to climb faster-harder-better. Challenging each other. The competitive spirit is part of the bonds formed on those treks.

But I don't think we have manly relationships as such. We engage each other emotionally, although I don't think Leonard has provided me with as much personal insight into his life.

We've had some good talks, but our relationship hasn't been based on long in depth conversations. It's been more a bodily experience, a shared bodily experience with the world around us.

Camping is a prime example.

Something that comes back to drug use but is crucial that we talk about is doing acid. We did acid together for the first time. And that was a HUGE moment in our lives.

We were in a high fern gully playing cards and we dosed these acids. About an hour into the trip, I let a card go and it just kept falling from my hand and never hit the ground.

For anyone who has never done acid—it's impossible to describe—but the moment of dropping that tab onto your tongue is not the important part, where as with weed the smoking of it is crucial to the experience.

With acid there is that one second where reality shifts and you're in an altered state full of transformative potential. Watching it happen to yourself through another human being who is also simultaneously seeing themselves through you...phenomenal.

Ecstatic.

Working through that trip together connected Leonard and me in a sublime way, and we often talk about it when we return to each other.

Maybe that's a nice place to take this conversation...Leonard and I have always kept in contact either through conversations on the phone or getting



together. As time passes, I can think of only three individuals I regularly talk with on the phone—like once a month.

Leonard had always been there and I think one of the biggest growing years, aside from infancy, is the twenties. Leonard was my twenties.

He has always been honest. That is his greatest character trait. I have never met anyone more honest than Leonard. He has a high degree of personal self worth. What he says and does with his life he lives by. I've never experienced him saying one thing and then doing something else. Whenever I've asked him about how he feels, he always tells me. There's no one I'd turn to more in a time of crisis than Leonard.

Another crucial aspect of our friendship is that he's in the academic world as well. He's getting a PhD in microbiology. We have lots of similarities in terms of our struggles and passions for learning. We share books. He's always been an avid reader. He takes me in directions I would have never imagined. Like music.

Crucial.

The big thing was Steely Dan. During our early years together we listened to Steely Dan. We went to concerts. We got all the albums. We sang songs in Karaoke bars. Anything we could do to listen to Steely Dan.

Whenever I go home, I always make sure I go see him. Just a month ago I went home and spent two days with him. We played golf, we got drunk, and we played pool. We talked about the old times. We talked about the future. We do that every time we get together.

I feel guilty that I didn't go see him for two years when he was living in Seattle.

Another interesting thing about our relationship is that we always have a lot of big plans, but we rarely see them come to fruition. We've wanted to go canoeing up in the boundary waters in Canada. We've wanted to hike Mt. Whitney. We've wanted to go kayaking down in Baja, and we haven't done any of those things. We've come close a few times.

That doesn't say so much about our relationship as it does about us both being kind of flaky with our lives.

Another thing that I really appreciate about him is that I have a very contentious relationship with my father and one of the ways my father and I bond is through golf. I've often asked Leonard to join us. He's very honest with my dad and my dad respects Leonard. We've all enjoyed playing golf together over the years. Besides sitting around a table drinking scotch, Leonard and I will always be able to play golf together. Just last summer he was the best man in my wedding.

He was a rock as usual.

Leonard's very passionate about my relationship with my wife. He gave one of the most eloquent speeches I've ever heard in my life for the best man toast. He really showed his true grit.

I'm not here to criticize and I've got a lot of my own weaknesses but one thing that I do fear for Leonard is that he likes to drink. He got into drinking when we were in college together and he continues to drink. Would I say he's an

alcoholic, yeah, I probably would. Not in the sense of going to work drunk but drinking everyday. And he's dating someone now who enables that behavior. I worry about him.

I got an email from him the other day and it was laced with drunken connotations. I'm all for having a good time, but being 30 years old...he's doing well in school...but his mother just died of colon cancer a few years ago. And he's not always expressive about that loss. I know it's hurt him tremendously. He was very close with his mother. His father and he have always had a tight lipped relationship. His dad is very quiet and they can't express how they feel with each other even to me.

I don't know if I'm his best friend, but I think I'd be pretty close.

I regret that we haven't been together more these last twelve years. I learn a lot about myself being with him and know he learned a lot about himself too.

It makes me sad that we weren't able to share more moments together, because I know as we get older they are going to be fewer and fewer. I have few individuals who have influenced me in as powerful a way as Leonard has.

I sometimes wonder: Could it have been anybody? Was Leonard just filling a role? Was he just there at a time in my life when I was growing up? And it doesn't really matter who it was, but it *was* him, that lightning rod who helped me evolve as a human being.

I've spent a lot of time with people over the years and Leonard seems to, hands down, be able to resonate with me most eloquently. There's just a vibration that he and I share that I haven't been able to find in anyone else. I would be

heartbroken if our relationship ever ended or one of us left this Earth  
unexpectedly. He has taught me so much. I can think of so many times we would  
go to the beach in the summers  
and lay in the sand  
and go in the water  
and swim  
and ride waves  
and play Frisbee  
and Look at girls...

Those are moments I cherish deeply.

I'm sure that he does too.

I wish I lived closer to Leonard because he provides me with the  
sustenance that I don't get from many other men. He makes my life more sound  
and secure.

That is something we talk about frequently: Living close to one another  
again and how influential that would be on our lives. I don't say that about many  
people. I've spent my life running from relationships whether a family member  
or a previous lover or a man friend.

To want to spend more time with a male is very rare for me.

With close friends I find that I need to have something to look forward to  
with them.

Something that we can share.

Something that we can do together.

I'm always putting together vacations around being with friends because that's what gets me through my days.

Will I see him before in the meantime? Probably. I go home often maybe once or twice a year to see my family. Hopefully, I'll see him again soon.

Whether or not it's this summer...Probably not. And I really don't know where his life is going to take him. He's going to be a professor soon.

Hard saying.

Hard saying.

I hope that he and I find a way to work it out and be closer than we have been since those first times in college 10 years ago. It's been about 10 years to the day that he and I left the university together.

Amazing...

I miss him. I miss his laugh. I miss being able to ride the waves with him and walk. Play Frisbee. Listen to music. Just feed off his vibe. He provides me with such nourishment that is why we are such good friends. I don't get that from many other individuals. I strive for it. Again, it's something that you can't make happen. It has to happen naturally.

Somehow, Leonard and I just have it.

I hope it never ends.

The guy is crazy. I've watched him skateboard down a hill doing about 40 through rush hour traffic and almost kill himself.

I've been on the back of a dune buggy with him in the desert going 90 and almost slipping off to our deaths.

I've been in the high mountains of Colorado hiking with him in the winter and our sleeping bags weren't rated properly and almost freezing to death.

We've done some foolish things together. The least of which has been our drugs. Those moments have shown us how fallible we are and hopefully he realizes that too because I would be devastated if something were to happen to him. I worry that him drinking and driving as he's been known to do would be something...it's only a matter of time.

That's something I've never brought up with him. I'm not sure how he would take it. I don't know. I can't think about too many people who could talk to him about his drinking. I've just never had the courage to do it yet. I don't think it would end our relationship. Maybe it's something I need to do someday but I'm not sure. I just hope he's able to right the ship. There have been times when he's asked me to help him with his drug use—throwing away all the bongos and burying them in the desert. But he's always come back to using drugs. He's never seen drinking as a problem, but the man can put back a few. I just hope that somehow he is able to figure it out. I don't know if it will happen with the current woman. We'll see what happens. I would love for him to get married and soon.

He's the romantic type. He loves women. He loves to caress and care for women. But for some reason he hasn't really seriously dated—that's not true—he did date a woman for almost three years, and he came to me when it was time to quit. He came to me, and I said to get out while he could and I'm glad he did. Other than that, his relationships with women have been short lived. I don't know why. I've met all his girlfriends and they all seemed nice. But Leonard is a

single child and has a lot of personal desires and hasn't had to share much and I think he gets a little preoccupied with what's best for him. You have to think about what's best for the other as well.

Sometimes I wonder if he does that. It remains to be seen what will happen with the current woman. I spent the evening with them recently, and they seemed very much in love and willing to give to one another. They may have issues with alcohol, but we'll see.

Hopefully, it will work out. It's hard for me to put into words. It's like having a kid. You want so much for them to succeed and make a difference and be happy. How could I not want him to be with someone he loves someone who gives him joy? It's hard for me to say, "Leonard I don't want you to be with this person because they are contributing to your alcohol problem." Maybe that's why he loves her so much; I dunno.

We'll see.

I've come across a lot of guys, and I have a strong relationship with a few of them. But why has Leonard's remained while others have fallen away? I've had relations that went on for a long time and then suddenly stopped. With Leonard, we've maintained momentum even picked some up over time. It's a matter of perspective. He and I share a lot of similar values and beliefs.

I'm not talking about politics or the color of hair we like on women. I'm talking about a general, natural sense of living that he and I are very much in tune with. We're comfortable with each other.

I get frustrated and overwhelmed by people whose approaches to life are frenetic and out of control. Leonard is relaxed—how I'd like to be in some situations.

(Tape ran out. Flipped sides)

Leonard is my catalyst in life. He is the person I go to when I want to go do something that I've never done before. If I'm going to go bungee cord jumping, then who do I want as my right hand man? And it's Leonard. It's not because he's going to tell me not to do it—it's because when I go and do it he's *with* me. And we are going to have a conversation afterwards that will enhance the experience. That's what I'm getting at.

We give each other clarity.

And that makes those experiences that much more potent and powerful—more epiphany like because they included him.

It doesn't have to be extreme things like climbing mountains...

It's going to a wine auction in Idaho.

Or going to see the movie *Heat*.

It's throwing a Frisbee.

Or driving across country.

It's listening to music albums.

Or hanging out in his backyard watching the Jets of Miramar fly overhead—these little things that just continue to happen.

It's helpful that my wife loves him. And he loves my wife. We've all done wonderful things together. He gets along with my other friends too. It's



rare that you can bring one friend from one time in your life together with another from a different time, and they get along. He gets along with everyone marvelously.

I admire his ability to get along. He doesn't hold grudges. He remains friends with X's. I don't know how he does it, but he does. He goes to his high school reunions and everyone knows him and talks about him. He's a very likable guy. He doesn't make it difficult to be around him. You don't have to work hard or put energy into the relationship. It's just feels natural to be with him. When you can have someone like that, why wouldn't you want to be with that person?

We help each other feel good about ourselves.

What more can you say?

I hope this helps. I'm not sure how long I've taken it. I've flipped the tape over. But if you need anything else let me know.

Bye-bye.

## Chapter Nine: Hard Habits to Break

*August 2004*

“We will probably never be good friends,” I am thinking while driving down interstate 275 toward my second formal meeting with Kirk. The road is so familiar; I unconsciously change lanes to avoid an almost imperceptible hole at the end of a tight curve known as malfunction junction. The heat rising from the asphalt mesmerizes. I want to avoid the hierarchies—the typical demarcations that divide and diminish the possibility between us. I want to say that as long as there is something *between us*; then, we are friends, but my growing disappointment turns the need for openness into a struggle (see Brooks, 2006). The canceled activities, the unreturned e-mails, and the rescheduled meetings all play on a growing desire to protect myself and to blame myself, regardless of my education in relational communication.

“But we lead demanding lives,” I rationalize. Being graduate students, our precious time cannot always be spent maintaining or cultivating new friendships, even when there is a strong mutual attraction (see Miller, 1983). My warm feelings for Kirk do not override the other obligations that inevitably take us away from one another. I feel insecure. I want to share this insecurity with Kirk, but know, today, I will keep it a secret. Not because I fear showing weakness to another male, but because I am convinced of the relationship’s decline. The old

habits of the military brat in me keep my heart moving on, and, tragically, it never moves an inch.

I am also painfully aware of being a researcher and how this role often seems incompatible with that of being a friend (see Tillman-Healy, 2003). I close myself off because of fear of violating ethical mandates—fear that I am unconsciously manipulating people (see Goffman, 1989).

Just the other day Bert caught up with me in the computer lab; we hadn't spoken in a few weeks. Many times I had been on the verge of calling him, but hesitated—why? Fatigue from too much work, I think, or as a way to avoid my feelings. Now, we are in the habit of not hanging out, not talking (see Kupers, 1993; Miller, 1983; Osherson, 1992).

He jokingly asks, “Have you been testing me?”

No. But I feel ashamed anyway. I should have called and a litany of excuses sounds off in my head. We make plans, and looking at Bert I wonder, “Has some of the sparkle gone out of his eyes?” We hug, and I hold onto him a second longer trying to let him know that he doesn't have to go.

I exit the highway.

Moments later, I am pulling into the parking lot of the diner where Kirk and I habitually meet. I don't see his truck, but I am ten minutes early as usual. I shut my eyes and take a few deep breaths—meditating. The cool air trapped in my car begins to dissipate and sweat beads build up on my forehead. I am concentrating on the drip at the end of my nose when a knock on the glass startles

me. Kirk is peering into the window with a huge grin pasted on his face. I smile and grab my satchel.

The interior of the diner invites nostalgia not only for an idealized past but also for being on the road. License plates decorate the walls. Middle-aged men with potbellies sit on stools that are bolted to the floor, and tell dirty jokes to a seemingly interested waitress. I imagine she will spout, “Kiss my grits,” any second. The brown Formica counter top shows signs of discoloration from the multitude of elbows that have propped up greasy burgers. I am aware of having stepped into a cliché, and, for some inexplicable reason, I am pleased. As if on cue, the song drifting from the speakers in the ceiling provides a soundtrack for my wistfulness:

*Give me the beat boys, and free my soul*

*I want to get lost in your rock-n-roll*

*And drift away...*

“And drift away,” I sing quietly to myself, as we look around for an empty booth.

Kirk, typical of his character, beams over all that he surveys. Drinking in the details, I can see that my friend cherishes, perhaps irreverently, the kitschy flavor of this place. I know he appreciates the opportunity to eat what can only be described as grub. As is the case for many men, we forgo various pleasures in deference to a significant other. Things that we enjoyed in our teens and twenties seldom fit into our committed relationships with women. Our friendships with

other men are often occasions for revisiting a past life to resample the things given up out of love (see Kupers 1993; Miller, 1983; Osherson, 1992).

I recall the childish pacts made and oaths sworn with a beloved male companion—that a woman would never come between us—that nothing would ever change: We would howl at the moon until our dying day. I wonder if that desire to keep things the same is what fuels a sense of emptiness in many middle aged men? As a man who is approaching middle age, am I like other such men swept away by the contradictions of performing normative masculinity, because that social narrative compels us to both stay the same and to change: Retain our youthful camaraderie and get married. The idea that these things can exist simultaneously seems foreign. What is a man to do?

Despite my earlier misgivings, I am settling into the routine of being with Kirk. His customary excitement infects me and much of my fear and loathing evaporates. When I am with my friends, lost in the moment, the feeling of being more myself often consumes me (see Brooks, 2006).

The habit of being men together reaches out across time and space. *We* die hard. The social role we have practiced since childhood does have its advantages. Even though I haven't seen him all summer, we assume our old relationship as though a day hasn't gone by, a familiar occurrence in nearly all of my relationships with men.

Studying my friend, I notice he seems skinnier and that his head is shaved. After exchanging a bit of small talk, we are soon conversing about topics that routinely come up between graduate students: teaching, major professors, the job

market, and the upcoming deadline for submitting papers to the national convention. Much of what we discuss is ritual complaining that I imagine most coworkers engage in. For us that amounts to sharing our displeasure about the undergraduates we teach, and the fact that we are underpaid for our efforts.

Some of what we talk about is personal—too personal to reveal. After all, keeping each other's confidence is an important part of being friends and being a researcher (see Tillman-Healy, 2003). Sensing Kirk's need to discuss an issue he's having with his major professor, I decide to leave my tape recorder off, a convenient way of choosing roles in the moment. If only it were so easy to turn off being a researcher. I wonder why I privilege one role over the other; as though being a friend is always diametrically opposed to being a researcher (see Tillman-Healy, 2003).

If anything, at least for a little while, research gives us the necessary excuse to get together, to make time for another man. I cannot escape the fact that our relationships require an activity, a reason beyond just being with one another and these reasons—whatever they may be—allow us to ask permission from our significant others and, perhaps more importantly, from ourselves. Is this the bottom line of hetero-normalcy?

Finally, after a half hour or more of talking, I pull out my tape recorder and turn it on. Having disrupted our conversation, I feel the need to explain my actions, "This thing makes me feel self-conscious," I say, looking at the tape recorder I just laid on the middle of the table.

“I know what you mean,” Kirk replies, “We could have turned it on from the beginning.” Is this statement permission to let readers into our earlier conversation? Perhaps. But I know neither of us would want our exact words on the record. When we gripe about the pressures of being students, and the powerlessness we sometimes feel, the words shift from the jocular to the derogatory, and the meanness of our words is inexact, overstated.

“I was enjoying myself too much. When I turn it on,” I say, looking at the recorder again, “I feel like I’m a different person.” I pause for a moment to think about what to say next. “With the recorder on, I am a researcher. I am not just hanging out with a friend. While it’s on, if I try to be just a friend, even while its presence fades into the background, there’s something inauthentic about it.”

“That’s interesting, because when I am being interviewed, I respond with an extra awareness. I want to say the right thing,” Kirk says a bit self-consciously.

“I worry about betraying my friendships, maybe, because I feel ethnographers can turn out to be, as Goffman (1989) claims, a bunch of finks,” I say and know that this comment is more a harsh critique of my self and an expression of how my self-worth in negotiating these complex roles sometimes slips away.

“Explain that.”

“Remember that conference paper of his they published in *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*?” I ask.

“Refresh my memory.”

“An ethnographer’s job, according to Goffman (1989), is to insinuate themselves into people’s lives, to observe them, and to steal away in the night with the collected data,” adopting my teaching persona, my voice gets louder as I continue to speak, “Positing the ethnographer as fink configures relationships according to a parasitic rather than participatory view.” Sounding more and more like one of my own long-winded professors, I ramble on, “When we think of the ethnographer as friend, there is a radical shift in our perspective. People are participants rather than objects. I’m no longer asking what can you do for me or even what can I do for you, but rather what can *we* do together?”

“It means maintaining relationships after a project ends,” my friend interjects.

“Yes. I think the friendly ethnographer attempts research that is mutually beneficial to all involved” (see Tillman-Healy 2003).

“But the fact that it becomes research affects the way you have a relationship,” Kirk states.

“Right.” I answer.

“Seems tragic,” Kirk says sadly and then asks, “Why can’t you just have a relationship with someone and let it go at that?” A silence envelopes us, and I can see by my friend’s wrinkled brow that he is thinking of a “what if” scenario. I keep quiet to see where he takes the conversation.

“My best friend, this man I’ve known since I was a freshman in college, his mother died a number of years ago. We’ve had several conversations about how that death altered his relationship with his father. He has no other family and



it is interesting watching the two of them working out their emotional baggage. There hasn't been much research done on those types of relationships. If I write a paper about widowers and their children and decide to include my experiences with my friend, then suddenly I have to treat that friendship differently." Kirk states then exclaims in a hushed voice, "that's fucked up."

"Perhaps, but how do you respect *his* privacy? He had those conversations with you in confidence and in the knowledge that you were his friend not a communication researcher," I challenge.

"That's true," Kirk says.

"However," I continue, "you have relational truths you've uncovered and you have obligations to the scholarly community and they don't neatly fit with your obligations to your friend. I know I'll wrestle with that during my research project," I say, thinking of our earlier unrecorded conversation.

I am struggling with a need to voice my disappointment about our relationship. Isn't one of the points of my research not only to observe men in friendship but also to introduce alternative ways of communicating together? I began this project by responding to Miller's (1983) observation that the emotional state of modern men was abysmal at best? Had there been any progress in the convening years? My courage to speak is watered down with fear of the truth. Kirk and I liked one another. We could be good friends, but I wanted to avoid the reality that the relationship had run out of time. Unconsciously, I begin to speak indirectly—I circle the truth like a carrion eater when I open my lips again.

“Honesty between men is interesting when it comes to their friendships,” I say tentatively, “As friends we keep secrets not only *for* each other but also *from* each other. As a researcher, I want to know *why* and that may require revealing painful truths—add to that my ignorance; I am not sure how to talk about our own relationship: What is it? What does it mean? These are questions we might address more overtly with women as we negotiate our emotional and, especially, our sexual desires. As men, we seldom have that kind of overt meta-communication about our friendships.”

“I do that with my friend Leonard to some extent,” Kirk interrupts indicating that they meta-talk about their relationship.

“How often do we talk about our future as friends—it’s as though time operates differently between men,” I continue.

“There is a past but mostly there is just the now,” he adds with a Zen like expression.

“When I approach you as a researcher, I risk introducing matters foreign to our relational habits,” I theorize.

“Funny that you should mention honesty, because when my friend is talking to me, I believe everything between us is true. But,” he pauses, leans forward, and continues in a hushed voice, “but the instant I put it down on paper, readers will question the truth of it—bringing up the issue of representation. Will you try to weave that into your research?” Kirk asks, his hand now propping up his chin.

“My writing usually ends up calling attention to itself as writing but I wonder if this postmodern fascination with representation is, perhaps, a narcissistic dead end. At some point, regardless of the chosen medium’s imperfection and the impossibility of truth with a capital T, we have to get down to representing.” As excited as I am to wax quixotic over pomo-relativism, I feel the need to return to friendship and say, “On the tape you made for me you speak about the nourishment you receive from spending time with Leonard. I wonder if that is something that can be purposefully cultivated with other people. I know that feeling of nourishment and have experienced it in some unlikely places. There seems to be something organic or, perhaps, fateful about it.”

“You can’t make it happen, but there is this desire to have it with this person or that person.” He says pointing to me and then to one of the men sitting at the diner counter.

“How is it possible for two men to talk about that when they don’t already have that nourishment?” I wonder out loud and am thinking about the restriction feelings of homophobia places on many men.

“Well, I’ll tell you something. I studied Durkheim (1975) in social theory fall semester, and he talks about the collective consciousness that directs individual’s behavior with out them realizing it. These beliefs are ingrained but result from participation in moments of collective effervescence, which are transformational experiences that through ritualized action merge into our daily lives. We may forget that first moment...”

“Reminds me of Freud’s (1995) primal scene—it explains the incest taboo,” I toss in.

Kirk continues his explanation, “The energy that pulls people together into pairs or larger groups is felt to be an external agent. We might call it serendipity; others might call it God. But this force is manifested in getting together and living. Durkheim (1975) even posited that nations are built upon these small relationships that combust when individuals share similar experiences. When you get more and more people sharing the same routine...”

“Larger and larger social configurations occur that eventually lead to nations,” I guess out loud.

“So, I would say the reason that I obtain nourishment from certain friendships has to do with sharing transformational moments as a result of living life together. We’ve shared in ways that somehow and I don’t know the terminology for this—let me know if you do...” Kirk looks at me.

“I don’t know if there needs to be a terminology for it,” I say and realize that my life with these men has been filled with the use and mastery of words. Theoretical language is something we throw around like footballs. Some might consider the competitive spirit of our verbal play oppressive, but, for me, it has been mostly stimulating. What I have noticed is a habit of talking over the other to exert control of a conversation—not so much out of a need for dominance but out of excitement for expressing the inner workings of one’s own brain. Using the brain, we may forget—because it’s common to think of the mind as separate from the body—is a physically pleasurable experience: the adrenaline flows, the

heart rate increases, and the nostrils flare. A hidden sensuality permeates our exchanges: we move closer almost touching; we whisper; we shout; we gesticulate wildly. The blood runs hot and ideas spurt from our lips in epiphonic joy. We talk about ourselves with one another by sharing ideas. Sometimes, we use the indirect language of a theory to reach inside the other and leave something of ourselves behind. I look across the table at my friend and am grateful for his presence in my life, however fleeting it may turn out to be. As always, Kirk reminds me of Jack Kerouac and his Dharma Bums. Every word he utters, however nonsensical, seems filled with potential and ultimate purpose.

“It is that epiphany shit, man.” He says sounding like Dennis Hopper in *Apocalypse Now*. “These things happen all the time. Near misses of the soul, man—they knock you off course changing something way down inside—your constantly vectoring between points of profound awareness and the confusion of everyday life.” Kirk sits back in the booth and puts his hands behind his head in a self-congratulatory pose.

“And off you go,” I exclaim, slapping my hands together and gesturing toward the sky.

“I’ve had a lot of those with Leonard,” Kirk says.

“Many of the moments you shared on tape were instances of vulnerability. That history with Leonard, according to your articulation of Durkheim (1975), increases the possibility of it reoccurring.” I surmise.

“It’s manna for our relationship.”

“That UR moment of trust intrigues me. It must have taken courage to open up the way you did at such a young age,” I state.

“My three closest friends exude more feminine qualities. The friends that have fallen off were more masculine and dominant than I am. I think that is why I don’t have a good relationship with my father, because he is such a manly man. My grandfather isn’t; I can be more emotional with him,” Kirk says.

“What makes those moments of vulnerability possible in a relationship between men, especially given the state of masculinity depicted by many scholars?” I wonder.

“I think luck and just spending enough time together is what it takes. Eventually, life will collude in ways that, ‘Bam! There it is,’ and you’re dealing with it and, afterward, you can reflect, ‘holy shit man,’ you,”

“Have something to reminisce about,” I interrupt.

“That’s the only way to understand it—there it is—that’s the crux,” Kirk says glowingly. “There’s lots of shit that goes on in my day that could be serendipitous, but it isn’t, because I live it alone. Those moments require a dialogic context. When I call up friends, we reminisce about experiences we shared together. Sure, we’ll talk about what we’re doing in our daily lives, and we’ll turn to one another if we’re struggling, but a lot of our time is spent reflecting about our past together,” Kirk reveals then slaps his palm on the table, “Man, I’ve got to take a piss.”

During our talk the waitress—somehow the word server in this place seems a lie—has been dutifully refilling our large iced teas; we have been just as

dutifully draining them. I reach over and press the stop button on the tape recorder while Kirk excuses himself. I am alone and faced with the idea that my desire to change the status quo relies entirely on luck. Despite our socialization as males, some of us do manage to connect across the emotional distance proscribed by our performance of masculinity (see Brooks, 2006). My mind goes quiet, all thought recedes into unconsciousness, the sounds of the diner fill me, and the routine clinks and clanks of the kitchen stir something inside my chest: the feeling that I have been here before overwhelms me—it's then that I notice the oldies station on the radio is playing a Beatles song:

*I get by with a little help from my friends*

*I get high with a little help from my friends*

*I will try with a little help from my friends*

I see *my* friend sauntering down the aisle between the counter and the booths. The song's questioning line: *Could it be anybody* reverberates through my blood and I think, "with a little help." I am reminded of the absurdity that accidents can happen on purpose and resolve to keep trying—trying to understand the forces behind serendipity. Maybe we are in our own special moment where the ecstasy of being becomes memory, but I have my doubts, as Kirk slides back into his spot across from me. I push the play button, and we resume our dialogue.

"Maybe these moments of vulnerability you described," I begin, "just happen. And maybe it's the communication student in me, but I wonder if there are things that make those occurrences more possible?"

“I think you’re right, but I’m pessimistic. I feel hypocritical when I try to teach them in a speech class or how textbooks always talk about ways of improving your communication apprehension. Sometimes, I don’t even bring them up in class, because I think they’re a bunch of bullshit,” Kirk says.

“It’s something to teach so we have a job,” I joke.

“Yeah,” Kirk snorts.

“I feel your pessimism,” I say.

“My relationship with you isn’t emerging because I’m working hard to do one thing or another that gets in the way of us having better experiences. It just happens,” Kirk says.

“I know,” I reply and in just a few words Kirk captures the disappointment I’ve been feeling about our relationship: *It isn’t emerging*. I swallow the lump in my throat and realize that I have been blaming myself and take solace in his other three words: *it just happens*, but my heart is still aching.

“So, can I just walk up to someone and make a relationship out of it based on effort? Doing things that a textbook from a communication class has taught me? Would I be able to manifest an outcome like the one I had with Leonard?” Kirk asks rhetorically.

“How to win friends and influence people,” I joke again.

“Friendship is essentially like walking or breathing; it’s something that’s instinctual to us as social beings. Sure, how we engage others is influenced by childhood experiences, especially with parents, but, as you age, I think it’s harder to change those patterns,” Kirks says.



“If they aren’t natural, then they certainly feel that way,” I interject.

“Am I more in tune with how to communicate my emotions or to listen to others because of all the classes I’ve taken as a Ph.D. student? You bet. But can I teach that to someone?” Kirk shrugs.

“You have to experience those things first hand,” I say.

“It’s a complex beast talking about communication and changing it,” Kirk replies while drawing in a breath. “A lot of times, I’m like, ‘this is a complete waste of time; there ain’t nothing I can do to have you experience this ecstasy of dialogue.’ Maybe you can become more aware of it; maybe I’m not giving the pedagogy enough credit, but until you’re aware of your communication dynamic, you can’t change it. It’s like learning a new word. You never heard it before until you’ve learned it, then you hear it on the radio the next morning—‘that’s odd,’ you say, ‘now I hear it everywhere.’” He is looking around as he utters these last words.

“I’m not after an equation for achieving success in male friendships,” I state.

“But your study is that space between the friendship and you can’t understand that unless you have a friendship. You can reflect on the ones you’ve had in the past, but you want to be in the now. Again, you’re not going out systematically to make one equate, but there is definitely a need for effort. You have to go do things together,” Kirk replies, and I feel admonished by that last thought. Had I made enough of an effort?

“Commitment,” I say resolutely, “I guess that’s essential. When I reflect on my relationship with you or with the other participants, a lot of times it’s not so much our masculinity that gets in the way, but all our other commitments. We’re all getting Ph.D.s; we’re all seriously involved with a significant other,” I say making excuses.

“Our school and our careers,” Kirk interjects.

“Yes,” I concur.

“And our wives. Those relationships are HUGE.” His last word seems to echo in his mouth.

“And they take up almost all of our time,” I say.

“All of our time,” Kirk agrees.

“And that little bit of time,”

“That you have for yourself,” he says reading my mind.

“That you have for yourself,” I repeat, “Do I want to make the twenty minute drive to see you?” I ask myself. Most of the time, I’m too tired and would rather stay home,” I grumble.

“I know,” Kirk says sadly.

“But I often feel unhappy about that, because I think we’ve missed out on a lot over the last couple of years. We just don’t seem to have the time,” I lament.

“When I was in high school, I did everything in my power to spend time with my best friend,” Kirk replies.

“That’s the thing though, in high school and early college, we’re in a context that makes it easier for us to hang out with the guys to be in those kinds of relationships,” I rationalize.

“No doubt. It’s amazing how much of a grip our careers and marriages have on us,” Kirk says.

“Right.”

“Because when you start trying to get into those other kinds of relationships you feel guilty,” Kirk posits.

“You’re giving time to someone else that you could be giving to your wife or job,” I say.

“Bingo, and it fucks with you,” Kirk exclaims.

“I felt guilty that one time we went canoeing because Kimberly was home by herself, and we hadn’t spent much time together because of school,” I complain.

“It shouldn’t be that way,” Kirk says.

“No it shouldn’t, but,” I pause for a second not wanting to seem as though I blame her, “I don’t think our wives make us feel guilty for getting together. In fact, Kimberly encourages me to do things with my friends. I’ve found, and maybe this is also a product of getting older and getting married, that the things I used to do with male friends like going out drinking…” I leave it hanging.

“Oh my god yes,” Kirk laughs.

“It just doesn’t happen anymore,” I say.

“No way could we do that,”

“No way would we go out, get drunk, come home at 3 in the morning, and crawl into bed.” I conclude.

“Sometimes you want to be able to go and do whatever,” Kirk speculates.

“But we usually don’t. I wonder what makes us different?” I ask, thinking about how language constructs our perspective on the world. Though we both crave the rowdy companionship of the past to some extent, we respect the needs of our romantic relationships—something that cultivates its own longings. We use words like “settled down” or “being responsible,” while some of our single friends claim that we are “pussy whipped (see Murphy 2001).” Kirk and I see our lives with our spouses as a communion not an exercise in domination. Again, I am reminded that masculinity requires us to negotiate contradictions that both perspectives are part of a social narrative that ask us *to be a man*. The choices we make in how we story our life separates us from one friend and draw us closer to another. With this thought in mind I say, “At some point we diverge; we change in ways that pull us apart from other men.”

“In the last couple of years my political views have changed dramatically and that has reversed some relationships big time. Another friendship ended because of the way someone treated me. His actions were, for me, symbolic of disrespect and a lack of empathy towards how I feel and was the first time, as an adult, that I felt betrayed. At that moment, I said, ‘I’m fucking done,’ and I haven’t—”

“Had any contact with him since,” I interject.

“We’re done,” Kirk pauses and says with more emphasis, “done!”

“Would it be improper to ask about specifics?”

“No, no.” He stutters a little. “It doesn’t even seem like that big of a deal. In fact, I was talking about it with myself yesterday. How I would articulate my feelings toward him if I saw him. We were in Cape Cod for a wedding. My wife and I had dinner reservations at an Italian restaurant and this friend came up to me and said, ‘where are you two going?’ and I said, ‘this awesome Italian restaurant. Do you guys want to come?’ and he said, ‘I’m not sure we’re going to be able to make it.’ We exchange numbers and I said, ‘give us a call if you change your mind.’ We never get a phone call and we get to the restaurant and there’s my friend with six other couples—guys I was in a fraternity with—and there they are all sitting around this table. I thought to myself, ‘he didn’t fucking call me,’”

“Because he didn’t want to include you,” I state.

“Right. But I had been the one to initiate getting together and I felt betrayed big time. He’s getting married this summer and a lot of my friends are going. We were great friends in college. We spent a lot of time together. I didn’t invite him to my wedding last summer. He called me in September and left a message, and I never called him back,” Kirk pauses, then says, “My other friend came here about two months ago and said, ‘you and Josh just aren’t talking,’ and I said, ‘no.’ I think a couple of my friends are aghast by it. Another of my good friends who came to my wedding has had the same split with Josh. Josh is very masculine. *There’s* a friendship that’s imploded,” he finishes.

“Most of my friendships have dissolved over time probably because of my constant moving around. And though I have very many ‘feminine’ qualities,” I say, alluding to Kirk’s earlier comments.

“You’re very open,” he observes, cutting off my thoughts.

“Yes, but there is a line. I only let myself get so close with people because of moving every couple of years. It was hard for me to establish good friendships when I was young. I’m good at the acquaintance thing. The few times I let myself get close to someone it was like, ‘okay, it’s time to move.’ That was agonizing. When you’re a kid, you don’t have the power to jump in a car and go see a person,” I pause then add, “And yet when you’re an adult you feel powerless too.”

“Right,” Kirk sighs, followed by a long silence, “it’s funny because those experiences I’ve had with men are so much different than the ones I’ve had with women.”

“I’d like to spend some time talking about that, especially your idea of nourishment. The nourishment I get from another man is not the same as what I get in relationship with my wife. I can’t quite articulate the difference. What is the exact difference? It’s absurd but is it just that you’re with somebody who understands your life experience better because they also have a penis? I talk about a lot of the same things with my wife, but my relationships with men are different somehow,” I say.

“I think it has to do with sexual attraction and being able to be close in a bodily way. I don’t have that kind of attraction for my best friends who are men,” Kirk answers.

“That’s interesting because I’ve read that sexual attraction between straight men is always there but unconscious. Still, when I’m with my male friends, I’m never thinking how can I get into their pants? And with women we are socialized to be thinking that and I too often let that happen to me too. It’s something that many men need to work on and makes me avoid friendships with women,” I remark.

“Yes, there isn’t a relationship that I develop with a woman that I don’t sometime in that process think, ‘what would it be like?’” Kirk says.

“Fascinating. When we’re together, I never objectify you. I don’t notice your crotch the way I might notice a woman’s cleavage. I don’t look at you and say, ‘what nice abs you have; what a great package,’ but *you* do that with women,” I ask.

“Absolutely.”

“Much of the time we find ourselves looking,” I am amazed by my use of inclusive language like “we” or deflective language like “you” to describe this phenomenon. Even as two feminist friendly men, we come, perhaps too close, to unquestioning objectification of women.

“Absolutely,” Kirk says grimly.

“I think I need to pee,” I reveal a little embarrassed.

“Do you think you could, ah,” he pauses and looks at his watch.

“For the sake of research I’ll hold it. We have another quarter hour or so and then I’ve got to go check out the film I’m showing to my class tonight,” I say.

“Why don’t we hit it for another 10 or 15 minutes, then I need to head out too,” Kirk suggests, as we begin paying our tab. After the waitress leaves, he continues, “You know, I’ve also found that I have relationships with men who are on a similar financial level, because we can do things together more easily.”

“That is a big thing too. Economically, it’s been more difficult for me to do things with my friends. We’re down to one car, and I feel like most of “my” money isn’t “my” money anymore,” I say, perhaps unfairly.

“Right, sure. The amount of my money that goes into bills or the house doesn’t leave much left over for doing things with friends or whatever,” Kirk agrees.

“We’re more responsible now. In my twenties, I would have blown off the bills to go hang out with friends,” I say.

“Shit man, I almost couldn’t buy my house, because I did too much of that in my early twenties,” Kirk says then continues, “I’m fucking paying for it now, but at that time in my life it was more important for me to have a jack and coke in one hand and a pool cue in the other talking shit with my friends—talking about the women we wanted to fuck.”

“Right. That was definitely one of the biggest topics of conversation between my friends and me when I was in my teens and early twenties,” I agree.



“Oh yeah, oh yeah,” Kirk laughs, “that still happens, in a sense, but I find it more so with my friends who are not married. I’m always asking them, ‘how it’s going?’ but they never ask me especially since I married.”

“They just assume you’re getting laid,” I reply, dropping into the familiar coarseness that goes along with sex talk between two buddies. “Single pals don’t want to know about the other things like the fight you had about leaving the toilet seat up or whatever because they’re relationship issues.”

“Right.”

“You want to commiserate, but you don’t have the same things to commiserate about,” I add.

“Exactly, but I still try to make time for those friends to continue creating a history. I’m looking forward to spending time this July with one of my friends without my wife around. I’m going to miss her, but we’ll both have a great time without the other,” Kirk says.

“For me, it’s sometimes difficult having great times apart from my spouse. I’m going up to Iowa to spend time with one of my friends too, but I don’t want to leave Kimberly.”

“But you’re looking forward to having a great time in a place you used to live and going places you use to hang out. It’ll be great. You’re setting yourself up for a continued experience of collective effervescence.” Kirk says.

“You have to make it a ritual.” I agree.

“It doesn’t happen every time, but sometimes it does—and you can live off of that for the next 50 years. That’s what keeps those friendships going. You don’t have time to do that with everybody,” Kirk laments.

“There are only so many relationships you can have because of time, energy, and money,” I shrug and pause to look forlornly at my friend. The familiar chords of *Sweet Home Alabama* waft from the ceiling. The lyrics never appealed to me, but the tune always makes my skin prickle. Like the diner we are sitting in, the guitar riff calls me home to that place in the mind called perfection and the impossibility of it all inspires longing. We idealize the past in order to live through the absence of our friends. It’s a depressing routine and the lighthearted song creates the illusion of purpose, reminding me that the big wheels keep on turning, that they’ll carry me home again one day.

“Can we end it on that note,” Kirk asks, looking at his watch.

“We can,” I say and turn off the tape recorder.

## Chapter Ten: Speak Your Heart and the Rest Will Follow

*July 2004*

On my way to meet Sidney, I trot through a throng of people hanging out in the quad between the library and communication building, where my office is housed. I see a couple of guys—fresh-looking undergrads—caught up in some debate. I have no idea what they are talking about, but the passion of their exchange moves me; it reminds me of why I love college and something I value in my various friendships, the intense exchange of new or opposing ideas. I like to be challenged by my friends. I also realize there is comfort in facing, together, the changes inevitably wrought by such conversations.

As a man, I seldom voice my fears and longings to other men and rarely show affection for most of my male friends. The warm embraces that are typical of my time with Bert are not repeated in my relationship with Sidney. I wonder why? I feel love for them both and like being with them, though the way we are together is so different. With Bert, I sip tea and tell stories—he lets me do most of the talking. With Sidney, I shoot baskets or paddle the Myakka looking for gators—I let him do most of the talking.

I watch the two men—boys really—play at verbal combat and wonder if they ever hug one another. They seem on the verge of touching—their bodies so close and caught up in the heat of talk. Are they even good friends or just mere acquaintances? If they feel genuine affection for one another, do they ever get

that tense knot in their guts I sometimes experience when emotions threaten to bubble out?

There is so much I want to say to Sidney about how I feel not because of my project but because he will be graduating soon. He will be living far away and I might not see him for a couple of years. My experience of being a military brat—years of constant moving—tell me I will never see him again. My habit has been to lose touch and forget—to move on, well, almost. I think my study of friendship among men is, in part, a need to heal the old wounds of my childhood. A litany of lost boys occasionally creeps into my consciousness: Jimmy, Barry, Fred, Eric, Mike, Brad, Greg, Chris, Ed, Paul, Craig, Dan...

There are so many other friends I wish were still part of my life but they are gone and so it goes. I remember them with fondness and sometimes regret. I quickly climb the flights of stairs leading to the communication department. When I get to the top, I am out of breath. My friend is waiting outside my office. Sidney. I feel myself being more careful with him than I want to be.

“Hey,” I say.

“What up,” he replies.

“Why don’t we go somewhere more comfortable,” I suggest.

“Okay,” Sidney agrees.

“How about the Comm. Lounge?” I say, and he follows me down the hall. The lounge is a corner office with large floor to ceiling windows that look down over the quad. Inside the room there are plush futons and shelves filled with

unwanted journals and outdated textbooks. It is a good place for a nap or casual chat. We settle in and I turn on my tape recorder.

“Where should we start,” my friend asks with his usual grin.

“Maybe we can begin by talking about some of your specific male friends like the best man at your wedding,” I say remembering him from Sidney’s monologue.

“Brian was the best man at my wedding. I met him because he was my roommate’s friend freshman year. He hung out at our place a lot. They were both musicians—he plays piano. And my other friend who was at the wedding, Dave, was also my roommate at the time. Most of my friends are not athletes, even though I played sports. They’re artists, musicians, scientists—I’m closer to those types of guys,” he relates.

“Right, right,” I add.

“He’s very smart. And Brian hung out in our room a lot. I’d see him and say, ‘hi,’ but he was Owen’s friend. It wasn’t until sophomore year that we got closer. Over time, he got to be one of my best friends. I thought he was interesting, once I got to know him. He was in the Marines for about 5 years. Usually, when you think Marine...really macho...hardcore...”

“Yeah, yeah,” I nod.

“But he’s not. It’s kind of like a job. He knew all the stuff. He could do the job. But the five years he spent in the Marines, while everyone else was drinking or whatever, he was playing classical music. He got interested in it when he turned 13. And that’s what he came to school for. My friendships are atypical.

Most of my closest male friendships involve talking more than physical activity. We will get a bottle of wine and just sit and talk about life. Because of who my friends are, I go to art exhibits or museums. With Brian, I'd go to concerts. Often times, during the summers, we'd go to this bar, pay the cover, not really drink, just go there to listen to the live music for three or four hours. We went there so much that the guys in the band knew us," Sidney says.

"You used the word close in describing that friendship. What sort of things do you think made you close," I ask.

"It was definitely more mental. He was interesting to be around. Even if we weren't doing anything, he was a cool person—you could actually talk to him. But most of my close friendships are limited. I've always had the same small handful of friends. I know lots of people..." my friend pauses, "but you know I was sort of a nerdy kid. And while I could play sports and that shielded me from jibes, I could also fight."

"That's funny," I laugh not really thinking of my friend as a brawler.

"People watched what they said. On the whole, I didn't bond with jocks though. I've always had a close female friend. And I'd talk to her about things I wouldn't talk to my male friends about."

"Like other women," I ask.

"Yeah, if I want a real answer, I'm not going to ask my guy friends. I'm going to ask a woman. I feel that they know more than the average guy. I've always had a close female friend, which made me different from most of the guys growing up in the neighborhood. They were the ones who taught me how to

dance or how to be more comfortable in social situations. I was always more into school or sports. I didn't spend a lot of time outside of school on the social scene. If you weren't in school, you were probably going to be fighting. Guys didn't sit around and converse about much. You play sports or you get into trouble."

"I don't know if this is true or not but the kind of talk you were describing as having with your close friends, in some ways, it can be like a sport. It's an activity you do together. Were there times when that talk...you alluded to in your monologue about being able to be vulnerable or show empathy for another man...and it was interesting to me that you have to get to a crisis point," I say.

"Usually with most guys you have to do that. With my closest friends, we tend to share things you wouldn't feel comfortable sharing with most people or the average guy I played sports with because they're going to rag you about it. Something that separates my friends from the people I just know is that they tend to be very introspective. They understand a lot about themselves. Something I think most people haven't a clue about."

"That's true," I say and we both laugh.

"Even when they don't understand why they do something, I like this about them, they'll ask questions. They want to understand. They don't want to stay stupid. Why do I do that...or if we are people watching...why do they do that...my friends and I are students of human nature. We watch and have fun trying to predict what people will do from our observations. Someone would come into the cafeteria and we'd try to figure out what they'd do next. What do

they look like? Are they with this crew or this crew or this crew? Do they know anybody? We would play games where, not to mess with people, but out of curiosity, we would see a random person that we thought looked interesting, however you define that, and one of us would go talk with that person—*not hit on them*—but just start a conversation. But before hand, we take all kinds of little bets about where we'd think they were from or whatever just based on the way they looked or walked or dressed. One of us would go talk to that person and come back and fill the rest of us in just out of curiosity,” Sidney relates.

I figure that their intended ‘victims’ were more than likely female and wonder what it would have been like had they gone up to a random guy. But I don’t feel ready to start talking about our fears of homosexuality and say, “That’s talk that is centered on intellectual pursuits. What about...and maybe this is something that happened more with female friends...the kind of conversations that are started for reasons of comfort of trying to deal with something that is happening in your life...”

Before I can finish my thought, Sidney jumps in and he says, “Of course, as guys, when we have those conversations, they usually tend to be around dating and that sort of thing. With my friends, you get some real thought; they will tell me what I need to hear not what I want to hear. Brian, he once said that when I decide I don’t like a woman anymore and want to break up, it’s always for some trivial thing that I knew about from the start. And I’m like, ‘what are you talking about.’ And he’s like, ‘no, you do this.’ When I’m ready to go, I fixate on some



trivial thing and I use that as my excuse. And I was so pissed; we didn't talk for three days. But after the fact, I was like, 'you're right.'"

"That's fascinating. It reminds me that friends can act as a repository for our bad behaviors. They are another memory of who we are and what we do. And from the beginning of the project I've wondered about the cliché: what are friends for?"

"Friends are a source of confidence," Sidney begins, "I actually taught one of my guy friends to dance. And I asked one of my female friends to dance with him at my wedding, to please do it for me. Even at the wedding, it was kind of a joke, because he was like, 'I don't dance.'"

"That's funny, but what do you talk about?"

"We tend to talk about our lives, plans, things of that nature—sometimes family. As for me, and friendship in general, they are like extended family only better. Friendship is a two-way street in which both people choose to be around the other, which is very different from family. I'm born into a family. And you can't stand them some of the time, but there is nothing to be done about it. You're related to them for the rest of your life, no matter what. Where as a friend, there is nothing that says you have to be around these people. It's a choice and the fact that you would choose to interact with this person more than others means you genuinely like this person," Sidney replies and I am aware that he is also talking about our friendship. We almost never come out and say it, but we do genuinely like one another, a feeling that emerges from sharing activity together. We canoe, shoot hoops, lift weights, and (before my feet gave out) hike state

parks. We talk about rhetorical theory. We groan about our students. And our spouses like each other. So Sidney and I like one another all the more.

I find myself on the verge of wanting to say it our loud and directly—*I like you*. I feel embarrassed. I can not muster the courage to speak and, as is most often the case, settle for indirect ways of expressing my affection. There is a long silence while we think and finally I say, “I wonder about not just what are friends for but what are male friends for that’s where we start getting into how masculinity comes into play in those relationships. And...”

Sidney cuts in again, “The first thing that comes to mind: my male friends tend to be people very much like me. Not in every way but generally speaking they are atypical males. They are not jocks and don’t fit in with that crowd. Me, I can sit at a table of hockey players without a problem. And they will quiz me to find out what it’s like to be with those people. But there are a lot of stereotypes about jocks that I don’t like to fit into. I tend to pick friends who emphasize aspects of me that don’t fit your typical male. Like my friend Brian...he’s a 6’4” non basketball playing man and classical music expert. Friends affirm things about you that a way of being is okay. As much as I like to play sports, I can’t see myself hanging around with the average jock. I don’t usually find those guys interesting. We don’t have anything significant in common.”

“Speaking of sports,” I say, “Competition is something that comes up when thinking about male friendships and I was curious about how competitive or how does competition come into play in your close friendships? Like with Brian.

Do you ever feel that in those friendships that you are always trying to one up the other or are you, for the most part, equal?”

“It’s pretty equal.”

“Do they challenge you not just mentally but emotionally?”

“I and two of my friends have the exact personality type. If anything, it makes it easier to read each other because it’s like looking in the mirror. They can tell me things about my self that I don’t want to hear. But when they say it—it rings true. They put it in a way I find palatable. My friend Brian one of the things we talk about we have very similar personalities and our other friend Owen and...”

“You mentioned this personality type before that it was 1% of the population.”

“INTJ.”

“Oh, you’re using Myers-Briggs (1985),” I say.

“Right, we are INTJs.”

“Describe that.”

“It’s called the mastermind personality. We’re expert strategists and we tend to be more intuitive. We’re introverts, but introverts who can often display extroverted talents. We get our ideas about the world from inside rather than outside. INTJs don’t always want to assume leadership, but will if they have to, especially if others have shown themselves to be incompetent. Then it’s like, okay, I’ll do it, but I’m not asking to do it. And no one else can do it. There’s another personality type, I forget the acronym. It’s the architect. And they are

good at building systems and they fit well with INTJs because we are good implementers. It's cool. We're good at implementing ideas and making systems more efficient—more practical,” Sidney says.

“You are definitely a very practical man,” I say and we both laugh, “Maybe this is a change of topic, but it seems to me that even in our peer relationships that even as equals we are, as men, still struggling for dominance.”

“My friend Brian he one time read this article about fish and the research found that this one fish is more beautiful than the other one but they still hung out in pairs. Brian looked at me and asked which one of us is the more beautiful fish,” Sidney explains and we both laugh, “Well, the beautiful fish hangs out with the uglier one to look better and the ugly fish hangs out with the beautiful one because he gets a vibe off him too. So, which of us is the dominant fish? The sly one or the beautiful one? It's funny and though we are similar, over time, we have all chosen to emphasize different areas and so it's a split. I don't look at it in terms of dominance. We're each good at different things and that helps all of us. We're more complementary. But I am probably seen as the leader more in a spokesperson way. But I'm not the smartest, just the most social of my friends. I'm the talker.”

“There's not always a huge disparity, but I was thinking more along the lines of—and we're both guilty of this—we both cut people off and try to control the conversation. It's very combative,” I say.

“It's very male and I'm guilty. I've tried to learn from my female friends to listen more, but...” he trails off.

There is a long silence then I say, “We’ve been talking about friendships that you are still in and I wonder about friendships that ended and…”

“Rarely do I have friendships where I say I don’t want to be your friend anymore,” Sidney cuts in, and then after a short pause says, “I accept that people come into my life at certain times and that they sometimes leave for whatever reason. And they might even be replaced, like at different times in my life I had different best friends. My best friend freshman year was not my best friend senior year. We still have contact and talk a lot but the nature of the relationship changed as things changed in my life or their life. Other people help us grow in different ways and sometimes a person takes you as far as they can and it’s not that you don’t like them anymore or whatever. From 10<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade I had the same best friend. But I was always more focused on school than he was, and I applied to top colleges. There’s no reason he couldn’t have gone, but he didn’t apply. He was one of the top people in our class but ended up going to college locally and did okay career-wise. He could have done so much better. In some ways, friendship has less to do with how it’s maintained but where you are at in life. My friend from high school...our lives are so very different. And a lot of that is motivation. Our lives separated too much educationally and materially; it’s difficult to relate at that point—I think that more than anything governs how friendships last; our ability to relate. Your friend’s trajectory needs to stay the same as yours.”

I think about Sidney’s idea for a moment and then say, “I had a similar situation with a very close friend in high school. While I was taking AP classes,

he was taking shop classes. When high school was over, he didn't go to college, and I haven't seen him since 1994 when I was the best man in his wedding. And that was the last time I saw him or even talked to him. He was going to be a mechanic and by that point I was almost done with my BA and on my way to an MA. We had different perspectives on the world; mine changed from our teen years and his stayed the same. That and geography...he's in Texas and at the time I was in Iowa...that distance...I do have a couple of friends from college that I'm still in contact with and you're obviously still friends with people from your undergraduate days. I wonder about that time too and we are both in a place where we're starting our careers and families and makes me wonder how good we will be at maintaining the friendships we started in college, even our own friendship," I say.

"I think college is different because you often physically live with your friends. I think grad school, even though you don't necessarily live with your peers, on an academic level you do, so I think those friendships are more likely to be maintained than those from high school. Even with greater distances, you're more inclined to stay in touch," my friend replies.

"I've noticed that my father will be out of touch with someone for years and suddenly they'll contact him and they're seemingly right back to where they were years before. With the invention of the internet, he's in contact with buddies from Vietnam and it's like they've never missed a day and that seems to be a typical experience for lots of guys," I say.

“My best friend from freshman year is like that. We still have that bond; we still feel close. But it’s still different, because I don’t really talk to him as much, so there is a gap. And that came up when choosing a best man. Who do I talk to the most now?” Sidney says.

“So you chose Brian.”

“I chose Brian.”

“When I got to be best man at my friend’s wedding we hadn’t really hung out in four years...hadn’t really been friends. He contacted me out of the blue and asked me to come down because we had talked about it a lot when we were in high school. We were going to be the best man at each other’s wedding. I dropped everything and went just like that. But I didn’t ask him to be the best man at my wedding, because at that point we hadn’t spoken in seven or eight years. I don’t even know if he’s still in Texas,” I relate and feel a small lump in my throat. The sudden surge of emotion surprises me and hurts me. I fear the loss that I face with each of my new friends knowing that distance will eventually separate us. After a few long seconds, I continue, “we can keep talking about Brian or, and I’m curious and nervous about it, our own friendship. One of the things that a lot of research says is that men don’t typically meta-communicate about their friendships. Whereas with our significant others, we might say, ‘oh this is going well’ or ‘we need to work on that.’ I was wondering if that held true with your friends.”

“With guys there is less of an on going chat unless someone pisses you off,” Sidney replies.

“There has to be a point of contention, a bone to pick,” I say.

“If nothing is said, we are going to assume it’s going well.”

“If it ain’t broke don’t fix it.” And we both laugh, then I suggest, “As communication scholars, we would agree that talking about relationships is an important part of having better ones and—you also talked about this on your tape—it’s crucial to changing the conditions of masculinity that sometimes blocks that talk. If we are talking about our relationship, aren’t we automatically being counter-hegemonic?”

“It makes sense, but it’s still hard to talk about it unless something is wrong. Grad school is interesting because we are, many of us, also in significant relationships and trying to manage school at the same time; friendships end up in third place,” Sidney states.

“Yeah,” I agree.

“Before I can hang out with friends, I have to check with my wife, do I have work I need to get done, and if all that’s okay, then if time remains... I’ve met a lot of people who are cool and I’d like to hang out with, but I don’t want to over commit. It’s protection. I don’t want to have to pull back,” he explains.

“I know exactly what you mean. It’s hard not to meet interesting people when you’re getting your Ph.D. but, and like you said, I often lack time. There are lots of relationships with people in the department that I haven’t maintained or developed because I don’t want to spread myself too thin. There have been a couple of relationships that have just stopped,” I think of my other old friend, Jack and then say, “Since I’ve been with Kimberly, we also get into the couple thing.”



“That is definitely a factor,” Sidney replies.

“Does that make it easier for us to maintain,” I say pointing back and forth between us, “because we have that couple thing?”

“Yeah, and it also creates friendships. If your wife is hanging out with my wife, then we’re going to be around each other more. We might as well make the best of it.”

“That’s interesting because I’m friends with Bill. You know him?”

“Yeah,” Sidney replies.

“I’ve become good friends with him because of Kimberly. We probably wouldn’t have hung out otherwise. He is completely opposite of me, actually, he’s a lot like you. Part of me is thankful for that because we maintain friendships that might have never gone anywhere or fizzled.”

“It does factor in,” he says.

We are quiet for some time and I am thinking about our spouses and the impact they have on our emotional lives. Sidney is a tough guy and I wonder about his tender moments, and ask, “Have you ever cried in front of Melissa?”

“Once maybe,” he begins, “It’s one of those things. With some things you might see that there is no loss of manhood, but with crying you just don’t do that very often. That I can cry...part of it could be that I have lots of sisters. My dad was also always a factor, not like other families where I lived. Most guys in my neighborhood didn’t have role models for masculinity. They learned to be hard from the streets. I didn’t learn it from the street. And that makes a big difference. Still, my neighborhood influenced that big time. I wasn’t allowed to be soft. The

alternative was getting the crap beat out of you all the time. Unless you want to take a beating, you learn to be hard.”

I notice that we’ve gone over time and don’t want to keep my friend from his day too much longer. I look at Sidney and smile. “We should probably wrap things up.”

“Yeah, yours is an interesting project because it asks questions that people don’t always think about. I was just reading the recent book on black masculinity that bell hooks (2003) came out with and thought it fit your project perfectly.”

“I saw that one and thought it would be good for my gender class. I’ve had difficulty in the past trying to get students to see how masculinity for a black man in one context would be different from the experience of a white man in a different context.”

“A big one is sexuality,” Sidney says, “I remember talking to someone in college about gay black people.”

“You mean there are gay black people,” I say jokingly.

“There is no queer eye for the straight guy with black people in it,” Sidney says.

“They’re on the down low,” I reply.

“There’s not the same level of acceptance in the African American community, not that there’s high acceptance in general anyway.”

“True,” I say sadly, then, “Speaking of the importance of the project... Friendship can be an important context for altering our perceptions about masculinity. Being able to talk about it, being aware of it...is important. I know

I'm different for having talked about it even while I still sometimes do dumb male things. Self awareness teaches me how to start to listen," I say.

"It takes lots of introspection about what you do and monitoring your behaviors so much that your new awareness becomes habit," Sidney replies.

"You have to be able to see it, change it, and forget about," I add.

"Forget about it, yeah," my friend agrees.

"Fo'git about it," I say, trying out my best *Goodfellas* impersonation.

Sidney laughs and rolls gracefully out of the futon he's been sitting in.

His voice is deep and soothing when he says, "I'll catch you later a'right."

"We still on for that canoe trip to Myakka this weekend?"

"Yup," he responds and heads back down the hall toward his office.

I walk over to the window and look out onto the activity below. Various groups, pairs, and individuals congregate in and around concrete slabs that encircle a sun dial. I see another pair of young men—they seem more and more like boys to me every day—speaking excitedly to one another. They are laughing and joshing, so close they can almost touch. I concentrate on their eyes and know there is a glowing affection there. It's a look I've seen on Sidney's face from time to time.

*Have they given it voice*, I wonder and want to run down there to show them how to be gentle with one another, to speak their hearts, and realize I still have a lot to learn myself. I can't even tell my friend that I love him. I can only hint at it and wait for the right moment, a moment that never seems to come.

## Chapter Eleven: Man, I Love You

*July 2004*

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” I say and kiss my wife, Kimberly, on the lips.

“Take your time,” she replies and smiles at me. It’s a smile that never fails to disarm me or raise my spirits. These days I need my spirits lifted. I walk out the door of our cramped apartment and mosey to the end of the driveway. My feet seem OK. Maybe I’ll be fine. Early on in the fall semester, I began to experience excruciating foot pain, especially in the mornings. Some days I would even need to crawl from my bed to the bathroom because the ache of standing was too much for me to bear. The physical pain was tough but not as tough as the mental anguish I felt from losing my mobility.

Before being diagnosed with plantar fasciitis, a foot condition where the connective tissue becomes inflamed due to a loss in elasticity, I walked everywhere all the time. Now, I seldom leave the house. Most depressing was the end of what had once been a morning ritual. During the previous year, my friend Bert and I would meet outside his townhouse every other day for what we called our constitutional. We would speed walk through the neighborhood for a couple of hours and talk. We talked about everything.

As I near the end of my driveway, my brain clicks into heavy thought mode. My mind is seldom quite. Walking used to be a great way to calm the

inner voices in my head—the ones that turned me into a worry wart, but not today. Even though it is only a few blocks from my house, I fear the walk to Panera Bread will kill me and a torrent of thoughts washes over me.

Maybe I'm trying to prove to myself that I can walk through the pain, I think, I feel crippled...held back. I put my head down and pick up the pace.

My foot condition ended one of the most important activities Bert and I shared: our frequent walks. During these walks we talked, really talked. Our conversations ranged from complaining about teaching to exploring the complex subject matter of the courses we were taking. We also talked about life. We explored our ideas about religion, philosophy, politics, and love. Sometimes we even spoke about personal dilemmas but not too often. When I couldn't walk anymore, our daily meetings dropped off to a few times a month. Bert often picked me up, and we would go over to the bookstore for iced tea and a chat. These chats were just as stimulating, but I feel sad that we don't hang out as much anymore. Men, I've learned, require more than the simple pleasure of another man's company. Men require an activity to go along with the act of just being together. Our walks fulfilled that requirement. We could justify our being together by saying to ourselves or a spouse, "We're getting into shape."

I can't say I like being with Bert because he 'completes me' or some other corny sentiment we learn from the movies. Those are romantic notions reserved for the women in our lives. But when I'm with him, I feel at ease. I feel more myself. I don't have to pretend. I don't have to be as civilized. I become less aware of my being gruff. And I think maybe the mythopoets like Robert Bly

(1990) are onto something. Maybe some of us do need to go into the wilderness and beat on drums. Isn't that the problem...individual men are not so easily pegged by an all encompassing theory of masculinity. We only sometimes fit the proscribed narrative about manhood, and maybe the old saying 'boys will be boys' is true but only sometimes.

My thoughts cease as I come to the curb and face the danger of crossing Kennedy, a major street in south Tampa. On the other side is a strip mall that houses Panera Bread. I step over the edge and sprint for my life to the grassy median, where I stop to catch my breath and recheck the traffic. When the sedans and SUV's seem a manageable distance away, I hobble-skip across the road and seconds later am standing in front of glass double doors.

I open the left door and cold air fogs my glasses—my bare legs prickle at the change in temperature and I limp through the entrance where I am greeted by loud violin music playing over the intercom. There is a long line at the counter and I reserve a spot knowing my friend will arrive any second. I crane my neck to see out the window into the parking lot—nothing yet.

I am desperate to sit down and shift my ample weight to my left foot—my best foot. The throbbing depresses me. I just turned thirty-two but feel like the wrecks you see in junkyards, the ones with weeds and rust. I imagine this is how a senior citizen must feel and kick myself for succumbing to our cultures' ageism. And lament that I haven't enjoyed a long walk with Bert since last summer. I have also gained twenty pounds and wonder: Am I worthless?

I peer out the window again—nothing.

I have no doubts about his impending arrival; we talked on the phone ten minutes before I left the house. He's probably fixing his hair or pressing his jeans and I whisper to myself, "You're a slob."

I am wearing a ragged t-shirt and cargo shorts. I haven't shaved in several days and the stubble is starting to itch. Too fatigued to fix my hair, I wear a ball cap—the rim stained and smelling like an armpit.

I see Bert's car, a well-maintained, late model hatchback, pull into an empty slot. Stepping from his sensible car, my friend, as usual, is impeccably, though comfortably dressed. I watch him stroll between parked vehicles, a characteristic smile on his face.

I've never seen him miserable or unhappy—angry—yes, but not in pain. I don't think he would admit it to me or anyone else if he did feel sad, not because he's a tough guy but, maybe, because he imagines himself as a sidekick. While the macho man will suck up any pain, his less powerful subordinate may see no value in his personal suffering; thus, making it difficult to reveal. Besides, I can hear my friend say, "I don't want to be a drag or anything..."

In making pleasure a way of life, Bert avoids circumstances that could result in sorrow or regret. He expresses few bad feelings. I don't fault his way of being, but often wonder what it means to play it safe in relationships—in life. What are the possibilities for personal growth? As part of his definition of friendship, Bert points out that the significant other actively reveals your self-identity whenever contact is made and contact is achieved through mutual respect. To be able to be yourself, to remove the masks held in place by family or society

is the true purpose of friendship. Such performances for Bert are joint ventures in self-pleasure.

Today, I feel almost incapable of keeping up my end. Though my friend knows I suffer, I will not go into it. I will not discuss my emotional turmoil—convinced that sharing enables my depression. What can we do about it anyway? Crying on his shoulder won't reduce the inflammation. I don't want to be a drag either.

Bert spots me standing in line and strides over to hug me. I melt into his arms and our physical contact soothes me. He is always glad to see me, and I perceive his delight as genuine. His eyes get bigger and his smile widens. He almost dances a jig, as he explodes with excitement. My self-loathing diminishes in his presence and for that I am thankful.

“Been here long?” Bert asks.

“No, just a few minutes,” I reply and pull out my tape recorder. I turn it on while we're waiting in line and my friend signals his consent with a nod of his head. We exchange a few more pleasantries before reaching the counter to place our order.

Bert almost never orders food. He has peculiar eating habits, something he developed while working in the health food business for many years. He limits himself to one “real” meal a day. No meat or processed foods. If he were known by his eating habits alone, he might be mistaken for a new age hippy. My friend is anything but new age or hippy in his character. His eating habits set him apart as a non-conformist. His relationship with food is peculiar to him, an eccentricity



that is not the result of fad marketing. His eating doesn't make him part of a crowd. This maverick sense of self, this rugged individuality is, perhaps, one of the few ways he performs orthodox masculinity and is something I admire.

Bert orders lemonade and I settle for a bagel and iced tea. I decide to treat my friend and pay the tab. We make our way through the masses of people to an empty table and sit down.

"How's class going?" he asks.

"Not too bad. We finished up last week with the film *Shadowlands*. I think they loved it even though they thought I was being hokey."

"That's the one with Anthony Hopkins and what's her name," Bert interrupts.

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

"I claimed that the movie teaches us that telling someone that you love them and *meaning it* makes all the difference in the world. Sappy as it may be, such emotional exchanges are sustenance necessary for bearing life. We need other people to speak their connection to us as much as we need to speak our connection to them," I relate.

"It's interesting that you bring that up because it's somewhat problematic for me...I have found that actually saying 'I love you' is a jinx. I've had bad experiences where I've said that to someone. There was this one girl in high school..."

"I remember you told me that story," I interrupt.

“All you have to do is *do* it. We, we, we,” Bert repeats while pointing back and forth between us, “*do* it so we don’t really have to *say* it. If it’s really there, then you don’t have to say it. I do think if you say it, then you have to mean it. But if you do mean it, then I wonder if it is even necessary to say it,” Bert argues.

“But you can’t just say it in replacement of the action. I think your actions in a relationship make those words more possible. Kimberly and I say, ‘I love you’ all the time. Much of the time it is a greeting but not all of the time. There are significant moments of connectedness around those words,” I describe, “And to me it’s a verbalization of a very important realization.”

“I think it’s a good thing to do, but I don’t know, maybe it’s just a male way of thinking, but it seems redundant. If you’re in the middle of it, if you’re a good listener or you make dinner or you do all these things, then duh...I mean you and me. You call me—we do stuff together. I can tell by the way you talk to me or the way you look at me that you love me,” Bert explains.

“With men it’s even more embarrassing to verbalize with other men than with a woman or family member. Only twice in my life have I said those words to another man and with one of them those were the last words I ever spoke to him.”

“Wow! Really?”

“He was my friend from High School. I traveled back to Texas to be the best man in his wedding. I was finishing my BA at Northern Iowa at the time. The day after the ceremony and before I headed home, I drove over to my friend’s

apartment to say goodbye. We were standing out in the parking lot talking and I just looked at him and said, ‘I love you,’ and I hugged him. I was caught up in the nostalgia of seeing him again and I had been listening to the old songs. Something sublime had crept under my skin. I wanted him to feel it too but he was embarrassed and mumbled, ‘You too.’”

“And I hope you don’t want to get into my butt,” Bert jokes.

“That is a reason many men often won’t verbalize their love to other men because there *is* sexual tension and fear of homosexuality between straight men.”

“No doubt,” Bert agrees.

“That was the last time I talked to him. It’s been over 10 years. The last thing I ever got from him was a Christmas card and I think his wife sent it. I still have that card. It’s packed away with all my other memorabilia. I’ve often thought about tracking him down like you did with the friends you lost touch with, but I always hold back. I worry that all we have in common is the past and nothing else. That what we shared was only a fantasy. I rationalize that we went in different directions after high school. I went to college and he went into automotives. He really loves cars. And I love books. Our past was based on shared activities: We played pool, road bikes, went fishing or camping whatever. We didn’t really have any deep conversations that I can recall. But still, there was a moment in 9<sup>th</sup> grade when I needed a friend, and he was there. When the world seemed against me, he sat next to me on the bus. When no one else would have anything to do with me either for being the new kid or being weird—*and I was weird*—he accepted me. He hung out with me. I loved him for that moment.

When I saw him again, I was longing for that sweet understanding of my otherness.”

“You were lonely?” Bert asks.

“Yes. Did you know he is the only guy who has ever cried in front of me? I held him for almost an hour while he sobbed over a devastating breakup. It was over the woman he eventually married. They dated for most of high school.”

“Your story reminds me of the time my friend cried. It’s strange how uncomfortable it makes me feel like when my dad cried while remembering how his father would come watch him play softball. His father would sit in left field with his dog and just watch my dad play. It was me and my wife and my mother at the table and I felt like I had to,” Bert says.

“Change the subject,” I interrupt.

“I couldn’t just sit there and let him cry.”

“He was remembering his father. I think it’s hard not to love your father even if they are lacking in lots of ways,” I say.

“I don’t feel like I’m alienated from my emotions. I can cry when it’s time to cry.”

“There is something private about it. Even when we cry at movies and it is a public place, our experience of it is private,” I say.

“It’s still surprising, especially if it’s an emotion connected to you somehow. When my friend said goodbye to me, he was shaking from it,” Bert says.

“But he really loved you and he knew you probably wouldn’t see much of each other again. While I was listening to your tape, you play that off—you’re just going away to college and you’d see each other at holiday—but when you were saying that, it doesn’t matter, you weren’t taking into account that the dynamic of the friendship was going to be changed by that distance and lack of time. He may not have been consciously aware of it, but he had to know the relationship wasn’t going to be the same.”

“He knew we couldn’t see each other as often,” Bert rationalizes.

“It was a change.”

“I don’t know if I’m heartless that way because my other friend said exactly the same thing. Sure you go away to college but you end up not ever seeing each other again. I don’t know—I had to move a lot and was ripped away from friends when I was young. Maybe I learned to put up a wall to protect myself,” Bert explains.

“That’s been my experience too.”

“How many times did you move?” Bert asks knowing that my father is retired military.

“Seemed like every couple of years. Even though we might have been in the same city, for example, I lived in San Antonio two different times. But those two times that my family lived there we moved like five times. When we first moved there I started Kindergarten and we lived off base. Then we moved on base. Then we moved away for three years. Then we moved back and we lived off base. Then we moved on base. Then we moved off base again when I was

half way through the ninth grade. I didn't have close friends and I certainly didn't maintain any friendships from those different neighborhoods. When I was listening to your tape, I was thinking about those leave taking moments and there was a place in your monologue where you didn't say good-bye to your friend and that was someone you later got back in touch with," I say.

"I felt overwhelmed at the time. I had gotten fired from my job and I didn't know what I was going to do," Bert sighs, "We had always wanted to move back to Florida so my wife looked to see if there was any need for her skills. She found something and we needed to make a quick move. So it was hurry up and go. I didn't think of it. I didn't think of it. He wasn't a friend that I got together with every week. There was never that sense of obligation about it. We got together when we had the time. To this day I'll email him and he'll immediately respond back—I might take 4 or 5 weeks. Sometimes I feel like I don't have anything to say," Bert laments.

"It takes time. For me to write a personal email, I commit an hour or more of my time because I'm trying to think of something thoughtful to say as opposed to a quick note."

"My emails come out to about 3 or 4 paragraphs because more than that then I have to read a long email. I have this friend who emailed me in April and it was huge. I still haven't gotten back because I just don't feel like it," Bert says.

"It's a lot of work. I think we have that in common; we are both lazy," I chide and Bert laughs.

“Absolutely,” He agrees in a tone that acknowledges the lie. We both work too hard at tasks that require solitude.

“Get in the way of my jerk off time,” I joke and we both double over in laughter. It’s not uncommon for us to refer to our intellectual pursuits as mental masturbation. We enjoy the coarseness of the language. When it’s just the two of us we often prefer the ribald to the polite.

“Got to have my three hours for that,” Bert adds and we are both tearing up from laughing.

“Exactly, I’d rather spend 3 hours jerking my brain than writing a note to a friend...what does that mean. Seems sad, but it’s true we spend a lot of time doing things that are self-absorbed,” I say.

“It’s hard to reconcile your desire to do important relevant things with your life and...Tony Robbins says this thing...how many people really want to change the world? How many people just want to lie on the beach? What do you have when you have those two things: Inner civil war?”

And I think that his last phrase speaks volumes about what men face when attempting to maintain close friendships with other men. How should we divide our time? How should we perform our masculinity? Instead of trying to examine this idea, I make another joke. “Speaking of inner civil war, I’ve got to piss,” I say.

“Me too,” Bert responds. We gather our things and head for the bathroom. It is a single occupancy facility and I let my friend go first. After we are done relieving ourselves, we decide to move outside because the Bread Company keeps

the restaurant too cold. When we are seated at our new table, Bert asks abruptly, “We have about an hour before the matinee starts. What other things do you want to talk about?” He reminds me that we are going to go see the Spiderman II premiere and somehow our conversation suddenly feels like work.

“Your ideas about obligation and friendship intrigue me. In friendships we are, whether we like it or not, under obligation. The trick seems to be that as a friend you shouldn’t *feel* obligated. Like when I ask you to come over and feed my cats while I’m out of town. I don’t expect you to do it, but it’s still one of those things that friends do for one another. Doesn’t that fall under obligation? I know what you mean that if you feel like it’s expected then the relationship feels more business like...you’re doing something because you have to, not because you want to,” I say.

“It’s hard to escape the thought, ‘well he did this for me, so maybe I should do this for him’ in a friendship. If a person is voluntarily very giving to you, then you’re almost out of necessity in their debt. They may not have been trying to get you to do something in return but you’re still, in a sense, obligated...in their debt. It’s like that old saying if you save a person’s life then their life belongs to you. You do things for people, and it’s not supposed to be accounting, but sometimes it gets that way. When I take care of your pets it’s because I want to...I see it as an opportunity to give you, my friend, something. The obligatory part comes when your friend seems to be pushing you...trying to make you feel obligated...”

“Like using guilt,” I interrupt.



“Yes,” Bert agrees.

“We’ve had this conversation before. I was thinking about how sometimes I do feel obligated but it’s not necessarily bad. My friend, Chris, from high school, we had this thing where one person would pay for the other when we played pool or whatever. We never kept track but every now and then we’d talk about it,” I say.

“By the way, thanks for the lemonade,” Bert says holding up the drink I bought for him earlier.

“My pleasure, but no, we’d have this conversation about we’re friends and we don’t have to keep record because we know there’s going to be a time when the other person doesn’t have money. What I found interesting is that we didn’t have that conversation one time; we had it a number of times over the years that we were friends. When you were talking about obligation on your tape, you got me thinking about that and wondering what purpose that conversation served? Was it reminding us of the obligation without being a discussion of obligation? I never felt like I was imposing on him when he had to pay for things and vice versus. Perhaps it was also a reminder that we had each other’s back.”

“But if you were a moocher?” Bert dangles.

“But you could always tell when some one was a moocher. There were some situations with guys like, ‘man you never pay for anything.’ That wasn’t the case with him. I think the other reason we had that conversation—and this may be a man thing—is that the exchange qualified our interdependence. If we were going to do things besides hang out at his house like go play pool for

example, which was one of the things we loved to do together, you needed money.”

“In my culture I’ve seen two men get into a fight about who is going to pay, ‘I’m going to pay.’ Then ‘no, no I’m going to pay.’ All right, fine, you win,” Bert says.

“I have a hard time with that kind of stuff. If you say you’re going to pay I’ll probably ask one time, ‘Are you sure?’ if you say ‘yeah’ then I’m like, ‘Ok, I’ll get you next time.’ I’m honest about that I will pay other times. I’m not a stingy person with my money, even though I prefer spending it on myself.”

“I wish I could be more like my wife,” Bert says, “My wife is the greatest. She takes a walk every weekend to the mall and she buys stuff for every body. Sometimes she brings back something for me. When I’m out, I don’t go, ‘Matt would like that or so and so would like this.’”

“That goes back to us being selfish,” I add, “but remind me of something else interesting in talking about friendship. What about the convenience factor? With us, it’s made all the difference that we live so close to one another; it’s been easier having a friendship. Compared to my other friends, it’s easier for us to hang out. We might get together several times a month while I’m lucky to see my other friends once a month,” I say.

“You have to center it on school,” Bert explains.

“It’s a lot of work to arrange times to meet and to drive across town,” I say.

“That makes a difference. Of course, it depends on the value of the relationship. Is it worth it to make the trek? It’s a balancing act. Sometimes I have to kick myself. You can’t be that fucking lazy. Important things require effort,” he says.

“Forcing myself to get out of the house is often very hard. I could sit all day and watch TV even if there is nothing on—I can flip channels and watch pieces of shows all day long.”

“I could lie in bed all day. I have my whole library in there. My TV is in there. I could lie in bed all day too,” Bert agrees.

“If I didn’t have to get up to go to the refrigerator,” I joke.

“I wouldn’t do that either,” Bert finishes.

“What does that say about us?”

“I would like to be more driven. Sometimes I wonder what it is that gets me up in the morning. I need public commitments.”

Our conversation trails off for a moment and we are lost in private thought. I know we are talking about being lazy but the truth is we spend most of our time reading hundreds if not thousands of pages of text every week. We spend hours sitting at the computer trying to make sense out of our knowledge through writing. Why do we chastise ourselves? Why do we negate the pleasure gotten from spending time foolishly? Must we always be accomplishing something? “Am I bitching?” I think then say, “I’ve noticed that with all of my friends we have a habit of bitching. When we get together; we spend a lot of time

complaining, which seems to be integral to doing the relationship. Probably has to do with the shared context of school or work.”

“I didn’t have many friends from work at all,” Bert changes the subject.

“Some of that probably had to do with the power dynamic. You were the boss.”

“I did pursue this one friendship. He was the shy not very talkative type and I just sort of went after him. I have this habit of picking up strays. The person who doesn’t have a friend at all or is ostracized is a person I want to adopt. For the most part though friendships have been mutual or they pursued me. You pursued me. And that was somewhat from the class and the project for qualitative methods,” Bert says.

“That’s something I’ve been reflecting on when I was listening to your tape. I was attracted to you because you seemed so obviously open,” I say.

“Cool. That’s nice.”

“You didn’t strike me as someone who was belligerent or hyper-masculine, which are things that tend to keep me at a distance from other men, to make me wary in their presence. You didn’t automatically make me feel wary.”

“That’s cool,” Bert repeats.

“I knew that feeling was important to my project. I felt that you had the ability to be open, something that would make it easier for us to talk. And that also came up in your tape. I wonder how that is related to your perception of being a sidekick.”

“I think so and I’m like that in my relationships with females too. The relationships happened because they came after me.”

“I’m similar because I seldom pursue people. It goes back to our failures and rejections. Yet, we’ve always been able to maintain the appearance if not the reality of being open. Still, it’s always an effort for me to get to know people. I have a good sense of people right away probably because I moved around so much. I know quickly whether or not I’m going to like someone. With you I knew right away—I knew we had plenty of things in common even if we are not exactly the same.

“The commonness helps. You just can’t have a friendship without it. How are you going to connect? What are you going to relate too? You have to have enough of a common ground,” Bert says.

I decide to change the subject and say, “I can’t think of any friendship where there wasn’t at least some pain involved. Either I moved away or something happened to change the relationship. One example you gave was the fight you had with that one friend and you went back with your candy to apologize and that was very painful.”

“I wouldn’t think of that as the painful part of the friendship. It was the strength of the friendship that motivated me to do that. If I hadn’t cared that much about him, then I’d just blow it off,” Bert says.

“When you were telling that story it reminded me of a friendship when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. My buddy Jim lived 2 or 3 houses down from me, and we were on the swim team together. That was one of those relationships where I was the

sidekick and he was the leader. He was better looking than me and had already reached puberty. I was chubby and not very coordinated. He would always put me down. I was always the butt of the joke and he'd do that two for flinching thing. He was always doing that—punching me as hard as he could on my arm. Frogging me, we called it frogging, I don't remember why. One time, he did it and I got angry enough to hit him back. I hit him back real hard and said, 'I'm tired of being hit. You can't treat me like this all the time.' I actually stood up to him, which was out of character for me at the time. He went home and I went home. I thought our friendship was over. I went upstairs and I was crying and crying. I was sad that I had lost a friend. A couple of hours later, he came over and apologized. When I reflected on it though, I felt that it wasn't genuine that maybe his mom put him up to it. We shook hands and I took a risk and told him how I felt, about how upset I was. I told him I had cried. Then we were never friends again. He completely..."

"He couldn't deal with it," Bert adds.

"He rejected me," I say.

"Because you cried?"

"Yeah, but also, probably, because I stood up to him. That rebellious act changed the dynamic"

"How old were you?"

"Twelve or thirteen. I don't know, maybe I was just more emotionally mature. We were just kids. It's not like we had been friends that long...we'd been hanging out for about a year. In my childhood that was a long time. But

that was the last time I was that open with a guy friend until much later in life. Maybe with my friend Chris from high school, but even then it was more him being vulnerable with me. That time he cried. I didn't reject him, but I never opened up to him."

"Because of that?"

"I don't know. Maybe. It's one of those things you learn. You learn to be more closed off as a guy, you know."

"But he opened up to you. I mean he cried and that's like opening up,"

Bert says then pauses for a second before continuing, "Speaking of vulnerability, I came back to Wisconsin after trying to get into acting out in New York and was feeling rejected. I had tried, then given up. I talked to an old friend who was still living in Tampa and told him I didn't know what was happening in my life, that I was adrift. He said, 'well, most people are adrift.' He comforted me and I've always thought that was kind. It's not like I want my friend to coddle me. And he could have just told me to get it together like my father would have," Bert relates.

"Pull yourself up by you bootstraps."

"Yeah all that stuff. But he didn't. He listened to me. Sometimes you just need somebody to listen to you. Even if you didn't have anything to say even if you just validate what they say. It helps. You don't have to supply a solution. That's the traditional male thing to do," Bert says.

"Sometimes you just need your pain acknowledged."

“It would be nice sometimes if someone had a solution but mostly you just want to be heard.”

“But there has to be some reciprocation,” I add.

“I was talking with a friend the other day, and I feel the same way, that when you’re sharing a lot and the other person isn’t sharing anything that you start censoring yourself. It had to be a tit for tat thing, a gesture of good faith. If I told you...”

“The irony for me, at that time in my life—during high school, I needed someone to talk to and many times I wanted to talk with my friend Chris about what my grandpa did to my sister. That he molested her, but I kept it all to myself. I didn’t go to him and tell him how I was feeling. I was angry and I was sad, all these things, but I couldn’t share it; I was too ashamed. And I wonder if that is a sign of true friendship, and goes along with what you were saying about being yourself, that you are able to share terrible, confusing events with the other and be understood.”

“Yes, at least accepted. It helps to be accepted. Sometimes it goes hand in hand. Hopefully, the other person isn’t going to reject or judge you—because other people will or your parents will and so on.”

“Something that has come up on the other tapes is moments of vulnerability with a best friend. Whether it’s talking about how you really feel about women because at that younger age there was a lot more bravado when it came to discussing the opposite sex. We had a hard time expressing our genuine



fear about approaching girls not being able to come to terms with our hormones and our emotions,” I say.

“There was never any of that bravado stuff with me,” Bert says.

“Can you recall any other moments of vulnerability with your good friends?”

“Talk a little about vulnerability...in the sense of opening up and crying?”

“Opening up. I think it’s those rare moments of authenticity when another person shares something of the self. We talk about how we feel inside. Then there are those times that we need other people either for feedback or succor. How do we negotiate those times as men while performing masculinity, or despite our masculinity?”

“I’m trying to think. I can remember formulating the theory that a friend is somebody who actually has enough information or insight into your character that they could hurt you,” Bert says.

“Sometimes I wonder if that comes out in our “bitch sessions” because I have a hard time believing that you didn’t bitch about your father to your friends for example,” I say.

“I had trouble with my dad in junior high and I remember thinking he’s a pain. He’s overbearing. Honestly, in making that recording I realized that I’ve had few friends across the years, fewer after college. I can’t think of any from college that immediately come to mind.”

“Like the childhood ones?”

“There’s a certain age when you have a friend, like when you’re 12. You’re more impressionable,” Bert says.

“You have a lot more emotional instability at that time perhaps?”

“I had a friend for a while who was a Kung Fu master but I didn’t see him much the whole time I was working the store. It was pretty much just my wife.”

“That’s not surprising. Most of the literature suggests that men, as they move out of their 20s, get married, and are working more, that their relationships revolve around work and home. Unless you had couple friends that you hung out with, most guys do not maintain those one-on-one friendships. Some of that has to do with not having the time. You spend 8 hours a day at a job and when you get home your wife or your kids want your attention and you want to give it.”

“Exactly,” Bert agrees.

“During that period of time most men end up not having as many friendships but with women it’s different. They seem to be able to maintain those relationships to juggle the demands put on them or at least that’s what the literature suggests (see Baumli, 1985; Cardelle, 1990; Garfinkel, 1989; McGill, 1985).”

“I have my friend, Joe. He’s someone who actively sought me out. We don’t see each other all the time, but when we do, we can’t wait to connect. He works a lot and finding time...it’s hard. People have a way of coming and going. They just leave. You’re the first male friend that I’ve cultivated a decent relationship with in awhile.”

“I know,” I say, “me too.” Bert smiles and we sit silently for a moment gazing warmly at one another. I look at my watch and gesture toward the mall where we will go to watch Spiderman swing into battle against an evil villain. We stand up and stretch our tired limbs and on impulse I hug my friend. And under his breath I am sure I hear him say:

“I love you too man.”

## Chapter Twelve: Reflections at a Rest Stop

## The End?

My head is pounding as I exit the turnpike into one of the service stations that appear too infrequently along the way. The day's activity—the driving, the talking, the driving—has finally taken its toll. Migraines haven't bothered me since high school, and I want to die to end the pain. I need to puke. As I hobble to the restroom seeking an empty stall, I smell urine and road-sweat. I close the door and secure the latch, then empty my stomach into the toilet. When I am done heaving, the automated American Standard spits in my face and I turn away. Some graffiti tempts me to call "Bert" for a good time.

I leave the stall and head over to the row of sinks to wash up. My deliberate hand motions fail to summon any water, so I jerk my right palm as fast as I can under the faucet. A red light blinks and a short spurt of lukewarm liquid gushes out. Looking at the blow dryer with skepticism, I wipe my wet hands over my face and use my shirt to dry off the remaining water before walking out into the common area.

I find a booth and for a long time I slump forward with my head on the table. When my head starts to clear, I notice a familiar Marvin Gaye song drifting down from speakers mounted in the ceiling: *Somebody tell me what's going on, yeah, what's going on?*

As I struggle to recover my senses among the familiar seeming strangers of rest stops, familiar because they too are trying to find their way home while locked up in the solitude of personal dramas, I push myself to think back over years of conversation about and research on masculinity and friendship: I remember negotiating time with my wife, Kimberly, to write the stories that make up this dissertation; I understand that the journey has been one that recognizes and validates both a flexible identity and the good stuff of close relationships, where friendship through dialogue can sometimes open a gap that allows us to run counter to the socially proscribed norm for men; But our friendships, I also know, uplift and reinvigorate the norm.

The danger is in keeping quiet, in going along to keep from being singled out or rejected or worse the object of violence, something that reminds me that fear figures highly in being a man. Sadly, there are some places in my dissertation where I hold back, hold my tongue, hold on too tightly to myself out of fear. It is a fear learned in the secluded corner of a school yard, in the foggy confines of a locker room shower, in the porno laden closet of a father, in the oppressive smiles of a family dinner, and even around the heady seminar table of a classroom. It is a fear that sweetly calls me home to a place I do not belong, but know all too well: *Be a man my boy, be a man—just be a man.*

Even with the fears surrounding my manliness that sometimes hold me back, the stories that make up this dissertation matter. There are many places where, together with my friends, we converse openly about subjects many men prefer to leave unspoken.

I hope the openness of this text helps to awaken those male readers, to nudge them out of their self imposed isolation, whose socialized need to play the part of “Man” has cut them off from the joy of commitment, intimacy, and dialogue with other men. And I look forward to hearing from those readers, whose fear of being found out has kept them silent about their distinction from the norm (see Heasley, 2005).

Just so, the open-ended quality of our text, this text, magnifies the space where change and difference are welcome. It is a space that needs to be constantly revisited and given the time of days and days. For I found there is too little time as it is: *to be a friend my man, be a friend—just be a friend.*

I learned, and maybe it’s an obvious fact, being a man is something I do not do alone; it is something I do with other people, especially other men. But through conversations, through writing about the conversations, I uncovered a boy who had, for most of his life, gone it alone, saw manhood as an individual accomplishment—something to be, *finally*, achieved.

I realized that the man of my dreams, the one firmly rooted in my past, the one I longed to be was an unconscious collusion with my father—a co-illusion shared among friends—of perfection: the man who is impenetrable, indestructible, unforgiving, without flaw and made of steel. I can hear Jack lamenting: *I constantly imagine that I can get rid of what’s around my waist.* I can also hear Kirk talking about his father: *I think to this day my dad could whip my ass, even though I’m taller and stronger because mentally I fear him.* I can hear Sidney revealing: *You weren’t allowed to be soft. The alternative was*

*getting the crap beat out of you all the time. Unless you want to take a beating, you learn to be hard.* I can still hear Bert saying at the end of our first conversation: *I've got a picture from when I was a kid flexing my muscles. It said: I'm a man. I'm strong. Don't mess with me.*

And this was the man I wanted to expose, whose skin I wanted to shed. The man who, my father jokes: *Belches lightning and shits thunder and is the baddest mother fucker in the valley.* This was the man who really did stand alone, could do nothing but stand alone, a statue, a monument, something that every man one of us—me and my friends—has worshipped at some point, if not through our fathers, then through the disembodied images that permeate this culture. And together, with my male friends of all people, we can use our friendship to undo the bow of masculinity, offer up a counter-narrative that opens the box and lets out the possibility of being more loving and more caring, more open and more free—*more human*—subjects of fallibility. And with my friends, being a man doesn't seem as lonely a prospect or even as big a deal anymore.

However, at the end of my work I am still troubled by the thought: am I a good man and a good friend? And I realize that my uneasiness is part of performing an identity that is a self oriented on the individual not the relational, a self stuck in the past. Sitting in the present moment and looking forward, some thoughts occur to me about the dissertation, thoughts that are certainly not firm advice but suggestions, a notion or two to help us on our way.

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## Analysis

In Chapter One I emphasized four themes that tend to run through the various scholarly conversations about male friendship and masculinity: homoerotism/homophobia; pain, discomfort, and emotions; time; and fathers. Returning to these themes in the analysis, and rather than highlighting them separately, I allow them to surface and recede while considering first the contradictions men face when performing orthodox masculinity. I then move into a discussion that seeks understanding about the difference between being just a friend and a good friend along with the ways my research method may have aided the process of friendship. I end by reflecting about my relationship and conversation with each man.

### **Masculinity and Contradiction**

My journey, though sometimes a painful struggle, and still incomplete, has been meaningful and challenging. As Miller (1983) reminds me:

Personal initiatives, however, will not be wholly sufficient. The fact that male friendship is as dead as it is requires collective action. So often in the personal quest for friendship, thinking a lack of a true male friend is a problem to solve alone, a man finds himself feeling crazy (p. 196).

The compulsion to solve a problem alone is a demonstration of how the cultural discourse of masculinity writes itself onto the body and asserts itself into the performance of masculinity. Acting together to form better friendships and acknowledging their importance in shaping how we act *as men* is an important step toward rewriting the story of masculinity.



Part of rewriting this story is recognizing many of the contradictions men face while simultaneously performing the orthodox standard of manhood and attending to the necessary behaviors of a good friendship. Rawlins (1983) says:

The existence of opposing demands means that certain tensions are common in relationships. These tensions constitute subtle and covert dilemmas that must be managed effectively if a relationship is to flourish (p. 256).

Managing these contradictions does not mean eliminating them. Taking a dialectical approach, Rawlins (1983) suggests, means seeing contradiction as a starting place for explanation. From contradiction comes a sense of the interrelatedness of behaviors such that contradiction is “seen not only as persistent in interpersonal life but essential to the development of close personal bonds” (p. 256).

Contradictions are present at the onset of friendship, in the middle, and at the end, maybe even before and after. Time in friendship is not just a matter of negotiating how much is necessary but also at what time certain behaviors and events will happen. This orientation on time is especially important when considering the various contradictions inherent in any close personal relationship.

Analyzing the functions of communication in close personal relationships, Bochner (1984) points out:

Several ways in which talk may inhibit what it exhibits—expressiveness mandating protectiveness, revealing necessitating concealing, openness petitioning discretion, weakness used to dominate, freedom as a constraint (p. 192).

When thinking about the order of these pairs, I wonder if these behaviors can be reversed. Can protectiveness mandate expressiveness, concealing necessitate

revealing, discretion petition openness, domination used to allow weakness, and constraint as a freedom? For that matter, at what point in interpersonal relationships are these behaviors manifest? It would seem that initiating a friendship, for example, would require being expressive first before being protective, that something must first be revealed before it can be concealed and so forth. Rawlins (1983) in “Openness as Problematic in Ongoing Friendships: Two conversational Dilemmas” says:

People have to reveal their personal thoughts and feelings to others in order to “emerge from the shadows” of typification and change relationships from impersonal to interpersonal. Indeed, mutual *expressiveness* is necessary to achieve intimacy (p. 4).

However, when thinking about orthodox masculinity and the ways that I am called on to prove my manhood to myself and other men, I see the reverse happening all too often. To make friends with other men I must first demonstrate my protectiveness, ability to conceal, discretion, desire to dominate, determination to be closed off, and on and on. Adhering to normative masculinity from this perspective would seem to run counter to forming friendships, something maintained by many other scholars (McGill, 1985; Miller, 1983; Osherson, 1992; Morman & Floyd, 1998; Wagner-Raphael, Seal, & Ehrhardt, 2001).

Observing Rawlins again (1983), I’m fascinated that certain behaviors in the contradictions he studies seem to be not only privileged but predominantly illustrated by examples from male-male friendships. As I said in Chapter 1, for

example, independence seems to trump dependence as a desirable trait in close relationships.

Men, even while bound by orthodox masculinity, find ways to get together and become friends, but what kind of friends remains to be seen. Perhaps, instead of negating the possibility of friendship, orthodox masculinity heightens the anxiety of forming such bonds because such bonds begin with the seemingly impossible task of moving from independence to dependence, from invulnerability to vulnerability from being insensitive to being sensitive. Perhaps the function of activity in male-male friendships is one of time. Pitting ourselves against one another in the various competitive activities most men seem drawn to provides sufficient time to play out our need to be manly. And having been manly, perhaps a fleeting chance at friendship opens. But when, how? From within the crucible of adversity? From within a context that both secures manliness while wounding us enough to require the succor of a true friend? Being thrown together and overcoming hardships seems to be the only way for two men from within the confines of orthodox masculinity to become friends let alone close friends. It is no wonder that some men love war.

Still, even if friendships form, orthodox masculinity compels men to continue devaluing the behaviors that deepen interpersonal bonds (openness, vulnerability, intimacy, and so on). In devaluing these qualities men who would be manly must continually reassert their stance as closed, invulnerable, and cold hearted, something possibly reinforced when the dyad belongs to a group. So once formed, friendships between men, likely as not, will become as impenetrable

as the solitary male. No wonder, as Miller (1983) claims, talking about our male friendships with other male friends is so taboo. And something that closes men off from a valuable tool for building closeness in relationships: reflexivity.

Facing the taboo takes courage. Exploring our friendships, revising the social norms for being a man is not something done in a day or in one dissertation. To write this new story may require men to face a double contradiction: to risk vulnerability without first establishing their invulnerability, to assert their dependence before proving their independence. It may also necessitate expressing a need for one another from the start and, I hope, avoid going it alone.

### **Knowing a Good Friendship and Sticking to it**

My journey has been a search for self—a self troubled by masculinity—in and through friendship. Through the conversations, I learned that to define friendship, to use it for changing lives, requires balancing between taking those relationships as they are and infusing them with an ideal. Such a balance seems to me an act that moves between being just friends or true friends to being good friends. For men—most men—to reach such a balance means nurturing the possibility of a close relationship with another man by tending to a variety of communication practices: our willingness to be vulnerable, intimate, committed, complicit, reflexive, validating, challenging, and caring in dialogue with one another matters not only to our own relational wellbeing but also to the wellbeing of future generations. Miller (1983) says:

By no longer kidding ourselves, homogenizing every fond relationship into an indiscriminately general friendship, some of my male friends and I are able to exist for one another, clear eyed, in a middle distance that has more engagement than before. This middle position, a product of greater hard-mindedness about what male friendship is, is expressed subjectively by more tenderness, by firmer and keener looks, and also by a generalized sense of the opening of possibilities: a sense that perhaps we can gradually explore more fully the true meaning of friendship between us (p. 193-194).

Attending to friendship this way redefines masculinity, implying a change in how we see ourselves as men and how we behave. The difference between what does it look like and what should it look like—and sometimes all we can hope for—maybe all we need—is a middle ground and a little more time.

In thinking about this middle ground, I can see why it is hard, has been hard, to be friends with men. After ten years of looking for and working toward close male friendship, Miller (1983) made a serious connection with only one other man, Larry. There is a moment, in conversation with Jacqueline, his wife, that Miller realizes that he is imitating his friend's mannerisms. This simple bodily or embodied experience demonstrates the extent these men have softened with one another. As Miller (1983) says:

When you start to love someone, you take him into you. You unconsciously take parts of his being and, with them, some of the outer appearances, the manners that are the symbols of deeper realities (p. 187).

Kimberly, my partner, has pointed out numerous times how I emulate my friends: how when I adopt an authoritative tone, I sound like Sidney or how when I beam over something, I smile like Bert. I am reminded that orthodox masculinity is experienced as a hardening of the body, not the kind of hardening that comes from hours at the gym, but the kind of tension in the neck and ass—a pain—that

comes from years of fearing and competing with other males. When I am able to let my male friends inside, I soften. I soften toward them and, perhaps more importantly, I soften toward myself. I can look at my gut and not feel embarrassed. I can look at my difference from the norm without feeling shame. This therapeutic turn in the relationship is something experienced by each man in this dissertation, and I realize that part of being at ease with one another comes from spending the kind of quality time required by my research method.

While I wouldn't advocate the method of this dissertation as a fail proof way of sparking a good friendship, I recognize the powerful way friendship as method, the use of dialogue, and autoethnography create conditions where getting close and staying close are increasingly possible.

Tillman-Healy (2003) says of friendship as method that, "it is a level of investment in participants' lives that puts fieldwork relationships on par with the project" that "when asked, we keep secrets, even if they would add compelling twists to our research report or narrative" (p. 735). That I have kept confidences is an important part of the trust I share with my friends. There are some moments in my relationships with each man that I will keep to myself out of love. This kind of care is, I think, a result of the hyperawareness—the reflexivity—that comes from invoking friendship *as method*.

In my conversations with each of these men, on the record and off, we had, on more than one occasion, what Maslow (1962) referred to as a peak experience. Goodall and Kellette (2005) recognize the conditions of a peak

experience as important elements of getting in the habit of dialogue; in a personal account of such an experience Goodall describes:

We got into things neither one of us had ever spoken out loud to anyone else...I know my heart was pumping fast, too, and by the time we came to the end of it—more an arrival than a destination—we were both exhausted but knew we had been somewhere special together. I remember the stars that night, the moon, the feel of the air—everything around us was alive and deeply meaningful...And I'll never forget it because I've spent so much of my life since then trying to get there again. Trying to find that special place where true communication happens...I would learn to call this meaningful conversation "dialogue." And I would learn that it happens not just in talk, but in music, in lovemaking, in communion with nature and Spirit—in a whole lot of what makes this life interesting and memorable (p. 160).

When this communication experience coalesces in the body of a friend, it is equally hard to forget that person. The desire to get back in touch with them is deeper. With Bert, especially, I sometimes found it difficult to leave his side.

I turn my attention again to Raymond Carver (2001) who in a meditation, a piece of "sociological introspection" (see Ellis, 1991), shared a line from Saint Teresa, "Words lead to deeds...They prepare the soul, make it ready, and move it to tenderness" (p. 123). My words, in writing through my experience of masculinity and male friends, allow tenderness back into the story of being a man.

Carver (2001) says:

Long after what I've said has passed from your minds, whether it be weeks or months, and all that remains is the sensation of having attended a large public occasion, marking the end of one significant period in your lives and the beginning of another, try then, as you work out your individual destinies, to remember that words, the right and true words, can have the power of deeds (p. 125.)

Through friendship as method, dialogue, and autoethnography my friends and I experienced a degree of intimacy and complicity that many men seldom

have with other men (see Baumli, 1985; Cordelle, 1990; Rabinowitz, 1991; Osherson, 1992; Farrell, 1993; and Kupers, 1993). While these conversations in and of themselves do not make a good friendship, they set the conditions whereby that friendship and the emotional engagement necessary to sustain it happens more easily. The peak experience paves the way for continued emotional involvement. Miller (1983) says:

Intimacy and complicity, however, do not by themselves make friendship. Even familiarity—coziness and trust and occasional supportiveness—can be mistaken for friendship. True friendship must be true engagement with the friend—a very frequent mutual holding in the mind and heart...Male friendship can thus be thought of as a place in a man's inner being, a space in his life, that is daily occupied by another man, a place that is regularly charged with love, concern, thoughtfulness—and, sometimes, resentment, anger, even deep hurt. Engagement means emotional involvement (p. 191).

What does he mean by emotional involvement? Sure, my friends and I show affection for one another. We hug one another. We grin when we see one another. We slap each other on the back to show support. And we talk, boy do we talk. But there is another side to emotional involvement that with other men we usually prefer to avoid, prefer not to show: sadness and pain. And I am reminded that in an intimate moment with a man (friend or father) I have never cried, never shared in an unqualified way my pain: had a catharsis.

### **My Friends; My Self**

And I can hear Bert saying: *What if you don't have anything to cry about?* And Bert isn't one to cry about anything. Yet, he is not a tough guy and he doesn't think life is absent of pain. I can also hear him say: *Besides, being overwhelmed by emotion is something that just happens—you can't force it.* But I



can stamp it down when it comes up. And with Bert I held back in getting him to talk about anything that might be too painful for him. I had the opportunity, but I did not ask him: *Have you ever wept?*

In our conversations we both revealed—and maybe it speaks to the kind of men we are—that male friends have cried in front of us. *In front of us...* this is how my gut phrased it, and I think of Berger (1972) who stated, “*Men act and women appear*” (p. 47). A simple linguistic construction shows how deep in the bones gender acts on our behavior. We fear the crying man because he exhibits vulnerability, weakness, and need, something seen as feminine, to be avoided.

Bert in his monologue reveals:

*We were sitting in his car. Jeff started to cry and I couldn't handle it. I still can't handle it—my father cried one time at dinner, and I felt uncomfortable. I wanted to stop him from crying, so I changed the subject to cheer him up. Same thing with Jeff...he started crying and I got nervous and started trying to get out of the car. But he put his hand out to me to shake and I shook his hand. I feel bad about it to this day, because I didn't allow him to cry about me going away. I didn't think it was that big of a deal. We'd see each other at the next holiday, so it wasn't that big of a deal. But it was to him...and I couldn't deal with it.*

When this happened to Bert all those years ago, it made him uncomfortable and he just sat there. Then he tried to escape. I believe our conversations changed that about Bert. First, the tenor of our talk allowed him to reveal this painful moment. Being able to self-disclose is an important step toward acting reflexively on the self and changing. This experience also shows how being a man in the orthodox sense wounds us. And when I think of my own experience of being with a crying man, I see how we are doubly wounded by orthodox masculinity.

With my high school friend, I remember standing in the road outside his house, his head pressed against my chest, while he wept over a break up with his girlfriend. I remember stroking his back and repeating the words as a quiet shush: *I know, I know, I know* until he was finished crying. I imagine this is how Bert wishes he acted with his boyhood friend, why he carried it around for so long—the succor apparent in this moment is how we ought to behave. But being seventeen and doing the right thing, neither of us felt good for long. Embarrassment took over. I remember my friend taking a step back; we looked into each other’s eyes and something clicked, a moment of recognition slipped between us. Without saying it, both of us knew—the straightening of our posture, the hardening of our chest muscles told us—we had been acting like a couple of girls. And we didn’t speak for several days or even a week, long enough to act as though it never happened. But like Bert I can’t forget.

Epstein (2006) would say I am making a big deal out of nothing, but to be able to dissolve in front of, no, *with*, another man matters. I am hopeful that if the time ever came, if I needed to, Bert would sit with me, hold my hand, and cradle me to his chest while I wept. And that I would reciprocate. And both of us would be fine...better in showing our love for one another.

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I lost touch with Jack. His graduating and moving away scared me. I’ve always associated moving away with moving on—an old habit hard to break. I wish I had been a good enough friend—good enough researcher to pursue him more aggressively. But, in the end, *we* let each other go. When looking over our

conversation, I always stop for a chuckle when I come to the repair guy moment. While Jack and I talk about overeating, hitting puberty, pot-bellies, fear of bigger men, having emotions, needing to express emotions with other men, aging and appearance, plastic surgery, and feminism, Billy the repair guy is in the kitchen—a traditionally feminine space—working on the refrigerator. Maybe he overhears us. And when he returns, part way through our conversation, standing there in his tan overalls and chunky boots, looking like the most typical guy in the world, he says: *It's fixed.*

As a writer, I am tempted to use the repair guy's presence, rich in metaphor, for all he's worth. Where his announcement shows up, that he even shows up, matters. I could move his statement around or erase him from the research. I have that power. I am glad I left him in his place at the middle. And I wonder, after he leaves the scene, if our conversation fixes anything. Jack and I continue to talk about the same topics, the typical guy and his metaphors lingering over us, filling each other in with more personal details from our lives: how we fantasized about and struggled with the image of rugged masculinity portrayed by actors like Clint Eastwood—images that never seem to age or lose their vitality—how we validated each other's "queerness" in disclosing some of the ways we carried our bodies or, in Jack's case more than mine, cared for our bodies. How we talked and the way we negotiated our bodies adds, Heasley (2005) claims, legitimacy to other ways of presenting manliness; he says, "naming the diversity of masculinity and its relationship to queerness will ideally provoke greater discourse on the topic and extended awareness of the influence of the

hegemonically straight masculine, not only for gay men, but straight men as well” (p. 319).

In validating our “queerness,” I am startled at how easy it was by the end of our conversation to talk about failed erections. Penis talk between men typically amounts to boasting about one’s size or belittling the size of the other man (see Murphy, 2001). With Jack, on that day, it was a caring and validating moment that in the press of time I wish we could have explored further. I see how easy it is, in our masculinity, to get caught up on how well our bodies perform—something reinforced by the other men in our lives—how easy it is to get stuck tending to how good we are in bed rather than how good we are in relationships.

When we reveal some of our early sexual experiences, Jack’s words surprise me: *I didn’t have a body. I just had a penis.* And when I think back over many—too many—of my experiences with women, I know he is right.

While talking about erectile dysfunction has become more common these days, it is a subject brought up only as a medical issue, something that can be *fixed* with a little blue pill. And I wonder, when looking back over my own experience, how many of those failed erections had more to do with failing relationships. A pill might have made it possible to perform in bed, but what about everywhere else? Everywhere else is the stuff good friends should mull over; rather than point my friend to the nearest pharmacy, I might ask him to talk about it, to open up to me about what is going on with him and his lover.

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I believe Kirk and his friend Leonard share a special connection, the kind where two men could open up about and share the sometimes painful side of married or coupled life. That I know another pair of men share such a close bond, a friendship like the one I want and have with Bert, is heartening. I am drawn to Kirk's monologue because it is keenly focused on one man. My other friends spoke more broadly about various men, never zeroing in on one significant still ongoing relationship. What does this say about male-male friendships? That it's too embarrassing to talk openly about them? That men don't feel as strongly toward their friends as they do their lovers and family? That they just don't last?

Kirk's story about Leonard reminds me of all the ways I "misbehaved" and explored identity with other males in my teens and twenties. He says about an acid trip with his friend: *Watching it happen to yourself through another human being who is also simultaneously seeing themselves through you...phenomenal.* And his words sound shockingly like a partial definition for what happens while being a friend, something that reminds me of a line about friendship from C. S. Lewis (1960), "And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude" (p. 65).

Coming out of that solitude is a risky move. The threat of disapproval and disruption of the relationship, from within or without, are just as immense, especially in how the behavior between friends separates them from the herd of men, of being men. First, there are the embarrassing details; that Kirk shared these is a gift. For example, talking candidly about masturbation, even masturbating together, are experiences straight men seldom admit. There are also

the emotional disclosures, the sharing of pain about fathers. Kirk shows that he and Leonard comfort one another about how difficult it is to relate to their respective dads and how their friendship makes it a little easier to be with the old man. Kirk's sharing of intimate details of his relationship with Leonard violates the idea that *it's just between us*. So, friendship between these two men is, then, not just about going off together, it is also about coming back.

When thinking about going off together, I think of misbehaving again. In rereading my conversation with Kirk, I am startled by the use of coarse language and remember, while rewriting, taking out some of *those* words. In marking up my text later, I write in the margins: *I am intrigued by the coarseness in our relationship; I've noticed that I cuss more with some friends and not at all with others. Why is that? Am I following his lead? Kirk did use the word 'fuck' a lot and vulgarity is something I'm good at, something I picked up from my career military father. It protects us. It's a way of feeling the other man out. It makes us comfortable enough to trust and come together but also keeps us apart, at a distance. And when we do disclose about our life experience, the cursing keeps the conversation about sex—a moment full of potential for intimacy and tender understanding—that comes out of our mouths in a torrent of epithets that turns on our competitive selves, and our need to show off our exploits instead of sharing our experience.*

Still, our bar room banter seduces me. I am reminded that the foul language in my friendships with men often went hand in hand with a cold beer, a lot of cold beer. While none of my conversations for this dissertation were helped

along by alcohol or drugs, Kirks monologue and our cussing recalls past friendships, where getting wasted seemed to be the only way for a couple of guys to get away from themselves, overcome their inhibitions, long enough to relate. I can remember seeking that buzz moment with other men where drunk enough meant being loose enough to speak openly, still coherent enough to know, and only a drink or two away from falling off the stool. While I still enjoy the occasional glass of wine or even a couple of lagers, I realize that I don't need it to be with other men emotionally, something this dissertation reinforced.

Kirk realizes it too and is troubled by his friend Leonard's continued need of the influence. He reveals:

*I'm not here to criticize and I've got a lot of my own weaknesses but one thing that I do fear for Leonard is that he likes to drink. He got into drinking when we were in college together and he continues to drink. Would I say he's an alcoholic, yeah, I probably would. Not in the sense of going to work drunk but drinking everyday. And he's dating someone now who enables that behavior. I worry about him. I got an email from him the other day and it was laced with drunken connotations. I'm all for having a good time, but being 30 years old...he's doing well in school...but his mother just died of colon cancer a few years ago. And he's not always expressive about that loss. I know it's hurt him tremendously. He was very close with his mother. His father and he have always had a tight lipped relationship. His dad is very quiet and they can't express how they feel with each other, even to me.*

This moment brings home to me the need for continuing work on engaging the emotional lives of the men we call friend.

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Of all the friends in this dissertation, I have known Sidney the longest. But when looking back through our conversations, I have a hard time seeing the man I love. What I see is the man everyone thinks they know: strong, closed off,

theoretically deft, a debater. And I think of something I learned early on in my education: the best stuff often happens outside of class in the hallway *between* lectures. I realize, especially for this work, that some of the best moments took place off the page outside of the research inside the solitary space of a friendship. In the spirit of coming back, I want to share a couple of memories before turning my attention to some of the harder things evoked by my conversations with Sidney.

Once, during my second semester, I presented an evocative and painful story about my childhood in a class we took together. It was the kind of story that my fellow students praised me for having the courage to share but it was also one, I sensed, that made it uncomfortable for them to look me in the eye, an awkwardness I hadn't yet learned to write through. Sidney was *there*. Later, in the hallway, both of us heading toward each other to get back to class after break, we made eye contact. He didn't look away. He didn't frown solemnly either. He grinned. It was a facial expression that allowed me to keep my head up. I smiled too and we stopped near the classroom door to gaze at each other a second longer than was necessary. *Hey, cool*, I thought. And he patted me on the shoulder when we turned to go inside, together.

Another time, I brought my infant son to school; and I bumped into Sidney on my way to CIS. "May I hold him?" he asked right off. I handed my son over and Sidney cradled him in his arms without the usual clumsiness I had come to expect from most guys. And they both grinned, together. I smiled inside knowing I could leave my son in this man's care. There are other times, but these



two are enough for now. They show a tender side of Sidney through my eyes, something good friends ought to demonstrate for one another, and that takes me back to the conversation we had for my research where, I asked: *what are friends for?* Sidney responded: *Friends are a source of confidence. I actually taught one of my guy friends to dance. One thing friends do is help us through awkward moments—are willing to get awkward. They nudge us out of our complacency to get us to try new things, and we try out of love for our friend. I tried to nudge Sidney about our friendship. I said:*

*I'm curious and nervous about it, our own relationship. Research shows that men don't typically meta-communicate about their friendships. Whereas with our significant others, we might say, 'oh this is going well' or 'we need to work on that.' I was wondering if that held true with your friends.*

We do not talk directly about *our* friendship. The way I ended my statement allowed Sidney to navigate away from a potentially intimate moment. He speaks generally. He thinks men assume all is well if their actions do not evoke anger, something that on reflection tells me that our friendship must be going ok. I haven't, in his words, *pissed him off* enough to speak about it. I am surprised by the layers of indirectness in our communication. And I push a little harder. I tell him:

*I think you would agree that talking about relationships is an important part of having better ones and—you also talk about this on your tape—it's crucial to changing the conditions of masculinity that sometimes block that talk. If we are talking about our relationship, aren't we automatically being counter-hegemonic?*

And Sidney agreed. But lamented that time constraints and other obligations always made it so *friendships end up in third place.*

In reviewing our talk, I wonder, given the layers of indirectness, if my friend hadn't been poking at me too. And this is the hardest thing for me to bring up, because it is something so potentially hurtful: My friend is a black man.

And I weep inside over my frustration at not wanting to bring it up, while urgently wanting to talk with him about the color of our skin. I weep over it because I notice in looking back that we danced around this issue like a teen couple out of the 1950s—barely touching, uncomfortable with our difference, and knowing that we are being watched. In our initial conversation, when we are talking about our bodies, Sidney only hints at the issue of race. Caught up in the moment and seeing him as *just my friend, just another one of the guys* and without thinking, I asked: *Can you recall any other time when you felt more aware or conscious of being in your body.*

He recounts being an undergraduate at an elite College, where the norm for men was, according to Sidney, *short and stocky*. He said: *Being a tall guy, I stood out. I was also conscious of being skinnier. Even though my body was good, it was not the norm, not what most women were looking for.*

And I asked: *Do you feel that you acted differently toward yourself?*

And he said: *I think it impacts **confidence**.* Sidney shifts our talk away from the physical body to the clothes we wear, and neither one of us seems to want to acknowledge how, given the racial divide still present in the U.S., being one of the few black bodies among a host of white bodies had to matter. And I wonder what it takes to allow ourselves this awkward moment, the word

*confidence* chiding my ear. I should have more confidence in my friend, more confidence in myself. Who should be showing whom how to dance?

In rewriting our first conversation I struggle over whether or not to directly identify my friend as black. I chose to only hint. In his monologue, Sidney discusses the dangers of a narrowly defined masculinity, especially for the African-American community (see Hooks, 2003; Majors and Billson, 2002; and Boykin, 2005), especially because, he says: *I am a black male*.

*A male*. Not a man, a male. Orthodox masculinity calls men to work hard at distancing themselves from pain, from emotional wounds. And who am I to say what hurts my friend? But I can't help asking: *what's going on?* Black men, it has been observed feel compelled, out of a need to survive in a racist and patriarchal culture, like the U.S., to ratchet up their masculinity to intensify their performance into something of a caricature of the white norm that serves as both a critique and an affront to a society that is unwilling to acknowledge them on their own terms, as men.

Thus, it is not an accident that Sidney rebukes one of our culture's signs of success, something open to and pushed upon black men, as a *child's* territory: sports. He is careful to point out that the *men* he chooses for friends are outside the norm, by which he means, without saying it, the African-American Community's norm. Brian, his best friend and also African-American, is a classical pianist and an X-Marine. Sidney, himself, is a scholar and an X-athlete. I see two men, two friends, struggling to move from the hyper-masculine space

carved out for them by an insidious racism into a broader definition of what it means to be not only a black man but just a man.

When trying to work through our masculinity Sidney says: *To be able to step back is crucial.* He also acknowledges the role of fathers in making this journey. And of all my friends, he speaks the most respectfully of his father:

*The person who has had the most influence on the type of man I've become, the way in which I understand manhood, is my father. Although my father was a military man, he is someone you'd say the still waters run deep. Though he did live and work and breathe in this very hierarchical culture, my father is also a very gentle man. He is not a man who is afraid to cry or show compassion. He is very loving and very family oriented. Morality and ethics are a priority for him. Those are things that I have always admired about my father and he's tried to teach me over the years. That made a big difference for me. I can say I had a father figure.*

In this part of his monologue, Sidney is speaking more to the African-American community of men than he is to all men. He is acknowledging the need of fathers to be there, to be present in the lives of native sons.

As I've already revealed, I fictionalized my friend's names. I chose "Sidney" as a moniker, because the actor I borrowed it from reminds me of my friend. I thought it would be easier to bring up the color of our skin—easier to talk about openly, and this is another place where I've held back. And thinking about Sidney Poitier's career, the movies he starred in, those films, from a modern perspective, seem flawed, maybe a little too cookie-cutter; *awkward*. Yes, those films are awkward, but they forced a conversation; nudged subjects into the public consciousness at a heated time in our cultural history. And maybe it's time to push again.

There is a scene in *Look Who's Coming to Dinner* where Poitier's character, in speaking with his father, says: *You see yourself as a colored man; I just see myself as a man.* And this line captures the dilemma of my friendship with Sidney. As much as my friend struggles to be a man, he is called on to be a black man by two different places in our culture. *And it hurts.* I avoid the issue because, perhaps, it points a laser beam at my privilege to walk—to pass through this world as *just a man.* But I think my avoidance comes from an even more selfish place; race, as it plays out in our culture, accentuates differences, separates us, makes it harder to be *just good friends.*

#### Calling Home

And, finally, I wonder, is the kind of friendship I seek with men, any man, possible for others? Yes. But not unlike a marriage or anything worth doing, it's damn hard—subject to digressions, disappointments, lapses, and the press of time. Almost three years after “data collection” ended, what am I to make of the fact I am only in regular contact with one of my friends? Dash a quick note on a card at Christmas time with another? I can say that because of our dialogues—having shared peak experiences—I could assume the habit of friendship—we could assume the habit more easily when time and distance permits. But it never seems to! True enough, writing about these men, my friends, has imprinted them under my skin. Until we meet again, I hold each of these men in my heart and keep faith, believing as Raymond Carver (2001) does when contemplating his friends: “When I think about friendship, which is, in at least one regard anyway, like

marriage—another shared dream—something the participants have to believe in and put their faith in, trusting that it will go on forever” (p. 118).

My reflections are interrupted by the melodic voice of Frank Sinatra drifting down from speakers: *and I did it my way*.

*My way.*

I laugh.

Did I do it my way? Did it matter? As much as my project is about the self, it is also about the community I live in. By acting reflexively on my self through dialogue, autoethnography, and friendship, I open the possibility for intense recognition of self in community, a recognition that sometimes disrupts and reorganizes relationships. But it is also a powerful ally for the status-quo, and while that self sustains norms, my writing opens it to critique and transformation by others.

My reliance on self has been ironic—is still ironic for there are always others; significant others. I lurch from the booth and plod over to the pay phone. I pick up the receiver and stare at it, then rub the mouth piece against my t-shirt hoping to wash away any germs. I dial my calling card number and wait for the familiar jingle and computerized voice asking for my pin number; I punch it in, wait, then enter my home phone. After the third ring, Kimberly picks up.

“Hello,” she says in a sweet contralto.

“Hey, it’s me,” I say even though she knows my voice.

“You OK?” she asks.

“Yes. But my head hurts.”

“Where you at?”

“Rest stop.”

“Do you have any medicine?”

“No,” I say.

“When do you think you’ll be home?”

“In an hour or so. Is Benjamin asleep?”

“Yes, he just went down. He misses his daddy. All day he kept saying, ‘dada home. Dada home.’ And he wouldn’t take a nap.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, “You must have had a rough day.”

“Just the last couple of hours were hard. How was your day?”

“Fine,”

“Did you see Bert?” Kimberly asks.

“Yes,” I answer.

“Did you have fun?”

“We did.”

“That’s good.”

“Yes. It is.”

“Take care of yourself and get home soon,” she says and then adds, as a way of ending the conversation, “I love you.”

*Me too.* I think.

And I nestle the receiver in its cradle and walk out of the rest stop ready to continue my journey.

## Epilogue

November 4, 2007

A couple of days have passed since defending my dissertation. I want to celebrate, to rest, but the journey is not over. My committee asked me to write an epilogue, which I am doing now. The point of this epilogue is to raise a couple of important issues brought up during the defense; issues that can't be resolved today will guide my future research.

Art's idea was to write the story of the defense, but I find my memory inadequate. Who spoke first? What exactly did I say? My memory of that day is impressionistic, not precise, maybe because my body's heightened anxiety pushed my brain into fight or flight mode. I should have been entirely at ease; after all, as Art reminded me before the defense, I know practically everything about my research. Knowing what I know, perhaps I had a feeling, a premonition, about the way Jim and Stacy would react. But even before the defense, my feelings about the dissertation have been mixed. And today, as always, I feel satisfied with what I accomplished but also frustrated by the desire to do more, to express more evocatively what I know.

So here I am—alone again—in the library writing something for my dissertation, tasked with communicating a couple of concerns raised by the committee. I'll begin with Jim King's reactions. He wanted to know, given the suggestive elements of my writing, why I didn't go all the way, why I didn't bring him to the point of orgasm. What did I fear?



The suggestive elements, he felt, read like gay porn, but without the “money shot.” Part of the frustration and confusion he experienced in reading several of my stories, I think, is first trusting that the writing is intentionally queer and intentionally seductive. Yes, I consciously wrote with an erotic sensibility, especially in the chapters with Bert and Jack. Writing without knowing about this latent content submerges the sensual in the unconscious mind where the homophobia that is so much a part of performing orthodox masculinity does its dirty work, which brings me to the second part of Jim’s frustration and confusion.

Though my writing is disruptive, it is not forceful enough at capturing and accounting for why my friends and I do not “go all the way.” My writing does not adequately convey or critique the orthodox male’s confusion of intimacy with sex, the fear that showing emotions can only lead to sex. The “money shot” for Jim is not the fucking implied by my tongue and cheek use of language, but the love making necessary for intimate, emotional contact. This confusion for men caught by orthodox masculinity’s narrative is part of the perceived need to protect the anus from penetration that is also a metaphorical protection of the heart from being broken.

In performing orthodox masculinity, I shy away from complete emotional surrender, the kind of vulnerability I saw in a photograph the day before my defense. It was a picture of two men lying side-by-side on the grass in a public park. Their feet point in opposite directions, their heads cocked to face one another. The photographer snapped the shot from above and at an angle. The positioning of the bodies of the two men resembled a crooked line that pulls me

into their eyes and the delight for one another that shone there. Without thinking about it, I ask the photographer if the two men are gay. It is the wrong response, the wrong question. How do I steer myself away from this confusion, this need to protect myself? But that picture represents for me Jim's "money shot," where he wants me to go. It is childlike, casual, innocent, a picture of pure joy, a moment of meeting not unlike an orgasm and not at all about sex. But why can't I get there? How do I go all the way?

The confusion of sex with intimacy is only part of the story and, perhaps, only a product of something deeper. My fear of intimacy with other men resides in a couple of other places as well. I think first of my father, a thought that occurs to me because of my present relationship with my son, Benjamin—who, I am sad to reveal, is already learning to live with his daddy's prolonged absences. He lives with my absence by guarding, or withholding, his delight in my presence—it breaks my heart. I try to explain to him that I must go to work or that I must go write my dissertation, because it is how daddy earns a living, is able to provide for our family. I will play with him later, always later. What does he know? All he knows is that his daddy is gone a lot more, and that, maybe, his daddy doesn't love him as much. He sobs when I leave the house. I resist telling him to be strong. I try to make up for leaving by giving extra hugs and kisses. But I know, one day, he will stop crying just as he has stopped running into my arms when I get home in the evening.

My son's pain reminds me of an early memory. I wasn't much older than Benjamin, a little more than three. My family lived in California on an Air force

base near Sacramento. My daddy was home for a change, maybe he had some time off after working too many grueling swing shifts, but he needed to run an errand. He had to pick up a prescription from the base hospital. I desperately wanted to go with him, to be with him. He didn't want to bring me. There may have been a good reason, but not a good enough reason for a three year old. He said he'd be back, and then he left. I sobbed over the injustice.

I don't know how, but I got out of the house and into the neighborhood. I wandered in the direction of the hospital. I was going to catch up with my daddy and surprise him. But I got lost. Luckily, a woman picked me up and helped me get back home. But in looking back, I think I've been lost since that day. I spent my childhood urgently wanting to be with my daddy, I adored him, but he was absent most of the time, at work—trying to support his family. I learned to protect myself from the pain of his absence. I learned to hold back my delight; until, one day, I didn't feel that delight anymore.

Instead, I remember feeling angry, wanting to express anger about his absence but also feeling ashamed for being angry, because, by then, as an elementary school aged boy, I was man enough to know that dad was gone out of duty. It wasn't his fault he had to go to work. And, in my child's mind, it was even noble that his work involved protecting America's fragile democracy. What did I know? What could any boy possibly know? But I learned to protect my father from my feelings, to hold back my rage, my desire to shout: *I am right here, and I need your love more than this country will ever need your death!*

Protecting myself and protecting the other is all over my dissertation.

When I get to the “cum shot,” to use Jim’s phrase, I pull back. I don’t want to be rejected, and I’m angry—frustrated. What if my friend doesn’t feel the same way about me? What if dad doesn’t feel the same way about me? Fuck me!

Besides confusing sex and intimacy and the compulsion to protect myself, my father, my friends, is how both of these strains in the narrative of orthodox masculinity express themselves in my romantic relationship with Kimberly. Jim acknowledges the possible discomfort of having her present at the defense in a moment that, for the untrained ear, can provoke doubt about my sexuality. Am I gay? Is Jim outing me? Like my blurted question about the two men in the photograph these are the wrong responses. But the doubts and the questions are there. Later, in bed with my wife, she jokingly asks if I am on the “down low.” If I know anything about Freud, jokes are an expression, a cover-up for serious matters. Is getting too close with a male friend allowing that relationship to cross into emotional territory my wife claims for herself? Sexual or otherwise? Am I committing emotional adultery? Having done the emotional work for men for centuries, are women conditioned to automatically suspect two men who show love for one another? Or do I hold back, because I think this is what she may think and it’s not what I want her to think. Can she and I talk about this so I don’t have to guess this is what she may be thinking and protect her from it? Or by not talking about it, am I really protecting myself? I’m not sure where to draw the line or whether just to erase it entirely.

I tried during my defense to articulate the way my network of interpersonal relationships prohibited me from going too far in my friendships with men. I wonder if the emotional distance I experience with other men is part of a compulsion to continually prove my straightness to my spouse. Is this what the culture of masculinity has come to now? If you maintain deep friendships with me, then you must have at least a gay side. You're not all man (as if gay is not manly). This just reinforces the binary, gay/straight man.

And off all people, I thought Kimberly would understand and I feel a little resentment when she raised the issue again, even as a joke. Do I voice my disappointment? No. I go on the defensive. And going on the defensive only makes her doubt my sexual intent even more.

Am I gay? Would it matter if I say I have had sex with another man? I shouldn't have to answer those questions. I am queer though, which means I delight in subverting orthodox masculinity, in performing alternatives, something that doesn't get full enough expression in the dissertation, something that is necessary for going all the way. And, how, as a passionate researcher, do I better write a queer narrative? Shouldn't a more compelling story about friendship be co-authored? Why, even at the last second, do I see myself going it alone? Am I alone in this effort? Maybe the reason I can't answer that question or any of the questions satisfactorily is because I don't trust enough. I don't trust the people of this dissertation enough to allow myself the luxury of complete openness, complete vulnerability. I am always caught in a struggle to protect, to prohibit, something that is reinforced in all of my interpersonal relationships. But, then

again, is anyone capable of complete vulnerability, of expressing everything he or she thinks and desires without any restraint? Would I want to be in such a relationship? Do I believe Kimberley is completely open with and vulnerable to me? If she were, would she have raised the issue the way she did? Indeed, maybe she was saying, there are things I don't want to know, places to which I don't want to go.

How, then, if I can't overcome this need to protect myself, to protect my father, to protect my friend, to protect my lover, to protect the reader am I going to explore the painful nuances of race that also come between Sidney and me? I know Stacy Holman Jones wants me to question whether gender trumps race. If gender does trump race, then this learned protection, part of my socialization into orthodox masculinity, is how it happens. How can I talk openly about the ways race separate us, when it takes all my effort to bypass my masculine persona to become momentarily vulnerable?

With Sidney I never got there, never went all the way, never felt comfortable enough to let my guard completely down. But to use the dance metaphor I developed in my reflection about our relationship, part of my role as a researcher is to lead us there; however, as a friend, I must also collaborate. To have a meaningful dialogue about race as it happens in our relationship requires us both to risk vulnerability, for both of us to lead, for both of us to follow. What is wrong is for me to put the burden of bringing up race or even resolving it on my friend, to evoke the narrative of white guilt—to “copout” as Stacy suggests. But how am I supposed to take a risk with a man who is so adept at being the

orthodox male? In trying to see the flip side of this question, in trying to see from my friend's perspective, I realize that gender trumps race for me. But for him, these social narratives are, perhaps, at play simultaneously. I don't doubt for Sidney race trumps gender, because race intensifies his performance of masculinity, intensifies everything that I have already expressed about myself. So, how can he possibly see his way to vulnerability with me? So we are stuck at arms length, playing it safe. How do we stop playing it safe? How do we reach that golden moment of connection where it no longer matters who is leading or who is following?

As I bring these thoughts to a close, I am reminded of my literature review and reflections. To go all the way with another man requires a reversal of the dialectical oppositions at work in our friendships—we need to learn how to lead with alternative terms. To write our new story requires us to face a double contradiction: to risk vulnerability without first establishing our invulnerability, to assert our dependence before insisting on our independence. It may also necessitate expressing a need for one another from the start and, I hope, avoid going it alone. The question remains: but how?

I don't even know how to conclude this epilogue just as I don't seem to know how to finish this dissertation. At the end of this project, I feel desperate. I feel an urgent need to get on with my life, to leave this solitude behind. I know that when I am finished writing for today, I will go home. I long for home. When I get there, I will probably gripe at my son at some point, because he will resist washing up and getting into bed; but, finally, he will settle down. I will lie next to

him. I will turn to face him and while there is still a measure of delight in his eyes, I will tell him a story.



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