

MY SUMMER OF '99: ORIGINS

Ted Rees



Chest wet. Blood seeping down to clavicle from facial lacerations. Frost in hair becoming dew as the sun hits his body tied to a split-rail fence.

Chest wet. Belly wet. Swamp ass. Sheets soaked.

I t's the summer and I'm having the same nightmare I've been having since the previous October. My eyes are open, the cicadas and insects throb outside, but I can still see the smooth, pronounced Adam's apple bobbing slowly as he drowns "in his own blood," this sodden scarecrow a monument on the high plains, a place I've never been now dousing my dreamlife. I allow my body to remain motionless for a few moments, resting in the stew of my fear and the thin twin mattress, before I flip the damp, threadbare Mickey Mouse sheets to the side, get out of bed, and take a few short steps to the attached bathroom.

As I piss, I turn to the right and gaze at my frame in the cheap full-length mirror leaning against the bathroom wall. My belly hangs over my crown and my dick ever so slightly, and my tits seem to settle slightly farther down my chest than the last time I checked. After shaking, I rotate my body and face the mirror. I am a fat boy, and judging from the rapid and resented spread of hair from my crotch to my thighs and up toward my belly button and armpits, I am turning into a fat young man.

I am a fat faggot, I think to myself, prodding one of my breasts with an index finger.

Earlier in the summer, I had resolved to change the circumstances of my body and my desires by rejecting the former and accepting the latter. At academic summer camp, I'd come out to my nerdy friends, who thought nothing of my queerness. After camp finished and I was back home living with my parents, waiting through the mid-Atlantic swelter for high school to start, I came out to my skate rat and punk friends, who also thought nothing of it. I began eating less and bicycling every day through leafy suburban streets to the chain bookstore, where I hid myself in the mostly-ignored photography and art book section, flipping through skin-heavy tomes like *The Male Nude* and collections of Bruce Weber photographs. At the used bookstore across the street from the chain bookstore, I purchased Allen Ginsberg's selected poems and carried it around in my backpack like a Bible, reading and re-reading "The Bricklayer's Lunch Hour," the first poem that ever gave me a hard-on.

The nightmare persisted, though, despite my attempts to open one part of my world. I stare at my naked body in the mirror and imagine myself strung up like a pig, choking on my own blood. I cannot figure myself living long, and while I know this problem

is the world's and not mine, the fear is mine: the toothy half-grin revealing braces, the prominent brow, the slumped slim frame pistol-whipped and left to rot. Repressing the urge to smash the mirror makes me sweat as I furiously brush my teeth, my belly and breasts shaking back and forth with the motion. It's the same as most mornings.

Chest wet. Belly wet. Swamp ass.

I am riding my mountain bike to the chain bookstore when I see Jay on the sidewalk about a mile away from my destination. He's walking in the same direction I'm riding, so I get a look at the back of him, his swishy walk accentuated by the tight cut-offs clinging to his buttocks. He has grown an inch or two since the end of the school year, but he's still little. As I pass him, I turn to my right to catch a glimpse of his face, and he sees me, scowls, and flips me off. I think of stopping my bike, but then think better of it and ride on.

Jay was the first boy I ever came out to, and the first boy I ever touched. He swore he didn't know if he was gay, but to me and everyone else he was obviously gay, and he and I would fool around sometimes. But when we got a little too close— occasionally holding hands, sharing private jokes with each other at lunch, calling each other by pet names— the whispers about us got a little loud and I cast him aside, pretending like nothing had ever happened between us. The nightmares had started already, and for the rest of eighth grade, we hardly spoke, though he sat across from me in homeroom and we would catch each other staring. In my bedroom that summer, I would close my eyes and remember how he felt in my hands. I didn't blame him for hating me.

At the bookstore, I go straight to the magazines and grab the one I've been eyeing for a few weeks. I'm sweating profusely despite the store's ample air conditioning blasting cool air in every direction. I take a circuitous route behind the games and the floating staircase in order to get to the checkout area near the store's entrance, which is staffed by only one person, a spectacled middle-aged woman with premature grays. The sun is beating down on the asphalt outside the window and a glint from a passing car's window pierces my eyes as my sloppy wet palm places the magazine on the counter. I can feel a bead of sweat falling down my spine into my crack.

The woman looks at the magazine, looks at me, looks at the magazine, then flips through the magazine. She then looks at me again, registering the rainbow flag ring I wear on my left hand whenever I leave my parents' house.

"One second," she says as she grabs her phone. I can hear another phone ring in the information area-cum-manager's office about thirty feet away. The woman at the checkout counter nearly whispers, "I have a young man here who wants to buy a magazine called... *XY Magazine*. Am I allowed to sell him this?" After a few moments during which she nods and I can see the manager

looking at me from their perch, she puts the phone down, scans the magazine, and says, "That will be \$6.30 with tax. Do you need a bag?" She looks straight at me, and I look straight at her, and there is an unmistakable look of disgust in her eyes as she enunciates the last words of her question. I gulp and say, "Yes," and as quickly as she places the magazine into a bag, I take the bag from her and shove it in my backpack and nearly run out of the store.

Outside, it's a sauna. I get on my bike and ride home. I don't see Jay on my ride home. I can feel the magazine burning against my back.

Chest wet. Belly wet. Swamp ass.

The magazine is on the bed, its cover a photograph depicting the slim, slick back of a young man next to a hazy body of water, his sweat shorts pulled slightly below a tanline, revealing the beginnings of his cheeks.

I'm in the bathroom, my bare ass smushed against the press-on tile floor, legs spread, facing the mirror. A safety razor sits next to me, clogged with foam and the last remnants of my pubic hair. The tip of my hard dick drips pre-cum to the floor. I stand up and look at what I've done in the mirror, and I am not sure I like it, though it does *feel* good: my thighs, my pubes, my underarms are all shorn. I delude myself into thinking I look like a version of one of the models in the magazine, or one of the boys I lusted after at nerd camp. I masturbate into the toilet, then take a bath.

Later that night, after I drift off to sleep, I have a nightmare. This time, it's different:

I am in a crowd and can't move. My clothes are too tight for me, and I seem to be growing out of them rapidly. A woman next to me yells, "Hey, watch it!" as I balloon.

I wake up sweating and itching like crazy, the area above my dick covered with hard red bumps. It's the first night of a new nightmare, and high school doesn't begin for another three weeks.

The preceding piece of memoir is part of an ongoing prose project about growing up queer and mentally ill in the culture of the late 90s and early 2000s.

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