

THE DISCO KID

Second private session with Leighton Kingsley, Esq. at Northwestern University in April 1999. Transcript by Francis Winslow.

So, in high school I became very concerned with my looks. Tried everything to figure out what would make me attractive to other boys (as opposed to all those girls flinging themselves at me). I was what you might call ‘straight-passing’. Wore the same stuff as everybody else. But now, I was looking in magazines and studying what people on television wore to cultivate my own style. This was likely when my mother realised I was a queer. She didn’t *say* anything but mentally, I think, she was just like, “Okay. Alright, then.”

Isaac thought it was ridiculous, of course. He was like, “dude, you need to focus on your schoolwork if you don’t wanna get held back a year.” And of course, I was in high school and this was the seventies, so my fashion sense was atrocious (if you’re ever in need of polyester high-waisted pastel pants and satin shirts and paisley neck scarves, I’m your guy). But it was atrocious in a fun, fruity way, so I think I pulled it off.

Pretty soon, people knew me as ‘the disco kid’, which, in my case, was really code for ‘Homo Supreme’. I didn’t mind — of course, I knew what happened to gays in my town but it’s not like I was *out*, or anything.

Isaac worried, though he tried not to show it. He wouldn’t say anything but you could see the fear in his eyes when he looked at me. Like I was an escaped zoo animal. But if he refused to talk about it, I didn’t see why I should bring it up.

Every day at lunch, I would sit by myself on the bleachers by the football field and flip through my magazines. That day I was reading last month's vogue, which I took from the hairdressers. Looking at all the beautiful women between its pages, I wondered if I was meant to be a girl.

I watched some guys who were on the football team running laps until my gaze drifted over to this cheerleader and the linebacker flirting by the water fountain. I watched as the guy wrapped his arm around her waist and I realised in that moment that *I* wanted to hold someone like that. In fact, I'd never wanted anything more in my entire life.

And for a moment I thought I might cry because, as it stood, that was impossible. I could never stand in the open air and lay claim to another boy so thoughtlessly. I'd be putting us in danger.

I thought about how the cheerleader and the football player would probably marry young — I hadn't even *considered* marriage until that point and it seemed so inconceivable to me in the moment I had to laugh. They'd live in a modest but spacious house right here in their hometown and they'd have children — I'd never have children, I thought— then they'd grow old together and die. All within a 10-mile radius of where they first started courting, unwittingly observed by a jealous pansy.

I was about to go find a bathroom stall to cry in when this big guy, another football player, came and stood in front of me. He was tall and had a white towel draped over his huge shoulders and I knew what these people were like, so I said, "do you mind? You're blocking my view of the parking lot."

He said, “oh, *that’s* what you were lookin’ at, huh?”

I raised my eyebrow at him, then rolled up my copy of *Vogue* and said, “don’t flatter yourself. If I wanted to watch some primitive creature lumber around vaguely for an hour, I’d watch Frankenstein.”

He scoffed and wiped his face with his towel, then replied, “I never read that one. Was Frankenstein hot?”

I looked at him carefully before saying, “depends who you mean. The monster or the creator?”

“Whichever one’s hotter, I guess.”

“The creator, then, I’d say.” I continued to eye him. “Unfortunately, he was also an asshole.”

He smiled at me, which sent shockwaves down to my fingers. He said, “guess you get away with a lot when you’re hot.”

We looked at each other for a long while. Then he stood up and said, “I come here late on Tuesdays after school for solo training,” which was the longest sentence he’d said to me so far. “You should come watch. Just try to think of some nicer people to compare me to.”

I didn’t say anything but I watched him leave, trying and failing to remember if he gave me his name.

I wasn't sure if this guy was into me, so I decided to test my theory on Tuesday. That morning, I arrived to school in my best outfit — an offensively denim ensemble, but rest assured it was fashion forward for the time — and made a point of walking past his locker on my way to Calculus. I cast a carefully rehearsed glance his way but he didn't so much as look at me. I was devastated.

As I headed to the football field after last period, Isaac cornered me near the gymnasium and asked if I wanted to have dinner at his place after school, saying he felt guilty for neglecting me. I told him not to and that I couldn't tonight because I had stuff to do, then I told him goodbye before hurrying to the field.

The guy was running laps as I arrived and sat up on the bleachers. I watched him for a long time. His legs were thick and toned and powerful and I was mesmerised by them. I imagined how each dip and curve of taut muscle would feel under my hand and then I pinched myself for thinking that.

There were a few other kids scattered around the field but they all eventually slunk off, leaving us alone. After some time, he stopped to wipe his face with that white towel, then unnecessarily lifted the bottom of his t-shirt to wipe it again. He climbed up the bleachers and sat down on the bench beside me much closer than he had the day before, then lowered his head and said quietly, "I saw you today. Walking down the hall in that thing," and he pointed at my shirt, which had the top three buttons tastefully undone. "I know what you were doing."

I looked at him coyly and asked, "what was I doing?"

"Showing off," he said. "That's your thing, isn't it? You love the attention. Even if it's negative."

I didn't know what to say to this. So I said, "Everybody likes to be looked at."

And the guy said, "not everybody. Some people prefer to hide. But you — you're really out there."

Again, I didn't know what to say. I wasn't sure what this guy was trying to achieve. At a loss for anything intelligent to say, I asked, "what's your name, anyway? I don't believe we've met."

And the guy laughed and went, "Wow. Harsh. I'm Joshua. I play quarterback — Isaac said you two are neighbours, or something?"

"That's right," I said. "And I suppose you think just because you're on the football team, everybody should be totally obsessed with you?"

Joshua grinned at me and said, "Well, yeah. And, if I remember correctly, just yesterday you were watching me long enough to see me break a sweat. Sounds a little obsessive, doesn't it?"

I was mortified. But I couldn't lose face now. "I've been considering getting into sports," I said, real nonchalant. "I was just scoping out the area."

"Yeah, I bet you were," he replied, all sarcastic and knowing. He leant toward me and whispered, "you don't have to pretend. It's just us, now."

I'll admit I got a little flustered on account of how close his face was to mine all of a sudden and how hot his breath was on my skin. I had enough of my wits about me not to go mute at the first sign of action, though, so I asked, "what exactly do you think I'm hiding?"

Josh looked around at the empty football field before turning back to face me with a little smirk. “I can spot a queer from a mile off,” he said. “Helps when they put up their own flashing neon signs.”

I went cold. I thought, *oh, God. It's happening. This is it.* It was something I always knew would happen to me one day but I never expected it to happen so soon and I never imagined I would walk right into it like this. I was too frightened to run so I braced myself for the attack. Then Josh put his face right up next to mine and whispered, “follow me.” So I did.

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What happened behind the bleachers that Tuesday stayed between me and Josh; I wasn't going to give Isaac the satisfaction of either confirming or denying his suspicions about us. And then there was the Obvious — but also something Josh said to me before we left. He'd grabbed my arm when I turned to go and reached out with his hand to readjust the collar of my shirt before saying softly, “I think it's more special if we don't tell anybody. Don't you agree?”

I often asked myself after that, ‘*don't I agree?*’ While I allowed people to speculate about me, I never said anything outright. To do so was a death sentence.

Joshua and I soon developed our own, private little game. We ignored each other at school but I would wear things I knew he liked on me — the black and white gingham shirt, the fur-lined denim jacket, the blue ascot with the salmon button-down. He told me once that dark red was my colour, but I didn't own anything with

that. I saved my allowance for a full two weeks to afford this bright red, ruffled satin thing from a catalogue. You should've seen my mother's face when *that* arrived.

When we weren't coyly pretending the other didn't exist, Joshua and I would squirrel ourselves away into little alcoves and supply closets, allowing ourselves the closeness and the language that didn't exist between us in public. At first, I felt vindicated — all I ever wanted was for people like him to acknowledge me, to give me a second glance once in a while. But if I could draw their gaze for more than a second, for reasons more than curiosity — if I could actually *be* with one of them — then perhaps I was something special.

But when the vindication wore off, it left something softer in its place. Something fragile that had to be carefully contained lest it be destroyed in its infancy. I wanted to give him everything I had to offer. My time. My attention. My body. Anything he asked, I did for him. I'd have followed him barefoot into the ocean if he'd only led the way.

We all look back on our teen years and laugh at how much we blew things out of proportion, but I think that's awfully hypocritical of us. Perhaps I was inflating the significance of these moments with Joshua, hopped up on those dreaded teenage hormones, but the happiness I felt with him was nevertheless as real as the pain of a broken bone.

Equally real was the contempt I felt for the girl, Jennifer, who hung off him all hours of the day like a sloth. I hated how brazen she was with him. How she could drape herself over him in front of a hundred of her peers, like she was marking her territory, and nobody would question it. I would have killed for the power to claim

him like that, to selfishly wrap my arm around his waist and kiss him in front of the whole student body. I'd never talked to the girl, but I just knew she was the worst.

At some point, it became too much. Josh and I were skipping fourth period to make out in the boy's restroom and I stopped for a second to ask, "when are you going to break up with her?"

He looked at me blankly and said, "who? Jennifer?" and I said, "yeah. You told me you're only staying with her 'cause her aunt died last summer. So, when are you going to break things off?"

He immediately said, "let's not talk about this now," but I'd been waiting all day to do this so I continued.

I said, "I hate seeing her put her hands all over you. You get angry when I look at other guys, so when are you going to end things?"

Josh went silent. Then he nodded slowly and said, "after prom."

I honestly hadn't expected him to give me an answer. I had been prepared to have a full-out argument — but his answer was so final, it left me a little speechless. Finally, I said, "you mean it?" He nodded again. I tried to figure from his eyes whether he was lying but he hardly flinched. "But then the semester will be over," I said, and I hated how small my voice was. "You'll be going to college in the fall. We won't see each other"

"Of course we will," he said. "We'll have all summer. Think about it, Leigh. Jen's gonna be a thousand miles away. It'll be just you and me for two whole months. Then you can have me all to yourself."

And against everything I knew about the world, I believed him.

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I hardly talked to Isaac after that Tuesday; we only spoke as and when we had to about schoolwork or travel arrangements or our mothers — which wasn't that different to how things had been before. Only now, instead of loneliness, there was restlessness. My life at school had become a series of waiting periods in between brief pockets of bliss with Joshua. When I wasn't with him, I was dreaming up a myriad of scenarios where he and Jennifer broke up at prom — in some iterations, there was a speech and a crying girl, and in others there was a shouting match and a fully-choreographed fight scene a la Bruce Lee.

Underclassmen weren't invited to senior prom, but there was a way into the event for us through the prom committee. I signed up expecting to bus tables and sweep up confetti and condoms but, when I turned up at the first meeting, I was greeted personally by Tracy, who sat me down in front of an overflowing black binder with a post-it note on it reading 'PROM '78'. She wanted me to help transform the gymnasium into something out of Saturday Night Fever. As Tracy opened the binder, my eyes wandered to the corner of the room where a blonde girl was pinning up notices on the council room cork board. I recognised her by the way her right foot popped when she reached up high. Jennifer was clearly playing the long-con, no doubt hoping her ass-kissing on the committee would win her the crown this year. Could you imagine if that were how politics worked in the real world? We'd be royally screwed.

Senior prom rolled around and, sure enough, Jennifer and Josh were named King and Queen. In my daydreams, the breakup happened right there on stage — but, in reality, they each gave a short, rehearsed speech (both evidently written by Jennifer) and then the DJ played ‘Dancing Queen’ as they slow-danced in the middle of the room and the plastic glass of sparkling apple cider I was holding cracked in my hand.

I slunk outside during the dance to clean off my hand and touch up my hair, wondering what on earth I was doing spending my Saturday evening at someone else’s Big Night. I felt like the bridesmaid at a wedding who was only there to balance out the group shot at the reception.

I was out there longer than I thought because, before I knew it, the gymnasium doors swung open and Josh stepped out into the evening air, looking exquisite in this cornflower tux that matched his eyes and brought out the slight orange tinge to his blonde hair. He didn’t look at me at first, just walked right on past before leaning back against the wall. I looked at him, this enormous pressure building up in my chest, and tried to find the right words. I never knew what to say to him in these moments. I couldn’t tell him he was beautiful — boys back then didn’t like to hear that kind of thing. I often settled with saying nothing at all, but I kind of wish I’d told him just once. Maybe things would’ve been different if I had.

I asked, “did you do it? Is it over?”

Josh shrugged and said, “I’m working on it.” I was tired and my free hand was still clenched from watching the crowning ceremony so I snapped at him. “Work harder,” I said. “I don’t want her ruining our summer.”

“She won’t,” he assured me. Then he shuffled right up next to me and slipped an arm around my waist, which siphoned out all the bitterness, and he said, “walk with me?” So I did.

We walked along the side of the main building before turning the corner at the back end, where the dumpsters were. We stopped in between two of them and Joshua encircled me with both arms and whispered, “I’ve been thinking about you all night. It’s so hot when you get jealous.” I knew I should’ve been flattered by this, but it only made me squirm. He went on, “it’s so exciting, hiding like this. Don’t you think?” I didn’t, but I nodded anyway, distracted by the look in his eyes. “Jennifer’s always telling people about our relationship, but you and me — we don’t have to share it with anybody. Only two people in the world know what we’ve done together. Isn’t that incredible?”

I suppose he was right. You gotta think how many times throughout history something has transpired between two men, or two women or just any two people, and has remained between them to the grave. No yearbook photos captioned ‘Best Couple’ or word-of-mouth accounts of dramatic fallings-out. Their love remains forever in the abstract. There is something beautiful about that. Especially these days, when the papers notify us of the every ejaculation of any given stage, screen or television star.

The evening air went suddenly cold. There was an odd, breathless silence like the seconds before a glass shatters on the tile. It was all wrong, somehow — but how could it be? The sky was clear and the stars were out and Joshua, who looked lovelier than ever, held me like a delicate thing. Wasn’t I lucky just to be here, in our little

pocket of time where it didn't matter that he would be marrying a woman from his church in five years and I would likely be on some roadside somewhere, wandering along with my thumb stuck out but no particular place to go?

Josh pressed his face against mine, his breath in my ear as he said, "I don't wanna wait until summer." He clutched me close and coaxed me up against the wall. "I want you now," he whispered.

I felt the chill of the evening as Josh slipped off my jacket before I could process what was happening. He had me caged in with both arms, so I put a hand up on his shoulder and gently pushed him back, saying, "oh, no, Josh, not tonight." The hand on the small of my back snapped up to grab my wrist and pressed it against the wall. I stared at him. His face was half cast in shadow and the look in his eyes chilled me to the core. His expression was placating but for the first time I noticed there was nothing behind those eyes — what I had always taken for a quiet solemnity in his gaze was in fact cold surveillance. For a minute, I was so frozen with confusion that I just stared off into the distance as Joshua undressed me. I was strangely calm through this part, because no part of it seemed real.

I told myself then, and many times for years afterwards, that I must have mistaken another person for Josh, that he had really been inside with Jennifer the entire time and I'd simply projected his likeness onto a complete stranger. That way, I could only blame myself for being so careless.

The fear didn't set in until he turned me around. I felt the coarseness of the brick wall on my cheek, which seemed to reactivate all my other senses. My arms were pressed between my stomach and the wall and the weight of him against me was so

immense that it hurt to move as my skin scraped against the brick. I began to shake, with fear or anger or despair I don't know anymore. At some point, I believe whatever it was melted into a strange relief. *This* was it. The thing that waits to happen to everyone like me. It was happening now, and then it never had to happen again. Because back then, I kind of thought you had just the one bad night, and then after that you were either invincible or dead.

When the weight lifted off me, I thought I really had died. I remember Isaac saying that when you go to the afterlife, you don't remember anything about life on earth because you're immediately immersed in such a cloud of bliss that past, present, future — it just evaporates and all you're left with is, basically, God.

But it wasn't God that hit Joshua over the head with a rhinestone-encrusted platform heel, that night. When it became apparent I was, in fact, alive, I turned around to look at him lying there slumped against the dumpster, clutching his head. I didn't stand up right away; it was like all my molecules had commingled with those of the bricks and I had become inextricable from the wall.

Jennifer stood over Joshua's crumpled form, her heel-wielding hand raised up above her head for another swing. Her eyes snapped up to meet mine and I could see them sparkling with fury. Though her expression didn't budge, she asked me angrily, "are you okay?"

I nodded.

A small crowd of smartly dressed students soon gathered around us, some of them with hands over their mouths in shock and others excitedly whispering to each other.

I was at first mortified — and then that strange relief came over me again. While the looks they gave me weren't at all pleasant, it occurred to me that I had been given an enormous amount of power. The whole scene rather spoke for itself but the nature of it was in my hands. Here I was, a pariah standing over the fallen king, poisoned apple still in hand, exposed but thereby emboldened.

So I stood up. I smoothed down my hair with both hands and gave the crowd a small but assured smile. I picked up my shirt and pulled on my jacket and gave Jennifer a little nod before sauntering off, heart still racing, mind still streaming — but altogether actualised. There wouldn't be speculation about me on Monday; there would be gospel. I'd survived my one bad night and I was ready to take on the world.

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Charles is picking Patrick up from preschool today, so I have a few more minutes if you have any questions. Go right ahead. I'm an open book.

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