

Back To School

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

The ominous signs have been up for months. The days are shorter and crisper, the sun more intense as it slices through a deep blue sky, and everything is more vibrant, more alive as the summer's stifling hold releases and the first frosty nights snap us into awareness. It's the time for those three words that still have the power to fill me with dread and fear: Back-To-School. It makes no matter that I graduated from college over five years ago, I still cringe and quiver with foreboding when the big yellow and black signs go up in the stores.

Looking back, it seems somewhat odd that I would dread it so. In grade school I was one of the most popular kids ~ funny, entertaining, smart, always-impeccably-dressed ~ and I enjoyed the time with friends, the art projects, and even the activities of physical education. Music class was a favorite, lunchtime was filled with laughter, and while everyone else groaned with the mandatory minutes of "silent reading", inwardly I was glad for the momentary respite from socialization. Still, I would have much preferred to have been on my own at home – exploring the forest behind our house, reading the books I wanted to read, drawing and painting and creating projects of my own choosing.

The rigors of schoolwork and test-taking came easy to me ~ straight-A report cards were just happy accidents for which I never had to work very hard. I tended to be a gregarious show-off, to ease the boredom of being there and to entertain those around me. I was the fastest to climb the ropes to the top of the gymnasium, slapping the dusty ceiling beam with my hand until the teacher noticed, all to the exhilarating sounds of kids calling out my name in congratulations.

Of course, at that time of our lives, sexuality played absolutely no part in our existence. Boys and girls played together without awkwardness, while boys played with boys and girls played with girls without anything questionable about it. Most of my closest friends were girls, with whom I confided secrets and inside jokes. I felt attracted to certain boys, but had no idea what that feeling meant. It was just a warmth in me, a cozy, giddy sensation that escaped just before cognition came to fruition. There was confusion here as well. The crazy thought of doling out exquisite pain upon those very boys unfathomably thrilled me. Maybe I knew then that one day they would turn, that their acceptance of me was limited to the all-too-brief years of childhood, and that the onslaught of adolescence would irrevocably alter the purity of our friendships.

As the years passed and adolescence encroached, my popularity waned. I withdrew from the easy interaction I once shared with almost everyone else, turning inward when I sensed I wasn't like other boys. They began to notice girls differently now – it was rare for the sexes to mingle outside of volleyed insults and teasing. Middle school became high school and soon I found myself drowning in pools of depression, despondent without knowing why.

Though I remained for the most part well-liked and accepted, I was never completely myself. The droll, witty, sarcastic comic that cut down jocks and cheerleaders with anarchistic abandon was just a cover for the cowering queer within me. Outwardly I didn't care. Maintaining a cynically-cool façade is the goal of many a teenager, and I excelled at it. I wasn't taunted that much because I kept well below the radar. Subversively I gazed at the football players in their tight pants outlining the underlying lines of their underwear, gaudy golden lycra catching the light and clinging to every curve and bulge. I stole surreptitious glances at the older guys in gym class ~ white briefs and muscles and chest hair at once erotic and intimidating. Would I ever grow into one of those men? Would the desire for women reveal itself to me suddenly? Quietly I waited, but the revelation never came.

One day I was eating lunch when a boy I didn't know approached my table. He slapped me across the face, called me a faggot, slapped me again, and walked away. I met his violence with vehement denials ~ inwardly and outwardly ~ and somehow shrugged it off. That boy, in all his stupidity, had unwittingly said the one thing that was true, and I, scared and confused and alone, fought that frightening truth to its death. Somewhere inside I knew too, but I wasn't ready to acknowledge it.

That was my junior year of high school. The first boy I ever had a crush on would kill himself that spring. My best friend would move to Denmark. My high school years were nearing their end. The innocence was over ~ suddenly summer was no longer the release it had once been, and life, not school, was what I now feared.