

OF HEART & HOME

Summer 1999

By Alan Ilagan

My name is Alan. I am seven years old. I like to draw and paint. I like flowers. I pick flowers for my Mommy. I help my Daddy in the garden. I love my Mommy. I have one brother. He is five years old. We play hide and seek. My Grammy visits on Christmas. We go to her house for Easter. We play cards at night. I love Grammy. My birthday is in the summer. I like to swim. My Mommy made us wear floaties on our arms in the shallow end. One day I took them off and swam without them! She was surprised! My Daddy peels grapes for us. He cuts our hair in the basement. I like reading. I love my family.

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My Daddy belts us. It is because we are bad and because we misbehave. I get red marks. I can see them on my tippy-toes in the bathroom mirror. I jump up high to see them better. My Mommy doesn't spank us. She gets mad. Sometimes she yells and then she is mad. My brother makes her cry. I hate him then. We fight sometimes and he cries. I am sorry. We wear five underpants so the belt won't hurt when we get on trouble. Then we laugh. We're not supposed to play with the hose. We got belted for that. Our neighbor saw it. He laughed at us. I want to be a painter and a florist when I grow up and maybe a dentist. My Daddy is a doctor. We go on vacations in the summer. I like the beach. I make sandcastles.

A boy and his mother walk into the cool sanctuary of a liquor store in the middle of a hot summer day. They are buying drinks for a lawn party later that week. The boy wanders around mounds of wine bottles and rows of thick glass jugs. The air-conditioned atmosphere is refreshing, and there is a scent of sterility that vaguely reminds of a hospital. A grizzled old man sits at the counter, looks over his glasses, and takes a slip of paper from the boy's mother. They smile and talk. It is grown-up language, so the boy explores the dark recesses of the store. He senses magnificence and, though he does not realize it yet, decadence. He sees, in the way that only children see, a chance to become big and imposing and powerful, like those big men who drink at his parents' parties. He wants someday to frighten others in the same way those men frighten him, but he doesn't know this now. He understands only that there will be a party, and that he hates the taste of those grown-up drinks and can't see why they drink them.

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A young man sits alone by the window. A glass of water waves gently in his hand. He can't remember last night and he has to lie down again. A moment of worry passes as his head re-adjusts, but he doesn't think he'll have to vomit again. He feels a flicker of pain in his left arm, a return to dead reality. Looking down, he discovers the large purple bruise and wonders what made it. There is similar hurt in his thumb and he locates another abrasion. A sudden release of saliva fills his mouth. He swallows it quickly away, but it's not working. Bracing himself, he heaves a torrent of light yellow fluid into the toilet. It feels like he is losing everything that was once inside of him and at any moment he expects chunks of swollen organs to choke their way up his throat. Tears fall numbly

form his eyes and watery mucus flows from his nose. He wants to die and he wants to drink.

The boy stands in a storage room of the basement. It is dark except for the harsh doorway of a distant naked light bulb. A figure appears, his silhouette black before the light, the glowing red tip of a cigarette slowly approaching Alan. The boy has done something bad, he has urinated on his Uncle like he does in his bed in the middle of the night, and his Uncle holds him violently. In that hell his favorite Uncle rasps wickedly, "*I will put this cigarette out in your eye,*" and then he is gone. Alan crumples to the floor, heaving convulsions of fear and nervous laughter. His hands are shaking. His hands will always shake after this day.

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The boy lies in bed. In the middle of that black night a man enters his room. Shutting the door carefully behind him he stands still and adjusts to the absence of light. The boy's heart beats faster, clawing its way up his throat. The dim shadow moves. A growing terror as he spies his Uncle through half-closed eyes, approaching him, closer, ever closer, and then he is there. His hands hard and rough around the boy's little throat, and all because of a childish prank. Squeezing with hatred and then the words he was to hear forever after:

"If it wasn't for your Father I would kill you."

His Father. Hero and Savior, rescuing his Son in some twisted irony, powerful simply in his existence. His Uncle lets go and walks back into the night, receding like a deadly ghost.

PART I

During the Winter of 1993, Amsterdam High School's Senior English Honors Class was assigned a Creative Writing Project to be completed by the Spring. The students were given free reign to design their projects, the only requirement being that it involve writing in some way. Most of the class sighed at the ponderous task put forth by the new teacher, miffed by the hefty workload at a time when they were supposed to be enjoying their final High School days, but one person saw silently in his chair, secretly delighted at the possibility that had been presented. He didn't realize it then, but at that moment the seeds of a life-long passion had been planted, and in the ensuing months it would take root and grow. He raised his hand and offered his sole stipulation, "Will anyone else read this, other than you?" he asked. The teacher promised that no one would.

It would be a grand undertaking, a way to finally speak out for the abuse he felt he suffered at the hands of his hometown, his high school, his friends, and his family. It would be an indictment of those who had wronged him the most. He'd been given a lifetime of ammunition, and the time had finally come. By the end of that day, Alan Ilagan had come up with his Creative Writing project. He did not know it then, but he was about to create a myth that would forever change his life.

The project would raise a firestorm of activity, the echoes of which reverberate to this very day. Ultimately it would bring tears to the eyes of his parents, obliterate his goody-two-shoes image in the eyes of his teachers and fellow students, severely alter his

relationships in the eyes of his friends, and finally be submitted to the judgmental eyes of the school psychiatrist.

The project was conceived as a series of letters written to a faraway love interest. His narrator would be called “Frederick” and he would be writing to a girlfriend named “Melissa”. Already the line between fact and fiction was disappearing, as Alan had been dating a girl named Melissa Natale for a few months. He explained the premise to the teacher and got the go-ahead for his Creative Writing Project. Initially it was to be a generic love story, a series of letters written by “Frederick” who was separated from his “Melissa” for one reason or another. Only later did it become clear that this was turning into something much more.

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“This is how we communicate in this family.”

These are the first words spoken after the three-hour-plus drive from Boston, MA to Amsterdam, NY. Alan is explaining the preceding silence to his friend Chris Vaeth, who, along with Alissa Myrick and Alan’s boyfriend Paul Fraley, have accompanied Alan to his hometown of Amsterdam to take in a showing of *Sunset Blvd.* at Proctor’s Theatre in Schenectady, NY. Mrs. Laurel Ilagan had dutifully picked up the group at the Ilagan condo, and in the ensuing ride to their hometown barely a word passed the mother and son who sat in the front seat. There was no animosity; there was simply silence.

After giving his friends a quick tour of the house at 20 Pershing Road, everyone assembled in the Ilagan dining room for a steak dinner with all the amenities of Thanksgiving Day. The good china was out, the sterling silver utensils sparkled, and the best Waterford crystal clinked beneath the immaculate chandelier. Dr. and Mrs. Ilagan sat at the heads of the formal table, with Alan and Paul on one side and Chris and Alissa facing them on the other. Mrs. Ilagan offered dish after delicious dish, passing around an abundance of homemade food. A bottle of red wine was opened and poured into the crystal goblets.

The conversation was pleasant, if politely constrained. Most of it was carried by Alan’s parents and Chris and Alissa. Alan opened his mouth only for witty and cutting comments, mainly at the expense of his parents. For the most part he ate in silence, eyes downcast, occasionally glancing towards his Mom or Dad, and then retreating out the window to the dark expanse of his backyard where he had once played as a child.

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In that cold winter of 1993, Alan’s very first writing project was slowly taking shape. Instead of focusing on romantic letters, his words were becoming subconsciously confessional. No one is exactly sure of the events that triggered Alan’s estrangement from his family, but at the time he was writing he hadn’t spoken to his parents for over a year. It was a silence that had profound effects on him, and it made his writing immediate and deeply personal. His usual habit was to write after dinner. An early excerpt:

{Dear Melissa,

My parents always tell me that they’ve given me everything and that I am extremely lucky. In a way that’s true. I had all the clothes, food, and luxuries that I could ask for. They gave my brother and me everything we wanted. I suppose they even gave us some love. The one thing they never gave us, the one thing they absolutely refused to let us have was our childhood. How ironic that it happened to be the only thing I really wanted.

I remember that hot July day when my brother and I were outside. Dad had just set up the sprinkler and the sparkling, cool water was too tempting for either of us to resist. We ran through the falling water. The soft, wet grass felt so good under our feet. We laughed and shouted and soon were drenched with coolness. Then we heard him.

We heard the muffled shouts from within that cold brick house. He hadn't even waited to get outside before he started yelling. The deep, sinking feeling took over again, as it had done a thousand times before. He unstrapped his belt with the skill of experience. I tightened my face as I tried to prepare for the impending pain. Then it was over. My brother and I limped into the house filled with shame. We didn't exchange words about it; it was better that way.

It wasn't child abuse. I'd like to think my father never meant to hurt us, it was just his way of discipline. I just wish it didn't have to happen so many times. I should've learned to be good. Yet again it was I who screwed things up. As long as I live I'll never understand how you can love someone like me. ~ Frederick }

His troubled family life entering its second year, Alan was taking his writing into emotionally risky territory and exposing the inner-workings of the previously-well-guarded Ilagan family. Knowing that what he wrote would be seen as his own life, he took little precautions in protecting the privacy of those he depicted. He had started the silence, and he would be the one to end it.

Still, it was never his intent to show the work to his parents. The original compositions, usually hand-written on note-book paper, stayed secretly in his back-pack, which he kept on his person at all times. Alan knew that reading it would hurt them, and despite his anger, he would never maliciously inflict such pain.

Pain and sadness were a mainstay at the time he assembled the project. Something much deeper, and far darker, was at work besides adolescent trauma. He went to bed crying almost every night and, while never clinically diagnosed, it is probable that this was the beginning of a life-long battle with depression. It also marked the first of several serious suicide attempts.

"One of the darkest and scariest times of my life," is how Alan sums it up today. "I would get upset by the smallest things and they would build and build until I was bawling and screaming and writhing about on the floor just wishing to die. And there was no reason for me to be so upset, I simply *was*."

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The dinner droned on at the Ilagan house, and the topic eventually came around to school. Both Chris and Alissa explained their ongoing graduate work, as Alan looked quietly down at his plate. Graduate school had long been a point of contention between him and his parents, and the awkward silence that ended the school discussion told more than any number of words could have said.

Chris commented, "Alan's love for his parents and vice versa seems present yet unspoken, at least in front of strangers."

Alissa saw a different side to Alan that evening. "He rolls his eyes, he looks bored, he gets quiet (except for varied cutting comments) and he sighs a lot," she says of his behavior at the dinner table.

It probably sounds a lot worse than it was. Alan himself has proclaimed that the dinner was "one of the best I've had at that table in some time." Still, much remains

unsaid and unexplained. There was certainly a coldness evident between members of the Ilagan family, and a shrill sterility that shot through an evening in their company. It is not necessarily a family without love, but it is missing the outgoing and openly-affectionate behavior that goes on in many families once they have shut out the outside world and are sitting around the dinner table.

The prominently displayed framed photographs taken during holidays and birthdays past seem to depict happiness, but that giddy innocence of days-gone-by seems to have been stricken with an arch formality that leaves visitors slightly uncomfortable at every turn. After spending any time with Alan and his family, it is apparent than the past is full of tumult, most of it deeply buried, and none of it completely forgotten or forgiven.

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He hadn't spoken to his mother for almost two years, save the absolute minimum required for living with another person. Most assumed he didn't care, and in his silenced they saw acquiescence to unsaid accusations of apathy. In fact, his heart was being torn apart over the deterioration of their relationship. He sought catharsis in his writing.

Another excerpt laments the "loss" of his mother, and, in effect, his childhood:

"Dear Melissa

I remember a time when she came into my room late at night and comforted me as only she could. Her hint of sweet perfume and the softness of her nightgown always ran my fears away. Her hands rubbed round and round in small steady circles on my small back. I can hear the pulsating swishing of my cotton pajamas now. Only when my tears had dried and my eyes had closed did she leave.

I remember a time in a wonderful summer of youth when we splashed and played in the cool waters of the pool. I'd grasp her shoulders as she took me on a submarine ride. We'd playfully race and somehow I always managed to win. We stayed in the pool for hours. I'd get her to play Blind Man's Bluff and we'd laugh and joke the entire time. Then we'd lay in the grass in the warm sun. I'd run to the edge of the yard and pick some flowers, bleeding hearts, for her and she'd accept them gratefully with a hug and a kiss.

I remember that cold, rainy school day when I reluctantly trudged out of the house, saddened by the thought of having to leave her. Half-way to school I turned back. I told the other kids to go on, I had forgotten something. I ran into the house calling her name. She was doing laundry in the basement. She wiped away my tears and hugged me close to her. I had the courage to return to school.

I remember the Christmas Eve when she tucked me and my brother in for the night. "Listen for the sleigh bells," she whispered as she said good-night. We'd wake early the next morning and rush into her room, telling her of all the gifts we had received from Santa. She acted joyously surprised when she had known all along.

I remember cleaning the yard when the first warmth of spring arrived. I'd run barefoot in the fresh green grass, and the work wasn't work when she was around. I remember the hot summer days when I would pick her bouquets from the garden. She'd put them in a vase at the center of the table and we'd sit lazily down enjoying the cool iced tea, but each other's company more.

For so long she was the center of my life. I did everything for her. I want that back. I want to be able to talk feely like we once did. I want to be able to laugh with her

and share things with her. Without her part of me is slowly dying. I want it back, I still love her. ~ Frederick }

In both of the excerpts we have seen, the writing has been simple, almost child-like. It is, almost transparently so, Alan as a little boy, shouting out for love while simultaneously feeling unworthy of it. His oft-repeated claim that the Creative Writing project was entirely fictitious cannot hide the pain and regret that seeps through his writer's voice. The words cry out for help, for understanding, and for forgiveness, but throughout the months of his final high school year, Alan maintained his steadfast silent treatment. To this day, no one is exactly sure what fractured the family so as to warrant such a powerful reaction from a teenage son. Alan himself confirms that "it was less about one specific incident and more of a collective response to a lifetime of hypocrisy and unfairness and emotional manipulation."

Growing up in the Ilagan family was a complicated affair, and the results, as evidenced by Alan and his brother Paul, are complex adults. There was a tangled mass of contradictions that constantly surrounded the boys and each of them dealt with this in his own way. Alan turned inward, shielding himself with a veneer of perfection: straight A's, model behavior, and an outwardly quiet existence. Paul acted out: temper tantrums, misbehavior, and mediocre grades. Up until adolescence they were each other's closest buddies.

"We were best friends when we were little," says Alan. "We had to be. There was no one else. Plus, we were dealing with the same exact things as far as surroundings and being raised by the same people."

The Ilagan brothers grew up in a privileged home, but the privileges they were afforded were not necessarily those that a child needs. They had all the clothes, food, and luxuries most kids wish for, but were lacking in the simple pleasures of childhood.

"All I wanted was to be like the other kids in the neighborhood," Alan explains wistfully. "I wanted to run through the sprinkler and have sleepovers and stay out past eight o'clock. My parents provided for us very well, but they were strict. What they gave us in financial stability they took away in childhood freedom. And it was really the little things that we wanted, like MTV, which we didn't get until the late eighties, or a VCR, which we didn't get until 1990. It sounds simplistic, but those are the things that separate children from the norm, and as a kid that's the last thing you want. Looking back I'm grateful for it, because it forced me to focus on other things. I became well-acquainted with nature in our back-yard, and I devoured books on gardening and pets. But it made me very different from other kids, and that difference was a crucial aspect to whom I became."

One of the fonder memories the boys harbor is that of family vacations. It was one of the few excesses to which Dr. Ilagan acquiesced, mainly at the insistence of Mrs. Ilagan. Even those outings were not without problems.

My Mom was the reason we got to go to all those great places. She would plan out the trips months in advance and come July we were set to go. My Dad did not enjoy them at all, because he hated to miss work, and he just wasn't good at relaxing and having fun. If we were at the beach he'd stay in the hotel room, coming out once or twice to visit us and then retreating to watch television in the air-conditioned room. Towards our last few vacations it became clear that our time together was very forced, and both

my brother and I rebelled by misbehaving. We didn't understand why, if we were on vacation, we had to get up at the crack of dawn when all we wanted to do was sleep. Our vacations were fun, but they were also pretty regimented. And that affects me to this day," he says with a laugh.

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Dinner is over, and Alan drives the kids to the local haunt ~ Super K-Mart. Away from his parents he seems more relaxed and free, less uptight and stern. He is like a little kid suddenly released from the company of adults, and while time has healed many of the wounds, the Ilagan family is still working on the old frictions.

One of the people who has seen the family's evolution for over twenty years is Alan's closest-friend and sister-figure Suzie Ko. Currently acting as his "personal Manager" she has been there from the beginning and remains a powerful confidante. She is certainly an expert on the inner-workings of Alan's mind, and is close enough with his family to call his Mom "Aunt Laurie" and his Dad "Uncle Emil".

"I always felt that it was a distant relationship," she says, describing how Alan interacts with his parents. "I sometimes think that Aunt Laurie is one of the most selfless people that I know. Not selfless like Mother Theresa, but selfless for her kids. And when Alan was a bit younger and less mature, it often seemed to be taken for granted. I think he has a much closer relationship with her now. She seems to be very intuitive into the workings of her son's lives, frighteningly so in fact. And then there's his Dad. Uncle Emil is an enigma. I'm not sure how much of a relationship has developed here."

"He loves his parents, for sure," says Chris Vaeth. "But his spoiled upbringing and communication problems hide this fact well. Alan, in his eccentricities, seems stifled by his parents' conservative nature, and they by his boldness."

A telling clue comes in two of Alissa's observations: "He talks to his Mom more than his Dad... There was zero physical interaction at all in his family." In the mid-nineties that proved true, but as a child Alan engaged in much physical interaction with his parents.

"I remember being very physical with my Mom ~ hugging and playing and stuff ~ when I was very young, up until I was maybe eleven or twelve. And when I was *really* little I remember being that way with my Dad. He held us up on his shoulders and dried our hair after we bathed and peeled grapes for us. But the main thing I remember physically is being hit with a belt by my father. The image of him unbuckling his belt and coming towards me or my brother, the tone in his voice ~ that is indelibly printed in the memories of my father. I wouldn't go so far as to call it child abuse... my Dad just did not know any other way of discipline. And we weren't exactly angels growing up either." Alan feels a need both to blame and protect the man who brought him into the world. He finds fault with his father, but is the first to defend his actions. Alan clearly stands in awe and slight reverence of his Dad, and in a tenth grade writing assignment on a "hero", Alan was one of the only people in the class to pick his father. He has a profound respect for him, as well as a great deal of pride in his accomplishments. "My Dad came from next to nothing and fought and worked for all of his success. And with his friend and co-workers he is funny and charming and completely lovable. With his family... it wasn't always that way."

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In April of 1993, Alan's Creative Writing Project was almost finished. Printed out in bold colors and fonts, and assembled in a leather binder betwixt pages of tissue paper, it was as much a physical assault as a cerebral one. The infamous compilation of letters was a combustible mixture of sex, family strife, romance, abuse, drug use, and ultimately suicide. The somewhat-thin plot-line details the character of Frederick Bennettson, and his relationship with Melissa Jeanwell. Separated (though it's never explained how or why), their only communication is through letters. The reader is only allowed Frederick's words; Melissa is a silent character, a muse perhaps, who brings Frederick's most hidden thoughts to the surface. It is a problematic device in most cases: the reader hears only one side of the story. In this instance it works. These are Alan's words, and Frederick gives them a voice. Great literature it is not ~ most of the passages are trite and whiny, but there are moments of brilliance, as evidenced by the excerpts seen previously, and in the selection that follows:

"My Dearest Melissa,

It is now my favorite hour. The time when day fights dusk, and purple and pink fight for the color of the sky. The snow is content to be a soft powder blue and the sun shines a brilliant orange-yellow. Every color is out in its splendor and I feel glad that I'm able to see it all. It's almost an anxious feeling, like what I'm seeing is so good I have to do something, though I know not what. I suppose sharing it with someone would help to relieve my anxiety. I hate to feel so good alone. The beauty of the moment is almost lost when one is overcome with loneliness and despair.

I know I shouldn't feel so bad, but sometimes the feeling just overtakes me. I am powerless against this unseen force, and I don't realize it has a hold of me until it's too late to go back. It always seems to be too late. I'm now at the point where I can look back and see most of the mistakes I've made, and most of them are because I've waited too long to correct the original mistake before it got out of hand. I fear it's happening again, and once again I'm afraid it's too late.

The hot, horrible feeling of terror, the predestined whirlpool of sadness that I'm falling into, not just falling, but being *pulled* into, is once again too strong for me to resist. All of the past feelings that I've tried so hard to forget come flooding back in a rush. The terrible memories of past horrors push me further down into the deepness of darkness.

I can't let this happen again. I promised myself I would never let them win. I promised to never again give up. Why must this continue? It's hurting me more and more, and I fear it will never stop until I do something. I must do something, anything to make this feeling end. I need to sleep, I must. It's the only way for me to be at peace, for I can't feel if I'm sleeping. I used to think I could go through the motions and turn off my feelings, but I can't. No one can and still retain a sense of sanity. I wish I didn't feel anything though. It would be so much easier. And yes, I would forsake the temporary moments of happiness just to stop the sadness. Those moments aren't meant to last anyway. And if I make it past that problem another one comes up. The problems just don't stop, they hit harder and harder, pummeling me until I give up. Well I think it's time for me to let them win. I can no longer fight them, I no longer have the strength. Why is it that some people can't be happy unless someone is miserable?

Once, a long time ago, I believed that all people were essentially good. I thought that once everything was stripped away, and things really mattered, people would turn

out to be good. I can see I was blind. People aren't good, if anything they are inheritantly (sic.) evil. It's a sad conclusion to come to, but if you knew what I now know you'd feel the same. The years of heartache, of unreleased anger have finally taken their toll. It's over ~ the bad guys win. And yet I'll keep going. I'll keep going through this hellish existence, if only out of a built-in sense of obligation. I hate to live this way, but it's the only way I know, or at least the only way I've been taught. Not even you can help me now. I just want to fall asleep forever. I'd never have to see anyone's awful face again. I could just float away, ignorant to the pain and despair that people have had such joy in giving. I want the world as I know it to disappear. I want it to crumble and fall. I want all the foolish, dumb idiots who think they are the world to slowly die. Let them feel the pain. Then let them make the choices I've had to make. See if they can take it. One day in my life and they'd all be screeching for mercy. Sometime it will come ~ the time when they pay for what they've done will come, and I will survive on that knowledge for now. Just knowing is enough for the moment. Everyone but you and me can go to hell. Let them rot, slowly and painfully. This feeling I have isn't of hate, it's of rationality. It's also not of revenge, believe it or not. For you see, I don't care what happens to everyone else; it matters not to me. To hate them would be letting them win. True I may lose, but I believe it's worth it. True I may lose, but I believe it's worth it. Love, Frederick }

This excerpt comes rather early in the collection of letters, and in it we have a brief encapsulation of the project as a whole. It is easy to dismiss the writing as simple high school cynicism, but as we get beyond the whining there is something gravely telling in this passage. Consciously or not, Alan is describing someone who is severely depressed. He writes that "the feeling just overtakes me" and that he is "powerless against this unseen force." It is a "hot, horrible feeling of terror, the *predestined* whirlpool of sadness."

Most disturbing, but perhaps most hopeful in a peculiar way, is his presumed misuse of the word "inheritantly" in the fifth paragraph. The sentence "People aren't good, if anything they are inheritantly evil" would appear to beg for "inherently" in the place of "inheritantly", thereby attributing evil to the base nature of a human being. As he writes it, evil is an *inherited* trait, implying that it is passed on by the parents, and not intrinsic to humanity. By using "inherently" there would be an absence of a source of evil, offering a dim mystery to the reader. Alan provides a blade of hope in a field of despair, and while technically inaccurate, the word "inheritantly" seems to indicate a sense of accountability for such evil, and a chance that it is not a necessary component of everyone's make-up.

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As the time to depart for *Sunset Blvd.* nears, Alan is barking order to hurry at Chris Vaeth. A true Virgo, Alan is notoriously adamant about tardiness. It is a trait inherited from his father, another Virgo, who raised Alan to abhor lateness.

"It's not just about being late," Alan defends. "I understand that there are circumstances where people will be five or ten minutes late, but anything over half an hour is just complete and total irresponsibility."

There is the well-known rule that if Alan waits for you for over thirty minutes, chances are he will not be there when you arrive. Chris and Alissa put this rule to the test when they were scheduled to see a movie with Alan and showed up forty-five minutes

late. He had already gone home, and was reportedly so steamed that he would not speak to either of them for over a week, opting instead to fire off a heated epistle admonishing them in no subtle way. He is, in the words of Alissa, “a stickler-prick about time.”

“Hey, if I can leave a few minutes early to make sure I’m on time, then I expect the same in return. Public transportation is no excuse. Everyone know nothing runs on time, so you make allowances for that and leave accordingly. But most people think the world revolves around them, and that the subway or the bud will be waiting just when they get there. You wouldn’t take those chances if you had a job interview or had to make a plane departure. Why do you use friendship as an excuse for being careless?” He has decidedly strong feelings on the issue, and is defensive when questioned what the fuss is about.

“Look, it’s more than an issue of being late. It’s an insult. It shows someone has, unconsciously or not, shown blatant disregard for another person. It’s a question of respect,” he concludes, and the tone of finality in his voice ends the subject. That respect is something he demands of his friends, but only in-as-much as he gives it. When that respect is not returned, he takes it to heart, which leads to the disappearance of old friends Kim and Simon from his life.

Originally, Kimberley Caola and Simon Towers were to have accompanied the four of them to *Sunset Blvd.*, and until now the reasons for their absence have gone unexplained. Unlike his past antics, Alan has remained pretty much mum on the issue. Rather than inciting a bout of ranting and raving, the touchy topic seems almost a non-subject with Alan. When confronted with the ‘Where are they now?’ question, he simply shrugs.

“The last time I spoke with Kim was a few days before we were scheduled to leave for Amsterdam to see *Sunset*. She and Simon had known for weeks that I couldn’t fit them in my car, and they had each promised to get there on their own, so I really wasn’t doubting that they would come,” he explains without bitterness or regret. “Remember, I ordered the tickets for this seven months before-hands, at their request. Then about a week before the show, Kim called and said she was having car trouble, but that they would still be there somehow,” he continues with a slightly quizzical countenance. “So, a couple days later I get a call from Simon saying that he wasn’t sure how they would get there, and I asked straight out if they were coming or not, and once again I was told that they would be there by bus or train if need be. I made it clear that I had two \$50 tickets that I had bought half a year ago for them, but he re-assured me they would be there. The next day Kim called and said it looked like there was no way, what with all the car trouble, that she and Simon could make it. I mentioned the ticket money and she was shocked to discover that I hadn’t paid for the tickets out of my own pocket, and that I had to pay my parents back for them... but this isn’t about the money. Kim then said she would call me back by six o’clock that day and try to figure out a solution, and she never called. That was the last time I’ve spoken with her.”

The rift between the three of them seemed a final breaking point in their friendship, and the question remains whether there are any feelings of anger or resentment towards either Kim or Simon. After a dismissive chuckle, Alan shakes his head.

“There are really no feelings either way. In some ways I kind of expected them to bail; it’s happened so many times in the past. There always seemed to be something ~ car

trouble, emotional breakdowns, whatever... and if they really wanted to be there they could have. We had some good times together, but they're not really the kind of people I want as cherished friends. They don't want to give back what they get."

He stops himself and smiles, "This is sounding bad isn't it? Look, Kim and Simon were two friends from a certain part of my life. I bear no ill-will towards them, but we really don't have that much in common anymore. Kim seems content to stay in retail for the time being whereas I had to move on, and Simon and I never shared any of the same interests except for work. It seems very far in the past, and that's why I really don't think about it much unless someone brings it up."

Alan at first seems shocked when asked if he felt left out when Kim and Simon started dating. "What?! Let the record show that I was the one pushing them onto each other. If it wasn't for me saying something to both of them, they'd probably still be pussy-footing around, afraid that the other wouldn't feel the same way." When the possibility of him being jealous over their union rears its head, he is less boisterous, and while clearly tired of talking about the situation, a faint glimmer of the old Alan emerges as he smiles a secret smile and answers the question.

"I am not jealous of what they have, because I wouldn't want it. My boyfriend never cheated on me, and I know for a fact that that's something Kim cannot claim. But I'm done with talking about that ~ it's all over." He has slung his final arrow, and another chapter is done.

"I feel that he is a very loyal friend," Suzie concludes. "I've seen this tested throughout the years, and I've seen him drop people for being disloyal and downright rude. They deserve it though. He looks for reciprocity, although he sometimes forgets to consider that people have different gauges of friendship and loyalty. And he takes stupid carelessness very seriously and personally when sometimes it's just carelessness. So, I guess what I'm getting at is that he is more sensitive about certain things than he shows."

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Our subconscious mind words in mysterious ways, and while we often strive to suppress the feelings and desires of which we aren't particularly proud, they have a way of surfacing and leading us to the truth, in spite of the pain involved. It was always Alan's intent to keep his Creative Writing Project away from the eyes of his parents, knowing full well that it would hurt them. Despite this declaration, much of his writing seemed to be written expressly for Dr. and Mrs. Ilagan. In some passages he goes so far as to address them directly:

{Go ahead and break my neck. Whip me with your belt harder and harder. See if you can make me bleed. Don't kill me until you've broken every last bone in my body. I love the pain. I love the pain your words inflict... Hurt me, daddy. Unbuckle your belt and unleash your power over your helpless son. Don't stop with just 7 or 8 hits, keep going. Those scars will only last a few years at the most, you've got to hit harder. Please hurt me mommy. I want to feel the sting of your words, the hatred in your tone. And you too, take the belt from your waist, just like daddy taught you. Take it and hit me. Yours leaves a better sting because it's so thin, almost like a whip. If you try hard enough you may even cut through my soft skin. Hurt me brother. I ache for your fist against my face. I live for the look in your eyes before you strike me down. Take the knife we used to cut watermelon with in the summer. Knock me to the ground with your elbow. Kneel on me and grin. Take the knife and slit my throat. You can even drink my blood this time...

that's all I want – punishment, resentment. Bring death to my door and give me over to him. I'm now ready, I can take it. }

Clearly, Alan didn't want his Mother or Father to read this, but in some way he wanted the message to reach them. One morning he forgot to put the transcript in his book-bag, and as he searched frantically for it at school, he realized he had left it on the floor of the family room. Contemplating what to do, he initially decided he must go back before anyone had a chance to read the dangerous words. He came up with several outlandish ploys to get home, but in the end left it up to fate: there was a good chance no one would care to pick up the old binder and leaf through it.

When he arrived home later that day, he had forgotten about the whole affair until he walked into the house and found his Mother sitting on the couch, tears falling down her cheeks, his writing in her hands. "You weren't supposed to read that," Alan told her. He retrieved the book and they never spoke further about it.

She was not the only one who managed to read it without permission. Alan walked into the school office and discovered his manuscript lying in the mailbox of the school psychiatrist, specific pages marked by tiny scraps of paper. His English teacher had promised that no one else would read his words and this betrayal left a bitter taste in his mouth. Already, the project that had started off so innocently was veering rapidly out of control.

News of the writing spread quickly. Students and teachers alike glanced a little longer when Alan passed them in the hall. With its racy mix of melodrama, the Creative Writing Project spawned rampant rumors of sexual shenanigans, familial trauma, drug abuse, and suicidal tendencies. Unknowingly, Alan had painted a distinctive portrait of himself, a picture that time has done little to erase or alter. To many of the students who heard the rumors at the time, Alan remains a sex-freak, who was physically abused as a child, and now taking out his problems in the form of rebellious actions against society.

Despite his printed claim that it was entirely fiction, much of the writing of that time was autobiographical, and today he owns up to this fact.

"Of course a lot of Frederick was drawn from my own life. *Of course*. But the majority of plot details were absolutely fictional. I was never molested by a priest, I never did any hard drugs back then, I never plotted to kill my cousin, I never cheated on my girlfriend, and I never had sex in the rafters of the school auditorium. The main thing that was the same were the feelings and longings and the pain evoked; the details were all made up. Unfortunately, people got caught up in those silly details," he reasons. "And while I regret it in a small way, I still think I'd do it again, because that writing project was me telling people for the very first time what my life had been like. It was my way of letting people know that our family was not the prim and proper model that sat up straight in church and smiled at all times."

Most people got the point. When all was said and done, his writing opened up a line of communication between Alan and his parents that no amount of face-to-face discussion could have accomplished. By the end of his senior year of high school, after almost two years of silence, Alan and his parents began the difficult and often-painful road back into to each other's lives.

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Their weekend in Amsterdam coming to an end, Alan and his friends return to the blustery cold of a Boston winter. Before departing, Alan gives his parents a quick but meaningful hug good-bye. "Drive safe," he intones as they leave. Chris and Alissa head home together. They have seen Alan in his hometown and some of the mystery now makes sense.

"I think Amsterdam forced Alan to amuse himself ~ to ferment his creativity," Alissa comments. "I also think he must have been lonely."

Chris echoes those sentiments, "Alan makes up in Boston and in his travels what he could never access in Amsterdam ~ cultural opportunities and diversity and exploration. Amsterdam is small-town USA, and represents the experience of many Americans, as well as a lesser number of gay American boys/men, and even less bi-racial Americans. It wouldn't have been an easy place to grow up, if I was him."

After Chris and Alissa depart, Alan is left with his boyfriend Paul. Their demeanor relaxes a little and they cuddle on the couch before deciding what to do for dinner. Since spending New Year's together at the Ilagan house, Paul had been with Alan and his immediate family only twice. In those brief instances he saw a new side to Alan, one which was altogether different from the Alan he had come to know romantically.

"He seems a little more quiet, a little subdued, almost solemn," Paul says about Alan's relationship with his Mother. "In a certain sense there is a need to reach out to her and wanting things to be different. If he could just perk up and be more of a friend to his Mom I think he'd be happier. The few times I've seen Alan with his Dad have been at the dinner table. They rarely talk to each other. Even so, he seems to love both his parents deeply. His brother and he seem to have the most loving relationship. They're complete opposites, or so it seems, but they get along really well."

It was early winter when Paul offered these comments, and he would have no idea of the change he would have a small hand in bringing about. There was no definite beginning to this change. Rather, it is the accumulation of the effects one person can have on another over time ~ through proximity, example, and other forms of enlightenment.

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On the eve of his departure from Amsterdam to begin a new life at Brandeis University in Waltham, MA, Alan stepped into his parents' room, sat on the bed where he had slept between them so many nights ago, and talked and laugh for a moment before packing. It was a small gesture, but in it was forgiveness and healing beyond words. It had not been too late. The tears that fell that night were tears of joy. Alan wrote out a heartfelt letter of thanks for everything his Mom and Dad had done for him over the years, and an apology for being so difficult at times. He had finished one life-changing chapter and was at the beginning of yet another.

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PART II

It is summer and it is how. The temperature is soaring over ninety degrees and the humidity is at a comparable percentage. The atmosphere is thick, oppressive. It clamps down on the shoulders and squeezes from all sides. It is headache-inducing and leaves one weak and limp in its wake. Through the haze sits a man in a cool, dim room. He has found sanctuary in the air-conditioned darkness. Away from the beating of the sun and

the whipping of the hot wind, he sits high on his barstool, his fingers running over the cold rim and the glass he holds, his thoughts running out of his mind. Slowly and deliberately he is escaping the heat; the cool liquid burns sweet forgetful relief down his throat and he swims gleefully in the newly-found-but-familiar freedom. ~ excerpt from *disenchantment part II*

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The most disturbing conversation Alan can recall having is one in which he plays no active part. It is not the discussion where he broke down in tears in front of his parents after not speaking to them for over a year. It is not the time he told his brother he was gay. It was not the talks he had with friends over his suicide attempt conversation he had with his Mother over a dinner the two of them had one summer's evening.

A year or two before their relationship cracked, Alan and his Mom went out for a meal at Lorenzo's, their favorite local Italian food haunt. It was common then for the two of them to have a dinner out and then engage in some shopping; Alan had been closest to his Mom out of everyone in the family and he shared almost everything with her. She was, however, his Mother, and as such he had placed her on an ill-appointed pedestal. Human frailties and faults she simply did not possess, and a past less-than-perfect was inconceivable. On this evening he would lose that child-like view, and with it a bit of his own innocence.

They were waiting for the food to arrive when his Mom started talking about her own Mother. Alan loved hearing tales of his Grandma because they were often so funny and they showed his Mom as a kid his own age. It lowered the pedestal in a safe and harmless way and the effect was thrilling for a child. Ensnared in conversational confidence, Alan asked a rare question about his Grandfather. He had passed away when Alan's Mom was a teenager. She told the story of how the police came to the door late at night to inform them that he had died of a heart attack.

It was a singular moment of revelation, one which shed light on an otherwise unspoken past. And there was more.

"Alan," his Mom spoke plainly, but with the slightest bit of sadness, perhaps shame, "My Father was an alcoholic."

Suddenly he was a little boy again. A feeling of terror and inescapable fear penetrated his heart, the feeling he had when he turned around in a crowded Mall and thought he was holding his Mother's hand when really it was the purse of some stranger.

Alan didn't know what to say. He looked down at the wine glass from which his Mom had just taken a sip. He wanted to say something but felt embarrassed. There was nothing that could be said. He pictured his Mom as a girl his age, opening up the door to a policeman, scared but somehow unsurprised.

"We knew why he was there. A policeman doesn't come to your door at midnight for any other reason..."

Words filtered through, fragments of past stories making frightening sense. His Grandfather, *her Father*, big and imposing and loud, barreling through the quiet of night waking up his Mother with his drunkenness.

"We knew he was drinking..."

Alan's Grandmother, meek and quiet most of the time, but always so quick with an excuse and defense. Her strength hinged on her husband's, falling as he fell, leaving

when he left. She leaned now on her only child ~ her daughter ~ and this child gave up the little bit of childhood she had known.

Months after the dinner, Alan was sitting in the kitchen with his Mom and Grandma. They were talking about the family again and something broke through the surface.

“Ma, he was an alcoholic,” he recalls his Mother saying in exasperation.

His Grandmother sounded offended, “I don’t think so. Yes, he drank, but...”

And then the memory recedes. It is rare for Alan not to remember, but it was so very long ago. Perhaps he ran out of the room before it was over. He had a habit of running away and hiding. When his Father returned from his rounds at the hospital, and later from betting on horses at OTB, Alan would slink away into the deep recesses of the Ilagan house as he heard the garage door open. His Father would feel the heat of the television and the dent of the couch still warm and wonder why they left. Both Alan and his brother learned to flee, waiting it out and hoping that the anger would subside and be forgotten before they had to meet again.

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“A lovable tyrant” is how Alan describes himself at work. His co-workers tend to agree.

Kira Drake, arguably his closest friend on the job right now, had this to say about their working relationship: “Alan is very friendly when you get to know him. He could also get on your nerves when he is in a bad mood.”

Alissa Myrick sees a bigger picture: “Alan does good work, endears himself to his co-workers, and forgets about it all at 5:01 PM.”

Since September of 1998, he has worked at the John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company, one of the largest corporations in Boston, MA. Their influence is felt all over the city, from the John Hancock Tower (the tallest building in Boston) to their official sponsorship of the Olympics and this year’s All-Star Fanfest and Baseball game. Hired as a research analyst, he was quickly promoted to Team Leader status and currently oversees a group of ten researchers. Due to the confidential nature of his current employment, he is only permitted to say that he is working on a Class Action Case; after the company goes public he will be able to speak more freely. Not that he has any wish to do so: insurance is hardly the stuff of scintillating conversation. When pressed on why he is working for an insurance company when he could be doing so much more, Alan gives the customary shrug and says simply, “It’s only temporary. I need to save up some decent money and not be bound down by a permanent job.”

For some, Alan-at-work is an impossible oxymoron. Most of his past acquaintances and friends view him as a superficial dandy ~ a fashion-obsessed prima donna with an eye for what looks good but without any real depth or substance, and certainly not the person for any real-world nine-to-five job. In spite of his rather impressive three-year stint at a men’s clothing store (where he begged off an early offer of a management position in favor of finishing school), and his current reign at John Hancock (where he declined a permanent position for moral reasons – “I knew I was leaving and couldn’t lie”), Alan is saddled with an unfairly fluffy image of not doing much of anything.

He does in fact work. People don’t get offered promotions for sitting around and looking good on the job. He has proven himself countless times and anyone who has ever

had him as an employee will vouch for this. His supervisor at St. Mary's Hospital, where Alan worked as a Dietary Aide, "a glorified dishwasher," commented that Alan was indeed a hard worker. Every one of his managers lavishly praises his work ethic. His co-workers at John Hancock grudgingly admit that he has done some serious work for the company. So why the bad image? Why does no one believe he can put his nose to the grindstone and work? Most probably it is due to his delivery.

Alan is notorious for finding fun in the most unlikely of places and making the most dismal of situations somehow enjoyable. He can light up the room when he is "on" and there is a noticeable shift in the atmosphere when he is absent. He never seems to be working because he is so often seen to be having a good time.

Former co-worker and current friend Jo Ann MacKinnon summed up the situation thusly: "Alan can be mean and off-putting, but he is intelligent, efficient, and reliable in regards to the work place. His co-workers don't know what to make of him at times. I think he shocks people with his photos and stories. For the most part he is liked by all and he is a lot of fun."

"He seems to have a good time," says his boyfriend Paul. "I think he *makes* fun when he's at work."

If Alan can find fun at an insurance company then he can enjoy just about any job that comes his way. Despite this, many feel he hasn't found his niche. "In my opinion he should be doing other things," claims Paul.

Most agree that he needs to find a job more fitted to his capabilities. Suzie Ko quips dryly, "He recently said he was considering applying for writing jobs... what a great idea! It's not like we have been begging him to apply for them for two and half years now."

Chris Vaeth has been harping for a long time that Alan should utilize his writing talents as a career. In his opinion, "Alan would affect a lot more people and cultivate his own talents and legacy much earlier in life if he stopped playing around with microfiche and adolescent co-workers and instead focused on his God-given talent and craft."

While he disagrees with Mr. Vaeth's dismissal of "adolescent co-workers" ~ ("I guess those folks are only good enough for Chris to drool over at parties,") Alan reluctantly admits it is time for him to settle down in a job that makes the most of his creative energy. To that end, he has recently revised his resume, and is in the process of compiling some of his written work to peddle about some publishing possibilities. Most importantly, he has been writing again.

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Since finishing 'The Fall' in September of 1998, Alan has done little actual written work. That seminal project was his most artistically successful work to date. It illuminated the workings of a life-in-progress, and by showing the journey of one human being it reached across all boundaries and became a common voice to which all people could relate. A mark of compelling, communicative writing is that the reader feels like he or she has had similar experiences ~ a feeling of 'Yes! That's it exactly. *I know what you mean.*' This form of required understanding, the powerful recognition of an ally through shared emotions, made for some of the most glowing reviews of his writing career. Released in Autumn of 1998, 'The Fall' was instantly hailed as a masterpiece.

“I see maturity as a writer in this work... It takes courage to investigate the day-to-day antics of one’s life and try to figure out how it affects one as a person,” wrote Brian Bergeron, a guest at several of Alan’s infamous soirees.

Chris Vaeth reviewed it as “the best single piece I have read by Alan. Ever. I think this eclipses all of the interviews and projects that I’ve seen. This story is a triumph. And it is true. It reflects Alan at his best, personally and professionally.”

Long-time pal Ann Agresta was moved immensely by the work: “I must say that this project has had a very profound effect on me... It was beautifully written, but sometimes I have to wonder why it takes a project for the “true” him to be seen.”

Alissa Myrick found the truth-telling ambivalently admirable: “It was a powerful experience. It explains a lot. I don’t know if I would have been that open about such events. He went through some really scary situations. I don’t know how he wrote that, but he created something very special, very potent, very real.”

Some thought it was too real, and that Alan went a little too far.

“I’m still having trouble with the whole idea of turning your life into a documentary,” says Suzie Ko. “I don’t know how you can find peace if you never let anything slide, or if you never let yourself forget anything, even if it’s a momentary forgetfulness,” she explains. “Alan has every detail of many encounters to read up on any time. But I guess that’s it... this is his way of working through things.”

Another friend from his High School days, and his very first girlfriend, Melissa Natale, found the work bittersweet. “It brought me back to remembering the concerns and fears I had for Alan,” she says, “But by the end of the interview I had a feeling of calm - almost security, in knowing that Alan had used each of his experiences – good or bad – to learn and grow.”

Such growth is a cornerstone of Alan’s life. His ability to change and evolve is unparalleled. He has gone through remarkable transformations, especially in the last few years, and he shows no sign of stagnation. His writing captures this on a universal level. No matter how dark the topic, there is a common thread of hope weaving throughout all of his work, a thread that offers salvation and re-birth in the form of evolution and growth.

In a profile of Alan done for a John Hancock newsletter, the interviewer wrote, “He has the unique ability to write about himself in the third-person. This is more than just superb literary skill – it is actually a form of self-assessment. By examining his conduct in the third-person, Alan is better able to understand why he behaves the way he does.”

After ‘The Fall’ Ms. Ko was left in the familiar position of not knowing what Alan would do next. “It feels like every time I think that he’s on the path to finding where he is most comfortable in life that something else comes loose and he sets off to find stability by doing anything and everything destructive first and then settling down. I’m really awaiting what he’ll write now that he seems happier with himself. Will he go completely into a realm of fiction, will he stop writing, will he go out and find different adventures now that he’s played the wild youth thing out?”

Apparently, all of the above. Following the release of ‘The Fall’ he did not write for several months.

“At first I was just coasting,” Alan offers, “And then I was scared that I wouldn’t be able to follow it up with something worthy. Plus, I was busy working full-time and

just starting to go out with Paul. Basically I was living, as opposed to reflecting and analyzing.”

He was also drinking. A lot. After finding happiness within himself, he looked outward and saw a world where happiness was growing increasingly rare and hard to find. For the first time he became acutely aware of the outside world, the world he found so frightening to face directly without a disguise or act. Drinking now served a multitude of purposes ~ a way to be brave and courageous and say things he couldn't say while sober, as well as a nifty shield to block out whatever was unpleasant. It was easy to shut out the world without going into Norma Desmond-like delusion if he had a little liquor in him. Even so, some things managed to puncture his alcoholic haze of happiness, and as the real world crept into view he realized he did not like what he saw.

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To many people, Alan is notoriously oblivious to world events. His good friend Christopher Vaeth has said, “He’s as deep as a puddle on a sunny day.” Granted, Alan’s favorite part of the newspaper is the Arts and Entertainment section, and yes, he does have a strong interest in fashion and other things deems superficial, but he is also acutely aware of what is happening outside his seemingly cloistered environment. He simply doesn’t have a strong need to discuss current events, especially when he himself has no answers.

“Unless there is something I can directly do, I must admit to shutting a lot of things out. That’s just for sanity’s sake,” he defends. But even Alan could not shut out two events of the past year that had an immense impact on his view of the world: the murder of Matthew Shephard and the massacre at Columbine High School. Both incidents made Alan cry ~ a first for a news item.

“I’d been affected by things before ~ the Challenger explosion, the election of Corazon Aquino and downfall of Marcos, the release of Nelson Mandela, the O.J. Simpson case, and tons of gay-related stories ~ but none of them touched me in the way Matthew Shephard and the shootings at Columbine did,” Alan says quietly. “Those literally knocked me off my feet ~ I had to sit down when I heard what had happened. And then I had to cry.”

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“Authorities say Matthew Shephard was at a local tavern when he met McKinney and Henderson. The two men convinced Shephard that they were gay and got him to tell them about his sexuality, police say. The two men then lured Shephard outside and into apickup. They pistol-whipped Shephard as they drove to an isolated area just east of town, officials say. When they stopped, they tied Shephard spread-eagle to a wooden ranch fence and stole his wallet, credit cards and shoes. As they tortured him, bashing his skull with the butt of a .357 magnum, Shephard begged for his life. They left him tied to the fence. Eighteen hours later, a bicyclist almost pedaled past Shaphard, thinking the battered man was a scarecrow.

Shephard, a 21-year-old student at the University of Wyoming, lay in a coma for five days before he died. His skull was so badly smashed that doctors could not operate.” ~ excerpt from *USA Today*.

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“I had read in the paper that he was in the hospital,” Alan recalls, “And for some reason I thought he was going to be okay. Then I walked into work and someone said he

had died. At first I didn't believe it, until someone else confirmed it. I sunk down into a chair, in shock, and I wanted to cry. It was so far removed, but at the same time so close. The way in which it was executed ~ the malicious brutality ~ that's what so horrified me, regardless of the gay issue.

“On one hand you have people saying, ‘Oh, this is just a big deal because he was gay,’ And yes, that's true. But think about it ~ this particular incident would *not* have occurred if he wasn't gay. His sexuality was the sole reason for the violence and ultimately the reason for his death. There's no way around it.”

The other event that affected Alan profoundly was the shooting spree at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, where students and teachers were gunned down and killed before the two teenage gunmen shot themselves.

“I can't really explain why I cried over that. So many more people have died so many other times, but this was different. The one image of parents rushing to the school searching frantically and praying to find their children alive ~ that scene was what got me. Watching the kids find their folks and hugging them ~ I can't imagine...” and he trails off.

Alan had always taken such incidents and blocked them out of his mind. Pausing at a news story or adding a comment to news discussions at the workplace had been the extent of his involvement; he managed to remain detached. Matthew Shephard and the Columbine shootings changed this slightly.

For the first time he thought, “That could have been me.” (In his college years he often found rides home to Waltham from Boston from people he hardly knew, once even in a big empty van with a guy he met at the Back Bay T station.) As far as how these recent events changed him, it is difficult to gauge. Alan did not fire off any politically charged letter to the people of America, he didn't send money to any of the funds hastily organized after each event, and he didn't even walk five blocks to the candlelight vigil in remembrance of Matthe Shephard. But would any good have come if he had done those things? Copy-cat shootings schemes were discovered in high schools all over the country in the weeks following Columbine. Gay men and women continue to be killed because they are gay. The publicity has died down and we are back at the beginning with no discernible change.

“Alan knows that shit goes on all the time, and I'm sure that he reads about what's going on in the world and not just the entertainment page. It's difficult to live in a city and be sheltered,” claims Suzie. “Sometimes I think that Alan just accepts these things as part of life, death, and suffering. He takes a stand on things that he has a right to, things that have affected him personally. I admire that. Too often people grand-stand on issues that they have no clue about. That's the shit that pisses me off.”

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He may be able to tick off a number of world events, but is there any understanding and growth from them, or is his a simple laundry list to mask the absence of substance? Anyone can name the big newsmakers ~ they infiltrate television, movies, magazines, newspapers, and the internet. It takes an open-minded thinking person to look beyond and relate to it personally. With regards to the O.J. Simpson verdict, Alan harkens back to an experience he had during his sophomore year at college,

“I was walking in Central Square, Cambridge, which at that time was *not* a great area. It was dusk, in that pocket of time when things just turned dark so no one can really see that well, the time when the most car accidents happen.

I passed a black man who was leaning against a building. He held a brown paper bag that flimsily disguised his bottle. He called me over to him. Now normally I wouldn't have gone, but that night I did. He pulled me closer to him and then pushed me gently up against the wall. I felt for my wallet, but I wasn't really nervous. He was shaky and it would be easy to get away. There were also a number of people around, though no one paid any attention to the two of us. He asked if I wanted a swig from his bottle. I told him I didn't drink. He smiled and asked what I was. I didn't understand. Grabbing my hand he turned it over in the fading light. He asked again what I was.

“I'm American,” I told him. Laughing a little, he shook his head.

“Are you black or white?” he asked through crinkly eyes.

“I'm American,” I repeated. “My Dad is from the Philippines.”

He shook his head again and said, “In the country you're either black or white.”

I left after that. A few months later I saw him on the subway, but he didn't seem to recognize me. During my last year at school I wrote a final exam essay on that experience and how it related to O.J. Simpson. To me, that was the most ridiculous trial. Clearly this was a man who had committed these murders. Riches, race, and political agenda had no factor in whether or not he did it. Regardless of his race, he killed two human beings. It was unfortunate that people could not get past the race issue. And many people I've talked to feel that it was less about O.J. and his guilt and more of a message to America that blacks have been living under oppression for so long that this was a symbolic victory for equality, a way to make amends for past wrongdoing. Personally I think that's bullshit.”

Alan goes on for quite some time on this discourse; it is evident he has thought about this, and has managed to make connections between events and outcomes. The one thing of which he is clearly, and openly, unsure of is a solution.

“Look, I don't have the answers. That's why I seldom talk about issues like this, because I am open-minded enough to trust in myself and my judgment, but I find it hard to believe the same of others. History has shown that many people don't have the open minds and ability to change and accept difference. For me, that's where the problem lies, but as far as going about making it better, I just don't know.”

Such fatalism is a telling sign of a wish for the bad things to go away. Without a solution to word towards, the best thing to do would be to ignore the problems. If this cannot be don on one's own, as was the case when things began hitting too close to his home, one must turn to false ignorance ~ drug-induced ignorance that numbs the senses and calms the soul of awareness. Alan chose alcohol.

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“I never liked you,” his Uncle slurs. “In fact, I hate you. Since the first day I met you I hated you.” He takes another sip of J&B. He likes it on the rocks, no soda. Eyes burning with fire, yellow and faded with smoke, but gleaming with uncharacteristic animation, he smiles grotesquely with chipped dentures, “I *still* hate you.”

It is January of 1998. Roberto Ilagan is talking to his nephew Alan, who made the mistake of bringing a bottle of whiskey to Washington, D.C. to visit his father's brother. A tiny, slight wisp of a man, Alan's self-proclaimed “favorite Uncle” staggers unsteadily

towards his least-favorite nephew with the bottle of liquor dangling dangerously in his hand. He grips Alan's arm tightly and transports him to a brutal memory plane.

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*The boy stands in a storage room of the basement. It is dark except for the harsh doorway of a distant naked light bulb. A figure appears, his silhouette black before the light, the glowing red tip of a cigarette slowly approaching Alan. The boy has done something bad, he has urinated on his Uncle like he does in his bed in the middle of the night, and his Uncle holds him violently. In that hell his favorite Uncle rasps wickedly, **“I will put this cigarette out in your eye,”** and then he is gone. Alan crumples to the floor, heaving convulsions of fear and nervous laughter. His hands are shaking. His hands will always shake after this day.*

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Alan shudders back to the moment. In his Uncle's apartment the television drones on and the two of them are on the couch. Standing, Alan takes his Uncle's hand off his arm. He is about a foot taller than the trembling man, but his Uncle senses no threat or danger. Alan could take him down easily. Could knock him to the floor and beat him senseless if there was any sense left. Could wrap his hands around his Uncle's neck...

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The boy lies in bed. In the middle of that black night a man enters his room. Shutting the door carefully behind him he stands still and adjusts to the absence of light. The boy's heart beats faster, clawing its way up his throat. The dim shadow moves. A growing terror as he spies his Uncle through half-closed eyes, approaching him, closer, ever closer, and then he is there. His hands hard and rough around the boy's little throat, and all because of a childish prank. Squeezing with hatred and then the words he was to hear forever after:

“If it wasn't for your Father I would kill you.”

His Father. Hero and Savior, rescuing his Son in some twisted irony, powerful simply in his existence. His Uncle lets go and walks back into the night, receding like a deadly ghost.

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Waking to his present condition, Alan looks at his Uncle before moving safely into the bedroom. He does not challenge his Uncle now; he knows this drunken state. Nothing can be done until later, and by then it won't matter. It's easier to walk away. In the bedroom of his Uncle apartment he sits and sighs. The futility of it finally presents itself clearly after two years of hopeful obscurity. Alan must give this one up. He will never get through to his Uncle, never communicate in any meaningful way. Taking a deep breath, he re-emerges into the smoky, alcoholic atmosphere.

The fan is humming in the kitchen and his Uncle is sitting languidly on the couch. His eyes look sleepy, but sparkle to life when he senses company. Even Alan will do when he is like this. Leaning over to his nephew, he mumbles some nonsense about his life and how he wants Alan to write a book about it.

It has become absurd. Alan laughs richly, then slaps his Uncle lightly across the face. It is seen as a form of affection because of his smile, but in that slap is a purging of hatred and resentment. He pours himself some whiskey and swallows the burning substance. The tingly warmth grows from his stomach outward and at last he has found a way to reach his Uncle. Swimming, flying, floating upward he can make out his Uncle

just ahead of him, laughing and happy and free. He swallows more and is right next to him. They talk and laugh and are closer than they have ever been. The spirits of the bottle have been released, and the magic they work is Alan's way to acceptance, to love.

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In a few days he will leave his Uncle's and meet heart-break and grief at the hands of a one-night-stand. At that moment, and from that time forward, he will remember this escape. He will drink while he drives. He will drink when he is out. He will drink when he is alone. He will drink on his job interviews, at his family dinners, and at lunch with friends.

Alcohol will give him courage. He will become the man he once feared and from then on it will be Alan who does the scaring. Liquor will make him powerful. He won't hold his tongue and suppress himself any longer. Drunkenness will be him at his best. He will have fun; fuck the right thing.

He will vomit it out and fill the hole with more booze. If he keeps drinking he knows he can fill that hole. Fill it with love and care and affection and warmth and desire, all sloshing about in some sour elixir that is slowly poisoning his organs and shutting down his true senses.

At first he will flaunt it: here's Alan, the good-time guy, ready for fun and excitement and a silly story to tell your friends the day after! Come drink with him and have a grand old time! There are tales of him running up and down the street shouting out distorted names, stories where he punches people and remembers nothing the next day. There are bruises inflicted in a haze of drunken forgetfulness, tell-tale reminders that *something* happened, but nothing except a number of empty bottles offering empty explanations.

He was not an alcoholic, not yet, He could function and perform better than most, and do so without a bottle of booze in his hand; true alcoholics cannot live without drinking. Even so, Alan seemed headed in that dangerous direction.

Friends from work mention his drinking across-the-board; comments find their way into the most unrelated of topics. It's difficult to decipher whether or not these have any significance. Though their frequency seems to suggest so.

"My first memory of Alan was that he was hung over from the weekend," says one co-worker. Another states that Alan is "usually too hung over to show his real work ethic." Ms. Drake, the co-worker to whom Alan is closest, says in her broken English, "He has taught me a lot, even though he drinks too much. All the time he is drinking." Jo Ann MacKinnon, like most of those close to him, isn't entirely convinced. "Whether or not Alan is an alcoholic, I can't say for sure," she says hesitantly, "I do know he makes a mean martini and enjoys drinking them quite a lot."

Alan himself laughs off the notions, though as he does so he sits at a bar and swallows the last of his second screwdriver.

"I don't think I'm an alcoholic," he asserts, "But if I was I'd be following in the footsteps of my heroes. Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Dorothy Parker, Edgar Allen Poe ~ even Mr. Wilde himself enjoyed his emerald absinthe. These are big shoes to fill, and if it takes a little liquor to ease the pain, well, I'm all for it," and he laughs. There is no way to convey exactly the tone with which he has said this. It is weighted equally with humor and pathos, confusion and contentment, anger and bliss. The laughter at the end isn't reassuring ~ it is terrifying.

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“A dream is that deep, dark ground that is the support of our conscious lives.” –
Joseph Campbell

He inhabits an often-dark world. At night he slips unconsciously into a realm of nocturnal ether, floating between sleep and wake, hovering on the horizon of madness, sometimes shouting out unintelligible words of fear, or cackling disturbing laughs with the sinister glee of a fiend. It is here where the demons surface, and here where they wage war over control of Alan’s mind. Alternately still and silent or wrathful and restless, his sleep is a cacophony of confusing images and feelings. Paul tries to decipher the often-senseless banter, crawling carefully into bed and listening and wondering in the darkness.

Occasionally it is funny: “Gigolos and pimpies,” Alan says clearly in the middle of one night, followed by a loud laugh. Like his drunken black-outs, he recalls little of these night-time perambulations. If a dream is particularly vivid, or if he manages to wake just as one ends, he can explain it with startling detail. Mostly, however, he is left with the faint exhaustion of having traveled many places, and the feeling of having forgotten something.

When he was little he often had the dream of being chased by a “monster”. In this dream he “glides” rather than runs.

“And when this *thing* finally caught me, I fell to the floor and it pounced on my back,” Alan recalls. “I could see my mother in her room, putting on jewelry and getting dressed up for something. I tried shouting, but no sound would come out, and I just panicked and tried harder until I woke up. It was the fact that my Mom wasn’t doing anything that was more frightening than the monster itself.” In another dream of his childhood, he is trying to warn his Mother of impending danger. He is being chased again, and his Mother is ahead of him. “I try to yell to her to run, but no sound comes out. I fall down and scream in silence, and then I wake up.

Many mornings are spent trying to piece together why he feels so tired, why he can’t get up when he has slept for eight hours. When a dream is remembered, when the plot has become so unsettling it jars him awake, he will try to write it down in the hope of finding some meaning, some answer to all the questions:

I am in a dark, castle-like space, as I am in most of my dreams. Carrying a small dog, I navigate tight, constricted stone crawlways. After emerging into a stone room, I bend down to smell the dog’s head. It smells like home, like Paul. He is sitting at a stone table and I join him as the dog runs around us. At the same time, I think, or maybe there is a transformation of people, I am also sitting down with Suzie and her Mom, Elaine. Now I am back with Paul, but the room with Suzie and Elaine is still there, or maybe it has changed back to its original form, or perhaps I am in two places at once, simultaneously carrying on two lives. In the original room, Paul’s father comes running up to us. It doesn’t look like his father, but I know that it is. He and his wife Rhonda join me and Paul at the table and a group of adults join us. This same group also joins me at the table with Suzie and Elaine. The adults are strange, with glazed eyes and faces caked with forced smiles. The table with Suzie gets pizza, Elaine being the perfect host. The adults start discussing morals and values and what’s right and wrong and a sin and I know immediately that I am being judged. Paul and Suzie look incredulous as the foolish tall continues, and I am amazed that such ridiculous ideas still find such fertile ground in

which to grow. They think homosexuality is a sin. One woman tells her story of drug-addiction as a parallel example. "So you're comparing taking drugs with being gay?" I ask, not quite believing it. Bluntly, the answer is a resounding yes. Their children then march into both rooms ~ four-or-five-year-olds, innocent and small. It seems as though they're singing "Happy Birthday" but then the tune changes. Tiny, light cherubic voices sing sweetly: "Oh, whoaa-ohh... get fucked.. oh -whoa-ohh and that's how we get fucked. Oh yes and we are fucked, we are fucked, oh whoa-ohh and that's how we get fucked..." and they don't stop. I want to yell, "You condemn me for being gay and you teach your children to say the word 'fuck?'"

I wake up. Paul has gone to work. A light summer breeze blows gently in through the window. The world is fucked.

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PART III

The minute I heard my first love story
I started looking for you, not knowing
How blind that was.

Lovers don't finally meet somewhere,
They're in each other all along. ~ Rumi

Alan's Soliloquy:

People always ask, "How did the two of you meet?" when they hear that I have a boyfriend. Usually I tell them that he was working in a soap store and I was out shopping. While that may be technically accurate, it doesn't fully convey the import of our story. The truth is that I had been searching for Paul Samuel Fraley all of my life. I looked, quite literally, all over the world. My search was alternately exciting and boring; sometimes hilarious, often painful, and occasionally poignant. Even when I thought I wasn't, I was always searching. A space in my heart had been reserved, and despite the many misguided attempts at filling it, I never lost the hope that someday find the perfect fit. It was rarely an easy journey, and looking back I realize it was less about finding another person to make me happy and more about finding my own self, and being comfortable and content with who I am. Once I learned that most important lesson, the path became clearer and the destination turned into the journey itself. Having completed the necessary foundation, I waited until the love of my life crossed my path. Something told me that I would know intuitively when that was, and that there would be no manipulation or game-playing involved. I would not have to plan things out or become weighed down by insecurities; it would work itself out of its own accord. There would be an instinctual mode of living that would commence upon my meeting Paul, and I wouldn't have to try so hard to impress or worry that I wasn't good enough. We would nourish and care for one another as if that were what we had been born to do.

This is exceedingly difficult for me to put into words. That is just one of the many ways in which this tale has proven itself exceptional in my life. It is why I have chosen to document it without the superficial masks that were once my trademark. There is nothing false about this; everything you will read is how I honestly feel. I've never been able to

say that about any of my written work, and it is with more than a little trepidation and fear that I begin this story. It is a story of passion and patience, of waiting and wanting, and ultimately of love and happiness. It is the final step of one journey and the very beginning of another. I have finally found my partner in life, and within his heart I have found my home.

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It has all the excitement and magical anticipation of a wedding-in-the-making. There are the change-of-address cards to be sent off, the packing to be done, and hotel reservations to be made for the few remaining trips to New York City and Amsterdam. There are the busy days in Boston before departing for good, the giddy final work hours with friends from John Hancock, and the late evenings out with long-time friends. As Alan and his boyfriend Paul plan to depart for Chicago together, it is a time of sparkling exhilaration and heady sensations.

“Once again, everything is happening at once and I’m beginning to wonder how it’s all going to come together,” Alan sighs happily. “It’ll happen, I just hope it’s easier than I think it will be.”

He has the breathless lilt of a man in motion. Even with Alan’s acute organizational skills, the move is a complicated one. Not only must he manage the logistics of moving into a new apartment halfway across the country, he must also rent out his Boston condo at the same time. The whole operation involves a multitude of phone calls, real estate meetings, and head-ache inducing decision-making.

This is Alan’s first major move since his 1995 official arrival in Boston. It also marks the first time he will be so far from his friends and family in New York. While many assume that he is moving to Chicago to “follow” Paul, there seem to be other reasons; after all of his re-locating for possible paramours, Alan seems the last person to move solely for love at this point.

“When I started working at John Hancock in September of ’98 I committed myself for only six months. At that point they asked if I would stay for a while longer, and I stayed because there was nothing else going on and the money was great, but it was always my intention to leave. This was, after all, a temp position. It’s been almost a year, and it’s time to say good-bye,” Alan explains. “And as far as moving to Chicago goes, it was a decision I made way back in November. I knew Paul was going, and that was of course one of the main reasons, but I also knew I needed a change, and it seemed the perfect stepping stone for moving West. I had also been to Chicago once and fell in love with it ~ and it was during that killer heat wave of ’95, so if I can love a city in that wretched state, then that says something.”

He is calmer and quieter when he speaks of Paul. He also smiles a lot. With all of the craziness that has been his life, Alan has finally found a pocket of peace. As an excerpt from his journal shows, Paul’s entrance into Alan’s life was a defining moment for the two of them:

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{It wouldn’t necessarily strike me like lightning; it would slowly and gently envelope me in its goodness, and it would reverberate through my entire being, changing and transforming everything in its radiance. At the very end of the Summer, he arrived.

I had passed him a couple of times in Copley Place. A little voice deep inside of me whispered to me at those moments. A tiny ‘What if?’ rang in the pit of my stomach,

as it has done with all of the major events of my life. I didn't really register it at first; it seemed too good to be true, and like those dreams where we receive all the riches we desire, it seemed impossible to realize.

Paul was working at the soap store, and I went in looking for something that smelled like almonds. We spoke briefly. "How are *you* doing today?" he asked with an insinuating charm that was somehow tinged with innocence. I couldn't help but smile, though I kept an aloof air of disinterest, as I tend to do with those whose beauty puts me off balance. After talking for a minute, I left. A few days later, drawn to him by forces beyond reason or control, I returned and bought something that I didn't need. At the register we exchanged smiles. He had such a sweet smile ~ a smile of kindness and understanding, and a smile that made me feel all was right with the world. We stood there awkwardly at the end of the transaction.

"Can I get you anything else? Some more free samples? My phone number..."
My heart jumped...

"Just kidding," he said with a little embarrassed laugh.

Damn. I walked out with a mixture of regret and hope. I wished I'd had the courage to say more, but there was also something different at work. A feeling of resignation, as though we would be together and we were both powerless over it, washed over me. It was as if I had unlocked the door to paradise, and it lay before me waiting to be explored. When I got home, the afternoon sun flowed into my bedroom and I lay down on the bed, breathing quickly with excitement and exasperation. Had it finally happened? Was the life-long search at last over? I sat up in a state of giddy bewilderment. It was my favorite time to be in the bedroom, when the bed was soaked with the sun and the fig tree shone brightly green in the beams of radiance. The warm wood of the floor glowed honey in the sunlight and I felt a new warmth within my heart. For one striking moment I saw my future, not quite clearly, not with any definite specifics, but with a sense that *he* would be there with me. It was a fleeting glimpse into a wondrous pool of something calm and deep, and as I laid back upon the bed I thought of it suddenly as *our bed*.

It was ludicrous. The whole idea was crazy. It was time to put this flight of fancy out of my mind and return to reality. But that calm and soothing warmth was growing inside of me, and the visage of my destiny was slowly revealed as the face of *him*. Of course, as is often the case with tales of destiny and epic scope, there would be obstacles to overcome and challenges to be met. I didn't realize then how many of the problems were to be brought about by myself, the first being my penchant for drinking too much, an adversity that would surface on our very first "evening" together. }

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On that first evening, Alan's drunken state led him to invite Paul back to his condo for a night of inappropriate behavior. He had a few more drinks, proceeded to grab Paul's crotch ("to see if he was hard", in his words) and ultimately offend him to the point where he left, privately vowing not to return or call. Two days later, unaware of how bad his behavior had been, Alan called Paul and was shocked to discover that he "didn't want someone like Alan in his life." It was an unexpected slap-across-the-face, and it both angered and dismayed Alan, a person unaccustomed to being put in his place by anything other than physical violence.

It there is one thing that upsets him to no end, it is being misunderstood. It is why he writes about himself so much, why he does not let the smallest comment go by

without an explanation, and why he documents the most minute movements of his life both on film and paper. Upon realizing Paul's misconception over who Alan was, he promptly printed out a copy of 'The Fall' and delivered it to Paul's workplace within the week. That written work displayed Alan at his most well-rounded, an honest portrait of good and bad, and an ultimately human view of a compassionate and vulnerable person. The very day he received the work, Paul called Alan and invited him out for dinner, claiming that anyone who cared enough to explain himself so thoroughly deserved a second chance. In that writing, Paul sensed a kinship, a shared yearning to love and be loved. On September 25, 1998, a week later, Alan and Paul went out on their first official date, and since then the two have been an inseparable item.

Alissa Myrick and Chris Vaeth, themselves a successful long-term couple, have seen them through the budding stages of a relationship.

"I met Paul at a little get-together at Alan's house," Alissa begins. "I thought he was cute, droll, funny, and just crazy/zany enough for Alan." She had been witness to Alan's past romantic debacles, but this one was noticeably different.

"Alan and Paul are very tender with each other," she says. "I like them together ~ I think they are well-matched." Having witnessed "intimate gestures like Paul making a pillow for Alan in the car or Alan wistfully staring at Paul in his apartment," she attributes their solid romance to "Patience with each other, a willingness to communicate and try to work things out, a high level of intimacy, and a desire for the relationship to work."

Chris Vaeth had seen Alan evolve from a pathetic door-mat for one-night-stands like Patrick Richardson to the self-assured independent young man who had a healthy functioning relationship with a man named Christopher Church in the summer of '98. "But with hindsight it should be noted how quickly Mr. Church faded into the recesses of our memories," Chris recounts. "Paul Samuel Fraley stepped in. This makes me think that the changes Alan made during his relationship with Mr. Church had less to do with Mr. Church and a lot more to do with Alan. It took a good person like Paul to come along and access those changes."

Jo Ann MacKinnon is one of a new batch of friends who has only known Alan since he started going out with Paul. She has met him on a few occasions. "I think Paul is a good-looking guy. He has a sweetness about him," she explains. "It seems to me that Alan and Paul are honest with each other... Paul seems to light up when he sees Alan and Alan does the same. Alan talks about him a lot at work."

For Jo Ann, and everyone else at John Hancock, Alan has always been part of a "couple." It seems strange for those unaccustomed to the loner-image, and even stranger for those used to the romantic disasters of the past. Those failed relationships were fast and furious: Alan thrashed himself emotionally and lived hard regardless of the pain. The damage that resulted is felt to this day. In the year prior to meeting Paul, Alan went on a journey of self-discovery and self-evaluation that made him stronger, wiser, and more independent. Without this, there was no way he could have made such a successful relationship work. In the next month, the two will share their first anniversary together. It is Alan's longest functioning relationship, and seems the most enduring. Both of them have a strong desire to protect what they share, and in this shared bond is the strength that gets them through the difficult times.

“Every day, Paul teaches me how to be less selfish, how to compromise, and how to love,” Alan says. When he speaks about Paul he is at peace. The loud shouting and manic gesticulations cease, and in their place is a blissfully content man who smiles a lot and blushes when he gushes. “Paul inspires me and makes me want to be a better person. I think that’s a big component of true love ~ finding someone who makes you the best possible person you can be, someone who makes you want to improve.”

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Paul Samuel Fraley speaks softly, thoughtfully. He has a certain grace and charm reminiscent of old-time movie stars; he acts with the suave deportment of Cary Grant, and there is a sweet, romantic gentility in the way that he carries himself. At first glance it seems odd that he would click with the brash abrasiveness that many feel makes up Alan. However, beneath that harsh exterior was a sensitive soul aching to be released. Paul sensed this, and it is to his credit that he worked to penetrate the world-weary walls Alan had worked so hard to erect.

“When I met Alan I knew that what he really needed was to be loved, and I knew I could give that to him,” Paul begins. “Not that it was a charity thing ~ I wanted him to know how good life could be. I definitely have benefited from it too.”

It was a feeling that struck through the coldest, hardest, most-hidden recesses of Alan’s heart. He had always prayed for “someone who loved me the same way that I loved them.” It goes a long way in explaining the great sense of calm that has surrounded Alan since he met Paul.

“If you’re going out with someone, they should be *enhancing* your life,” Alan proclaims. “It can be something simple, like making you laugh, or more deeply enriching, like changing your entire attitude towards the world. Paul has done both for me. I still have a way to go,” he laughs, “But he has an enormous reserve of patience in dealing with me. *Thank God.*”

Alan is notorious for his mood swings, his penchant for ordering instead of asking, and his tendency to criticize those around him. It’s not always obnoxious, but it can be draining (and certainly taking on a relationship). His Mother attributes this to the high standards and expectations he sets for himself: if he can put forth the effort to be perfect, then he expects the same from those around him. It’s not always fair to be so exacting, and this is not the sort of behavior that endears him to anyone ~ surely not his boyfriend. At the start of their relationship they had to contend with this.

“I think mainly he’s just needy,” Paul elucidates. “We’re all needy, but he translates his needs into being demanding ~ most of us have better manners than Alan. My patience has been tried and I’ve been thoroughly annoyed and there are days when I think I can’t go on... but there are nights when I feel like we could go on forever, and I truly hope we do.”

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Being a part of any romantic relationship requires a certain amount of effort and care. As a monogamous gay couple, Alan and Paul navigate especially tricky waters. There are no well-known role-models, and the committed gay couples that do exist are not very vocal or evident. In many ways they are exploring a vastly uncharted territory, treading unknown paths, and making their own way without any definitive guides. They are pioneers in their super-couple status. Empowering one another, they are often at their best when working as a team. Their success and longevity as a pair speaks volumes more

than any ruckus-raising gay activism could. Both young men are well-aware of the issues at hand, and in the past each dealt with them in their own way: Alan used bold editorials in the local newspaper to promote acceptance; Paul set up a petition to legalize gay marriage. These days they are changing the world in a quieter way ~ a subtler, more serious, and far more affecting way.

As Paul sees it, “You just have to rely on your own morals and values and lead your life that way. But for me it’s not even a gay thing anymore ~ I don’t think of it in those terms. It’s not my identity, but I definitely am proud.”

They are of a new generation of gay men. The shackles of the past have long been loosened, and sexuality in and of itself is no longer the main focus. They have the same problems and disagreements as their heterosexual counterparts, and find commonality in the relationships of their straight friends.

The glow of newlyweds surrounds them, and that special bit of magic that everyone wants to be a part of ~ the kind that makes people attend weddings ~ is a big part of their existence at the moment. It is an exhilarating time, and if they seem a little swept away it is understandable and forgivable. They realize that the giddiness won’t last forever, and are savoring these days to the fullest.

“I look forward to the future,” says Paul. “I’ve been told that it takes several years for a relationship to be completely settled and free of major glitches. I guess it’s just a question of whether or not we want to stick it out or not.”

Alan concurs, “It’s up to us what happens next. If we work at it, if we care enough to put forth the effort, if we compromise and learn from our mistakes, then I’m confident it will happen. I’m *sure* it will.”

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On August 27, 1999, Alan will work his final day at John Hancock. He will leave a little legacy behind, in remembered stories that elicit smiles and in tales recounted with loads of laughter. With a distinct, yet subtle influence, Alan has slowly changed the face of the work environment in John Hancock, whether in small ways (his wacky hair colors and envelope-pushing wardrobe charging through the cafeteria) or large (his Creative Committee.)

He has touched almost all of his co-workers in some way, either directly or peripherally; just being around him seems to have been enough inspiration for some. The general consensus at the office is that Alan’s departure will leave the place a little quieter, a little more subdued, and a lot less fun.

It wasn’t always that way. In the beginning, Alan, in the haughty air he adopts in foreign situations, came across as cold and distant. Jim Bouzan was the one who interviewed Alan for the job. His initial impression is typical of those who haven’t gotten to know him.

“When I was first introduced to Alan, I immediately noticed something unique about him, special if you will: he didn’t give a shit about anything,” Mr. Bouzan recounts. “He came into the job interview with a lackadaisical, aloof air about him.” Such an attitude has always been Alan’s trademark defense-mechanism; sometimes it works too well.

“He was not well-liked at first,” Mr. Bouzan claims. “Others found him privileged and condescending. So did I.”

But Alan's quirky charm insinuated him into the good graces of those who took the time to listen and get the sly humor and clever cutting comments. It took a little time, but Alan won over his most apathetic co-workers. Even those with whom he had almost nothing in common were not immune to his contagious laugh, crazy antics, and over-the-top character.

"I admired the flamboyant thing ~ kind of a cross between Nathan Lane and a Backstreet Boy whose name escapes me now," Jim admits. "Alan's personality is one of the few I would call perfect. If his life was a 24-hour satellite channel, I would tune in while eating my dinner."

"I rarely cross paths with individuals like him," Says current co-worker Jaime Silansky. "I like his sassiness and wit... I envy his strength and pride."

It is that pride, in being a gay man and human being (for Alan they bleed together into one), which may very well be his best and most-lasting contribution to those at John Hancock. Many of his co-workers cite Alan as the first gay friend they've ever had. As was previously mentioned, he's not an outspoken activist, and is the first to poke fun at himself and roll with the punches; it is this down-to-earth stance (and the fact that he focuses on himself as a person rather than a gay man,) which is the reason he has broken through to certain individuals.

"I know that I have taught a lot of people about what it's like being gay, and the fact is that it's not all that different from being straight," Alan says. "I think it's more important to relate on common ground, rather than focusing on differences. Granted, those differences are important, but if that's all one focuses on, then there is no chance for real understanding. Besides, I've found that it's easier to get across ideas on a one-to-one basis, rather than some off-putting banner-waving that has no interest in true open-mindedness and communication."

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This philosophy makes more sense when Alan is in public with his boyfriend. He may be calm and confident at his work-place, but when he leaves the office he is less sure. Paul has no qualms about holding hands in public, but Alan outright refuses to do so unless they're alone. Paul doesn't hesitate to give Alan a quick peck on the cheek; Alan looks over his shoulder before giving a quick, tight hug.

The two differ dramatically in the way they carry themselves while walking down the street together. Paul projects an openness wholly lacking in Alan's public demeanor. He is less guarded than Alan, unafraid and unashamed to be openly affectionate. He cannot have been unaffected by his share of derogatory comments, but the way in which he has dealt with them is drastically different.

"I think I'm pretty confident with people," Paul says. He is bright and full of smiles. "I feel that people are innately good and I feel like I'm a good spiritual person and somehow I'm protected by something... and nothing is going to let me be harmed."

It is a sharp contrast with Alan's cynical suspicions of a world where someone's sexuality can result in their being beaten to death and hung Christ-like on a wooden fence.

"I just don't want to deal with [sexuality]," Alan sighs. "I walk through Copley sometimes and I hear the snickers and gangs of kids shouting 'Faggot' as I pass them, and they just keep shouting it until I either look back or pass out of their view. Sometimes I just want to blend in and disappear."

Paul seems to carry a little more hope than Alan does. He is the optimist to Alan's pessimist/realist. And slowly, but beautifully, he is breaking down Alan's somewhat jaded take on the cruel world. With Paul's influence, Alan seems to have re-shuffled his priorities. Quiet moments of intimacy and reading in bed together have displaced rowdy nights out at the local bar. They sleep in on weekends and go out for late brunches. An evening out at the movies is a big deal now. All of Alan's long-time friends have seen the change, citing how "domestic" he has become. It's not so strange for Alan though; he always had it in him, he was simply waiting for the right person to reveal it.

There may be moments when they talk about being together "forever", but when the situation calls for brutal honesty, neither of them pretends that they are ready to get married anytime soon.

"I can't predict the future," Alan says plainly, "For now we make a good couple ~ will we always be this way? I don't know. We are both capable of great change, and an entire lifetime is too vast to make a lasting statement at this time. We're also very young, even though we've both done a lot of living... We're happy with the way it is, and I don't think you need to question or analyze or think that far ahead."

It is an amazing change of pace from the man who once planned his life out years in advance. Emotionally it seems a healthier stance ~ there is more enjoyment in the days of living than in the days of planning. Alan is more at ease with forgiving and forgetting, more willing to leave the past in the past instead of re-hashing and analyzing to the point of destruction. It shows in his departure from his friends in Boston and the Northeast.

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This is a moment he has been through many times ~ from his good-bye's to high school and Amsterdam, NY to his farewells to the friends he made on his Royal Rainbow World Tour, from bidding adieu to his co-workers at Structure in Boston, MA and Rotterdam, NY to his departures from extended make-do families in Rochester and Ithaca, NY. Though he still finds leaving difficult, he has finally come to terms with it, and is at a different place this time around.

"I used to be extremely adamant that the friends I was leaving would *remain* my friends forever," Alan explains. "That's why I wrote so many letters and why I sent out so much stuff to all of my friends. And for a few years after high school I held it together. I was the one who kept that group of friends intact, with my letters and keeping everyone updated on the others and throwing get-together parties and everything else. But it just got to be too draining, and people eventually lost interest. No one ever wrote back after a while. After college I lost touch with the friends I made there, and then when I left Structure I lost touch of those friends. Each time I dreaded having to start over again and meet new people, but I did it. I no longer feel that the friends you make today will be with you for life ~ we go through a number of friendship circles. A big part of it is location and work, and when you move you do it over again. There are certain special people who will be with me for life ~ Suzie, Ann, Chris, Alissa, Kristen, Dawn, Matt ~ but others I don't see as permanent. If people aren't willing to put forth the effort, then there's nothing I can do."

He is picky about choosing friends these days. In the past he opened himself up to anyone who would listen, and occasionally got burned. (His friendship with Gina Agresta ended when her boyfriend robbed Alan of \$200 for drug-money; his relationships with Kim Caola and Simon Towers turned into a one-sided unrequited series of phone calls;

there are even recent spurnings by such long-time friends as Kate and Kerry Ochal (who haven't really seen Alan since they missed his much-hyped Masquerade party and New Year's Eve gathering ~ to which they never even RSVP'd). These events left him initially angry, then sad, and finally apathetic.

Today he is weary of people getting close to him, and that comes out as cold detachment or, worse, blatant manipulation. He has been hurt so often in the past that he goes into every relationship suspecting the worst, often inflicting the pain before he has a chance to become the inflicted. Kira Drake wrote in his going-away journal:

“Alan, you need to stop doing things the way you do because it isn't fair to mistreat your friends. I know you are a good friend and because I'm your friend I'm telling you this for your own benefit. Some people are not as patient as me and everyone has a limit and if you keep up with your attitude you will be alone. Just be yourself because you're a good person and people will like you for what you are. I'm going to miss you very much because I spend good and bad time with you, more good than bad. I also learned a lot from you and I hope that you do things for others because you really feel like doing it, not just because people owe you stuff. P.S. Also slow down on your drinks. ~ Tu amiga, Kira”

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He has a tendency to fall into self-fulfilling roles, sometimes at the subtle suggestions of others. When he was growing up, the dinner table was where the big discussions of the day would take place, and afterwards he and his brother would scurry off upstairs or outside. If they stayed around, however, they could hear their parents talk about them. One day, sure that something would be said after he misbehaved or done something to his brother, Alan lingered on the stairway, listening as his parents waited a moment before whispering. His Grandmother was there too, always ready to gently defend her grandchildren.

“I don't know why he is so *mean*,” Alan hears his Father saying in exasperation.

“Of, I don't think he's mean,” his Grandmother says softly, “He's just ... different.”

“Grammy,” his Father says, annoyed, “He is just *mean*.” It is said in a tone of disgust, almost hatred ~ it is the tone in which he told Alan to stop posing like a girl in the family photos, the same tone he used to tell his boys to stop crying. What may be most insidious is the fact that Alan was never meant to hear any of it, and to a child that lent it the air of truth.

Instead of rebelling against the “mean” image, Alan played up to it. He turned into the villain and gave himself over to the role of the bad-guy. Only after years of alienating people and testing friendships did he see the harm this had done, and since then he has worked to make amends.

His “villainy” has become the campy stuff of legend: his biting comments and histrionic yelling are almost always followed by a laugh or giggle, and people enjoy the sparks of interest in a sometimes-dull world.

“People like the diva-role,” claims Chris Vaeth. “The bad behavior isn't genuinely bad, just performance (for the most part). This makes friendship with Alan so exciting.”

While Chris concedes that Alan can be “demanding” and “sensitive about friendship,” he senses an underlying truth to all of his actions. “His love for family and

friends is real. His creativity is real. His passion for writing is real. His sensitivity is real (his bitterness is also real, but can become an act much more easily than his sensitivity can be downplayed). His constant search for self-evaluation, self-improvement, and self-interview is real.”

Alan still gets upset over certain things, but the way in which he handles himself is determinedly altered: he no longer lashed out in faux-viciousness. When he feels let-down or betrayed by friends, he retreats within himself, denying them his friendship until he has reconciled their actions.

“Sometimes Alan won’t call anyone for days,” Alissa confirms. “He’ll withdraw from the world. He’ll emit an air of surrender ~ like it’s not worth trying anymore. His quietness will only be interrupted by spiteful comments if you push too hard.”

Despite this rather negative view of him, Alissa has gotten to know him well-enough to see beneath the acting-out. “Alan has been awesome to me. He’s welcomed me into his life and given me kick-ass spaghetti sauce when I was sick ~ so, imperfections and all, I love him.”

His longest-known friend, and the one person who probably knows Alan better than anyone else, maintains that he has always been “real”. Suzie Ko asserts, “Every time we have talks he’s always Alan. He takes off the persona of the minute and there he is (the following is not meant literally), bare naked Alan sans the bitchy, self-absorbed, whiny, impatient, “the world has done me wrong” character with the feather boa and a mimosa or whatever it is that is his vice of the minute.”

Suzie has seen him through thousands of transformations, and is excited about his upcoming move to Chicago and the search for a writing job. “Happily,” she says, “I think that Alan has moved into a more comfortable area of living.”

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There is no happy ending to this story ~ rather, we are left on the edge of hopeful expectation. It could go a number of ways: a young man heads off to a new place and ruins everything he once had, falling into a destructive path of alcoholic madness and emotional mayhem, losing the one man who every truly loved him, and discarding his talent in apathetic abandon ~ or a young man takes a chance, moves to an exciting new city, finds a decent job that creatively challenges him, enriches his life with a special group of friends, and realizes a deep and enduring love with his partner for life.

It certainly won’t be as clear-cut as that ~ there will most likely be a combination of the two, with Alan striving valiantly for the latter outcome. Whatever the case, one thing will remain the same ~ he will never stay still; there will forever be ways in which to improve, problems to solve, and lessons to be learned.

“I want to read all the great books and listen to cheesy pop music and see amazing theater ~ I want to lay on the beach and see scary movies and go out for sushi ~ I want to sleep-in on rainy Sunday mornings with Paul and watch him on-stage and read my words in a magazine,” Alan once said. He has done almost all of it already, and the list is only the beginning.

Not only is he ready for the fun stuff, he is bravely tackling the darker issues of life ~ his own and others’. Rather than living out the worst of human nature as he had done in the past, Alan seems to have translated that into the journey his writing takes, and it is this writing which gives voice to the path he no longer allows himself to take.

“Right now I’m thinking about how easy it is to hurt yourself, not in a bad way (like I want to die), just that it’s easy,” says Suzie. “It’s the strangest experience to crawl into your own head. It’s the fastest way to sadness for me, and I never stop it before inflicting pain. And it’s one of those things that resists mind control... It seems to me that Alan has a similar downfall. And with all of the differences between us, it sure is nice to know that we share this terrible affliction. Rest assured, we handle these episodes in different ways. *Alan acts on things* and me... well, I just do nothing at all.”

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He has never done “nothing”. Even in silence he conveys strong messages, perhaps more-so than in any amount of verbal rubbish. His fear of being misunderstood brings out his literary skill, and a need to communicate drives his desire to write.

There remain problematic issues which must eventually be addressed (not the least of which are his growing reliance on alcohol and a life-long battle with depression), but for the first time he sees that much of this is in his own hands. This bright realization is a hopeful sign. If he wants it all, it is there for the taking. At last, this is his time, and if the past is any indication of what is to come, Alan will turn out just fine.

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