

Brandon Gets His Big Break

Chapter Twelve

By

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Amy loved Jane.

It was 2019.

It was the morning after the first bull session.

Sometime before that first session, Jane came to the office and found Amy in the bathroom, hugging the toilet and crying. Humiliated and embarrassed, Amy began to leave. Jane stopped her by telling her that she witnessed her parents being shot dead at a JCC by an antisemitic terrorist: she was six years old. Because Jane shared that confidence, Amy then told Jane about her mom's murder attempt which forced her to break up with her girlfriend Linda. A few days later, Amy followed up with Jane as some of her comments left Amy concerned about her boss' well-being. Jane was touched by this and recommended that the two become confidants. Jane then insisted that Amy see her shrink (Jane agreed to pay). She told Amy that she's bisexual and told her that she wanted to help her find friends in the Hollywood gay community.

This led to an agreement that the two would be each other's confidant. They would bare all at a weekly tête-à-tête. The first one was very consequential.

Jane revealed that she deathly afraid of the rise of Fascism in the United States in the form of Christian Nationalism. This would lead to her being slaughtered (because she was both queer and a Jew). She could not bring herself to openly share this fear with the people in her life, like Jim who was her romantic partner.

Amy was traumatized by her mom's attempt to murder her for being gay. Besides the relentless homophobia from her church community, the anti-intellectualism led her to deny her considerable mental gifts. She confided in Jane that she is completely self-isolated as a result.

Jane observed at the first bull session: "Seems to me that we found some focus here. We both have to get our shit together. Each of us has to help the other to get her shit together. That's the point of these bull sessions."

Subsequently, the two went to a gay bar in West Hollywood. Jane hooked Amy up with a woman that was both a friend and a former lover. She was a dead ring for Iman, the wife of David Bowie. Being coy, Jane would not tell Amy the woman's name. She wanted to give her friend an opening: 'Jane wouldn't tell me your name!'

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Jane motioned with her eyes and directed Amy's attention towards the woman standing near the bathroom.

"She thinks you're cute."

"Oh...yeah? What's her name?"

"I won't tell you."

"Oh."

Her name was Ilhan.

Her immediate family were [Cultural Muslims](#). While non-theists, her parents, brothers, and sisters identified with Islam. This was a connection to their heritage, relatives in the Middle East and Africa and their ancestors. It was simply their social and cultural essence. Her parents – both doctors – were irreligious. They were hostile to the universal supernatural interpretation of the faith. They reinterpreted the tenets in a secular way.

While the [Five Pillars of Islam](#) are traditionally understood as religious obligations, her mom and dad – like other nonreligious-to-atheist Muslims – interpreted them in a more secular way. They felt that the Five Pillars were a framework for social justice and human rights. While *Shahada* was normally defined as a declaration of faith in one God and the prophethood of Muhammad, it represented the right to freedom of belief to her parents. *Salat* referred to the five daily prayers that a Muslim was obligated to perform: to Ilhan's family, it represented the right to freedom of expression. *Zakat* was the giving of alms to the poor and needy. Her people retained the value placed on charity but amended it to include an expression of the right to economic security. *Sawm*, which normally referred to fasting during the month of Ramadan, represented the right to health. *Hajj* – the pilgrimage to Mecca that Muslims undertake at least once in their lifetime (if able) – represented the right to the freedom of movement.

Ilhan's family valued the structure that the faith preached while separating itself from Allah. Her family were disciplined freethinkers.

She had heard two different explanations about her name. It was said to be an indirect Quranic name that meant to eloquently state something, to say something beautifully. She liked that. She also heard that the name was of Turkish origin and meant the 'the king – or queen – of a nation'. She was even more fond of that. Being a Western woman, she knew that regal status was earned and not given. Those who were just given family wealth and did not make their own way were slugs: the 'Eric's,' Don Jr.s' and 'Ivankas'. They were not regal.

And that related back to the value that her parents placed on a structured life. This led her parents' to emphasize the value of academic achievement. Besides the ideal gleaned from Islam, her parents would

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often remind her that a black woman was dismissed in American culture and had to work to prove herself. At 25, Ilhan was enrolled residency program at [Adventist Health Glendale](#) for cardiac surgeons.

When Amy awoke, she rolled over and realized that Ilhan was not in bed. She slipped on her panties and went looking for her. Ilhan owned a condo in [The Excelsior at Glendale](#). If mom and dad did something, they weren't half-assed.

The high-end complex offered a pool, a fitness center, and a spa. Ilhan's parents made this possible. They were more than happy to share their wealth with their child, as long as she earned it. While irreligious – and dismissive of the elements of Islam that differed with their cosmopolitan and atheistic nature – Ilhan's parents embraced [Islamic family values](#) (both the embrace of extended family and the value placed upon raising healthy children). Also, they felt that helping their child financially was in keeping with *Zakat*. They only asked that their child work hard and prove herself. Their interpretation of this Pillar was an expression of concern over economic security. It was a familial quid-pro-quo. They wanted to help their child – who was working to establish herself – to get her life going. In addition, it was about their security as well. All of her life, they emphasized to her the value of family. While they prepared for retirement, they might need Ilhan's monetary help in the future. More likely, they would be ravished by age. It could be that only one is left and would be suffering from the onset of dementia. The widow would want the choice of smart and established children to be the caretaker.

And Ilhan was smart and industrious.

Her parents knew that she was a lesbian and assured her that they did not love her any less for it. They further assured her that there was no shame. They did counsel her to be ethical in all of her dealings...that included sexual liaisons.

Amy crossed the hard wood floor to the kitchenette where her host was fixing coffee.

"Good morning, Ilhan!", Amy said brightly.

"Sweetie. You don't have to sound so perky. You must be hung over."

By this time, Amy was standing next to her. Ilhan was wearing a bathrobe and a white terry cloth towel as a turban. As she spoke, she motioned to a bowl of breath mints on the counter: Amy took a couple and chewed them.

The comparison between Ilhan and the supermodel was valid. Like Iman, she was a tall woman...a head taller than Amy. She shared Iman's long neck, slender figure, and fine features. There was one difference between her and her famous doppelganger. While the supermodel had a copper skin tone, her complexion was black as coal. California was peopled by hot women. Even still, she constantly received compliments on her exceptional beauty. Sometimes the observation was made in a sweet way but most of them were crass and ugly. The women tended to be supportive and the men...not so much. If the tribute was politely offered, she would just say that her looks were merely typically Somalian.

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Otherwise, she would just walk away. Not all the unsolicited comments were about her beauty. Sometimes a passerby would call her 'nigger'.

Ilhan leaned in and the two women frenched. While Amy embraced her, Ilhan squeezed and kneaded her pale friend's butt: she gave one of the cheeks a swat.

"I need coffee but need to get dressed.", Amy said.

"I have a nice robe that you can wear."

Before Amy could protest about size, Ilhan continued:

"Don't worry. It'll fit. I had some family over recently. My niece forgot to pack it. She's thirteen. Somalian thirteen. It'll fit you."

They both laughed.

"It's hanging in my bedroom closet...far left hand side."

Ilhan slapped Amy's ass as she started to pad off to the bedroom. Amy didn't react but kept walking.

"How do you like your coffee?", Ilhan said with raised voice.

Amy turned.

"Black."

"You like your coffee like your women?"

They laughed.

Amy easily located the young woman's robe, a white terry cloth. It was considerably smaller than the rest of the clothes. She started to flesh out the thought that greeted her when she woke. It wasn't about Ilhan but Jane. She loved the women. She did not love easily.

There was Linda, that being romantic love.

There was Roz. Her feelings were more complex. She loved Roz like a good mother. She also felt the love that a submissive felt towards her dominant (in a healthy D/s relationship). It was a connection that was tinged with dependence. This dependency was experienced – in part – through sexual experimentation that could be politely described as 'dynamic'. She long appreciated how such a relationship could easily be dysfunctional. While forever grateful for Linda, Roz affirmed her faith in God. While the God of her mom and her Pastor...her Shepherd was an ugly lie that was meant to control, her God was Love. And it was the Love of the Universe that connected them.

Her relationship with Linda was a beautiful 50/50 one. Roz was in charge but only cared about her well-being: they respected each other. Amy knew that she needed that again. She needed to be told what to do, by someone who was decent and of pure intent. She understood now that was what the last five

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years was about. She was working things through...absolutely. But she didn't know what to do. That wasn't true: she knew but didn't have the spine to do it. She had faith in herself once but her Doris slapped her down, figuratively and literally.

She was at her lowest after her breakup with Linda. The possibility of her committing suicide was very real. The Love of the Universe – God – connected her with Roz. Not another girlfriend but an emotionally stable dominant that would give her the guidance that she needed. And the relationship expanded her sexual palette. Now she would routinely incorporate vanilla play into encounters with her partners. She would ask to be spanked.

As she did with Ilhan (who enthusiastically complied). Both naked, she sat on the edge of the bed and instructed Amy – in a commanding tone – to lean across her upper legs so that her butt was sticking up. She gave Amy a nice spanking. That definitely defined the direction of their encounter.

When with a partner for the first time, Ilhan looked to the woman to set the tone. She liked situations where she could be more assertive.

She took advantage of the situation with Amy last night. She slapped the woman's ass. She pushed her around a bit (in a laughing and playful way). She straddled her pale friend and squeezed the woman's nipples with thumb and forefinger. She would never go further than that, no toys or hardware.

Whenever a partner demonstrated interest in more than vanilla stuff, Amy would oblige. If it turned out that the woman had a strap-on, she would be pegged. She was not adverse to other activity: like wax play. She would only ask for a spanking. If her partner expressed interest in something more – and did so explicitly – Amy would go with it. Sadly, Ilhan did not.

God made this healthy expression of her sexuality possible.

She knew that there were those who would scoff. Not her mom and that clan. No. a notion like 'God is Love' would be a challenge. Among her people, it would create a need to dissuade so that the soul-saving could begin. That's why she was turned out as Jesus' whore at the age of nine. When she was street preaching, she was trying to turn a person away from ideas that worked to those that did not. She saw that now. The militant atheists would scoff. She had met a few as Buddhist meditation was popular with them. Her feelings towards her people was somewhat complex. There was hate...great hatred. There was also frustration and anger. And fear. She knew what Jane said last night was spot on. If the extremists got the Christian Nationalist government that they wanted, she'd be gang raped and thrown into a death camp.

And the militant atheists? She only felt hate. They were also controllers, just as bad as her people. Deep down, she suspected that they were right. The Universe was just a void. And that scared her. That fear metastasized into pure hate.

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Jane was the first woman, outside of the other two, to see her. That day that she had her breakdown wrapped around Jane's toilet, her boss comforted her. That, in itself, was not a big deal. Anyone would comfort her employee. Then she would kick her to the curb.

This isn't working out.

Jane didn't do that. She actually cared. After the toilet episode, Amy returned to follow up. She was concerned about what Jane said. In winning over Amy's confidence, Jane shared her feelings about her parents' murder, a heady mix of guilt and fear. She made clear that she could not share her deepest thoughts with those that she loved. Amy could relate. She could no longer love at all. The reason why she did relate and – did not just blow off Jane like everyone else – is because Jane cared about her in the first place. She knew the misery caused by her inability to communicate. She was concerned about Jane. The concern was life-affirming.

Amy appreciated the synchronicity: Jane needed her as well.

In both of her prior relationships, she fulfilled a need that the other woman had.

Linda was her girlfriend: they fulfilled each other emotionally and physically. It was just an amazing romantic relationship.

The thing with Roz was different. Roz also had a crazy and abusive mom as well. While her mom was fucked up for a different reason – drugs and alcohol, not religious fanaticism – she understood what it was like dealing with a verbally and physically abusive caretaker. Quantitatively, her mom was worse than Doris. After the court removed her from her mom's home, she moved in with her uncle. He was a wise man who gave her emotional support and guidance. He gave her the love that she needed but was a gruff guy: he cared but wasn't hardwired to be nurturing. But he cared and tried. He also set her up financially. He recognized that the young woman was exceptionally smart and quickly began to groom her to take over his business upon his retirement. That's why she had her head reasonably well screwed on when Amy fell in with the middle school outsiders – the punks, goths, and gays – after Linda.

Roz ached to be someone's mom. She wanted to guide someone in the way that her mom should have. When Amy became part of the group, Roz saw that she was bright and hurting: alone and scared. She adopted her. After Roz understood the situation with Doris, she wanted to be Amy's surrogate, replacing her crazy bitch of a mom. She knew exactly what she was doing. And she was there for her charge from middle school to the end of high school.

The two fell into a D/s situation quickly. Amy initiated it. While she was with Linda, she researched homosexuality, in a few years it would be called 'the gay lifestyle'. She used both the school library's computer and Linda's: she further researched the school's library books (fast forward a few years: the extremists would ban those books to keep a kid from independently learning about his or her authentic self). She understood – consciously – that it was part of the process of breaking free from all the toxic bullshit...the control. She was driven by her desire for women but found that she had a specific appetite. She would fantasize about sexually submitting herself to a woman. While she loved Linda with all of her

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heart and soul, she understood that would not happen with her. She fantasized about it when she masturbated (which she would do when Doris was sleeping).

They were both naked. She was on her hands and knees in front of her petite, pale and blonde girlfriend who was sitting on the edge of the bed. Extending one of her legs and pointing her toes towards her compliant partner, Tara ordered Willow to suck her toes in a commanding voice. And Willow enthusiastically complied.

Things were at their lowest when she got involved with the outsiders. She wanted someone to take charge. And – thankfully – Roz turned out to stable. She would come to believe that the Love of the Universe – God – connected her with Roz. Given how things could have turned out, it was not an unreasonable belief. She found that she enjoyed D/s sex immensely (as did Roz). It was natural for them both.

After the first bull session, she realized that she was attracted to sexual submission because she was temporarily extending control to another. But she really had the power. She decided – beforehand – the nature of the dominance and she set the limits. And it was temporary. It was not the soul crushing rule of her mom and her Pastor...her Shepherd that constricted her emotional, intellectual and sexual being (her Authentic Self).

Jane reawakened an important aspect of her Authentic Self: her intellectual self. While Roz encouraged her to study – as she realized that was her way of rebelling against Doris and the ‘church folk’ (and Roz hated them as well) – she did not make a special effort to challenge her mind. Jane did:

“Do you know what happened in 1492?”, Jane asked.

“Columbus sailed the ocean blue’...? That can’t be it.”

“No...sweetie...practicing Jews were expelled from Spain.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“No...I wish I were. Ferdinand and Isabella issued something called the Alhambra Decree. Practicing Jews were expelled so that they would not ‘corrupt’ the Conversos...Jews that had converted to Catholicism.”

“No...I swear. I never heard this before.”

“Yeah...I know...”

She felt a rebirth after the first bull session.

Jane turned to her for comfort, and she provided it. She was a loner. She did not comfort people. She felt the pleasure of maternal love. Jane gave that to her.

There was more than that.

Jane pushed her...challenged her mind.

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Jane continued:

“Human institutions magnify the worst in the individual. Now...individuals collectively create them. That means that those institutions are reflecting the depravity of the individual. That shit will drive you crazy. It’s best to say the institution is the practical source of concerted evil. The Nazis. KKK. Stalin. Mao.”

“What should I do?”, Amy asked.

“Educate yourself. Learn about the horrible things that are done to groups of people by institutions: religions, governments, and corporations. Not only my people...Jews. But...Native Americans, Blacks, queers, of course, and others.”

“I will.”

She subsequently was flooded with exciting memories of her academic accomplishments. She had forgotten so much. She knew about the expulsions of the Jews from Spain...and so much more. Her mom, her Pastor...her Shepherd, shamed her for being smart. What she learned contradicted what she was taught all of her life. There is a term: [cognitive dissonance](#). She learned about that in high school. She forgot it with a lot of other stuff (suppressed it...did not forget it). The mental discomfort that resulted from holding two conflicting beliefs was overwhelming. She was feeling psychic distress because she had defied Jesus. Her intellect shamed her. She was still shamed by it when she had her breakdown in Jane’s bathroom.

Memories of her past came flooding back. Not only ‘forbidden knowledge’ but her accomplishments. She remembered a report that she wrote for her ‘American Lit’ class about the book *Catch-22*.

Ms. Eames taught the class.

She had Amy stay after class to discuss her paper. Amy was petrified as she was certain that the teacher was going to call in her mom and report that her daughter blasphemed Christ in writing.

“Please don’t call my mom...I’m so sorry for what I did.”

“What did you do?”

“I disrespected Christ with that report. I’m sorry.”

“Amy...I was very impressed. You’re an exceptional young woman. You’re meant to do great things.”

After the first bull session, this memory came back to her...along with the memory of the report and what she learned. Amy realized that it was an example of how she was tormented by her upbringing. She was still untying the gordian knot.

Amy then remembered the powerful statements of support that she received from her sixth grade teachers. She remembered how she was praised by her teachers. But she was ashamed of her mind in the same way that she was ashamed of her sexuality.

At the first bull session, Amy told Jane that for that she was like David Carradine’s character – Caine – in the seventies series ‘Kung Fu’ during her travels for the past five years. Caine was on the run in the Old West

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after he killed the Chinese Emperor's nephew: the coward killed his teacher in cold blood with a gun (not his hands in a honorable fight). Like Caine, she did nothing wrong but was only being righteous. She was only embracing her Authentic Self - both sexual and intellectual - and her controlling people were getting off by holding her down & holding her back. In an exile of her own, she reflected on this.

Her sexual submission was a repudiation of that control. She understood now.

She often thought about 'James 1: 6-8' and its warning:

'But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. Such a person is double-minded and unstable in all they do.'

But she was more than a 'wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind'.

Controlling bullshit.

She often thought about what her Pastor...her Shepherd once said. A person trying to embrace both the way of the church and the world was torn. He was just enough of the world to know that he couldn't be happy in the church and with just enough Christ in him to know that he couldn't be happy in the world. Such a person is a spiritual schizophrenic...a two-soul person.

Cognitive Dissonance.

She was of two souls, but only one was real. She was a woman of intellect and a sexual being. While an endless stream of superstitious drivel – piss from high – rained on her, she was not the piss. This truth affirmed that she was not being allowed to be her Authentic Self. It affirmed to her that a person did – in fact – have an Authentic Self. Those that both created her fake soul – and foisted it on her – were still controlling her. She minimized her gifts. She was ashamed of them. She was ashamed of her sexuality. Despite being very active, she still felt irrational shame. She felt greater shame over her desire to be a sub than her lesbianism. She thought that the shame was due to the kinkiness of it. No. The shame was based in the fact that it was a break with her past. When she comforted Jane over the slaughter of her people – and the fear that it could happen to her – she was there for another. And she understood that she could only be there for another in a moment when there was no shame.

And she understood that she would be there for others going forward.

She only had questions when she was a kid. First, there was only her questions. There was no one who would listen to her. Talk to her...yes. Lecture her...yes. Berate her...yes. But not listen. They were encasing her in her fake soul. Then there was Linda...she listened. There were people like Ms. Eames: they listened and praised her intellect. They broke the fake soul apart. They freed her and she responded with great anger and hate directed towards her captors. But the captors were not defeated. They made her feel shame for those things that defined her. Then Jane came along. She experienced the ravishes of being controlled but never observed it in another.

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Every time a street preacher accosted Jane that person was both controlling her and reminding her of the consequences of being an individual. And, in Jane's case, that meant embracing her Jewish Identity and being bisexual. Jane knew that people like her were slaughtered throughout history. To be blunt, the guards at the deathcamps were not atheist, or Muslim, or Buddhist. They were Christian. When accosted by a street preacher, Jane was forced to look into the eyes of the enemy and justify herself...to present her papers. A street preacher – like when she was kid – tortured people like Jane, not simply annoyed. How many did she torture? She was a victim of control and that made her control others. It was only when Amy saw the torment that control caused in another did the shame – like a fever – break. The shame was control and she saw through control at the first bull session.

Was that permanent? She couldn't say. But Jane did that for her.

Last night, after they bared their souls each other and cried together, Jane hooked her up with a supermodel. Well...a cardiac surgeon who looked like one. After that transformative evening, she – someone with whom she had developed an amazing connection – hooked her up...with a '10' no less. And the sex was totally free of shame. It was more than amazing sex: it was an expression of total freedom. The last time that she felt that was with Linda. While her time with Roz positively expanded her sexual essence. It was marred by the guilt. Being a lesbian was one thing: being a kinky one was another. And that revived the guilt that was pounded into her all of her life. Last night was perfect...and the kink made it so. It was the rebirth that coalesced after the first bull session.

Jane was restoring essence – her Authentic Self – to her.

She loved her. Jane was looking out for her, and she was looking out for Jane. She hadn't had this connection with another woman for five years. Like Linda and Roz before her, this thing with Jane had its own character. They were friends – 'special friends', perhaps – but friends. She could not blow this. There was no intimate component to this relationship. She would ruin everything if she came off too strong...didn't play things cool.

But she could seduce Jane and certainly wanted to do that. After all, Jane confided in her about the depth of her fear that fascists could come to power in the States, and she'd end up being brutalized and slaughtered. It's true that she gave Jane the opening by having her breakdown first. But Jim was her live-in and that's one hell of an opening. Ultimately, Jane was looking for someone that she could talk freely with (even though she had a lover). She found that 'someone' in her. She hadn't met Jim yet – the discussed dinner was cancelled and rescheduled – and knew little about him. He might be a smart fellow and someone who shared Linda's interest in the gay lifestyle but perhaps was simply unapproachable. Besides it was clear that Jane needed the inherent support of another woman. They cried together. Did Jane and Jim ever cry together?

Then there was the survivor's guilt that arose from the murder of her parents. The two obviously talked about the murders on multiple occasions. Jane never opened up fully: she had to consciously hold back.

But Amy knew that Jane was sexually unattainable.

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She was in a committed relationship with Jim. If she didn't respect that, she would not respect Jane. And her love would be a lie. And she would be trying to control someone: she would be Doris. And her mom undoubtedly 'loved' her: she drowned her in the fucking commode as an expression of it.

Amy put on the young woman's robe (which fit perfectly) and rejoined Ilhan.

"I hope you're hungry. I was making myself an omelet and took the liberty of making you one too. With toast and jam. Also...OJ and coffee...a nice gourmet blend. Black...like you requested.", Ilhan said.

"Oh...bless you."

They sat down. They ate and talked.

As they got up, Ilhan said:

"So, the three of us have to get together. I haven't hung with Jane for a while."

"I'd love that."

"Yeah. We can go to *The Bayou*. I'm really busy. I party on Fridays."

"Okay. I'll talk to Jane."

"And...I'll give her a call as well. I owe her one.", Ilhan said.

"I guess I need to take a shower."

"We need to shower together."

"Is there a water shortage?"

"No."

Ilhan let her robe drop to the ground and then Amy did. They frenched. Then she took Amy's hand and led her to the bathroom.

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It was December 25, 2005.

Jim was fifteen. His tenth-grade class took off for Christmas day from Flintridge Preparatory School: there was only a half day the day of Christmas Eve.

In 1999, his mom died. Jim's dad was a kind and supportive guy: he was instrumental in helping Jim handle the loss. In '02, his dad started dating a woman: it became clear that they would marry. Having a solid relationship, Jim and his father enjoyed spending Christmas together. In the previous year, his dad spent Christmas Eve and Day with his girlfriend and did so this year. Meanwhile, Mark's parents left him to tend to his comatose aunt who had stage four cancer and was expected to pass at any moment. They ended up making plans to spend the two days together. Jim and Mark were close but not exactly friends

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as they belonged to different cliques. Jim was in AV. Mark hung with a group of guys who were reputed to be gay (and that turned out to be true). Jim was bisexual. He had his share of experiences with girls but never was with a guy. And he really desired it. The two ended up being intimate that night and Jim expressed his desire to be in his Mark's group.

When Jim awoke, Mark wasn't in bed. He got up. Still naked, he headed to the living room where the two had stripped the night before. He located his underpants and jeans: he put them on. Sitting on the sofa, he looked up and saw Mark was at the table. He was collecting the dirty dishes from the previous evening's dinner. He was wearing pajama pants and slippers, no top. Jim became fully hard. Small and slight, Mark was cute. He had an olive complexion with naturally curly jet-black hair. Jim was definitely attracted to boys like him. He had noticed that Mark's group was equally divided between hot little boys like Mark and big athletic guys. While he did fantasize about performing oral – being the center of a blowbang – he really wanted to nail cute boys.

"Hey...sweetie.", Jim said.

"Hey, beautiful. You're up. I had to clean up this mess. It was bugging me."

Jim walked over. Mark sat the dishes that he was holding down on the table, next to the dishrag. He picked up the rag and: wiped his hands.

Mark wrapped his arms around his guest.

"I haven't brushed my teeth.", Jim said.

"I don't mind if you don't."

They frenched.

"I had a great time last night. Do you still want to hang with my group?"

"Well..."

"You changed your mind."

"No...no. I'm into it. But I'm really tight with my AV peeps. Can I hang with both?"

"Sure. AV is cool. It's not like you hang with the fucking jocks. But we are about discretion. You know...*What happens in Fight Club stays in Fight Club.*"

"You like that movie?"

Mark laughed.

"There are a lot of creeps out there. We are about discretion. You're AV friends will have questions. You'll just have to be coy. You know...shit...like...'Oh we just like watching movies and bowling'."

"Okay."

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“That’s all bullshit. Everyone knows. Thank god for the big, street-fighting, fuckers like Trey. Reason for the group. But we have to keep the front up. Hanging with us is the same as coming out. Can you handle that?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you worried about your AV friends?”

After a pause, Jim said:

“They’ll just have to be cool. Um...Can I just say something?”

“I don’t know...can you?”

“I just have this super intense sex drive. I like cute boys.”

Mark rolled his eyes and laughed:

“You like girls too?”

“Um...yeah.”

“Well...you’re in luck. Our group has groupies. I don’t give a shit because I’m not into that. But we have a couple bi guys. Apparently, they have wild parties.”

“Really?”

“Really...I’ll let the guys tell you about that. But...the girls are cool. Total [fag hags](#). They like hanging with us. We’re totally mellow. We don’t hit on them and are just friends. So, yeah, I didn’t go into this last night. These girls hang with us on weeknights. As I said, the guys hook up and peel off to the bedrooms. But we keep it totally asexual in the main room. And it’s important to me that the girls feel safe with us.”

“I’ve never noticed girls hanging with you.”

“Well...they’re discreet. They stop by Trey’s on a weeknight and never the orgy night. We don’t even make eye contact at school. They just watch TV with us. Gotta be cool. Everyone knows that we’re gay and it’s pretty taboo for girls to hang with gays. Even just socializing. It’s nuts...really.”

“Who are they?”

“I won’t say...too soon. It’s like I said. I care about the girls...look out for them.”

Mark continued:

“We get what’s going on. A lot of reactionary bullshit out there: the bullshit has all the power. Not everyone wants to come out. It can destroy your life...or save it. There’s eighteen guys in our group...”

“No, there isn’t. There’s six of you guys.”, Jim protested.

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"The six hang out openly at school. And that provides protection for small boys like me. There's strength in numbers. If I didn't hang with the group, with bruisers like Trey, I'd be beaten. Other guys aren't ready to come out. They drop by Trey's at night...some are [twinks](#) same as me...you'll like that. Like the girls, these guys just drop by. There's another dozen guys who are with us. It gives our weekday social nights and weekend orgy night nice variety. You know...you don't have to hang with us at school. You can keep it on the downlow."

Jim flashed on a conversation that he had with his dad when he was thirteen.

"Dad...do you feel like a fraud? I mean you keep having recurring conversations with your friends at church about Jesus and you no longer believe in him."

"No...son. I don't. My life is really tied up with the faith. My friends...my professional colleagues...are all a part of it. It really is my life. Yeah...I don't believe in Jesus, or the Sacraments, or any of it, anymore. But I'm middle age: I'm not going to restart my life. Besides, we aren't fanatics like the nuts that do the street corner preaching. I imagine every damn conversation comes back to Jesus with them. My people...my community...are smart people. We have interesting and well-rounded conversations, and they'll occasionally veer into religion."

"You don't feel like a fraud, then?"

"Naw...I think a lot of people are in the same boat. They don't believe...or fully buy...the faith anymore. But they aren't going to renounce their entire life over it. Hell, son, I know that friends of mine feel the same way. I think I know. But I can't ask. Could go badly. But I have a radar about this."

"Um...dad...have you ever heard the term 'closeted'?", Jim asked.

"No...son...what's that?"

"Nothing...dad. Nothing."

Jim wasn't going to be closeted.

"No...I'm not ashamed of who I am. I want to hang with you guys at school."

"Good for you", Mark said and kissed Jim on the cheek.

Mark continued:

"Help me clean this mess up and then we'll fool around."

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"Okay...if he's good guy, why can't you talk to him about how difficult it is dealing with your parents' deaths? About the stuff that you're dealing with as a Jew? I get it...we need to help each other to get it together. But you have a relationship...and friends...you're ahead of me...and why haven't you gotten it together yet?", Amy said.

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It was 2019 and Jane and Amy were having their second bull session.

The first bull session took place at Jane's office and the second took place at her former townhome. She moved out of it to move into Jim's small house in Elysian Valley (commonly known as Frogtown). The move constituted a massive reduction in Jane's *physical* quality of life. Jim wanted to share in expenses equally. He was tormented by the difference in wealth: he was very upfront about that. But Jim was a decent guy and was profoundly disturbed that Jane was giving up such an amazing place to move into his (comparative) hovel.

While he wanted to live with Jane, he felt horribly about how he was lessening Jane's quality of life. She had to convince him. At the same time, she could not talk to him about her fears.

Before the move, he and Jane had numerous conversations – arguments really – about the undeniable sacrifice that she was making. Jane would reassure him that she *truly* loved him and wanted to live with him: she would reassure him that his *emotional* comfort was important to her than her *physical* comfort. She wanted to be with him and truly felt that the Valley had its charm.

She may have been an established Hollywood agent, but the *physical* was less important than the *emotional*.

The townhome was currently vacant. Even though the escrow had closed, the new owners had not yet taken possession. Jane had a 5% stake in the [Century Plaza Tower Residences](#) (where the townhome was located). Also, she was friends with the property manager: his actor son was a client of hers. She had no difficulty getting the keys for a meeting.

Jim was getting his career as an architect going. He was slim and hairy. He was – at best – of average attractiveness.

Jane – a supermodel beauty – could buy and sell him.

There was no doubt who was settling.

Designed by Pei Cobb Freed and Partners – which was founded in 1955 by the renowned architect I.M. Pei and others – the Century Plaza Tower Residences was in Century City. It was comprised of two 44-story residential towers.

From an ariel view, each of the striking twin towers was sculpted in the shape of a [reuleaux triangle](#): a curved triangle with constant width. There were a total of 268 residences that featured floor-to-ceiling windows with unparalleled views of the city. Each residence featured glass-lined balconies, gourmet kitchens with state-of-the-art appliances, and spa-like bathrooms.

The complex's hotel-like amenities ranged from a wine room and library lounge to a children's playroom and screening room. There was also a full suite of fitness amenities, including a yoga and meditation lawn and a reading garden.

No Doubt Who Settled.

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“Why can’t you fully confide in Jim or your friends?”, Amy pressed.

“Have you ever heard of the [butterfly effect](#)?”

“No.”

“It’s the idea that a small changes to a system can have large effects on the system as a whole. I understand that the term comes from the idea that a butterfly fluttering in Rio de Janeiro could change the weather in Chicago.”

“Sure...that’s really interesting. But I don’t see what that has to do with you being unable to talk to Jim about how hard it can be for you to deal.”

“I felt that if he fully understood that it would end up fucking the whole relationship. Same reason that I can’t fully open up to my friends about it.”

“Your friends...*your friends*...Oh, I get it. I’m an outsider so you can talk to me about this stuff.”

“No...no...no. Maybe in a way. Um...no. It’s hard for me to be vulnerable...to be open. Yeah, you know how it is with any relationship...you’re always trying to figure out the boundaries. I knew that I can be fully open with you.”

“Because you saw me having that breakdown...and you helped me.”

“Yeah.”

Before Amy could respond, Jane held her hand up – palm facing her friend – and continued:

“We promised complete honesty in these bull sessions. Initially, that was it. You had broken down and were my subordinate. I could just talk to you freely...without fear of repercussion sessions were my idea. These bull sessions were my idea. Now...you are my closest friend. Never...ever...doubt that, Amy.”

Amy flashed on a conversation that she had with Linda in 2008. It was about how Linda initiated their relationship with a kiss.

Linda told Amy that she was attracted to her but didn’t know what to do about it. After all, Amy came from a pretty repressive church. Linda explained that she understood that did not mean that her friend could not be gay. But, even if she had those feelings, she would probably be having a hard time handling them. Linda copped to the fact that she only kissed her because she realized that it couldn’t affect her social standing with her cheerleader friends. Amy was – in fact – the only girl that she could come out to. Even if some of her other friends were gay, there was no way to tell. That was 2008 and being a gay kid was shameful. If she hit on any of her cheerleader friends and things went badly, she would be ostracized. Linda further explained to Amy that If she felt that hit on her and things went south, it wouldn’t matter from the perspective of her social life. Amy was a total outsider. That was harsh: that was reality. The entire relationship – which forever changed Amy’s life – only came to be because of her low position on the social ladder at *James Jordan Middle School*.

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And Amy understood that her friendship with Jane – like her romance with Linda a decade before – was a highwater moment that redefined her. In both cases, an amazing person only incorporated Amy into her life because she knew that Amy society marginalized.

Amy exhaled loudly and continued:

“Why did you ever hook up with him? I mean...how could you get involved with a guy that you can't be open with about...your Jewishness.”

“I love him...Amy.”

“You gave all this up...”, Amy said with a wave of her arm. “To live in some crackerjack house in Elysian Valley. You showed me the pics on your phone...hell of a downgrade. You do love him.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“He's a kind and decent guy. He's smart and respects my mind. We have smart conversations: like I have with you, Amy. We're sexually compatible. We're both bi and met through the gay community. I love the guy. He's a good man.”

“Yeah...but this is rom-com love – the third fucking act – I'm not feeling it, girlfriend.”

Jane was quiet for a moment then said:

“Love is an emotion...a feeling. You can't adequately put it into words. It's like describing the color 'blue'. Can you put the love that you had for Linda into words?”

Amy nodded but pressed:

“But...why didn't you hook up with a nice Jewish boy...or girl?”

“Yeah, if I had found a cool, smart, queer through temple, I would have gone with him...or her. Now, Reconstructionists are super tolerant and respectful of gays. But no one – who is a good fit for me – goes to temple. To my knowledge, only a couple queers go to temple: neither of them are even remotely good for me. I'm a queer...Amy...and I love it. Besides being this really singular emotional and intellectual fit, Jim and I share the gay lifestyle...the clubbing...the music...and we've done some group stuff.”

“I'm sorry if I sound stupid. Are you saying that it is because you saw me having a breakdown that you confided in me...in a way that you could not do with Jim?”

“Well...yeah...yeah...I'm not ashamed of that...not anymore. Everyone puts up a front. Everyone. The truth is you never really know another. And...since you never really know another...you just don't know if you can really open up. But you were fully naked with me, and I felt that I could be fully naked with you.”

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"If I had my breakdown but you were not involved with Jim..."

"No. No. No. We aren't going there. I did meet Jim first and I do love him. You and I have something special, Amy. Honestly...it's better than what I have with Jim in certain ways. But...I do love him. We're committed to each other. I'm his woman and he's my man."

"Of course."

Amy paused. There was something that she wanted to get at. She did not know how. Then it all coalesced in her mind. Amy continued:

"So...as I said...I had a great time with Ilhan the other night..."

"She's the greatest!", Jane enthused.

"She really is. So...after we leave you at *The Bayou*, we ended up near her condo complex and we're walking around the outside of that huge-ass retail complex..."

"Hmmm...hmmm...[The Americana at Brand](#)..."

"Yeah...we ended up just standing in front of [the fountain](#) and watching it..."

"Oh...yeah...It's amazing: the choreographed lights and water display..."

"Yeah...so, we're watching it, and she takes my hand. It was romantic."

"That's Ilhan. So?"

Well...I hadn't been romantic with a girl since Linda. Roz and I had a loving energy...but not romantic."

"You felt awkward? You shouldn't. Ilhan is just super-sweet..."

"I know. It wasn't awkward. I was embarrassed..."

"Why!? Why would you possibly be embarrassed?"

"We're...well...two girls. And...I'm not embarrassed by that...except in a way. I mean my people...mom and that fucking church...drilled shame into me. I'm not completely over it. I fucking hate it. I hate them. I just want to be 100% past their bullshit."

"Go on.", Jane said.

"So...there's always this...um...underlying shame over who I am. I love being a lesbian...I really do. I'm not ashamed but feel shame. I cross dress for god's sake. The ties...the suits...the short hair. I'm not backing away from who I am...but...I'm really...um...mortified...to say the next bit..."

"Go on."

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"I'm so anti-racist...it's crazy. But...I was momentarily bothered holding her hand...I mean, just the moment when she first took my hand...in public because she's black."

"Go on."

"It was just a flash...a millisecond...when she first took my hand. A flash of bigotry. I'm not...I'm not...but all of this toxic shit has been drilled into to me. I'm not a bad person. Fuck, I just want the bullshit from that cunt Doris to be gone. 100%. I'm not a bad person..."

"You're not, sweetie. There a lot of shit that's drilled into each of us...It's a challenge to be a good person. That's true. It takes work...you're good."

"But...this is about more Ilhan. It's about you. I'm afraid that this might damage our...friendship."

"Go on."

"So...my people were religious fanatics but more than that...antisemitic."

"How antisemitic?"

"Well...the church people would talk about shit like [Revelation 3:9](#)."

"3.9'...that's hard core. So...Jesus was going to make the evil Jews worship at the feet of your church people?"

"And...now you hate me. God...now you hate me." Amy moved her hands upward and covered her face with her open palms.

"No...I don't. Did your people ever talk about the [Protocols of the Elders of Zion](#) and believe that it was real?"

Amy lowered her hands. She turned her head and looked Jane in the eyes: she was red-faced. She was sitting on a couch and Jane was sitting on the matching chair that was perpendicular to it. She broke eye contact with her friend. She leaned forward and retrieved a few tissues from the box on the coffee table. She wiped her face and blew her nose. She resumed eye contact.

"Yes. You hate me."

"No...I don't.", Jane tended to speak in a monotone, reminiscent of the character 'Joe Friday' on the 1960's TV show *Dragnet*. In this moment, her voice was infused with an additional coldness. "That's such crazy conspiratorial shit. It's the ugliness that ends up getting my People slaughtered. So, you know who Henry Ford is...the car guy? In his private newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*, he often cited the bullshit 'Protocols' as evidence of a Jewish threat."

"I know...I'm so sorry."

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"I honestly believe that if not the 'Protocols' and that evil little book that Martin Luther...the founder of Lutheranism...wrote called [On the Jews and Their Lies](#), Hitler would not have come to power and the Holocaust would not have happened. ...And [Richard Wagner](#)."

"God...I'm sorry. I'm so...so...sorry."

While maintaining her typical monotone, her voice warmed. She leaned over and cupped Amy's knee with the palm of her hand.

"Jesus...girl. Now you're apologizing for the Holocaust. Relax...sweetie...you're a good person. You were exposed to a lot of toxic shit. You've worked hard to get past it."

"Only because I'm a lesbian and my people hated me for that."

"They hated you in the same way that they hated people like me."

"Yeah."

"That's why you understand me. You moved past all of it. You could have been closeted. You could have been a hateful queer: you could have been a 'Milo'. You worked past all of it."

"But...that hateful little feeling that I had when Ilhan took my hand at the fountain?"

"How long did that feeling last?"

"A second...a millisecond...a flash."

"You were raised by evil people, Amy. Even if you work hard to excise those dark feelings, residual remains. When you experience that residual, you excise that as well. Being a good person takes discipline...ongoing effort. Isn't that what Buddhism says?"

"Yeah."

Jane took her hand off Amy's knee. She kept leaning forward: she clasped her hands together and spoke while looking Amy firmly in the eyes.

"Now...don't apologize or anything. You're my best friend and nothing that you will say will change that. But I have to ask you. Did you ever feel any Jew-hate when talking to me...ever? Even a flash?"

"No, I swear. Nothing. But I was aware of what my people said...what they were. Do you remember the first bull session? We were talking about my proselytizing...street preaching...as a kid? I apologized. That is why."

At the first bull session, Jane said:

"As a Jew, I have to study my history. That's why my Synagogue is so important to me. I have to know things. And, well...sweetie...Jews have been persecuted for hundreds of years."

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"...By Christians.", Amy added.

"Yeah."

"God...I'm sorry."

"You have no reason to apologize."

"Yes...I do."

Jane pursed her lips and nodded.

"Okay...I get that. I thought that you were just being super-sweet. But...okay. Look we're good...we're better, now. You're my girl, Amy."

Jane leaned back. Amy cleared her throat and continued.

"Um...I've been thinking about our talks and my life...I've come to a conclusion."

"Tell me."

"People are inherently good. We have to be...I guess...it's evolution...I guess...We need to survive as a people. That's evolution...right? The traits that further us are passed on from generation to generation...That which kills us off...dies off."

"Okay...okay.", Jane said. "I get that. You're not wrong...I suppose. But...you just said it...when...you held Ilhan's hand at the fountain...you were embarrassed...because of bad feelings that were drilled into you. Not just that flash of bigotry...but the shame over your sexuality...why is that? Why hasn't the bad shit simply died out?"

"I guess people are so different than other animals. That's all we are. There's nothing wrong with that. Animals ...but we're arrogant. We can't 'just be animals' So...we make shit up to convince us that we are more than that. The angels care that we masturbate..."

"Why is that?", Jane asked.

"Maybe, it's because the human mind is so sophisticated? We eat animals...wear their skin...we make up gods that are our allies. And they wouldn't be our allies if...we weren't special."

"I get that. But, why are going after each other? Why is one group always killing the other? Why can't we have our little god delusion and just all feel superior together?"

"We've created this artificial reality and that perverts our natural survival instinct...", Amy felt a tingle run through her body. She was just talking freely and was not being shouted down for questioning the word of god. She wasn't being dismissed or ignored. In fact, Jane was drawing her out...and encouraging her to talk about her ideas. She felt a spasm of intense love for her. She continued:

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“So...yeah...our artificial reality gives a great quality of life for...for...the lucky ones...that’s us, Jane...and so many of us are minimized...persecuted...raped...and murdered...We live in this artificial reality and others in squalor. This artificial reality creates the fiction of groups. And the groups are fighting each other. One group dominates the other. Why? Because the artificial reality...which we created...for our benefit is to be fought over.”

“Why do you think that is, Amy? Why can’t we go ‘kumbaya’ and just all share the good things that we’ve created? Just share it...no poverty? No war?”

“Because...we are animals. But...not in the jungle or the sea. We live in our artificial reality. We are still territorial...But it is a perverted sense of territory. It’s all twisted. We’re hardwired to fight over territory...that’s not going away...fake reality...fake instincts.”

Amy cleared her throat and continued:

“It’s like the antisemitism of my people. Irrational...evil. Our arrogance is an artificial form of our natural self.”

Amy started to cry uncontrollably. She was sitting on a couch and Jane was sitting on the matching chair that was perpendicular to it. Amy felt Jane sit down beside her. Jane wrapped her adjacent arm around her and handed her the box of tissues. When Amy pulled herself together to a reasonable degree, Jane spoke:

“I put the tissues out for when we’re talking about painful stuff...Doris trying to drown you in the commode. Shit like that. This is a heavy talk. But smart people have heavy talks. Why are you crying?”

“You’re letting me talk...you’re encouraging me to share my opinions.”

Jane rolled her eyes and gave Amy’s shoulders a squeeze:

“Of course...I am sweetie. Of course.”

“My people never did that. I just had to parrot their bullshit. You care about what I have to say.”

“Of course I do. You’re a smart girl, Amy.”

“I am?”

“Yeah...you are. I don’t say that sort of thing to be kind or polite. You’re smart...freaking brilliant. That self-knowledge was beaten out of you.”

“Remember...last week? You were talking about how the Jews were expelled from Spain?”

“Of course.”

“I knew that...I really did.”

“Then...why did you say that you didn’t?”

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"In that moment, I didn't. I...was...I was such a good student in High School. My teachers would go on about how smart I was. Being smart...knowing things...was not popular with mom or the church. They did not like facts that contradicted their beliefs. And that was most facts. Shit...our entire society is fact adverse."

Jane nodded with downcast eyes.

"Do you know the term 'cognitive dissonance'?" Amy asked. "So much has been pouring back into my mind since our first talk."

"I know it. You feel that you suppressed your knowledge of facts because they contradicted your church's superstitions?"

"I know that's what happened. Then you just spoke to me like an adult and the shit comes back to me. It's been pretty intense."

"I want you to go to UCLA next semester."

"Well...the tuition..."

"...I've got it."

"I can't... you're paying for Dr. Gonzalas already..."

"I'll take care it."

"I have money. My inheritance..."

"...is your life's savings. I'm not offering to put you through to graduation. I just want to get you started by paying for the first semester."

"I really can't..."

"Jesus...woman...I want you to shut the fuck up about the money. I'm doing it. Besides, this is self-interest. Do you appreciate how gratifying it is to help an exceptional young woman reach her potential? The moment is now, girl. It would be torture for me to watch you to continue to squander your potential. You're exceptional."

"I'm...ahhh...", Amy fell silent.

"Say it...woman...say it."

"I'm...exceptional."

"I've been thinking about this funding issue. We need to minimize your expense. I'll take care of the first semester. During the first semester, you'll apply for a [Pell Grant](#)...that's a Fed education grant that doesn't need to be repaid, good for a half semester. Then...if you do well, you will – you're

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exceptional...we'll start shopping for a scholarship. Possibly some queer thing or woman thing. We could do a Go-fund-me. All kinds of things."

"OK, Ro-o-a-a-h, sorry...weird brain fart...kinda intense moment, that's amazing...thank you, Jane. I'm...exceptional."

"Damn straight. And I want to help you realize you're potential. I expect something in return."

"Um...what?"

"Those grades better kick ass."

"They will."

"Oh...there's something else. I want you to stop with this loner nonsense. You, Ilhan and I have plans. The dinner party with Jim and Brandon is back on. I want you to continue to build on that.

"I will. I want you to fully open up with Jim about your fears."

"I'll talk to him...after the dinner party. I expect you to hold me to account."

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It was mid-October of 2008. It was the third month of Amy's seventh grade term which lasted four months. After Amy had a momentous conversation with Linda, the two of them went to *Spencer's Gifts*. They bought two matching *Buffy* posters. The plan was for each of them to put one up as a reminder of their commitment. After taking her leave from Linda, she tossed the rolled poster – still sealed in polyurethane film – onto her bed. She turned to leave her room and her mom was just outside her room.

"Hi, Amy. How is everything?"

"I'm great, ma. Is everything okay?"

"Yes. Really...everything is cool. But I would like to talk."

"Sure, ma."

They headed to the family room. The walls of the room were cream. At one end of the room was an unpretentious entertainment center which consisted of a flatscreen on a simple display stand made of thick wood planks. At the other end was an L-shape sectional sofa, covered in a fabric with a floral pattern. The coffee table was a dark wood with a glass pane taking up most of the surface. Other than that, the room was sparsely furnished. There were two bookshelves made from a similar wood. There were only a small number books: several bibles and contemporary Christian titles like *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren.

Amy and Doris sat down on the sectional, at right-angle to each other.

Doris was concerned that her daughter was drifting away from Jesus. She started slowly by asking Amy about how she was feeling. She moved on to what Dr. Greene – the school counselor at *James Jordan Middle School* – said. She knew he was Satanic but even those compromised by pure evil could be right

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sometimes. He told Doris about reports from Amy's sixth grade teachers that she was sullen and withdrawn. This jibed with what Amy's Sunday school instructor – Ms. Simms – said. While her daughter was once very enthusiastic – throwing her hand up and giving great answers – now she just sat there: she seemed bitter and said as little as possible. All of this jibed with her own observations: Amy was just going through the motions, her passion for Jesus seemed to be gone.

Amy was sick and tired of the farce. She had wholeheartedly rejected the faith of her mom and her Pastor...her Shepherd. It was absurd drivel that controlled her mind and body. She hated it. She ached to be honest but knew that she couldn't. While she knew that there was no way that she could be open about being a lesbian and having a girlfriend, she wondered if she could express her nonbelief by calling it 'doubt'.

But things quickly spun out of control. Amy confronted Doris about just a couple of the many factual absurdities in the Bible. She went on to say that the Bible was written to condemn the believer who had any questions about those many absurdities.

You don't believe in God!", Doris screamed.

They were both on their feet.

"Yes! Yes! I do believe in God! I don't believe in your God!"

Doris slapped her hard...knocking her to the ground.

"Go to your room!"

Amy ran to her room. Sitting on the edge of her bed, she started to cry. The side of her face stung: she massaged it with an open palm and wondered if there would be a mark. This situation was intolerable. She just wanted to be who she was. She was gay and – damn it – she was smart.

While not wanting to confront Doris, she found herself getting up and walking out of her bedroom. She closed the door behind her and headed to the family room. Looking out of the bay window, she saw that the car was gone. Doris had undoubtedly left for church to get some solace and emergency counseling from her Pastor...her Shepherd.

Amy left the house and locked it up. She went to the bus stop (she longed for the day that she could drive) and took the bus to the *Spencer's Gifts* where she and Linda had bought the *Buffy* posters earlier that day. She was unsure what she wanted to do.

She found herself wandering towards the quirky retail store. She stopped in front of a barber shop. Peering through the plate glass window, she saw that there were no customers. There was only an elderly black man. He was dressed in the nondescript clothes that barber's wore. She entered.

"Hello, sir!", she said brightly.

"Hello, miss. How can I help you? Do you need change?"

"Sir...I want a haircut."

"Well...miss...this is a men's barber shop. You want *Lucille's Beauty Salon*. It's on the other side of..."

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“No, sir. I apologize for interrupting you. But...I want a haircut.”

The man continued, obviously confused.

“Well...miss...the salon is very good. I know Lucille personally. She’s...a friend. They’ll treat you right.”

“Yes...sir. The salon is very good. I want a boy’s haircut.”, Amy pointed to a poster that had a series of drawings of the same boy’s head with different cuts. Her fingered trained in on one image. The cut was conservative: short on the sides and longer on top. “That one...please.”

The man had been very polite and solicitous. He said with exasperation:

“Are you crazy...girl?”

“Maybe, sir. But you know how crazy we kids are. This is a fad. You know...girls getting boy’s haircuts.”

“I don’t think so...miss.”

“Oh...please...please...sir.”

“This might not even be legal.”

“Sure...it is, sir”, Amy said. And then she implored: “Please...please...please.”

“But...you have such a nice permanent.”

Amy’s hair was like the character Laura Petrie’s hairstyle on the classic sitcom *The Dick Van Dyke Show* which debuted in 1961. From the standards of that decade, it was considered classy and elegant: influenced by the fashion icon of the time First Lady Jackie Kennedy. It was a short, sleek bob that did frame her face nicely. But, in 2008, it was horribly dated. She was an outsider at school. This was – to a large extent – because her mom and the church drummed into her that she should not get close to people who were not ‘right with Jesus’. The hair did not help. Setting aside the tensions at home, she hated her hair and wanted a contemporary cut. She wanted Taylor Swift’s hairstyle as it reflected her youthful charm and evolving musical career. Swift had just released her second album, *Fearless* and her curly locks were a defining feature. Her 2008 hairstyle was a delightful blend of curls, youthful energy, and country music flair.

If Amy could have worn Laura Petrie’s capri pants and blouses, she could have sold it as retro. She may have even been a trendsetter. Maybe...just maybe...that would have pulled her out of the funk about not hanging with people that were not ‘right with Jesus’. That didn’t happen: Linda did.

The look did have a ‘strong woman’ vibe. She was drawn to Laura’s energy: both masculine and feminine. Instead, Doris made wear dowdy dresses that made her look matronly and frumpy. How she bagged Linda was a mystery.

She was wearing something that she especially detested. It was a shapeless floral dress that hid her curves.

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The control was complete. It had to end.

“Please...sir...please...sir...please...please.”

“Are your parents okay with this?”

“Oh...yes, sir!”

“Oh...what the hell. It’s been crazy slow today. This will be a story that I can tell the guys at the bar. You kids are crazy.”

He crossed over to the window and dropped the venetian blind and closed the slats. He locked the door.

“We’re closing now...anyway. I don’t want someone walking in on us. I’m still not convinced that this isn’t illegal. But...this is a story for the guys. Hop in the chair...young lady.”

Amy left the shop, rubbing her head. She had some more stops to make. She was going to the shoe store for boy’s tennis shoes. She had to buy jeans and some white t-shirts.

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It was Tuesday. The previous weekend *The 2023 Frogtown Art Walk* happened in Elysian Valley. Ilana Glazer was on the set of her new dramedy, a reimagining of the classic ‘90s sitcom *Friends*.

Josie Totah played Phoebe. Like the actress in real life, Phoebe was a transgendered woman. Josie had both a Producer and a Consultant credit. The latter credit was especially important to Ilana since she wanted to get the character right. Josie would only have played Phoebe if she had a direct say in the character’s development, anyway.

Ilana walked up to Josie:

“Did you hear about what happened in Elysian Valley last weekend?”

“The rape and murder of that poor woman...of course. Our society is sick...twisted...Ilana. I’m glad that the two motherfuckers were shot dead.”

“Yeah”, Ilana said. “So...do you know Brandon?”

“The new writer...of course. I spoke to him at the party on Friday. Me, Odeya, and Aidan cornered you later to rave on him...smart guy. Shit, is he somehow involved?”

“Yeah...not in a bad way. He was very close to the victim.”

“Shit...was she his sister...girlfriend?”

“Girlfriend. But more than that. For over the past three years, he and the victim were in a polyamorous thing...with a guy and another girl. It was a very emotionally tight relationship...a solid commitment. The

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reason that I didn't come in on Monday was that I was working with him throughout the early morning...Zoom calls. He was really broken up."

"Fuck...Ilana."

"He's taking three days off for bereavement. I pushed him to take more. I'll try again to get him to take some additional days. He's in some denial...to say the least. But he realizes that he can't work in the writer's room."

"Yeah...he'll be in no shape to write jokes."

"I'm looking for another slot for him. Are you still looking for an assistant for your Consultant & Producer duties?"

"Well...I finished interviews. I'm mulling over my decision right now."

"You have absolute autonomy...of course. But would you consider speaking to him about the opening?"

"Of course...Ilana. But would he be up to talk to me?"

"Yeah...strong guy. It's important to me that I keep him in our family."

"Okay...Ilana. I won't promise anything. I'm looking at two candidates...one especially. I might go with someone else."

"I know...I have several ideas. This is one of them. Besides...there's no rush getting back to him."

"I'll talk to him, Ilana. Of course. "

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