

Brandon Gets His Big Break

Chapter Eight

By

John Eisenhauer

It was December 23rd, 2005.

Jim was fond of thinking of his father as 'Jim's dad.' "

Five years earlier, the movie *American Pie* came out. His dad was very much like the character played Eugene Levy. Like that character, his dad was a source of unfailing supportive. Also, like that character, his dad was a bit feckless with his support. He also shared the mannerisms and general personality that Levy brought to his character.

His mother died after a prolong illness shortly before the release of the film: Jim was nine. His father easy-going and tolerant nature really helped greatly in coming to terms with this tragedy. Tension between a parent and child was the norm, especially after the kid became a teen. But the two enjoyed a harmonious relationship.

The two attended Mass every Sunday at *St. Ann Catholic Parish*. Jim's dad, however, was an agnostic. When he and his wife married, they were both devout Catholics. Over time Jim's dad simply lost the faith. His wife, who he loved deeply, never wavered in her beliefs. He saw no need to confront her over this. Besides, he was raised in the Church and found on-going comfort in the ceremony. When Jim turned thirteen, he had a conversation with the young boy to explain his beliefs. Jim was relieved. He had drifted away from the faith also. He did not share his dad's fondness for Mass as he found it to be painfully boring. Both, however, agreed to continue attending services to honor his mom. Mass became meaningful to Jim again.

During that conversation, Jim asked his dad if he felt like a fraud. After all, his father would have recurring conversations with his friends at church about Jesus when he no longer believed.

"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?"

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“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 thought about that conversation and that made him think about the sad little girl that was preaching at Glendale Galleria the other night. Street preachers were an ongoing nuisance. Jim would just deal politely with the person and then blow him off. He made a point of not thinking about them any further.

But he did find himself thinking about the girl. The zealots were happy people. This girl was different. While she obviously was a believer, her beliefs did not seem to fill her with glassy-eyed contentment. She clearly did not want to be on that corner and hassling people.

His father began dating a woman in '02. It became clear that he intended on marrying her at some point. Last year, dad spent Christmas eve and day with her girlfriend. This marked a profound change for them as the holiday was a time that they shared. But his dad felt that his son was old enough to understand that he wanted to spend that time with his woman and would be fine fending for himself.

His tenth-grade class was going to take off for Christmas day from [Flintridge Preparatory School](#), one the best college prep private high schools in California. Situated in a tree-covered suburban area, and close to both the Jet Propulsion Laboratory and the Rose Bowl, the campus was impressive. It spanned over 41 acres and featured a variety of facilities like a library, science labs, art studios, music rooms, athletic fields, and more. It also had had a performing arts center that sat 400 people.

It was December 23rd. Jim was walking around the open-air dining area when he saw Mark sitting alone at one of the tables. Mark was a borderline friend. They had shared several classes over the past couple years and were both in debate club currently. He got along well with him, but Mark hung out with a clique that did not include him. Mark looked depressed.

“Hey, Mark! Can I join you?”

“Sure.”

“Are you okay? You look down”, Jim said as removed his lunch from the brown bag and arrange it on the table.

“I’m fine. But my aunt is in hospice with stage 4 cancer.”

“Shit. I’m so sorry.”

“Mom and dad are going to spend Christmas eve and day near the hospice. She is at [Certified Hospice Care](#). They think that she’ll pass really soon.”

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“Oh...are you going to join them?”

“No...she’s in a coma. And wouldn’t know that I’m there. My parents feel that it would be best if I just stayed here. Honestly, I only met her a few times. I’m going to be alone over the holiday.”, Mark said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. All of my friends will be hanging out with their families. I’m going to be alone. It sucks.”

“This is wild.”, Jim said. He went on to explain how his dad was spending the holiday with his girlfriend. And he was going to be alone as well.

“Well, hell, let’s hang out. I can get a pony keg.”, Mark said.

“I’d like to do something traditional. We can cook a Christmas Eve feast and just chill. I’m going to miss dad.”

“Sure...that’s cool. We can get together in the afternoon and cook. I’ll bring the wine. And mom and dad gave me money for food.”, Mark said.

“Your place or mine?”

“Mine. My house is a little nicer than yours. No offense.”

“None taken. It’s true.”, Jim said.

The next day Jim dropped by Mark’s house around 5 PM.

“Come in.”, Mark said. “I need help in the kitchen.”

This place was Christmas. Mark’s house was decked out. It was a suburban ranch, a single-story house. The sun was already beginning to set. Mark had the outdoor lights on. The home’s long and low profile was festooned with strands of outdoor lights. They were the kind that Jim preferred. The ice cycle lights were pinpoints of blue and white. Jim didn’t really care for the large lights that were shaped like a candle flame. They were garish. Whoever made the purchase decision, and it was probably mom, selected lighting with a sense of restraint. Jim appreciated that.

In the front yard, there were three aluminum structures. Each piece was a stylized representation of a tree. An aluminum pole was in the center. A spiral of a thick aluminum wire surrounded the pole. The circular base was near the ground, about a foot above. The pole was planted in the dirt. The wire tapered to a point, the apex, at the tip of the pole. This created a curved surface that was meant to ape a Christmas Tree. They were different sizes: 10, 6, 4 feet. White ice cycle lights were evenly spaced on the wire and were turned on.

The roof was low-pitched and had wide eaves. The exterior of the house was white stucco and dark wood siding framed the windows. Once inside, Jim appreciated that the living room, dining room, and kitchen flowed together nicely as is typical of suburban ranch.

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While Jim was a young boy, he found himself drawn to interior design. Something that he enjoyed doing was going to the school library and looking at magazines like *Architectural Digest*. He liked the articles about architecture, interior design, and home decorating. He loved the high-quality photography of cool homes.

He recognized that the interior was done rustic style. It was characterized by the use of natural materials such as wood, stone, and metal. The furniture was seemingly made from reclaimed wood and featured a distressed finish. Everything matched. The color palette was warm and earthy, with shades of brown, green, and red. The overall look was cozy and inviting, with a focus on comfort and relaxation.

The moment that Jim stepped into Mark's house he knew that someone with a good eye – and some form of training, even just pouring over the right magazines – was responsible for the decorating.

The fireplace was especially suited to rustic interior design: a stone fireplace with a wooden mantel. The wall portion was large stones that were separated by mortar, a natural and earthy feel. Jim recognized that the wooden mantel was Cherry, a hardwood. It would have been a pale salmon color when machined but had aged beautifully into warm reddish-brown.

Seasonal pillar candles were evenly spaced along the mantle's top: solid red and green candles alternated. They were recently lit. Mark waited until Jim's expected arrival time. Pinecones were strewn amongst the candles. It looked like they were thrown about carelessly but Jim knew that thought went into placement. Ideal for rustic décor, there was a mix of natural pinecones and glittery ones. On the mantle's edge hung three burlap stockings. Burlap sounded like a bad choice but someone with a good sense of design would know that was the perfect choice for a rustic interior.

Mark's mom is good. Jim thought.

Next to the fireplace was the tree, a perfect tree. There were strands of the ice cycle lights similar to the outside: blue and white. Tastefully placed, there was a nice arrangement of pinecones and wooden ornaments (a mix of simple stars and intricate snowflakes). There was NO garish tinsel.

"Your house is really nice. Your mom has a good eye. You can tell when the person decorating knows her shit."

"Actually, mom and I worked on this. I'm into interior design and fashion. Mom encourages it."

"Cool. I love decorating. It's kind of a 'forbidden pleasure'. I like going to the school library and going through the design mags, like *Architectural Digest*."

Normally, Jim would never reveal that to a semi-friend: someone with whom he had a nice connection yet was still trying to impress. Rumors flew around *Flintridge Prep* that Mark and his friends were more than friends. Depending on who you spoke to, they were either 'gay' or 'fags'. This did not bother Jim in the least. Quite the opposite.

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“Appreciating beauty should never be a ‘forbidden pleasure’.”, Mark said. He reached out and gave Jim an arm rub on his bare skin with his open palm. The pressure alternated firm and tender: it was overlong and grossly inappropriate. Mark gauged his guest’s reaction. Except for a smile, there was none.

“Come on, the kitchen is this way.”, Mark said. He turned and walked away.

The moment that they got into the kitchen; Jim was flooded with years of Christmas memories. Some of his earliest memories were of his mom’s holiday cooking. After she passed, when he was nine, dad took up the slack. He had no cooking experience – save for bachelor cooking – prior to this. There was an ingrained pop culture trope that such a meal would be unspeakably bad. The opposite was true. It was as good as mom’s. Dad took his first holiday meal very seriously. He studied the books that belonged to his wife. While the internet had not yet reached ubiquitous status, it was widely available. Jim’s dad used it for further research. He wanted to honor his wife’s memory and did not want to disappoint his son. Jim’s dad was a good father.

The aroma of a perfectly seasoned turkey assaulted him. That savory scent commingled with the biscuits and other food.

“We’re eating at six. We need to get the table set in 45 minutes, tops.”, Mark said. “Can you baste a turkey?”

“Yeah...I think that I can handle it.”, Jim said with exaggerated bemusement and an eye roll.

“Have at it then.”, Mark said as he handed him the baster.

Jim opened the oven door, crouched, and began basting.

After watching his friend for a moment, Mark said:

“I honestly don’t know your taste. I made Sütlaç for desert.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s a rice pudding that’s ‘not-too-sweet’. I’m serving it with a nice fruit compote on the side. The Sütlaç is simmering now. We need to keep stirring it.”

“Damn...you’re good at this.”

“Thanks. All of the best chefs are men.”

“Well enjoying the good life is not about gender. I should cook.”

“Yeah, you should.”

Getting the meal to the table was work...the fun kind. While doing so, the boys talked and were pleased to discover that they had a nice, easy, chemistry. They had been friendly for some time. For example, they were both in debate club currently. They had worked together preparing and delivering various arguments but were in different cliques. Jim was AV which had a reputation for nerdiness. Jim felt that

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was unfair. They were very different – from the jocks or brains – but not nerds or even socially awkward. They had a bohemian energy but, since that was a cultivated persona, weren't bohemian at all. As for Mark, he hung out with this group of guys. Not much was known about them. Unlike other groups, there was not a single defining interest. Sports (Jocks). Communication, Media & Related Technology (AV). Get Into An Ivy League University Or Die Trying (Brains).

Mark's group liked to bowl, and the gay rumors would not die.

Jim thought Mark was cute.

He had never been with a guy but knew that he wanted that. Up to this point, he'd been with girls and liked it. A lot. His confusion – and years later would understand that kids were simply confused by sex at fifteen – was that he was attracted to both sexes. He didn't care about the social contempt for gays. As his posturing bohemian friends would say, that was just the patriarchy. His group's take on gays was not fully clear. There was no moral commendation or rebuke of any kind. Politically...they were socialists. The AV was uniquely coed. This guy was assumed to be gay: that girl was assumed to be lesbian. While there was no hostility, no one would openly proclaim same sex desire.

Within AV, there had been a rumor that two AV boys were involved. Unlike the rumors about Mark's group, and other such school wide speculation, there was no hostility or disapproval. In fact, a gay joke or using a word like 'faggot' would get someone expelled immediately. It was an unwritten rule: it was the same with someone making a bigoted comment about blacks or Jews. Still, those two boys never held hands or kissed.

He had been tempted to hit on this one specific boy (and was fairly certain that he would have been interested, at least in general principle). He couldn't work up the nerve. He was fairly certain that even if it went badly, it would not result in him getting ostracized from AV. It was not like being a jock. A rebuffed gay advance would not only result in expulsion but numerous beatings. Still...mixed signals with AV.

More significantly, high school cliques were 'information porous'. It would get out to the brains. His primary affiliation was AV but had a very strong affiliation with the 'I'm-going-to-an-Ivy-League' crowd. There was a significant overlap between the two groups. After all, AV folk were into tech as were the brains. While he had zero connection with the jocks, the story would migrate from the brains to them. The brains tutored the jocks.

The jocks bullied and beat the faggots, at least those *perceived* as such. Also, the target had to be seen as isolated or having weak friends. Jim was with AV, not an intimidating group.

The reason why Mark – who was of slight build - had not been beaten was that several guys in his group were big and had earned reputations as fighters.

He suspected that it would be reasonably safe to hit on Mark. Something told him that it would not bleed out to the school even if Mark repudiated his advance while proclaiming his normal – and healthy – desire. While there was some interaction between the cliques. Mark's group was self-isolated.

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This fed the gay rumors. At this point, however, he had zero doubt that Mark was gay. He always believed the rumors. While all of his experience thus far has been with girls, he was certain that they were flirting: big time. Jim knew that he was. And Mark's arm thing? Yeah, right.

There seemed to be this added component. Each was scoping out the other's interest... not simply about attraction but predilection.

Mark was cute. He had an olive complexion. His jet-black hair was naturally curly. Not knowing his last name, Jim idly speculated as to his heritage...Latino...Italian...Ashkenazi Jew. Mark was slight and small.

He thought about the possibility of something happening since plans for Christmas Eve were made over lunch. When Jim masturbated later that night, he fantasized about it.

They had just finished up the Sütlaç and fruit compote. The desert was amazing, as was the entire meal. Mark was an incredible cook. He loved the conversation. They were fully free to discuss his love of design and the arts. While he talked about this stuff with AV friends, there was none of the bohemian pretensions with Mark. He always hated that. AV was such a good match for his interests, and he liked the *laissez-faire* liberalism (despite the seeming underbelly of unspoken hypocrisy). But he hated the pretention. Enduring it was a tradeoff for being in the right group. Mark and him just had a long conversation that leaned heavily into graphic arts. Neither one of them uttered the word 'proletariat' or 'bourgeoisie'.

He had the perfect level of drunkenness. While more than a buzz, his faculties were reasonably clear. While feeling boisterous and horny, his judgement was not being overtaken by self-aggrandizing flights of fancy.

The two were sitting at a corner of the table, perpendicular to each other.

He decided to go for it. Thanks to the wine, the nerves were gone.

"Mark, I think you're cute.", Jim said. He felt an urge to close his eyes but fought it.

Mark only smiled.

They were at a right angle to each other and were resting their hands on the table. Mark took one of his hands. While still new to a gay encounter, Jim had been in one than more situation like this with a girl. He pulled Mark's hand towards his mouth. He kissed the back of his hand. Mark ran the tip of his tongue along his upper lip. Jim started to kiss and lick Mark's hand. After a time, Mark stood up.

He removed his t-shirt.

Jim thought:

Damn, Mark is so fucking cute.

"Do you want to be naked with me?", Mark asked.

Jim nodded.

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"C'mon...then. Let's go to the couch. We'll be more comfortable there.", Mark held his hand out and Jim took it. When they were halfway there, Mark released Jim's hand and undid his pants. Jim took off his t-shirt and threw it up in the air. When they got to couch, they perched on the edge of their respective cushions: they finished stripping. They scooted back and started to make out. They were good together as each knew when to advance or retreat. Jim knew that he had to credit the wine: otherwise, this would have been an awkward experience for him...at the least. Jim started to kiss and lick Mark's neck and shoulders while feeling him up with his free hand.

And things progressed from there.

After it was over, they were lying in bed. They were not cuddling. Each was on his back: each had his hands folded across his stomach.

"Really...", Mark said. "...I'm your first boy? You sure knew what you were doing."

"I've had experience with girls and have watched my share of gay porn...I cross-referenced. You're my first boy. Can I ask you something?"

"Sure.", Mark said as he readjusted his body and laid on his side. He rested his head in his hand.

"I'm into both boys and girls. Is that weird? I really am. Is there even a word for it?"

" 'Bisexual' or just 'bi'. Yeah, that's a thing. Me? I just like the boys."

"Wow...there's a word for it. I only hear about 'gay' and 'straight'. I'm not a freak?"

"Shut up...sweetie. A couple of the guys in my crowd are 'bi'. The rest of us...just guys."

"Those guys that you hang with..."

"We're totally gay. I know about the rumors. They're true. I mean...I think it's more obvious than Liberace."

"Who...um...what..."

"Never mind.", Mark said. "Doesn't matter. Hell, man you're free to join us. I mean...this was kind of like an initiation. But only if you want to...of course."

"Absolutely."

"You don't need to think about it?"

"No."

"Okay...I want to tell you a few things. We don't pair off into relationships."

"You don't?"

"No. Let's say that you join, and you and another guy want a relationship. That's fine. There's no rules. I'm telling you that is not how it works right now. We're bros. We do a lot of stuff, We bowl. We'll go to

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movies...in groups of two or three or something. We aren't a cult. But we also like goofing around Garden Galleria. We fuck. Our big hangout is Trey's basement. His dad his gay.", Mark reached out and gave Jim's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry. He's not a perv. He's never been anything but a nice guy. He 100% makes himself scarce. He gets our situation and is sympathetic."

"I see."

"He doesn't want us dealing with the shit that he dealt with in high school. It's a fully furnished basement, very comfy. It has a KDL." KDL was short for [Sony KDL-VXBR1](#).

"The 40-inch plasma flatscreen? That costs 4K!", Jim said. He was an AV guy and knew his entertainment tech cold.

"Well, sweetie. Our families are all upper-middle to lower-upper. I mean...that prep school that we go to...damn. I'm University bound...because I couldn't live with the guilt."

Mark continued:

"Yeah...so nice hangout. We'll watch TV: there's a DVD player and we watch movies. Now...here's the thing. There are two bedrooms that are adjacent to the basement's main room. We aren't sexual in the main room but there's a lot of pairing up – groups of 2 or 3 – and they'll head to a room. Can you handle that?"

"Yeah...I mean I'd have to meet the guys. But, assuming they're cool...and I'm sure they are...yes."

"Okay. So, the sexual part is somewhat restrained on a typical night hanging out. We'll chill and guys will spontaneously peel off. Friday or Saturday we have a full-blown orgy. Trey's dad even has a spread of deli set up before our party."

"I'm interested."

Mark lifted the sheet and looked down towards Jim's groin.

"I see that. We practice safe sex...condoms. And lube. We just did '69' and we don't use them for that. We use them for anal. Understand?"

"Yeah."

Mark moved towards Jim. He lays on his side and embraces him with his free arm.

"Do you want to fuck me, sailor?"

"Yes...please."

Mark started to kiss Jim.

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