

Interlude – I Get Roped into Teaching a Writing Class

I was standing in line at the grocery store – the fancy kind – where a green pepper costs five bucks. I was sweaty from a workout, carrying a basket full of leafy green organic veggies and hormone and antibiotic free range chicken breasts that I'd sweat or steam. If you see me, all hairy and covered in ropes of muscle, standing at all of 5'7" and weighing almost 240 lbs., you know I lift weights and I do it for fun.

I got into the line to pay for my stuff on this hot steamy mid-August Friday in 2004. The basket was heavy, even for me. I barely noticed the young woman in the coral sweater set with pearls and sunglasses in the line next to mine. I felt her energy directed towards me, but I've been taught not to stare at people... not to do what she was doing at me, even though she was trying to be discreet.

She kept looking, though. I could sense her taking me in.

My shoulders are so hairy – I shave them daily along with my head and hours later, I'm covered in bristle. I'm very self-conscious about it. I'm covered in fur everywhere...except on my head where I'm bald. The same wiry grey cable that now grows out of my ears and nose is covering my arms, my back and crawling up my thick neck. In public, I wear long sleeves and long pants out of respect for others. I was also hoping to keep my post work-out stink from offending all these fussy finicky shoppers at Epicure, the fanciest, most expensive grocery store in South Beach.

Even though I'm covered, wiry hair sticks out through the loose-fitting cotton material. I'm not a fashion do, I'm more of a fashion don't... and still she stared. It was starting to bug me.

I had a couple of people in line behind me, but they switched to another lane when they saw that the lady in front of the line was trying to pay with an out of state check and that her ID was in Hebrew. These were impatient South Americans – they come

here to flee from their winter and prefer our heat and hurricane watches to their sleet and slush.

The Hebrew on the ID completely befuddled the poor checkout girl whose English was faltering at best, and she called for help. That was it for them. They switched lanes. I started to think; stay or leave/stay or leave. I couldn't decide. I never can.

That's when the girl in the sweater set got behind me. We made eye contact – sort of, I got a reflection of myself off her glasses and she smiled. "Hi," she had a thin waify voice just like the rest of her. She was too thin, maybe anorexic. Her ankles were tiny in strappy high-heeled sandals. She wore bangles at her wrist and a golden Rolex with diamonds that slid down her hand – one good shake and they'd all fall on the floor. Her blonde hair was cheer-leader length and draped around her tiny shoulders. She had breasts, too small to be fake under that little sweater set and sweat marks from the heat. She looked like a little kid playing dress up in her mother's clothes. I knew her – we all know each other on this little island. But I couldn't place her. I smiled back and didn't say anything.

"I'm Andy's wife," she volleyed further. "He's a money manager... your money manager."

That got my attention, and she took off her sunglasses – big white framed Jackie O's with D's at the side for Dior. Her purse was one of those that girls like her collect: big, shiny, and very expensive... price of a used car.

I finally placed her. She's an heiress to an enormous fortune and my best friend Cassie sold her the house that she turned into an Architectural Digest showcase (June issue of 2001). Her husband is the dumb ex-football player my brother hired to keep our trusts in check. Too much money and we get heavily taxed. Not enough money and bad things can happen. The market's been crazed for years. I don't care about it – I just spend a little of the income and keep the rest in blue chip bonds.

I've never cared about money, never had to. My father saw to that.

"We're getting divorced," she said as she slid the glasses into their case and in the purse. I could see she'd been crying. Probably a week's worth. My alarms went off. Was Andy on a bender or minding the store? Was I going to get ponzied? I collected myself, trying not to seem so self-interested.

"Sorry to hear that, are you ok?" for a short minute, she smirked when she heard my voice. Most people do. Because of my three-pack-a-day habit, I sound like Popeye from cartoons. Also, Harvey Fierstein. She regained her composure and continued, "We were homecoming king and queen. We've known each other since our teens. We have two kids."

I placed my groceries on the conveyer and didn't say anything. I wanted to see if she was done before I asked about the state of my money. I didn't want to be that gauche.

"I'm with a woman now."

Didn't see that one coming, "Yeah?"

She nodded and added, "I read your book."

This also surprised me. She'd read my book about my time in Provincetown. I didn't know that girls like to read about two dicks together in one bed. Go figure? According to my publisher this is a key clientele to a gay novel's success: lonely girls in their 30's to 40's. Obviously, the publisher was right, and I was wrong, though, the book didn't sell all that well. I'd hoped to be the next Gordon Merrick – hoped I'd see that book of mine on every beach towel from here on South Beach to the Russian River, but my sales were modest – something the book wasn't: two dicks in a bed, three dicks in a bed, eight dicks in a bed, and so on...

Normally, I pride myself on being a good observer. How did I miss this? She's a new gay? Nothing about her gave off any type of gay girl vibe and I've had a lot of gay girlfriends in my

years on the scene. They're fun to drink with, play darts and billiards with, and they're more fun than any straight boy to go see a game with or do something like that. Stuff I enjoy doing which most of my gay male friends don't do... like bowling, football, and golf.

"I just took a job at the little gay HIV agency on Washington. I'm thinking of starting a writing group and I kept thinking of you, so it's really perfect synchronicity that you're here in line at the grocery store."

"Kismet," I corrected.

"Yes. Kismet. A famous published author to head up the class," I didn't want to burst her bubble because I was hardly famous, "You in?"

"Why not," was all I told her, and she gave me a card.

"I'll take care of everything."

Amy was true to her word. She did take care of everything except the writing class she envisioned – a class full of young people who wanted to write about coming out and coming to terms with being gay was not to be. In fact, even then, young people were already becoming addicted to being online or having everything mediated through tech. The ones who did show up were a motley crew – more like me than what she (and the center's manager) envisioned. They were all suffering from what sociologists termed "The Lazarus Syndrome." They'd had an AIDS defining diagnosis but somehow, had outlived their expiration date.

The center where we held the class smelled of dust, mold, and sex sweat all over the Goodwill destined donated chintz covered sofas. It was always hot in there because the a/c barely wheezed. The air filters were covered in grey dust bunnies and some of the air vents dripped green slime onto the filthy carpet which got a daily once-over with a donated vacuum cleaner that didn't really work.

Me (Connecticut) included, there are four of us who've been meeting up twice a week on the second floor of this old office building off Alton and 12th. The Center had a yoga class that always had one or two people plus the teacher; a trans group that had two or three people in it; this is how our writing group became a success.

Since Amy's so rich, it might be all running on her own money. I bet she put this all together to get back into the workforce. That wouldn't surprise me.

She's an heiress with a famous last name. Think about it.

That first day, I had nothing prepared and I felt like a fraud till the guys showed up. As I looked around the room, I realized this was going to be easier than I thought. We all had a story to tell though none of us had studied the craft of writing. As I said, everyone who lives on this island knows everyone else. I know these guys but not personally. We are neighbors and know each other by sight from running into each other at the local haunts.

Amy had posted videos on MySpace, plastered posters with my photo all over Lincoln Road and hoped: Come to a writing class taught by a professional and blah-blah-blah. On those sites she said, "Being gay myself, I know it gets better," which seemed really strange coming out of her tiny mouth with her poodle teeth. The comments on her video post were very funny – all about her *realness* which I'm sure she didn't understand. They couldn't believe anyone that girlie was an RLG (real live girl).

I guess the guys who did come, came to be supportive.

Truth be told, I only got published because my neighbor (whom you'll meet next, "Miami") is a pushy ball buster. He forced me to edit the shit out of my manuscript and even helped me write letters to fifteen publishers. He's a South American Jew and a self-described writer who's never had anything published or produced – yet somehow knows everything about the publishing world, writing, and everything else under God's green earth.

He really gets under my skin.

Leave it to him to be the only one who shows up to the first class with a reading prepared. What an asshole.

In his defense, he did take some writing classes. But he's not an expert, not how he'd describe himself.

Even before that first reading, I decided to call the first section of our class: "The death sentence commuted," though the boys (middle aged men with the hearts and minds of adolescents) thought the first section should be titled "Slutty" as they all tried to one up each other:

"I fucked a guy in a stairwell and kept on going while his movers went up and down the stairs carrying his shit away," that was Orlando – you'll meet him too.

"I gave a handjob to the fishmonger to get a better price," added Wisconsin, trying to be competitive with Orlando.

"I blew my mechanic to get him to fix my Alfa," Miami always such a pretentious asshole. He now rides the bus, no Alfa in sight.

"Alright, alright... I want all these stories – but give me the whole scenario. Who, where, what and when. I want you to take your time, and to help keep you emotionally honest, select a name for yourself that's not your real name. Use a pseudonym."

"Why can't I use my real name," asked Miami. He scanned over the pages he held in a trembly hand from the neuropathy, "I already used my real name."

"Try it like an exercise." I gave him a pen and had him go through it. He put on reading glasses that made his eyes look huge, like a deranged owl, and went through his notebook, making little notes and scratching out his own name to call himself "Miami."

“Why Miami?” I asked him, thinking, *why not Bogota or something like from Colombia? Where you’re actually from? You fucking asshole!*

“I came here when I was seven. I’ve lived here most of my life. It makes sense to me.” Of course, it does.

“You really want to read today?” He did. Of course, he did.

As he read, I swallowed hard. I’d have to do this exercise too. That was going to be hard. Wish me luck – I think we’re all going to need it. As my Sadie used to say, a little luck never hurts.

It’s April 2004: The death sentence commuted...