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FINDING MY WAY INTO OPPOSITION: Joel and Jon

Jon, my long-time boyfriend was in medical school and although we were now living together, we saw less and less of each other. His schedule was particularly hectic. The sex between us, however, just got better and better. I think that is what kept us together.

I was now enrolled in a teaching certificate program at Boston University. I decided to teach high school social science. After spending a year and a half learning methods, evaluation, measurement, educational psychology and the like, I finally had my first chance at teaching. I was assigned to student teach at Walpole High School. Walpole was a rather well-to-do town southwest of Boston. It was a hike to get there from the apartment Jon and I occupied alone after my roommates graduated, but the teaching was a capital experience. Jon was nearing the last year of medical school and I wanted a job teaching. I hoped that the experience at Walpole would help me achieve that goal.

I student taught at Walpole High School from February to May. I was given full control of two American history classes and occasionally an African history section. When I first heard I was assigned to Walpole, I cringed. I had heard horror stories about the staff at the high school from others in the program. Once there, however, I am happy to report that only to a very small degree were the rumors true. Two other students were assigned to Walpole along with me. We were brought to meet the principal, a-much-feared-by-the-students-man by the name of James Powers. He was rather brusque in his manner. He kept a tight control over the school. I later grew to like him very much even though my real contact with him was nil.

I was then introduced to my cooperating teacher. At first, I was enthused with my lot. It was Robert Ledge. He immediately told me I would have complete control of the content and evaluation of all my classes. He only sat in on my sessions once or twice during the entire time I was at Walpole.

Ledge was short and on the heavy side. He had closely cropped hair for the Sixties. He was missing his right index finger below the major knuckle. It was fascinating to watch him smoke during those times we both had free periods and hung around the teachers' lounge. He never had his own butts. I usually hate to be asked for a cigarette by someone who smokes, yet never buys their own. Because of his physical peculiarity, however, I usually offered more than he asked for cigarettes just

to watch him smoke. His politics were liberal. Powers said he was just to the right of Ho Chi Mihn, but his students, as I would soon learn, reflected a strong dislike for his dictatorial approach in the classroom.

As he was showing me around the school, Ledge pointed out several students to "watch." I didn't like him trying to cultivate in me his dislikes, although I suppose he was trying to be protective of this novice. One student pointed out by Ledge was Joel Greenfield. As we were walking toward the teachers' lounge, we met a group of boys who asked him if he might chaperone a dance that Friday. He said "No." As we walked away, referring to one of the boys, he said, "I can't stand that Greenfield." Not wanting to know why, I did not ask him for his reasons. Greenfield was in one of my classes and I didn't want to go into my first session prejudging anyone. I wanted to form my own opinions.

It seems, however, that one of Joel's friends overheard Ledge's remark and reported it back to him. Joel reported it to the principal. Ledge passed the information on to me and warned me before taking over Joel's class by myself that I might have more trouble than usual because of it. I didn't. I made it clear to all the classes during my introductory remarks that whatever happened between them and previous teachers of the course would not influence my perceptions. It was a new start for everyone. It was a clean slate, and I would make my own judgments. I looked directly at Joel as I made this remark. After that class he came up to me and thanked me for my remarks. He also said he would do his best not to disappoint me. He didn't. He became one of the star pupils in the class. They were all well behaved, but Joel particularly so. He took part in class discussion. He always did his work and as a result did well on exams and at grading time.

My classes were very dry at first. I lectured according to the book and constantly. I was really bored with the whole process. I could only imagine how the students felt. Very soon, however, I threw this method aside and became more discussion oriented. I relied on the students to read the book and told them it was expected that they would be prepared for each class. On the whole, most were prepared for discussions.

I worked the present into the past quite easily. The 1920's which we were studying were quite pertinent to the issues of the late 1960's. Each student read a book reflecting the "lost generation" philosophy of the Twenties and then they were asked to compare what they read to the current U.S. society. We discussed civil liberties, drugs, Vietnam, reforms of society not to mention the draft and civil rights. I was really enjoying the classes and I suspect the students were, too. I tried to make it

clear that my opinion on these issues was only one in many. I urged them to consider all points of view before forming their own analysis of any situation. This seems to have been the major reason Ledge was much disliked. He would never let students express a position of their own choosing. Students could only reflect his view and when they didn't, he would badger them into what he considered "agreement."

One day, I was asked by Ledge to take another his classes which he hadn't assigned to me for the first twenty minutes. I agreed. It seems my politics came before me. As the class began, they all threw questions to me about Vietnam, the past presidential election and the like. Taken aghast at first, I finally accepted a question from one of the students. He asked for whom I voted for in the November 1968 elections and why?

The class said, in what seemed like unison, "Yeah, Mr. Ledge is always talking about McCarthy and how he wishes he had won the election."

Having discussed this pint with my own classes many times, I told them exactly what I believed. I could not and would not vote for any of the major candidates in the past election including "Clean Gene." I said that I wanted a total and immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam and even McCarthy was for a gradual withdrawal. I said I wouldn't compromise my beliefs about a unilateral solution to the Vietnam War. I told them I voted for the comedian Dick Gregory for President. He was the only candidate running on such a platform. No sooner had I finished than Mr. Ledge returned to the classroom. As I approached the door to leave the class burst into applause. Needless to say, I was delighted.

The applause was a much for Mr. Ledge's benefit as my own. The class wanted to deflate his ego as much as they may have wanted to give mine a boost. And, sure, I realize now how naïve such a political position was. The I was young and idealistic.

At the end of my student teaching, I was hired to teach social studies at Walpole. I stayed for several years. During that time I made a close friend of Joel who took other classes with me. There was also Leah Roberts, Tommy Kirstein, and Donald Graber. I had found a profession in which I thought I could really make a difference in the lives of some students. These were a few of the students who made me feel that just maybe the thought was true.

While I was teaching at Walpole, Jon finished his medical degree and went on to his internship at Massachusetts General Hospital. Although we lived in the same apartment, we virtually never saw each other. We talked a couple of times each day on the phone or passing in the hallway as one was going to sleep and the other to work.

Everything you've been told about the life of an intern is true. They have no time of their own and even less for those they love. It can be very draining on a relationship. Some of Jon's fellow interns were married and not a few of these marriages ended in divorce because of the tensions and strains placed upon them by the time requirements of the internship program.

We did survive his internship. It was the late Spring just before hearing where Jon would do his residency. We went camping in New Hampshire in one of the National Park Service campgrounds. It rained the entire weekend we were there. We did some hiking each morning, but spent most of the time in the tent we had borrowed from my sister and her husband. We had two sleeping bags with us. They opened up completely with zippers. We zipped them together to make one. We had flashlights, food, books, a radio and each other. It was a great reliving of those carefree undergraduate days. We bathed nude in the river each day though the water was freezing. The great several days we spent on this outing were the last. We didn't know that then, but it wouldn't have made the weekend my better if we had. I loved this guy and thought he would be my life partner for all time.

I was wrong. When we returned from camping, there was a letter waiting for Jon from the San Francisco Medical Center. He had been accepted as a resident there. He never told me he was applying for any positions beyond Boston and southern New England. Needless to say, Jon was thrilled. It was a hospital with a great reputation and great research facilities. Jon wanted to do research after his residency. He did. He's now an Associate Professor at the medical school in clinical pharmacology. I was as displeased as Jon was pleased. I tried not to rain on his parade. He called all his fellow interns, told them the good news and arranged to meet them for a celebration. Several of the others had been given their assignments as well.

"You don't mind if I go, Michael? I've become pretty close to these guys and this is a very, very special time for us," he said.

"I understand. Go. Go." I tried to smile.

I was feeling left out. Somehow I knew that this was going to be the end of something. I was hoping that it would be the start of a new beginning for Jon and I but I was wrong. We stayed together until he left in early August for orientation at the Medical Center. We spent a fortune on airfare and telephone calls over the next year, but we did stay together. I didn't like him being alone in San Francisco. I was afraid of losing him. We agreed that I would continue my teaching here and that he would return as soon as he finished the residency in a year or two. It didn't happen that way.

Jon finished his residency, but before returning home, the director of the Medical Center Pharmacology Laboratory offered him a position on the staff. Again, Jon was thrilled and I wasn't. He flew home to tell me the news and asked me to join him. I said I couldn't right now and that I had responsibilities in my own career which precluded me from making such a decision no matter how attractive it was.

We agreed that Jon would go to the Medical Center again and that I would join him as soon as I could finish up at home and secure a teaching position in the Bay Area. It was difficult to find work San Francisco. Everyone was moving there. I never secured a position.

One year turned into two, two years turned into three. The plane trips back and forth stopped by the end of the first year. By the end of the second year, the phone calls were only on holidays or other special occasions. We finally came to an agreement that we would date others until we could get together again. By the fourth year, even the telephone calls stopped. We had gradually grown apart. We were each building our own lives but sadly in different cities.

I stayed home most nights and weekends during the first year Jon was in San Francisco. I didn't want to miss any of his phone calls or the occasional, unannounced flight in to visit. In the second year, however, I began to go out with friends to the bars. It was there that I met Joel again.

It was early on a Saturday morning, *Chaps*, the famous Boston gay bar, was just closing. As a friend and I approached the street, walking by was Joel Greenfield and a group of his friends. I didn't recognize the friends. At first I didn't recognize Joel.

"Mr. Decata! Mr. Decata!! He yelled.

I turned and realized it was Joel. He came running up to me, grabbed and shook my hand. He asked how I was. He was genuinely glad to see me.

"Boy, I bet you guys were really shocked when you realized that was a "fag" bar, right?" Joel hoped.

"No, Joel. I knew it was a GAY bar before I went in," I retorted as I felt my stomach tense.

"You did?!? Are you telling me you're a queer? You're a poof, a faggot?" Joel was always direct.

"No, But, I am telling you that I am a homosexual. I am gay and I am proud of it." I said as strongly as I could.

"Jesus Christ. All these years I've been admiring you and all the time you tell me you were a fucking cocksucker!" He began to laugh hysterically as he turned to friends screaming, "My favorite high school teacher is a queer! Look it's Mr. Decata and he's a fag!" Joel continued to scream.

We attracted a bit of attention. Some of the guys coming out of the club slowed down or stood by in case this was going to turn into a classic fag-bashing. One of Joel's friends grabbed him by the arm.

"Come on, Greenfield, let's get out of here. You've made your point," he seemed to say in disgust.

As they walked away, I could still hear Joel's laugh.

I didn't sleep that night. I hated being alone. Things weren't going well for me. Jon was gone and probably wouldn't be back. I was beginning to get antsy about moving on, and then this Joel thing. Just what I needed. A full blown reality check of just how people feel about guys like me. Sure, I cried but I was as much angry as I was sad. I was going to get involved in stopping such bullshit!

25 october 2010