

Fred Astaire's Dancing Lessons

Dustin Bradley Goltz

PRESHOW SONG: "Yesterday, When I Was Young" version by Dusty Springfield.

PROJECTED ON-SCREEN: "It's a terrible thing for a man to suddenly realize all his life he was telling the truth" - Oscar Wilde

Center of the stage is a projection screen, hovering above a black stool and side table, where a sparkly binder sits. Stage Right is a clothes rack, an open suitcase, a makeup table and a stool. Stage left, all the way DS is a lectern and a small table. Video begins as song ends.

VIDEO TRANSITION – "Opening": Static and a cacophony of sounds interrupts the close of the song. Various video segments of the performer, clearly younger of various ages, in front of the camera, preparing to speak. The Image moves in and out of focus. Focusing closely, and then, just as he is about to speak to screen cuts to still text image.

Part 1 – Scene #1: The Professor, "Dancing Lessons"

PROJECTED ON-SCREEN: Fred Astaire's Dancing Lesson's. Fred – Ass-Tears – Dance-Ing – Less-uns/. noun informal/slang. 1. The act or process of offering intergenerational gay mentorship. See also: aunties mothers.

The performer as Professor, in a gray blazer, steps to podium, mid lecture. He is playful and directly engaging the live audience as his class.

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PROFESSOR: Fred Astaire's Dancing lessons. "The Wisdom of the Aunties." Mothers showed you the door, the handshake, the aesthetic, the armory of words, of camp. These relations modeled a continuity, meaning beyond one's time, a passing on to the belle, cause back then, coming out was not a public declaration. Coming out was coming in, a coming out "to the life"—the underground. Loughery argues that "a social system so new and one that operated in such a hostile climate, could not have sustained itself without a foundation in camaraderie and without a willingness on the part of older homosexuals to act as mentors."¹ ... Yes? (*calls on student, plays reaction*)

No, the term is actually pre-Stonewall. (*Look around.*) How old do you think I am? ... Oooh. Someday, you too will be retired to *Jurassic Park*, but until then, my little queers, there is nothing more normative than biting the head off the generation before you.

Relax. You're all lovely- at twenty, I was terrible. Hideous, in fact, I keep him covered under a sheet in the attic, and if that little prick ever comes knocking at your door, do yourself a favor. Don't answer

So, by the 80s and 90s, a lot has changed, but queers are still raised in primarily straight homes, straight schools, straight spaces. Who tells you your story? Who reads you your future?

Haha. So true, yet banking on the movies is a poor investment. I thought being a college professor was like Barbara Streisand in *A Mirror Has Two Faces*. (*Size them up.*) It is not.

But, that is the question. Where is the lie?

VIDEO TRANSITION – "WHAT IS HAPPENING?": *Stilled, removed in space and time, the performer slowly walks center and crouches down.*

VIDEO TRANSITION: *Video displays screen grab of an email reading, "Hey Dusty, I thought you might find this interesting" with a link to a New York Times article from a colleague. The voice track narrates the email, followed by a sinister laugh. Next, the image cuts to old film footage of the performer. Clearly younger, looking out into the camera. The clips cut across a range of contexts and ages, some with time stamps clearly marking 1999 until mid 2000s. The audio track is edited clips from *Sunset Blvd*. "How could she breathe in that house so crowded with Norma Desmonds. And even more Norma Desmonds. And even more." The performer whispers, "Please tell me story." A young girl asks, "Mommy,*

¹ Loughery, John. *The Other Side of Silence: Men's Lives and Gay Identities: A Twentieth-Century History*. New York: Henry Holt and Co. 1998, p. 71.

why can't Jessie wake up like everybody else?" (Elm Street 2: Freddy's Dead). The music grows increasingly eerie and foreboding. The track ends with "It was all very queer. But queerer things were yet to come" (Sunset Boulevard) and labored lingering deep breaths.

Part 1 – Scene #2: "Suicidal Nostalgia" (Video)

The M.A.S.H. theme song "Suicide is Painless" plays in the background of old footage of a young boy, running down the street, using his coat as a cape, and then laying on a swing, belly to seat, pretending to fly, and watching his body in the shadows. This video projects over next four voice segments. On stage, the performer slowly traces the floor, mirroring the boy in the video.

AUDIO VOICEOVER: *For as long as I can remember suicide was just... there. Before knowing what it was, I knew it was painless, and familiar, and lulling in its melody. ("Don't Cry Out Loud" by Melissa Manchester, crossfades in) 1980- And then it was a mountain. A place. Suicide mountain. I must have been 5 or 6. We were dropping my brothers off at camp in Rockford. That right there, the camp tour guide announced, is suicide mountain. A recreational activity, alongside horseback riding and archery. I stood at the bottom, looking up. This is suicide mountain- tall steep, exciting. ("Arthur's Theme," by Christopher Cross, transitions in) 1981- A year later, mom on the phone, wall mounted white, long tangled cord, she cries. One of Dad's clients committed suicide, she said. He's gone. I envisioned the client traveling to Rockford Illinois and leaping from that cliff. Painless. Free. gone, to some place magical, Flying away. ("Take Me Home Tonight," by Eddie Money, fades over) 1986- That feeling in 7th grade, tears streaming down my face, I climbed out the window, hopped the fence, and started running down the street, arms out, free, flying, running away. I can breathe.*

Music crossfades to the opening of "Ballad of the Sad Young Man," where two verses play in full. On the screen is a stilled, ponderous, investigating, staring image of the performer, about 14 years younger, staring out directly into the camera/audience.

*"Sing a song of sad young men, glasses full of rye
All the news is bad again, kiss your dreams goodbye
All the sad young men, singing in the cold
Trying to forget, that they're growing old
All the sad young men, choking on their youth
Trying to be brave, running from the truth"²*

On stage, the performer mirrors the video, mirroring himself staring out at the video. The effect of age between the two faces is given time to process. On stage, the performer slowly raises his hands to his neck and begins to slowly choke himself. It is not forced or violent,

² Song written by Frances Landesman and Thomas J. Wolf, Jr.

but calm, as if reliving a memory. When the second verse ends, the song cuts out and the performer walks stage right.

Part 1 – Scene #3: “Another Gay Story” (Video)

On stage, the performer places on a camouflage poncho, seated before a flickering light in the mirror. The light has a campfire/ghost story effect, with the camouflage outfit. He listens to the monologue projected for the audience, and watches them watching him. He monitors them, in a form of confrontation and uneasy accountability. He repeatedly powders his neck with makeup.

ON VIDEO PERFORMER (21 YEARS YOUNGER): Do you know what I do when old gay men touch me? Do you? Do you know what I do when a man three times my age comes up to me in bar and whispers something hot and dirty into my ear? When he tells me how he wants to fuck my little ass so hard, when he tells me he wants to swallow my load, when he tells me that he can show me pleasure in a way I could never even dream of? I laugh at him first. I laugh at him and I say no fucking way, Grampa. I look him in the eyes and stare real deep and real close and say, “You’re old. You’re old, and ugly, and wrinkly, and foul, and freckled, and your shelf life has expired.” Usually he’ll get up to leave at this point. But he’s a man so he has to say something back, right. He’ll call me a little prick, or some stupid kid who doesn’t know shit. He’ll get angry, so angry, but it’s all under his breathe. See, he still wants to fuck me. It’s so sad to look at. Oh, he is so sad, now. I tell him that he’s pathetic. I ask him, “Grampa, why can’t you tell me stories about when you were a kid?” His face grows warm, he moves to me, and he lowers his hand to slightly cup my ass. “Tell me a story,” I repeat, and his finger begins to massage the outside of my crack, through my jeans. “I want to know about who I am, where I came from.” His hand moves further around my crotch till his fingers are touching my balls. He leans into my ear and whispers, “I want to fuck your hot little ass.” I grab him by the neck and I shove him into the wall. His body moves so easily, he is so old and so weak. The veins in his neck are popping out, his eyes filling with tears, his crusty old face frozen in fear. “Tell me a story old man!” He looks at me straight in the eye, with tears beginning to run down his face, his choked voice, barely audible, utters, “I want to fuck your hot little ass.” So I press harder, and harder, no one in the bar stopping me, I press my hand trying, desperately to make it touch the wall, with only his throat between my fingers and the brick, harder, and harder ... make them touch. And he drops dead. He falls like a bag of shit. And I take my seat again. And he just rots there, with all the others of them who have tried. Dozens of corpses, laying by the bar, in various stages of decay. And I drink my beer.

VIDEO TRANSITION – “METAMORPHOSIS TO GHOST #1”: *The video shows a long montage of flies, trapped on yellowed and dingy fly paper, kicking and*

struggling. A congested soundtrack takes over of fly buzzing, eerie organ music, a distorted version of the Fraggle Rock Theme, audio excerpts from Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Dead and Sunset BLVD, and the amplified foul sound of moist chewing of food. On stage, the performer smears bright red and blue makeup across his face, and then covers himself with a green monster mask to match the camouflage outfit, resembling Marjorie the trash heap from Fraggle Rock. The soundtrack pinnacles to an evil laugh, and a scream.

Part 1 – Scene #4: Auntie #1, “The Ghost of Faggots’ Past”

The performer as Auntie #1 leaps center and screams, gowned in a camouflage trash coat, puffy frog mask and a bedazzled Freddy Kruger glove. They look at their jeweled Freddy hand in terrified realization and screams, and then turns to audience and screams again (visually referencing Jessie in Elm Street 2).

AUNTIE #1: Ahhhhh. Really? *(To audience, annoyed.)* You got some shit to work through, my boy. *(Looks at jeweled glove and reconsiders its potential.)* I can work with this.

Anyhoo – Darling! I’m your Ghost of faggots’ past *(sprinkles gold flower petals across space)*. “Is your Auntie Mame anything like you expected?”³ Don’t look at me like that. This is *your* lie, sweetie. Judgment won’t help either one of us. Ohhh. Betty surely shit her dress. Gloria fucking Swanson meet ... Mrs. Roper! *(walks to clothes rack and flip through outfits)* No. No No. Yes! *(selects a bright red kimono and a turban with a plant on top)*. It pays to advertise. “Maybe red. Bright flaming Red. Let’s make it gay!” “Auntie Needs Fuel” *(sucks down two bottles of vodka)* “There now- are we all lit?”

Performer steps down to dressing areas and touches up their hideous makeup.

Okay, Joey, park the biscuit! Somebody needs to know how to bite their nails, yes? Let the hair down, missy? Drop a pin? “You won’t need some of these words for months and months... take a notepad and write down words you don’t understand!”

Now, let me look at you, Peter Pan. *(walks up to specific male in audience)* Hmm hmm. A Venus with a penis, indeed. *(Flirting with audience member, while making a fisting gesture.)* I could certainly wear *that*. Like a bracelet! “Time for a tumble with Mr. Bundle.”⁴

Alright, baby, let's talk shop—Tick tock, before Madam L’age gets you—and she will. *Yesterday, when I was young!* No professional chickens—Wrong! *(Ala Liza, with*

³ Quoted lines in the next two paragraphs are from the film *Auntie Mame*.

⁴ Line is from Miss Hannigan in the film *Annie*.

dramatic pose.) That shits a no-dy no no! You own this (*referencing their aged face*). And, you pay your respects.

Like Harry⁵ says, "I molested an adult until I found out what I needed to know ..."
(*Loud cackle.*)

Oh, I see we have a situation. (*puts Freddy glove back on*). No, you don't need to be just like me. No, I am not interested in you sexually, but if I was, that is no reason to treat me like shit. Yes, you stink of insecurity. No, you are not fooling anyone. Yes, everything that happened before you may be history, but no, sweetie, the world did not start because you started paying attention—you got some work to do.

Hate on Bette or Barbara and you are running up a bill, dearly. Shit in Donna all you want, but so not fuck with Diana! Learn to laugh sweet meat or you are not gonna make it. And when you cry, don't forget the importance of style.

Performer strikes a dramatic pose, with Freddy glove opened widely to the sky, as they sing.

*"I guess it was yourself you were involved with. I could have sworn it was me. I might of found out sooner if you only let me closer if you only let me close enough to see. That ain't no way to treat a lady, no way to treat your baby, your woman, your friend. That ain't no way to treat a lady, no way. But maybe it's a way for us to end."*⁶

Performer snaps out of it, returns to audience, in sadness, and longing.

There is no OZ. Not, anymore. But once... once, it was just darkness. And me, the freak. (*pulls off turban, and removes glove*). The first time I walked through those doors, the music, the smoke, it's like the walls fell away, the ceiling broke open into the most starry and infinite night sky, and bodies spun around me in the air like sweaty confetti. It was magic. It was being seen. But in the absence of darkness, the light means so little

I'm not sure what exactly else you want me to say. "What for? I can say anything I want with my eyes" "We didn't need words, just faces!"⁷ I do love all this faggotry. Be not afraid, my boy. Be not afraid; I know you. I am mother, I am father, I am uncle and I am auntie. Yes, we have met before. 1997, Kramer Books, Afterwards. I was, a little younger. And you, you were a vile little shit. Remember me.

⁵ Referring to Harry Hay, cited in Loughery 1998, p. 29..

⁶ "Ain't No Way to Treat a Lady," by Helen Reddy. Lyrics by Harriet Shock.

⁷ Line from film *Sunset Boulevard*.

Walk tight, my sweetest sweet boy. The witching hour is upon us, and Cinderella needs to wash the egg out

(Performer changes from Kimono back to blazer and steps to podium, resuming class. As he lectures, he wipes his face, removing most of the sloppy makeup, though it is not fully removed.)



Part 2 – Scene #1: Professor, “The Twilight Creatures”

PROJECTED ON-SCREEN: “Take on a Trip.” “Take one on a trip” verb/slang.
1) to lie, deceive or steer into falsehood or untruths. See also *Bullshit, Fake, Fool, Pretend*

PROFESSOR: Underground Gay male culture, the twilight aristocracy. There is a beautiful, diverse history there, but the mainstream story—the one straight people tell to feel better—horror. Anita Bryant’s militant homosexuals recruiting your precious children. Swishy and devious Pied Pipers leading us all to damnation. Queer writers have been interrogating these monstrous projections for decades. Isherwood’s George was “The fiend that won’t fit into their statistics, the Gorgon that refuses their plastic surgery, the vampire drinking blood with tactless uncultured slurps...”⁸ Illness! It is one of the reasons Frank Kameny went after the APA, knowing no gay movement could be built on a story that declared us sick and degraded.

And these myths were embedded in queer culture, and were camped and played with. The *Vampire* is the drooling old man who swoops down on young stuff as they parade to and fro. *Cinderella* is an older queen who has to be in by 12 or her face falls off, and for someone to be *sweet* is to be young, tender, mouthwatering (*playfully licks lips in a tease/taunt*).

The real horror is you feel the same, but the world sees you different, and with that comes expectations. “Stop wearing that! How sad!” “Stop hanging out at the bars! How sad! You should hear what we are saying about you. It’s not what you think (*smiles in a tease*). But, what if the older gay male is not this joyless, terrifying gorgon? If research rejects this myth, and it does, then why? Why the story? While I am not one to indulge your generations desire to put yourself in the middle of, well, everything, how is this, absolutely, about you, my little chick-a-dees? What happens to you if I’m becoming a monster? Be afraid. Be very afraid.

⁸ Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. 1964. NY: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992.

VIDEO TRANSITION – “POSITIVE AGING”: *Video plays a series of images of the performer, partying, being silly, at various ages between 20 and 30. This is intercut with grainy footage of a desktop with stacks of organized papers, someone setting their glasses on the desk, and closing a laptop. The audio sounds like an old news cast film strip, stating, “Having seen few public examples there were of gay men growing older gracefully,” Gay Therapist. Bob Bergeron. I’ve got a concise picture of what being over 40 is about. It is a great perspective filled with happiness, feeling sexy, possessing comfort relating to other men and taking good care of ourselves.”*

Part 2 – Scene #2: “Safe”

The performer crouches before the audience, and directly addresses them, as no character but himself, for the first time in the show.

PERFORMER: I was 10 years old when *20/20* exposed me to the Satanists in America. These Satanists, living in your town and mine, would kidnap and sacrifice children as part of their demonic rituals.

I was laying on the floor in my living room, snug in my blanket that snapped and zipped into something between a sleeping bag and pajamas. I wasn't going upstairs. No way. It was bedtime, but the thought of my dark room, after hearing about babies baked in loaf pans was too much. So, I tried to fall asleep. My parents watched a Blackhawks game with my older brothers. “It's bedtime,” I heard my mother say towards my eyes squeezed tight. I can't say for sure if they knew I was a big faker, but somewhere in the middle of that hockey game, it worked. I drifted off.

I was awoken, by my father, scooping me up with a deep groan. (*performer slowly stands, with arms open*) I was way too big for him, with his shitty back, to carry me upstairs anymore, but he did it. I should have let him know I was awake, but I pretended sleep... through the accidental bumping of the staircase, the knocking of my head on the wall... twice, and even the extremely loud whisper of my mother cursing his every movement, “MARTY... Be careful,” in a bullhorn whisper. Still, I squeezed my eyes tight.

I felt compact, held, like I was floating. It had been so long since someone had carried me, the complete surrender of motion to the will of someone else, someone big and strong and safe. I felt so safe.

Part 2 – Scene #3: “Suicidal Nostalgia” (Reprise, Video)

The video repeats the old movie visuals of the young boy on the swing. Nothing Compares to You” Sinead O’Conner fades in, and the voiceover comes in over it. On stage, the performer repeats tracing gesture on floor. The audio track is a voiceover with music.

AUDIO VOICEOVER: *1990. I swallowed the bottle of pills. That feeling of running away, wind in face. I did it... freedom. Tomorrow won't feel this good. OK. This is ok. Maybe beautiful even. Ok. Stop here. Walk away.*

(Video cuts to younger version of performer lying in bed, staring at camera. On stage, the performer lies on the ground, mirroring the video, staring at audience. “Under the Bridge” by Red Hot Chili Peppers fades in.)

1991. I wake in a hospital bed again. Different room, different month, same me. My body's exhausted from the charcoal tube forced down my throat, the gagging, resistance.

(“Enter Sandman” by Metallica cross fades in).

I’m still, my eyes closed, hiding in half sleep. Nurses talk, doctors talk, my parents talk – and yell. Dad screams and curses, nurses interrupt. Mom makes him leave the room. Good, I think. The nurses will see his outburst and put two and two together; depressed suicidal kid, jerk father, case closed. It’s the work of the closet, always planning ahead, anticipating risks, covering tracks. *(Music fades out.)*

The room gets quiet. I breathe, thinking I’m alone. I am not. Mom whispers, interrupted by squelched full-body crying. “You don’t get to open up this box anymore. Never again.”

Part 2 – Scene #4: Michael

Performer stands up, walks to center stool, sits, and directly addresses audience.

PERFORMER: His name was Michael. He was my store manager- Kramer Book and Afterwards. DuPont Circle – 1990s. I remember one night, we were stocking books and talking—some gay topic. Something I forgot but something that set him all aflame. I remember he calmly set his books down, walked over to a chair, sat himself down, took a deep breath, and said “come here.” Come here. I was a bit unsure, I hesitated. “Come here, dammit. Now sit. Sit (slapping his own lap) ... sit ... *sit* down. Now, look at me. You need to learn to embrace your sissyness. That is all. Go! You’ve got work to do, and you’re bruising the fruit.”

Part 2 – Scene #5: George

PERFORMER: When I heard George died, I couldn't move. George. My, "I want your sex," "monkey on our back," "father figure" "looking for some fast love," "spinning the wheel" as we got older monster. George Michael's dancing lessons. Buying playgirls from the 7-11 at 12, cruising mall bathrooms at 13, afterhours bookstore at 17. George.

1992. Senior year, show choir concert, I'm going to do it. I will sing "Waiting (Reprise)," the final track from *Listen without Prejudice Volume 1*, in front of all of them, in front of my parents, who have never come to a show before, never heard me sing before, and would never guess I was... a George.

It was a dramatic blue light. I had show choir tux pants and sparkly blue bow tie and cummerbund. Jonathon played the piano. Three women sang back up. Do do do do do do do do do. Do do do do do. Do do do do do/ dod od d.

I was singing, singing my heart out, but over the girls and the piano, no one could hear me. My mic was off. I didn't know. Drowned out with the do do dos, I sang, "Here I am."

VIDEO TRANSITION – "INTRODUCTION TO GHOST #2": *Projected image cuts to TV static, and flips channels to scene of the pilot episode of the original Dynasty. On TV, Blake says, "Of course. I forgot. The American Psychiatric Association decided that it's no longer a disease. Too bad. I could have endowed a foundation. The Steven Carington Institute for the Treatment and Study of Faggotry!" The clip then rapidly cuts to an early MTV commercial and theme, and then a quick montage of early gay TV and film clips from SOAP, MASH, Longtime Companion, early AIDS news reporting, Eddie Murphy standup, and a flurry of texts setting up an early 80s context and the repetition of gay men in the context of death or jokes. The music cuts between "Post Mortem Bar" "Longtime Companion theme" by Zane Campbell, the "Dynasty theme," and a large creaky door opening to a room playing Erasure "Always." As "Always" plays, the image turns to an 80s/90s club laser light show. The performer as Auntie #2 enters to the music, in a bright pink wig, leopard glasses, a WHAM "Choose Life" tank top and huge lime green blazer, and a pink tutu. They have a new splash of bright, sloppy, childlike makeup smeared across their face. They pose in the Madonna "Dress You Up" opening pose, dances a few beats, until they are over it, and calls for the music to stop, with a record scratch.*

Part 2 – Scene #6: Auntie #2, "The Ghost of Faggots' Present"

AUNTIE #2: Oh Dorothy! (*In Southern accent*) You can call me Mark, or Rick, or Steve-- I'm your ghost of faggots' present (*sprinkles silver flower petals*) — the 80s pop culture edition. Totally!

They turn and walks back to the center desk, flipping open and digging through the large silver binder covered with 80s pop cultural images.

So, yes – yes. It was all there from the beginning. Greg Evigan from *BJ and the Bear*. *BJ and the Bear* was a television show and it starred that guy! You liked *Grease* 2 way too much! You cried when you didn't get the *Xanadu* record at Kmart, Christopher Atkins, Christopher Atkins, and (*looks with glasses closer*) Oh, you are gonna hurt yourself! This New Edition obsession was clearly out of proportion to the boys around you, and then, well, the Ajoile commercial whenever you had a moment to yourself.

(Sung.) *"I can bring home the bacon. Fry it up in a pan, Cause I'm a women Ajoile!"*

No no no, this is not a story about your Jewish suburban coming out, thank god! But, in order to get there (*flipping through book*) pain pain pain, shame shame shame, woo woo woo. And that ain't no siren, but a real faggot on the roof going woo woo woo – Fuck you, Eddie Murphy! More shame, more pain, and before you know it its 1987 and you are starring in the mirror, mouthing I'm gay, blah blah (*a la Aurora from Terms of Endearment*). We get it! It was *hard*.

"Girls! Girls Girls, We need to have a talk!" (*a la Mrs Garrett from Facts of Life*). "Face to face. A couple of silver spoons."⁹ "You take the good. You take the bad." "There's a time for love and a time for living," "So don't another minute on your crying," "Cause we're gonna find our way." "When your lost out here and on your own, the tide is waiting to carry you home." "And it took a whole lot of trying, just to get up that hill." "So, Gimme' a break, the game is survival," and "Everybody's got a special kind of story, everybody finds a way to shine." "It's my life. It's my dreams. Nothing is gonna stop me now!" So, "Thank you for being a friend." "Cause I want I want Charles in charge of me!"

Ugh, lighten up sweat pea, we get it! All gay men on TV in the 80s were sad, and miserable and depressed, but who are we kidding? Steven Carrington on *Dynasty* was a drag! But Crystal! But Fallon, But Diahann Carrol as Miss Domonique Devereax. That is where our story was really playing out. "Aren't you gonna welcome me to the family" (*under breath*) motherfuckers?

You, my boy, grew up at the height of Alexis Merrell Carrington Colby Dexter. You were blessed with a kiss by *The Golden Girls* and nice paddling by miss Julia

⁹ The monologue is all sitcom theme lyrics, in the following order. *Silver Spoons*, *The Facts of Life*, *Who's the Boss?*, *Growing Pains*, *Full House*, *The Jeffersons*, *Gimme a Break!*, *Diff'rent Strokes*, *Perfect Strangers*, *The Golden Girls*, *Charles in Charge*.

Sugarbaker — and don't you forget it! She gave you Bette, and Madonna, Aurora Greenway from *Terms of Endearment*. “Grown women are prepared for life's little emergencies” (put on scarf). She gave you Marjorie the trash heap from *Fraggle Rock*, her two bitchy twinks and all that faggotry! She gave you Cyndi and Dolly. “Where did I train? I tell you where I trained, at Screw U!”¹⁰

And then you found Erasure. You found Depeche Mode, The Smiths, Echo and the Bunnymen, Adam Ant, Prince, Grace Jones, Michael Hutchence of INXS, Molly Ringwald, Duckie Dale, Some kind of Wonderful, and you realized the world speaks in style, in code. The wink at the restroom sink, the tap of a foot under a stall. (*looking under stall*) Hello Liza! The sleepover games that always turn into doctor, or spanking cause you have been a bad boy, and, of course, the gym teachers. MMM MM. The gym teachers. Baby, we are everyone.

(*Sung, while dancing and removing tutu and green blazer*) “Going through life with blinders on, it's tough to see. I had to get up, get out from under and look for me.”¹¹

Yes, that generation of men is still missing. Yes, you grew up a latch key gay in front of the TV because there was other work to be done. But family was nowhere and everywhere, hiding in plain sight. Whispering secret calls, small little sparkles in the night, saying we were here, we are here, we will be here. So breathe. And come find us.

Auntie drops remainder of costume, as they step to the podium. The performer puts on the blazer, again, with the “Choose Life” tank top still showing, embodying the Professor, wiping off the new makeup as he lectures.



Part 3 – Scene #1: Professor, “Future Logics”

PROJECTED ON-SCREEN: *Ganymede. Ganymede: Noun/Slang. 1). To Play Ganymede, as in an old man trying to play young. 2) Trojan youth who was abducted by Zeus and taken to Olympus, where he was made the cupbearer of the gods and became immortal.*

PROFESSOR: “A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten stories, full of dirty words. I saw my future in that

¹⁰ Line from the film *Straight Talk*.

¹¹ From the theme song to the TV show *Alice*. Lyrics by Allen & Marilyn Bergman.

cavern. I was afraid"¹² Queers have always had a complicated relationship to future. "Damn the future. Let Kenny and the kids have it" (Isherwood).¹³ And in the community and queer activism- the generational tensions, enmeshed with racial and gendered tensions were always there. The new homosexual of 70s called for the death of the old queen in 1969. She died at stonewall, replaced by the damn Marlboro man.

And in the 80s, we grew up to watching the older men fall away- The door man at Trax, the sexy daddy at the bookstore—just gone. We internalized that count-down. It was inside us, it was a part of us, regardless of what the test said.

And then they started to test positive- my friends- even though they knew all the information – it didn't seem to matter

Part 3 – Scene #2: "Ganymede: Oh, the Horror!" (Video)

The performer exits the stage, and as lights go dark. A video plays a "Blair Witch" style movie trailer of the nightmare of gay aging and failed maturation. The soundtrack is creepy and ominous. The cuts parody horror film trailers, where the older gay man is a paranoid nightmare.

VOICEOVER: *The teenage boy can struggle to find their place in the world. A rebellious brooding outcast. The emo eyelinered, hoodie headphone wearing outcast. It's just a phase, we tell them. But is it? What if that boy never grows up. Never finds their place. What happens when teen angst turns 40.*

YOUNG VOICE: *It's so weird, I have been having the exact same dream.*

OLDER VOICE: *You don't want to go down there, son.*

YOUNG VOICE: *Ewe. He's like really old.*

OLDER VOICE: *You remind me of myself.*

YOUNG VOICE: *What are you doing? Why won't you turn around?*

YOUNG BOY: *Ewe. Get lost, creeper.*

OLDER VOICE: *Welcome to the party!*

SAME YOUNG BOY: *Are you seriously still wearing converse?*

OLDER VOICE: *Come to papa. Come to daddy.*

¹² Baldwin, James. *Giovanni's Room: A Novel*. 1956. Ed. NY: Delta Trade Paperbacks, 2000. p 9.

¹³ Isherwood, Christopher. *A Single Man*. 1964. NY: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1992. p. 26.

OLDER VOICE: *I never grew out of it. I only grew up. (With a sinister close up of male lips kissing to the screen.)*

Part 3: Scene #3—"My Secret (Didja Get it Yet)?"

The audio abruptly shifts to the poppy upbeat song, "My Secret (Didja Get it yet?) by New Edition. The screen is bright and flashy, projecting flickering and bouncing images of 80s teen boy stars from teen magazines, along with flashy 80s style banners. The images of the boys are (as they were) very sexualized. On stage, the performer enters in high plastic heels, a mesh tank, shiny skimpy blue bootie shorts, a rainbow spinner hat, wolf gloves with red painted nails, grey and green and bloody smeared monstrous makeup, and a grotesque boa made of old converse shoe canvas and laces. Part drag queen, and part lizard monster, the performer dances, mouths the words, wags his tongue, flirts with the audience, and grinds to the song—yet works around the podium as a grotesque embodiment of the professor.

(Lyrics lip synched, at points.) "Ohhhh. Yaaaaaaa

Girl I got a secret, See if you can guess

Put your heart into the Problem, See if you can pass the Test (Can you see it?)

It's a natural occurrence, 1+1 makes 2

If I've been acting crazy that's Just one more clue

When I see you

Oh, feel you start to shake? Do a double take

Didja get it yet, Get it yet, Get it yet

Oooh my secret

Ooh sparks begin to fly. Lightening in the sky

Didja get it yet, Get it yet, Get it yet, Get it yet

My secret

Didja get it yet, Didja get it yet, Didja get it yet, Didja get it yet

Get it yet, Get it yet, Get it, Get it yet."¹⁴

The video makes a bumpy static transition, and the live performer freezes in a sexy/monster pose, that he holds perfectly still for the next segment. The video cuts to a YouTube video of a gay counselor talking to a room of gay men.

ON VIDEO MALE SPEAKING:: *"And if you try to, there is only one word to describe how it's going to look, and that word is 'desperate.' And when younger me see this, they are*

¹⁴ "My Secret (Didja Get It Yet)," written by Buck Ram.

going to be terrified of it, and they are going to look at this older man and think, Oh, my god, if this Hollywood guy cannot figure out how to deal with his aging, then how am I going to do it?"

On stage, the Performer remains frozen in his awkward sexy/monster pose, but the precision of the pose softens as his body starts to droop. The video cuts to a recording of the performer, younger, late at night, laying down talking to the camera directly. He appears to be clearly wasted, depressed, inaudible, defeated. It's hard to make out words, but you can faintly hear, "I'm not sure how others can do this, but I can't."

Part 3 – Scene #4: “The Story of Bob Bergeron”

The Performer walks to the dressing area, drops several costume items and reenters wearing only the mesh top and black gym shorts. His face is covered in green and grey makeup, with fake blood around his mouth. He sits center, on the stool. He slowly and methodically wipes off the makeup with makeup wipes – folding each of the multiple wipes in a careful square, and placing them in uniform piles beside him.

PERFORMER: On the first day of class, I always have students do pretty common activity – two truths and a lie. You lay our three unique statements about yourself and we look for the lie. It highlights different elements depending on the class; nonverbals; performance of identity; gendered scripts; etc. But, the thing is, the students are usually not very good at it. It's the first day of class, they are nervous, image conscious, they never ever seem to take full advantage of the lie. Its freedom. Its poetry.

In my writing, in my teaching, I have tried to do what Bob Bergeron was doing. You can look him up on YouTube – handsome guy, cute glasses. A gay therapist described in *The New York Times* as “relentlessly cheery.”¹⁵

In March 2012, I was introduced to Bob's work via an email, from a colleague. The subject line read, “I thought you'd find this interesting.” In the article, Bob is pictured, turtle neck and leather coat. He was about to publish a book titled “The Right Side of Forty: The Complete Guide for Happiness for Gay Men at Midlife and Beyond.”

A thick stack of printed pages, the final page proofs of this book were found in Bob's Apartment on January 5th, 2012. Scribbled on the title page of “The Right

¹⁵ Bernstein, Jacob. Not Waiting to Say Goodbye. *New York Times*. March 30, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/01/fashion/the-life-and-death-of-the-therapist-bob-bergeron.html>

Side of Forty,” Bob Bergeron, at 49, wrote the words “I’m done.” Alongside his manuscript were small pristine stacks of documents, personal papers and instructions left with meticulous precision. They found Bob’s body, he killed himself - suffocation. On the title page, he scribbled his suicide note, calling his upcoming book, “The Complete Guide to Happiness for Gay Men at Midlife and Beyond,” “A lie based on bad information.” So, class, where is the lie?



Part 4 – Scene #1: Professor, “Suicidal Logics”

Performer steps up the podium, and places on the blazer over the mesh tank top.

PROJECTED ON-SCREEN: *Take a Bow. Take a bow: to leave, usually by suicide, because of the feeling of not being wanted.*

PROFESSOR: In film, or literature, or television, if a queer character who stares into the mirror, or looks off from a mountain top, or gazes past a group of friends on a city balcony, or walks alongside traffic, or shares the screen with a bottle of pills in the periphery—the pull is there. The whisper, the next step we have come to anticipate—We know, right? He’ll down the pill bottle, she’ll jump off the cliff, they step into the traffic.

When George died, in 2017, that first 24 hours there was a flood of speculation - AIDS or suicide, too old, but it was... (*answering student question*) George Michael. The singer... it’s not, ...When we hear a news report about a queer person who does kill them self, do we ask why? When a straight person kills them self we need an answer, a reason, but when they are queer, the culture provides a logic. Their queerness, tacitly, is the why. Sure, you can argue its awareness to a cultural epidemic, but also, it reiterates a very dangerous cultural claim—that suicide is always present, there, an option, a character in our lives, a plot point to our narrative. And, what’s more scary and insidious, it feels authentic. Like its ours. Like it’s the truest part of you.

From Mann to Cooper to Cunningham, we die fabulously beautiful deaths – elegant, purposeful, poetic. “He let it have him.”¹⁶ They seem to grant us dignity and a sense of agency but it’s not. It’s not your story.

Year after year, student journal after journal (*referencing student work in front of him*), of all the inheritances to be passed down. Disco! Or Madonna! I mean, fuck your

¹⁶ Cunningham, Michael. *Flesh & Blood*. NY: Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 1995. p. 442.

generation is way too hard on her—but this (*refencing student work again*) ... Suicide is not poetic. It's brutal. It's a fucking cliché and it is NOT your story. You want to be radical, then stay alive and... (*laughs at self and refuses to perform a certainty he lacks*) I don't know.

Look, I'm not singling anyone out, I'm not talking one student journal or two or even five, but... Does it help if I tell you I see you, that many of us share that darkness, that whisper? That lying fucking whisper. If I tell you, my queers, you belong, does it help? If I asked, could see that you are bound and tied to one another - to us. That we are counting on you. That you are part of something flawed and shifting but still magic? That there is a world beyond this now, beyond blood, that there is a thickness to that thing they call "water." Would it matter?

Part 4 – Scene #2: Auntie #3, “The Ghost of Faggots’ Future”

The image on the video is a lavender graduation banner with a rainbow flag. The audio is a voiceover of a man, saying, “Today we are also honoring a man who has served this university for over 50 years, and helped found the LGBTQ studies program, the student center, and the very visibility of gay life on this campus. Much of what we see here was established in his labor in a time when the risks were severe. Please help me welcome to the stage Dr. George Marjorie.” Throughout the introduction are snickering voices mocking the person being introduced saying, “This retirement is 10 years too late.” “Have you read his syllabus. It’s like LGBTQ studies from the dark ages.” “Don’t ask me to clap for another cis white dude,” “Thanks, Dumbledore.” At the end of the introduction, and mockery, the Performer slowly walks downstage center. He wears horn rim glasses, a red and green long-sleeved striped Freddy Krueger shirt, alien antenna, short blue booty shorts, a black and white kimono, exposing his bare legs, and big fluffy slippers in the style of black Converse high tops. His voice is raspy, slow, tired, delicate and sarcastic.

AUNTIE #3: My smile, once playful is now perverse. I lick my lips because they are dry, or not. I have white thin hair, clothes that puff out in the places where my body shrinks and retreats.

The stories I carry stopped having meaning. Students look past me, raise their hands and speak through me. Believing it has never been thought, said or done before. A ghost.

And – I saw you leave (*gesturing to professor’s podium*). At my speech. A few caddy little queer students barely off their mother’s teat make a few jokes. Big deal, but you stood and you left. You are hardly more than a few years innocent of that type of self-righteousness. Glass houses, professor.

What do you expect? Gee, what was it like to be a homosexual in the olden days, papa?

Do you want to know what I said? In my retirement speech? Well that's a shame, you left, and you'll never know, and now I'm a trite recurring motif of your assumptions, fears, and insatiable yearning. That's right, Mary—I'm your ghost of faggots' future. *(He pulls out a rainbow pride flag hankie, and waves it around. Black flower petals fly out in various directions. He then blows his nose into the hankie).* Now sit!

He, Her, Zi, Here, them, and them, and you, my dear, are all on your way to the land of the monsters. The re-generation of Vicious little fuckers. Oh- you see it coming. You aren't even that old. You are in the middle- looking over that edge – mmmm. Well, take it in.

*(Sung) "And as I grow older the world forgets me/
And talks to me as if I'm some kind of child."¹⁷*

The bizarre third act twist to go from feeling like you are the only one in the world to feeling lost in the crowd. Or if I am seen- I'm an oppressive relic of the past—a cis privileged body *(laughs)*. I still don't know when my relationship to masculinity apparently got so comfortable. Sissy to cis in a blink

I make you sad. That's your shit. I stood up here and told a story, And, yes. Many students joked, and whispered critiques. They look at me, watch me, and assumed my ease, my comfort in this space, in my body. So, they bought it. They believed my lie. I'm a 70-year old faggot. I break. They don't know that watching doors on campus and in bars was not a recent response to tragedy, it's been a way of life. They don't know that, and so what? I don't know their experience, they don't know mine. There is amazing power in accepting how small you really are.

But, I'm not some dusted off trophy to trot out once a year, no teeth, no heat, no cock, no opinion. No, no. I am a damn *(in a lovely way)* miracle.

We've got our scars. I cannot imagine what it cost you to be here, still alive. I regret, so ... much. We queers can be awful- caddy, cruel, ignorant..... our rhetoric of family, at times, has surely rung false, ... but then, I hope, sometimes, Oh I hope it has rung true

VIDEO TRANSITION – “ALL GAY, ALL DAY”: *The video starts with a film projection flicker as a few bars of Garland's "Somewhere over the Rainbow" plays. It is interrupted by the sound of a GRINDR alert and a screen shot of various men. More alerts jump in and the video and audio starts to spiral into chaos. The soundscape is overly congested and too fast, loaded with snippets of gay anthems, social media alerts and noise upon*

¹⁷ Lyrics from “Piano Song,” by Erasure.

noise. The visual projection is a rapid and incoherent explosion of gay articles, apps, actors, texts, groups, identity terms and overall hyper presence of gayness in mainstream culture; it's very fast and impossible to track, getting faster and louder and more and more claustrophobic. The performer steps out, wearing a black dress and a black tulle veil, slowly walking to the screen, watching the flickering avalanche of Ellen, Gaga, Grindr, Frank Ocean, Love Simon, Riverdale, Glee, etc.

Part 4 – Scene #3: “Coping with the Yawn”

In black dress and veil, the Performer sits in the stool and speaks just above the audience, outward.

PERFORMER: I don't see it in their eyes anymore. That thing we knew but dared not say.

Their time, their time before what? What is the story they tell themselves?

Maybe they need to believe in the new, and that we, and all those before, were wrong – but maybe that's a lie too. That, in some of the very darker days, maybe we knew how to love each other better, support one another better, and dance with the monsters.

Maybe we were miracles.

My Kings. My Queens. I Miss hope outside the fifth or sixth cocktail

I Miss Feeling like what I'm writing matters, rather than

Just write. Just Right

I miss Raw newness. I Miss you boys. I Miss us girls,

Even if we never quite knew who we were to each other then,

You haunt my now

I Miss convening Sunday night at Fosters

Our giving and taking of space and wet and heat on the dancefloor,

Sweat, Gloria, Erasure, strobe, body, soft,

I've grown hard, boys. They Miss us! *(He pulls off the veil and holds it in front of himself, like a lifeless body.)*

My kings and queens of Sunday night, I miss barely surviving

This living, this ... light Misses... so much. *(He allows veil to drop.)*

Part 4 – Scene #4: Professor, “Just History”

The transition is abrupt. He drops the veil and puts on blazer, as he leaps back into the classroom as a professor, clearly frustrated with how class discussion is going.

PROFESSOR: No, James, it's not just history. Who were the people most affected by the initial outbreak? Who was dying? *(pause)*

What did you learn about AIDS in high school? “A sexually transmitted virus. A bad one.” Is that what you've... *(catch/calms self)* Look folks. I get it. When my parents talked about the Vietnam War, it was never not just history to me. It was always something before, but... For many people, it's not just a historical event, it's still here, in their body,

In their muscles, it's seared into their souls, a shift in the chemistry of their being, the terror and fear and confusion of sickness and silence and greed and ... *Jamie, I see your hand!* To experience hospitals quarantining partners, experience lovers and friends dying, weekly, experience people fear, and avoid and condemn their dying bodies, to reject those bodies at funeral homes, to experience our country and our fucking president say nothing. 10s of 1000s of people, in this country, in our communities, dying and nothing. Because they were mostly faggots and IV drug users. *(Long studied pause, followed by uneasy laugh of recognition.)* Huh, there it is. It's the word. It's the word that offends you, the word that gives you pause. Well, I'll tell you what, folks, I think we all need to start owning your faggot anger a little bit, cause we need it now, and it appears to be getting lost in our reading of the text.

And these silly old monsters that amuse you, their scars that sicken you—their rage and pain and desperate sweetness that eludes you. See them, what they carry, because they are not just here for YOU. Everything you, everything we, that I take for granted.... We stand on the shoulders of... their stories, and their faggotry, and their broken and beautiful fury. So, no. No. It's not *just* history.

Part 4 – Scene #5: “Lying”

Performer steps away from podium and walks all the way downstage right, directly engaging the audience.

PERFORMER: “I’m Done.” “A lie based on bad information.” Bravo, Bob. Bravo. Tony Kushner once said you know great art when you see a glimmer of an idea you had, but it was fully executed by someone else. But maybe, maybe, maybe that is more about the piss elegance of The Duchess Tony Kushner. She sounds awfully proud of her cookies. *(Switching to voice and embodiment of Auntie #1, as drapes himself in the red kimono.)*

What happened to Our Miss Brooks- quite the Camille. God help us all, and Oscar Wilde. You want to know Bob’s lie? Hmmm. Hardly the puzzle, Dorian Grey. *(Puts on pink wig, shifts to Auntie #2 voice and embodiment.)* It’s that he was beyond the past. Of course it’s a lie. This Ghostly faggot ain’t ever done with you- you remember. You remember *(places on horn rimmed glasses and shifts to voice and embodiment of Auntie #3)* Tell me a story, grandpa. The land of OZ- the desire to be long – to stretch from then to here. Your empty inheritance *(line by line, the voice of the rest of the show shifts back and forth between the three Aunties)* It’s like ending up on a month-long vacation when you only packed for a week. You improvise.

So many curtain calls, final bows. I’ve died so many times. Some painful, some lovely, each in me. But scary movie monsters, they never really die, they always come back. Each time a little more grotesque – a bit more dead – a bit less. good. Sing it out.

Tell me, it gets bitter! *(Overhears correction.)* Oh shit, “better?” Really? Well, sure. That too.

So, what do I want? Well it’s in the smile of every fallen angel, even if a lie, it’s what everybody wants. I see you, still. *(Aunties voices are dropped and Performer speaks in his own voice)* But I cover you in in makeup, in mask, in metaphor, in poetry, so I see what I need. To see me, still.

Part 4 – Scene #6: “Waiting (Reprise)”

On stage, now wearing costume elements from all three ghosts, piled on top of each other, the performer places the professor blazer over it all. The video cuts in, showing the performer, in high school, on stage singing George Michael. It’s the high school show choir concert, under the blue light, and you can barely hear him (as the mic was not on). The video then transitions to performer, mid-twenties, walking, outside, looking at the camera, watching. He stares out to the camera to the audience, for several seconds, and just, when,

he is about to speak, the audio and video jumble and cut out after a bump of static. The video cuts to BLACK. After a beat, "I'm Gonna Be Strong" by Gene Pitney begins playing as the final quote is projected:

"Poetry is the lie that makes life bearable" – R. P. Blackmuir. Lecture, Princeton University, 1959

End.



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