The Visible Man

BY WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

Coming out of the closet is about more than sexuality. It's about being seen.

"Are you gay?"

The only time I was ever asked that question was a dozen years ago, when I was in my early 20s. It was a rainy Sunday afternoon, and I was sitting on a futon chatting with a woman named Rita who had just hosted a meeting of our writing group. Everyone else had left. I didn't know Rita very well, but we were both flush with excitement over fiction writing—trading opinions about favorite authors and about others in the group, sharing the thrill of those rare trance-like times when we'd find words spilling onto the page like rice from a measuring cup. We talked about our backgrounds, our families. She told me of having recently broken up with her lover, a woman. I listened to her story, making sympathetic comments along the way. I was understanding, I was supportive, and I felt as though I were standing on a shore watching a boat I had no desire to set foot on sail slowly toward me. Then came the question.

And my answer: "No."

She looked surprised and embarrassed, but gracefully maneuvered the conversation in another direction. Driving home afterward, I felt angry, invaded—and proudly, stubbornly victorious. Our writing group met once more before petering out. I never saw Rita again.

She'd asked me for something she needed, and I'd denied it to her; she'd offered me something I could have used, and I'd refused it. Both would have cost me too much: my ability, as painful as it was precious, to be invisible.

At college parties, standing in a cluster of people, I used to wonder why the circle would often close in and leave me frustrated outside the perimeter. Or why so many people I'd been introduced to on one occasion would, the second and third time around, forget having met me—their "No, I don't believe we know each other" overlapping precisely with my "Yes, we've met." On the other hand, when I spent a few nights with a family friend in Dublin during my junior year abroad, I took it as a huge compliment when he told me one morning that he'd never heard anyone breathe as soundlessly as I did while sleeping.

It would be simplistic to explain away those incidents as evidence of a reluctance to deal with my attraction to men—something as basic as my personality was no doubt a factor, too. But I can't deny that the qualities characterizing much of my social self at one time—erasure, silence—mirrored those that I imposed on my sexual life. *I am not here; I do not exist.* Both complaint and confirmation. I wanted to matter, to have a presence in other people's consciousness, but I was too comfortable in nonpresence. As hushed and still as that space may have been, at least I knew my way around it—the cool of its walls, the creak of its floor.

After college, on Saturday nights I'd occasionally go dancing with a group of women friends to a primarily gay club that drew a mixed crowd on weekends. (Dancing was one release I did allow myself, with a vengeance.) Spinning to the synthetic rhythms of Madonna, the Communards, Bananarama, I'd surreptitiously watch the strobe-lit pairs of beautiful men flashing beside me. I never let my face betray me to them, never quite let my mind acknowledge what my eyes were certain of. *I don't see you.* Once, around the same time, an earnest young man at an author's reading artlessly introduced himself to me in the restroom. ("Some weather we're having this spring. . . . My name's Rob.") We sat together at the reading, he asked me for my number afterward, and I gave it to him—with two digits transposed. *You don't see me.*

Meanwhile, I was alone. I enjoyed the company of my family and my small circle of friends, worked long hours, burned out, quit my job, went back to school, felt happy, was miserable. I became romantically involved with a dear friend, a woman. I thought I saw a future, but it was just a postcard from someone else's

(Continued on page 71)

Illustration by Timothy Cook

The Naked Eye

(Continued from page 72)

future, not mine. I began to crack. I ruined the friendship. (We're friends again, by something that feels like grace.) I finally did crack—not *up* but *out,* out of myself, out of that dark, dark place. And into myself.

I came out to a number of people in my life in quick succession—taking trips from Washington, D.C., to New York City and Chicago (on a bookstore clerk's salary) with the sole purpose of telling two friends face to face, catching another just under the wire; we met at a diner for breakfast on the same day she moved to a different city. In two separate cases, I was virtually taking my last preparatory breath before spilling the news when the other person made a negative remark about gay people, stopping me in my tracks until I got the nerve to try again a day or two later. And one strangely mild January night, from a chair opposite my 70-year-old parents, I spoke the words that, even as they were being said, I could feel reconfiguring the molecules around us, giving birth to an unfamiliar (to all of us), sharply outlined new version of me.

Coming out can't help but be a bold act of visibility, regardless of the audience, the circumstances, or any given individual's history. Not an act of visibility in the way that all too many straight people interpret it—i.e., "flaunting" one's sexuality—but in the sense of simply naming the unnamed. Where there's a name, there's a face.

After being, in effect, faceless to all but my closest friends and family well into my 20s, I'm still pleasantly shocked when I'm flagged down on the street by someone I've met only once before. And, in a kind of reversal of my former pride in my talent as the world's quietest sleeper, I'm inordinately cheered if someone comments on a habitual, physical trait of mine—the way I rub my beard, for instance, or how I tilt my head to the left when posing for a photo. *Someone retains a mental image of me beyond the present moment.*

When I look back on how I got to where I am, it feels as though I've survived an emergency, and I guess I have. Coming out of the closet as a full-fledged adult is like having given someone your life story to read and days later finding the most important page hidden behind the sofa cushion. Or like standing on a shore watching a boat on the water, but now it's moving *away* from you. There are a lot of people on deck who suddenly look brave and daring, prepared to risk scorn or disregard for the sake of an identity, a face, a destination. The recognition in their eyes is unmistakable. You reach toward their outstretched hands.

Many gay men and lesbians joke about "gaydar," that radar or sixth sense that supposedly enables us to pick one another out of a crowd. There's an element of self-congratulation to the joke, of course, the fun of possessing (or thinking we possess) insider knowledge. But gaydar can also be a tool of genuine connection and support, eliciting a friendly wink between the only two unattached men at a wedding reception, say, or a thumbs-up from a teenage girl at a Fourth of July picnic when she spots a pair of women changing a baby's diaper. Following your gaydar can be a way of saying to someone: I see you, even if no one else here does.

Coming out as an adult is like having given someone your life story to read and days later finding the most important page hidden behind the sofa cushion.

It was certainly gaydar that enabled my former writing pal Rita to ask her question of me all those years ago, before I was close to admitting the truth about myself. If I ran into her today, she'd probably be either angry or elated to see me—and she'd have good reason to feel either way. But I like to think she'd crack a smile. And this time she wouldn't even need to ask.

William O'Sullivan is managing editor of *Common Boundary.*

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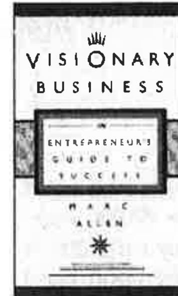

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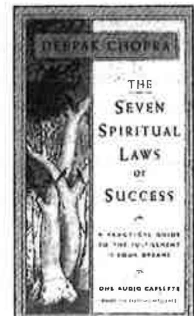

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