

A few weeks shy of thirteen, Alex Paulson was reading a magazine in his room when he discovered a men's underwear ad on the page after the celebrity news. The ad showed a shirtless man with a muscled chest, his arms crossed, biceps and shoulders big as grapefruits. The man was wearing blue underwear and had thighs loaded with muscle. Alex studied the page a long time, his heart beating quickly. He tore the ad from the magazine, making sure not to rip the picture. He went with it to the bookshelf beneath his window, and took out a thin, hard book titled, *War Stories: Real Life Accounts of Combat*. Alex had liked the book for the rugged faces of the soldiers inside and been reading it since third grade. He tucked the ad inside the back cover, meaning to keep it.

Alex thought of the man in the ad over the following days, in fact, had trouble not to. Alex could not read his social studies book in class without remembering him. He pictured meeting the fellow at school somehow, even marching into him in the hallway. He imagined a personality for the man to match his body. The guy had to be masculine and strong, he thought, because of his chest and arms. He had to be disciplined since he exercised until his abs showed. The fellow was probably confident too with his solid pose. In time, Alex liked his invented character as much as the man's picture.

Alex never told his parents and friends his feelings over the man in the ad. His parents had never talked about guys who liked guys, but he guessed, since their church was strict and traditional, they would not like it. His friends, for their part, made fun of anything gay. Rick Sanders was the biggest on it. Rick had a talent for labeling a homo any boy or man who did anything feminine, pointless, or polite. It went like this:

"Mr. Benson's wrist hung like a loose hinge all through math class. He's such a fag."

"What was that kid Tom acting like during gym? 'Oh, no, you guys shouldn't make *me* the forward in your game. I'm no good with the ball.' What a homo!"

"Did you see that guy in those tight pants? He must be gay as hell!"

Alex's friends were all smiles over Rick's remarks. Alex smiled too even after discovering the underwear ad. He was used to Rick's saying these things and thought that good enough reason to smirk. Alex had no trouble switching from his dreams about the bare-chested man to talking to Rick as a friend. When his mother announced from the stairs that Rick had come to visit, Alex slipped the ad (if he had it out) back into the book on his shelf, went downstairs, and greeted his buddy the way he always did. He never had feelings about Rick like the man from the magazine, since Rick was just a friend.

A month and a half after he discovered the magazine ad, Alex arrived at school and found a new kid by the hallway lockers with Rick and his other friends. The new kid was a tall boy with a good-looking, heart-shaped face. He had thin, dark eyes and white, pink, and red cheeks. Alex saw his lips were the pink color of his cheeks. The boy's hair that was pale brown swept to the right in a clean curve. His body was wide at the shoulders and his arms thick with muscle. When Alex went to the group, Rick introduced him to the new boy, whose name was Craig Levitsky.

"Craig's in our class," Rick said. "His family moved here the other day. He'll be on our Little League team." He beamed at Craig. "You play football too, don't you?"

Craig nodded his head.

"You're built for it. You must play sports pretty good."

"Maybe." Craig smiled a little. His voice had a deeper tone than the other boys'.

Alex felt very soon that he liked Craig. The guy seemed friendly for sure. And then he sounded more like a man than any other boy in school. His body was hard, strong, and neat. His face was better than most that Alex knew. In fact, Alex had to say it was handsome, which seemed more than if it just looked like an adult's. As his friends spoke,

Alex studied Craig while being careful not to show what he felt. When he had to face someone else in the group as people talked, Alex kept thinking of Craig beside him. When Craig said something, Alex looked toward him eagerly. He was glad to see Craig's bright smile and dark eyes glint at a joke.

By a wonderful stroke of luck, Alex's teacher, Mr. Sampson, seated Craig at a desk in the row before him in class. Since no one else sat near them, Alex could observe his new classmate without any fear of being caught. Alex came to see that Craig was a quiet, all around modest guy. Craig listened to the teacher and never tried to be loud and distracting like the other boys. He spoke with few of the other kids but always had a word for the friends who passed by his desk. "Hard game yesterday," he said when Rick passed, referring to their baseball event of the past day. In group work, Craig treated the well-liked and the unpopular much the same, that is kindly, and never seemed eager to show off. Alex admired Craig for it. If only the others in class were like him, he thought.

Craig did many neat things while seated at his desk during class as Alex discovered. Alex's favorite was the way that Craig shuffled as Mr. Sampson droned on at the blackboard. The boy moved his arm back or forward after leaning it a long time against his desk. He shifted his legs beneath the desk, sometimes letting the left lean into the aisle, then slid in the seat. It seemed more mature, even out of place for middle school; Alex, from the safety of the back of the room, thought only well of it. Craig had other interesting moves, too. When he lifted a book to put it into the tray beside his seat, his arms tightened thickly. Bowing his head over the side tray on his left, he showed a quiet, serene face.

In the spring, Alex got to be around Craig more often since the two played on the same Little League team. Alex was paired with him in catching and hitting practice many times. He found he enjoyed how Craig threw him the ball. The fellow clutched it, his arm tense, and trained a eagle eye on him. He then curled his arm in a strong arc and sent the ball flying. Alex raised his glove, his heart pounding, and caught the throw; he enjoyed feeling the impact of the ball from Craig. Hitting was good for Alex, too. He felt a kind of half-pleasure as Craig, tall on the pitcher's mound, studied him, leaned back with his broad right shoulder, and raised his leg in a tight crook. The boy barreled forward then, his chest bowing, and hurled the ball. Alex followed its geometric curve, finding it attractive as Craig himself. He became that caught up with Craig and his pitch that he hit the ball less than he should have. He liked to think afterward that he did it to make Craig look a better pitcher.

Craig displaced the man from the ad in Alex's imagination. At home by himself in his room, Alex pictured how Craig would look taking off his shirt. Craig entered his dreams, showing to the full the strength and confidence that Alex loved. Alex never let on to Craig, Rick, or his other friends about these dreams. He continued to talk with them about baseball, TV, and video games when they clustered by the hallway lockers. All the while, Rick accused half of people whom he did not know of being gay. Craig laughed at the accusations like everyone else and his dark eyes shone. Craig and Rick were proving to be good friends and they talked together often. But there were times when Craig came to Alex by the edge of the lockers to talk alone together. Alex crushed down his joy over it, half frightened, and tried only to seem friendly to the tall, athletic boy. Craig spoke with him like the modest, respectable guy Alex had seen in class. If he had a fault, it was for sometimes making fun of people as Rick did.

"What was that kid Tom doing in those tight pants the other day?" he said right to Alex's face. "He looked so fucking gay!"

Alex smiled, breaking into a laugh. He did not care if Craig made fun of people for seeming gay. Craig had looked him in the face with his dark eyes and let his pink lips come close. Alex loved him.

Alex was glad when Rick Sanders invited him to his year-end party. The party seemed cause for excitement because Rick's father was letting him hold the event exactly as he liked, with music on the stereo and tons of chips and soda for everyone. The boy's mother, who was away, would not be there to lay down the rules. Best of all, Craig Levitsky had said he would be there.

"I'm having a lot of good guys from class come," Rick told Alex. "Besides Craig, Ted, John T., Peter. There'll be a bunch of fun girls, too." Alex was not surprised about the girls. Rick had talked lately about several, especially those he wished would like him.

Alex arrived eager at the party on the slated Saturday. A good sixteen or eighteen kids from the seventh grade had come, crowding the living room and overflowing into the den. Alex knew Mr. Sanders, Rick's father, an overweight man in a striped T-shirt who kept to a corner of the den. The man, supposedly watching over them, did not trouble Rick over what he did here, or, in fact, much elsewhere. When Alex had spoken with him, the man spouted remarks on the lines that Rick made at school about girls and gays. "Fags only can fight over another guy's ass," the gentleman had informed him once.

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As the party got in gear, the stereo played low and kids meandered in no order through the downstairs of the house. Alex made his way through the group of his early teen classmates. He spoke with his friend David Hosner, a boy from his Little League team, about their recent game against Derby. Soon after this, he went to Ted Jameson and brought up the new mystery crime series they were watching on TV. Feeling he had some stride, he thought to talk next to Craig. When he went to, however, he spotted Rick and John talking face to face with him in the den, their eyes bright and near laughter. A talk with Craig when the other boys meant to speak to him would not be as good, Alex thought, as when the two of them spoke apart beside their lockers. He knew Rick and John were probably just sharing dirty stories, the wrong remarks on their classmates, but it did not matter: he went to talk with someone else.

As the party continued, Alex saw John T. and Stacey R., a girl from Ms. Iver's class, leave the living room and go upstairs. Rick's father made no move to stop the pair if he saw them. From where he stood by the stairs, Alex heard and spied the boy and girl in the upstairs hallway, touching each other's arms. After ten minutes, they returned to the party smiling, pleased for some reason he did not know. Next Rick Sanders and Abbie A. left for the dining room; another couple went upstairs. Alex recognized at last that they were acting out the new party fad called Two Go Alone. The fad required a boy take a girl aside from the party, after making sure they were seen leaving; alone, the two were to talk a little, hold hands, and kiss; at the end of it, they returned and acted like they were very happy over what they had done so everyone else noticed. Alex knew people would go for the fad at Rick's, but he had thought to stand it out seeing he was not into girls. However, he did not feel as good about it when he watched the fourth and fifth pair from the party leave and return to the room. The more couples went, the stranger he thought he seemed for not doing the same. By the sixth couple, Alex edged from the main group of partiers to a corner of the living room. Mark Mancini, a short, shy boy who kept to the sidelines in gym, quietly was observing the people of the living room from there.

"So, Mark, how's it going?"

Mark smiled dumbly.

"What do you think about that novel we were reading for class?" Alex asked. "I really got into the first chapter."

Mark shrugged and smiled again. Alex thought they might keep going like this until the people at the party forgot about them.

As he carried the conversation one-sidedly, Alex saw Craig in the back of the living room with Zoe Baird. Zoe was a thin, cute, and polite girl with long brown hair who sat in the front row of their class. Alex had hoped Craig would not leave with a girl as the others; he had felt he was Craig's after all: he believed, on some level, that would mean Craig would not go for anyone else. However, Craig, after talking and passing a few smiles with Zoe, led her to the dining room. Alex's heart sank. Could Craig really like Zoe?, he thought as he forced himself to talk on with Mark. He was making a slow-go at an interesting remark about school when Rick came and drew him aside.

"Hey, why haven't you taken a girl from the room yet?" he asked.

"I was talking to Mark."

"Mark isn't much to talk to."

"He's okay."

"He's only good to kid. So why not leave with some girl..."

"I don't know."

Rick leaned forward and thumbed toward a corner of the room. "Why not try with Cathy Gorman?" Cathy, a blonde, nicely figured girl with green eyes, was standing with her friend Jill Alvarez by the food and drink table. Alex had heard her called good-looking several times. "No guy has taken her from the room yet."

Alex guessed what Rick might think if he said no again. He was not ready to be called gay tonight, right as it would be. Embarrassment from the other boys, his friends from Little League, was certain to follow. He imagined Rick going so far as to point him out to the party guests and crying, *Hey there, everyone, Alex won't leave with a girl! Alex is a homo!*

"Alright," Alex told Rick, trying to sound he wanted it, "I will." Without another word, he stalked to Cathy and Jill by the drink table. He felt weird and peculiar as soon as the two faced him. He had never actually talked to a girl seriously in class or outside it until now.

"Hello there, Cathy," he forced out.

"Hello, Alex."

Jill passed Cathy a quick, intelligent look; without saying a word, she slipped away to the kitchen.

"It's nice to see you here," Cathy went on, smiling at Alex.

Alex held silent but stretched his lips into a half smile.

"So are you enjoying the party?" she asked.

"Sure, how about you?"

"I am, yes."

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"You doing well in school?"

"Sure. Are you?"

"I'm doing alright."

The two let go a long pause, studying the floor awkwardly before Cathy motioned to the food table beside them. "The food here is pretty good."

"Yes." They examined the sandwich platters, the chip bowl, the plastic liters of Coke and Pepsi. With a quick move, Cathy reached beside the cracker plate near the back and picked up something like a tall cone.

"Hey, did you see this hat?" The cone was a red party hat sprinkled with yellow stars. "I found it lying under the couch while talking to Jill."

Alex took it in his hand. "I bet it was for another party and they forgot about it."

"Sure looks neat with those stars. Why don't you try it on? For fun."

Alex thought it strange he should, but remembered he was supposed to get her into a good mood to leave the room. "Okay." He put on the hat, tucking its strap under his chin, and immediately felt as if the red cone stood a mile high on his head.

Cathy chuckled. "You look cute in that. Just don't walk around with it or everyone will think you're silly." When Alex took off the hat, Cathy gave him an easy smile and he saw he had her interest as he'd planned. But he felt embarrassed all the same, much as if the ridiculous hat had stayed on his head.

The two made more friendly chitchat a minute when Cathy said, "Do you think it's crowded in here? We could go somewhere quieter to talk. Outside on the deck there's nobody."

Alex thought it strange they should when everyone else had kept inside. But he saw she meant to for the fad; he thought he could follow her out because of that. "I'd be okay with the deck."

Alex and Cathy passed into the kitchen, where Jill and another girl by the fridge saw them go out the sliding doors. We've been spotted, Alex thought, more nervous than glad. Outside, the small night-light broke the dark and made the deck shady but not well-lit. The two crossed to the deck's end, the warm June air wrapping around them. Cathy leaned her arms comfortably on the end rail. "Very nice night," she said as she faced the lawn. The tall maples near the deck rippled with dark leaves, the boughs in thick clusters; it made Alex think the trees larger than he had known them in the day. Beyond the maples, the yard stretched flat, dark, and long, almost forever it seemed. The thought made Alex uneasy but he hid any sign of it. "I like it out here," he said and leaned on the rail beside Cathy.

"Do you like the sound of the crickets in the dark?" he asked to say something.

"I do."

The two held quiet. Cathy moved toward him and put her hand on his. "You like me, don't you, Alex?"

"Yes." He made himself say the word even as he disliked finding Cathy's hand on his.

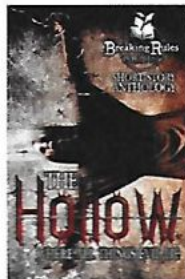
"Well then, would you kiss me?"

Alex struggled. This was the point, wasn't it?, he thought. He turned and saw the lids of Cathy's eyes lowered as she expected his kiss. Her pink lips half opened. "Alright," he said. Alex leaned forward and gave Cathy a fleshy, loose, spiritless kiss. A sad feeling dawned in his heart as he realized that doing this was what Rick had expected from him. The two dallied by the dark edge of the lawn for a few minutes, hands in one another's, before he led her back inside.

Once Alex was alone again in the living room, Rick came and asked how it had gone. "Was it any good?"

"Sure," Alex said, pretending. He asked himself then, What if Rick expects anything more between me and Cathy? Would he have to make as if he liked her, talk with her, carry her books, eat lunch together and not be with the guys he liked? The idea upset him. He had not lost the feeling he had for Craig. Cathy was not Craig and Alex did not know how she might ever become him.

"You two kiss?" Rick asked breaking into Alex's worried reflection. Alex walked without answering for the corner where Mark stood quietly. However, he knew Rick was following, hoping to hear him answer, "Yes."



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