

To my beloved Hedy Lamarr,

and Judge Petrine

Jim Barry

John Gaffney

Lynette Labinger

Chuck Noice

John Ward

*and Sasha Alyson, without whom I would never have had
the opportunity to write this book.*

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The names of some students and other characters in this
story have been changed.

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end street at the top of a hill in North Cumberland, with a beautiful view of the neighboring town of Lincoln.

My father worked as an independent ships' pilot out of the port of Providence. His seagoing career made it impossible for him to be present all the time during my childhood. There were no nine-to-five hours for Dad. He could be called out at five o'clock in the morning and spend days piloting a single ship from the port of Providence to New York or New London. But he didn't let his unconventional schedule infringe on our relationship. We spent much time together, simply because he wanted to make that time for me.

My mother never worked outside the home after she married. She spent most of her time taking care of me and my sister, Cheryl. Mom did a very good job, and I developed a deep love for my mother and for my father.

Cheryl was born eight years before me. Because of our great age difference, my sister and I were not particularly close during childhood. In my eyes she was another adult, almost a third parent, and I looked up to her. Yet my parents reprimanded her as they did me, so I knew she was really closer to my status level.

One day when I was about six, while watching a *Batman* episode with Cheryl, I casually commented on the anatomical proportions of Batman. I knew no reason to stifle my aroused sexual feelings, so I just mentioned that I liked what I saw. Cheryl freaked out. It was my first lesson that talking about this subject made people upset.

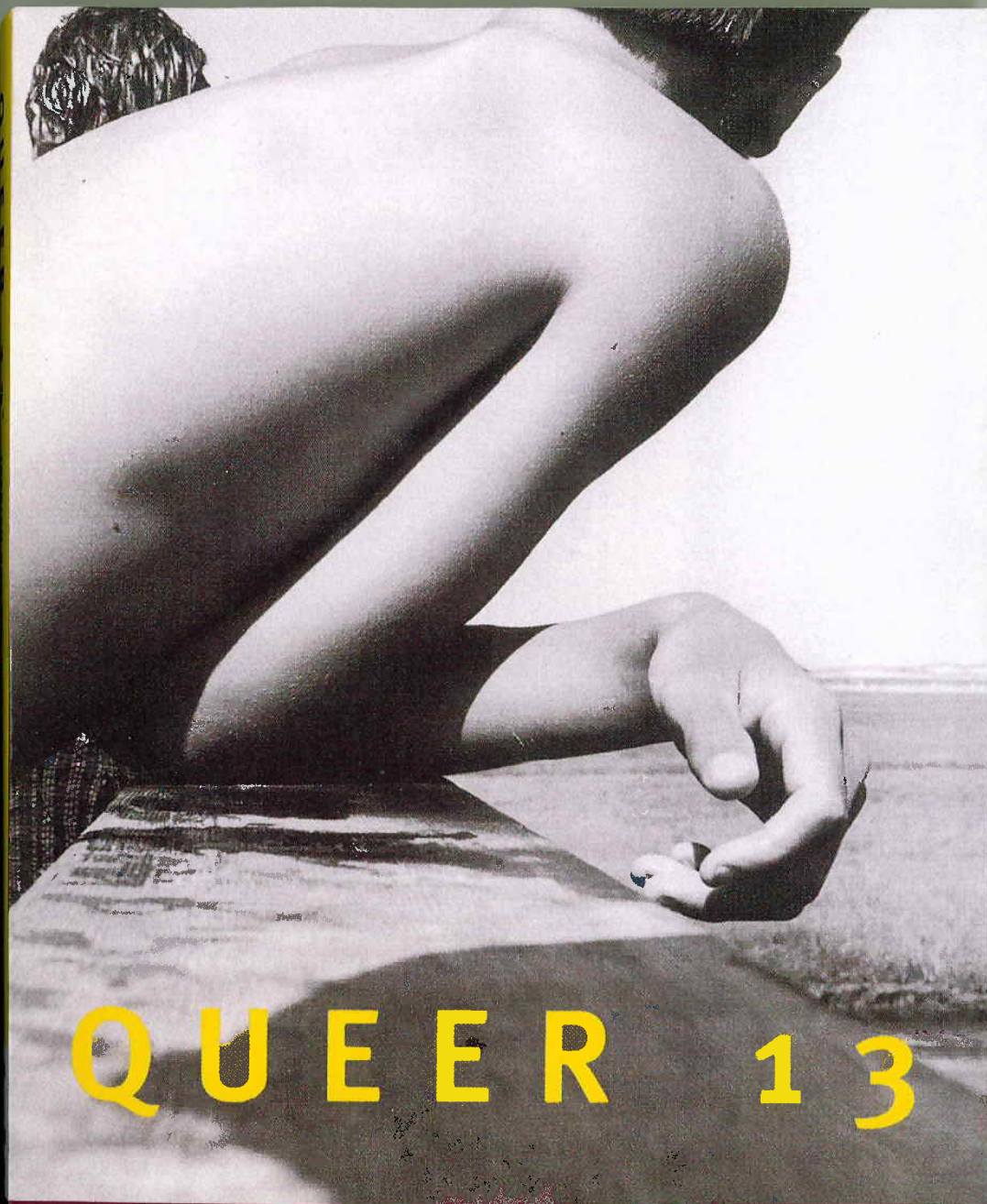
This was the first time I had spoken of my sexual thoughts, although I had been having those thoughts for as long as I could remember. Already I was undressing my G.I. Joe dolls, and I had messed around with some of my male playmates, but it never crossed my mind to mention my feelings to anyone. After the *Batman* inci-

dent, I never expressed my sexual observations to my sister again. But beyond that, this incident had no major effect on me. I still had no idea that my sexuality was considered "wrong."

My sexual exploits with my neighborhood playmates continued. I lived a busy homosexual childhood, somehow managing to avoid venereal disease through all my toddler years. By first grade I was sexually active with many friends. In fact, a small group of us regularly met in the grammar school lavatory to perform fellatio on one another. A typical week's schedule would be Aaron and Michael on Monday during lunch; Michael and Johnny on Tuesday after school; Fred and Timmy at noon Wednesday; Aaron and Timmy after school on Thursday. None of us ever got caught, but we never worried about it anyway. We all understood that what we were doing was not to be discussed freely with adults, but we viewed it as a fun sort of confidential activity. None of us had any guilty feelings about it; we figured everyone did it. Why shouldn't they?

One friend I was very close to was Billy Marlen. Billy was a year behind me in school, yet we got along well together. In our friendship, a special camaraderie existed that was rare in my other friendships. There was a brotherhood that does not often occur even between brothers. We shared our toys and spent many summer days building sandcastles on the beach. On rainy days I'd walk down to Billy's house, where we spent the day reading books and building racetracks and playing sex therapist in his basement. We were human beings who knew no social inhibitions and were willing to explore our sexuality to its fullest.

We found vestibules around his house and mine where we could hide on rainy days while our mothers prepared



QUEER 13

lesbian and gay writers recall seventh grade

EDITED BY CLIFFORD CHASE

WITH A FOREWORD BY DALE PECK

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Three from Thirteen

Robert Glück

1. The Greeks Came First

Jacking off into the toilet, into the slit between pushed-together beds, into paper-towel tubes (*Ugh*, my little sister shouts, *what's this stuff?*), in the shower, while standing in the crotch of a tree, while standing on my head. What belongs to me except the next orgasm? Even shame is not mine. I can't afford to fantasize or to connect mind and body. Strip poker with Mike Cogan: Since we're naked, we might as well masturbate. *Don't look*, he keeps whining. His orgasm is like him, a pipsqueak.

Lessons at the Art Shack, an artist-supply store in Sherman Oaks, taught by Dagmar, the local Flemish master's vivacious daughter. I paint a courtier playing a lute as though I were already safely dead and great. Rembrandt shadows surround and define the musician; he wears tights and sort of floats above a relentless one-point-perspective checkered floor. My smock is too short to hide my random boner, but Dagmar is European about it. Her father, the old master, strolls among us; he takes my brush and palette and lays a few bright swatches on my canvas, alarming until I gain distance by squinting and see that my mud puddle has been given a shape.

an idea from books: Viewing my neighborhood from above will give me perspective, as though looking down through the years. It's still dark when I reach the top, and I'm afraid of the tree—what if a snake or rat or an insect lives in it? The air is too weak to carry a scent. For some reason the ground is lit, a sparse layer of dry weeds and grasses.

I stand above my tract. In the clear darkness, the sky seems manageable. Below, streetlights illuminate ranch-style houses, mirror images that are raucously artificial. I assume the humans in these identical dwellings are robbed of dignity, that dignity means living beautifully. Under these roofs, families are sunk in mute desolation and each family member labors under the curse of unrelenting failure. Weakened by sleep, they invent a useless hodgepodge of dreams. I'm the only one awake, too excited below the sky and above the earth. Morning, yet to begin, is already old and jangled from my weariness.

Fatigue is disheveled isolation. I don't know how to be part of the world. When darkness disappears and light has not yet come, pale gray turns to mist white. A bird makes frail peeps. If I had the knowledge, I'd recognize that rare bird and know it never flew through Woodland Hills before. It's an exhausted thought because what would I know if I knew that? In Will and Ariel Durant's history, I read that the Greeks came first, then the Romans. That's consoling somehow. Is the march of civilization heading my way? Will I be allowed to join the parade? Its splendor seems undermined by fatigue and wasted effort.

I want someone to love me. I already love whoever it is. Somehow the first light makes my grief explicit—*so much endlessness stored up and in store*. The sunless light casts no shadows, yet it reveals my dense flesh to itself and shrinks my emotions by making them seem organized. My face, struck by the light, feels caked and rigid. I sit down on the hard ground and cry a little. I fish my aged cock out of my jeans as though I can *mark* the scene with pleasure so later I can find it and reread it for understanding. Once imagined, it is my responsibility to jack off in front of it all. The air feels funny on my cock, which usually squirms like a larva in the darkness; it's more sensitive than I am to the prickle of a slight breeze. There is nothing to arouse me except myself. My tract looks so boring, its emptiness so lacks potential, that I can almost believe in reality, since here is appearance spreading out at my

feet. It only takes a minute. My crotch rings like an alarm clock, some pump mechanism kicks in, and after short flights my sperm falls on the gray dirt. I feel edgy and shallow, emptied out by the day ahead, and twinges of residual pleasure make me twitch.

The white is replaced by pastels. I have not prevented the sunrise—a red smudge on the horizon—or the flat mineral-blue.

2. Do Be. Don't Be.

My Hollywood cousin says watch out for queers in theater toilets; if they bother me, I should punch them in the shoulder and they'll go away. I'm impressed by my cousin's sophistication. I'm a country mouse and he is letting me feel the difference between Hollywood savoir faire and the barbarism of the West Valley. And sure enough, the next time I go to the movies in Hollywood, a queer speaks to me. I don't remember the movie; I do remember the bathroom but so what? It was empty even though we were in it. The little man in a checked sports jacket stands too close to me at the urinal. Is he subnormal? Doesn't he understand social distance? He has an accent—British? Cockney? Maybe he's wearing a bowler? "Excuse me?"

"Xxxx'x x xxxx xxxx xxx xxxx xxxxx."

"What?"

"That's a nice *cock* you have there." He's offering his, a prim pink boutonniere; I can see why he likes mine better. A nice cock? Is it separate from my body, which is not nice? Separate, like my beautiful eyes? He's will-less as a dust bunny, and when I tap him on the shoulder, he drifts away.

Later, in a smelly gas-station toilet, I realize the wad of toilet paper left on top of the dispenser is filled with someone's sperm. Some pervert left it there, I tell myself wonderingly. To be found, I add. And recognized. As what? An offering, an assertion? I don't forget to be grossed out. I smell it—sure enough, sperm. Consciousness the predicament, orgasm the escape. I look around for the masturbator as though I'm dreaming, as though I can hear his *I'm coming* noises. Obviously no one else could fit inside the tiny stinking cinder-block cell. I try to remember the face of a man slouching outside the door, and the face of a man who gave me the key.

At the start of every school year I had to get a set of passport-sized photos taken. These were used for bus passes, library cards, report cards, health reports, and other documents. I would comb my hair, put on my school uniform, and set off to the Cathay studio, which was run by four old men who always seemed to be in their pajama trousers and white undershirts. The equipment in the studio was as old as the proprietors. The photographer would put me on the stool and make me hold up a stick on which the serial numbers were composed out of wood chips, then he would putter around to adjust the golden umbrellas that were strategically placed to reflect light. The old, old camera was huge, on a trolley and covered with a black cloth—the kind you see in movies of the thirties. The old man would crawl under the cloth and try to adjust his equipment. Usually I was made to sit at a slight tilt to match the tilt in the camera. Then, with a final admonition to hold still, there was a massive supernova and the pictures for the year were taken.

All this has given me a record of myself growing older in bits, year by year in the same pose, same frame, and a similar white shirt, not unlike the evolutionary table found in biology textbooks. Looking at the photos of myself at thirteen, I am amazed at how very young I look. Baby fat, chubby cheeks, doleful eyes, crooked teeth—braces would come the next year. Sure, puberty had hit, my voice had changed, and I was finally granted divine reason to quit the Sunday school junior choir. Small scraps of hair had started to peek out of my pubic region and under my arms. But in the photo I look ten. The only giveaway is the school uniform—I'm wearing a school badge instead of a patch.

I was in Secondary One (seventh grade). It was to signify a Great Change in my life. "You will no longer be spoon-fed! You are no longer children, you are all young adults and you will conduct yourselves as such!" boomed principal Ernest Lau over the P.A. of the auditorium on Orientation Day. Secondary school was difficult: a new series of subjects, a new environment, new expectations. I did not feel any older or more mature even though I was constantly told I was.

One day, on the bus to shop class, this ugly fuck of a man sat behind me and put his foot in the crack of my seat. He was skinny, with a patchy, pencil-thin mustache that besotted his oily face. I ignored him for most of the trip. I did notice that he changed buses when I did, but this time he sat beside me. He tried a little small talk, but then he

suddenly and very nervously put his hand on my crotch. It never occurred to me to tell him not to. I'm not sure if I agreed to it or not, but he managed to get me to follow him to a nearby rest room at another secondary school "to play." In the bathroom stall, lit by two scant rows of fluorescent lights, half of them burnt-out or flickering, he tried to kiss me, but I was too nauseated to do that. He sucked my nipples and played with my cock. I had no idea what to do. He then tried to get me to suck his. Somehow I knew this was expected of me, but I just could not put his ugly, foul-smelling penis into my mouth. When he forced it in I gagged so hard I started vomiting. Undaunted, he tried to put his cock in my ass. Thankfully, he came prematurely. He pulled up his trousers and left me in the toilet stall confused, frightened, crying, and praying to God for forgiveness of my horrible sin. I spent a good deal of time locked in the stall, trying to clean up, trying to wipe the smell of that act off with wet toilet paper, but I was doused in the stench of that man and what he had done.

This incident should have soured me on men, but it only made me more confused and needful. One day later, something accidental happened that would change my life. I discovered that at a urinal I could actually see someone else's penis. I was ecstatic and fearful, but I wanted more. One day, at a local shopping mall, as I was trying to sneak a peek at penises in the rest rooms, a man at the urinal actually turned to me and started playing with himself. He flashed me a gold-toothed smirk and motioned for me to come over. Shocked, I zippered up and ran out, but the seeds had been laid. The whole world of rest-room sex had opened itself up to me.

Soon I was spending a great deal of time hanging out in shopping malls and cruising the rest rooms for sexual encounters. My rest-room exploits started to be a great burden on my mind. The better part of the year was spent making deals with God, asking for a sign, then ignoring and rationalizing everything I perceived to be a sign, praying for forgiveness, and being obsessed with raging hormones and a seemingly endless supply of dicks. I believed that it was all part of a test by God to see if I was a sinner. I was.

I had known before that something was up, and that I was attracted to men, but this toilet thing was a whole new realm of sin and Satan, a

new level that I had never before imagined. The following years were spent praying for forgiveness and trying to purge my homosexuality through prayer and Bible study. While my classmates wondered what sex was like, content to masturbate over pinups, I was out there having my cock sucked and my ass fucked. These were grown men I was tricking with. Some were nice, grateful for a young boy to have their way with. Some were harsh and mean. There were a few nasty encounters, brutal and painful experiences, near-rapes, but through it all, I never thought that I had the ability to say no.

I was scared about what I was doing, scared of God's judgment and of being caught in all those rest rooms and parks, but I really did enjoy those sexual encounters. That feeling of doing it to them and them doing the same for me was just too damn good.

This is what I knew of homosexuality: That it was a sin. That gay men wanted to have their penises cut off. That they all wanted sex-change operations. That the transvestites on Bugis Street and Rochor Canal were bad people. That poor transvestites who could not afford the sex change and hormones had crumpled-up newspapers for tits and hung out in dark parking lots at night whoring. That you had to be effeminate. That it was to be made fun of. That the boys in the Drama Club were. That they could never have children. That in a gay couple, one would play the woman and the other the man. That it meant a life of suffering, loneliness, fear, secrecy, shame.

This was the year I realized I was helpless, different, wholly alone and defenseless. This was the beginning of my worthlessness. It was always pointed out to me that I wasn't good enough and that there was always someone somewhere doing better, and that no matter what I did, I could still have done better.

The adults in my life held my brother up as an example for me to emulate. He excelled in mathematics and the sciences and had no problems with his second language, even taking on a third. He got good grades and was always in the top classes. He competed in chess tour-

to make the image real, eliminating anything that threatened it. So just before my twelfth birthday, I took that photograph of my brother Charles, my cousin Charles, and me standing in front of the Big Tree in Grandmom's backyard and ripped it to shreds. For years I had looked at it, a bit of my self-esteem fading each time. Later I actually felt the jab to my stomach each time Mom hauled down the album. One day I taped a piece of carpet lint over my hands in the picture. The next time Mom showed off "her boys," she reprimanded me for defacing the photo. She peeled off the tape, making everyone even more conscious of the incriminating pose I had tried to conceal. The next time she looked the picture was gone. I destroyed it and cursed myself for not doing it earlier. She never mentioned it again. Maybe she forgot it, or was she as relieved as I was?

I could destroy evidence and conceal gestures, but I couldn't change what I felt. Despite my best efforts, someday the artifice of "normality" had to fall away. It did, early one Sunday afternoon when I was twelve. My cousin was sixteen.

I put on my blue velour robe and padded down the rickety stairs. My cousin was watching an old black-and-white movie on our black-and-white TV set. He wore only his Ewing High School J.V. basketball shorts, black with waxy yellow lettering. I sat next to him on the couch, silent. He would occasionally sneak glances at me. The glances grew longer and longer.

I noticed his slightly parted thick lips. Uncomfortable, I stood up and went to the front door. I pretended to look out the window up Field Avenue. The street was empty.

My cousin got up from the couch and stood behind me. He lightly brushed the soft fabric of my robe. "Let's get gay," he fawned in a mock faggy tone. "Let's get gay." He rubbed his huge hands over the thin fabric that separated them from my behind. He pulled up the robe.

Exposed and naked, my erection to the wind, I wanted to melt into his arms, to be held by him, to desperately answer the questions my soul had been avoiding, but I also wanted to shield my eyes from what was happening.

We went back to the couch, and I felt someone's hands on my genitals for the first time. They were boiling—his hands and my genitals. I sat back and closed my eyes.

My ecstasy from his touch. My relief from loneliness. Momentarily overcoming fear and shame. Then, the fall. Each of the half-dozen times we did it over the next four years it would be that way. While we were in the act, it was good. His heavy brown body lying against mine, providing the warmth I never thought I would have. He was tender and sweet. But after I came, shame tumbled on top of me, the pleasure buried, suffocated. The disgraceful white goo the physical proof of my spiritual delinquency.

Only once did my cousin and I mention our misdeeds outside the sacred and profane boundaries of our time together on Sunday afternoons when everyone else was out of the house or, later, when I came home from boarding school. We were fighting over the TV or something equally important. He wanted to watch football. I wanted to watch *Bewitched*. I said, close to him, my lips tight, "I'm gonna tell my mother what we do."

"Nobody makes you do anything," he snarled.

I felt like a baby for whining that I would tattletale. But, for me, the fact that I liked it—and I didn't really want it to stop—or I wanted it to continue at least as much as I wanted it to stop—sealed my damnation. I was going to hell. From then on I multiplied the shame of being gay by the shame of incest. They became one. And they both grew bigger, badder, blacker. It would take another child's lifetime, three thousand miles, an ocean, and the refuge of Europe for me to pick up where I left off.

"What?"

"I mean . . . I'm still waiting."

Donnie looked at me surprised. "You mean you haven't got any pubes?"

"No, I mean, well, kind of. I mean I don't have very many." I picked up the *Playboy* again and flipped through it, not really looking at anything.

"How old are you, twelve? I had pubes when I was twelve," Donnie said in disbelief.

"I'm thirteen and I do have some pubes," I said. "Just not a lot."

Donnie moved toward me. "Let's see. I bet you've got more than you think." I started to unzip my fly to show him when his mom yelled again for us to turn the music down before she came down and did it herself. I nervously zipped my jeans back up.

Donnie said, "It's weird. I'm only two years older than you, but look at mine." He sat on the edge of his bed and slid his jeans down to his knees. He pulled on his pubes and showed me how thick his hair was. He wasn't self-conscious at all. It felt like he was showing me a science project or something. He let me examine his dick and pubes close up. I had never seen that much pubic hair that close before. I only had a few pubic hairs, but I kept a vigilant watch over them. I counted them and watched them grow. I knew whenever a new one appeared. Donnie's pubes looked so good, so exciting to me. Blood started rushing around me. I felt warm. I felt happy and hopeful at the thought that someday soon I would have that much, too. Donnie was proud of himself. That close, his pubic hair looked like a dense forest. There was a dark moist smell. Kind of familiar, but different from my own. More like a man smell than a boy smell. I was in awe not only of his pubes but because I wanted to have a dick the size of his, with all that hair. Compared to Donnie's mature dick with that thick bush at its base, mine was a naked pencil. I was surprised that his dick was big. He was kind of overweight, just a big kid really. I told him I thought fat guys had small dicks. He didn't get upset that I called him fat. He said matter-of-factly, "Some of 'em do."

He spread the *Playboy* open on the bed and showed me how he jacked off. I sat next to him and watched as he spit in his hand and

rubbed it on the head of his dick. Then he wrapped his hand around his dick and moved it quickly up and down. He didn't get very hard. It was just a demonstration. I was too shy to tell him how I did it. When I masturbated I had to be quiet so I wouldn't wake up my brothers. I lay on my stomach and humped the mattress until I came. My sheets always had yellow crusty stains on them, but my mother never mentioned it even though she was the one who washed them.

I wanted to watch Donnie some more, but he lost interest. He was more excited about the new Beatles record. He zipped up his jeans, scooted off the bed back to the floor, and propped himself against the bed. He picked up the album jacket and started reading the lyrics along with the music. I sat on the bed reading over his shoulder for a little while, then my eyes started wandering around the room. I looked up at his window and saw a little gray frog about an inch long jumping up over and over trying to get out of the window well. The music was soothing in a weird way. I liked it, but if I listened to it too closely, it made me a little uneasy. Donnie kept saying, "Wow!"

"Hey, Joe, I've got something else you might be interested in," Donnie said as he put the *Playboy* back in his dresser drawer. "Can you keep a secret?" He pulled a little brown pill bottle out of the back of the drawer. He held it close to me and asked if I knew what it was. He shook the bottle a little bit in front of me. I reached out and held his hand still so I could get a closer look. It looked like what I'd imagined marijuana to look like, only I never thought of it being kept in a pill bottle.

"What?" I asked.

He leaned over close to me and whispered reverently, "It's pot!" I thought he was bullshitting me. He took the white cap off the bottle. It couldn't be pot, it looked just like he'd picked off the top of some weeds and crunched them into the bottle. He held it under my nose and told me to take a whiff. I didn't recognize the sweet odor. He sat down on the floor and opened up the double album, and then sprinkled some out on the inside. "Come here," he said. "I'll show you how to roll." I sat down on the floor next to him. I was nervous. What if his mom decided to check in on him? At my house someone was always walking in and out of my room. There was never a long time alone.

