

Commuters: Austin to Dallas

My graduation from the University of Houston was a family event: Mother, Daddy, Judy, and Paul all came down to attend the outdoor ceremonies. Mother and Daddy stayed with me in my furnished room; Carol and Bob brought Donna by. For me, the ceremony would have been dispensable (I certainly didn't care whether Jerry attended or not), but it meant a lot to my parents, and I am especially glad now that they were there. They had done everything they were able to do to help me through college, from moving me and my things back and forth to mailing me food boxes (oatmeal cookies and canned hams) and the occasional unexpected money order.

That summer I worked as a "destruction clerk" for another insurance company, weeding files of old credit reports and medical records that, by law, the *company* was no longer required to keep. The only entertaining part of the job was the odd narrative: I'd become intimately involved in a policyholder's life, for a brief period, reading the thicker files like a plot summary but often unable to learn the outcome.

My year in graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin was by necessity and choice devoted almost entirely to study. I lived in a graduate dorm, in a two-room suite with a bathroom in the middle, each room accommodating three young men who were pretty much there only to sleep. When we weren't attending classes, we were studying in our assigned cubicles, either in the tower library or in our own departments (English, drama, philosophy, physics, astronomy, and chemistry—an interesting assortment). Most of us subscribed to a meal plan offered by a nearby cooperative house, so our getting to know one another, to the extent that we did, was accomplished over dinner. There were about ten other graduate students in our dorm (actually the second floor of what I think used to be a motel).

The operators of the dorm made a community room available to us, and we would gather there on some Saturday nights for a little

socializing. The philosophy major had already begun dating one of the women in the dorm, so they were usually off on their own.

Most of the rest of us, though, would gather to listen to music, drink wine or beer, and share experiences at the university.

On one of these occasions, the astronomy major, Jos, a very good-looking fellow, told the group about an upsetting encounter he had had while sunbathing on campus. He was lying, shirtless, in a common area near the student union building, and another young man approached him and made some suggestive comment—an overture, perhaps. Jos was angry, he told the group, because there seemed to be so many queers on campus that a person couldn't even take his shirt off to get a little sun without being propositioned.

I might have said something had the other gay member of the dorm, the drama major, been with us that night. As it was, I coldly felt outnumbered, and I was years away from being able to meet prejudice head-on. So, without a word, I quickly finished my beer, discarded the can, and returned to my room.

Jos was there immediately, hoping he hadn't offended, asking me to come back to the party. I told him that I had to do a little reading, then I was going to bed. I climbed up into my bunk, turned on the reading lamp, and opened a book. He left.

After having successfully avoided mainstream English and American literary classics for most of my undergraduate years, I was advised to read a bit more of the canon for my English major.

I enjoyed surveying the American Transcendentalists in a course that went well beyond the scope of Mrs. Worsham's College Outline Series volume. I also read Milton, Dickens, Trollope, and Hardy, often sitting against a sunny wall of the English building—and not at all afraid to take my shirt off.

My Conrad seminar met at the professor's house, and I made friends with the lady who usually gave me a ride there. Anne Freeman was working on her PhD. She was a careful, sensitive reader who frequently argued her points with the forcefulness of her Irish

passion, often leavened by her Irish wit. She seemed a little older than the rest of us, perhaps because she had to walk with a cane due to childhood polio.

It was the Greek minor that occupied most of my time, however. I was lucky enough to have a sequence of independent study courses offered by the classics department, and Dr. Thomas Gould was my supervising teacher. He was just finishing up his translation of *Oedipus the King* for Prentice-Hall, and he suggested that I read the play with him and, later, that I proofread and check his extensive commentary. This was an exciting project to work on, and I was flattered to have been asked and very eager to please.

We met twice a week in his office at lunchtime (he always brought sandwiches, and sometimes we had wine). I had dinner with him once in his apartment overlooking the lake. As would William Arrowsmith and D.S. Carne-Ross (whom I had for a Milton course), Dr. Gould was very soon to leave UT to return to New England as the result of a dispute over teaching loads.

In addition to Diane, nearing the end of her doctoral program, there were two people in Austin I had known earlier. John was working on his undergraduate degree, not entirely successfully, and living in one of the first high-rise dorms Austin had. Three years younger than I, John was one of my sister's high-school friends whom I got to know later, when I was living with Jay.

In my room there, we had sex one afternoon—rather suddenly, as I remember; what I do recall quite clearly, though, is Jay's description of the expression on my face, afterwards, as "diaphanous".

John didn't stay in Austin long. He wasn't ready to settle down to schoolwork, and the gay ghetto in San Francisco lured him away. He has lived there ever since, working in accounting, losing lovers and friends to AIDS, seeing the face of his beloved city cloud. A few years ago he decided to finish his BA, and he has begun work on an M.A. in history. I see him once a year, when he comes home to visit his family; we have a meal and a long talk, and serve, I think, as a kind of

milepost for one another.

Bob was now in Austin too, having abandoned his English degree program in Houston to enter graduate school at UT in botany and work as a teaching assistant. We would meet for dinner Saturday nights, walking from our lodgings on opposite sides of the campus to a centrally-located cafe, then continuing our talks, or arguments, as we sauntered about the campus.

His deficiency in chemistry and a midwinter case of the flu finally did Bob in, academically: he gave up his teaching assistantship and dropped out of school, too discouraged to go on. Carol came up, found them a subsidized apartment, and worked to support the family until they eventually moved back to Houston. They invited me to dinner several times that spring semester. I played with Donna outside while Carol prepared dinner. After eating, Bob and I would sit on their tiny patio taking turns reading *Paradise Lost* aloud, and Carol would be inside practicing her French horn for an amateur group she played in.

I continued my coursework through the two summer sessions, determined to finish the degree. To save money and be nearer the English building, I rented a room at the old YMCA just across Guadalupe for the summer. Anne had found a job teaching English at St. Mark's School in Dallas, and she encouraged me to apply to Cistercian Prep for a position. As a Catholic, she knew a priest who taught there, and she thought the school would be ideal for me.

Bob agreed to drive me to Irving, near Dallas, for the interview at the school. He waited in the car for a long time while I visited with Fr. Denis, the young Hungarian priest ("I'm 33, the age Christ was when they crucified Him") who was to be the new headmaster that year. I was very much impressed by the school's demanding curriculum, by the academic backgrounds of its faculty, and by the beauty and seclusion of its wooded campus, just across the hilltop from the Cistercian monastery. I couldn't wait to get started, to come back home for good, and to be with Jerry.