

WHY DIM SUM MAKES ME FEEL TENDER

Kim Adrian

In college I knew a boy who walked funny, and a wrestler with golden ringlets, and a Greek boy who danced like an angel, and I knew a boy whose mother killed herself with a heavy-duty electrical extension cord. I knew other boys in college, too, but for some reason these are the four I still occasionally remember with affection despite the fact that, in reality, I never actually got to know any of them all that well. To tell the truth, I don't even remember most of their names.

The wrestler is the one I liked the best. He used to be able to put his enormous, wide-shouldered body into an empty green beer bottle. It was a magic trick of his. I don't know how he managed it, but he'd set the audience — a bunch of drunken frat boys, their drunken girlfriends, and other partygoers, like myself, on one side of the room, himself on the other, and an empty bottle of Rolling Rock in the middle. Drunk as he might be (and I believe he sometimes achieved great heights of drunkenness), this boy always managed to maintain a reserve of mystery, even a quality of dignity, which is why I liked him so much and why he was able to fit inside a beer bottle. Of course, he didn't really put himself inside the bottle. It was a kind of miming operation, or an optical illusion, or just the power of suggestion, but in any case, we all gasped whenever he slowly lowered one incredibly meaty leg (with its comparatively dainty foot, usually clad, as I remember it, in a white tennis shoe) into the bottle. And as he maneuvered his other incredibly meaty leg (at the end of which dangled another comparatively dainty foot in another white tennis shoe) into the bottle we laughed disbelievingly, perhaps even a little uneasily. And somewhere in the backs of our minds, as he wiggled his slim hips and slightly waspish waist past the neck of the bottle, and then struggled more and more desperately to pull in the rest of himself — his enormous chest and even more enormous shoulders, his beautifully sculpted arms decorated with a few plump and well-placed veins, and finally, his head, which was a silly and captivating thing with its sparkling blue eyes and great masses of shiny blond ringlets — we were all struck, I'm certain, by the poignant yet essentially pointless beauty of humanity.

This boy and I had a tradition. I'm not sure how long it lasted — a year or two, perhaps, long enough to become a "tradition" of sorts, despite the fact that it was really just a small thing. It went like this, whenever we were at the same party, we would at some point meet (without setting a specific time, or verbally agreeing beforehand to do so) on the front stoop of whatever building the party happened to be in. Rain or shine, warm or cold, at some point, the wrestler with the blond ringlets and I would find ourselves standing outside, where we would chat. About what — I have no idea. Things completely inconsequential. They didn't matter to me then, and of course they matter to me even less, now. What mattered was only the gentle, exploratory tone of these conversations, and the simple ritual of them. Absurd as it may seem, I know that, somewhere way back in the furthest reaches of my mind (which has since that time become so crowded, so preoccupied with the basic managerial tasks of living it's a wonder I can remember anything at all), I secretly hope that someday the blond wrestler (who has no doubt, by now, become at least partially gray) and I will find ourselves standing on the front stoop of some run-down New York City brownstone or other, chatting for five or maybe ten minutes the way we used to — gently and about nothing at all.



The boy who walked funny was a different story altogether. His name was Geoffrey, spelled the English way. He was very tall, and very thin, and very rich, and I think there was something developmentally wrong with him, beyond the limp. I say so because he was incredibly innocent. Like a child. He even looked like a child, his face was so wide-open and soft-skinned, his gray eyes were so hugely magnified by the thick lenses of his wire-rimmed eyeglasses. Geoffrey's hair was coarse and blond, nearly white, and it stood on end in all-different directions. He spoke with a lisp about things a four-year-old might notice: a plane in the sky, a bug on the sidewalk, the down on my arm, illuminated by the sun. I suppose it was partly on account of his hair, and partly because of his strange fixation on childish points of interest, and partly because he was, like myself, going to an ivy league university, that I was convinced that there must be more, much more to Geoffrey than he let on. In fact, I convinced myself that he was an eccentric genius, and spent every minute in his company searching for proof of this hidden ge-

nius, verbally poking and prying in order to catch a glimpse of the hard brilliance I was certain must be lurking beneath his befuddled and almost comically gentle exterior.

When I say that Geoffrey walked funny, I mean that something was wrong with one side of his body, so that in order to walk he had to swivel and pivot on his good side (his left side, I believe it was) in order to lift and advance his bad side. You've seen people like this walking along some street in some city or other, no doubt, and you've thought, as I have, *How do they do it? day after day, how do they manage not just the physical pain but the social consequences of such a limp, which are no doubt quite grave, and not just the social consequences, either, but the practical problems, too, which would almost certainly be enough to drive any normal, able-bodied person to desperation in a matter of hours, if that long?* Whether it's a misguided impulse on my part or not, people who walk in this way often strike me as quietly heroic and immediately likable, even lovable; such easy affection accounts for my still vivid memory Geoffrey. I thought I might fall in love with him. I thought it would be interesting to try, in any case. Perhaps I was still too young to understand what a perverse and destructive emotion pity is. Or maybe I didn't care. Mostly, it was a game for me: I thought I could cultivate love the way I could draw a picture or make a plant grow by watering it. Why did I bother? Why did I think these things? Maybe I thought it would make a good story, down the line. Or maybe I was bored. Or maybe I felt I needed a cause, and Geoffrey seemed like a good one.

In any case, my efforts failed. In fact, the longer I knew him, the less Geoffrey appealed to me. He just didn't make sense to me. Still, I admired him for his limp and his hair and for the fact that he came from money and looked like a genius even if he wasn't one. I'm fairly certain Geoffrey sensed my specious motives in all of this, but he carried on as if everything were wonderful. I'm not sure why. All I know is that for every awkward conversation we faked our way through, my subconscious disgust for this boy grew, until, unfortunately, it suddenly announced itself at the most inopportune moment.

The whole process didn't take very long — our relationship stretched over a month or two at most. The breaking point occurred one Sunday morning when we were walking through the Biblical garden on the south side the cathedral of St. John the Divine in Morningside Heights. It's called a Biblical garden because in it grow

as many of the flowers, fruits, herbs, and vegetables mentioned in the Bible as they can fit, given the climate and space constraints of New York City. As I remember them, the plants of this garden are impressive not as plants (as plants, they are, in fact, a fairly weedy-looking lot), but as living phantoms, ghosts from an ancient fable. In any case, the real attraction of the garden wasn't botanical at all, but zoological: the cathedral maintained (and still does, I believe) a collection of peacocks, some of which are albino — all pearls and diamonds — and these extraordinary creatures were allowed to wander wherever they pleased, even out onto the sidewalk on Amsterdam Avenue, with their long gleaming tails trailing behind them. This ersatz Eden, then, was the setting of Geoffrey's and my first and only kiss. The sun was hot and bright that day. Or maybe it was rainy. In any case, I distinctly remember a kind of oblique glare pressing down on us. And I remember Geoffrey's erection poking lightly into my abdomen. And I remember most clearly of all the uncomfortable impression I had that I was making out with a child, no matter how tall. I remember thinking that the soft tongue clumsily searching the inside my mouth was *too* soft, and I panicked. I stepped away, too discombobulated to make any kind of coherent or thoughtful excuse. I'm not sure what we talked about then, or how we parted, only that I was assiduous in my efforts to not stare at the wet spot on Geoffrey's khakis — a spot Geoffrey himself never seemed to notice.

For a period of time after that, he pretended I didn't exist. Even when I said hello in the cafeteria line, from a distance of no more than a yard, he made as if he couldn't hear me. Eventually, we both fell into more successful relationships. Me with my future husband, who drives me just as crazy with love and frustration today as he did back then, and Geoffrey with a short dark-haired girl who used to hang, as the saying goes, on his arm and who, for all I know, may well be his wife today.



Short but classically handsome, the Greek boy used to do this thing on the dance floor where he'd just spin and spin and spin and spin on one foot without seeming to make the least effort. Have you ever seen Fred Astaire? The Greek boy danced like that. Like walking, like it was nothing but actually his body was doing all of these beautiful things, and he was never out of breath. I was also known

around campus for my dancing — not because I could do any special tricks, like the Greek boy, but simply because I loved to dance and did so with abandon.

When I think about the night I spent with this boy, whose name, unfortunately, I can't quite remember, I see the two of us as if we were in a movie. Actually, I see myself more than I see him; specifically, I see myself *from his perspective*. Maybe this explains why I can barely remember his face — just a blur of tawny skin, high cheekbones, and black eyes. We went out dancing a few times. Ate a couple of meals together. Once he let me borrow his sweater when I was cold. It was black and brown, and he was anxious to get it back. One time, when I was lighting a cigarette, a tiny chunk of sulfur flew off the match head and struck him on the eyelid, where it burned his skin. I bought a jar of vitamin E cream and dabbed it over the mark. Beyond these few details, however, I remember next to nothing about this boy. Nothing, that is, except the night of the red underwear. Oddly, it's the red underwear I remember most clearly of all. For instance, I remember that they weren't actually underwear, only the bottom half of a finely ribbed, all-cotton leotard I'd cut up one day when I'd run out of clean underwear. This is why they barely stayed put on my body: they had no elastic to hold them up. This is why I apologized to the Greek boy.

"They aren't real underwear," I said.

"It doesn't matter," he told me.

But first, let me set the stage — because that's exactly what it was like: being on a stage. The Greek boy belonged to one of the more exclusive fraternities on campus, and his room, which he shared with another boy, was enormous with very high ceilings. I may have embellished things over the years, but I remember ornate creamy white moldings and velvet, moth-eaten drapes. I remember that the two single, unmade beds looked small and nearly toy-like in the enormity of that room. I remember that the Greek boy took care to lock the door, so that his roommate wouldn't barge in on us, and then, I think, he shut the drapes. One thing seemed crystal clear to me at the time: the Greek boy was in a bad mood. I was aware of a kind of severity in him that I'd never seen before, and I remember that he was drinking whiskey straight out of a bottle while sitting in an armchair covered by a white sheet, and he wasn't offering me any — if I wanted a sip, I had to ask. I also remember that the expectation hanging over both of us that night was that we

were going to have sex. The problem, I believe, was that neither of us was particularly interested in this prospect. I suspect we were both scared. Maybe he was afraid (as I know I was) of giving up what I was beginning to suspect were impossibly childish notions about love and sex belonging together. Maybe we were both afraid of the cynicism an act of intercourse between us would entail. That, anyway, is how I think of it now, how I explain what happened next.

"Take off your clothes," he told me, and for some reason I obeyed. Crouching over my own body, I slid off my jeans, my socks, unbuttoned my shirt, unclasped my bra.

"Stop," he said. This left me in my underwear, which, as I've already explained, were red, and not underwear at all. "Walk over to the window."

It went on like that for a while, with the Greek boy directing me from his armchair, telling me to walk toward him and away from him, across the enormous room and back, ordering me to turn, to bend, to stand up, to raise my arms over my head, to spin in a circle, slowly. I remember feeling like a piece on a chessboard, that's how carefully he seemed to consider each new move for me. "Again," he said many times. "Again." All of this went on for an extraordinarily long time, at least that's how it seems to me now. And what's funny is that now, so many years later, I see that as far apart as we were that night, we were doing something together, resisting something. Together we were refusing to grow up. Together, we were playing at being children. Together, we burned ourselves into one another's memory.



The last boy is the one I remember best of all, and the one I can tell you the least about. How did he look? Medium build, medium height. Brown hair. It's pretty foggy. What kind of car did he drive? Something sporty. At least, it felt sporty to me. I know his mother had recently hanged herself with an extra long industrial-strength extension cord, I remember that much. And I know that his girlfriend at the time, a dancer, had broken up with him right on the heels of this event, and I remember thinking that was pretty shabby. I think I said as much to boy, although in what context I no longer recall, but the setting of the cafeteria vaguely suggests itself. He was only the friend of a friend of a friend of mine — or, to put it more precisely, his ex-girlfriend, the dancer, was a friend of my

boyfriend's sister. And by "my boyfriend," I mean my future husband, whom I had only just recently started dating, but in whom I had complete confidence and with whom I was a 1,000 percent in love. This was obvious to everyone even remotely in our orbit, which is why the time I spent with the boy whose name I no longer recall was not romantic in the least, but time spent in the spirit of a friendly Platonic inquiry or an extended How-do-you-do?

We had two things in common: suicidal mothers (although, of course, his mother had succeeded in killing herself, whereas mine was forever only making failed attempts) and food. We didn't talk much about our mothers, but we did talk about food, and somehow, we got onto the topic of dumplings — the Chinese kind, greasy and sweet, that you sometimes find at dim sum restaurants. I'd never had this kind of dumpling before and the boy whose mother had just killed herself found this tragic. "They're amazing!" he told me earnestly. "And so cheap. You've got to try them. I'll tell you what. Let's go to Chinatown today. I'll buy you some. We'll drive down there. I have a car."

The car had actually belonged to his mother. I suppose that fact is neither here nor there, but I was aware of it the whole time, and I suspect he was, too.

We spent the afternoon and evening together — a long stretch, but I can't remember exactly how we passed all that time. I know we sped down Morningside Drive with the windows wide open and the Talking Heads blaring on the car stereo. I'm pretty sure we saw a movie at the Thalia. And for a while, we sat in a park filled with flowers and homeless men and women stretched out on newspaper-covered benches. At some point, we strolled around the Village, where the boy bought me a homely necklace made of oversized ceramic beads. It is something I never wore, yet kept for many, many years in a clay dish filled with ponytail holders and old lipsticks. Finally, after it was already dark, we drove to Chinatown to find some dumplings.

The streets were so crowded that we had to drive as slowly as the pedestrians (who kept spilling off the sidewalks) were walking. This was perfect for our purposes — scouting out a good dumpling restaurant — although in the end, we didn't eat at a restaurant at all, but bought the dumplings from a man selling them out of a steaming street cart. The boy whose name I no longer recall pulled up halfway onto the sidewalk and got out to place the order. He came

back with half-a-dozen small wax-paper bags inside each of which were three or four dumplings, big as golf balls, white and vaguely translucent. Some of these were coated with sesame seeds, some with tiny black mustard seeds, and some were plain. Inside, the dumplings were smeared with bits of ground meat, or stuffed with gobs of sweet bean paste — yellow and red and black. The skins, which were made with rice flour, were so gummy they made our teeth stick together, and this of course was both amusing and gross, but mostly amusing, even delightful. The grease from the dumplings slid down our throats and chins, so hot still that it felt light, not heavy or cloying. It felt almost quenching, like water. There were dozens of dumplings, and it's not easy, in fact, it's fairly hard work to eat such chewy, sticky, meaty morsels one right after the other, but that's what we did, sitting there in the dead woman's car; they were just so good, and we were so hungry. And to this day, when I order Chinese dumplings, or anything equally hot and greasy and sweet, I think of that boy and of the flowers that were in bloom that day — cherry and apple blossoms mostly, because it was spring, after all. It was April.

