

Lying With Men

By Thomas Kearnes

Vince breaks away from our kiss and his tone turns serious. You can never tell Charlie about this, he says. You promise? I smile, feel the warmth of his firm belly beneath my hand, and look into his slate gray eyes. The poor boy's terrified. I wonder if I looked like that the moment I realized I was about to spend my first night with another man. I haven't seen Charlie since graduation, I tell him. This is a lie, but a harmless one. Charlie helped his father rework the pipes in the guest bathroom at my parents' place two summers ago, but I couldn't risk Vince becoming paranoid I might see my childhood buddy anytime soon. No way was I letting this slim-hipped, soft-voiced boy leave my home.

This is a first time of sorts for me as well. I'd never picked up a guy in a straight bar before. I'd been knocking back badly mixed whiskey and Cokes at one of those "bar and grill" restaurants with car bumpers fastened to the wall and a dozen televisions suspended along the ceiling, all tuned to college football. I noticed Vince two stools away but couldn't remember his arrival. He simply appeared, the way you always hope a man will. He was a few years younger, probably still in college. His thin, stubbled face pinched in concentration and his narrow shoulders hunched over as he jerked his pencil back and forth across a page in an open sketchbook. At once, the childlike intensity of his movements stirred me. I watched him several moments, never looking away even as I signaled the bartender for another. I thought of the Burroughs novel open face down on the bar beside me and smirked: only gay boys bring books into bars.

Finally drunk enough to risk the off chance he might be straight, I migrated to the stool beside him and asked what he was drawing. He grinned, those soft lips snapping back as his cheeks flushed. I had embarrassed him. I couldn't believe my luck. Vince asked me if I noticed the fat slob drunkard across the bar. The one in the postal uniform and Cowboys cap. You're very good, I told him. He didn't notice I'd yet to look at his sketch. He told me he was in town for Thanksgiving, killing time before checking into a hotel. He was an art student in El Paso. When he told me his family lived in Mineola, I laughed and told him I'd graduated high school there. He asked if I knew Charlie. Since third grade, I said. I'm going to spend the night with Charlie's cousin, I kept telling myself. He'd lose his shit if he knew I was gay. He'd lose it again watching Vince follow me out of the bar and into the brisk, starless night.

Is this really your first time with a guy, I say as I strip off his shirt. That same smile that greeted me at the bar flutters across his face. Is it that obvious? No, I tell him, tugging at the waist of his jeans. That's why

I asked. I would've never guessed he was straight after spending the last half hour on my old plaid sofa. The television flickers in the dark, jolts of color scampering along his skin and mine. What do you want to do now? I ask. You could stay here tonight. Hotels are expensive. He rises from the pillow and kisses me, and I think about Charlie for the first time since Vince and I got back to my place. I remember all the fag jokes he cracked at the lunch table during junior high, how I sat in silence and hoped no one noticed I wasn't laughing. My bed's just a twin, I warn Vince. We'll have to snuggle up. Sounds good, he says. But I'm not tired.

I wake first that morning. I glance beside me and marvel at the slope of Vince's bare back, the blanket pulled only to his waist. Smiling, I recall the sensation of him shuddering beneath me as we rocked together. I graze my hand over his flesh, softly at first, then harder, my strokes kneading the bronze perfection beside me. I must wake him soon. He hopes to be back on the road by nine this morning. Still, I let him sleep a few moments more as I ease out of bed and creep toward my dresser. Vince's wallet and keys lay piled beside my own. After one glance behind myself, I open his wallet. He mentioned at the bar he was traveling with only cash, no credit cards. I find stuffed among all that cheap beige leather two one-hundred dollar bills and several lesser bills.

Of course, Vince will notice if one of these hundreds disappears. But I've been with many, many men—and few open their wallets before shoving them in their back pockets in the morning. I pluck a hundred from the wallet, slide open the top drawer of the dresser and hide it beneath a row of folded socks. I return to bed and lay beside him. True, his memory of last night will curdle in a matter of hours, at some lonely point on the interstate, his first experience with another man forever spoiled. But this is what fags do: we hurt each other. The first men I fucked taught me that, and I'm grateful. I pepper his cheek with baby kisses until his eyes flicker open. He sees me and smiles.

Good morning.

© 2011 Thomas Kearnes