

My Friend

by Gary Moshimer

Remember when we went to New York to take our test? We looked for cheap hotels near the test site, and there was the "Hotel Earle." Twelve bucks a night. The clerk behind bullet-proof glass, smiling a knowing smile. Pubes still on the sheets, but we couldn't sleep anyway, with the drug deals going down in the hallway. Then in the morning, how you mixed up the two little white bottles and put nose spray into your eyes instead of Visine?

Remember how during the test, your forehead hit the table so hard everybody jumped. But you passed.

Then that evening, the gay disco? We weren't, but we were cool. Accepted beers from a guy named Leon and looked at him out of the corners of our eyes. He didn't bother us. Then suddenly we were dancing, dancing, dancing! The beat so loud you couldn't talk. A pretty black man showered bills from his pockets, and we worked it into our dance, lunging down and pecking the dollars for our own. We screamed, "Gay disco money grabbing!" at the top of our lungs, but no one could hear. Everyone smiled and smiled and danced.

And the bar on 2nd. Called a "meat market" because older women went to pick up young studs. We were young, twenty-one, but you were tall and snouty like a dorky giraffe, and I was chimpy with no neck. We stood at the exit and shouted at women as they left with the John Travoltas. "We have rubber gloves!" I don't remember why.

I have a picture of us in our shiny disco shirts open down our chests and our gold disco chains and our golden perms.

You met that nice girl with the big family—eleven brothers and

sisters. Catholic. You married her. The three of us had some beers a few times, but I was not a part of you anymore, not really. I still wanted to shout, "We have rubber gloves!"

And I moved away.

You started with kids, a girl and then a boy.
I never grew up—I can't explain it. Maybe you will know when you see me.

I lost you. I had no phone because I couldn't keep a job. I became a creep, lurking in rain and shadows to toss gloves at passing women. I was arrested. I grew a brown and cracked tooth. I lived in my car and sold parts of it until it was gone.

Then I met this girl at the shelter. She got me a job assembling computers, and we moved into a room with a real phone.

I called you. You sounded like an old man, spoke in a whisper. "I've lost my kids."

You told me how they died in a fire at the in-law's house. Third floor room of pine paneling. Went up like that. Grown-ups on the first floor partying, smoke alarm unheard. You said someone put a towel over the lampshade to mute the light. I hope it wasn't you. The girl tried getting the little boy out, but couldn't. She died a week later from smoke inhalation. What could I say to any of this? You sounded like an old man. I'm sorry. It's my fault for letting you go.

I got off the bus about two hours ago, and I'm making my way to your house. I'll be there soon. I stopped at the Goodwill Fashion Outlet for a suit so I can look good for you guys. I can't believe it's still there. Back then it was just Goodwill. Remember how we bought old suits from the forties there, with those cool skinny ties? The pin-striped pants with cuffs? The two-tone shoes? I got a nice

wool coat, too, and right now I'm buttoning it up, because it's getting cold.

I wandered around the cemetery and found their stones in just an hour, which means maybe my luck will change. I could have bought new gloves at Goodwill, but I like the ones I have. You know how some people have the gloves with no fingers just to be cool? Well, I just have them. I like them because I can feel. This is a perfect example. I'm running my fingertips along their names, and the words about angels. I can feel the pain along the edges. I can leave my fingers on the stone until the ice comes and I feel nothing at all. That's a form of feeling, too.

I can't wait to see you, my friend. I'll be there any minute.

