

Bad Gay

I managed to fit three jumbo shrimp into my mouth but nearly choked and realized I should have dialed it back to two. The bowl of pre-peeled crustaceans rested on my stomach, as I lay sprawled, half-sitting up on the couch with the dogs, Walter and Bruno, one on either side of me, glistening strands of slobber dangling from their jowls, waiting for their turn at seafood. *You already ate! or Get away from me!* I yelled every few minutes as they continued to beg. They didn't flinch.

I had bought fresh, *not* frozen shrimp and Moët & Chandon champagne, because Freddie Mercury sings about it in his first hit, "Killer Queen," from the overpriced food store down the street from my Lakeview apartment. It was New Year's Eve and such luxuries were necessary and expected.

I reached over Walter to refill my Salvador Dalí mug with champagne, my last stemmed wine glass having been murdered by one of the dog's tails, as Anderson Cooper and Andy Cohen on television interviewed one of the Time's Square revelers

I flipped through Instagram stories when I was bored or the musical act on the Times Square New Year's special didn't interest me. Friends and acquaintances had begun posting pictures of four course meals, each pretentious plate with its own photo, selfies with captions like "HNY!," filters applied with meticulous attention, or group shots of N.Y.E. gatherings, biceps visible and synchronized as they stood front to back.

Most of these friend groups were comprised of gay men not because I lack heterosexual friends, but in my early thirties, a lot of my remaining single straight friends got hitched, moved to the burbs, and began popping out kids. The burbs might as well be in Canada with all the traffic in Chicago. Also, kids tend to hinder their parents from making evening plans.

I noticed a few friend groups I used to regularly associate with had gotten together, none of whom had invited me. So, I'm alone on New Year's Eve. During the past year I'd dropped off their radar because my grueling corporate job left me too exhausted to socialize. What free time I had was spent renovating and selling my condo and caring for a new adopted dog, which actually was like caring for a recovering addict. Bruno had become addicted to anxiety med at the animal shelter and he was going through a serious withdrawal. But mostly, I'm alone because I'm a bad gay.

Or so my friends said. I didn't go out enough and I didn't stay out late enough and I didn't join them in the gym enough.

I had difficulty identifying with many aspects of gay culture because I wasn't afforded the luxury or comfortability of exploring it at all. Being born and raised in Owosso, Michigan, a rinky-dink town without an ounce of culture and zero diversity, I would've just as soon died before developing any kind of gay identity. I got away with choir and being a madrigal singer because I was "well-rounded." I cancelled out my artsy tendencies with sports and aping toxic hetero- masculinity. This included calling my friends "homos" and peppering the word "titties" into every other sentence.

There was also the problem of my serial monogamy when I was fully out of the closet. I I was with my partner Dan for eight years during my twenties, a time when most gay men are dating a lot and “finding themselves,” which translates to avoiding commitment. After things ended with Dan, I moved back to the Chicago [from Florida?] and rebounded with a new partner, Alex, for two and half years. Relationships keep you grounded, in the emotionally heavy way, and also the way your mother might impose for discovering gay porn on the family computer’s browsing history; You’re not afforded the time you used to have to socialize.

Now I had nothing going on. I’d quit my job after corporate burnout, then renovated and sold my condo and was sitting on the money in a rental. I had a lot of spare time. Time to *think*. Thinking is dreadful. What used to not bother you now most certainly will. Your sense of calm will be dissolved by newly discovered anxieties and social inadequacies.

I looked at Anderson Cooper. He undoubtedly has vast social circles, looks like he’s in great shape, and he’s accomplished so much. Plus, I’d heard through the grapevine he’d taken on some new, young hotsy-totsy boyfriend, a mutual friend who’d moved from Chicago to New York City. Anderson is a good gay. The best.

Had I accomplished everything I’d wanted to? Not even close. Did I have the time to rediscover and find myself in my thirties? Until now, no. But I decided I was going to try, and what better a night to make such a decision than New Year’s Eve?

New beginnings! Clean slate! Reinvention! Gays love New Year’s Resolutions.

I’d work on my body, make all sorts of new friends, sleep with countless lovers, and move through the night like some big gay force to be reckoned with.

I'd be a *good* gay.

Good Gays Love the Gym

On January 1st, hungry to start my new life, I was rife with rainbow spirit. I found and purchased a new workout routine from some pretty Insta-gay, as well as one of his diet plans. It called for heavy lifting five to six times a week, light cardio three days a week, and a whopping 250 grams of protein each day, which initially seemed like a lot. But he had *just* the diet plan for me and directed me to some pre-made meal delivery company.

I've frequented the gym on and off since my early twenties, so that part I'd gotten half right, but my current gym had grown to be a cumbersome experience, always packed with Lululemon-splattered people that had more interest hogging machines while doom scrolling on their phones than exercising. Plus, it didn't have half the machines the Insta-gay said I'd need to develop a good gay's ultra fit body.

A friend of mine was always talking about how I should join Quads, a "world-famous" meathead gym, because the clientele are more "my people," and I'd never run out of new machines to use. So, I jumped through seven hoops and two different "membership advisers" to cancel at my current gym, and then walked down the street to join Quads.

At half a block long near Broadway and Grace, it's a large place, filled to the brim with weights and machines from the last few decades, like more of a fitness museum than an actual gym. Hundreds of autographed photos from bodybuilders line the walls, including posters of the

greats like Arnold Schwarzenegger lifting immense amounts of weight, their faces red and grimacing as if they've been attempting a bowel movement for months.

The clientele were of the various muscle types - lean, built, and very built, with a few outliers. The most muscular, those who resembled the juiced-up dudes in the pictures on the walls, were the type that grunted a lot and slammed weights after a set and looked to have been lifting for a hundred years. So pink and so rippled with muscle on muscle, they looked more like a pile of bubble gum that someone had sprinkled some hair on.

I'm out of my element, I think, but proceed with the first workout anyways, which ended up taking about two hours.

The first week was a doozy, but I pushed on like I knew Arnold would want me to. *Do it, you stupid baby!* I'd tell myself in the best Austrian accent I could muster. *You are a flabby man-baby!* There is a poster in one of the rooms at Quads where Arnold is flexing his bicep for two displeased-looking elderly women on a park bench, and I imagine him to be telling them *I could smoosh you into old lady confetti*.

The first box of meals had arrived, and I was supposed to eat five of the things in it each day, along with protein shakes between. The meat and vegetable meals were pre-cooked while vacuum sealed in plastic, a method called *sous-vide*, which may as well be French for chicken rectum. They smelled terrible upon opening and only slightly improved once microwaved with the packet of sauce dumped on them. Water rejected the protein shake powder. The shakes remained lumpy and tasted like chocolate swamp water. If I focused too much on the texture, I'd start gagging.

Drink it, you baby idiot!

And so I did, three times a day while stuffing myself with the meals, which left me perpetually bloated and always full. I kept up with the work out plan without a single skip day, pumping and pulling furiously, grunting and even slamming the occasional weight.

About a month had passed, and while I felt I'd made some progress, I was growing frustrated. Where were the giant man pecs I was promised? My biceps had grown, but nowhere near the size I'd need to reduce an elderly person to confetti. Not to mention, my joints were always on fire and the bones in my body seemingly surrounded by muscle soup.

Gay men are plagued with body dysmorphia, so naturally cycling anabolic steroids is a big part of gay culture. This requires you to illegally obtain the drugs because no legit doctor is going to write you a prescription for a controlled substance you don't absolutely need. Now, though, there's testosterone replacement therapy.

Instagram was targeting me daily with TRT ads that were telling me *You're old and crusty and your balls are shriveled so you desperately need the juice!* They featured chiseled men gallivanting down the beach or emerging from the pool, dripping with ripe, succulent testosterone rich bodies that are attracting other men, also with *oodles* of testosterone, and if you're not one of them, your life is dog shit.

As I continued to look around the gym each day, I was convinced everyone was on it and finally clicked on one of the ads out of curiosity. The homepage basically said *Male doctors have come together in the manliest way possible to make you a man again! Check out these hand-selected, concerningly obscure studies!*

I opted for the free blood test to assess my testosterone levels because why not, it's free. However, they hide the results from you until your online consultation. After the lab was done testing my sad, limp blood, I got on Zoom with a P.A. who informed me my testosterone levels were *very* low for my age in such a way she might as well have said *You have no dick*.

The appointment took only five minutes, and I don't recall if she stated my actual t-levels or if the labs were even made available to me, but my toxic masculinity reared its head and took over. Within a week, I was injecting myself with ooey-gooey testosterone and within a month, my body looked more like one of the men from the ads and less like a flabby man-baby.

Guys were taking more notice of me in the gym, including a tall, shredded fellow named Paul, who's heritage was half Chinese and half Austrian, which I took as a sign. A steamy fling with him began soon after, and despite feeling eternally bloated, and now experiencing cramps and mood swings because of the testosterone injections, I knew I was doing all the right things and was well on my way to living my best gay life.

Good Gays Love to Party

I grew up in a household of classic rock and country, and outside of that, I primarily listened to new wave, modern rock, and 90's alternative in high school and college, all genres which would find their way onto my Spotify playlists again and again.

The new gay me needed new gay music. Good gays love their techno and their house, but the closest I'd gotten to techno was Darude's "Sandstorm" two decades prior, and I couldn't

have begun to tell you what “house music” actually was, generally likening it to some douche bag onstage pumping out music with a MacBook.

One morning in the gym, I searched “house,” stumbled upon a playlist, and started listening. In some songs, I found myself wondering where the lyrics were and in others, I questioned if there was really a need to remix a classic song, by say Eurythmics, like “Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This),” that already was so great. There are not only remixes, but *remixes* of remixes. While I wasn’t really crazy about what I was hearing, I pushed through and told myself not to be such a curmudgeon. *Learn* to like it.

New beginnings! Clean slate! Reinvention!

Some friends I’d reconnected with were doing an event called “Queen!” at smartbar, a nightclub in Wrigleyville, and insisted I join. I’d done my fair share of gay bars, even in relationships, but Queen! was the big leagues. It’s classified as a “weekly lgbtq underground house and disco party” on its website, which sounds sexy and imposing in itself. I was a bit nervous because the event didn’t start until 9 pm on Sunday and would likely go most of the night. I wasn’t really the go-all-night type, boredom finding me before midnight mixed with the anxiety surrounding what I had to do the following day, not to mention I had dogs, who were going to wake me up first thing in the morning whether I was hungover or not.

My normal nights, prior to the Great Reinvention, were usually comprised of reading a book on the couch or watching a movie, often accompanied by a glass of wine or two fingers of bourbon to wind down and then hit the hay promptly.

Old and boring.

The 9 pm start time usually would've been a no-go for me, but I had no job and no other excuse to skip the event, and on top of that, it was President's day weekend, so many of my friends had Monday off. We arrived to find a long line filled with men, some in t-shirts and shorts, some in head-to-toe fishnet contraptions, all coatless and freezing because no one wanted to deal with coat check.

My friends are pretty and connected, and I'd argue they know just about every bouncer and bar manager in Boystown, so we got to skip the line—how important I must look!—and headed for the basement, the event literally being underground. The space was dark, seemingly all painted black, save for some posters and the lights behind the bars. The large room was divided in two, one side being more of a lounge, the other being the dance floor itself, both equally loud, filled with the music I had been absorbing in the gym.

My friend Alvaro said something to me that I had no hope of hearing.

"What?" I shouted.

He mouthed it again.

"WHAT?!"

He made a drinking motion with his hand and pointed to the bar in the lounge area.

"OH, OKAY!"

I ordered a tequila and soda with lime, having done some research beforehand about which drinks make you less tired, the most hydrated, and are least likely to give you a hangover.

Research is sexy, right? Apparently, Mexicans crank out “healthier” booze than Russians for which I was thankful because I always thought Vodka tasted like bug spray.

Returning to the larger group of friends, I noticed Clark, Stephen, and Johnny had all taken their shirts off. Like a drone returning to the nest, Alvaro promptly did the same. This was alien territory to me, and while I wouldn’t say I’m bashful, I’m not one to whip the girls out in any kind of establishment other than my own home, and even then I feel oddly exposed. One doesn’t read Tolstoy shirtless.

But I complied, and got reassuring looks, even some compliments on my body, none of which I could hear. I knew they were a form of praise only because of the appreciative looks that came with the drowned out words. After a couple more drinks, we moved to the dance floor, which had become a sea of nipples and waving arms. A couple of my friends started dancing, prompting the rest of us to join. On the dance floor, I was relieved to stop pretending I could hear what people were saying, and just nod my head and smile.

I assumed all club-going gays are amazing dancers, rhythmically inclined with moves as smooth as silk. This is not the case, which boded well for me, since my dance moves consist only of swaying side to side or jumping up and down. I managed to somehow combine the two, and actually found myself having fun. The drinks kept rolling in, some tequila, some vodka, some god knows what, but at that point I didn’t care. I was in the zone but --

There’s always a morning after and mine hit hard. It started with light flooding in from the window, a million rays forcing open my eyelids to cook my retinas. There was a searing pain in my head and if that pain was a fire, the light was like gasoline. My head weighed a hundred

pounds, but I managed to turn it away from the window. I was now looking into the living room at two dogs, both sitting on the couch and staring at me as if to say *Would you mind feeding us, lazy ass?*

I'd fallen asleep in the same clothes from the club and could feel my phone digging into my thigh. I took it out, saw the various messages about how great the night prior was, and an Uber receipt showing I'd come straight home, thank God. [Had you fallen asleep in your clothes in the living room? Yes, added this above.]

That morning's dog walk was a Herculean task. Walter and Bruno seemed to pull their leashes harder, lunging at invisible scents, jolting me forward and to the side, my hungover brain sloshing around in my skull, making me dizzier than I already was, as if this was my punishment for leaving them alone so long.

But I had so much fun!

...right?

Good Gays Love Daddies

Gays do this thing where in even having chatted together for just five minutes, you're expected to follow one another on Instagram immediately and from there on out refer to one another as "my friend so and so."

I was going out a lot more often and I'd made a lot of "friends," many of whom were interested in me romantically, and by *romantically* I mean they were looking to bump uglies, but

I'm not the type to just show up and do the dirty. I still hold on to a shred of my hopeless romantic self despite two failed relationships. However, prior to the Great Reinvention, I wasn't even dating, *period*.

The fling with Paul from the gym had died down as we entered the dreaded friend zone, and I had suitors blowing me up, some of which were of a new category to me, particularly those of a younger age.

I've always associated the smell of aging with Bengay and steamed vegetables, never anything remotely sexy. But lately, as I'm pushing forty, it's as if I've developed some kind of a scent that younger gay men suddenly pick up on, one that draws them to me. It's strange and even perverse at times, and while being called "daddy" doesn't quite hit my ear right, nor am I sure it ever will, I'd be lying if I said I didn't appreciate the attention from good looking guys in their twenties.

I agreed to a date with a twenty-something named Nate, unsure of his exact age and not necessarily wanting to know, whom I'd met a couple weeks prior at North End, a billiards bar in Boystown. After promptly following one another Instagram, our flirtation started with the exchanging of funny memes and reels, some light bantering, and then a suggestion for dinner, which ended up at Wakamono, a sushi restaurant in East Lakeview.

He was pretty. Very pretty. He had a distinguished but boyish face and a strong jawline. His thick, dark hair was swept to one side, and he had a straight, unrelenting hairline that I almost hated him for. No stranger to the gym, his muscles popped from within his t-shirt.

We chatted about the basics: Family, friends, where we'd lived, whether our parents were together or divorced, favorite music, hopes and dreams, blah blah blah.

"I don't think I caught how old you are the first time we met," I said.

"I'm twenty-two," he said.

I laughed, though it sounded more like a garbled *honk*.

I'm seventeen years older. Old enough to be his father if I were sexually active in high school. I was applying for *college* when he was born. I was beer-bonging shitty light beer while he was shitting his diaper. I was moving in with my first boyfriend while he was learning about fractions.

The calculations continued in my brain until he finally asked, "Is that okay?"

I didn't know what to say, so I avoided it completely. Since when did such a simple question become so loaded? Was I in my gay "daddy" phase? Sex between two consenting adults is one thing, but could I see myself taking on a partner where there was such a gap in *life* experience?

Turned out, not so much.

"You're having a mid-life crisis," my friend Greg said.

My mouth hung open as if to say something, but I realized I had no answer. I knew I was facing some kind of existential crisis, but certainly it was much smaller than a mid-life one, right?

This was five months after the Great Reinvention and the start of my testosterone therapy. We sat in DryHop, a brewery down the street from my place, and I'd just finished complaining to Greg about the bloating, the cramping, the feeling of always being tired, the incessant messages on Instagram from the new people I was meeting, and the music I could not find a way to like for the life of me.

My first instinct was to tell him to *Fuck off, I'm nowhere near old enough to be having one of those*, but realized I'd turned thirty-nine a couple weeks prior. I'd *surpassed* the halfway point of the average life expectancy of a male living in the U.S.

I was doing all the typically sad, midlife crisis-like things: feeling dissatisfied, forcing change for the sake of change, feeling my mortality, attempting to recapture a youth I felt I had been denied.

Soon after, I decided to call my dad, and asked if he'd ever experienced what I had been, this overwhelming feeling of regret and having missed out, and an urgent need to rectify it quickly.

"Of course," he said.

"When does it end?"

"It doesn't."

My father is the King of Proverbs. I heard them all the time growing up, rarely finding any help in their high-level, overly broad meanings. Most of the time, I found them to be irritating and preachy, even lazy.

Practice makes perfect.

Do as I say, not as I do.

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

I still don't know what the hell the bush one means, but this time he offered up two of his favorites, back-to-back, and they suddenly had a lot more depth, maxims as profound as they were simple:

Take life as it comes. Everything in moderation.

Or in other words, stop mulling over the past and drowning yourself in the new.

Over the course of the next few days as I reflected on my life with Dan and Alex and everything that followed, I came to a revelation: I was lifting too much, too hard, and not just in the gym; I was spinning my wheels trying to retroactively fix a life that didn't need fixing, at most just some tweaks and tune-ups from time to time so it keeps moving forward.

I've since stopped testosterone replacement therapy after doing the research I should have done in the first place. I got a test from my primary care doctor who didn't hide the results in a sales pitch. My levels were normal for my age and there are plenty of natural ways to boost them even higher, specifically by being less stressed and drinking less wine on the couch, both of which is a work in progress.

The playlists I love have made a comeback in the gym, but I'm listening to new songs thanks to Spotify's ability to find me similar music to my own tastes. I'm still working out at Quads and love it, though I'm focused on the exercises I enjoy and have come to realize (mostly) that I don't need to be exercising so hard.

I still socialize and go out, but I'm rarely out late. I'm meeting new people all the same, dating now and then, but not explicitly looking for anything. I've even started a book club with some gay buddies who like staying in and reading as much as I do.

Put the barbell down. Pick up the horror novel or the ice cream cone.

Stop lifting so much.