

ALLEN M. PRICE

## THE RAPE CLOSET

Gay brothers and sisters, what are you going to do about it? You must come out. Come out to your parents. I know that it is hard and that it will hurt them, but think of how they will hurt you in the voting booth! Come out to your relatives. I know that it is hard and will upset them but think of how they will upset you in the voting booth. Come out to your friends. If indeed they are your friends. Come out to your neighbors, to your coworkers, to the people who work where you eat and shop. Come out only to the people you know, and who know you. Not to anyone else. But once and for all, break down the myths, destroy the lies and distortions. For your sake. For their sake. For the sake of the youngsters who are being terrified. There will be no safe “closet” for any gay person. So break out of yours today—tear the damn thing down once and for all!

*Harvey Milk, on June 25, 1978, the ninth anniversary  
of Stonewall, five months before his assassination.*

**YOU’RE GAY**, people say. *Isn’t that how you all behave?* That’s what came to mind as Todd’s eyes stared into mine. Something in them drew me in, like the snake in *The Jungle Book*. How else to explain what he did to me? I was a Black weightlifter with two hundred and ten pounds of ripped muscle, and a runner since the sixth grade. Yet my first reaction wasn’t self-defense. It was *I brought this on myself*.

Todd was my friend Pat’s boyfriend. Pat and I had been friends since the night we met in 1993, on the dance floor at a gay nightclub in our home state of Rhode Island. I was in college, finally out of the closet after years of struggle to accept my sexuality. I had my first boyfriend. I believed a great life lay ahead. Pat was a pronounced presence everywhere, whereas I was shy and reserved. We often hung out at Reflections, the gay-owned and -operated coffeehouse on Wickenden Street on the East Side of Providence. Pat was a few years older than me. Every time people saw us, we were laughing, we were dapping up, and after a few years we had a binding friendship. When he moved to San Francisco, I was excited to visit.

Pat had met Todd at a bar in the Castro, and a few months into dating, moved in with him. They lived in a house owned by Todd’s mother, next door to her own house in San Jose. I didn’t get what Pat saw in Todd.

The first time we met, he didn't even look at me. He was completely silent. His tight jeans outlined his penis—I couldn't tell if it was natural or an erection. *Shouldn't he say hello? Does he feel threatened? I should say hello.* So I did, with joy in my heart for Pat. My rapport with Pat was in no way sexual. There was never any flirtation or innuendo between us. Pat was HIV-positive, and he knew that, having watched many close friends die of AIDS, I had a terrible fear of contracting it. I was twenty-nine, and safe sex was of paramount importance to me.

For San Francisco Pride Weekend in June 2003, Pat invited me to visit him and Todd in San Jose. That Saturday night we went to a warehouse-sized nightclub packed with drop-dead beautiful, muscular men. I'd not experienced anything like it before. I was intoxicated with the attention I was drawing. Tipsy on Alabama slammers, I kissed a couple of men on the dance floor.

Todd drove us back to his and Pat's house, glaring at me in the rear-view mirror as I lay in the backseat, my head in Pat's lap. At the house, Pat stripped me down to my underwear for sleeping. We were in the living room. I wasn't a person to undress in front of strangers. Even in the locker room at the gym, I'd go into a stall to change. Todd watching me made me uncomfortable, but I didn't want to make a fuss. Pat made me drink a glass of water to dilute the alcohol's effects before tucking me into their bed. It was something he had done for me many times. Before falling asleep, the last thing I remember was Pat smoothing the blue sheet over me as I told him how much I loved his cat Conner, then him closing the door on his way out.

Light woke me, cutting across my face through the open bedroom door. In the doorway stood Todd, naked. He closed the door behind himself, crept over to the bed, yanked the sheet off me, pulled down my underwear, and climbed into bed. He laid his bare body across my legs. I didn't freeze. I wasn't shocked. I didn't understand what was happening.

I wriggled, lifted my torso, but Todd pushed me back against the bed and tightened his grip. One of my hands was locked under his body. With the alcohol slowing my reflexes, I lunged my other hand at his face to push his mouth off my penis, but my hand passed right through the air. He snatched my arm and stuffed it under his side, pressed against the bed. He was going to continue.

"Get off me." I hoped Pat would hear me. I hoped Todd's mother next door would hear me.

Todd didn't stop. His mouth clamped down. His whiskery face scraped my thigh. I yelled internally at my body for failing me. My penis was ignoring how repulsive I found Todd.

"Get off, get off me!"

He persisted. Our eyes met. I looked into his, and there was no human there. An image rose in my mind of slitting his throat with a knife. In that moment, he wasn't a living being. I imagined a world where every rape victim settled their own score. How many dead bodies? My rage was climbing. I could feel Todd getting pleased. I tried to make my erection go down, but it refused. I couldn't understand this bodily betrayal, and my frustration grew. *He thinks I like what he's doing to me.*

His erection slapping against my feet, his focus became acute. I stared at the door. Where's Pat? Todd's slurping filled my ears, a hollow, cavernous sound like sea surge in a rocky cave. It grew louder and fuller. Unbearable.

*There's no way this is happening. Guys like me don't find ourselves in such situations. Is this what it's like when a woman is raped at a fraternity? Revelers watching, listening, enjoying the show?*

I tuned in to Todd's breathing. Light and calm—as though he had no fear and all the time he needed. Deep below me, in an ocean of foam, rolled a river along a channel. I had dammed it up on the mountainside. In an instant the stream, swollen by storms in the distant mountains, breached the barrier. Descending in full force, it swept away Todd, Pat, and every trace of this forced act. My body remembered how to merge with nature. On that mattress my body merged with the body of the fifty-three-year-old man assaulting me.

As Todd worked away on me, I remained in that river. The huge trees that grew along the banks, their girth attesting to ages of growth, trembled, rocked, and were uprooted. Their giant branches waved above the flood and then disappeared. I never saw them again. Although I tracked the stream for miles and spent the entirety of two days in search of their bodies, I never discovered any trace of the violators.

Somehow I got a hand loose and was able to move my body, again peering into Todd's eyes. I pushed. He rolled and stood up. Then he left. Gone. Not a word. No orgasm. The door slammed behind him. I don't know how long I lay there shaking. I fell asleep asking myself, *What did I do to make him think I was interested in him?*

When I woke later that morning, I rushed into the shower, letting the hot water scald my skin, my penis. Scrubbing my genitals with my

fingerprints, I wished I had a Brillo. Instead, I used up the two bars of antibacterial Dial soap I had brought with me—thank you, God. I washed myself under the shower until the water ran cold. After I got out, I stepped in front of the mirror. My hands were wrinkled and cracked. Todd's fingertips had left pressure points around my groin, shaped like smeared roses. I had handprints all over my chest and stomach.

Not wanting to use one of Todd and Pat's towels, I dried myself off with a shirt in my bag, returned to the bedroom, dressed, and packed. I took heed of my torn underwear lying on the floor. I took heed of the sheets on the bed. I took heed of the sheets. Would Todd's mother be the one to wash away the evidence? Even though I heard Pat's heavy breathing as he and Todd lay sleeping in the other bedroom, suddenly I felt watched. I walked through the house. In the living room were DVDs of porn piled around the television. Dozens of homemade VHS tapes caught my eye. I inserted one, labeled *Patty Pat's Good Vibration*, into the VCR. It was a recording of Pat having sex with a bunch of guys while Todd told the men what to do to him.

*Was there a video camera in the room where I had slept?*

My search found it—latched on to a book inside the bookcase, lens pointed at the bed. The revulsion in my body nearly floored me. I took the camera down, ripped out the tape, and stuffed it into my bag. I looked up and saw, on Todd's side of the bed, a wall collage of men. Every photo was a candid shot. None of the men were smiling; it seemed they had been photographed unawares. There was a photo of me. I was one of his trophies. I pulled it off the wall, tore it up, and put the pieces in my pocket. From the curb outside the house, I called a cab to take me to the airport.

The sun beat down. Sweat dripped down my back. It was 9:15 in the morning. All I could think was how Pat, who I had known since I was nineteen, had betrayed me. I was certain Pat had heard me calling last night. He knew what his partner was doing to me. The house was no more than 1,000 square feet. My brain said, *They invited you to use you that way*. I was a grown man but couldn't defend myself. It never occurred to me that I had been raped. I had never heard of a grown man being sexually assaulted by another grown man. And strangers were the ones I was supposed to fear, not my friend's boyfriend.

Todd had done it against my will, but only women get raped. The American society I grew up in taught me that gay men were always

wanting sex. Gay men were always sleeping around. Bill Clinton claimed that the blowjob he received from Monica Lewinsky wasn't actually sex. I had never heard of a gay man going to the police to report being raped by another gay man.

To clear from my mind the image of Todd on top of me, I turned my gaze on the mountain range off in the distance. Then Pat appeared, blocking my view of the mountains as he walked toward me. The first words out of his mouth were confession. He knew Todd was going to do that to me, and he let Todd do it. *You're sorry? An apology won't undo it. I don't want to hear your lies.* Yet when he said Todd wanted to drive me to the airport and apologize himself, I acquiesced. My cab wouldn't be coming for an hour, and I was desperate to get away. Though my mind asked, *Why does Todd want to drive me to the airport without Pat?*

Pat went back inside the house, and shortly afterward Todd emerged. He walked toward me, eyes staring, flaccid brown arms held up like a wounded man, doughy hands grabbing at the air, feet stepping down hard. He didn't look at me; he looked through me.

"Oh, good," he said. "You're okay. You were so drunk last night."

I let him put my luggage in the backseat. He opened the door for me, and I got into the car, shaky on my feet. My heart was a full-on adrenaline dump. Todd blabbered concern, comfort, for my evident distress, and then he said, "You were so sweaty and hot kissing those two guys on the dance floor. No need to worry. You're all right." Was he talking to himself? Had someone done to him what he did to me, and is that what they said to him?

I asked him about the video recording of me in the bedroom. I kept my voice calm, but I knew I would lose my mind if I didn't confront him. My instincts told me he would lie, but I asked anyway. Todd said he had just set the video camera down there on the bookcase and forgotten about it. Then I asked him about my picture on the wall and told him I had pulled it off. He turned red. "Where is it?" Shuddering, I patted my pocket. He swerved the car as he got in my face. All of a sudden, *Todd* was the person who felt violated. The airport, a few hundred feet away, held my flight to freedom. I took the fragments of the photo out of my pocket and put them in the ashtray. Todd relaxed.

In front of the airport entrance, I grasped the door handle and Todd grabbed my forearm. There were people all around. I pulled; he gripped tighter. *If I yell, will anybody help me? Pat didn't. Nor did Todd's mother.* I told him to let go of me. He begged me to stay in the car. "Let me loose."

Rubbing the hair on my forearm with his thumb, he blurted out that from the age of thirteen to when he moved out of his parents' home at sixteen, his father sexually assaulted him, orally and with objects, and filmed it. "Dad was always apologetic: 'This'll never happen again. I don't know what got into me.' But it just got worse and worse and, um, and worse. I was trapped. I had no way out. I look back at that time and wonder how I survived. I remember all of the abuse sessions. And then one day I got my first boyfriend, Dad wanted me to come over, and I said no. And he just stopped talking to me."

Mental and emotional manipulation; Todd was moving the pieces into place. He never mentioned what he did to me. Did he think I was ministering to the sexual predator in him because I kissed a couple of guys on the dance floor? Did he think that I came with batteries included?

"You better not've given me HIV," I said, then mumbled, "Insane Chucky doll." That's when he lost it. "As God is my witness, may I fry in hell if I'm not being totally honest, I will never do it again to anyone if you accept my apology. My dream's to marry Pat. I love him more than I've ever loved anyone. He's the most important thing to me. Please." It would've been one thing for him to say, "Don't tell anybody." It was quite another to say, "I'll never do it again." He didn't seem to know what was and wasn't love.

I looked at him. "You'll forever have the memory of defending your actions. And I'll forever have the memory of you and Pat violating me." I had to escape from that car. To distract him, I grabbed his face and smacked the biggest kiss I've ever given anybody right on his lips. I pushed his head back, said "I'm leaving," shoved the car door open, scrambled out, snatched my bags from the backseat, and bolted into the airport.

The next afternoon I drove to a clinic in Boston where I could get HIV test results in fifteen minutes. There wasn't one in Rhode Island at the time. Todd was only the fourth guy I'd had sexual contact with, and I was petrified, convinced he had given me HIV. When the results came back negative my relief gave way to even more suspicion. I was told I needed to retake the test in four weeks to be sure.

I never told anybody. I went back into the closet. If that was how it was to be gay, I wanted no part of it. I feared men who looked like Todd. I stopped trusting older gay men, even though they were the only type of men who attracted me. Convinced that all older gay men were

abusers, I actively sabotaged existing relationships with them in my life. Each time a man ended things with me, it confirmed I was an imposter who didn't deserve a good man.

I live in a country where men beating men is the focus of movies, sports, music, and television, where physically imposing oneself on another is considered manhood, not crime. Building a big muscular body and acquiring an Ivy League education were ways to mask my pain, ways to not look queer.

Over the next decade I maintained my friendship with Pat because I believed that what he and Todd did to me was just gay male culture. In gay clubs and bars, I constantly saw men touch other men without permission. Pat revealed that Todd knowingly and unknowingly infected other men with HIV. Todd had infected Pat too, pushing him to open their relationship while refusing to use condoms.

I stayed in touch with Pat until he told me he wanted to have sex with my live-in partner. I couldn't tell my partner. He sensed that something was wrong, but he never knew the extent. So I ended my friendship with Pat. I still didn't want this to be a victim thing. Ever since I was called a sissy and a fag in elementary school, strength has been critical to me. *Gay men can't be sexually assaulted, because gay men are promiscuous and fellatio isn't sex.*

In September 2020, when I was still in COVID isolation, I met a man on a gay dating app. During one of our nightly phone conversations, the conviction of Harvey Weinstein came up. This man was so disgusted with sexual assault that I felt safe enough to tell him what Todd did to me. I expected him to say *That's how it goes with gay men*, but instead he said, "That's rape. You were raped. Weinstein was convicted for forced oral sex on those women."

Slowly, painfully, something shifted within me. I recounted every detail to this man, who I'd never met in person. The conversation was brutal. It wasn't just a rape, I realized. Not that there's such a thing as "just a rape." Todd was my friend's boyfriend. All those years I couldn't forgive myself, because I wasn't able to shut his ass down in that moment and make him pause before he tried it with another man. So many demons to work through.

Over 25 percent of men in the United States will experience contact sexual violence in their lifetime, according to the National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey developed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Only a quarter of them will report it to the

police. The actual number is likely higher, given the stigma attached to reporting sexual violence.

That stigma isolated me from the many other gay men who share my experience. What a loss for all of us to be separated by our silence. Over the past four years, my new friend from the dating app helped me to speak in public about my rape, and I realized there was no healing without sharing. At the root of how living beings connect is vulnerability, and I can't have intimate connection without being vulnerable.

I'm now fifty-one years old. I am no longer darting around the edges of relationship and trust. No more do I think that going back into the closet is better than living a gay life. I will admit that, after I learned that Pat and Todd moved to Mexico and opened a gay bed and breakfast, it did set me back. When I went to their website and scrolled through photos of the rooms, I wanted to strangle myself. Instead, reading guest comments about how Todd and Pat made the stay so comfortable and enjoyable drove me to write this essay. Leaving America hasn't absolved Todd and Pat of their crimes. And my greatest fear is that living in Mexico will empower them to do it again. I can't allow that to happen. I won't go back into the rape closet. I will not be silenced.