One of the Boys

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I interview my uncle, William Anderson, in his Toronto home on Queen West, just west of Dufferin. When I walk in, I see a new black-and-white photograph on my left: a dark-haired, serious-looking young man stands in a neck brace and a full leg cast in a formal, Victorian-style living room. He's naked. His penis drapes over the leg cast.

William informs me that it's the work of Chuck Samuels, from the artist's series, After the Masters.

"It's the artist's self re-enactment of a Helmut Newton photo, of a high fashion model after a car accident," he explains.

Before we chat, he pours soda water into a heavy 50s vintage Lalique tumbler and slides it over to me, snaps open a Pilsner Urquell for his own tumbler, then settles into a chair on the other side of a ten-foot long glass table. He frequently bends down to run his hand over his Basenji dog, Hershey.

During the interview, I glance at a few curiosities around William's storefront studio apartment: Greater Kudu antlers spiral up the wall; a vintage Scandinavian red-metal lampshade hangs from the high mustard-coloured ceiling, elegant and reminiscent of children weaving together construction paper for a Christmas tree; and a canvas glove with caribou antler fingers rests on a wall-mounted burnt and broken chair frame by artist Gord Peterman. Stacks and stacks of

design magazines sit on the floor. A glamorous Graydon Dyck portrait of my grandmother in younger days stands out among the expanse of eclectic paintings, photographs and objects. From the ceiling hang two Calderesque mobiles and three wildly contrasting chandeliers.

After transcribing our taped interview, the following story is my rendition of William's voice.

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I was born in 1951 and, since I was five years old, or as long as I can remember, I always knew that I was attracted to men.

I grew up in the Anderson family, the youngest of four children, each arriving precisely two years after the other: First, Robert George, then Mary Lynn and Margaret Joy, and finally, me, William John Clayton. I'm not sure why I got an extra name. During my childhood we lived twenty miles outside of Windsor, two miles outside of the small town of Puce, our old home resting on the shores of Lake St. Clair. Two acres of land extended around us, with farmland across the road.

I took for granted my growing up experience as "normal" but, in retrospect, it was far from normal in that we were a very stable, upper middle-class family that seemed like it would be there as long as you needed. As I've since learned, we were also considered somewhat eccentric. My mother, Mary, who always looked great, was home fulltime to raise us children following her early career as a nurse and one of TCA's first stewardesses. She was like Betty Crocker on speed. My father, Andy, was a busy, well-respected urologist in the Windsor community. There were no apparent crises, no hardships, no clear threats, no traumas. Well, the house burnt down twice, but oddly enough, that wasn't traumatic, at least not for me. It was simply, "Well, here we are with the house burning down. Now where do we go?" And my brother, in fact, blew three fingers off his right hand playing with dynamite. It seemed to me that we managed those things in stride—my brother even continued to play the piano.
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We were surrounded by a secure, friendly, immediate neighbourhood: my friends, Pamela Wachna and her family down the beach and Luciania Zanier and her family up the road; the Deans over to one side; and the seasonal Americans with their year-round gardener, Freddie, on the other. I knew I was welcome and safe in all of those places—any time. Winter was especially quiet as the Americans next door left for six months.

Being the last one at home during my adolescence in the mid to late sixties, I had full use of my mother's dark green Ford Thunderbird to drive to school and get around. Suicide doors and opera lights! I was in heaven. While I experienced the comfort, quiet and solitude of a rural upbringing, I was also familiar with Windsor and Detroit. Detroit was big, booming and sophisticated—a beautiful, classic American city, laid out in a spoke pattern, that overshadowed the seemingly distant and inconsequential Toronto of those days. It boasted the Detroit Institute of the Arts, Saks Fifth Avenue and the elite neighbourhood of Gross Point. Before I could drive, Detroit was only two bus rides away.

I went to high school in Walkerville, an affluent and historic area of Windsor. It contained a much larger pool of students than I had known at Puce Public School—mostly the children of other professionals. There was money for summer camps and shopping and motor boats. At Walkerville, my friends and I grew up with the assumption that we would all go to university and it would be paid for by our parents. We presumed ourselves equipped with sufficient intelligence, and trusted that a certain level of stability and professionalism would surely undergird our entire lives.

At Walkerville C.I., group social activity overshadowed dating. At lunch break, five or six of us often piled into someone's car and smoked cigarettes, or a handful of us would wander over to the Sanderson's house to watch soap operas. On weekends, we had drinking parties wherever parents were away. Failing a home free of parental supervision, we hit the abandoned drive-in. There were some kids who dated

and coupled up, but that wasn't prominent. If anyone was having sex, it wasn't a topic of much interest. As I still lived a twenty-minute drive into the country, I was also somewhat of an outsider. It was not unusual for me to be single. I was popular enough. There wasn't any reason to think I needed a girlfriend. Nobody expected that. We were always in groups.

Once a year, Walkerville held a Sadie Hawkin's semi-formal. In eleventh grade, I attended with Mary Mackenzie and experienced my first kiss. I thought, "Oh, this is what this is all about. Pleasant enough, but no big deal." I didn't think, "Oh, wow, this is what I've been waiting for." That was no surprise. I found women glamorous, but I was never attracted to them. They were a completely different species. Erotic for me was masculine: hair on the arms, stubble, the sharp lines and angles of men.

I remember having a crush on my handsome science teacher in public school and I remember a boy named Russell. As young teens, Russell and I went on a ski trip to Michigan one day and he slept over at my home that night. I was so excited. My crushes were not overtly sexual, but the attraction was there and felt completely comfortable—natural.

Perhaps a small role in my self-acceptance was that my family was technically Presbyterian—only by virtue of St. Andrew being the church nearest our home. Being a Presbyterian was easy. All you had to do was stand up and sing.

From my point of view, sin didn't exist—and, if it did, I could never be culpable. What could I ever do that would be a sin? Other than murder somebody or cheat someone. It was not like the Catholic upbringing of my friend, Luciana, where she was overtly informed that sin is all-pervasive, requiring weekly confession. Nobody told me I was bad. To the contrary, I grew up with security and positivity, protected by the containment of my lakeside home.

I didn't discuss my attraction to men with anyone. I had no "best" friend or intimate sibling with whom I shared my inner thoughts or passions, just the easy camaraderie of my neighbourhood friends.

At school, there was no reference to homosexuality. That concept, that word, didn't show up. I don't remember negative slurs. In public school, there were boys showing off their newly sprouted pubic hair, but no one seemed to see that as unusual or abhorrent behaviour.

Though we didn't know it at the time, decades later, we realized that Walkerville C.I. had sported a remarkably high number of gay kids. Two younger guys had even pulled off a secret long-term affair at the time. I didn't have my first meaningful, romantic, sexual encounter with a man until I was twenty-one. I've never regretted not being sexual earlier. I don't feel that I missed anything. I've had more than enough time to catch up.

I never really thought about homosexuality that much. I didn't intensely ponder if there were other people like me. I was just the way I was. I remember being thirteen or fourteen and taking the bus over to Detroit with a friend. We passed by a square with bookseller stands. In one booth, I saw a book with a cover illustration of young men in prison leering at each other in their underwear. It was quite obvious that something sexual was going on. Seeing that book was the first time I realized that my attractions were not that unusual or unique. It wasn't, "Oh, this is reassuring." It was, "Oh! This is available!" Still, I recognized the element of taboo. I didn't have the nerve to buy the book.

During my childhood and adolescent years, while no one ever said the word *gay,* I do remember adult talk of "The Boys." There was Pierce Letner, the jeweller; O'Neill, the decorator; and the hairdresser who my mother went to in Detroit's Gross Point.

My parents returned from occasional parties and talked about who was there: so and so and so and so and—The Boys. It was never derogatory. My father never slandered anybody, other than psychiatrists.

The Boys were invited to all of the cocktail parties, just like the other respected local professionals.

Back then, there were gay people all over the place, but people didn't talk about it. They just left it alone. When two women lived together, they were considered "spinsters," and when two men lived together, they were just two of The Boys. Later on, Windsor had a gay bar or two, and Detroit definitely had a number of them. In my protected upbringing, I had no idea that homosexuality was technically considered a psychiatric illness or that, while I graduated from high school in late June 1969, gay men were resisting police oppression and rioting at the Stonewall Inn, in New York City.

After high school, I left Windsor to study architecture at the University of Toronto. During the first year, I had a growing awareness of my sexuality, but I felt no urgency to express it. I had a couple of exciting, pseudosexual experiences, but I didn't "come out" at that time.

I then headed off for a year of travel, touring England, Scotland, Ireland and Africa. It was during these travels that I explored my sexuality more deeply. I remember camping in the Sahara, sitting around a campfire, revelling in the utterly unfamiliar, almost surreal setting, when I encountered the most handsome creature I'd ever seen: a Tuareg man, maybe my age, probably younger. The nomadic Tuareg were known in their parts as "the blue people," with their unique indigo-coloured garments and Caucasian features. Nothing happened between that young man and me, but my eyes took in his exquisite beauty. It was one of the first times that physical attraction captivated me so entirely.

Soon after that, hanging around the Island of Lamu off the coast of Kenya, I thought, "Well, I'm old enough. I should do something about this sexual business." There was an almost obligatory heterosexual encounter with slender, boyish Brit Cozy Pavalko, who was sexually experienced way beyond me and who later became a San Francisco sexual tutor, involved in women's rights and goddess rituals and all the rest of it. Hormones worked and we went through with it, but it wasn't that in-

teresting to me—at all. So, that was that. We travelled back to Nairobi together, en route to London.

Prior to departing Kenya, it was arranged that I would stay at a mutual friend's London flat for one night before settling into more permanent lodging elsewhere. I showed up at the designated address with a bottle of scotch and a substantive bag of African marijuana tucked into my backpack. I knocked on the door, and—wow! Michael Parish stood before me, an all-American advertiser with wavy blonde hair, shining white teeth and blue eyes that lit up as much as mine must have done. For the first evening, we sat around, drank scotch, smoked a joint and chatted. The whole thing was very charming. There was real electricity, from my point of view, but I thought, "What do I know?" When I was weak with exhaustion and Michael hadn't specified where I was to sleep, I finally excused myself and slept alone in a guest room.

The next day, I made an excuse to stay at Michael's one more night. I just knew within myself that there was unfinished business. That second night, we re-enacted the routine of the previous evening and, getting late, I realized, "Hey—this is my last chance here!" It suddenly seemed very simple and I blurted out, "I think I'd like to kiss you." He was more than happy to oblige and everything fell naturally into place. We spent the night in his room and I was introduced to one of the alternative uses of Corn Husker's Lotion.

That affair lasted about a month. I grew bored. I was curious about whatever this new life had to offer and I was not about to settle down. I went to London bars and nightclubs and spent time with my friends. One night, out late to buy cigarettes, a Rolls Royce with three attractive men pulled up and they offered me a ride. What a ride! Off to a Belgravia apartment larger than I had ever seen. I was handed a tumbler full of scotch and given the grand tour which naturally ended in the bedroom. With my scotch half-finished, it wasn't long before we were all in bed—also the largest I'd ever seen.

While exhilarating, the incident left me feeling estranged from myself. Feeling the need to reconnect with something familiar, I called my parents.

"I've always been honest with you. I just called to tell you I'm homosexual."

After I disclosed my homosexuality, my upset completely dissolved because it sounded so silly when talking about it. My parents were absolutely speechless and far more distraught than I had been. It may seem naïve, but I hadn't realized that they would be so reactive. My feelings suddenly paled in comparison. My parents were particularly concerned that I was exploring this new emotional territory in a foreign country. Mother and Father exclaimed, "What?! You should come home immediately. We have to take care of this!" Their alarm made me feel stronger and more comfortable where I was. However, they insisted I come home. I finally relented.

"I'll only come for the weekend if you agree to give me money to fly back to England for the rest of the summer."

Expecting to be refinanced, I promptly spent my available funds on three pairs of spectacular platform shoes and flew home.

Once I arrived in Ontario, my parents expressed, "We'll get you a psychologist. We'll get you a psychiatrist."

I told them, "I'm fine, I don't need counselling, and I'm happy." I apologized for causing alarm. When I requested the agreed upon money for my return trip, it quickly became apparent that they weren't about to finance my return to Sodom.

In response, I picked up a six-week job, earned enough to get back to London for a few weeks, and then resumed my studies at U of T that fall.

My parents' reaction of trying to "help me" was a little off track but, you know, that only lasted a few months. I think they were reassured to see me home from London and refocused on my studies. The issue of my sexuality soon fell to the background. My father died a few months

after my return to Toronto and, judging by the nature of our conversations, I think he recognized my capabilities and developed a confidence in my decision-making. I sense that my ability to stand up for myself and give voice to this aspect of my adult identity actually garnered his respect.

My mother was concerned that I was embarking on a path divergent from the dominant cultural norms. She later told me that she hadn't been aware of homosexuality until her thirties. She hadn't even known it existed! But then, as a little girl on the prairies, she thought that all "Chinamen" had knives hidden up their sleeves. She once expressed her thought that the gay lifestyle was all about lurking in alleys seeking sex. I didn't indicate at the time that I thought, "That sounds fun to me!" However, she quickly moved beyond all of that, and was soon comfortable welcoming my gay friends and lovers into her home. Over the years, she gained a reputation among my close companions as a most dynamic, inclusive hostess, garnering enduring affection and respect.

I remember telling my oldest sister, Mary Lynn, that I was home from my travels because I had told mother and father over the phone that I was gay. She wasn't surprised. If anything, the whole thing became quite anticlimactic. You know, here I was, anticipating making this announcement to my friends and contacts: "Here I am. I've put a piece of the puzzle together. Aren't you surprised?" After my parents' initial shock, I prepared for an array of dramatic responses. But no one seemed to care. It really wasn't a big deal at all.

And that was pretty much it. Shortly after that, I was introduced to all kinds of gay people, so many personalities. It never dawned on me that there should be any gay norms or role models. My experience was that some gay people seemed normal, some eccentric, some had money, some didn't, and we were of all ages.

A year or two into my undergraduate studies, I became friends with a remarkable character: Murray Cooper. Murray had left Bancroft, Ontario, at age sixteen and established himself as a well-known hair

and make-up artist and exceptional drag queen. He founded one of Toronto's original gay night clubs, Momma Cooper's. It was all very glamorous in those days. Murray knew the ropes and guided me away from potential trouble. I was remarkably free from the harassment or discrimination that some gay men experienced in those days. What I liked was that we were part of the same underground community, one that was exciting and full of life and drama. Freed from typical scripts, people expressed themselves in very liberated, unique ways. There was something quite sparkling about it all.

In the decades since, by lifting the cover off of that subversive underground scene, the sunlight came in and somehow demeaned the mysterious, magical richness of those times. Pulling the curtain back on it all is like turning the lights on after last call. Suddenly you think, "Ay-yay-yay, this isn't so pretty"—when, in fact, that subculture and those times were really special. I count my blessings for having lived through a very charmed time in history.