

Chapter 12: A New Love

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

After the GALA V festival, the GALA Choruses on-line mailing list was buzzing with excitement generated by attending the festival. Each day saw dozens of posts to this list. New people joined the list, high from the festival and wanting to talk about it with others who'd been there. One woman who joined the list, Melanie, was particularly excited and effervescent. I loved her brash humor on the list, but thought her a bit over the top and wasn't sure quite how to take her. I'd developed a close e-mail correspondence with another woman in the same chorus, Ellen, so I asked her about Melanie. Ellen affirmed that Melanie was "good folks," so I began a private correspondence with Melanie, as I liked her style.

Melanie and I grew closer through e-mail, and she told me her life story. It was a tear-jerker. She'd been married for years, and realized she was a lesbian when she fell "in lust" with a younger woman in her small midwestern town and had an affair. She left her husband and moved to a nearby large city, eventually settling into a long-term relationship with a woman.

She had always felt keenly the loss of her only child, her son James, in a custody battle with her ex-husband. Judges in the midwest rarely grant full custody to a queer couple, though James had expressed a clear desire to live with his mother. I was intrigued by this woman, and she by me. I told her my story, also, and she was appropriately supportive. Our e-mail correspondence quickly became the most important thing in either of our daily lives.

I took a few days off from e-mail to attend the second FTM conference, in

Seattle, and had a wonderful time. Alan was there, and it didn't matter. I didn't feel compelled to either approach or avoid him. And I was able to meet several of my e-mail correspondents, which was affirming. One of those correspondents was Kate Bornstein, and we realized we had an affinity that has lasted, though we have rarely met or corresponded since that time. I will never forget that when I sat next to her and introduced myself, she said, "Reid! You are positively brilliant!" and flung her arms around me. I was very taken aback, and said, "Well, so are you!"

I remember that particular FTM conference with joy, meeting some FTMs who had just started hormones shortly before the conference. We only ever meet at conferences, and this enables me to mark their progress. One FTM, Roland, had been a member of the Seattle Women's Ensemble at the time we co-produced the "Under One Sky" concert, back during Judy's revelations to me. I could not place Roland until he said, "I was the one who brought the coffee to the planning meetings." Then I knew immediately who he'd been. It felt wonderful to be able to talk about losing my voice with this former chorister, who would understand how I felt about the Choir. The one thing I did not talk with anyone about was my growing love for Melanie. I was so unsure of myself, knowing that she had an image in her mind of me as male while I was still very female in body.

One evening in mid-August, Melanie got into an altercation with a rude man on the GALA Choruses list. She was in tears at some of the things he'd written about her and posted to the entire list. I was attempting to console her, and our e-mail exchanges grew quite passionate. I realized at one point that not only was I in love with her, but that this

feeling seemed to be mutual.

Daringly taking the plunge, I e-mailed her that I'd obviously fallen in love with her. Her computer had bombed out, however, before she received this e-mail. She called me instead, and for the first time we talked on the telephone instead of via e-mail. We did not speak of love that first evening on the phone, but she replied to my e-mail the next day by confessing her love for me, also. Thus began a very intense e-mail relationship that I felt powerless to avoid, though I felt guilty because I knew she was already in a relationship. It didn't matter that she was very unhappy with her relationship, I still felt guilty, as I'd never been one to have affairs with married women.

Melanie was planning to visit the Names Project Quilt display in October, 1996. In mid-September, we had an especially passionate exchange of e-mails and she sent me a last late-night post that said simply, "Come to D.C." repeated over and over. I weakened, and finally said I would, though I knew it was financially irresponsible. I was unable to resist this new love I felt, and I had to meet her. I had to know if this was real or not, I had to know one way or another.

I made a plane reservation the next day, and managed with some difficulty to find a vacant hotel room. D.C. was going to be packed that weekend, as this was the last time the entire Quilt would ever be displayed in one place. Sadly, it had gotten too big. It was indicative of my focus on Melanie that I thought of this trip to D.C. as an opportunity to meet this woman who had captured my heart, without giving much thought to the Quilt itself. This, despite the fact that Bridges had made a panel for its two deceased members, which would be part of the display.

It was icing on the cake for me that my

other friend from Melanie's chorus, Ellen, was also going to be in D.C. She and I had connected briefly at GALA, but this was before I'd come out to her, and we had become much closer e-mail correspondents since that time. Ellen was a former drug addict over ten years clean at the time, and when she found out I was transitioning, she told me that she thought doing a recovery program was a similarly deep process to transition. At the time, I had not gone far enough with my transition to know whether or not she was right, though it seemed logical to me. Now, having gone as far as I have and having studied addictions more closely, I find I wholeheartedly agree with her. There are elements of process that are strikingly similar.

One evening in late September, Melanie and I talked for three hours on the phone. This had become normal for us on the rare occasions when we indulged in a phone conversation. Phone calls were cheaper for me than our marathon e-mail sessions, as this was before e-mail providers switched from hourly rates to a flat monthly fee for their services.

At about 11:00 my time, Melanie heard the click that announces another call coming in. She thought it was her partner calling to say she was heading home, so she clicked off with irritation to take the call. Bridges used to sing a Sweet Honey in the Rock song that will always make me think of Melanie in that moment when she clicked back on:

*Cain't no one know at sunrise
how this day is going to end.
Cain't no one know at sunset
if the next day will begin.
In this world of trouble and woe,
a member had better be ready to go.
We look for things to stay the same,
but in the twinkling of an eye,*

everything can be changed.
(from "Spiritual," Ysaye Barnwell)

Melanie's ex-husband had called to say their only son, James, who had just turned 15 that summer, had been killed in a boating accident that evening.

Of course, Melanie was hysterical. 2,500 miles away from this woman I'd fallen in love with, I was the first to hear the news of James' death and was powerless to help Melanie in any way whatsoever. I had never felt so helpless in my life. I wanted her to stay on the line with me until her partner arrived home, but she had to take action, to call her parents with the horrible news.

As her ex-husband lived in a small town some 200 miles away, I knew Melanie was going to be out of touch with me for days. The thought was unbearable. It was all I could do not to hop the next flight, though I knew that would be counterproductive, to say the least. No one in Melanie's life knew about me (except Ellen), and this was certainly not the time to disrupt Melanie's precarious hold on sanity by threatening her relationship.

Melanie did manage to call me from her motel room early Sunday morning, but our conversation was subdued and brief. It was a tremendous relief to me that she seemed to be holding up under the stress, though she told me she had nearly attacked an elderly female relative who had had the temerity to question the propriety of Melanie's lesbian partner being present.

When Melanie returned from the funeral, I sensed an immediate difference in her attitude toward me. Of course I should have broken off our affair and shifted into the role of supportive friend. The last thing Melanie needed at that time was any further losses in her life, which left me in a quandary. Losing

me would also constitute a loss. Losing her partner would constitute a loss of stability, however, something she needed badly.

I was also ambivalent about my impending trip to D.C. I no longer wanted to go, feeling that it was inappropriate for us to continue our affair, yet I knew that Melanie would have a very difficult time viewing the Quilt during this time of intense grief, and I wanted to support her.

Ultimately, I just could not stay away from D.C. and ended up spending two days with Melanie. I had an interesting time of it. I realized as soon as we met that the chemistry simply was not there for a sexual relationship, yet I found old patterns kicking in immediately. It was clear to me that Melanie was completely withdrawn from life at the time, that she was a shell of her former self, locked in her grief for James. I did not have the strength or boundaries to understand this was not at all about me, and I clung to her that weekend. Even though I wasn't that attracted to her physically, I still wanted her to love me!

It did not help my self-esteem that Melanie could not get past my female appearance to see me as an FTM. I had begun to visualize myself male, but Melanie just couldn't see it. She slipped on pronouns a few times, which she had never done during our e-mail correspondence or on the phone (though my voice was still female). At this point, I realized how important it had become to me that friends and family use correct pronouns for me, at this most vulnerable time in my transition. Every "she" that came out of Melanie's mouth was like a stab in the heart, coming from someone I loved and who had seen such a vulnerable side of me.

I knew Melanie had been changed so irrevocably that she was not going to want

the same kind of contact with me once we'd returned to our respective cities. I realized even then how neurotic my attachment to her was – here I had concrete evidence that the physical chemistry between us was non-existent, yet I was clinging to the on-line love we'd had as if we actually had been lovers and were breaking up!

The only bright spot about that trip to D.C. is that my other friend from Melanie's chorus, Ellen, was in town on a business trip. Melanie's partner flew in to meet her toward the end of the weekend, and I spent that last afternoon and evening with Ellen. We'd had a very strong on-line connection, and I found it was just as strong in person.

Ironically, my bond with Ellen in person matched our on-line bond in a way my bond with Melanie did not. I will never know whether Melanie and I would have hit it off in person had James not died, but I doubt it. The physical attraction that is so fundamental to any love relationship just wasn't there.

It's a measure of how un-centered I continued to be where love relationships are concerned, following my life-long pattern, that I spent less emotional energy on the Quilt than I did on Melanie. Yet one of my choruses, Bridges, had a quilt panel, in memory of the two Bridges members who have died of AIDS. I did find the panel and paid homage to Trent Gagnon and Ron Hale, but my primary focus was still on Melanie.

That focus was bound up in James's death, however, and I don't know that I would have been quite so caught up in Melanie during that visit to D.C. had it not been for James. Death had been on my mind for about a year at that point, following my near-suicide the previous summer, and I never looked at it the same way again. Once a person has had a personal visitation with

Death, it's not possible to look on another's death with detachment. My feelings for Melanie made it more personal yet, but I have found in the ensuing years that news of death always brings tears to my eyes. I experience it personally whenever I hear of it, regardless of any connection to the person who died.

When we were parting, I was near tears when I whispered to her, "Goodbye, Melanie." Of course, I was saying goodbye to the on-line relationship we'd had, knowing it would never be the same again. She was a bit startled by the intensity of my goodbye, not seeing it as dramatically as I did. She was still shell-shocked about James' death and I don't think she'd seen what I had, that her focus was returning to her partner and that whatever problems they'd had before James' death, they were going to work out. My rational mind knew that Melanie would have a breakdown if anything else in her life changed, if she experienced any more loss. Losing me was a mere blip compared to the fall-out she would experience if her relationship of nine years ended. (I found out recently that they broke up within a few months of James' death. One of the most stressful tests of a marriage is the death of a child.)

I felt so alone on that long cross-country flight back to Portland. Ironically, I had a layover in Melanie's city. I tried to call her from the airport, but got a recording. Here I was, having said goodbye to the relationship, still trying to call her!

When I got home, I tried to re-establish our old on-line camaraderie, but something had shifted in her as well as in me. I tried denying the shift to myself, clinging to our old paradigm, but Melanie did not try to deny it. I'm sure many have experienced a similar pattern – it's over, you know it's over,

yet you keep clinging, trying to hold on.

Eventually, Melanie grew angry with me, and cut off communication. I still kept her on my jokes e-mail list, however, as she'd said she needed things that would make her laugh. I also sent her occasional cards, letting her know I had not forgotten her pain. Though I was not sending her personal e-mail any longer, I was still clinging!

The last straw for her was when I sent her a card near Mother's Day, 1997, trying to support her by letting her know I knew this day must be hard for her. She sent me a very terse e-mail, the first in nearly five months, asking me not to contact her again. My very name, and most especially my e-mail address, only reminded her that it had been me she was talking with the night she found out about James. That's all she thought of every time she saw my e-mail address. I was crushed.

The irony did not escape me that had we not become involved to the extent we did, we would both still have the benefit of our friendship, the very warm and supportive relationship we'd had before we stepped over the line. Given her childhood upbringing in a very conservative religion, Melanie never lost her sense of guilt and transgression over our affair, and that tainted any support she might have been able to receive from me. And I had been able to give her considerable support in the past. But no more.

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