1001 Beds
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As someone who has spent my whole adult life writing and performing stories from my experience, the gnarly terrain of memoir is both a favorite comfy chair and a particularly scary attic room. I have bounced between both the exquisite pleasures and pitfalls that are inevitably part of the encounter with one’s life and memory. I have put myself (and, of course, my boyfriends) through the most detailed public revelations of the psychic, emotional, and sexual autobiographical narratives to which the flesh is heir. I sometimes have to remind myself that not everyone could tolerate their lives being on display like this. Most people sensibly maintain some pretty fixed boundaries about what is and is not available for public consumption. To “rim and tell” loudmouths like me, these boundaries just function as a tempting dare to dive into what I hope might be a deeper, more naked truth.

I have kept a journal consistently since I was in fifth grade. The fact that I first picked up a spiral notebook at the age of ten and began writing daily about what happened to me is every bit as important a detail about who I am as the fact that when I was fourteen I realized that I was gay and that it was my fate to love the boy next door. I would hazard that my need as a young boy-child to document my story was tightly bound up with the inchoate inkling that I would soon also have to rewrite their story, the heterosexual
narrative! Long before I began dressing like Oscar Wilde when I was fifteen, the impulse to write my memoir was my first declaration to the world that I was here and before too long would also be queer.

My favorite book during that revelatory Wildean sophomore year of high school was the *Confessions* of Jean Jacques Rousseau. (This should have tipped everyone off right then that I was destined to be a naked performance artist!) I suppose I was inspired by Rousseau’s urgent need in his *Confessions* to spill all the beans: his obsessive masturbation, his penchant for indecent exposure in public parks, and so on. I learned that as salubrious as it is to spew those gargabanzos in the privacy of your own three-ring binder, it’s even better to spread them out à la carte for all to see. Since the moment I did my first feverish scribblings in my gay boy’s adolescent journal, the crazed scrawl as panicky as a seismograph after an 8.1 earthquake, I have always seen writing about my life to be a fundamental act of knowing myself, of claiming space, and of simple survival. The act of remembering and sharing that memory with others became a crucial way to survive the shit that the world would strew in my path. I figured that if Rousseau’s autobiographical ranting could start the French Revolution, my own might at least get me through high school so I could finally find a boyfriend.

Speaking of boyfriends, I have been writing a lot these days about my relationship with my lover, Alistair. Since he is from Australia, an antipodal land where people are not “blessed” by U.S. citizenship, for many years we have been dealing with the septic tank of homophobic INS rules and regulations that determine how we can make a life together. This is quite a challenge on top of negotiating the garden-variety difficulties that any two men have in trying to relate to each other. Since I keep trying to stay true to my crazy notion that I should always write about what is most truly on the front burner in my life, I am naturally trying to get down on paper in the book I’m currently writing the steak tartar of feelings that this existential bina- tional relationship is bringing up. Alistair and I have had to fling ourselves around the globe trying to get papers in order so that our
love for each other could find a place to grow. You can forget such luxuries as wall-to-wall carpeting and a room with a view. We just want to be in the same time zone!

This sometimes overwhelming international dilemma has tapped me back into a kind of faith I had as a tortured gay teenager, that if I wrote about the hard stuff in my life, it just might make the situation better. During the rigors of individuating as a gay boy in hate-filled America, I had somehow begun to believe that the act of writing about life might be a way to find the potential to transform it. If the truth be told, I think I have never stopped believing this. Writing about my life has always carried the potential for liberation. Maybe the writing cure could now help me once again to get a lock on a very chaotic situation, the nagging fear that at some point Alistair will be forced to leave the country. This can really cut through a lot of writer’s block. I’m writing as fast as I can before his visa expires! I have never really lost this trust that the act of writing down my story somehow could alchemically affect how the story might end.

A moment ago I took a break from writing these words and stepped outside the house that Alistair and I share in Venice Beach. I decided that rather than dutifully try to meet my deadline, it was more important that I should spy on Alistair in his office, a small writing cabana next to our gurgling hot tub. Leaving my office with the computer humming its annoyance with my bad work habits, I made a quick detour to the kitchen for a reduced-fat granola bar (empty calories have been proven crucial to the memoir-writing process!) and turned the light off by the fridge before sneaking outdoors and down to the ugly powder-blue tile the previous owner of the house put down over his failed grass lawn. Alistair’s face is right behind the window of his writing fort. His mouth tenses as he searches for the right word, the exact association, the accessed feeling for the memoir that he is writing about his childhood. Several images on the bulletin board on the wall behind him frame Alistair’s face: a beautiful Sicilian boy, now long dead, photographed by Baron Von Gloeden; an image of Patti Smith in concert; a bold blood-red printout from one of the
many websites dedicated to Rimbaud. He brushes some hair off his forehead, perhaps thinking, “I’m not sure that I really like this long hair hanging in my face, but I know that Tim fetishizes the look, so I can live with it.”

He is probably writing from his own memory about the time when a magpie swooped down on him as a child, or about the first time that he came, or about a father who was so distant that he might as well have not existed. Whatever he is writing about, I can see it wander across his face. I, a literary Peeping Tom, try to see what’s going on with him so that I can then snare that moment and drag it kicking and screaming back into the house to write about it. I will do this to try to make sense of my chaotic life and to share what sense I may find there with an unsuspecting reader. This act of writing memoir is how Alistair is also doing his part to solve, for the present at least, our immigration problem. Alistair and I are able to be together in the United States because he has a student visa to do an MFA in creative nonfiction at Antioch University in Los Angeles. So, you see, this subject is near and dear to me, because the act of writing memoir is both the practical and the psychic mechanism for Alistair and me to share our lives together.

Peeking (all right, spying) at Alistair as he types away feels a lot like when I try to look at my own life so as to write about it. I take off my shoes, sneak up on myself very quietly. I don’t want to scare myself off. I pull out my machete and start to hack away at the tangled vines that block my view. I make decisions, have attacks of selective memory. Sometimes I am too easy on myself; the next moment I describe some ordinary selfish moment more brutally than it probably deserves.

As I look at Alistair writing away in his hut thousands of miles away from the land where he grew up, how can I hope in my own writing to get at the knotty tendons of how complex our real life is? Every time I try to write down anything from my memory, I am pulling the words out through a shrinking device that makes the feelings and the experience and the joys and the shit seem all vaguely
squeezed, like trying to coax the last bit of toothpaste (or KY for that matter!) out of the tube and onto your trembling toothbrush (or tumescent red-purple cock). Like Pepé Le Pew forever caught in the grasp of a Warner Brothers cartoon laundry wringer, I am in trouble every time I start to write down what has gone on in my life.

How can I describe the fall of even a single hair on Alistair’s forehead and hope to get anywhere near the ballpark of how tender and hard we can be with one another? When I write about the experiences and feelings that have come up from being in love with a man from another country, while living in a society that puts no value on such relationships, how can I get under the covers with the hurt that such a situation brings up inside me? Lately I often find myself crying at the drop of a hat whenever I actually allow myself to feel the pain of the fact that my partnership with Alistair is totally negated by my own country’s immigration laws, part of the platter of rights every heterosexual takes for granted. These tears are definitely welcome to this tightly wound WASP, and their salt is quite precious to me. Any arrangement of subjects and verbs I might find to describe this reality may well be insufficient by comparison to the actual wet feeling of the thing, yet I know I must keep trying to find these words, write them, fling them from the stage and the page, or I will go fucking nuts from anger and fear.

When I tell the stories from my life, I hope I can be at least a tiny bit as authentic and surprising as those tears that creep down my face when I least expect them, when something reminds me of this situation Alistair and I face. I want those tears to get the page wet and tell their own story of how much joy and hurt there is in loving a man from another land. Pushing beyond my bad writing habits (my Mixmaster metaphors, attraction to puns, and shameless hyperbole, for starters), I want to find the words that might invite you into this place where I live. I write these stories in the hope that someone else just might understand what it has felt like to walk around in my smelly shoes. On a good day, I can hold these stories in the palm of my palm, in a clear light, toward you.
I know that the words I squeeze out of the tube and onto the page will never be as true or wet as the messy experiences lived from day to day. There is such a sweet hopelessness in trying to write from your life, a built-in certainty that whatever you cull will not be as layered or true as what you go through in a single day. Inevitably, the act of writing will distill, edit, change, compress, compact, alter, disguise, enhance, and reduce the raw mess of living. But parallel to that is another magic trick at work. As real as those perils are, the writing of memoir can also hone, expose, reveal, connect, and dig up something from inside me that I can use to build a future.

I have a big story to tell right now. It fills my memory. It’s a story of how I met a man from another land and how I want to be with him. But my country, which I both love and hate, doesn’t allow such things. I need to tell this story or I will go crazy. When I write my story, I can howl out the rage I feel at both our medieval government and my own shortcomings as a man and a lover. I can draw attention to the injustice. As I write this story, it becomes a completely necessary act of looking at the past as a means of negotiating a more empowered and grounded relationship in an uncertain future. Each in our own way, Alistair and I are writing our memoirs of what has happened as a way of creating a future together.

I have a completely unsubstantiated faith that if I write this story, I may be able to affect how the story will end. I have always used the memories of things passed to rewrite the ending of what is to come. I have done this from that first moment that I picked up my spiral binder at the edge of ten and somehow knew that the queer boy star of my story was not going to end up hanging by his neck from a beam in our family’s detached suburban garage. I write these stories of who I have been to imagine who I might become. Writing memoir is a fierce act of imagining the future.