On the afternoon of Sunday, October 1, 1961, the Russos left Manhattan for the last time. Three of them would never live there again. One was already plotting his return.

With one ear tuned to the Yankees broadcast, twelve-year-old Charlie gazed westward. The young jock couldn’t wait to ditch East Harlem’s cramped streets for the fresh green grass of the Jersey fields. As Charlie watched the Palisades swell through the windshield, the radio suddenly squawked in triumph: right-fielder Roger Maris had just shattered Babe Ruth’s record by hitting his sixty-first homerun of the season. Charlie whooped with joy over Maris’s achievement—sixty-one homers in ’61. The youngest Russo sailed over the Hudson and into Jersey on a cloud.

In the front passenger seat, Annie grinned at her younger son’s glee and congratulated herself on giving him access to a world that her hometown could never offer. She glanced away from the Palisades and swiveled in her seat, her gaze drifting over Charlie’s head to the receding Manhattan skyline. Craning to the far right, Annie peered 110 blocks down the Henry Hudson Parkway to West 69th Street. For two years, the residential blocks of the West Sixties had been tumbling like dominoes in order to make room for the gleaming marble complex that would soon be Lincoln Center, the Juilliard School, and Fordham Law School. Annie’s eyes welled as she thought of the song that she and her sisters sang to each other while their homestead vanished. They borrowed the melody of “Back to Hawaii,” but their adapted lyrics were pure West Side:

It won’t be long before those little dumpy flats on 69th Street
Will be thrown down and then they’ll be no more.
Well I’m just a little Italian . . . a homesick ginny goil,
I wanna go back to my pasta and oil.
I wanna go back to my little dumpy flat on 69th Street.
With the bookies and the big mouths and the people I love so well.

Annie wiped her eyes. There was no point in getting sloppy. She was doing her duty. No more “nigger lover” taunts for Charlie; no more hoods to terrorize Vito. So what if she had never learned how to drive? Charles could chauffeur her anywhere she needed to go. She mustered a smile and turned back in her seat.

Charles fixed his eyes on the road and tried to concentrate. The pro-Yankees yelps echoing from the backseat were distracting, but Charles shared his younger son’s excitement and was overjoyed by the boy’s athletic gifts. He was less sanguine about this move. With the exception of his tour in Kansas, Charles had never lived beyond the five-block walk between his apartment and his mother’s in East Harlem. He could scarcely imagine how it would feel to fall asleep on a street that wasn’t still hopping with fistfights and craps games well past midnight. Still, the move offered irresistible advantages. For years now, on every late-night ride back from Paramus, Annie had badgered Charles with her wish to live and die in New Jersey. After nearly nineteen years of marriage, Charles still adored his wife and strove to do whatever he could to please her. He also had no desire for his sons to see him helpless as cop-hassling punks invaded their old block.

Which brought him to the matter of Vito. Now fifteen, the boy was a model student and had begun expressing himself with a literate vocabulary that Charles sometimes found impenetrable. That was okay; he was proud of the sharp mind that would guarantee his son a bright professional future. But there were other sides to Vito that Charles didn’t want to ponder at all. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. Vito was a good, healthy boy. He just needed a new environment away from certain influences.

From the backseat, Vito squinted at the Hudson glare while trying to ignore both the radio and his brother’s hysteria. Roger Who? Like Annie, he turned in his seat and stared through the rear window at his vanishing hometown. He tried to look on the bright side. He had always wanted to live in a house where he and Charlie could run down the stairs on Christmas morning to find presents awaiting them under the tree. Now that dream could become a reality.

Big deal. This move was a disaster. Jersey meant endless days in Paramus without a single subway to whisk him off to parts unknown. It also meant incurring the wrath of crabby neighbors when he innocently plucked flowers from their yards. What was all the commotion about? Nature, when you cared to notice it at all, was there for everyone’s enjoyment. Hadn’t these yahoos ever been to Central Park?

Then there was the change of schools. A year earlier, Vito had celebrated his eighth-grade graduation from Holy Rosary. That June, in his school keepsake book, he recorded his professional ambition: to become a journalist after
attending West Point. “Attending West Point” was code for “surrounding myself with handsome men”—a goal he achieved the following September. He enrolled as a freshman at the all-male Catholic high school Power Memorial Academy (PMA), where he would have been completely unimpressed to learn that one of his new school’s future alums was basketball great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. As far as Vito was concerned, PMA gave him a passport out of East Harlem and a daily excuse to explore Columbus Circle, where Lincoln Center’s construction kept everyone in a state of high anticipation. As an added bonus, just when Vito started at PMA, the West Side Story (1961) production team was setting up camp on his school’s very street to film the Sharks and Jets opening ballet sequence. For a filmstruck kid, no place outside Hollywood could be more exciting.

During his year at PMA, Vito often walked over to Central Park to share a lunch of hard-boiled eggs with his cousin Anna Romanello, who worked at nearby ABC. At their meals, she found him “always smiling” and “always happy” about his successes at school, where he made friends and flourished academically. After years of ducking home from Holy Rosary, Vito had finally found peace. He had no wish to leave it behind.

The Russos’ car was exiting the George Washington Bridge. Christmas was nearly three months off. Vito closed his eyes.

A few years before the Russos’ move, Lodi historian Lawrence C. Toscano composed a paean to his hometown. Here are two of eight stanzas from “Mister—We Are Proud of Lodi”:

Maybe your ancestors came on the Mayflower to our shores,  
And you feel that gives you the privilege to judge our criteria.  
But may I remind you that many of our people settled on San Salvadore.  
They came long ago on the ships, Nina, Pinta, and the Santa Maria.

But you see Mister, we claim no greatness of that age and Era.  
So cast no stones upon us and do not be too harsh and critical,  
Because we respect all people, love our country, our great America.  
Instead, extend to us your hand without being snobbish or cynical.

Toscano must have seen Vito coming. 

By the late 1950s, Lodi had a population of approximately twenty-one thousand, many of whom were employed at the nearby Wright Aeronautical Plant. When not at work, Lodi’s residents had at their disposal a wide range of social clubs (American Legion, Lodi Rotary, Lodi Kiwanis, Lodi Women’s Club, Lodi Boys’ Club) that interested Vito not in the slightest. He was aghast at his new town’s lack of diversion. In order to see a film, he had to endure a forty-minute bus ride to the nearest theaters, in Passaic or Hackensack. The closest live musical entertainment was accessible only by car. When the Russos arrived in New
Jersey, future Catwoman Julie Newmar was “pitch[ing] curves” in *Damn Yankees* at Cedar Grove’s Meadowbrook Dinner Theater; she was followed that season by Jack Carson in *The Music Man*, and Mamie Van Doren in *Wildcat*. This wasn’t Broadway by a long shot.

The Russos’ new home sat roughly a mile from the town’s commercial center. This distance presented no problem during clement weather, but as autumn froze into winter, it meant a bitter walk to the area’s shops and to Vito’s own sanctuary, the public library. He escaped for hours into reading, trying to forget that he’d landed, in his brother’s phrasing, in “*Ozzie and Harriet* and [*Leave It to*] *Beaver* territory.” In the weeks prior to the Russos’ arrival, Lodi’s two hottest news items had been “Police Issue More Than 300 [Parking] Tickets” and “Mayor Warns Young Main St. Loiterers,” that is, the teenage boys who sometimes congregated opposite Borough Hall after midnight, to go home. This was news? Vito couldn’t help summoning up Thelma Ritter as the caustic nurse in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954): “I’ve handled enough of [these] red pills to put everyone in Hackensack to sleep for the winter.” As far as Vito could tell, everyone in Lodi was still asleep from last winter, without the benefit of Nurse Ritter’s meds.

Luckily, Vito found plenty of excitement at home. Starting in October 1961 and stretching over the next twenty years, 24 Blueridge Road served as party central for the Russos, the Salernos, and countless friends of Vito and Charlie. By taking the suburban plunge, Charles and Annie gave their city-bound families access to a world they had only read about in *Life* or *Good Housekeeping*. Cars from the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan started lining up early Saturday morning. As guests piled out and wandered toward the dining room or backyard stone patio, they were greeted by the distinctly Italian stylings of Jimmy Roselli, Jerry Vale, Lou Monte, Louis Prima, Connie Francis, Dean Martin, “and of course the king, MR. SINATRA.”

As he had at the Old Mill picnic grounds, Charles served as principal chef. Summertime lunches were barbecue feasts of sausage and peppers, ribs, hot dogs, and hamburgers accompanied by a huge mozzarella, tomato, and red onion salad. Beer and wine flowed through the afternoon and into dinner, when Charles outdid himself weekly: linguine with white clam sauce and baked clams, platters of fried flounder filets, fried shrimp by the basket, spaghetti with tangy crab sauce, and, on special occasions, lobster gravy made fresh from Tommy Russo’s fish store in the Bronx. Even when Charles suffered layoffs, he was determined to share his new home in style. Parties lasted until after midnight, when younger visitors often didn’t want to accompany their parents back to New York. They begged to spend summer weeks at Aunt Annie’s, which was fine by her.

Nieces and nephews weren’t the only children present. The Russos’ house was located on a friendly block of small, look-alike Cape Cod homes whose tidy lawns teemed with kids around Vito and Charlie’s ages. Next door lived Dianne
Wondra, who was two years behind Vito in school, and whose best friend, Carol De Simone, came to consider the Russos’ her second home once she began dating Charlie. Carol spent many an afternoon dancing with him to Dion and the Belmonts records in the basement game room, which Charles had pieced together from eclectic materials picked up on construction jobs. She considered Annie a second mother, always ready to offer advice, and none of her other friends’ fathers could crack her up like Charles could.

For a time, Carol didn’t notice the fourth member of the household. In her mind, Vito was only her beau’s big brother, hardly worth a second glance—until the afternoon that he burst from his bedroom, one of Annie’s skirts draped over his shoulders, and came careening down the stairs, declaiming at the top of his lungs verses that he had lifted from some unidentified play or movie. Carol and Dianne looked up in wonder at this impromptu performance, realizing that a unique force had entered Lodi society. How would other kids respond to him?

In October 1961, Vito restarted his sophomore year at Lodi High School (LHS). The school was a rambling, relatively new (1934) structure with imposing Doric columns and a handsome white cupola atop the entrance. High, plentiful windows looked out on a wide green lawn sprinkled with young trees. Situated above the Saddle River, LHS gave Vito his first taste of a school not completely ringed by concrete.

He entered a class of 240 students, 2 of whom were black, the vast majority of whom were Italian, including 4 Russos. Lodi’s own Mayor Focarino was a member of the English department. LHS took pride in its well-educated faculty. During Vito’s junior year, 13.3 percent of New Jersey’s teachers lacked certification. At LHS, however, all thirty-two instructors held bachelor’s degrees, while nineteen had also earned their masters’.

If Vito was impressed by his new school’s academics, he gave a wide berth to its extracurricular activities and is notably absent from his sophomore and junior yearbooks. His eleventh-grade portrait shows a pale, scrawny boy in a black suit and tie. Disheveled hair and an extremely tentative grin give the impression that he arrived breathless at school and didn’t want to be photographed in the first place. His next appearance, shockingly, is as the newly crowned king of the junior prom, held at the upscale Bow and Arrow Manor in nearby West Orange. Charlie, who ended up prom king for his own sophomore and junior years, isn’t sure whether LHS students chose their royalty by election or random drawing, but he does remember that the honor made Vito and their parents very happy. It must have been a surprise to the boy who had kept a deliberately low profile for two years.

At the LHS of the early sixties, jocks ruled the roost, and it didn’t take them long to discover the new bookworm in their midst. It might be perfectly okay for athletes to don cheerleader drag for the Thanksgiving pep assembly, but woe to
any other boy who seemed less than a total he-man in gym class. Vito took considerable abuse, but he also found champions who protected him, ordering would-be tormentors, “Leave that guy alone.” His ethnicity may have earned him some safety. Carol De Simone jokes that “LODI” stands for “Lots of Dumb Italians,” who often vented their hostility on kids of other nationalities. As Vito’s Irish Mexican classmate Ronnie Giles recalls, “I was the only kid with red hair and freckles in a town filled with Guidos, Giuseppes, and Anthonys—and those were just the women. So I got the crap beat out of me regularly.” As a full-blooded Italian American, Vito may have accrued some default security. He may also have benefited from being Charlie Russo’s brother. What jock would attack anyone related to the little dynamo whose picture was already dominating local newspapers?

Vito began to emerge from his shell in jealous response to his brother’s phenomenal athletic successes. At his first basketball game, three seconds from the final buzzer, Charlie sank the winning basket and was engulfed by fans. At his first football game, he similarly scored the winning touchdown and was carried off the field on teammates’ shoulders. Lodi Thanksgivings meant ritual attendance at Charlie’s football games, with Annie and all the aunts decked out in corsages. Vito chafed at these massive shows of support for Charlie and shunned his brother’s games. He also resented bitterly the attention that Charlie earned from their father. More than a decade later, the wound still stung. “One thing I’ve seen very clearly,” he wrote, “is no matter how much I accomplish, it’s hard to let go of a need to be appreciated (approved of) by my father (who always expressed all his pride in my brother the athlete, coach, champ, etc.) . . . it’s . . . a nagging, pissed off feeling which manifests itself in a certain reckless hostility.” As a teenager, he struggled to tug some of the spotlight back from his little brother.

During his senior year, Vito became the exchange editor of the Jefferson News, LHS’s student paper. Assuming this position required some courage. One year earlier, the News editorial staff had been entirely female, while its business staff boasted one lone boy in a sea of girls. During Vito’s tenure, the numbers were slightly more balanced: five boys and seventeen girls on editorial, three boys and thirteen girls on business. Vito refused to let sexism keep him from his first byline. After submitting a favorable review of William Golding’s novel The Lord of the Flies (1955), he discovered that working on the News gave him a professional excuse for returning to Manhattan. He wangled the plum assignment of reviewing the new Broadway musical Oliver! In his virgin effort, Vito tried to engage readers’ senses directly: “The musical score makes you want to tap your feet and it literally puts you in just the right mood for the right scene.” Other features in the same issue do not carry Vito’s name but do bear his stamp: a note that Richard Burton, soon to open in Hamlet on Broadway, is filming Night of the Iguana in
New Mexico (actually Mexico); a survey seeking students’ opinions on the most popular movies of 1963 (the choices *Lawrence of Arabia* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are flanked by *Call Me Bwana*, *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, and *Gidget Goes to Rome*) and the most popular TV variety show of 1963 (*Judy Garland* heads the list of choices). Another question in the survey doesn’t sound at all like Vito but offers a vivid snapshot of Cold War paranoia distilled for high school consumption: “What do you think 1964 will bring to the United States?” Possibilities include “world leadership,” “we will get a man on the moon,” “we will be communistically controlled,” and “World War III.”

Vito’s work on the *News* made him more outgoing and better able to express himself orally as well as on paper. On the day of President Kennedy’s assassination, he raced through LHS corridors, pausing briefly at classroom doors to deliver the news. A few teachers got angry, thinking he was playing a tasteless joke. But most took it seriously because Vito had a reputation for reliability and intelligence. In Ronnie Giles’s Sales and Advertising class, nobody doubted what Vito had to say. As Ronnie puts it, “It was like those old . . . commercials: ‘When [E. F. Hutton] talks, people listen.’” By his senior year, Vito had accumulated enough credibility that his journalism teacher chose him as the sole LHS student to see the brand-new World’s Fair site in Flushing Meadow, Queens. Vito reported back to classmates on the beauty of the fair’s iconic Unisphere.

As his prominence grew, Vito nonetheless despaired of fitting in among Lodi youth whose tastes differed wildly from his. On the night of the Beatles’ February 1964 arrival in New York, he sat home, indifferent to the white-hot quartet. To his ears, the pop music that enthralled his classmates—anything by the Fab Four, the Kingsmen’s “Louie Louie,” the Angels’ “My Boyfriend’s Back,” Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons’ “Candy Girl,” Bobby Rydell’s “Swingin’ School”—could not compete with Garland’s torchy wail in “The Man That Got Away.” Still, eager to establish a playboy image, he threw a couple of decadent parties and got himself hauled into court when one of his guests damaged a neighbor’s property. The judge, a close friend of one of Charlie’s coaches, tossed the case out. On the surface, Vito was relieved, but the outcome troubled him. How many times would he have to depend on his little brother to get him out of a jam? When would he be able to defend himself without anyone’s assistance?

In the hermetically sealed world of 1964 Lodi, self-reliance was not easy for a gay adolescent. For the yearbook blurb accompanying his senior portrait, Vito listed as his likes “weekends, N.Y., vacations, and girls.” The latter was by no means wholly untrue; Vito was often more comfortable with female friends than he was with other males. But in deliberate echo of many boys in his class, he included “girls” in his roster in order to promote his heterosexuality among peers. In reality, his physical experience with girls was confined to some enjoyable
“doctor” sessions with a neighbor and two “steady” years with a classmate at Holy Rosary. “If that wasn’t love,” he insisted, “then there’s no such thing. I hung on this woman’s every word.”

In twelfth-grade homeroom, alphabetical order placed Vito Russo one seat ahead of Lucille Sanzero. Like Vito, Lucille was a Lodi transplant. She had come to Jersey at age twelve, when her family moved from Scranton, Pennsylvania. Also like Vito, Lucille considered herself a misfit. Younger than the majority of her classmates, she was a shy, bookish girl who deemed her time at LHS “some of the worst years of [her] life.” Lucille quickly learned that “the popular kids were very vocal towards those of us . . . who weren’t.” LHS girls were intensely cliquish and given to wearing initial-embossed sweaters to indicate who was socially acceptable and who wasn’t. Lucille’s darkly exotic, heavily Italian features cut her no slack with the school’s princesses, who scorned her avid study habits and turned study-hall periods into a nonstop nightmare of teasing. Her extremely strict parents also won her no points.

Shooting through this adolescent gloom, “the sun” entered Lucille’s life at the beginning of her senior year. When Vito took his homeroom seat in front of her, Lucille found herself fascinated by this painfully thin boy who always seemed to wear his pants too short and too tight. “He was enthusiastic, had boundless energy, had a zest for life—nothing bothered him; he was always happy . . . . People used to tease him. . . . I think they probably used the word ‘fag’ . . . and he outwardly brushed it off. It didn’t appear to bother him. That was another thing that impressed me about him. He was just his own person.” For his part, Vito was happy to chat up an articulate girl, particularly one who shared his aversion to “people who won’t let you argue,” the sole dislike that Lucille cited for her senior yearbook portrait. Vito was charmed by this smart cookie whose father, an employee of the Newark Star Ledger, inhabited the professional orbit to which Vito aspired. He and Lucille soon exchanged class rings.

Annie and Charles, no doubt relieved to see evidence of Vito’s interest in girls, welcomed Lucille and her parents into their home. Up in his bedroom, Lucille admired the wide-eyed Margaret Keane “waif” prints adorning Vito’s walls. She listened patiently to recitals of stories he had written and enjoyed his impressive collection of Garland albums, which he played, imitated, and dissected at length. How passionately Vito sang along to his records! “I can just see his ebullient personality talking about Judy. . . . He could do a fabulous impersonation with gestures—I can [still] see his broad, grand gestures of Judy singing.” Vito and Lucille’s relationship never quite reached an exchange of “I love you”s, but they did discuss the possibility of living in Manhattan after marriage. Vito also promised to squire Lucille to the Academy Awards when he got nominated for Best Original Screenplay.
Looking back on his relationship with Lucille, Vito—always more conversant in the dates of his favorite films than in the dates of his personal milestones—stretched the time of their dating from one to three years. He also claimed that they had sex. Lucille places their entire relationship within senior year and insists, with a laugh, that they “never got past first base.” Shortly after their graduation from LHS, Vito escorted Lucille home from a date. When she invited him in, they began kissing in a vestibule just past the front door. Emboldened, they climbed up to Lucille’s bedroom and continued making out, unaware that Mr. Sanzero had spotted them. Bedlam ensued. “My father tore open the door, began shouting at us, and threw Vito out. It was mortifying for both of us, and pretty much right after that was when he broke up with me.” Lucille was beyond bewildered; she could only assume that Vito’s embarrassment drove him away. Heartbroken, she wanted the relationship to continue.

Vito told a different story. Following the breakup, he turned to Carol De Simone for comfort. In Carol’s memory, Vito sobbed convulsively in her bedroom, devastated that Lucille had dumped him. Carol took his shattered word for it. Like Lucille, she never questioned what he was doing with a girl in the first place.

There is no reason to doubt Lucille’s version of events. There is, however, every reason to doubt Vito’s. By June 1964, on the eve of his eighteenth birthday, Vito realized that his future did not include heterosexual dating or marriage. He genuinely liked Lucille, but her father’s inopportune entrance gave him an excuse to end a relationship that he could not pursue. Fully aware of his homosexuality, Vito had become involved in gay circles both in and outside LHS. While dating Lucille, he was living the double life of most pre-Stonewall gay men. Typical of Vito, he did it with a flair that would have put men twice his age to shame.

Whenever Vito told the story of his coming-out, he invariably began with praise for New York City. He recognized that there were gay people living all over Manhattan and counted himself lucky that he “never had the experience that you always hear from so many lesbians and gay men of growing up in a small town where there were no other gay people and thinking that you were the only one in the world.” But even if he had not spent his first fifteen years in New York, Vito would not have suffered the isolation common to his gay generation. In his family were two older, openly gay cousins who provided him with the invaluable knowledge that gays were “we” rather than alien “they.” The family might not have spoken approvingly about these cousins, but they did speak about them—often—and language breeds reality.

As a little boy, Vito loved to toss water bags off the rooftop at 336 East 120th. His accomplices were cousins Maria “Chickie” Salerno, daughter of Annie’s brother Tony, and Vinny Percoco, Aunt Marie’s son. Annie whipped all three for...
the infraction, but Vito was willing to take any punishment for adventures with Chickie. Eleven years older than Vito, teenage Chickie “scandalized” her family with her butch appearance and the switchblade in her back pocket. Vito, on the other hand, “was just fascinated by her; [he] thought she was great!” He looked up to Chickie as “the classic ’50s dyke. You know, tough, black leather jacket, ducktail hairdo, slicked back with grease.” He listened with relish to tales of Chickie’s exploits in a girl gang and gleaned that she’d spent some of her adolescence in jail, though he was not quite sure of the cause. Her permanent decampment to California in 1957, when Vito was barely eleven years old, made it impossible for him to grill her for details.

Chickie’s full story is far more dramatic. When violence forced her out of the house at age fifteen, she took to the streets. Looking “like a little boy,” she lived in subways and hallways until a friend took her in. Chickie didn’t realize that this friend was hiding drugs in the apartment. She also didn’t know that said friend had packed drugs in the suitcase that she gave Chickie to take with her when she moved out. Subsequently arrested for not wearing three articles of women’s clothing, as per New York State law, Chickie slashed a cop with her switchblade when he began beating her female companion. Between the drugs, the assault on an officer, and clothing violations, she was remanded to the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility for Women, where she spent the next three years. Whether Vito ever learned the particulars of Chickie’s tale is unclear. But without question he adored this unapologetically lesbian cousin who asserted herself during a time when women of all orientations generally deferred to men.

Born in 1940, Vinny was six years older than Vito and a far greater influence on him. Omnisexual from puberty, at fifteen he nearly became a father (false alarm), contracted gonorrhea, and experimented, guilt free, with male friends. With his “overt distaste for authority,” Vinny wore a Star of David, gift of a trick, in the Italian Catholic West Sixties and sported hickeys, gifts of various tricks, all over his neck. Detectives caught Vinny with another boy and an older man, prompting beatings with a broom handle and a belt buckle from both his parents. Throughout the ordeal, Vinny maintained that he was not “molested,” that he genuinely liked his sex partners, and that whatever he did with them was absolutely “normal.”

Shortly after this confrontation, Vinny moved out of his parents’ apartment and in with his first boyfriend—in the same building, five stories below. His place became a nonstop party palace, one of whose most frequent visitors was little cousin Vito, agog at the clutch of sailors fresh off the Hudson and more gay men than he had ever seen in one place at one time. Among the throng was drag legend Lynne Carter, whom Vinny proudly introduced to Vito with the epithet, “It’s not a she; it’s a he!” By 1960, Carter was a fixture on the drag circuit. He numbered Pearl Bailey and Josephine Baker among his fans, had starred in New Jersey Boy
York’s notorious Jewel Box Revue drag show, and later played the Apollo, the Bon Soir, and Long Island’s Town and Country. He would eventually be the first female impersonator to sell out Carnegie Hall. When he met Vito, Carter favored the teenager with a rendition of “Leave Transylvania,” a vampire spoof from his latest show. The crowd at Vinny’s roared, and Vito realized he had found a second home.

Having openly gay relatives and acquaintances made it easier for Vito to acknowledge what he had already known about himself for years. He first realized his attraction to boys at age four and began scoping out Manhattan’s male scenery as soon as possible. Though he enjoyed shepherding Charlie to Freedomland and Yankee Stadium, once Vito realized that the subway ran downtown as well, he left his little brother behind to go exploring on his own.

One of his first destinations was the Museum of Natural History on West 77th Street, where he stared for hours at the dinosaurs and the famous battling squid and whale diorama. Of greater interest, however, was the unmistakable gay scene on adjacent Central Park West. In the early sixties, pioneering activist Dick Leitsch attested that the avenue from 59th to 86th streets “was one long bench from corner to corner, solid with gay men. Hundreds and thousands of them walked back and forth singularly, in couples, and in groups.” Frequent harassment from patrol cars—“Keep moving, faggots. Keep moving”—did not much dissuade the men, who simply pretended to vacate the area until the police had left. Some gay men, such as Vito’s future friend and fellow activist John Paul Hudson, found the scene too intimidating to join. “I would hunker down beneath the [museum’s] equestrian statue of Teddy Roosevelt in the protective shadow of his mighty steed’s magnificent balls and wistfully watch the big boys bravely promenading across the street on Central Park West. But I wouldn’t haul ass over, CPW being too close to the unknown for comfort.” Longing for connection, teenaged Vito stepped into the fragile community. “I would see men that I was interested in [and] talk to them and sometimes give them my phone number, but I was always too scared to do anything.” At least twice Vito approached men not because he found them attractive, but because they were clearly gay and he wanted to make contact. Spotting him for jailbait, the men remained aloof. When he confessed his age, they fled and left him feeling more cut off than ever.

During his last year at Holy Rosary, Vito found a confidant in Sister Jane Francis, the teacher who eventually left the order and the Catholic Church. He felt that he could talk with her about any issue. Except one. For weeks he wrestled with how to tell Sister Jane about a personal “problem” that he could not share with anyone else. But even with her, he could only hint at the problem; he lacked the language to name homosexuality beyond a dirty joke or a parkside proposition. Ultimately, he didn’t have to say anything. On one of their many
walks from Holy Rosary back to Vito’s apartment, Sister Jane abruptly remarked, “I got up in the middle of the night last night and I figured out what you were talking about and I said, ‘Oh, my God!’” Though she was no more direct than he, they knew that they were discussing the same topic. Realizing that it was probably “the first time she had ever even considered such a thing,” Vito marveled at Sister Jane’s ability to perceive his “terrible sin” without a single criticism. She was, as he commented with understatement, “pretty open-minded” for a 1960 nun.

Sister Jane provided Vito with badly needed adult sympathy. His parents reacted with horror when he began to explore his sexuality, especially since Annie suspected that a priest had already molested Vito. Extremely young at the time, Charlie remembers many heated conversations between Annie and her sisters over “that son-of-a-bitch” and what he had allegedly done to her son. He more clearly remembers a later episode in which his father discovered that a stepnephew living in their building had had sex with Vito. Charles had to be physically restrained after attacking the man on the street. This is surely the incident to which Vito was referring when he related that Charles “went out with a hatchet to look for some guy because [Vito] had sex with him.”

The notion of Vito’s homosexuality was simply more than Charles and Annie could accept. As an adult, Vito recalled, “[I had] a lot of confrontation with my parents, a lot of hurt, around that issue. Every time when I was ever sexual with another man . . . they found out about it . . . [and] it was incredibly traumatic.” The worst instance occurred when Charles discovered Vito with an older boy who had taken him to the movies and spent the night. At eleven, Vito was only “experimenting,” but to Charles, relative degrees of sexual involvement did not lessen the crime. Both Vito and his partner “got the shit kicked out of [them],” and Vito received “hysteria and screaming and lectures from [his] father about how dreadful this was and lectures from [his] aunt about how these people were the scum of the earth. . . . All these confrontations had this ominous ring to them: ‘These people’ were cursed by God and it was a sin and it was sick and ‘these people’ were perverted and how could [Vito] have anything to do with them?” For the time being, Vito didn’t answer such questions.

But he was developing a defiant insistence about his sexuality. No matter the pitch of his father’s rhetoric or violence, Vito refused to stop having sex with men. Thanks to an experience at church, he soon stopped honoring Catholic doctrine as well. “I went to confession and told this priest that I was having sex with this guy. And of course he recognized my voice because, you know, every week he was hearing me say this, so he says finally, ‘Look! Enough is enough! Next time I’m not giving you absolution.’” That did it. Vito thought to himself, “Who the hell cares if he doesn’t give me absolution? This is absurd!” He recognized that even when he had followed Church directives to “‘confess’ these
‘awful’ feelings, on some level [he] couldn’t believe a word of it.” With serene self-confidence, Vito realized that “there was nothing wrong with being gay, that [the church] was full of shit and this was all just a guilt trip.” He came to understand that if being gay “could be so natural to who [he] was, then it had to be okay. [He] also knew that [his] only real choice was whether to express it openly.” For a working-class, Italian Catholic teenager, this was a stunningly precocious conclusion to reach nearly a decade before Stonewall.

When Vito arrived in Lodi, he found no equivalent to Central Park West or Vinny’s apartment. In his isolation, he turned to his most reliable source of comfort: the movies. As luck would have it, American and British filmmakers were finally ready to deal openly with homosexuality. Of 1961’s cinematic output, Vito merrily noted: “The movies obviously grew up just in time for me.”

On February 23, 1962, an anguished shot of Shirley MacLaine appeared on the cover of Life magazine with the caption “A Tortured Role in a Daring New Movie.” The movie was The Children’s Hour, an adaptation of Lillian Hellman’s landmark play (1934) about two schoolteachers accused of lesbianism by a malicious student. When the story had been previously filmed as These Three (1936), the scandal was diluted to an allegation of heterosexual adultery. By 1962, Hollywood was ready to take Hellman’s story on its own terms. Life spotted similar boldness in the recent films The Mark (1961), the story of a heterosexual child molester (Stuart Whitman), and the British film Victim (1961), about a closeted lawyer (Dirk Bogarde) and his attempts to bring blackmailers of gay men to justice.

Vito devoured the article in a single gulp and shoved it under Aunt Marie’s nose for her reaction. She didn’t disappoint. “Three sick movies, none of which you should see.” He didn’t need an embossed invitation. With gay-themed films popping up everywhere and family disapproval guaranteed, Vito practically sprinted to the theater.

First up was Victim, which gave him an excuse to return to Manhattan. The import was confined to the artsy Paris Theatre, opposite the Plaza Hotel. Its distributor had scorned Production Code warnings to cut the word “homosexual,” which had never been heard in an English-language film. Mainstream release was forbidden. That was fine by Vito, who knew that he was watching a film that Hollywood didn’t want him to see. Victim shows its gay protagonist, Melvin Farr (Bogarde), in a sympathetic light. Though married and deeply ashamed of his homosexuality, he takes extremely risky legal action as one man after another falls prey to a blackmail ring. Vito squirmed in his seat when the blackmailers, trying to scare Farr off, painted “Farr Is Queer” in huge white letters on his garage door. “Queer” was a word that Vito had heard all too often directed at him; seeing it broadcast so boldly from the silver screen was almost unendurable. But he listened with wonder as a police captain defended gays to a bigoted
colleague: “If the law punished every abnormality, we’d be kept pretty busy, son!” And his jaw dropped to hear Farr’s tortured roar to his wife that he had “wanted” the young man whose suicide sets the story in motion. Despite the character’s audible self-disgust, Vito recognized in Farr his first “homosexual hero,” one who implied that “maybe it was okay to be gay.”

A game stretch, but one that warmed Vito up while he waited for the bus back to Lodi that cold February night. Winter 1962 introduced another homoerotic film to heat his blood: Sidney Lumet’s *A View from the Bridge*, based on Arthur Miller’s play (1955), which gave Vito his first sight of two men kissing on screen. The kiss comes as an assault when longshoreman Eddie Carbone (Raf Vallone) plants one on unwitting pretty-boy Rodolpho (Jean Sorel) in order to “prove” the youth’s homosexuality. Eddie’s accusation “burned a hole” in Vito, but the moment contained an undeniable erotic charge. And the clean-cut blond Rodolpho was Vito’s physical ideal.

A few months later, he caught *Advise & Consent* (1962), which director Otto Preminger adapted from Allen Drury’s bestseller. This film required a hike to Passaic’s Capitol Theatre, but it was worth the trip for a glimpse inside a gay bar—a notorious first in mainstream American film. Senator Brigham Anderson (Don Murray) goes hunting for his blackmailing ex-lover at Club 602, where a male throng listens to Frank Sinatra’s queasy crooning as swirling lights pinpoint their haunted faces. Vito’s eyes bugged to see the handsome Brig cruised by three pinched queens who give him an unmistakable once-over. They bugged harder still to see Brig take flight from the bar, pursued by the hunky blond, whom he shoves face first into a puddle. Later, when Brig drew a straight razor across his own throat, Vito sat “horrified.” He recalled, “[The film] impressed upon me that homosexuality was something so terrible that you committed suicide. I came home on the bus after seeing it, in shock. I had seen a character whom I identified with—I knew what I was—and this is what happened to him.”

The fatalism of these movies was terrifying. Vito had left Manhattan positive that homosexuality was acceptable. Now in Lodi, he needed to find friends to convince him that he was right. There was no way he would let himself end up like the suicides and outcasts populating the new gay screen. He began scanning LHS’s male population with furtive interest.

Looking back, Carol De Simone realizes that the boys of the LHS crowd she shared with Vito were gay. Along with Vito’s neighbor Dianne, Carol happily dated several of them after she and Charlie broke up. Despite the pronounced homophobia at LHS, she never suspected the boys’ homosexuality. She and Dianne, Carol remarked with a shrug, “never judged [their] friends that way.”

Vito and his gay friends discovered one another much as Vito had recognized men on the streets of Manhattan. “Gaydar” was alive and well in 1963 Lodi. Nearly every day after school, the quartet would meet at wooded railroad
tracks in town to discuss the two topics that mattered most to them: reading and boys. For their first meeting, one boy instructed Vito to “bring anything [he thought was] interesting” to share with the group. Typically, “anything interesting” meant a letter one of them had received or an article they could discuss. The themes of their texts weren’t important; the boys simply wanted an opportunity to converse in a manner that their peers would have found bizarre outside a classroom. Safe in the woods, they also had the chance to light up Marlboros and review their crushes on straight boys in town.

Vito didn’t share any overtly gay-themed literature with his buddies. But his constant library visits had unearthed a pulpy trove of it. At age twelve, he introduced himself to literary scandal via Polly Adler’s memoir *A House Is Not a Home* (1953). Manhattan’s most successful madam in the twenties and thirties, Adler spun a yarn to which Vito could well relate. Through hard work and indifference to social mores, she rose from desperately poor immigrant roots to a social network that included film stars and politicians. Given her line of work, much of Adler’s narrative is necessarily heterosexual, but she touches on a number of topics already growing dear to Vito’s heart: a casual friendship with boozy torch singer Helen Morgan, a tantalizing hint that one of her former employees has ascended to Hollywood royalty, an improbably chaste romance with Oscar winner “Wally” Beery. It endeared Adler to Vito even more when, at the Times Square opening night of the House film adaptation (1964), he got to sit behind Sophie Tucker and collect autographs from several starlets who played Adler’s “girls.” His date, Dianne Wondra, marveled at Vito’s unself-conscious ability to approach celebrities as if they were just anybody.

Adler’s memoir and the film reassured Vito that sexual “morality” is a more flexible concept than society generally acknowledges. She accounts for her career choice with an unruffled aplomb that Vito adopted for himself on the spot: “I am not apologizing for my decision, nor do I think, even if I had been aware of the moral issues involved, I would have made a different one. My feeling is that by the time there are such choices to be made, your life has already made the decision for you.” Adler casts her professional decision in terms of inevitability that anticipate gay pride rhetoric by nearly twenty years. She also expresses a comfort with homosexuality that is extraordinary for a book published during the McCarthy era. Some of her employees, she acknowledges, are lesbian. Some are “troublemakers,” some are “very peaceful souls,” but in Adler’s placid estimation, lesbianism simply “occurs in every walk of life.” Gay men bother Adler not in the least; in fact, she is delighted by the antics of “three queer boys” in drag, and she adores her dishy hairdresser, who is “regarded by [her] girls as the ultimate authority on matters of appearance, taste, style and grooming” and is, more importantly, “the only real friend” Adler’s employees have. Vito could hardly have hoped for more compassionate treatment of his emerging identity.
The first overtly gay novel that Vito read was *Maybe—Tomorrow* (1952) by “Jay Little” (aka Clarence Lewis Miller). As an adult, Vito recalled liking the book for its happy ending: protagonist Gaylord Le Claire lands himself a quarterback hunk. He apparently didn’t remember what an agonizing path “Gay”—who seems a refugee from some pre-Stonewall *Pilgrim’s Progress*, so allegorical is his sexual development—must endure before finally snagging Bob Blake, jock of his dreams.

At the novel’s opening, Gay is a high school senior fraught with “melancholia, emotional frigidity, [and] feminine symbolisms.” A tormented teen who likes trying on his emasculating mother’s wedding dress, he spends entire paragraphs wishing he’d been born a girl. When Gay escapes tiny Cotton, Texas, for New Orleans, he gets an education in camp humor and vocabulary that Vito eagerly imbibed. Like Vito, Gay mistakes his first drag queen for a woman; he also learns the terms “crabs,” “sixty-nine party,” and “glory hole.” Gay’s lover, Paul, warns him about closeted quacks who promise heterosexual “cures” while lusting after their patients and counsels Gay that although homosexuality makes for a “hard life,” they are but two of countless gay men stretching back to “the beginning of time.” Like his unnamed ancestors, Gay must follow his heart and do “what seems natural” for him. Ultimately, Gay does just that, moving to New Orleans with Bob and deciding that “if loving Blake was a crime for which society would never forgive him he didn’t care.” Despite its considerable hand-wringing, *Maybe—Tomorrow* introduced Vito to the possibility of gay self-respect. All he had to do was follow the protagonist’s example and ditch his small town to find it.

While stuck in Lodi, however, Vito continued to pursue his fascination with the world’s oldest profession. Kenneth Marlowe’s *Mr. Madam: Confessions of a Male Madam* (1964) appeared the year of Vito’s high school graduation. He devoured it at once, thrilled to learn “that there was also such a thing as a loose man.” *Mr. Madam* opens with all the misery of *Maybe—Tomorrow*. In his introduction, Dr. Leonard A. Lowag labels Marlowe’s life “degrading” and “pathetic,” while Marlowe argues in his own preface (plaintively titled “Why?”) that “homosexuality is not a convenience. It’s a hell of a problem. Homosexuals are what they are because they have confused sex for love.” But Marlowe’s boyhood aversion to baseball and his failure at Boy Scouts were reassuringly familiar, and Vito snapped to attention on reading that in boyhood Marlowe turned himself into a “size queen” by test-driving a wide range of peers. He also felt a surge of recognition at Marlowe’s description of his new gay friends: “There’s an immediate acceptance by them. You’ve shared forbidden experiences, forbidden lusts. You have a kinship.” From daily talks with his LHS friends, Vito appreciated this brand of camaraderie.

And he couldn’t miss the book’s nascent politicking. Repeatedly arrested in bar raids and for running a stable, Marlowe gets fired from a hairdressing job...
when his boss discovers that he moonlights as a drag queen: “We don’t want any of your kind here” (emphasis in original). He attacks gay men who take out female “beards” twice a week while dating men every other night. Most strikingly, he informs skeptical readers, “Homosexuals aren’t lepers, you know. We’re people.” Echoing rhetoric of the early homophile organizations, Marlowe declares homosexuals “a minority group who are denied their human rights!” and argues, with conservative prescience, “If homosexuals ever organized, banding together for mutual protection and rights, like other minorities, they could exist without bondage as long as they publicly behaved themselves as thinking adults.”

Vito wasn’t ready to organize for rights. Oppression meant enduring his father’s rage, not losing a job or an apartment. Yet Marlowe’s seedy, campy milieu felt very comfortable. Before he finished high school, Vito had already begun to find gay friends well past the literate trio he met at the tracks.

Two acquisitions broadened Vito’s social life beyond LHS and Blueridge Road. The first was a fake ID, procured for the express purpose of getting into gay bars. The second was his own wheels, obtained when Charles bequeathed to him a finned old rattlerap. Where the backseat should have been were yawning holes through which exhaust fumes rose into the faces of Vito’s passengers. Carol De Simone’s mother gave Vito some old sofa cushions to cover the holes, et voilà! He had his own means of transportation, which enabled him to disappear for long stretches outside his parents’ vision and explore a very different social life than that offered in Lodi.

Vito’s first drag-queen contemporary was a fellow student who could have given Kenneth Marlowe lessons in flash. Standing six feet two inches under a bleached-blond mane, Billy knew how to make a striking entrance—particularly when bombing around Lodi in his pink Cadillac convertible. Contact with Billy meant automatic social ostracism. “If you hung around with him,” Vito asserted, “that was it; your reputation was ruined. You were gay.” The majority of the student body gave Billy plenty of space. But Vito, amazed by his nerve, “moved immediately to become his friend because [he] knew that [he] had something in common with this person.” Billy invited Vito to a New Year’s Eve party held at the home of “the most outrageous drag queen in Bergen County.” At this party, Vito met the men who would become his best friends for the next several years and introduce him to gay life.

Billy’s friends were working-class drag queens from Lodi and the nearby towns of Garfield, Bloomfield, Hackensack, and Paterson. Like Billy, these men were wildly out of the closet, almost unwittingly so: they were “identifiable on the street whether they liked it or not. They couldn’t hide it even if they tried.” From them, Vito got his first lessons in gay survival. He listened attentively to their tutorials on “how to take care of [himself] on the streets and be funny and get out of a raid and go through a window in a bathroom and all that stuff” you
had to know in the '60s.” The older queens had suffered at length for their appearance and responded with a gutsy sass that Vito immediately adopted. “Honey,” one growled, “I’m from the old school; me and the queens from downtown Paterson came up the hard way. Anybody tries to mess with this bitch’ll be teasing a bald head.”

The older queens were only too happy to introduce an eager novitiate to the local bar scene. From Mr. Madam, Vito had some sense of gay life on the Jersey Shore. Bradley Beach was hustler heaven; the Asbury Park Y hopped all weekend long. But he didn’t know how to find these places, and anyway, where could he just hang out with friends and have fun? He soon learned that Asbury Park, like Seaside Heights, boasted an impressive array of gay bars. Another favorite haunt was Danny’s in Fort Lee, where the group went to see “Bella from the Bronx,” a drag queen whose act consisted of traditional Italian families’ reactions to the revelations of their gay children. For obvious reasons, Vito found this routine uproarious and went every weekend. He was also enamored of the headliner at Fran Bell’s in Nyack, New York. Fran herself, a more stylized rendition of cousin Chickie, donned a tuxedo and top hat and crooned “Just a Gigolo” à la Dietrich. Then there were the drag balls at Newark’s Robert Treat Hotel. Vito’s social life was like a page from Mr. Madam come to life.

From his friends, Vito learned a campy affect that he would cherish all his life. After the buttoned-down years of Catholic school and serving as LHS’s star journalist, it was exhilarating to go “‘riding around’ at night with the other gays and proposition[ing] truck drivers on the highway out of an open window at 60 mph: ‘Hey, wanna fuck an Italian actress?’” The new slang Vito was learning could fill several dictionaries. He quickly caught on when the queens addressed him as “Mary,” and nothing was funnier than tales of the nearly deaf, ninety-year-old Arthur Cohen, who, stopped by a highway patrolman demanding to see his license and registration, turned to his friends in the car and shrieked, “Who’s she calling a cocksucker?” These queens, who fought with fists flying, forever shattered for Vito any equation of effeminacy with weakness. Typical exclamations at each other’s apartments included, “Listen, bitch, how would you like to eat pastina for the rest of your life?” and “Don’t fuck with my man, you tacky cunt, or I’ll put your lights out.”

Through this circle, Vito discovered a place he had read about but never thought to visit on his own. In one of his favorite novels, Auntie Mame tells her nephew Patrick that a visit with the snooty Upsons is costing her a weekend “out at Fire Island with some of the most amusing boys.” Vito was certain he knew who Auntie Mame’s “boys” were and why they congregated on Fire Island. The picture sharpened when he read Polly Adler’s assertion that “the island was popular with the long-haired boys and the short-haired girls, and they showed up in swarms.” Vito tucked these nuggets away for future reference.
One Friday night in the summer of 1966, a group of friends picked Vito up on Blueridge Road. He told Annie he was off to Seaside Heights for the evening and piled into the car. After riding some distance, Vito realized that the car was headed east, not south. He asked the driver, his buddy Joey Foglia, “Don’t we have to get on the Garden State Parkway?” Joey responded, “We’re not going to Seaside Heights; we’re gonna go to Fire Island!” Vito’s reply, informed by Auntie Mame and Polly Adler, was an unqualified “Oh, great!”

When Vito stepped off the Cherry Grove ferry for the first time, he realized that the “world” didn’t exist on Fire Island. He gasped at the male smorgasbord spread out before him. “I never realized there was a totally gay place before. I mean, I’d heard that Fire Island was gay, but a place where you could do anything, and not be bothered by the straight world?” Here the woods didn’t contain just four gay students cautiously dishing their latest boy-crushes; they contained hundreds of barely clad gay men openly seeking the same sport in the moonlight. None of his reading had prepared Vito for the orgiastic sight of the wooded “Meat Rack” that separates Cherry Grove from the Pines. Cruising guys in the shoreside bars was one thing; cruising them under the stars for immediate sexual gratification was something else altogether. This was galaxies away from the covert hunting on Central Park West just a few years earlier. Vito had never felt so safe in nature or so at home in his own body.

On arrival, Joey hooked up with a Montreal native who offered lodging to the entire Jersey gang. Vito was secretly relieved. He was willing to sleep on the beach if necessary, but the great outdoors was never his favorite setting, and access to a bathroom meant being able to clean up for the Ice Palace. In pre-disco 1966, the hall was an unadorned oasis. With a floor made of “old, shiny wood worn away by dancers, it was very rustic, very beach-y.” Cool ocean breezes blew through the open doors while the DJ spun, over and over, Chris Montez’s ballad “The More I See You.” But there was also an unexpected throwback to Annie and Charles’s courting days. To Vito’s delight, some of these guys liked to Lindy. Looking back in 1987, long after the island had become outrageously expensive and the Ice Palace impossibly noisy, Vito remembered its 1966 incarnation as “nothing fancy. There were no amenities the way there are now; there [were] no poolbar and cabanas and organized doody-doos. . . . [There were] just a lot of people having a good time.” In the arms of innumerable male cuties, the pounding Atlantic surf echoing his steps, Vito was overjoyed to be one of those people.

Three frenzied days later, duty called. The Jerseyites dragged themselves down to the dock and caught the last possible ride back to Sayville, Long Island, where Joey had left his car. Their boat wasn’t the sleek ferry that would later ease transportation between Long Island and Fire Island; it was a so-called bucket, named for its resemblance to “a bucket of blood.” In this rickety sloop, Vito
sagged, sun scorched, his feet aching, “The More I See You” still ringing in his ears. Joey and another friend, Greg, slumped at Vito’s sides. Across the aisle, their lesbian cohort Jo Jo grinned at this spent gay portrait. “Look at these three; they don’t want to go home, do they?” Vito looked up. “No.” Jo Jo asked, “You guys want to stay out here all summer?” “Yeah” was Vito’s immediate reply. Jo Jo smiled. “You’re exhausted. You should go home and get some sleep.” Vito knew she was right. But as he headed toward New York, Vito realized that the weekend had been “a revelation.” He could now imagine the idyllic world that gay men and lesbians might create on their own.

Back in Lodi, Annie was a wreck. Vito was twenty years old, no longer a baby, but he was still living under her roof, and this three-day vanishing act just wasn’t acceptable. She was fairly sure that he hadn’t gone to Seaside Heights as he had said. But where? With whom? And why didn’t she ever meet these friends who occupied his every weekend?

Vito approached Lodi with a twinge of guilt. As revelatory as the weekend had been, he had no desire to worry his parents. On the whole, he reasoned, Annie and Charles “put up with a lot from [him] that a lot of parents simply would not have put up with.” Considering their conservative background and lack of education, they gave Vito “virtually no trouble at all.” His years of being caught in bed with boys were past, and in any case, Charles was too exhausted by twelve-hour workdays to notice what Vito was up to. When he arrived home after 6:30, all he wanted to do was eat his dinner and collapse on the couch.

Annie, however, was not so encumbered. Her part-time job at the local Modell’s department store left her plenty of time to worry about her kids. She issued an ultimatum: either Vito introduce her to these mysterious friends or stop seeing them. He readily complied. He loved his friends and wanted his mother to meet them. On the other hand, he couldn’t help but wonder how she would respond to a group of guys who, even when they weren’t in drag, tooled about New Jersey in full make-up. He invited his friend George, better known as Brandy, home for a visit. Stunned, Brandy replied, “Do you know you’re the only friend I have who has the nerve to bring me in their house and introduce me to their family? Everyone else is ashamed of the way I look.” Vito swallowed hard, grimly determined to show Brandy a hospitable time and prove that at least one of his friends was proud to know him. When they arrived at the Russos’, Annie greeted Brandy warmly but then recoiled. She maintained composure throughout the visit but rounded on Vito the second Brandy left. “He was wearing make-up!” she screamed. Vito remained cool. “So?” As his mother sputtered, Vito decided to up the ante. At the next visit, Brandy wouldn’t be the only drag queen on Blueridge Road.

A few months later, Vito invited a bunch of friends to share Christmas Eve with his family. Annie and Charlie settled into the living room with everyone
while Vito played bartender. Realizing that his friends would be nervous, he poured with a heavy hand and distributed lethal cocktails all around. Joey took a sip of his and announced, pointing at Vito, “Boy! When she makes a drink, she really makes a fuckin’ drink!” The room fell dead silent. Annie might have been offended by the profanity on Christmas Eve, but under these circumstances, she barely noticed it. That kid had just called her son “she.” Unmistakably.

Vito shot Joey a look and steered the conversation in a different direction. The room buzzed, glad to bury the gaffe, while Vito studied his friends. He realized that he would have had no social life without them for the past few years. These were the same guys with whom he had just met Barbra Streisand in Philadelphia, where, when her outdoor concert was rained out, the diva proved accessible at her trailer door. And they were all planning a trip together to Montreal’s massive Expo ’67 the following summer. But Vito also knew that in certain important ways he was outgrowing these men. They didn’t share his interest in education, and they had no desire ever to leave New Jersey. The Shore/Fire Island circuit was more than enough for them. Vito saw a very different future for himself.

Ironically, he was building that future in the heart of New Jersey. Following his graduation from LHS, Vito enrolled as an English major at Fairleigh Dickinson University (FDU) in Rutherford. The last place he wanted to be was stuck at home with his parents, but Annie and Charles couldn’t afford to send him anywhere that would require tuition and housing. The mortgage payments at 24 Blueridge were high, and Charles’s work situation remained precarious. He did, however, manage to pay one full year of Vito’s tuition on a fluke. Reading the Daily News one morning, he spied the number 310 on a license plate in the comic strip Smitty. With a “what-the-hell” attitude, he called up a bookie and told him to play the number. It hit. Charles raced home, threw his paper in the air, and yelled through the house, “We got the tuition!” Otherwise, Vito was on his own, which meant substantial student loans and choosing a college within quick driving distance of home.

At FDU, Vito summoned the courage to do something he had avoided since his days back at the East Harlem Boys’ Club: get up in front of an audience to perform. FDU offered a Play Production class that had been under the energetic guidance of Bertha Ayres since 1948. Ayres assigned Vito prominent roles in such “sophisticated” plays as Luigi Pirandello’s Six Characters in Search of an Author (1923), Terrence Rattigan’s Separate Tables (1954), Brian Friel’s Philadelphia, Here I Come (1964), and J. B. Priestley’s An Inspector Calls (1945), starring Vito as Inspector Goole.

He became active in FDU campus life by joining the Film Arts Club and getting himself elected the Student Council Fine Arts Board chairman. Vito found his student council work especially rewarding. The board secured Dr. Martin
Luther King Jr. and F. Lee Bailey as campus speakers. For entertainment they engaged Jack Jones, The Four Tops, The Happenings, and The Magnificent Men. In his Film Arts capacity, Vito cautiously brought gay-themed movies to a campus that found such subject matter deeply shocking. During a single semester, he screened _The Children's Hour_ and Kenneth Anger’s intensely homoerotic _Scorpio Rising_ (1963) three times—occasioning his surmise that although he wasn’t officially out on campus, he probably “wasn’t that difficult to spot.”

Of necessity, Vito remained closeted at FDU. But he tried to take on homophobia in a sociology course. After months of discussing every minority save his own, Vito put up his hand and asked the professor, “What about homosexuals?” In the Rutherford, New Jersey, of the mid-1960s, this was a nitroglycerine question. “The class went crazy. Crazy. And the teacher said, ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute—all right, homosexuals are a minority.’” Then, gazing directly at Vito, he asked, “Why did you bring it up?” Vito flushed, gulped, and answered, “Because I know a lot of people who are gay.” Recounting this experience more than a decade later, he commented, “[It] stands out in my memory more vividly than anything else I’ve ever done. I don’t think I’ve ever been ashamed of anything as much as I was ashamed of that. And it hurt me so much to have to sit there and deny” being gay. On the spot, he vowed, “[I] would never, ever do that again, I would never, ever deny—that if anybody asked me, I would always admit [my sexuality]. Because it hurt so much not to be able to stand up in front of that class and say, ‘I’m in your class; I’ve been in your class for two semesters now, and you’re talking around me.’”

Vito’s silence was understandable given the climate at FDU. He didn’t find comrades even where he might reasonably have expected them. In Play Production, he knew of “several gay men and at least one gay woman . . . but nobody talked about it. Nobody talked about it to each other.” Vito “slept with all of [his] English teachers” and “had some disastrous encounters with women who wanted to prove something,” but by this point, he knew that he was otherwise inclined.

Vito visited his first Manhattan gay bar with an FDU friend during the World’s Fair (April 1964–October 1965). In an effort to “clean up” the city for mobs of tourists, Mayor Robert F. Wagner posted in the windows of gay bars big, white cardboard signs proclaiming in bold black letters, “This Is a Raided Premises [sic], New York City Police Department.” Many of the bars also suffered a policeman standing guard at the door in a clear attempt to intimidate patrons. Vito recognized the degree to which his sexuality put him at odds with city government. He also understood that the Mafia’s widespread control of Manhattan gay bars made for a complicated relationship between crime, justice, and the simple desire to enjoy a drink with his own kind.

During other escapes from FDU, Vito visited his first bathhouse, the St. Marks, on East 8th Street. As a college sophomore, he had gathered some sense
of the East Village as the “capital of hippiedom,” which seemed to promise a certain degree of sexual tolerance. With a friend in tow for moral support, Vito trudged up the dingy marble staircase, paid his three-dollar entrance fee, and entered the “dilapidated old fire trap.” If he had hoped to find a bevy of cute young things like himself reclining on sparkling tile, he was sorely disappointed. The hallways were filthy and crawling with “lost souls and seedy drunks” who made Vito wonder why he’d bothered to take the trip in from Rutherford. The St. Marks didn’t even afford its customers the privacy of rooms; it offered instead dank cubicles so tight that “you couldn’t bend over . . . in any way.” Men lurked inside these tiny spaces, hoping to lure in passersby, until, as frequently happened, “there would be a great crashing and stomping of feet and six men in suits would come rampaging down the hallway, slamming all the doors shut and screaming ‘Keep those doors shut, you queers.’” Vito cowered inside his cubicle. His caution notwithstanding, he still got swept up with all other patrons during a raid. Terrified to contact Annie, he allowed himself to be bailed out by a friend’s mother who, he suspected, would be more understanding than his own.

Following his visits to 24 Blue Ridge with the Jersey queens, Vito did not tell his mother about his sexuality. He had learned this lesson from one queen who counseled him, “If your mother asks if you’re gay, deny it left and right. They can’t prove a thing.” Despite the Jersey circle’s flamboyance in wardrobe and affectation, they did not endorse the notion of honesty with families. They instructed Vito that if by some tragic turn his parents did find out that he was gay, he should move to New York immediately so as not to “disgrace” them. In this milieu, Vito could not conceive of romance between two men. When Chuck, an FDU friend, confessed his love, Vito shot back that “he was full of shit: ‘You don’t love me.’” Even with his ever-widening circle of gay friends and acquaintances, Vito went through much of college in emotional lockdown.

He realized that he couldn’t survive in this mode. He had to begin relating to other gay men as more than tricks. Ever since his eureka moment in the confessional, Vito had accepted that being gay was an immutable facet of his identity—and a central one at that. He had too much self-respect to allow a repeat of his performance in class or to sleep with professors who couldn’t face him on campus.

At an FDU New Year’s Eve party, Vito met a sweet guy, Lenny, who invited him home not just for the night but for the weekend. Like his first trip to Fire Island, this experience showed Vito a new element of gay rapport. Prior to Lenny, Vito had never pondered spending time with a man after sex. The goal was to meet, enjoy each other’s bodies, and then get back to the “real,” respectable world as soon as possible. Lenny showed him that physical pleasure could be combined with emotional connection. Vito was astonished to realize that such kinship between two men could be “the most natural thing in the world.” And what a relief that their shared weekend “was not fraught with any kind of meaning.
about what it is to be ‘queer’ and to be doing this kind of thing for the first time.”

The weekend made Vito recognize his own capacity for affection and kindness toward another man. It also made him determined to find other men who thought that being gay meant more than a shared, shameful orgasm.

During his trips to New York, Vito discovered the tiny but tenacious world of gay publishing. On Thanksgiving weekend in 1967, Craig Rodwell opened the world’s first gay bookstore, the Oscar Wilde Memorial Bookshop, at 291 Mercer Street in Greenwich Village. With only twenty-five titles to offer, Rodwell refused to sell pornography and was “determined to have a store where gay people did not feel manipulated or used.” On opening day, signs in the window and inside the store proclaimed “Gay Is Good” at the “Bookshop of the Homophile Movement.” At Oscar Wilde, it was possible to purchase the gay magazine \textit{ONE}, which had been founded in Los Angeles in January 1953. Though the publication eschewed any overt politicking on behalf of gay rights, its national distribution did provide countless gay men with their first understanding that they were not alone. Featuring articles on entrapment, gay sexuality, bar life, and even fiction (including one story by Norman Mailer), \textit{ONE} helped give “an oppressed minority the chance to express thoughts that had previously been barred from public discourse.” Through \textit{ONE}, Vito became aware of the Mattachine Society New York (MSNY), an East Coast offshoot of Los Angeles’ Mattachine Society, one of the country’s first gay-rights organizations, founded in 1951 by Harry Hay. He also became aware of MSNY’s president, Dick Leitsch, the man who would plant in him the seeds of gay militancy.

At twenty-nine, Leitsch was a well-to-do Kentucky native with no particular interest in gay politics. Believing that the “only three significant letters in the word ‘homosexual’” were “s, e, and x,” Leitsch “entered the [gay] movement ‘dick first’” with the philosophy that “homosexuality is 10 percent cause and 90 percent fun.” But when Donald Webster Cory (aka Edward Sagarin), the author of \textit{The Homosexual in America} (1951), ran for MSNY president despite his contention that homosexuals are “disturbed individuals” who “tend to be goofers” if not “borderline psychotics,” Leitsch decided to enter gay politics full force. He ran against Cory on the platform that “homosexuality is \textit{not} a sickness, disturbance, or other pathology in any sense, but is merely a preference, orientation, or propensity on par with and not different in kind from heterosexuality.” Leitsch vowed to end police entrapment of gays and to eradicate their suffering under homophobic law. He won the MSNY election over Cory by a margin of two to one.

New York’s fledgling gay-rights advocates were ready for a charismatic leader. In April 1966, Leitsch went on the attack against police harassment of gay bars. He decided to stage a theatrical “sip in,” in which he, bookstore owner Rodwell, and MSNY officer John Timmons, trailing reporters from the \textit{New York Times}, the \textit{New York Post}, and the \textit{Village Voice}, dared Village bartenders to honor the State Liquor Authority (SLA)’s prohibition against serving liquor to known
homosexuals. Less than a year later, the SLA lost its legal ability to “revoke [a bar’s] license on the basis of homosexual solicitation.” Leitsch and MSNY had begun to defang the laws that targeted gays in public places. His media-friendly successes earned him a spot on *The David Susskind Show* in February 1967.

As MSNY president, Leitsch extended the organization’s educational outreach to American colleges and universities. A coordinator at City College of New York thanked him for providing “a friendly discussion rather than a rote lecture,” noting, “I learned much about the function of the Mattachine Society and of laws concerning homosexuality.” Denison, Ohio State, and Hofstra, where Leitsch proposed to discuss sodomy law reform, requested visits as well. As his reputation grew, students from across the country began contacting him. A Grinnell senior, terrified of the draft, confessed to Leitsch, “The prospect of donning those dismal army khakis without the masterful touch of Balenciaga or Schiaparelli leaves me frigid.”

Vito decided to put Fairleigh Dickinson on Leitsch’s tour of duty. He paid several visits to Leitsch at his Upper West Side apartment, often in the company of Madolin Cervantes, MSNY’s heterosexual vice president. It was, Vito later declared, “the first time I ever heard gay people talk politics. Gay politics. . . . They were simply talking about being allowed to live without being subject to attack.” Besides, Leitsch’s banter had a familiar ring; his free application of “she” and “auntie” to other men sounded very much like the Jersey queens. Vito had to share this funny, brave man with his benighted classmates and professors. He persuaded FDU’s Student Activities to pony up one hundred dollars for Leitsch to come lecture on campus. With the force of an atomic explosion, Leitsch arrived in Rutherford at 10 a.m. on March 6, 1968.

For the occasion, Vito managed to gather an audience of roughly one hundred—not bad, he thought, considering FDU’s terror of the subject matter. In the crowd, he spotted “the inevitable closet queens (about whom everyone ‘knew’ anyway), several ‘interested’ professors and scores of ostentatiously heterosexual couples in tight physical embrace.” After receiving Vito’s decorous introduction, Leitsch shattered the pomp by branding himself a “good old fashioned cocksucker.” The remark was intended to disarm, but the FDU audience had no idea how to take it. Leitsch’s term was one seldom voiced in public, much less in an academic forum. Out in the throng, Vito noticed “a lot of hostility . . . a lot of laughter. A lot of disdain.” Later at lunch, Vito’s political science professor—“a droll, quick-witted woman from the Joan Blondell school of classroom technique”—pulled him aside to remark, “Some day, cookie, they’ll shoot you in the streets if you push this thing.”

Vito bristled at the recommendation of self-censorship. Near the start of his college career, he had promised himself that he would never hide again. Now with graduation approaching, Vito renewed that promise with a resolve to put both Jersey and the closet behind him for good.