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The Siren's Song

One of the first sounds I learned to detect and fully understand was the song of a screaming ambulance. As a little boy, I would run toward the window every time that scary noise appeared in my simple world. I would glance back at my mom, my hand flat on the glass, and eagerly await a response. Mom would sadly answer, "Someone's hurt; we should close our eyes and pray for them." As I got older, I realized these massive sound waves didn't just alert one of another's injury, but, in many cases, they shouted that death was nearby and lingering. As I journeyed through different parts of the world, I was quite intrigued to notice that despite the language spoken, that high-pitched tune had the same meaning in every quaint, small town and every grand metropolis.

Working in San Francisco's financial district desensitized me, and I could tuck away all of my childhood fears and superstitions. Those chaotic alarms that came from the fast-moving white vans and cop cars became part of my daily soundtrack. On a fogless and busy Friday filled with errands, I dared to take on the condensed shops and piles of people on the sloped streets of downtown San Francisco. An overpriced haircut and two cups of coffee later, my over-caffeinated

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body vibrated down a quiet set of steps near Market Street to make some calls. I had only been single for a short period; however, with the help of close friends and the Internet, I had quickly added a few names to my trendy new phone. After sliding my thumb up and down the silver buttons a couple of times, I was able to schedule a dinner for later that day with an old lover the Web had reconnected me with. I remained on the steps, enjoying the intoxicating high one gets from scheduling that special date. I stared as if in a trance into the hazel sky and began to drift. Beethoven's Fifth started to play. I had assigned new ringtones to friends and family since the addition of my slick, hip toy and didn't always recognize the tone. I read the three-letter word and quickly answered, "Hi, Mom."

She started to tell me about her trip as I uncoiled my Armani tie with my free hand and stretched my right leg. It was our usual weekly check-in until she cautiously said, "I hope you're not going out tonight. It's the thirteenth, you know!"

I smiled and replied, "I'm not planning to stay out that late." Just like when I told lies as a kid, I looked away from the phone as if the lens on the camera were an extension of her stare. Suddenly, I felt and saw a roaring fire truck make its way down Second Street and turn onto Market. Knowing well the fire department was the opening act, I said to my mom, "It's too loud; let me call you tomorrow." The concert was in full session by the time I closed my phone and snuggled it back in my pants pocket. I rushed down to the subway to get away, my mother's words guiding me back to my adolescence.



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Although I have four sisters, I always felt my mom was more overprotective of me, since I was a gay man living in a Latino neighborhood with old worldviews. As a teen, Mom would always warn me to be careful, even if I was just going across the street. She told me of distant relatives and friends who shared my “likes” and how they often disappeared, leaving nothing but memories behind. Like Xavier’s School for the Gifted, my mom would let my friends hide in our home where they felt safe, accepted, and, most importantly, not like mutants. Most of the people I was bringing home were other teenage boys I met on the newly introduced World Wide Web. Unlike me, they lacked their parents’ support and often just wanted to hang out. My mom kept all gatherings PG-13, and everyone felt comfortable with the relaxed social agenda.

Among the flock of new acquaintances were two brothers—both gay and almost a decade apart in age. Although the elder brother was obviously the more responsible and ethical one, the younger brother seemed to call the shots.

Carlos, although only sixteen, was as experienced as the guys my older sisters dated. He drank, smoked, and mysteriously attended high school in another city. Carlos was a legend within the local gay community. He was often courted by men twice his age and always managed to get out of relationships before they got serious. His older brother, Rodrigo, was the complete opposite: he would rarely talk and was socially awkward. Nonetheless, the brothers and I, and a fourth guy named Jesus, became inseparable for a while. Armed with our fake IDs and Rodrigo as our reliable driver, we ventured to gay bars as far north from our San Jose neighborhood as Sacramento and as far south as Salinas. It was both fun and extremely deviant to be part of the crowd of

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kids who were popular outside of school cliques. This is how I rationalized the concept of staying up late and drinking on school nights, allowing myself to get caught up in the toxic gay scene of the time.

We had been hanging out for a few months and could have printed tour-style T-shirts with all the clubs we had visited. It was a typical Friday night, and we were making our way to the notorious Bench and Bar club in Oakland when I sobered up the car by saying, "Umm, I can't hang out next weekend."

Jesus nearly spilled his Irish slurpie and asked, "Why, bitch?"

I shyly replied, "I have to take my SATs; I want to go to college."

Their disengaged and uninterested sighs filled the car. After that, things were never the same. I repeatedly canceled on them as I prepared for college and, eventually, was admitted to a small Catholic university in Belmont, California, where my life took a new turn. Carlos and the gang came to my dorm a few times but never stayed for very long. We maintained a loose friendship for a while, but as years passed, they became just other faces in a bar I would fondly greet after slow recognition.

Rejecting my mother's admonition to respect the power of the day, I happily prepared for a night on the town. Pete and I had been flirting for years, and although this was not a first date, it felt like such. We agreed to meet at "corporate headquarters," Castro and Eighteenth Street, where we then veered to the latest gay hangout. My friend Don called, and I struggled to make out his words over the background music at The Café, a few blocks down. Pete and I then agreed to move the party because he was eager to meet my friends.

After a few introductions and exchange of hugs, I realized