

*from "Clubbing"*

It's a Friday night, about 10 p.m., and I am midway through my fifty-ninth year. I have white hair and no fewer than three spare tires beneath my breasts. I remind myself of one of those stacking toys on which rings are layered from large to small. I am sunk, with my arthritic knees in front of my face, into a broken down, 1970's-era sofa in the basement of a gay nightclub. In order to get up, I'm going to have to press its cushions with my hands and rock this body onto my feet. As the only straight person here, I doubly dread that moment because I feel self-conscious as it is. Isn't it enough that I look like everybody's grandmother?

The only person in the room who might feel more self-conscious than I do is my twenty-two-year-old son who is slinking around in all-black, doing his best to look like a mother-less shadow, the humiliation of my presence almost unbearable.

Behind me at a bit of an angle sits a large papier-mache drag queen, a throwback to Ethel Merman, had she been morbidly obese and a closeted he. I spotted her when I came down the stairs, and I caught my breath. She looks scary with her akimbo red hair and tight rosebud of a mouth. Her eyebrows are up in exaggerated curves. She has on a polka-dotted dress and her hands are in her lap. Her feet are planted on the floor, parallel to one another, and she has crimson polish on her toenails. I wonder what she thinks of my presence here, and I tell myself I'm the source of her astonishment.

In addition, the basement contains a tumble of boxes, a chair, a table, one stuffed monkey head, and a mannequin-like human torso, as seen from the backside. I assume the last two are

props of some sort – perhaps for shows performed on the upstairs stage, or for the annual gay pride parade that is held in this town every summer – and I try not to let my imagination wander any further. The gay lifestyle is one I'm only just beginning to familiarize myself with; some things, I figure, I am better off not knowing.

In an adjoining room, which I dare not peek into for modesty reasons, but from which flow the sounds of giddiness, a drag queen transforms himself into a herself. He is a light-skinned Puerto Rican with a compact build. His forehead slants back like Cleopatra's when she's rendered as a bust. He wears his long black hair in a ponytail, held high. And he prances in varying stages of gender. First he is shirtless, a well-built man. Then he has on a body suit that renders him smooth and shapely as a bowling pin. Soon he has breasts, approximately size C, scaffolded into position by a determined bodice.

Shortly, he wears a bouffant wig and the most elaborate, beautiful makeup I have ever seen. There are inch-long eyelashes and two shades of eyeliner, precisely layered. There is rose-colored lipstick, rich and velvety.

Now he has on a floor-length robe and spiked heels, a cigarette dangling, movie star-style, from between the index and middle fingers of his right hand. I marvel when he applies the final touch: a three-foot tall, feathered headpiece weighted with sequins and beads. He keeps it in place by walking perfectly erect, like a juggler balancing a stack of plates on his head, as he lights up the room.

The air in this room is lighter than the air in places with which I am more familiar. There is a sense, almost tangible, of flurrying, of skittering. As if a brisk breeze had just blown in a rush of crisp fall leaves. I know this sense comes from the young men who hurry up and down

the stairs, this one then that, with music tapes for the drag queen, with colas and ice to share, with energy they are holding in check, in anticipation of the party to come. They are all handsome men in their early twenties, slim blondes and brunettes, and they all speak with those fey voices that betray homosexuality. They sashay. They talk with their hands. They preen and cajole one another, wondering, with a feigned mixture of dread and eagerness, when the next of them is going to slip into a dress. I can sense their temptation, the wheels turning in their heads as they slap one another on their backs: *You know you want to. I know I want to. Maybe we'd better not.*

If they think it strange that one among them has brought his mother along they don't say anything. At first they ignore me, as if I were simply another prop. But soon one of them, momentarily at a loss for something to do, begins to talk to me. His name is Jerry. His short dyed hair peaks lengthwise, like a roof on the top of his head. He has on glasses, a mint-green shirt, and blue jeans. He has begun to open up about how it was that he was first attracted to my son – and how my son rebuffed him after asking Jerry to drive him to a gathering one night. He was offended by Christian's rudeness – the way he accepted the ride but then proceeded to ignore him, Jerry says. He rolls his eyes and shakes his head. He hand gestures.

I feel the stain of embarrassment flood my cheeks as I explain that Christian has Asperger's Syndrome, a high-functioning form of autism that, in Christian's case, makes socializing and manners and common sense – and their attendant nuances – difficult. I hate having to explain the nature of Asperger's, all the troubles it brings to what looks like a "normal" person on the outside. Still, I chatter out its manifestations, in a compelled, I-want-to-protect-him, sort of way.

Christian, who is smart and handsome, wants to fit in, I tell Jerry, to have relationships and be accepted like everyone else, but his Asperger's works like a cocoon of glass: it's an invisible but formidable barrier, confounding other people, and even Christian, most of the time.

Because of his Asperger's Christian doesn't drive. That's why I'm here. My son is a member of the dance troupe that is performing alongside the drag queen tonight. He couldn't have participated had I not provided his ride.

I drive Christian to school, work, and most of his social outings because I want him to experience the fullness of life. Usually I drop him off, or kill time by doing paperwork in my car. Tonight, not wanting to waste gas by driving home and then back again at two in the morning – a forty minute drive, one way – I have brought some editing work with me, a student's manuscript, so that I can keep busy while Christian performs. My student, a psychologist, is writing a book about abundance, which strikes me as sublimely ironic at this moment.

Jerry's demeanor softens just a bit. He looks at me and says it must be hard being gay and having autism too. He recognizes firsthand, of course, the challenges that homosexuality brings to any life. He says, "You must worry."

I say I do. It's a double-whammy, facing these twin trials. I worry about whether Christian will have a job, a relationship, a group of friends – the things we all strive for. I worry, frankly, that some miscreant will beat him up – somebody with a prejudice, or something to prove. Christian strikes me as a target-type: a pretty boy, with fine features and a slight build, who, because of his Asperger's, is as gullible as a ten-year-old.

Jerry joins me on the couch and begins to tell about how he “came out” to his parents – an act that I increasingly recognize to be courageous, given the astonishing number of gay children who are rejected by their parents.

It’s been a year, Jerry says. They didn’t like the truth, especially his mother. She blamed his orientation on his friends. They talked him into being gay. I envision what the woman must look like: a little on the short and plump side like Jerry, her hair in curls as tight as her anxiety.

And while I’d like to think that I am more progressive, more generous, a part of me can commiserate with Jerry’s mother: A child’s homosexuality makes a shape-shifter of the dream you’ve carried from the moment you felt his presence in your womb.