

# SHOEBOX VIGILANTES

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THERE IS A SHOEBOX OF PHOTOGRAPHS in most homes. This shoebox can be literal or digital, can live under a bed or on a hard-drive, be neat or messy. Its purpose is to keep memories alive. It doesn't matter if the snapshot is of a child at a birthday party or a corpse at a murder scene. The image allows one to remember and interpret—and re-interpret—what happened. The picture helps to guarantee that at least part of the story was true. There *was* a birthday party on the lawn, a white cake with five candles, presents wrapped with bows. Someone cared or appeared to care. The woman in the hotel room, the one with blood on her nightgown, *was* punctured in the stomach with a knife or a bullet. There was blood in the centre. At least one person had stopped caring, or maybe cared too much.

I'm looking into an old shoebox. There's no label other than the manufacturer's sticker (Nike, 7.5, Daybreak), nothing to let me know what shots are inside. When I pull off the lid, I know conclusively what is inside—photographs from a Halloween party, 1994. I was coming of age and therefore just coming into my sexuality, which included, but was not limited to, "coming out." Coming out involved telling my close friends that I was gay. They already knew. Telling my mother that I was gay, which happened in a mall parking lot in a Chicago suburb. She already knew. I didn't tell my father. He already knew. Moving forward, it involved not hiding my sexuality in professional or social situations. This would prove an impossible and, at times, absurd task.

The costume I donned that night was composed of a leather jockstrap, a ripped white t-shirt, a red bandana and biker boots. A "Leather Man." I—an un-inked man standing 5'6" with fair hair and freckles and no interest in the mechanical arts—chose the costume because I wanted to appear (and be) more masculine. Taller, darker-featured, musky. A brute with an uncompromising attitude and appendage. I did not yet understand that wearing treated hide and the attendant accessories did not make one any more or less masculine. "Leather," as it pertains to a lifestyle in certain

segments of the gay community, in fact, was more or less about costumes and performance, drag shows for those too frightened or forlorn to put on a gown.

During the party I danced with a man in a pink antebellum dress. I ran after a fickle kitten screaming, "You will love me!" After too much to drink and too many conversations about the impossibility of being free, I lay face-down on a bed and allowed party guests to draw hearts and smiley faces on my legs and exposed butt cheeks with a black mascara wand. It was a night that reached its fullest promise in the early morning, when the peripheral friends peeled away and the close network, those of us who knew each other, the ones who lived and rhymed and bled together, decided to stand on the rooftop, shed our clothes and dance under the stars.

My friends and I loved the idea of freedom, even though our understanding of its terms was clouded in our own fierce personal logic. *You're only free if you can listen to The Smiths with the volume cranked at 3 am ... if you are able to make a living working on impenetrable art films that may never get played for a general audience ... if you can take to the road and never turn back.* Perhaps this is how it is with everyone. Freedom only maintains its allure because no one can really define its terms. I'm speaking, of course, of a time before the towers fell, before we would all start to question the costs of our perceived freedom. A time when we seemed quite willing to let go of certain freedoms. 9/11? How did I get there? That night on the rooftop happened many years before the cells coalesced, before that morning with the perfect blue sky, before the first hit and then the second, the grounding, the emergency state. Shoeboxes can make you remember things. Dangerous things.

Why do I keep looking into them? Because the next view always offers a new read, like going back to review a well-written book. You see things that eluded you on the first view. The boy in the leather jockstrap had scratches on his arm. The cat didn't like the love. The girl who drew a heart on my butt cheek had an engagement ring on her left hand; she was married the following year. The marriage would end in divorce, but no matter. This was the same girl who would lend me a CB radio for a road trip to New Mexico. I would end up not going and instead meet my mother in a Chicago suburb to tell her something that she already knew. I would attend a rooftop party. Expose myself first to the magic and then to the mourning.

On the morning after Hallowe'en, All Saint's Day, the music faded out. I remember lying on my back, watching the sky turn early-morning Chicago

blue and my eyes, bleary in communion and consummation, finally closing. I woke in the afternoon with a slight hangover, sunshine on my cheeks and a warm feeling that I would be with these people forever. We would lunch on cakes and meats and Bloody Marys in the late afternoon, and a week later we would meet up for another adventure. There would be a graduation, a trip to the shore, a cat burial. On and on we would go.

That few of us who took off our clothes that night in late October and writhed to the rhythm still speak to each other should be seen as a cautionary tale. Maybe there are only certain places that one can go with a group before the symmetry ruptures. The clothes must be put back on and the dance will change. How does it feel? Our lives change after rooftop ceremonies, just as they change after terrorist plots and shoebox retrieval.

The birthday party on a lawn, a white cake with five candles and presents wrapped in bows—that is from another shoebox (Adidas, 7.5, Samoa). It is a picture that my grandmother passed down to me. It is of her daughter's (my aunt's) fifth birthday. The cake is homemade, lopsided, beautiful. Her son (my father) runs through the frame, blurs. That picture tells me that there was a time when they were a young family who believed in wishes and parties on the lawn. It reminds me today not just of that innocence, but of how we outgrow it. The birthday girl would grow obese, join Weight Watchers, get thin on caloric counts and frozen broccoli, and grow fat again. The blurred young boy would become a hellion and then a raging cop and then a depressive. The mother would try to control both the girl and the boy as she tried to control what came into and went out of the picture's frame. Her efforts could break your heart; it is hard to see someone who cares allow her children to go their own ways. They are so easily snapped up by the predators that run free in the open fields of our lives.

Free children will turn up their own truths in these fields. Creatures, too. If they are out in the natural world, they will invariably come upon a dead bird at some point. The same shoeboxes that store our photographs can be used for a backyard ceremony, nicely entombing an avian find, providing a lesson for the innocent or affirmation for the mature. The shoebox that I use now could not be used to bury a bird. It is not a shoebox, but a file. The photographs are in a folder on my desktop. The last picture I took was this: Lake Ontario at Cherry Beach. I remember the day I snapped the picture. It was windy, starting out at 52° and ending at 30°, a day with a five-minute window, that's all, when the breeze had died down and the sun shone, *that*

moment when one could mistake this day in fall for a day in early spring. There was a whiff of childhood in that day, the crowning of hope and loss, a measure of these human times.

That's not the last picture in the folder. Another has crept in. A picture of a corpse. She has bushy red hair. She is bleeding from the centre. Three men on their knees surround her, each with a camera to his eye. It is an awful image, an abomination, and I cannot wait to drag it into my trash. But I know that deleting this image, in a world of connections and digital transfers, does little to remove it. It is out there. It is in *here*. It is not going away. No matter how vigilant I am, similar pictures will pop up on my screens, again and again, offering unwanted glimpses into my fears, fantasies and failings.