

Terry Barr

It's Just A Silly Phase I'm Going Through

He lived in one of those college houses that only a certain group ever sees, a basement apartment of a house that had as many entrances as it did occupants. In James' basement there were three private bedrooms though privacy, given their intimate spacing, existed only as much as any closed door can be considered secure and soundproof. There was a comfortable living area, too, where he kept his books on set design and his incredible stereo system with forty-eight inch tall matching speakers and where one cool night in the fall of my freshman year, I heard for the first time the original off-Broadway cast recording of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*.

That should have told me something, but I didn't know what the whole thing was about then.

And I didn't see that movie until four years later while on my second and last acid trip and so wasn't quite sure what I was seeing on screen, on stage, or in the audience, except that my macho theatre-friend Kevin was wearing fishnet hose and garters.

The black and white checkerboard tiles of James' living room, seamlessly woven into an adjoining kitchen that was never exactly clean, weren't a part of an acid dream, though. Never scrubbed, but still tidier than most, they were certainly neater than I'd have ever kept them.

Neater still was James, who seemed a king with his royal red hair maned upward on his long head. A tall guy, slim but sturdy: someone who always acted stoned but who rarely was.

On the night I first met James, the night where I first heard voices singing about "sweet transvestites" and "time warps," I had arrived at his place with my friend Ron, his lover Lynne, and her roommate Cheryl. Ron edited the campus newspaper, *The Alabaminan*; with his back-length hair and his rippling red beard, he was grooming me to take over after he graduated that year. But I didn't know that either, then. All I knew was that as we were wandering over our rural campus, Cheryl suggested that we light at James' place.

There were always people there. Usually theatre people: majors, minors, semi-professional techies, and often middle-aged women and men who had decided to come back to college. I never asked why or what they hoped to do with their degrees. I simply wondered at it all, especially on that first night.

I had written stories for the paper by then: startling exposes on cafeteria food and work-study programs. Any reputation I had, however, was based purely on my association with Ron, and at least I knew that. I liked my new friends and considered myself lucky to be hanging out with important students, especially given what my life in high school had been. It was hard digesting the reality that these friends enjoyed hanging out with me and were willing to include me in their nightly plans. But when I looked around, people smiled; when I entered the college dining hall, my

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new friends beckoned me over, and soon, I learned to quit hesitating and so took my place beside them.

Even so, I really couldn't believe it when, walking into James' apartment that night, seeing him reclined in his great yellow-cloth chair—the center of it all—he looked up at us, greeted Ron, the girls, and then attended to me:

“Well, hello Mr. Barr. What are you doing here?”

Had I ever laid eyes on this person before? Did I even know his name? And, what *was* I doing here? Did I have to have a reason? Do college freshman really need a reason for anything they do?

I suppose, somewhere in my intimidated haze, that I said hello. And I also suppose that James heard me, but it didn't matter because he had already moved on to the others who were drinking their beer and Southern Comfort and, in a dark corner, rolling new joints.

We sat on floor pillows, and I listened to everyone talk. Cheryl kept translating for me: who everyone was, what they did for the theatre, why they mattered more than anyone else on campus.

I learned that James' roommates were Sam and Bob, but I think that at least four or five other people lived there, too. I couldn't tell if I were envious of all of them or not. I lived in a fairly new dorm-- an ugly cereal box of a building--with one roommate and a private bathroom. That seemed normal and often sane.

But not always satisfying when I thought about James' place, something I did with increasing frequency.

Over my five years at the college, James must have had ten or twelve different roommates, including my friend Cheryl. I spent the night with her there once, the only time I ever slept in James' world, though I had already passed a night or two in the upper part of the house—the part whose entrance came via the front door--in the room of a girl named Delores, someone I haven't altogether forgotten, but not someone I remember easily or well. Not too long ago I ran into one of Delores's former roommates—there were always four or five women living in this part of the house. I recognized this woman; I recognized the context of her, too, but before I could step out of the way, she made it a point to recognize me. Loudly:

“Terry Barr! I was so jealous of you. I was in love with Delores and you ruined everything. And you didn't even love her. Just so you'll know: you ruined the love of my life.”

“Well, it was a long time ago,” I muttered, and then thanking her for bringing up my checkered past, I escaped back to my mother who, of course, was wondering why a strange woman was accosting me at the bargain book row of this suburban Books-a-Million. By this point, I had been married for twenty years and had two daughters. I had long since moved on from Delores and that house. James's house.

Or so I thought.

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I remembered then that I hadn't treated Delores very kindly at the end. She might have loved me, too. But like the nineteen year-old guy I was, I grew tired of "us" after about a month of dating her. I was the campus editor by then, quite puffed up. On the last day of 'us," she left a chalked message on our office assignment board:

"Terry, I don't know what's happened. But just be happy. -Delores."

She left underneath this message and propped up on the eraser stand a giant-sized Marvel Comic Book: The Avengers. I appreciated the gesture but of course never told her so. For after all, I wasn't the one in love.

Like most people you meet in college, James came into my life without a past. As well as I got to know him over those years, those years were all I ever knew about him. I had much to learn and did so, hanging out at his place most weekend nights with the only crowd who ever wanted to be there. The theatre crowd. His crowd.

Purple Jesus parties; after-performance cast parties. Friday evenings after a hard week's classes. His place felt like a retreat, and eventually, like home.

And every outing into Birmingham started there. Two or three cars led by James' two-toned, purple and white '57 Chevy would venture to DaVinci's Pizza or the Cadillac Café for sustenance, and then onto an evening of dancing at The Gizmo, Birmingham's primal Gay Bar in the 1970's.

It does no good to describe the atmosphere of a Gay Bar. You either know one or you don't. This one was long and narrow with a dance floor not much larger than James's kitchen. Yet, it had that glittering, spinning Disco ball which James could graze with his high red hair if he wanted. These were the days of "The Hustle" and "The Bus Stop;" of "Fight the Power" and "Fly Robin Fly." Of dollar beer and poppers.

Some in our group were actually gay. Others just liked to dance, and there was no doubt that the best music and dancing were at The Gizmo where, of course, no man ever did that embarrassing little two-step shuffle, the one that screams so loudly into the disco night: "I have absolutely no sense of rhythm."

In his low-top purple Converse sneakers, James danced. And I danced, and sometimes we even danced together, because no one who knew us cared. Because we could.

And because it really didn't mean anything.

But more than anything, I remember seeing James getting closer and closer to a girl in our pack, Karen, someone I once had a crush on too. I noticed how they sat near each other in the dining hall; how they made it a point to sit on the same side of the booth at DaVinci's; and how, over time, Karen began to ride in the front seat of James' car. If others needed to crowd in, she was the one to move closer to James. When we'd drop these others off, I saw how Karen never repositioned herself.

And I saw how James didn't mind.

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After a time, they were always together, and so everyone believed they were a couple. Karen had long, long, golden brown, wavy hair and beautifully round brown eyes. Her friend Heidi nicknamed her "The Deer." And maybe she was a deer in spirit, too, for though she liked to have fun, though she danced as wildly as anyone, and though she seemed so close to James, something wasn't right. It was like she was waiting to be frightened, ready to run at a moment's notice.

I never wanted to know what that something was, and maybe somewhere hidden within me I knew, but was just too afraid to ask.

In my junior year, I left college for a semester to work for my congressman in Washington. When I returned the next fall, Karen had moved away from her seat by James. She attached herself then to a series of openly gay men and began pointing out to me every man she thought was secretly gay, including one of my former roommates, a guy who had a long series of girlfriends during the time we lived together. For Karen, most men were closet jobs, and I should have known then what she was really trying to tell me.

But she never told me what happened between her and James. We weren't that kind of close. I had never exactly asked about them when they were "together," either. In our college phase, after all, we come and go from each other's intimacy all the time.

My loyalty to James's place withstood Karen's departure. Cheryl was living there now, and we had become best friends. On many nights, I'd bring some of my records over and those who spent the evening would sit back and talk and listen to the music of our times. We'd get pretty stoned during those evenings, and while James was still centered in his yellow chair, he also still refused to smoke with us.

One night, I brought the new 10CC album, *The Original Soundtrack*. It was unlike anything I had ever heard. Definitely not disco, but was it rock? Pop? I kept hearing their hit on commercial radio, that plaintive cry of some lost boy. At first I professed that the song was rather sappy and sickly. That was my hard-boiled college stance. But I knew better.

For I was a guy who could cry late on a Thanksgiving Eve at his parents' house while listening to Malo's "Suavecito" coasting out of an AM radio, after yet another date refused to pan out.

At first, I didn't understand why they called their record *The Original Soundtrack*, and like many people, I guess, I wondered what the soundtrack was from. What movie had I missed that was getting all this attention? Why did the radio DJ's assume we all knew this soundtrack, this popular show? Where had 10CC come from, and why did I hear this song everywhere I went? Why did every station play it every hour of the day?

And why, after just a few times, did I start making everyone in the car shut up when it came on?

I played it for James that night, and he got it after only one listen. He asked if he could borrow the album, and I said yes. I knew that any record was safe with him; he treated them as if they were precious. As if he were in love.

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A week or so later, I stopped by his place one late afternoon to see if Cheryl wanted to go out for supper, but no one was expecting me. It was one of those mid-fall days where you want to keep your screen door open because you can't believe that in Alabama the air could ever get that crisp. You wanted to breathe it in deeply all the time.

I heard him before I got to the back stoop. I recognized the song even before I heard him singing with it:

"And if I call you, don't make a fuss,
Don't tell your friends about the two of us.
I'm not in love, I'M NOT IN LOVE.
It's because...."

I stood still and the song ended and he replaced the needle at the beginning. I didn't know where in this series of repeated plays he was or how long this would go on. It was such a private moment, so I walked away and left him there.

The next evening, we gathered at his place as usual. Maybe James had been smoking before I arrived, for he was even quieter than normal. The talk went as it usually did, and then on the edge of night, James got up and put on that record. The only light now came from his receiver. Finally, he pointed at the stereo:

"That song. It's too much. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever heard."

And I know that James had heard so many beautiful things in his life.
"I know," I said. I know.

A couple of years later, I was home on break from grad school, and some of my friends wanted to go dancing. By then, more straight people had discovered gay bars. The Gizmo had shut down, and most people were patronizing The Lighthouse, a converted warehouse with a very open, massive, multi-colored dance floor.

I saw James almost immediately after we arrived. He had shaved his head and grown a formidable moustache. He'd traded in his purple converse for thick, black Doc Martens. You know.

We talked briefly, but too much time had passed to make anything we said meaningful.

For we had already shared the soundtrack of our life together, and we were past that now.

In the background I kept hearing the queer bass line of "Dance Disco Heat," and the thumping beat drowned James out.

And then he leaned into me:

"You know who came in to the bar last night? Karen. Imagine. She's such a fag hag. Ugh, it's so tired."

I must have said something, or maybe not, for "Got To Be Real" had

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just segued seamlessly into the mix, and James laughed and then hit the dance floor with his partner, a guy just his stature and build. They were both stripped to their waist, black t-shirts wrapped around tight jeans.

I travelled back to college for a minute as I watched him go. In those days, I never knew who was in love with whom. Not really.

"I keep your picture upon the wall.

It hides a nasty stain that's lying there.

So don't you ask me to give it back.

I know you know it doesn't mean that much to me.

I'm not in love, I'm not in love...

OOOhh, you'll wait a long time for me.

OOOhh, you'll wait a long time."

I don't know why he never asked me to move into one of those bedrooms, and even now, I'm at a loss to explain why I never considered the prospect myself. I guess a liberal arts education isn't as comprehensive as I'd like to believe.

And in reality, no one ever waited a long time back then for much of anything.

For in that original time of life, *our* time of life, we had to move on from the rural colleges, basement apartments, narrow dance floors, and from the middle spaces on Chevy car seats that tried to confine us.

That tried to define us.

And, of course, we all succeeded in that, if in nothing else.

But if we believed that we weren't in love, that this time wasn't an original reality, then I can attest that it just wasn't true. For it was a time of being in love—that transitional phase of college that you realize only much later you'll never be able to repeat. Though maybe, if you're lucky and if someone's listening—outside your screen door perhaps or perhaps sitting beside you as the music re-plays on and on—you can tell him, or her, about the two of you and what it was like to believe that what you were going through truly mattered. That it was beautiful.

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