

CHET MEEKS

I owe my friendship with Chet to a girl named Annie.

It was 1992, and Annie was a student in our freshman French course at the University of Wyoming. I suspect she was, like a lot of UW students, from a tiny high school in a tiny town, and probably overwhelmed by college life. Whatever her situation, there was no doubt that Annie was a terrible French student. She didn't understand anything. Didn't do her homework. Didn't prepare for class. And it was because of these things that I met Chet.

My first memory of Chet occurred just after our old Belgian professor asked Annie to recite something for the class. "Mademoiselle Annie, would you read your paper to ze class, s'il tu plais."

Annie stood and began to read: "Um...je ma...um...m'apelle Annie...and um...je suis...habiter...um..."

Now, as we all know, as far as Chet is concerned, this is blood in the water. I remember watching him sit there, a look on his face that he would give me hundreds of times over the coming years. *Chin resting hard in his palm, his mouth contorted sharply upward to the left, teeth showing, his nose wrinkled, his brow clenched, his slightly squinting eyes asking, "Are you really this stupid?"* Yes, that is my first memory of Chet.

A few weeks later, as we jostled our way back to the dorms, through the sea of students heading for lunch, Chet and I finally spoke. I said to him, "So, how about that Annie. Makes you wonder why she's in college."

Without missing a beat, Chet replied, "Makes you wonder why she's even alive."

Perfect Chet. Unafraid of hyperbole, always willing to take it to the next level.

Anyway, after that we became the best of friends. He met Andy and the three of us were, in our own minds, a "crew," a "posse." Not exactly tearing up the campus, but we did enjoy ourselves. Although, as Chet and I discussed a few weeks ago, it's hard in hindsight to see why. Studying in the Coe Library. Studying in the science library. Studying in the student union. Studying at the coffee shop. Not exactly wild college days!

But it wasn't all dull. I remember our junior year, when Chet would come over to our apartment every morning before class. Before setting a foot inside he would declare, "Andy, make me a mocha." And Andy would do just that—a mug of espresso with chocolate milk mixed in for each of us—while Chet and I made the cinnamon toast. Looking back I can't help but think, "how gay was that"?!

Then there were the Tuesday evenings as sophomores, when we always ate pizza at Chet's apartment. There was a fly-by-night operation called Pizza Time (I think), and between 4:00 and 7:00 p.m. their promotion was, "the time you call is the price you pay."

I remember how stressed out we would get if we didn't order the pizza until after 5:00 o'clock. We wouldn't want to pay anything above \$5.00 for dinner!

I also remember our final year at UW, Andy and I had a roommate named John. John was the most openly and flamboyant gay person on campus. And Chet did not like him. A few weeks before graduation, we were having a party. Chet was in typical form (in his pre-wine drinking days), annoyed about something, glumly sitting there on the couch, staring straight ahead. Next to him sat John, in a pair of 5 inch inseam denim shorts, perched on the sofa's edge, his legs crossed and a wine cooler resting on his knee.

"Chet, you need to learn to have fun!" John announced.

Chet shot back, "John, you need to tuck your ass back in your shorts."

It didn't take long before Chet was a member of the family. He was another son to my parents, another brother for Andy, Eli and me. His parents Heidi and Asa had to share him with us during Christmas and summer vacation, and he came to all of our weddings (including mine in India) and other family events. He loved teasing my dad by describing his rigid views of the appropriate roles of students, professors, and administrators at the university, finally prompting my dad to declare, "Chet, you are going to be a real pain in the ass someday!" Whenever someone in the family had an announcement, Chet was automatically included on the email. My mom couldn't sleep for two weeks when he told her he had cancer. We loved him so much. We had so many laughs. So many fights. He was a part of everything.

I've gone on too long already, but I want to share one final moment with you.

It was 1994, and I had known Chet for a couple of years. I noticed him acting a little more glum than normal, not very talkative, uncomfortable, gulping a lot. He was nervous about something. One early spring night we parted ways after a couple of hours in the library. But about an hour later, my phone rang. It was Chet.

"Hello, Brett?"

"Hey Chet."

"Can you come over?"

"Now?"

"Yeah."

"Um...okay."

So I rode my bike over to his apartment, and when he answered the door it was more of the same. Glum, quiet. We had tea.

Finally, during an uncomfortable silence, he said, “Brett, I need to tell you something.” He started twisting the back of his hair with his index finger and thumb.

“Okay, sure.”

“Um...[then he sighed – still twisting his hair]..well, I don’t know how to say this. It’s just that...”

“Okay?”

“Well...I’m gay.”

He was crying, tears running down his cheeks, his eyes locked on me – waiting for my reaction.

I didn’t want to smile, but I couldn’t help myself. I smiled just a little bit, and before it confused him, I grabbed his skinny shoulders and gave him a big hug.

He pulled away. “Did you know?”

“Yeah.”

“Does Andy know.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure he does.”

“Okay. I love you Brett.”

This was a new one for me. I grew up in Wyoming, and my high school friends were almost all former basketball or baseball teammates, people Chet would later describe as “repressed goons.” Never before had a friend told me he loved me.

But I’m not ashamed, and will never regret, that I said it right back to him. “I love you too Chet.”

And you know I’ll always miss you.