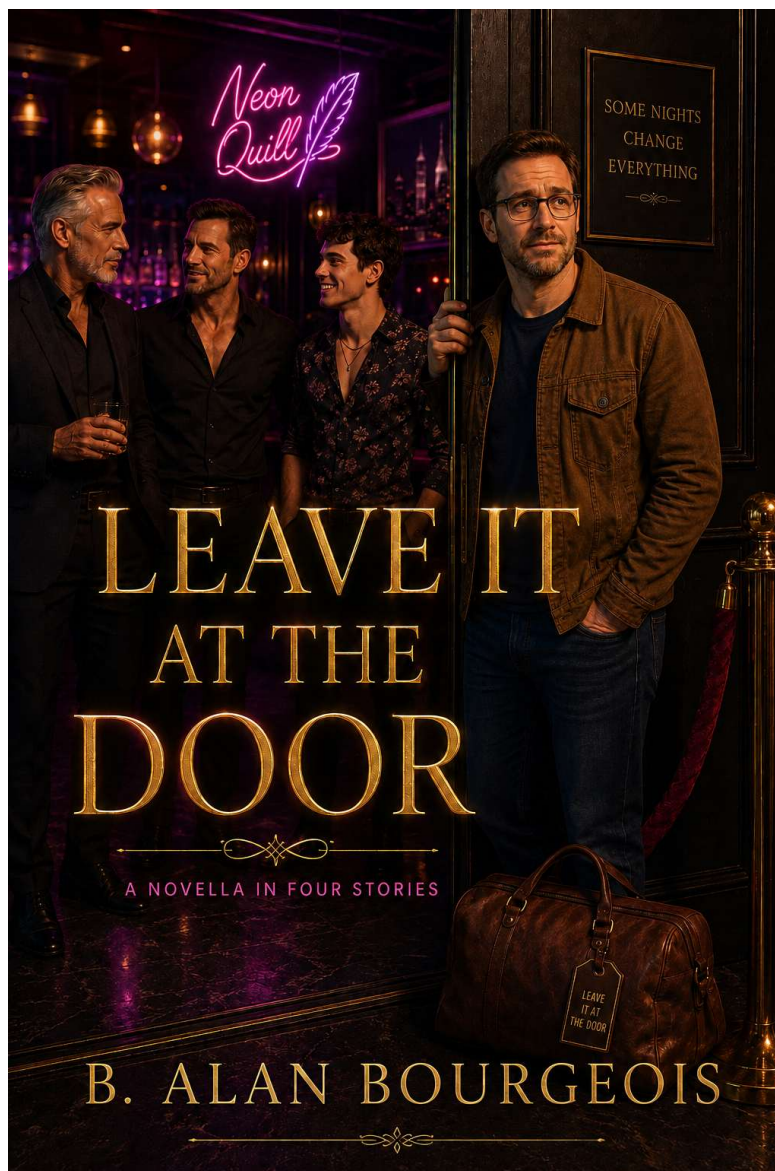




Leave It At The Door

LEAVE IT AT THE DOOR

A Novella in Four Stories

B. Alan Bourgeois

*Four men. One night. The things they carry in—and what
they choose to leave behind.*

Leave It at the Door

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The nightclub Neon Quill, as depicted in this novella, is fictional.

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Dedication

To every LGBTQIA+ person who has ever wondered where they fit, whether they are too young, too old, too late, too different, or somehow standing in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I have lived through many of the stages reflected in these stories.

I have been the young man who thought age was somewhere far in the distance.

I have been the man surprised to discover that the world had begun placing new labels on me.

And I have grown into the older man who understands that aging is not a loss of identity, relevance, desire, or possibility, but another stage of becoming.

Each stage looked different when I was standing inside it.

Each came with its own assumptions, fears, confidence, mistakes, and lessons.

And each eventually became the doorway to the next.

That is part of why I wrote these stories.

My hope is that LGBTQIA+ readers will enjoy the humor, the music, the flirtation, the awkward moments, and the humanity of these four men. But I hope the stories do something more as well.

I hope they encourage us to look beyond the labels we place on one another.

Young.

Old.

Daddy.

Grand Daddy.

Newly out.

Too late.

Too inexperienced.

Too experienced.

Too this.

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Not enough that.

Our community has spent generations fighting against people who wanted to define us before knowing us. We should be careful not to repeat that same habit with one another.

There is room for every age.

There is room for every stage.

There is room for the person who has known who they are since childhood and the person who finally finds the words at sixty.

There is room for those still searching.

There is room for those still changing.

There is room for those who have survived long enough to become the people they once could not imagine becoming.

If these stories offer anything beyond entertainment, I hope it is this:

Do not fear the next version of yourself.

Do not dismiss someone because they are standing at a different point in the journey.

And do not spend so much time worrying about where you belong that you forget to live the life happening around you.

I have been fortunate enough to grow from one stage into another, one by one.

I am still growing.

I hope you are too.

— **B. Alan Bourgeois**



STORY ONE

I'M NOT DONE YET

Adrian Vale had learned years ago that there were two kinds of mirrors.

There were mirrors that showed you what was there.

And there were mirrors that told you what you feared other people might see.

At sixty-five, he preferred the first kind.

He stood in front of the bathroom mirror wearing nothing but black boxer briefs and one sock, inspecting the gray beginning to spread through the hair on his chest. Not enough to qualify as distinguished. Too much to deny. His hair had gone mostly silver along the sides and temples several years earlier, though the top remained stubbornly dark enough that people sometimes accused him of coloring it.

He didn't.

He had better things to do.

He leaned closer to examine the spot below his left eye where a line seemed to have deepened since yesterday.

"Fine," he told it.

The line did not respond.

Adrian smiled.

That made several more appear.

"Fine."

He finished dressing.

Dark navy trousers. Black shirt, open two buttons. Lightweight charcoal jacket. No tie. Shoes comfortable enough to dance in without looking as though comfort had been the primary consideration.

He had made that mistake once.

Never again.

At twenty-five, he had dressed to be noticed.

At forty-five, he had dressed to look younger.

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At sixty-five, he dressed because he liked how he looked.

There was freedom in that.

His phone buzzed on the dresser.

A message from his friend Raymond.

You going out tonight?

Adrian typed:

Yes.

Three dots appeared almost immediately.

Where?

Neon Quill.

A pause.

On a Saturday? Brave.

Adrian laughed.

I survived the 80s. I can survive a DJ.

Raymond sent back three laughing faces and then:

You going alone?

Adrian stared at that question longer than it deserved.

He typed:

I am not going alone. I am going with myself.

He deleted it.

Too preachy.

Then:

Yep.

Raymond responded:

Have fun, Grand Daddy.

There it was.

Grand Daddy.

Adrian smiled despite himself.

Raymond had started calling him that two years earlier after Adrian complained that the word Daddy no longer seemed accurate.

"You've aged out," Raymond had announced over brunch. "You're Grand Daddy now."

Adrian had nearly thrown a biscuit at him.

Then he thought about it.

Daddy implied authority he had never particularly wanted. Grand Daddy suggested something else. Experience. Distance traveled. A man who had lived long

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enough to understand that most crises were survivable and most certainties were temporary.

He had decided he could live with that.

Under certain conditions.

Grand Daddy was acceptable.

Sugar daddy was not.

Old queen was not.

“Good for your age” was grounds for immediate dismissal.

He checked himself once more.

Not because he was vain.

Because he was sixty-five and going to a gay bar on a Saturday night, and vanity had earned its place at the table.

Adrian had spent most of his adult life taking care of himself. Not obsessively. He ate well because he liked waking up without feeling poisoned. He walked nearly every day. Swam twice a week. Lifted just enough weight to keep his shoulders and back from betraying him. He drank occasionally but rarely enough that bartenders remembered his order as sparkling water with lime.

He had watched too many men treat their bodies like temporary housing.

His had become permanent property.

He intended to maintain it.

Outside, Austin was still holding on to the heat of the day.

It was nearly nine and the pavement radiated warmth through the soles of his shoes. The air smelled faintly of car exhaust, grilled meat from somewhere nearby, and summer dust.

Adrian took a rideshare downtown.

He could have driven.

He preferred not to.

A good night should have room for changing plans.

The driver glanced at him in the rearview mirror.

“Going somewhere nice?”

“Depends on the DJ.”

The driver laughed.

“Date?”

“No.”

“Meeting friends?”

“Maybe.”

The driver seemed to consider asking another question, then thought better of it.

Adrian looked out the window.

That was another advantage of age.

People eventually learned to leave gaps in conversations.

When he was younger, he had thought wisdom meant knowing what to say.

Now he understood that much of it involved knowing when not to say anything at all.

• • •

Neon Quill sat between a boutique hotel and a restaurant that changed names every eighteen months.

The club had been there for six years, which in Austin nightlife made it an institution.

Its entrance was deliberately understated except for the sign above the door: a brilliant magenta feather bending into the words NEON QUILL.

Adrian liked the name.

It sounded like a bar where someone might either write a poem or make a terrible decision.

Possibly both.

There was no line yet.

That was good.

Lines were for people who wanted to be seen waiting to get somewhere.

Adrian wanted to get somewhere.

The man checking IDs looked at Adrian's driver's license, then at Adrian, then back at the license.

“You don't look sixty-five.”

Adrian smiled pleasantly.

“I've been practicing.”

The doorman laughed.

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"No, seriously."

"So am I."

That ended it.

Inside, music rolled through the building in a deep electronic pulse. Not yet loud enough to erase conversation, but loud enough to make everyone lean slightly closer to one another.

Adrian liked that too.

The room had been renovated since his last visit. Dark walls, warm amber lights over the bar, violet and blue spilling across the dance floor. Booths ran along one side beneath old black-and-white photographs of Austin nightlife from decades earlier.

Adrian recognized one of the clubs pictured.

The building was gone now.

Most of the men in the photograph probably were too.

He did not let himself linger there.

Tonight was not about archaeology.

He went to the bar.

"Vodka?" the bartender asked.

"Sparkling water. Lime."

The bartender paused.

"That's it?"

"Should I apologize?"

The bartender grinned.

"No, sir."

Sir.

Adrian accepted that one.

For now.

He carried his glass toward the edge of the dance floor.

This was always the first test of going out alone.

There was a brief period—three minutes, maybe five—when a person became intensely aware of having arrived without another person.

People who came in groups had somewhere to look.

Someone to speak to.

A built-in explanation for standing still.

A man alone had to decide whether solitude was a problem.

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Adrian had stopped treating it as one years ago.

He watched the room.

A couple in their thirties were already dancing as though the club might close unexpectedly. Three men near the bar were taking turns showing each other something on a phone. Two women occupied a booth with four gay men and appeared to be winning whatever argument was underway.

A tall man in his forties stood near the opposite wall.

Adrian noticed him because the man was trying very hard not to look like he was watching the room.

Fit. Dark hair. Good shoulders. Shirt chosen with care but not desperation.

Adrian smiled to himself.

Forty-something.

That strange age when men began checking whether everyone else thought they still belonged.

The man caught Adrian looking.

For a second, neither looked away.

Then the man lifted his glass slightly.

Adrian returned the gesture.

Good.

No complication required.

A few minutes later, the DJ shifted into something with a stronger bass line.

Adrian felt it before he consciously registered the song.

His body still knew what music was for.

He put his glass on a shelf near the wall and stepped onto the floor.

He did not dance like a twenty-five-year-old.

Why would he?

Twenty-five-year-olds danced as if energy had no cost.

Adrian knew better.

He moved with the rhythm instead of fighting it. Shoulders, hips, feet. Nothing exaggerated. Nothing restrained.

He had always loved dancing for the same reason he loved swimming.

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The body stopped being something observed and became something used.
Someone passed close behind him.
Another man smiled.
Adrian smiled back.
That was enough.
He had not come hunting.
He disliked the word cruising when people used it as though every glance was an unfinished sexual contract.
Sometimes a glance was simply a glance.
Sometimes it was an invitation.
The pleasure was in finding out.
A song later, the man from across the room had moved onto the dance floor.
Not directly toward Adrian.
Close enough to be coincidental.
Too close to be entirely accidental.
Adrian approved.
The man moved well.
Very well, actually.
He had the focused expression of someone who still thought dancing properly mattered.
Adrian leaned in when the music dipped.
“You're making the rest of us look bad.”
The man laughed.
“I was thinking the same thing about you.”
“Then we have a problem.”
The man's smile widened.
“Lucas.”
“Adrian.”
They shook hands, which seemed absurd in the middle of a dance floor and therefore made both of them laugh.
“How old are you?” Lucas asked.
Direct.
Adrian respected that more than arithmetic disguised as conversation.
“Sixty-five.”
Lucas stopped dancing for half a beat.
“Bullshit.”

"Thank you."

"No, seriously."

"I find people usually mean that as a compliment."

"I do."

"I know."

Lucas shook his head.

"Damn."

"Careful. You're about three words away from saying
'for your age.'"

Lucas laughed so hard he nearly bumped into the man
behind him.

"Okay. Fair."

The beat came back.

They danced.

No negotiation.

No assessment.

Just two men occupying the same song.

Adrian liked him immediately.

That did not mean he wanted to sleep with him.

Another lesson age had taught him: attraction did not
require a business plan.

• • •

Twenty minutes later, Lucas disappeared toward the
bar.

Adrian retrieved his sparkling water.

A young man stood beside it.

Very young.

Not teenager young. Adult young. Twenty-three,
twenty-four, perhaps.

Curly dark hair. Black T-shirt. Expensive sneakers.
The kind of face that had probably never needed to
consider lighting.

He was talking to another young man who looked
bored.

"Thirty-five?" Curly Hair said. "No."

The other man laughed.

"Seriously?"

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"That's old."

Adrian took a drink.

He had absolutely no intention of getting involved.

None.

"Like, what would we even talk about?"

Adrian closed his eyes.

He had made it sixty-five years.

Surely he could survive another thirty seconds without interfering in someone else's stupidity.

"Your student loans?" the friend suggested.

Curly Hair shoved him.

"Shut up."

Adrian smiled despite himself.

The friend noticed.

"You agree with him?"

Adrian looked around.

"Me?"

"Yeah."

Curly Hair looked at Adrian and immediately realized the trap his friend had created.

"Oh God."

Adrian raised a hand.

"No, please. Continue."

The young man looked mortified.

"I didn't mean—"

"You did."

"Okay. I did."

Adrian nodded.

"That makes this easier."

The friend started laughing.

Curly Hair gave him a murderous look.

Adrian took another sip.

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

Of course.

"What's your name?"

"Jamie."

"Adrian."

Jamie looked uncertain whether they were now having an argument.

Adrian decided not to give him one.

“So thirty-five is old.”

Jamie grimaced.

“When you say it like that—”

“I said exactly what you said.”

“Okay. Yes. It sounds bad now.”

“It sounded bad before.”

The friend nearly doubled over.

Jamie pointed at him.

“I hate you.”

“You'll survive.”

Adrian turned back to Jamie.

“How old are you planning to get?”

Jamie blinked.

“What?”

“How old are you planning to get?”

“I don't know. Old, I guess.”

“Interesting.”

Jamie stared at him.

Adrian let the silence do the work.

Then he smiled.

“Relax. I'm not going to give you a speech.”

“Thank God.”

“I charge for those.”

Jamie laughed.

Good.

Adrian took his glass and moved away.

He had gone perhaps ten feet when he heard the friend say:

“That old guy just destroyed you.”

Jamie answered:

“He's not that old.”

Adrian smiled.

Progress.

Tiny, ridiculous progress.

He caught himself feeling pleased.

Then immediately corrected the thought.

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He was not Jamie's teacher.

There was danger in older men assuming every
younger man required instruction.

Adrian remembered being twenty-four.

He had been unbearable.

Not because he was a bad person.

Because he was twenty-four and therefore occasionally
mistook unfinished thinking for conviction.

He had once told a man of forty-two that he couldn't
imagine being that old.

The man had replied, "You will."

Adrian had thought him bitter.

Eighteen years later, on his forty-second birthday, he
remembered the conversation while brushing his teeth.

He had laughed toothpaste onto the mirror.

Life had a remarkable sense of timing.

• • •

The club filled quickly after ten.

Music grew louder.

Conversation became something performed at close
range.

Adrian moved between the dance floor, the patio, and
the bar, enjoying the temporary nature of everything.

A man named Stephen flirted with him for three songs
and then vanished with friends.

A woman complimented his jacket.

A twenty-something asked if he had cocaine.

Adrian said no.

The young man asked if he knew where to get cocaine.

Adrian said, "Apparently I have aged into law
enforcement."

The young man apologized and fled.

Adrian laughed for several minutes.

He danced again.

That was when the DJ played the song.

It began with a low bass pulse and a male voice almost
speaking.

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You brought me with you through the doorway...
Adrian did not know the track.
Something electronic. Moody. Good rhythm.
He liked it immediately.
The chorus arrived:
You brought me with you
Like you always do...
People responded to the beat before they responded to
the words.
That was how good dance music worked.
It entered through the body and waited for the brain to
catch up.
Adrian moved with the crowd.
The lyrics floated in and out.
Fear.
Old reactions.
Stories carried inside.
Judging someone before they judged you.
Adrian's smile faded slightly.
"That's rude," he muttered.
A man dancing beside him leaned closer.
"What?"
"The song."
The man listened for a moment.
Then laughed.
"Damn."
Exactly.
The DJ had apparently decided therapy should have
bass.
Adrian looked around.
Lucas was back on the floor, dancing with someone
younger.
Jamie stood a short distance away with his friend.
And near the entrance, almost motionless in the
shifting light, was a man Adrian had not noticed before.
Late thirties, perhaps.
Maybe forty.
Brown jacket despite the heat outside. One hand still
curled around the strap of a small shoulder bag.

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He looked as if someone had dropped him into the room without instructions.
Everyone else moved around him.
He did not.
Adrian recognized that expression.
Not because he had seen it in bars.
Because he had seen it in mirrors.
Years ago.
The man turned toward the door.
For a second Adrian thought he might leave.
Then somebody passed behind him, blocking the exit.
He stayed.
Adrian filed the observation away.
Not his business.
Yet.
The song continued.
I'll name them before they name you...
Adrian looked toward Jamie.
The kid was singing along now despite obviously not knowing the song three minutes earlier.
Youth.
Learn the chorus first, meaning later.
Adrian laughed.
Then immediately caught himself.
There it was.
Judgment.
Small enough to seem harmless.
Automatic enough to escape notice.
He stopped dancing.
Not because he was offended with himself.
Because he was interested.
He had spent much of the evening noticing what other men assumed.
The doorman astonished by his age.
Lucas shocked that sixty-five could still look like Adrian.
Jamie declaring thirty-five ancient.
He had catalogued each offense neatly.

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But he had also decided Lucas was insecure before
speaking to him.
Decided Jamie was shallow before learning anything
about him.
Decided the man near the door was frightened.
Maybe he was.
Maybe he had indigestion.
Adrian smiled.
Wisdom was irritating that way.
Every time you thought you had acquired enough of it,
it presented another bill.
The song ended.
The crowd cheered.
The next beat started immediately.
The lesson was over.
Apparently.

• • •

Adrian went to the patio.
Outside, the sound became a distant pulse beneath
conversation.
He found an empty chair beside a planter and sat.
His knees were fine.
He resented feeling the need to note that.
A server passed.
“Can I get you anything?”
“Water.”
“Still or sparkling?”
“Still.”
Adrian looked toward the open patio doors.
Lucas came through them a minute later.
He scanned the patio, saw Adrian, and walked over.
“Mind?”
“Please.”
Lucas sat.
He had switched to water too.
Adrian liked him even more.
“You come here often?” Lucas asked.

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"That's a terrible line."

Lucas laughed.

"I wasn't using it as a line."

"Then you're safe."

"No, really."

"Every couple months."

"I haven't been out in a while."

Adrian nodded.

He could tell Lucas wanted to explain.

Adrian let him decide whether to.

A few seconds passed.

"Guy called me Daddy tonight."

There it was.

Adrian kept his face neutral.

"Congratulations?"

"No."

"Condolences?"

Lucas laughed.

"I don't know."

"How old are you?"

"Forty-six."

Adrian leaned back.

"My God."

"See?"

"I don't know how you're still mobile."

"Fuck you."

Adrian laughed.

Lucas shook his head.

"I know it's stupid."

"Then why does it bother you?"

Lucas looked through the glass doors toward the dance floor.

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

Lucas sighed.

"You always this annoying?"

"Only when hydrated."

The server brought Adrian's water.

Lucas waited until she moved away.

"I don't feel forty-six."
Adrian opened the bottle.
"What does forty-six feel like?"
"That is exactly the kind of bullshit answer I
expected."
"It's a question."
Lucas considered it.
"I don't know. Older."
"Than what?"
"Myself."
Adrian smiled.
"That one I understand."
Lucas looked at him.
"You feel sixty-five?"
"No."
"See?"
"I feel like me."
Lucas frowned.
Adrian continued.
"I have no idea what sixty-five is supposed to feel like.
My back occasionally sends suggestions. Otherwise, I'm
just the same person with more information."
Lucas smiled.
"More information."
"Some of it useful."
"Do people call you Daddy?"
"Sometimes."
"Doesn't bother you?"
"Depends who says it."
Lucas laughed.
Adrian leaned closer.
"Grand Daddy is preferred."
Lucas stared at him.
"You're kidding."
"Entirely."
"Thank God."
"Mostly."
Lucas laughed again.

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Adrian liked his laugh. It started quietly and then escaped him.

“So what's Grand Daddy?” Lucas asked.

Adrian looked toward the city beyond the patio railing.

“Someone who's been Daddy long enough to stop needing the title.”

Lucas raised an eyebrow.

“That sounds rehearsed.”

“It should. I've had sixty-five years.”

They sat quietly for a moment.

Then Lucas said, “You really don't care?”

“About aging?”

“About people thinking you're old.”

Adrian considered the honest answer.

“Of course I care.”

Lucas seemed surprised.

“I just don't let caring make every decision.”

The words settled between them.

Adrian continued.

“Some days I look in the mirror and think I look great. Some days I think I look tired. Sometimes a younger man looks right through me and I remember when men used to turn around. Sometimes somebody half my age flirts with me and I wonder if he wants money.”

Lucas laughed.

“See? Sugar daddy.”

Adrian pointed at him.

“Careful.”

“Sorry.”

“I don't want to be someone's retirement account with benefits.”

Lucas nearly spit out his water.

Adrian smiled.

“But yes. It gets to me sometimes. You don't become wise by ceasing to have feelings.”

“So what changes?”

“You get better at deciding which feelings deserve authority.”

Lucas went quiet.

Adrian immediately regretted the sentence.
It sounded like something printed beneath a sunset on
social media.
“God,” he said.
“What?”
“I sounded inspirational.”
Lucas grinned.
“You did.”
“Forget everything I said.”
“Too late.”
“Terrible.”
They laughed.
Through the doors, the music changed again.
Lucas stood.
“You dancing?”
“In a minute.”
Lucas started toward the door, then turned back.
“Adrian?”
“Yes?”
“You look good.”
Adrian waited.
Lucas smiled.
“That’s it.”
“Excellent recovery.”
Lucas disappeared inside.
Adrian remained seated.
He looked down at his hands.
They looked sixty-five.
Veins more visible than they used to be. Skin thinner
across the knuckles. A small brown spot near his thumb.
He flexed his fingers.
He thought about the first man he had loved.
Not because the evening was sad.
Because memory was not always sadness.
David had hated dancing.
He moved like a folding chair falling down stairs.
Adrian had loved him anyway.
David died at thirty-eight.
Not from AIDS.

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Aneurysm.

Adrian always found himself explaining that when people heard “gay man,” “eighties,” and “died young” in the same story.

As if tragedy needed to meet expectations too.

There had been others.

Friends lost to AIDS.

Friends lost to cancer.

One to addiction.

One to a motorcycle.

One who simply stopped answering calls and disappeared into whatever life he preferred.

Adrian had also attended weddings.

Retirement parties.

Sixtieth birthdays.

Seventieth birthdays.

He knew gay men who had been together forty years and men who reinvented themselves at fifty.

The story was never as simple as survival.

Living wasn't merely staying alive.

It was continuing to participate.

Adrian stood.

His knees remained cooperative.

“Thank you,” he told them.

A woman at the next table looked over.

“Sorry?”

“Private conversation.”

She nodded as though that made perfect sense.

Austin.

• • •

Back inside, Jamie was dancing.

Adrian saw immediately that the twenty-four-year-old was terrible.

Not bad.

Terrible.

All enthusiasm, no relationship to the beat.

Adrian watched for perhaps ten seconds before Jamie noticed.

“Oh, shut up.”

"I didn't say anything."
"Your face did."
"My face has sixty-five years of opinions."
Jamie pointed at him.
"See? That's exactly why I don't date older guys."
Adrian laughed.
"And here I was devastated."
Jamie kept dancing.
"You dance pretty good."
"For an old man?"
Jamie stopped.
"I wasn't going to say that."
"You thought it."
"Maybe."
"Progress."
Jamie rolled his eyes.
"Do you always teach classes no one signed up for?"
Adrian froze.
It landed more sharply than Jamie intended.
He could tell from the immediate change in the young
man's expression.
"I didn't mean—"
"No."
Adrian smiled.
"You're right."
Jamie looked confused.
"Really?"
"Don't get used to it."
The beat softened.
Adrian joined him.
For a while they danced without talking.
Jamie eventually leaned closer.
"I'm not an asshole."
"I didn't say you were."
"I know."
"Then who are you arguing with?"
Jamie frowned.
Adrian laughed.
"Sorry. That was a class."

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"Exactly."

They kept moving.

Jamie looked across the room.

"You really sixty-five?"

"Yes."

"You have a boyfriend?"

"No."

"Husband?"

"No."

"Ever married?"

"Almost."

"What happened?"

Adrian looked at him.

"You're very curious."

"You asked how old I plan to get."

"Fair."

He considered how much to say.

"He decided he wanted a different life."

"Cheated?"

"No."

Jamie seemed disappointed by the lack of drama.

"He just left?"

"We ended."

"That sucks."

"It did."

"When?"

"Twelve years ago."

Jamie blinked.

"That's like half my life."

Adrian laughed.

"Thank you for that."

"Sorry."

"Don't be. It's true."

Jamie shifted closer as the dance floor filled.

"So you never found anyone else?"

"I found several people."

"You know what I mean."

"Yes."

Adrian looked toward the lights.

“No. Not someone I wanted to build another life around.”

Jamie nodded as if processing information from a foreign country.

“Do you want to?”

“Maybe.”

“At sixty-five?”

There it was.

Jamie heard it at the same moment Adrian did.

His eyes widened.

“Shit.”

Adrian laughed.

Jamie covered his face.

“I walked right into that.”

“You sprinted.”

“Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

“Okay.”

“I’m not fragile.”

Jamie lowered his hands.

“You know what I meant.”

“I do.”

Adrian softened.

“And yes. At sixty-five.”

Jamie nodded.

“Okay.”

It was not enlightenment.

It was not transformation.

It was simply a twenty-four-year-old adjusting one piece of information.

Adrian found that more believable.

Across the floor, he saw the man in the brown jacket again.

Still alone.

Still watching.

This time their eyes met.

The stranger looked away immediately.

Adrian continued dancing.

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Close to midnight, Neon Quill became the kind of crowded that made everyone either touch strangers or pretend they weren't.

Adrian had always found that amusing.

People would spend years constructing elaborate rules around personal space and then pay twenty dollars to stand chest-to-back with fifty people under flashing lights.

He moved toward the bar for water.

Lucas was there.

Jamie was there too, several feet away.

And the man in the brown jacket had finally made it all the way inside.

Adrian noticed him because he was ordering something and seemed unable to hear the bartender.

"Sorry?"

The bartender shouted again.

The man leaned closer.

"What?"

Adrian stepped beside him.

"He asked what you want."

"Oh."

The man looked embarrassed.

"Club soda."

The bartender nodded.

Adrian smiled.

"My kind of troublemaker."

The man looked at him.

"What?"

"Nothing."

The bartender handed over the drink.

The man took it with both hands, as though receiving instructions.

Adrian hesitated.

Then:

"First time here?"

The man's face changed.

Not dramatically.
Enough.
“Is it that obvious?”
“Only because you're still listening to people.”
The man laughed.
Good.
“I'm Owen.”
“Adrian.”
They shook hands.
Owen looked around.
“I almost didn't come in.”
Adrian nodded.
“Most good things have a doorway like that.”
There he went again.
Inspirational.
He really had to stop.
Owen smiled anyway.
“I came out six months ago.”
Adrian's humor left his face, replaced by attention.
“Congratulations.”
Owen grimaced.
“Is that what people say?”
“I don't know what people say. It's what I'm saying.”
“Thanks.”
Owen stared into his drink.
“I thought I'd feel different.”
“Do you?”
“Yes.”
Adrian waited.
Owen looked up.
“Not in the way I expected.”
Adrian nodded.
That was enough.
He did not ask about wife, family, children, religion,
work, trauma, revelation, or timing.
Those questions would come if Owen wanted them to.
Instead Adrian said, “Dance floor's over there.”
Owen laughed nervously.
“I don't dance.”

Leave It At The Door

"Neither does Jamie."

From several feet away, Jamie shouted:

"Fuck you!"

Owen startled.

Adrian laughed.

"That's Jamie."

Jamie approached.

"You telling strangers I can't dance?"

"I don't know him well enough for him to be a stranger."

Jamie looked at Owen.

"I'm Jamie."

"Owen."

"Don't listen to him."

Adrian lifted his glass.

"Excellent advice."

Lucas appeared beside them.

"What are we talking about?"

"How Adrian is ruining my reputation," Jamie said.

Lucas looked at Adrian.

"Grand Daddy causing trouble?"

Jamie froze.

"Grand Daddy?"

Adrian closed his eyes.

"Lucas."

"What?"

"You were specifically asked to forget that."

Jamie started laughing.

"Oh my God."

Adrian pointed at him.

"Not one word."

"Grand Daddy?"

"One."

"That's amazing."

"Two."

"Can I call you that?"

"No."

Lucas said, "He likes it."

"I will kill you."

Owen began laughing.
Not polite laughter.
Real laughter.
The kind that catches a person by surprise.
Adrian looked at him.
Something had changed.
Only slightly.
His shoulders had dropped.
The death grip on his glass had loosened.
Then Jamie said, "Wait. How old are you?"
Owen looked at him.
"Thirty-eight."
Jamie made a face.
It happened automatically.
A tiny tightening around his mouth.
Owen caught it.
Lucas caught it.
Adrian certainly caught it.
"What?" Owen asked.
"Nothing."
Adrian stared at Jamie.
Jamie shook his head.
"No. I'm not saying it."
"Saying what?" Owen asked.
"Nothing."
Lucas started laughing.
Jamie turned on him.
"You're not helping."
Owen looked between them.
"What the hell is going on?"
Adrian said, "Jamie thinks you're ancient."
"I do not."
"You said thirty-five was old."
"That was before."
"Before what?"
"Before tonight."
Lucas leaned against the bar.
"This should be good."
Jamie glared at all three of them.

Leave It At The Door

"I said thirty-five seemed old because I'm twenty-four."

Owen blinked.

"Thirty-five?"

"See? When you all say it like that, it sounds ridiculous."

Adrian smiled.

"Because it is."

Jamie pointed at him.

"You're doing the class again."

Adrian stopped.

Jamie grinned.

Adrian raised both hands.

"Fair."

Lucas looked at Owen.

"And apparently I'm Daddy."

Owen glanced at him.

"I thought Daddy meant somebody thought you were hot."

Silence.

Then Jamie laughed.

Adrian laughed.

Lucas stared at Owen.

"Thank you."

"What?"

"Exactly."

Owen looked confused.

Lucas shook his head.

"Never mind."

Jamie leaned against the bar.

"This place has way too many labels."

Owen laughed once.

Sharp.

"Tell me about it."

Something in his tone made all of them look at him.

He hesitated.

Then said:

"I spent years being terrified somebody was going to put one label on me."

Then I finally accepted it. Gay. Fine. Good. Mine.”

He looked around the club.

“And I come in here and apparently there are fifty more.”

Jamie smiled.

Lucas looked down at his drink.

Owen continued.

“Daddy. Grand Daddy. Young. Old. Too young. Too old. My type. Not my type.”

He shrugged.

“I don't know. Maybe I'm new at this.”

“You are,” Jamie said.

Adrian gave him a look.

“What? He is.”

Owen laughed.

“I am.”

Then he looked at the three of them.

“But if none of you like what people assume about you...”

He paused.

The music seemed suddenly louder.

“...why are you doing it to each other?”

No one answered.

Adrian felt the sentence land somewhere inconvenient.

Jamie looked toward the dance floor.

Lucas rubbed the back of his neck.

Adrian stared into his water.

There were moments when wisdom consisted of speaking.

There were others when wisdom required recognizing that someone else had just said the thing you needed to hear.

Adrian smiled first.

He couldn't help it.

Owen looked nervous.

“Sorry.”

“Don't apologize,” Adrian said.

Jamie shook his head.

Leave It At The Door

"No. He's right."
Lucas sighed.
"Unfortunately."
Owen smiled.
A new song started.
Not Baggage.
Something brighter.
Simple beat.
Impossible not to move to.
Adrian put down his glass.
"Come on."
Owen looked alarmed.
"Where?"
Adrian stared at him.
"The airport."
Jamie laughed.
Adrian pointed toward the dance floor.
"Where do you think?"
"I told you, I don't dance."
"Neither does Jamie."
"I heard that!"
Lucas put his glass down.
"I'm in."
Jamie followed.
Owen remained beside the bar.
Adrian held out his hand.
Not seductively.
Not ceremonially.
Just an invitation.
Owen looked at it.
Then at Adrian.
"Seriously?"
Adrian nodded.
"It's a song, not a mortgage."
Owen took his hand.
They went to dance.

• • •

B Alan Bourgeois

Adrian did not remember the next twenty minutes as individual events.

He remembered pieces.

Jamie attempting something with his shoulders that should probably have required a permit.

Lucas laughing at him.

Owen moving awkwardly for half a song and then realizing no one cared.

A stranger joining them briefly.

Someone spilling water.

Jamie shouting a lyric incorrectly.

Lucas correcting him.

Adrian telling them both to shut up.

Lights sliding blue across faces.

A bass line beneath his feet.

And suddenly Adrian was aware of something he had not felt in a long time.

Not youth.

He did not feel twenty-five.

He had no interest in feeling twenty-five.

Twenty-five had been exhausting.

He felt present.

Entirely.

That was different.

He looked at Jamie.

Twenty-four.

So certain time was somewhere far ahead.

Lucas.

Forty-six.

Annoyed that time had caught him doing exactly what time does.

Owen.

Thirty-eight and newly arrived in a life he had already been living without naming.

And Adrian.

Sixty-five.

The oldest.

Not the ending.

Not the warning.

Leave It At The Door

Not the lesson.

Just the man standing where the others might
someday stand.

He thought of the photograph on the wall.

The vanished club.

The men whose names he would never know.

The friends he had buried.

The men who had buried people before Adrian ever
entered his first gay bar.

The ones who had fought.

The ones who had hidden.

The ones who had danced anyway.

For years Adrian had occasionally felt guilty about joy.

Not consciously.

More like a question buried under good days.

Why me?

Why did I get this far?

Why sixty-five when others got thirty-eight?

He no longer asked.

There was no answer that could honor the dead.

Living badly would not resurrect anyone.

Shrinking would not make the universe fair.

If anything, the opposite.

He had been given years.

Use them.

The song changed again.

A familiar bass pulse.

Adrian recognized it immediately.

You brought me with you...

"Again?" he said.

Jamie shouted, "I like this one!"

"Of course you do."

"What?"

"Nothing."

The chorus came.

This time Adrian heard the words differently.

You don't have to take me home.

He stopped moving for half a second.

Lucas noticed.

“You okay?”
Adrian smiled.
“Yeah.”
And he was.
More than okay.
He started dancing again.

• • •

At one-thirty, Adrian decided he was done.
Not exhausted.
Done.
There was a difference.
A good evening knew when to end.
Jamie had disappeared somewhere with his friend,
though not before giving Adrian an awkward half-hug
that seemed to surprise them both.
Lucas had exchanged numbers with someone.
Adrian did not ask who.
Owen remained near the dance floor, talking to a man
who had joined their group briefly.
He no longer looked like he had been dropped into the
wrong room.
Adrian collected his jacket.
Outside, the air had cooled slightly.
The Neon Quill sign painted the sidewalk pink.
There were several benches near the entrance. A
woman waited for a rideshare. Two men argued
affectionately about tacos.
Adrian requested a car.
Three minutes.
He leaned against the brick wall.
The door opened behind him.
Lucas stepped outside.
“Leaving?”
“Eventually.”
Lucas looked at his phone.
“I'm getting food.”
“Excellent.”

Leave It At The Door

"You?"

"Home."

Lucas nodded.

Then smiled.

"Good night, Grand Daddy."

Adrian gave him a long look.

Lucas held up his hands.

"Respectfully."

Adrian considered.

"I'll allow it."

Lucas grinned.

"See you around?"

"Probably."

Lucas started away.

"Lucas."

He turned.

Adrian thought about offering some final piece of wisdom.

Something about age.

Time.

Labels.

Living.

Then he remembered Jamie accusing him of teaching classes nobody had requested.

"Good night."

Lucas smiled.

"Good night."

Much better.

A minute later, Owen came outside.

He stood near Adrian.

"You heading home?"

"Yes."

"Me too."

Adrian looked at him.

"How was it?"

Owen thought.

"Strange."

"Good strange?"

"I think so."

Adrian nodded.
Owen looked back at the entrance.
"I almost left."
"I know."
"You saw me?"
"You weren't subtle."
Owen laughed.
"I don't know if I belong here."
Adrian followed his gaze toward the doorway.
"No one belongs in a bar."
Owen looked at him.
Adrian smiled.
"You belong in your life. The bar's optional."
Owen shook his head.
"You do that a lot."
"What?"
"Say something that sounds ridiculous for a second
and then turns out not to be."
"Age."
Owen smiled.
"Maybe."
Adrian's car pulled toward the curb.
He opened the door.
"Adrian?"
He looked back.
"Thanks."
"For what?"
Owen considered.
"Not asking me a thousand questions."
Adrian nodded.
"You'll tell people what you want them to know."
"I will."
"Then that's enough."
Adrian got into the car.
As they pulled away, he looked back through the
window.
Owen stood beneath the Neon Quill sign.
Not inside.
Not outside.

Leave It At The Door

At the threshold.
For a moment Adrian wondered what the man would
look like at forty-six.
At sixty-five.
Then he laughed quietly.
There he went again.
Trying to write somebody else's future.
He turned toward the window.
Austin moved past in streaks of light.
His phone buzzed.
Raymond.
Still alive, Grand Daddy?
Adrian typed:
Very.
Then, after thinking for a moment:
Good night.
He put the phone away.
The driver had music playing softly.
Adrian recognized the beat.
The same song from the club.
Baggage.
Of course.
He leaned his head back.
There were things he would carry home.
Memory.
Love.
Loss.
Experience.
The faces of three men he had not known five hours
earlier.
There were other things he could leave behind.
The need to defend sixty-five.
The irritation of being underestimated.
The quiet temptation to return judgment for
judgment.
Not forever.
He wasn't naïve.
Baggage had wheels for a reason.
But maybe tomorrow he would carry a little less.

B Alan Bourgeois

He smiled at his reflection in the dark window.
Sixty-five looked back.
No apology.
No disguise.
No countdown.
Adrian closed his eyes and listened to the song.
He wasn't young.
He wasn't trying to be.
He had been young.
He had been middle-aged.
He had been heartbroken.
Desired.
Ignored.
Loved.
Left.
Certain.
Wrong.
Afraid.
Brave.
All of it was still in him.
Age had not erased the men he had been.
It had gathered them.
That, he thought, was what Jamie couldn't understand
yet.
What Lucas was beginning to understand.
What Owen might eventually discover.
Getting older was not becoming less yourself.
If you were lucky, it was becoming more.
Adrian opened his eyes as the car crossed the river.
The city shimmered against the water.
He had plans tomorrow.
Coffee.
A swim.
Maybe brunch with Raymond if Raymond could be
persuaded to stop using the phrase Grand Daddy every
six minutes.
Monday there was work.
Next month a trip.

Leave It At The Door

Somewhere ahead, another man might walk into his life.

Or not.

Either way, there was music he had not heard.

People he had not met.

Nights he had not lived.

He thought about the young man asking whether he still wanted love at sixty-five.

At sixty-five.

As though desire had an expiration date printed somewhere beneath the heart.

Adrian smiled.

He looked out at the city.

"I'm not done yet," he said.

The driver glanced into the mirror.

"Sorry?"

Adrian laughed.

"Nothing."

Then thought better of it.

"No," he said. "Not nothing."

The driver waited.

Adrian smiled toward the window.

"Just reminding myself."

And the city carried him home.



STORY TWO

WHEN DID I BECOME DADDY?

Lucas Mercer knew the shirt was too much.

That was why he bought it.

Black, fitted, soft enough to move in, with a faint sheen that appeared only when light hit it from the right angle. It was the kind of shirt that could look completely normal at dinner and mildly irresponsible after eleven.

Perfect.

He stood in the dressing room under lighting designed by someone who clearly hated human beings.

“Jesus.”

Every department store dressing room should come with a warning:

Objects in mirror may appear more exhausted than they actually are.

Lucas turned sideways.

Not bad.

He had spent enough time in the gym to know he looked good. Not magazine good. Not twenty-six-year-old fitness influencer good. Real-person good.

Strong shoulders.

Flat enough stomach.

Arms that still filled out a sleeve.

Hair mostly dark, although gray had begun showing at the temples no matter how aggressively he pretended otherwise.

He leaned toward the mirror.

There it was.

One gray hair in his beard.

“Traitor.”

A voice from the next fitting room said, “You okay?”

Lucas froze.

"Fine."

"Sounded serious."

"Personal disagreement."

The stranger laughed.

Lucas looked at himself again.

Forty-six.

It wasn't that he minded forty-six.

He minded what other people seemed determined to make forty-six mean.

There was a difference.

He changed back into his T-shirt, carried the black shirt to the register, and ignored the fact that he owned at least six others that could have accomplished precisely the same thing.

Saturday night deserved a new shirt.

That was his story.

He was sticking to it.

• • •

At home, Lucas showered, shaved his neck, trimmed his beard, changed shirts twice, and then put on the new one.

He considered cologne.

Too much.

He sprayed it anyway.

One shot.

Then another into the air and walked through it because apparently he had become a fragrance commercial.

His phone sat on the bathroom counter.

A message appeared from his friend Marcus.

Quill tonight?

Lucas typed:

Maybe.

Marcus responded immediately.

That means yes.

Lucas smiled.

Leave It At The Door

You going?

Nope. Date.

Asshole.

Jealous.

Not remotely.

That was mostly true.

Lucas liked being single.

Usually.

His last relationship had ended almost two years ago, and the first six months afterward had felt like waking up from a long meeting and realizing no one remembered why they were there.

Eight years.

Not disastrous years.

Not wasted.

Good years, mostly.

But somewhere along the way he and Thomas had become exceptionally competent roommates who occasionally had sex and knew each other's dental appointments.

Thomas eventually said it first.

"I love you. I just don't think I'm in love with this anymore."

Lucas had hated the sentence because it was true.

There had been no betrayal.

No dramatic discovery.

No one caught naked with a personal trainer.

They divided furniture.

Argued once about a lamp.

Thomas kept the dog because the dog liked him better.

That hurt more than the breakup.

Afterward, Lucas rediscovered nights out.

Then dating apps.

Then the peculiar experience of realizing gay men had apparently reorganized themselves while he was away.

When he had entered the relationship at thirty-six, he had simply been Lucas.

When he emerged at forty-four, he had become a category.

Daddy.
The first time it happened online, he assumed it was
flirtation.
Hey Daddy.
He ignored it.
Then another.
Handsome Daddy.
Then:
You into younger?
Then:
Daddy?
Then someone twenty-nine messaged:
You look like you'd ruin my life in a good way.
Lucas stared at his phone for three full minutes.
What the hell had happened while he was gone?
He didn't have children.
He didn't own a grill large enough to justify the title.
He had never once said, "Because I said so."
Daddy was his father.
Daddy was a guy wearing white New Balance shoes
while checking the thermostat.
Daddy was not Lucas Mercer putting on a fitted black
shirt and deciding whether he could justify staying out
until two.
He checked himself again.
Dangerous.
That was the word he wanted.
Not young.
He didn't need young.
Dangerous would do.
His phone buzzed again.
Marcus.
Have fun, Daddy.
Lucas stared.
Then typed:
Go fuck yourself.
Three laughing emojis appeared.
Lucas put the phone in his pocket.
"Children."

Leave It At The Door

• • •

He took a rideshare because parking downtown on Saturday night was an act of self-harm.

The city flashed past the windows.

Lucas watched groups moving between restaurants and bars, people dressed for versions of themselves they wanted strangers to believe.

He understood the ritual.

Going out had always involved a little theater.

At twenty-three he had worn shirts tight enough to interfere with breathing.

At thirty he had owned leather pants.

Actual leather pants.

There were photographs.

He hoped civilization ended before they resurfaced.

At thirty-seven he had started dressing like someone who wanted to be taken seriously.

Now, at forty-six, he found himself trying not to look like he was trying.

That required an exhausting amount of effort.

The driver turned onto the street where Neon Quill sat glowing between the hotel and whatever restaurant currently occupied the corner.

Lucas had been there plenty of times before his relationship.

Not much afterward.

The line was short.

A couple ahead of him were laughing. A group of younger men stood nearby, all apparently dressed by the same stylist.

Lucas checked his phone.

10:02.

Good.

Early enough to avoid chaos.

Late enough to claim he had been somewhere else first.

The doorman glanced at his ID.

“Have a good night.”
No reaction.
Lucas almost felt insulted.
Then realized how stupid that was.
He went inside.

• • •

Neon Quill was louder than he remembered.
Or maybe Lucas was older than he remembered.
No.
He rejected the thought immediately.
The bass was simply excessive.
That was objective acoustics.
He headed to the bar and ordered vodka soda.
One drink.
Maybe two.
He wanted to dance.
He had never understood men who went to bars and
drank themselves into furniture.
Alcohol made Lucas sleepy.
Music woke him up.
The bartender handed him the drink.
Lucas turned toward the room.
The first ten minutes alone were always awkward.
He had forgotten that.
People assumed confident people were never self-
conscious.
Complete nonsense.
Confident people simply became skilled at hiding the
first ninety seconds.
Lucas found a spot near the wall.
He watched.
Couples.
Friends.
People cruising.
People pretending not to cruise.
Men checking phones while obviously checking the
room.

Leave It At The Door

A silver-haired man stood near the edge of the dance floor with sparkling water.

Lucas noticed him almost immediately.

Not because he was the oldest man there.

He wasn't.

Because he looked comfortable.

There was a difference.

The man wore dark clothes that actually fit him rather than whatever shapeless uniform some men adopted after fifty. Silver at the temples. Good posture. Trim without looking overworked.

He looked expensive.

Lucas hated himself for the thought.

Not rich necessarily.

Composed.

That was probably what he meant.

The older man glanced his way.

Lucas realized he had been staring.

Their eyes met.

Lucas lifted his glass.

The man returned the gesture.

Well.

Still worked.

Lucas smiled.

Then immediately thought:

What the hell does that mean?

Still worked?

As though he had expected not to?

He took a drink.

This was exactly the problem.

He did not think he was old until someone or something made him think about age.

Then he became obsessed with proving he wasn't.

At which point he felt ancient.

Excellent system.

• • •

A man stepped beside him.

Early thirties.
Maybe younger.
Nice face. Light beard. Blue shirt.
“You here alone?”
Lucas looked at him.
“Apparently.”
The man smiled.
“I’m Devon.”
“Lucas.”
They talked.
Nothing profound.
Work.
Neighborhoods.
Music.
The DJ.

Devon touched Lucas's arm twice during the conversation, which Lucas accepted as encouraging evidence.

Then the beat changed.
Devon leaned closer.
“You dance?”
“Yeah.”
“Good.”
Lucas followed him toward the floor.
This was better.
This he understood.
Music didn't ask age.
Music asked rhythm.
Lucas had always had that.

Not technically trained. Never cared enough for classes. But he could find a beat and stay there.

He moved.
Devon moved with him.
They weren't exactly dancing together.
They were dancing in mutual awareness.
Lucas liked that stage.
The possibility before the decision.
Devon leaned closer after a minute.
“You look good.”

Leave It At The Door

Lucas smiled.

“You too.”

Then Devon said it.

“Damn, Daddy.”

Lucas missed the next beat.

Physically.

His foot landed wrong.

It was ridiculous how quickly one word could change the temperature of an interaction.

Devon didn't notice.

Or maybe he did and mistook Lucas's expression for something else.

He leaned closer.

“I mean that in a good way.”

Lucas stared at him.

Of course you do.

Who says Daddy as an insult while trying to make out with someone?

Still.

Something inside Lucas folded its arms.

“I need a drink.”

Devon blinked.

“Okay.”

Lucas left the floor.

Immediately.

Too immediately.

He knew it.

Devon knew it.

But Lucas kept walking.

At the bar he ordered water.

The bartender looked at his mostly full vodka soda.

“You done with that?”

“Yes.”

The bartender removed it.

Lucas drank water.

Daddy.

For God's sake.

He wasn't angry at Devon.

That would have been easier.

He was angry because the word had landed on something already sore.

Why?

He had no answer he liked.

He pulled out his phone and texted Marcus.

Just got called Daddy.

Marcus responded before Lucas finished putting the phone down.

HOT

Lucas typed:

I hate you.

Did you sleep with him?

No.

Then you're wasting your title.

Lucas put the phone away.

“Asshole.”

A man beside him looked over.

“Sorry?”

“Friend.”

“Ah.”

Universal explanation.

• • •

Lucas returned to his spot near the wall.

The silver-haired man was still there.

The older man looked toward him.

Lucas suddenly wondered if he thought Lucas was old.

The thought irritated him.

Then embarrassed him.

Why would he care?

He didn't even know the guy.

The DJ transitioned into a heavier bass line.

The older man placed his drink on a shelf and stepped onto the floor.

Lucas watched.

The man could dance.

Not in a showy way.

Worse.

Leave It At The Door

Naturally.

He moved as though no part of him was asking permission.

Lucas felt a strange flicker of competition.

Absolutely not.

He was not competing with a sixty-something stranger.

That would be pathetic.

He waited an entire minute before stepping onto the dance floor.

To establish independence.

Then gradually drifted closer.

Coincidence.

Entirely.

The older man glanced over.

"You're making the rest of us look bad."

Lucas laughed.

"I was thinking the same thing about you."

"Then we have a problem."

Up close, the man's face showed his age more clearly.

Lines around the eyes.

Skin thinner along the cheeks.

But the effect didn't diminish him.

It gave him shape.

"Lucas."

"Adrian."

They shook hands like two businessmen who had mistakenly scheduled a meeting inside a nightclub.

Lucas laughed.

Then asked the question.

"How old are you?"

Why?

He had no idea.

Maybe because age was already sitting in his head like an unwanted guest.

"Sixty-five."

Lucas stopped.

"Bullshit."

"Thank you."

"No, seriously."

"I find people usually mean that as a compliment."

"I do."

"I know."

"Damn."

Adrian smiled.

"Careful. You're about three words away from saying
'for your age.'"

Lucas laughed.

It was funny because Adrian had caught him.

He absolutely had been about to say it.

You look amazing for sixty-five.

What was wrong with that?

Everything, apparently.

They danced.

Lucas found himself enjoying Adrian almost
immediately.

No performance.

No desperate energy.

No attempt to prove anything.

Lucas wondered what his secret was.

Then hated the question because it made sixty-five
sound like a disease someone had successfully managed.

• • •

They separated after several songs.

Lucas returned to the bar.

Devon was gone.

Good.

No.

Not good.

He had liked Devon.

That was the stupid part.

One word.

One completely complimentary word.

And Lucas had walked away from someone he was
attracted to because it made him feel something he
couldn't name.

Leave It At The Door

He ordered another water.

“Wild night?” the bartender asked.

“Out of control.”

The bartender looked at the bottle.

“Clearly.”

Lucas smiled.

He carried the water toward the patio doors, then stopped when he heard a young voice nearby.

“Thirty-five? No.”

Lucas turned slightly.

A kid—twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four—was talking to a friend.

“That’s old.”

Lucas nearly laughed.

Then he didn’t.

Thirty-five.

Old.

Eleven years younger than Lucas.

His first instinct was outrage.

His second was memory.

He had once been twenty-four.

He tried to remember what forty-six had looked like from there.

Impossible.

Men in their forties had seemed fully adult.

Not old exactly.

Established.

Finished.

People who bought houses and had opinions about interest rates.

Then Adrian stepped into the conversation.

Lucas watched from a distance.

He couldn’t hear every word over the music.

He caught:

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

Then Adrian:

“How old are you planning to get?”

Lucas smiled.

The kid's face changed.
Adrian moved away.
The friend laughed.
Lucas shook his head.
Smooth.
He wondered whether Adrian collected these
moments.
Maybe that was what happened at sixty-five.
You wandered bars asking young men philosophical
questions.
Lucas laughed at himself.
There it was again.
Age assumptions.
Apparently contagious.

• • •

The night moved.
Lucas danced.
Talked to two men.
Rejected one politely.
Was rejected by another with enough skill that Lucas
only realized it several minutes later.
Respect.
He saw Adrian again occasionally.
The twenty-four-year-old too.
The kid danced like a malfunctioning ceiling fan.
Lucas enjoyed that more than he should.
Around eleven, the DJ played a track Lucas hadn't
heard.
Dark electronic pulse.
Male voice.
You brought me with you through the doorway...
Good.
Lucas liked the beat.
Then the lyrics started irritating him.
Something about old reactions.
Judgment.
Stories you carried.

Leave It At The Door

"I came here to dance," Lucas muttered.
A man nearby shouted, "What?"
"Nothing."
The chorus hit.
You brought me with you
Like you always do...
Lucas moved anyway.
It was annoyingly good.
He caught a phrase:
I'll name them before they name you...
Daddy.
Lucas stopped.
No.
Absolutely not.
He was not allowing a nightclub song to psychoanalyze
him.
He danced harder.
That would show it.
Across the floor Adrian was dancing too.
For a moment the older man stopped.
Looked around.
Then smiled at something.
Lucas wondered if the song had found him too.
Nearby stood the twenty-four-year-old.
And near the entrance was another man Lucas hadn't
seen before.
Thirty-something.
Brown jacket.
Standing almost completely still.
The man looked terrified.
Lucas immediately thought:
First time in a gay bar.
Then caught himself.
How the hell would he know?
Maybe the guy hated the song.
Maybe he'd lost his wallet.
Maybe he had just recognized his ex.
Lucas shook his head.
The lyrics were doing damage.

• • •

He found Adrian on the patio later.
The older man sat alone beside a planter.
Lucas hesitated.
Then walked over.
“Mind?”
“Please.”
He sat.
Outside air felt good.
“Come here often?” Lucas asked.
Adrian looked at him.
“That's a terrible line.”
“I wasn't using it as a line.”
“Then you're safe.”
Lucas laughed.
They talked.
Then Lucas said it.
“Guy called me Daddy tonight.”
Why had he told Adrian?
Maybe because Adrian was sixty-five.
Maybe because Adrian seemed like someone who had
already survived whatever crisis Lucas was having.
“Congratulations?” Adrian said.
“No.”
“Condolences?”
Lucas laughed.
“I don't know.”
“How old are you?”
“Forty-six.”
Adrian leaned back.
“My God.”
“See?”
“I don't know how you're still mobile.”
“Fuck you.”
That laugh felt good.
Lucas knew the whole thing was stupid.
He admitted it.

Leave It At The Door

Adrian asked:

“Then why does it bother you?”

Lucas looked toward the dance floor.

Because it means I'm no longer the guy I think I am.

The answer arrived immediately.

He did not say it.

Instead:

“I don't know.”

“Yes, you do.”

Damn him.

Lucas sighed.

“You always this annoying?”

“Only when hydrated.”

Adrian's water arrived.

Lucas stared through the glass doors.

“I don't feel forty-six.”

“What does forty-six feel like?”

“That is exactly the kind of bullshit answer I expected.”

“It's a question.”

Lucas searched for an answer.

“Older.”

“Than what?”

“Myself.”

There.

That was it.

Not older than Devon.

Not older than the kid.

Older than himself.

He carried around a picture of Lucas that had stopped updating years ago.

Maybe thirty-three.

Thirty-five.

Late enough to know who he was.

Early enough that age hadn't become visible.

That version of him remained his internal reference point.

Every mirror now offered revisions.

Adrian said:

“I have no idea what sixty-five is supposed to feel like. My back occasionally sends suggestions. Otherwise, I'm just the same person with more information.”

Lucas smiled.

More information.

It sounded better than older.

He asked whether Adrian cared what people thought.

Expected some polished answer about wisdom.

Instead Adrian said:

“Of course I care.”

That surprised him.

Adrian talked about being ignored.

About wondering whether younger men wanted money.

About assumptions.

“You don't become wise by ceasing to have feelings.”

Lucas listened.

“So what changes?”

“You get better at deciding which feelings deserve authority.”

Lucas stared at him.

There it was.

One of those sentences that made Adrian sound like he should be sitting beside a fireplace holding brandy.

Then Adrian immediately groaned.

“God.”

“What?”

“I sounded inspirational.”

Lucas grinned.

“You did.”

“Forget everything I said.”

“Too late.”

That saved it.

Adrian wasn't performing wisdom.

He was embarrassed by it.

Lucas liked that.

When he stood to go back inside, he turned.

“Adrian?”

“Yes?”

Leave It At The Door

"You look good."
He paused deliberately.
"That's it."
Adrian smiled.
"Excellent recovery."
Lucas went inside.

• • •

Forty-six.
Lucas thought about the number as he crossed the
room.
Forty-six.
It was not young.
Fine.
It was also not old.
But the entire argument suddenly seemed absurd.
Young compared to whom?
Old compared to whom?
Adrian thought he was young.
The kid probably thought he was one unexpected
sneeze away from burial.
Both were technically correct from where they stood.
Lucas laughed.
He saw the twenty-four-year-old dancing.
Terribly.
Adrian joined him.
Lucas stayed back.
Watched for a moment.
The kid said something.
Adrian stopped.
Then smiled.
Interesting.
Maybe Adrian had finally received one of his own
lessons.
Lucas moved toward another group.
He ended up talking to a man named Eric.
Forty-one.
Cute.
64

Recently divorced.
“Married to a woman?” Lucas asked.
Eric laughed.
“No. Man.”
“Sorry.”
“Why?”
“I don't know. Reflex.”
“People hear divorced and create a wife.”
Lucas smiled.
“Apparently we all categorize.”
“Efficient.”
“Dangerous.”
Eric raised his drink.
“To dangerous efficiency.”
They clinked glasses.
Eric was attractive.
Easy conversation.
Lucas wondered if he should ask for his number.
Then Eric's friends pulled him away to the dance floor.
“Come!”
Lucas followed.
He lost Eric fifteen minutes later.
That was fine.
Not everything needed an outcome.
Adrian had said something earlier.
Attraction didn't—
No.
Adrian hadn't said that.
Lucas was beginning to invent Adrian wisdom now.
Dangerous.

• • •

Near midnight, Lucas found himself back at the bar.
Adrian was there.
So was the twenty-four-year-old.
And the man from the doorway—the one in the brown
jacket—had finally made it inside.
The stranger was trying to order a drink.

Leave It At The Door

He couldn't hear the bartender.

Adrian helped.

Of course he did.

Lucas watched.

The man looked nervous.

Then laughed at something Adrian said.

Good.

Lucas turned toward the bartender.

"Water."

He had consumed exactly one vodka soda and
approximately a gallon of club water.

Wild.

By the time Lucas turned back, Adrian was talking to
the stranger.

Then the young guy joined.

Lucas moved closer.

"What are we talking about?"

"How Adrian is ruining my reputation," the kid said.

Lucas looked at Adrian.

"Grand Daddy causing trouble?"

The kid froze.

"Grand Daddy?"

Adrian closed his eyes.

"Lucas."

"What?"

"You were specifically asked to forget that."

The kid started laughing.

"Oh my God."

Lucas enjoyed this enormously.

"Grand Daddy?"

Adrian pointed.

"Not one word."

"That's amazing."

"Two."

"Can I call you that?"

"No."

Lucas couldn't help himself.

"He likes it."

"I will kill you."

The stranger laughed.
Lucas noticed it.
Not polite.
Relieved.
Something in him loosened.
Adrian introduced everyone.
Jamie.
That was the kid.
Owen.
The newcomer.
Lucas filed both names away.
Then Jamie asked Owen how old he was.
"Thirty-eight."
Jamie made a face.
Tiny.
Almost invisible.
Lucas saw it.
Of course he did.
Age had become the night's running joke.
"What?" Owen asked.
"Nothing."
Adrian stared at Jamie.
Jamie refused to say whatever he was thinking.
Lucas started laughing.
"You're not helping," Jamie said.
Owen looked confused.
Adrian explained that Jamie thought he was ancient.
"I do not."
"You said thirty-five was old."
"That was before."
Lucas leaned against the bar.
"This should be good."
Jamie tried to explain that thirty-five seemed old
because he was twenty-four.
Owen blinked.
"Thirty-five?"
Jamie groaned.
"See? When you all say it like that, it sounds
ridiculous."

Leave It At The Door

"Because it is," Adrian said.

Jamie pointed.

"You're doing the class again."

Adrian stopped.

Lucas laughed.

That was what Jamie had said to him earlier.

Interesting.

Then Lucas found himself saying:

"And apparently I'm Daddy."

He wasn't sure why.

Maybe because it had become funny.

Owen glanced at him.

"I thought Daddy meant somebody thought you were hot."

Lucas stared.

There.

That simple.

The entire stupid crisis reduced to one sentence.

Jamie laughed.

Adrian laughed.

Lucas looked at Owen.

"Thank you."

"What?"

"Exactly."

Owen looked confused.

Lucas shook his head.

"Never mind."

But it mattered.

Because Lucas had been treating Daddy as an obituary.

Devon had meant:

You're hot.

That was it.

Maybe also older.

Fine.

Older than Devon.

Fact.

B Alan Bourgeois

Was Lucas really angry that a younger attractive man had accurately noticed Lucas had lived more years than he had?

Ridiculous.

Then Jamie said:

“This place has way too many labels.”

Owen laughed.

“Tell me about it.”

His tone changed.

The group quieted.

Owen talked about coming out six months earlier.

About finally accepting one label.

Gay.

Then discovering fifty more inside the bar.

Daddy.

Grand Daddy.

Young.

Old.

Type.

Not my type.

Lucas looked down at his drink.

He knew all those categories.

Used them constantly.

Everyone did.

Efficient shorthand.

Sometimes useful.

Sometimes funny.

Sometimes hot.

But Owen was new enough to hear them without years of normalization.

Then he asked:

“If none of you like what people assume about you... why are you doing it to each other?”

Silence.

Lucas rubbed the back of his neck.

“Unfortunately,” he said after Jamie admitted Owen was right.

He meant it.

Adrian smiled.