

# THE RIGHT TO BREAK SILENCE

You can fool some people some of the time, but you can fool yourself damn near full-time. Like a person can convince himself it doesn't seem all that weird to be passing around a petition for harsher drug laws in the Wenatchee Valley at the same time he's sitting up every night doing coke. But then maybe you just have to admit that prowling around that same valley at three in the morning in your police cruiser desperately seeking a toot isn't all that normal. The way the peace officer later known to the streets as "Lord Corwin" looks at it, he was lucky that his behavior was getting noticed by other officers, and that he only got called into the Commander's office for the laconic suggestion that he save everybody a lot of embarrassment by turning in an obliquely worded resignation. It also probably saved him a lot of time and, just maybe, his ass. And it saved him from having to do to his cop job what he did to his family ties two weeks later. He managed to have his father catch him aspirating a rail off the counter of the family business, and got thrown out of both family and business. This left him with no money (like most fiends of any tenure), no job, and no support system, but responsible for a family of four and a moderate but relentless habit. Time, perhaps, to get with The Program.

Narcotics Anonymous should have been the happy ending, except that it

turned out to be just the beginning. To hear Corwin tell it, the drugs had been masking the same things the badge and guns had been masking. "For a while, just being clean was a big buzz. I cried and fessed up and did the whole nine yards. But just when I should have been getting over the drag, it got a lot worse. I went to NA to save my ass, but found out my soul was attached. And my soul was starting to look like one sick puppy. I was doing 'step studies' and writing workshops, and gradually realizing that without authority and drugs to suppress it, whatever had been eating me all my life was chewing its way out of my guts like Alien Junior.

"I'll cut to the chase. I was queer. I probably always had been, too. All those high school letters for managing teams? You get the picture." But then, maybe you've had a little more experience in such matters. Corwin was new to it all and living in a town that doesn't exactly go out of its way to nurture gay awareness. But the Norman Rockwell consensus of Wenatchee did have a few loopholes, or at least gloryholes--the main one being a quarter-a-pop video booth of low repute. Corwin was tired of fighting it, tired of throwing up from the realizations sobriety was slapping him with. So he decided a little "test" would make it go away. "I stopped by the video place one night and met this guy and talked a little. And so forth. The 'test' was a flaming success. It just made me want more extensive testing. I was a Crash Dummy for Love and no longer in any kind of doubt about what I liked. Back in high school I

worked at getting limber enough that I could bend over and suck myself off. I remember wondering if it made me queer. Well, I don't have to wonder anymore." For a while there he had to wonder what to do about being a husband and father of three kids. But it turned out that as soon as he clued the wife in, all that took care of itself. Three weeks later he was unencumbered. "It was pretty rough on her and the kids especially since her first husband took off with another woman. But damned if I ever figured out any other way it could have worked."

When word of Corwin's new orientation got out, his new job at the local hospital took care of itself, too. So did most of his friends. Wenatchee was starting to look a little bleak. At about that point, Corwin overheard his sister telling his wife that he needed to learn to be honest with himself. His brother-in-law laughed and said, "He was doing fine when he was in denial. Now that he's being himself he's lost his family, job, house, money--and he's getting fucked up the butt. How much more honest you want him to get?"

After the obligatory suicide attempt he split for Seattle, where things started looking up. "I took a crummy job and a crummy room and started working out heavily in a gym. The workouts kept my mind busy and my body too tired for sex. See, I'd accepted being gay, but not fucking around with a bunch of fags. The gym was the first good thing to happen to me since I'd started losing it. I'd always admired guys with good bodies, wanted to have one myself. Now all of a sudden there were

guys giving me the eye. I found out I could be a hunk. I could make me a man. I got contacts instead of those helicopter-style glasses all the cops wore, glitized my hair, hit the tanning booth. I was an entirely new creature. I wasn't ashamed of my body anymore, or of looking at other bodies. And the best part; I was making \$12 an hour modeling for drawing classes, more than I got for shit work at the hospital, almost what I made as a cop. Check that out. I was popular at the gym (which, yes, was one of THOSE gyms) and in the gay community in general."

Which would be another nice spot to drop curtain on a Happily Ever After, as in a jillion other "How I Learned to Love Being Queer" stories; but life goes on. Not to mention child support payments--to the tune of \$450 a month. Which, coupled with greater living expenses in the Seattle area, started putting Corwin up against the financial wall. "Christ," he says, "The leather bills alone...." He was turning into quite the leather aficionado. As a cop, he'd enjoyed festooning himself with straps and accessories made of black leather and or stainless steel, but in the heart of gay culture he himself plumbing that urge a whole lot deeper.

"Hanging around the house, I was comfortable in my breechcloth and a chain between my nipple rings," he recalls. "But it cost money, the way I looked when I went someplace. Especially a place like the Dog Run. You have to be sporting pretty serious biker leather, or some equally butch drag, to even get in the place, but in the enclosed alley in back, where you'd be strutting your stuff in front of the most discriminating studs in

town, it takes more regalia. I wouldn't have been caught dead there without at least my full motorcycle leathers--heavily augmented with chains, steel pyramids and a great pair of Smith and Wesson handcuffs from a previous life. I passed muster just fine: I was in The Show.

In fact, exposure in the Dog Run led to Corwin making a mark on show business when a porn producer discovered he still had his police uniform and paraphernalia: since prominently featured in low-budget XXX features "Southern Exposure" and "Twin Cheeks". "I was the macho cop, of course. I still had the style and look and still carried my .357 in a shoulder holster. I may have turned queer, but nobody considered me much of a sissy.

"I was hitting the baths a lot then, still finding my sexuality. Just going in there and getting ravaged until I had to crawl out the door. I think 24 guys in one night was my record. The baths were a beautiful place, naked and ethereal. I recall some images that were absolutely incredible. Lines and shadows of the human body veiled in a diaphanous mist."

Obviously Corwin was having little trouble adjusting to his new psychosexual environment. But the financial milieu was proving tougher to crunch, with bleak and insolvent realities rapidly setting in.

He'd seen the ads for "escort services," and you don't have to be from the big city to figure out what they're advertising. He rung one up at random and got called in for an audition. "I needed the money in the worst way,

and figured that escorting wouldn't be the worst way to get it," Corwin recalls. "Besides, I'd always had that fantasy. What male wouldn't want to get paid for having sex all the time?"

Did they have the stereotypical "casting couch" we all imagine? "Don't be silly. This is the nineties. The 'test drive' was on a waterbed. That's realistic, after all, the pimp has to check out the merchandise. And hey, this is what it's going to be about--doing guys you aren't attracted to.

Maybe it's just as well that the pimp was this really vile, hateful, grotesque scrotum of a guy that everyone calls Jabba the Hutt. Three hundred fifty pounds and ugly as a spud. And coprophagous. His idea of a great time was to give you a wine cooler enema until you were so full you were about to blow, fit his mouth hermetically to your hole, then let 'er rip. Not many tricks would gross you out after a close encounter with our Jabba. "It was a continuing deal, too, doing his little twists. If you didn't keep him happy, he wouldn't call you and you wouldn't make any money. But I put up with it and made some major coin. Some nights I'd do as many as four gigs at \$95 a pop, \$65 for me and \$30 to Jabba.

'Then other nights I'd end up running around getting doors slammed on me because Jabba told the johns I was 22, or a 200-pound body-builder, or whatever they wanted. But it still came to sometimes \$350 a night, minimum \$700 a week. Cash, non-reportable. Not too shabby, huh? Of course, women get twice as much as men do for this work and all they have to do is lay there, not all the jumping and pumping we have to put

out. But nobody said it's fair."

So Corwin started a two-year electroglide through night town, as a sex symbol that went way past symbolism. At first it was an ego rush, getting paid to fuck, being drooled over, getting compliments. "There was an element of warped pride. And there were enough little anecdotes along the way, like showing at the room of a famous black disco star ("As seen in '70s-collection ads on TV!") who passed out on downs, giving Corwin a night's money for nothing. But there were more obnoxious experiences, like the obese client everybody called Shamu. "Three hundred pounds, a five inch dick, and he wants to be on top. I'm like, 'Ahab to Earth: send air!' You think it's going to be fun, then it turns out to be disgusting, going over to fuck some ugly guy." And some not so ugly. "I met some very nice, good-looking people, actually. Maybe they called me just so they wouldn't have to fix breakfast for somebody. Jazz musicians who work late, intelligent and articulate artists who didn't want a relationship, just some fun. I'd have loved to talk to some of them, but they just wanted me out of there after it was over. That bothered me; there was never any emotional contact with anyone, anywhere, at any time. Even among the escorts there is emotional distance.

"Some have boyfriends at home and don't want them to know about it. Some are moonlighting for extra money. Or just ashamed. Jabba didn't want us talking to each other. The silence and emotional unavailability was piling up around me.

"But, of course, true romance wasn't exactly what I was looking for, either, at that time. I was into it for money. And also, I was still coming out. Everybody has to do it, go through adolescence all over again. Anybody out there going to say they've never fucked somebody they didn't really want to? I was doing it on the earn-while-you-learn plan, that's all."

In a way, it was the attractive people that made it worse for Corwin. "I was used to the underbelly aspects of street life from police work. You don't meet a lot of people of redeeming value in the druggie/drunkie elements of the gay community. And the guy who works for Seafirst with a home in Madison Park is settled down, not out there cruising. But now and then I'd meet a guy I just couldn't believe would have to call a service--a guy I'd fall in love with in a heartbeat. But is Mr. Right is going to marry a whore? Cinder-fucking-ella, right? They close the door and you walk away. It's depressing to be saying, 'Why couldn't I have met this person at another time, in another situation?'" After a year, Corwin was realizing that, despite all the approval pumping up his ego, his self-respect was on the skids. At some point on the graph those lines crossed and he started wanting out. "They say every man has his price, but not many ever find out what it is. Which can be a little depressing." In fact, almost without him noticing it, he was being surrounded by deep drifts of depression; the kind that hovers around the truly lonesome. "I'd say over fifty percent of the people that call aren't so much horny as just

lonely. I have some incredibly solitary images; houses or rooms where peoples' shadows are moving down a hallway like they aren't even attached to them. They're like so isolated, even their shadow is unattached. Yet they want you to leave right away.

"This guy at a local AIDS hospice wanted an escort. Two, in fact; we had a two-for-one special going. We went over and crawled through the window. The guy wanted to get undressed, wanted to touch. Then he just broke down, started sobbing. He just wanted to talk to somebody for an hour. So we talked to him, then climbed out the window with the money. Solitude is, like, haunting the whole city. And all they can take for it is me. And all I can take is the money.

"Probably the worst was doing a month of mega-hustling (including some sicko sessions with Jabba in order to get he extra calls) in order to make enough to send Christmas presents to my kids. I was doing everything against what I would normally want to do and all for the Christmas spirit. Is that ironic enough for you? Well, it was worse: my ex-wife knew where the money came from.

"That's when I did drugs again. A trick said he'd give me all the coke I wanted if I stayed all night. Bad move: he ran out of coke before we ran out of sex. Good metaphor though--you can get all you want, but it's never enough. Fortunately, I didn't binge out after that little relapse; I just got a glimpse of where things were headed.

"There were other indications. At his HIV tests, when asked to list how

many sex contacts he'd had in three months, Corwin was finding himself writing down three-digit numbers. But a deeper sting came from seeing police officers patrolling areas he worked. "I always used to go over and chat up cops. There's a strong camaraderie there, something I liked belonging to. But once I was on the other side of the fence, I didn't want them to even notice me.

I'd become scum in their eyes, just one of the workers. It was beyond depressing to get my perspective flipped back like that--more in the despair category. You've gotten yourself stuck doing this shit and there's nothing else you can do for that kind of money. Any whore will tell you that. What else can you do for \$400 a night?"

With his soul primed to quit but his flesh dependent on the money, Corwin needed a catalyst to kick "the life." It took the form of a straight fifteen year old boy, a runaway. "I warned Jabba not to use him--he was just a child. But he picked the kid up, raped him, and put him on the street; withholding the money for the bus ticket back to Iowa or wherever so the kid would have to keep hustling. The typical predatory, disgusting, in-your-face, pick-'em -up-at-the-terminal-and-turn-'em-out shit the guy was all about. It put me over the edge.

"My last contact with Jabba was when I shoved a .357 in his mouth. I met him to pay him for a job and told him what I thought about his act, and he started dissing me something horrible. So I went off. I was trying to drag him out of the car and clean up the parking lot with him, but he

was too big to get outside. So I stuck a gun barrel down his throat, then told him it would serve in lieu of notice.

"And know what? I didn't starve or anything. Well, I ended up making six dollars an hour as a security guard--actually more like a bouncer in a hospital emergency room. And I've gotta tell you, every once in a while when I pick up a paycheck I say, 'Shit I used to make twice this in one night.' Not that I'd be tempted to go back out there. I'm not too tempted to go back to police work, either. I can't deal with the pain and despair and beatup loved ones. Even here, my empathy almost drains me sometimes."

But the humanity he's learned is worth the price he paid, Corwin feels.

"Oh yeah. Lots of gays in here, lots of AIDS patients. They're coming in here to die, essentially, and they spot me by my pink triangle ring. I've been there for some people in an empathetic sense. It's good there's somebody there that cares about them. I guess it's good that it's me."

As for going back to straight family life, Corwin is equally sure. "Not a chance. I couldn't put the mask back on; it damn near killed me.

Actually, I really have the best of both worlds now. I can see my kids, but I have a genuine sexual identity. I'm content enough where I am; but I guess I'm still waiting for Mr. Right. So if you're out there, contact me at The Stranger."

Which brings us as close to a happy ending as this thing is going to get: Corwin's summation of the four years this story covers. "I have more

regrets than I used to. But I feel I did what I had to do at the time. The lesson I've gotten out of all this is an ancient one, ultimately: Know thyself. And to thine own fucking self be true.