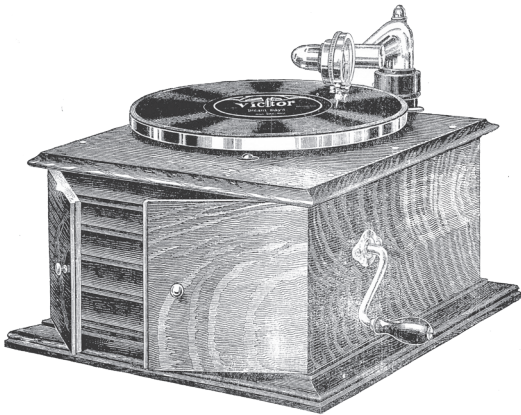


DAVID



Michael Harren

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listen to the music at:
michaelharren.com/david

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It probably won't come as a surprise to you that I was a somewhat odd kid. It wasn't just the sensitive, piano-playing, he's-gonna-be-a-big-homo-when-he-grows-up thing. I even managed to get those bits a little wrong. Not only did I enjoy playing house with my little sister, but when I did, I always wanted to be a cabaret singer who came home late to his kid, à la Linda Lavin in *Alice*. See what I mean? I was sort of like a gay kid cliché, yet always kinda missed the mark. Like when the other neighborhood boys played superheroes, I didn't even make a solid bold choice like Wonder Woman. I always

went for Samantha Stevens from *Bewitched*. Like maybe I was planning on staying back at the Batcave to clean the place up by wiggling my nose? There was one day when the other boys insisted I had to be a male superhero, so in keeping with the *Bewitched* theme, I went with the obvious choice, Uncle Arthur. You know, Paul Lynde's magnificently effeminate character?

So, I spent the majority of my early years knowing I wasn't quite getting it right, but being just on base enough kept me from chasing off the other kids and completely ostracizing myself.

One afternoon when I was in fifth grade, I was playing with some other kids in my front yard, oh and PJ, a puppet I had just gotten for my birthday. He was a white furry guy with long arms and legs you could velcro around your body. At some point that afternoon, this older kid I didn't know just sort of showed up and joined us. He was a little bossy, but

funny and since I had never seen him before I was curious if this could be a new friend. His name was David, and his family had just moved in on the end of the block. He hung out with us for a while and then as the other kids lost interest, David invited me over to his house. I brought PJ along.

David's parents were engrossed in the TV and barely acknowledged us when we came into the darkened living room. We went upstairs and hung out for a while. I don't remember the exact details of what we did that day, but I remember being impressed by the fucking mess. David and his brother Dennis had bedrooms upstairs, and apparently, their parents rarely, if ever, ascended the stairs, so they could keep it as disastrous as they liked.

At some point that afternoon, David got really pissed off at me. I don't remember why, maybe because I didn't really know why at the time, but I left pretty hastily and went home. Leaving my puppet PJ behind.

After some time went by, and David's anger had died down, he started hanging out at my house, but he always avoided my questions about getting my puppet back. This went on for a few days, until David finally confessed that he had chopped up PJ, burned him, and buried the ashes in his backyard. I don't recall an apology, but I do remember him explaining that it was because he had been so angry with me, implying that if I hadn't been such a dick, I would still have my puppet.

So, that sucked. But there was something about David that I liked. He was odd like me and we clicked in a way I hadn't experienced with another person. I was upset about the puppet, but kinda excited to have this new friend who related to me like few other kids did. The anger thing made me nervous, but he seemed nice too. We became best friends and were inseparable. He introduced me to cool music like the Go-Go's and Blondie which we listened to endlessly on

the turntable in his room. We even made up our own dance routines inspired by the *Solid Gold* dancers. One day we even dressed ourselves up in his mom's old clothes that were stored in the garage. My inspiration was Heidi, You know, that scene where she wears



all of her clothes at once while travelling because she didn't have any luggage. I was serving poverty-stricken pack-mule realness. Yeah, see what I mean about always being just somehow off?

My friendship with David was punctuated by periods where we didn't speak to one another. In my memory, it was always him getting pissed off at me, but to tell you the truth, I have no idea what kind of a jerk I might have been in those days. He was super passionate and emotional, like me, so maybe we both just couldn't handle it sometimes. We always re-connected, though, and when we did, it was like nothing had ever happened. We went right back to being best of friends.

My mom and step-father, Ken, were not fans of David. He was not at all intimidated by my step-father's West Texas wannabe authoritarian vibe. David had a pretty quick wit for a middle-schooler and also

disliked my step-father, which was pretty understandable. The guy was an asshole with a binge drinking problem.

One afternoon, before I realized that bleary-eyed + extra-cranky + home-on-a-weekday-afternoon meant that my step-father was back to drinking, David came over to my house. Ken was never a joy to be around, mind you, but his impatience with my free spirit seemed to increase when he was intoxicated. On this afternoon, he seemed intent on disrupting my time with David by inventing chores that needed to be done, and otherwise needling me with reminders that he was in charge and I was not to enjoy myself. Because my step-father was acting even more dickish than usual, we decided to go to David's house. I started to head out the door, and Ken said I needed to wash the dishes first before I left, and David talked back to him, probably reminding Ken that he wasn't my actual dad.

"Why don't you shut up?" Ken hissed.

To which David replied, "Why don't you go to hell?"

That's when Ken lost his shit, grabbed David by the shoulders and slammed him against the wall. I don't remember what he said, but he was screaming in David's face and David, a 9th grader being manhandled by a full-grown drunken man, was crying and yelling, writhing to get free of his grip. Ken finally let him go. David ran out the door.

The Police came to our house that evening. I was sent to my room so I didn't hear what was said. For obvious reasons, though, David's parents told him he could no longer be friends with me, and definitely could no longer come to my house. Even though David and I lived on the same street, I did not see him again—not even once—before my family moved to East Texas around a year later.

As if losing my best friend wasn't hard enough, I was absolutely devastated by the move. I was in the middle of my first year as a vocal major at Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts and felt like I belonged somewhere for literally the first time in my life. All the other kids loved the fact that I could play the piano so well and they would drag me into practice rooms before school started shoving sheet music in front of me so they could sing along to "Theme from Mahogany," "The Greatest Love of All," and just about anything from *Cats*. The things that made me quirky and weird at my old school, made me actually feel, I dunno... loved?

So we packed up and headed to Tyler, Texas during the winter break between semesters. Though it was primarily a Southern Baptist football town, I managed to make the best of my years there. Honestly, I am kinda proud when I look back at my teenage self. I held my own and found a pretty strong pack of freaky friends during that time.

Still, the moment I graduated, I made a beeline back to Houston to live with my brother and start college. I joined a band, too. It was a trio of sisters who made sugary pop music. We played gigs around town, and it was a great way to get re-connected with my home town.

A few months after I joined the band, I was out for dinner with a friend and saw one of the band's singers, Pinky, having dinner with someone who looked remarkably like my old friend David. I wasn't really sure though and brushed it off as a coincidence, perhaps just my nostalgia at the memory of my old friend. After all, he said his name was Simon so it couldn't have been him, right?

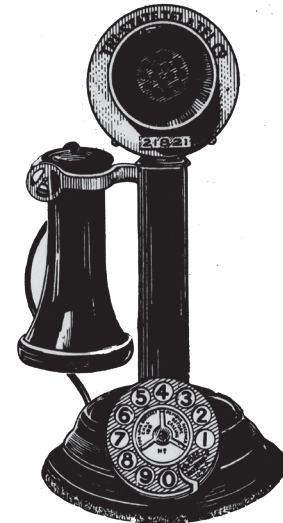
I called Pinky the next day and asked her about Simon. I told her how much he looked like my old friend David. She got weird.

"Oh yeah, that's my friend Simon. Simon Grimthorpe."

"Grimthorpe?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's his name."

Because she barked out her responses in an uncharacteristically businesslike and awkward manner, I knew she was lying. I didn't have to press much further until she cracked.



"Yes, that's David," Pinky choked as if she had been under interrogation for hours even though it had only been a few minutes, "I don't know why but he didn't want you to know it was him so he told me to tell you his name was Simon Grimthorpe."

"But why... 'Grimthorpe?'" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

"I don't know! I'm sorry."

Since I was getting pretty close with Pinky, and 'Simon' and she were such good friends, we wound up seeing a lot of each other. He dropped the Simon Grimthorpe thing since Pinky blew his cover and I never bothered to ask what that was all about. We became best friends all over again.

The timing here was pretty magnificent. I was just beginning to inch my toes out of the closet having met Bam Bam, the guy who

became my first boyfriend. David had been out since High School. I did the old, "I might be gay, maybe I'm bi, nope I'm definitely straight. Yeah, I'm gay" thing for quite a while and David's no-nonsense attitude about it was just what I needed.

"You're gay," he would say, "I've known you were gay since middle school. You're gay, girl."

When I finally came to terms with it, David took it upon himself to serve as a sort of mentor for me. Not just at the bars, mind you. We went together to Houston's gay book store, Lobo, and he introduced me to books about gay history and literature. I learned about Harvey Milk, *The Front Runner*, I even bought a copy of Larry Kramer's *Faggots*, which I kept hidden under my bed even though I lived alone by that point.

Our friendship deepened during this time, but so did its tumultuous nature. We never

fought about men, somehow, but we found plenty of other things to have spats over. But we always managed to make amends, even if we didn't speak for months. One of my favorites was the time David showed up one afternoon at my apartment, completely unannounced after not talking to me for close to a year. I opened the door, absolutely shocked to see him.

"I brought you this," he blurted out cautiously with a somewhat nervous, yet stoic look on his face.

It was the vinyl 12" single for the Pet Shop Boys' "Being Boring." He came inside, and we listened. I dropped the needle on the record, and each revolution seemed to heal a past hurt as we reconnected in the best way we knew how: listening to music that we both loved.

That's how David was. That's how I was too, I guess. We were sensitive souls with fucked

up pasts. Somehow we helped each other move forward.

David moved to Toronto in the early 2000s to get married. Gay marriage wasn't legal in the US yet, and his beau lived there anyway. David asked me to be his best man. I declined, claiming that I couldn't afford to make the trip, but really, I had entered a time in my own life where I shut myself down in so many ways. I was too afraid to make the trip, and I'm sad to admit that I resented David for finding love.

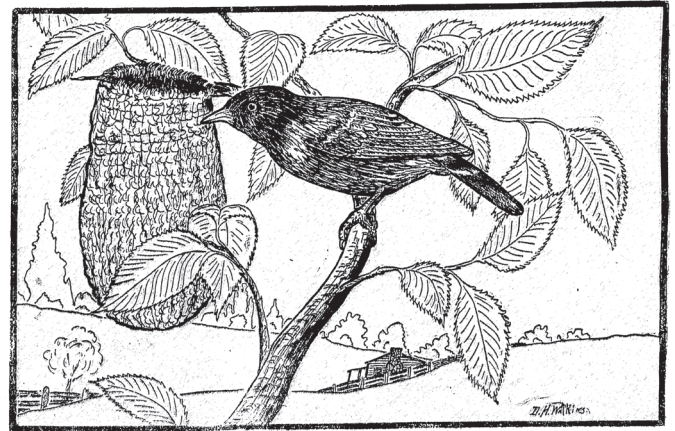
He stayed in Canada and I eventually moved to New York City. Our friendship had lost its way, but I still loved my friend.

The last time I talked to David was in 2010. He was in Hospice care in Toronto. A friend of his tracked me down on the internet and let me know that David was dying. I chipped in some money to help get him a laptop, and I sent him emails, but I was having such a hard

time coping with the idea that my lifelong friend was going to die, I just couldn't find my way there to see him in person. I sure wish I had.

Anyway, I summoned up the courage to call the hospice center in hopes of talking to him. It took a minute for the nurse to get him on the phone, but he did. David's voice was familiar but frail. We talked for only a minute or two before David said he was too tired to keep holding the phone.

Before we said goodbye, David said one last thing: "Remember that love is all that matters. I love you."





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