

This chapter excerpt comes from Raymond Luczak's book *Assembly Required: Notes from a Deaf Gay Life* (RID Press).
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LITTLE WINKS EVERYWHERE

IT WASN'T JUST the hearing aid harness I wore under my shirt like a bra that made me feel different. I didn't know how or why or what, but I *knew* I was different. All my childhood I was constantly ashamed—although I hadn't quite grasped precisely why at the time—to be deaf and to have imperfect and very nasal speech. (At the age of seven months, I lost much of my hearing [currently 82 decibels (dB) in my left ear; 105 dB, my right ear] due to a bout of double pneumonia. I began wearing hearing aids when I was two years old.) Moreover, I was much too skinny and nonathletic, and I'd matured a little more quickly than others. Then I found myself falling in love with my male classmates and teachers. I was endlessly fascinated with them, although I hadn't realized at the time the sexual possibilities of connecting.

But then again Ironwood, Michigan, the hometown in Upper Peninsula I left a good many years ago, never seemed smaller because

of the emptied iron ore mines nearby, nor did it seem to have thrived due to the flocks of skiers and tourists that came through to look at Copper Peak, the tallest ski jump in the Americas, or the Statue of Hiawatha, the world's tallest fiberglass statue. Nothing seemed to change in spite of the seasons endured.

Just as my damaged ears are able to grasp the bare skeletons of sound, I did not realize that I was gay—or even identify with certain icons revered by gay men—in some instant Hollywood moment; rather, it was more an epic moment than anything else. But a cast of dozens, some of whose names I have forgotten, did hold up signposts that gleamed in the darkness of my wondering.

Because I live so vicariously through my eyes, I am virtually incapable of tossing snappy comebacks directly from the movies and rendering smashing lyrics from Broadway musicals. My memories of growing up deaf and gay are sealed tight in the Pandora's box of my eyes, always looking back to see where I've come from.



OUT IN THE schoolyard, my best friend and I are fighting over the TV show *Batman*. The year is 1975; we are ten years old. He is my best friend because he doesn't care that I'm deaf, or that I have to spend half-days with his hearing class and half-days in my "hearing-impaired resources" classroom. He says that Adam West fights better than Burt Ward, and I disagree. We squabble over this nearly every day. I secretly cannot help staring at Adam West's firm jaw and faint

smile wrinkles underneath his mask, but I instinctively know it's not something to share. I finally give up watching the reruns after school. But the images of BRAAAAAAK! WHAM! never leave me.

Years later, after we'd moved apart, we connect and he tells me that although he's been married for a long time, he's become bisexual. He acknowledges that he was in love with me back then. Apparently, we'd tried to grapple with those strong feelings through our fights, perhaps inspired by the confused yet campy signals that *Batman* had broadcast.



MY SISTER JEAN brings home the brand-new vinyl album of Elton John's *Rock of the Westies*. I don't care for him, but I am inexorably fascinated by his smile and his stubble. Jean grooves to the album on our Panasonic stereo, but I cannot tear my eyes off Elton's. I look out for his other records in stores, and I wonder how he could get away with such flamboyant goofiness when I am such a total misfit in my class. I am not even allowed to wear slogan and funny pins on my shirts: I wish more than ever that I could play the piano and sing.

Years later, when I catch the last of Stockard Channing's stage performances in John Guare's Broadway play *Six Degrees of Separation* at Lincoln Center in New York City, Elton John himself sits on the other side of the aisle and two rows back. I do not recognize him at first, but his intense gazes back at me frighten me. What did I have to say to him? That the beard he once sported in the 1970s would still look good on him? No.



THE SUMMER OF 1979: I am in Ronnie's, the premier record shop in Ironwood. I am completely taken with the album cover of the Village People's *Go West*. They are so handsome, so cool, so ... *confident*. I wonder if any of them had had to endure the agony of pimples sprouting on their foreheads. I buy "Macho Man," and I blare the single over and over on the stereo in the living room. Oh, I did want to be a macho man, but no one seemed willing to show me how. It seemed that everyone knew the secret except me.

Even then, I couldn't decode the fact that it's actually a bunch of gay men; my eyes roam the blatant hirsuteness of Glenn Hughes, the leatherman. His eyes never seem to leave mine whenever I look at the Village People posters promoting their latest album. My fantasies are still platonic; they have not yet awakened in vividly sexual flavors.



IN 1980, WHEN I first see the silver-sheen cover of Queen's album *The Game*, something inside my head goes off. Freddie Mercury stands vacantly with his band, all donning leather jackets. I cannot pinpoint it until years later: The looks on their faces are identical to those of men in bars waiting to be approached without giving too much of themselves away.

And, of course, I am totally oblivious to the tongue-in-cheek irony of the group's name.



AT FIFTEEN, I am obsessed with Harrison Ford. His stubble in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* excites me, although in my dreams I am too terrified to touch his jaw. He is clearly a man's man; why should he have anything to do with me? Even hearing classmates half as self-assured as Indiana Jones had snubbed me. The one scene that replays most in my mind is Harrison Ford, his arm bandaged, lying on the bed on a ship. Karen Allen, the hard-boiled heart, bends over him and kisses him. The dialogue is a near-cliché, which could be summed up as: It hurts here. She kisses where he hurts, and then finally to the lips, where Indy quietly admits hurts also. It was the first time in the movies I suddenly understood the healing possibilities of a kiss. (Back then I didn't really catch all of the dialogue in the film, but it was so well-storyboarded that little dialogue was needed to carry the story. It was not until 1993 that I got to see it closed-captioned on laserdisc.)



MY SPEECH THERAPIST at Bay Cliff Health Camp unnerves me, still at fifteen. For one thing, it is a *he*; all my life my speech therapists were always women. He is blond and slender like me; his glasses are thick but completely clear without any distortion. He touches my throat as I try to perfect the more difficult diphthongs, and I shrink away. I do not feel comfortable, or is it that his tastes—

casually displayed in the cassette tapes of Mike Oldfield and Bruce Springsteen’s early albums—are beyond anything I’ve seen in Ironwood? I study the picture of Springsteen looking off into the distance. I look at my speech therapist and wonder whether he has any secrets or whether these albums are supposed to reveal secrets.



IT IS THE night of *M*A*S*H*’s much-ballyhooed final episode, and I am sixteen years old. Everyone is packed into the living room, eyes glued to the screen. I sit upstairs, my eyes glued to the public library copy of Gerold Frank’s *Judy*, perhaps the definitive biography on the twentieth century’s greatest gay icon.

In the dim background I hear claps and sobs and laughs from the TV, but I actually don’t care. Judy and I are both warm, alone together against the wintry world. I write passionate—and horrendous—poems about Judy, and I sigh. There is something about her beguiling eyes, the way they travel from one person to another, almost as if in a dream. I imagine myself as Judy and mouth the words to “Over the Rainbow” in front of the mirror. No sound comes out, for I know I cannot sing. . . .

This chapter—and more—continues in Raymond Luczak’s *Assembly Required: Notes from a Deaf Gay Life*. To order the book, please go online at www.rid.org!