Fellow Travelers

On a van to Boston, Rob Phelps learns that gay or straight, we're all on the same ride

February 1, 2003 By Rob Phelps

The van is almost full when I take a seat, and Provincetown's just the first stop on the long ride up the Cape into Boston. Bill, a retired teacher, is today's volunteer driver. Also aboard is a woman wearing a lavender velvet cap and a pink-triangle button; a leather daddy named Franco, who's fast asleep; Hank, a case manager for AIDS Support Group of Cape Cod; and Tomas, an artist who's stopped painting after a recent seizure. Only one seat remains.

It's a cold, gray November morning as we cruise along Beach Point on our way out of town. Chops in the bay lash the shore. I nestle into my seat. Bill will loop around Boston dropping off each of us for medical visits, then swing back to pick us up. I hope everybody's visit today is as routine as my eye checkup. "Anyone else to get?" I ask Bill.

He checks the schedule on his lap. "Nope. Just us today."

Good. I'm comfortable with present company. This is my first van ride since July, when massive statewide cuts in AIDS services forced Provincetown's AIDS agency to take on HIVers all along the Cape. Some of us longtime riders had worried there wouldn't be enough seats, but careful scheduling made that a non-issue. We also feared a million extra stops, but it turns out that the other folks are picked up only at Wendy's in Orleans, Burger King in Barnstable and McDonald's in Sagamore, where we always stop for treats and bathroom breaks anyhow. What makes me uneasy about sharing the van with others isn't logistics. It's personal. Towns get "saltier" the farther we cruise out of quaint and arty "P-town"; in other words, they're not so gay.

As we bounce along the rural highway through the Truro woods, I spy a gas station selling firewood and bait. We pass a closed drive-in theater, then a market, its red-and-blue Budweiser sign blazing through the morning mist. My mind drifts back a few years, to a Friday morning when the van stopped at that market for a boy in his early 20s who lived in the apartment above. (Once in a blue moon, we'd pick up someone outside P-town.) He had the body of a worn-out hard rocker, but his blue eyes were pure soul. Right away, I saw he was straight, mainly from the way his girlfriend, with her Dixie Chick hairdo, climbed in beside him with a giant duffle bag and held onto him for dear life. Still, his eyes lit up the deeper I looked into them. His girlfriend's didn't. For the rest of the trip, I avoided her glare. But on the trip back, strangely, neither was with us.

That Monday, I was back on the van. (In those days my checkups were numerous and far from

routine, as CMV had blinded my right eye and threatened to do the same to my left.) After the van picked me up from my appointment later that day, we headed for the hospital -- apparently the boy had been admitted over the weekend and the girl had stayed with him. All day, I'd been anticipating a peek into his soulful eyes, but when we got to the hospital, only the girl got on. She and her enormous duffle bag.

"Andy's staying for more tests," she told the driver flatly. "I need another ride in tomorrow." She said no more until we stopped at the Sagamore McDonald's.

I followed her to the counter, where she pulled out a dime-store change purse -- then crumpled in confused exhaustion. "I'm totally hungry and basically broke," she told the cashier.

"I'll buy you something," I said. What else could I do?

She eyed the menu above. "Maybe just a Happy Meal?"

"That's it?"

"OK," she said, "I'll have a Number-One-Big-Mac-Meal-*wait* -extra-big-apple-pie-box-of-cookies-large-*wait*-extra-large-strawberry-milkshake."

Back on the van, she thanked me. "Been eating from vending machines all weekend. Sleeping on the floor. Still got a hell of a night ahead." She patted her duffle bag. "Laundry."

The bag hung open, exposing a pair of faded plaid boxers so worn they looked like old flannel. Before I knew what my fingers were doing, I was stroking her boyfriend's underwear. She smiled faintly, then patted my hand, the way people do to let you know they understand. Then her head fell back and she slept.

I never saw her or Andy again. What happened to his beautiful blue eyes? Her careworn face? How could I have forgotten them both for so long?

The golden arches of McDonald's rising over the crest of the Sagamore Bridge yank me back into the present. It's 9:20 a.m. And even though Bill told me we're full up for today, when we pull into the parking lot for a breakfast and bathroom break, I'm looking around anyway. For Andy. For his girl. For anyone who might show up to claim that empty seat in the back of the van and, one day -- should I ever find myself totally hungry and basically broke -- buy me a burger and hear what I can tell them of my life on a dark and sleepy night ride home.

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