

description of him. If so, let it be our secret. The main thing is, I'll never forget him. I was Joe's first — well, you couldn't call us lovers. We never committed ourselves to that; my eyes were too fixed on New York; Joe's were too wide with the discovery of what it might mean to be a gay man. He was a big, burly farm boy, lumbering and pony-tailed, hot off the tractor, the newest and freshest and most bewildered gay man in town. We met in the Hi Hat — where else was there to meet? God knows what of our efficient bartender's brews we'd had to drink, but we ended up going home with each other. He told me he'd never been with a man before. He'd had a girl friend who he was trying to build up the courage to tell about himself — that he couldn't marry her and live on a farm and have the life his French Canadian forebears expected of him. He was big, strong, tender and frightened. He was hungry for life and love. From what I can recall, and from what I've heard from others who knew him after I left, he got a large measure of both.

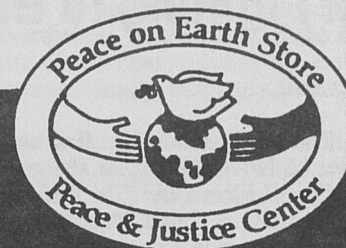
I left Vermont, he stayed. Back on a brief return trip in the late 1970s, I remember seeing him again, at a new bar — the current "Pearl's," I think — a bar that had replaced the Hi Hat. He seemed so confident and self-assured; the farm boy had become a full-fledged city gay man, at least Burlington style. He was a nurse; his life seemed to be filled with people he loved and liked, and who loved and liked him. I wished him well.

I hear now that the large measure of life he'd claimed for himself included AIDS. He died last year.

The news jolts me like a sledgehammer to the gut. Please — not Joe. Not the sweet, big, farm-bred man I was so privileged to know and caress. I hate facing the hard fact that he wasn't exempt; just as none of us is exempt from the possibility of that unwanted dividend of sex.

But remembering him brings so much back: the whole range of variety and innocence and wonder I knew as a man in my twenties in that nascent 1975 gay world of Vermont. It brings back the confusion, wonder, courage, and curiosity I saw in Joe's face as he allowed himself, for the first time, to touch and be touched by another man. We have gone on to other worlds, Joe and I. I know nothing about his; I don't know if he knows about mine. But I thank God that our lives touched when, where, and how they did.

Burlington is a larger town than it used to be, and not only physically. For one thing, it's got the gay and lesbian newsletter you're reading right now: a miracle from my 1975 perspective. Women are as visibly "out" as men, which is equally wonderful. Some fears and difficulties haven't changed: we still live in a largely homophobic world, and it's still hard to become a human being, whatever your sexuality. I have no idea what happened to that wonderful ex-nun. And Joe is no longer here. But remembering her and him, and the world we briefly shared, brings some focus as well as a painful feeling of loss. I've learned one thing from this look back to the gay Vermont of 1975, anyway: the worlds we leave are far more precious and important, sometimes, than we ever knew when we loved in them. ▼



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