Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

One time I was within earshot of a conversation between two older guys and one of them had a friend who revealed he was gay. The dude responded by saying: “I oughta kick your ass for telling me that crap. Get your gay ass outta here.”

Even though I’m straight, it makes my stomach turn to hear comments like that. Why would people go out of their way to hate on people because of how they live their lives? I think it’s an exercise in stupidity. But I don’t feel comfortable going up to strangers and calling them out.

Still, I admit that I have used the word “fag” when I’ve wanted to insult someone’s intelligence. No, I don’t think gays are dumb, but it’s a popular slang word. I know it’s hypocritical and I’m trying to stop using the term, but old habits die hard.

And even though I don’t consider myself to be homophobic, I used to think that gays act only one way because of how they’re portrayed on TV and film. The actors who portray gays play it to the hilt with their bold sexual statements, style of dress, and comments about their gayness. Since I didn’t usually run into anybody who acted that way, I thought that gays would never cross my path, like they lived in a separate world.

I know now I’ve probably been in contact with gays and didn’t know it. In high school, my guidance counselor/college advisor mentioned in an off-hand manner that he was gay during an assembly. I didn’t think too much about it, though. I still didn’t think that I would ever meet someone like me, but gay.

Then, during my stint working in a summer jobs program two years ago, I met Thomas.

On my first day of work he introduced himself to me and quickly became a good friend.

He was different and cool. I learned a lot from him, like how to take initiative when times called for it and to speak my mind a lot more. He had a sense of humor, and he was straightforward about everything. Evidently, he found me equally cool to be around.

We eventually started to hang out on the weekends. Sometimes we chilled at the mall. Other times we would hang out at a diner after picking up our paychecks. Or we would go to his cousin’s crib, where we watched cable or listened to music.

When we were hanging out, I picked up on some signs that made me think Thomas might be gay, like the feminine quality of his voice, and the way his hips swung back and forth when he walked.

I didn’t want to jump to conclusions, which is why I never said anything about it. In reality, you can’t tell someone’s sexuality that easily. I felt that I could not label Thomas as gay unless I heard it come straight from his mouth. I didn’t let it become a big issue with me. We were cool, so it didn’t matter.

But toward the end of July, Thomas started to get reclusive. He went from being outspoken to pensive, and I started to wonder what was going on. I came home from work one day, and was barely in the house for an hour when the phone rang. It was him.

“What the hell is the matter with you, n-gga? Dyin’ or something?” I demanded.

He started to say something smart, but stopped. He sighed, then put down the receiver. A few seconds later, someone picked it up.  
“Hello?” It was one of his cousins.  
“Look,” she started. “Thomas has something to say to you, but he’s too shy to say it. Do you know what it is?”

I wasn’t a total idiot. Or so I thought. “Does it have anything to do with his sexual orientation?” I ventured calmly.

“Yes it does. That’s not all, though. The reason why he had a hard time telling you was because he has a crush on you.”

I was shocked. Butterflies suddenly fluttered in my gut, then turned into angry hornets, which felt like they were bursting through the wall of my stomach. Then a bright-colored spot appeared in front of my eyes. I was silent for a moment before I decided to say something. I was prepared to hear him tell me he was gay, not that he had it for me.

His cousin said that he liked me because of my looks and personality. I blinked hard.

“Tell him he has nothing to be shy about,” I replied, trying to compose myself. “Put him on the phone.” I heard a faint “here” as she passed the receiver to Thomas.  
“Yeah.”  
“That’s all you had to tell me? Look, it was none of my business to begin with, so trusting me with something like that was strong of you. And it won’t change anything, if that’s what you’re thinking. I’m cool.”

After that, we still hung out as before, even though for a while we didn’t talk about his sexual orientation or his crush on me again. I didn’t want to bring anything up. I was thinking of how I would take it if I were gay and a straight friend started asking me about it. I thought that would make me feel uncomfortable and that I was running the risk of saying something stupid that would make him feel uncomfortable.

I wanted to know if he was happy with himself, even though other people probably didn’t accept him because he’s gay. But I didn’t ask. I didn’t want to make him feel like he was on trial for being who he was. I also wondered if he still had a crush on me.



Knowing a guy had feelings for me was unsettling. When girls liked me, I felt a sense of satisfaction. But with Thomas, I felt bewildered. According to my experiences, a male’s sentiments toward me began and stayed platonic. The idea of any guy liking me caught me off guard. This was a new experience and I felt uncomfortable.

Right after I hung up the phone with Thomas I called my good friend Darnell because I needed some feedback and advice. The minute I explained what happened, he burst out laughing.

Image by Mariet Guerrero

“Odé, that’s the worst,” he said in between snickers.

“He’s in love with you, baaaaaabeeeeeeeeee....” he added in a sing-song voice. “I would’ve screamed on him,” he suddenly stated coldly.

“For what?” I said. “He knows where I stand, so it’s not a problem. Plus, he’s peoples.”

“True, true,” Darnell said. “I still would’ve screamed on him,” he said.

But I didn’t want Thomas to feel bad that he’d told me. After letting all that time pass, and me getting used to the type of cat he already was, he probably thought I wouldn’t take it in a civilized manner. After hearing how kids our age treat gays—the threats, the jokes, and the violence—he was probably scared that I’d go and wild out.

The minute a straight person thinks something is up, they’re likely to tell their friends and it’ll start a big thing. The next thing you know everyone has bought into the hype, and your rep may never be the same.

For instance, at the summer job where we worked, a lot of the employees caught on to Thomas’ feminine mannerisms.

“Is he gay?” female counselors would ask me. Since I hung out with him, they turned to me for info.

“Yo, is that n-gga gay or somethin’?” the male counselors would ask accusatorily, as if it was my fault. Then, answering themselves aloud, they’d add, “Yeah, he’s gay.”

Because of attitudes like that, I think that gay teens are forced to live life differently than straight teens in many ways. They have to be careful about what they say and do in front of other people. Most people only want to know if someone is gay so they can go in for the attack.

So I tried to be very respectful of who Thomas was, even though I wasn’t perfect. And Thomas would sometimes bring up stuff on his sexuality. Those talks let me know where he was coming from.

One time we started discussing relationships and we swapped stories. He said that he had been involved in long-term relationships. His boyfriends were usually four to five years older than he was.

He would talk about how guys treated him and how he felt about the person he was dating, but he didn’t go into too much detail. I didn’t ask for more information because I didn’t want to overstep my boundaries as a friend, and I think he knew that.

For the rest of August, we hung out as much as we used to before Thomas came out. The only time I felt uncomfortable was when I let my tongue slip sometimes, using “fag” near him.

I wanted to kick myself because I didn’t know how Thomas took it. It didn’t seem to bother him, and that really threw me off. It made me feel stupid, because I felt disrespectful.

I think he knew that when I used the term it wasn’t directed at him being gay, but regardless, it is a term to make fun of gays. I didn’t want to seem insensitive to him.

After a little while, I stopped wondering if he still had a crush on me. It didn’t matter. Even if he still had feelings for me, it wasn’t changing our friendship.

But when the summer ended we didn’t keep in touch. A few weeks later, I began lifeguard training and went back to school and dated a few girls. He was trying to get a good job. We weren’t able to chill as much because we had less time.

When school started we began to fall out of touch. He called twice just to see how I was holding up and what I had been doing, but he didn’t ask to hang out. Neither did I. I figured he just didn’t want to hang out anymore. I don’t know why.

Even though we’re not friends anymore, I’m glad that Thomas had the guts to come out. I’m impressed that he kept it real and revealed who he was.

And I think our friendship showed me how my perceptions of gay people were pretty off. In reality, signs of gayness are nowhere near as cut and dried as they seem on TV because gay people don’t all act the same.

Thomas made me realize that gay people aren’t so stereotypical and have things in common with straight people. Thomas had some of the stereotypes in the way he walked and talked, but he was also reserved and thoughtful. He wasn’t loud at all; he couldn’t even tell me about his sexuality himself.

I’ve realized I don’t live in a separate world from gay people and I don’t want to discriminate against them. Ten years from now a gay person could be my boss or my son’s godfather. For all I know, my son could be gay. And I wouldn’t love him any less.