

Keeping Secrets: NAMBLA, the Idealization of Children, and the Contradictions of Gay Politics

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What must it look like, to any man camped in the prolonged shadow of our most demonized subculture, gazing out at the bright, noisy shambles of victoriously liberated gay life?

A number of the men in this article requested anonymity. Where no last name is given, a pseudonym has been used.

A year ago September I got a message on my machine from a man named Dennis Beejin inviting me to "give a talk"—no time, no date or place, just the request and his number. I'm a novelist, not well known, and any invitation to talk about my work interests me. I phoned back, thinking I would ask for an honorarium, but knowing I would accept regardless.

Dennis told me the event was secret, the location and date could not be shared with "the outside," and that it was the national conference of NAMBLA, the North American Man-Boy Love Association. Would I speak to them about my work? I was surprised and curious (Dennis said, "some of us have read your books"), but mostly I felt implicated. NAMBLA has been so broadly demonized as an organization of child molesters, the invitation felt like a summons from the underworld.

On the phone, Dennis was flustered and sweet. He apologized for the fact they couldn't pay me, and praised my book *The Child Molester*. (In fact, I never wrote such a book. Dennis meant a novel of mine called *The Sex Offender*.) The weekend would include a number of sessions, mostly about "man-boy love," the law, and NAMBLA. Several dozen men were coming from around the U.S., plus a handful from overseas. They wanted me to talk about my books and the conference theme "finding our voice."

NEW YORK, 1982

I first heard the name NAMBLA in 1982, when the *New York Post* ran a story accusing them of kidnapping a seven-year-old boy named Etan Patz. I was living in New York, and the paper devoted its famous panicky headlines to the case for almost a week. Patz had been kidnapped in 1979, and the *Post* reported that a photo of a "mystery boy" resembling him had turned up in a "sex den at NAMBLA headquarters" in Wareham, Massachusetts. The police believed Patz was being traded among a ring of pedophiles.

As it turned out "the mystery boy" was actually a model from a calendar made in 1968, long before Patz was even born, and there had been no "sex den" at the house, which wasn't NAMBLA headquarters at all but the summer home of the parents of a NAMBLA member. This didn't keep the police from arresting the men, but they had to drop the sex-kidnapping theory. After that, NAMBLA wasn't in the headlines so much. It's hard to understand how so small an organization could have survived the scandal (federal investigations into porn distribution, child prostitution, and sex abuse

charges continued for several years after the case), but they did, and periodically the acronym would appear again, usually in a less dire context.

In those days I was editing the national news section of the *NY Native*, a gay bi-weekly, so I saw almost every mention of the group. Each June NAMBLA was at the center of a controversy over their request to march in the city's Gay Pride parade. It was the same story year after year, with seemingly every gay and lesbian organization coming out against NAMBLA (which usually had no allies except older activists like Harry Hay, and Marxist groups like the Spartacist League and the Revolutionary Communist Party). Opposition to NAMBLA was not idle; it was passionate, sometimes extreme. I remember not knowing exactly what to do with a press release from one of New York's gay sadomasochism groups condemning NAMBLA for its advocacy of "disgusting, illegal sex which brings shame to our community."

The *Native* didn't pay much, so I also worked as a bartender at dinner parties thrown by wealthy gay men who wanted someone young serving drinks. Once you got one job, plenty more would follow if you just looked nice enough. I knew nothing about drinks and mixers, but I was 23 and pleasant to look at.

Like the rest of America, the men at these parties fetishized youth—they just pursued it a little more directly: body shaving, obsessive exercise, boyish baseball caps, and big shirts. The erotic ideal seemed to be something like a six-foot-two Little League shortstop with a huge dick and pecs. I had no idea what this fascination with boyishness meant about my gay brethren, or the broad gay hatred of NAMBLA; it just made me feel uncomfortable, like a woman might at a Kiwanis drag show. Older men—I mean men in their late 60s or 70s—seemed otherworldly at these parties, as though they had survived a holocaust of some sort and could never belong to the world of the living. I found them alluring. Their ill fit attracted me, as did a measure of graciousness, subtlety, and irony I thought I saw in them but not in the younger men. They seemed to be keeping secrets, while the younger men had none. Naively, I also assumed, because of their reserve, that the old men had given up any erotic fantasies, and weren't likely to maul me. Somehow these "twilight men" (as gays were called much earlier in the century) seemed to exist outside the conventional matrix of age and youth, predator and prey, that circumscribed NAMBLA's crimes and the confusions of the rest of us.

The parties, and my life in New York generally, left a residue of misgivings. Why did the uninhibited young men who threw the parties seem so sad? There was the obvious horror of the growing epidemic, but there was something else. Their bright, loud flamboyance was inflated and insistent, as though all the liberty we had won as "out" gay men could somehow never bring them enough. And the ghostly older men—what did they possess that was so compelling? What was it they knew but weren't telling? It was in this milieu that I formed a fairly common aversion to the men of NAMBLA (none of whom I had actually ever met), and I've carried it with me, largely unexamined, since.

NAMBLA IN SEATTLE, 1985

Dennis called again in November. The conference was scheduled for the next weekend, at a series of "secret locations in or near Seattle." A phone machine would tell me the site of the first evening's session. These mildly covert arrangements were a little alarming. Dennis described a forested retreat center in the hills and said, if need be, he could drive me there. I thought of the Moonies, and when the

time came I borrowed my mother's car. I didn't tell her what I needed it for. I didn't tell anyone. NAMBLA's secret had, for the weekend, become my secret.

The night arrived and I phoned the machine: "Hi and welcome to the 1995 annual NAMBLA membership conference. Our first session is at 6:00 p.m. in the meeting room at the Pike Place Market. Please don't give this phone number to anyone outside the conference. As you approach the clock in the market, look for a stairway to your left. If you see protesters or press do not identify yourself in any way. A man wearing a purple baseball cap carrying a green book-bag will be standing near the foot of the stairs. Identify yourself to him discreetly and he will direct you to an alternate location..."

There were no protesters or press. It was cold and wet, a typical Seattle November night, and the market was quiet. Upstairs at the meeting room a few dozen men stood by the folding tables, taking information packets and name tags, sipping pop and coffee. No kids, just men from their early 20s to late 60s or so. The room was cold, unheated despite the weather. Everyone wore coats, scarves, and pleasant, non-committal smiles on their faces, as they chatted while gathering the chairs into a semi-circle. I might have been at a Rotary Club meeting (except for the announcement to "please write your name or pseudonym clearly" on the name tag). The men were dressed, variously, from nerdy to neat: one in a sharp suit with a tiepin, sporting a pencil-thin mustache (a near-double for filmmaker John Waters); a few in sweats; some with new-age necklaces and bracelets; one "redneck" from Cleveland wearing his National Rifle Association hat next to a portly ex-hippie scholar from Taiwan.

The man with the tiepin and moustache, Derek Prince, had a bagful of neatly typed 16-page proposals, including calls for the removal of several steering-committee members and the total abolition of NAMBLA in the event age-of-consent laws remained unchanged. None of these proposals would pass, and Derek would end the weekend by withdrawing from the linked hands of a "prayer circle" to quit NAMBLA for good.

Derek's main target—against whom a special proposal of censure was aimed—was Bill Andriette, a 29-year-old member of the steering committee. Bill, as it turned out, was the "some of us" who had read my books. I recognized him from pictures I had seen a decade ago at the *Native*. He was 15 years old when he'd joined NAMBLA, and the organization always made sure they had their smart young volunteer front-and-center at press conferences. He was slumped in a metal chair, looking thin and exhausted, clutching the neck of his ratty sweater closed to keep the cold out.

After one member's whispered recitation of a soft-core erotic memoir (with lots of moral hand-wringing and no actual sex in it), a man named Bob Rhodes took the microphone and began a long history of NAMBLA. I tuned in and out, trying to place him, probably another face from the press photos I had seen at the *Native*. He described the organization's founding in 1978, in the wake of the raids and arrests of "the Boston sex scandal," then the first national conference in New York the following year. The Etan Patz case came along, then a painstaking strategy of legal actions and press conferences to survive that scandal; the organization emerged from five years of FBI surveillance relatively intact. This history was punctuated with the horrific (prison sentences for hundreds of members over the years, in-prison assaults and rapes, the murder of co-founder Bob Burdick) and the horrifically funny (the Los Angeles chapter's 1987 attempt to improve their public image with a NAMBLA "Toys for Tots" drive).

GAY POLITICS BEFORE STONEWALL

NAMBLA's emergence in the late '70s came at a critical time in the history of gay politics, right in the midst of the broad transformations of the post-Stonewall era. For the first time, mainstream America was being exposed to some of the breadth and complexity of gay and lesbian life. Newspapers covering the new pride marches began to show leathermen, drag queens, sadomasochists, and exotic fetishists of all stripes. Against this background, NAMBLA, with its earnest troupe of two dozen men waving hand-lettered banners made from bedsheets, looked like a new sexual subspecies, one among the many which were blossoming in the bright open space cleared by gay activism.

In fact, NAMBLA was nothing new. It was, in many ways, more of a throwback to the closeted, radical past of the pre-Stonewall era. Largely undocumented, its history has been excavated in a number of excellent books, first in John D'Emilio's outstanding *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. Relying on oral histories, D'Emilio uncovered the outlines of a long underground struggle dating back at least to the aftermath of World War II and "homophile" groups like the Mattachine Society and One, Inc. We need to go back at least this far to understand NAMBLA.

Mattachine and One were founded by self-declared "sex radicals," like Harry Hay, who believed that homophiles were "a blessed separate people." Hay's vision of homophile activism had its roots in his passionate commitment to the Communist Party, with its utopian vision of an enlightened revolution. (Stuart Timmons's excellent biography of Hay traces the difficulties of this uneasy ideological marriage.) With little hope for acceptance (just being gay was enough to warrant prison and electroshock therapy), the early homophiles, Hay especially, were not aiming for assimilation, but rather "gay liberation," a transforming social revolution, including the open practice of "deviant" sexualities, which might ultimately lead to a reinvention of society.

This radical vision didn't last long. By 1953 Mattachine had been taken over by a "cabal" of assimilationists, led by Hal Call and, later, Frank Kameny in Washington, D.C. Kameny was the man who got three dozen homophile activists into suits and ties (and the lesbians into dresses) for the staid picketing of the White House in 1965. (I was six when a photo of this action appeared in *Life* magazine, my first exposure to any public demonstration of homosexual identity.) Gays needed to appear "normal," Kameny felt, for the rest of America to accept them. Assertion of a separate gay identity would only deepen antipathy and intensify oppression. Activism, he in effect said, was doomed unless it was served up with a heaping side dish of apology.

This conflict between radicalism and assimilation was the central tension in gay politics throughout the era before Stonewall. The radical agenda ballooned in the wake of the riots when the short-lived Gay Liberation Front (GLF) called for gays to come out, link their cause to the broad struggles of the New Left, and "join the revolution." Almost immediately, a splinter group—largely male, white, and middle-to upper-class—broke off from GLF to form the more conservative Gay Activists' Alliance (GAA). Their numbers soon dwarfed the GLF. Their activism was strictly limited to "issues of relevance to homosexuals," which they addressed through an aggressively "out" strategy of engagement with existing institutions and power brokers. GAA hoped to gain rights for gay people from within the existing political structure. Their combination of constructive engagement and an unquestioned commitment to coming out became the model for gay activism over the next two decades.

"Coming out" emerged as the gay orthodoxy that promised to resolve the split between radicalism and assimilation. By insisting on both an open, aggressive gay identity *and* inclusion in the larger social fabric of America, activists appeared to have arrived at a resolution to the question of securing a true "gay liberation."

But there has been one big problem, one unwelcome guest at the party, and that is NAMBLA. NAMBLA today looks a lot like the radical homophiles who founded Mattachine—which is to say monstrous and largely underground. Operating from the same shadowy margin, under the same threats of prison and therapy, NAMBLA is an ugly reminder of the complexities of the anti-assimilationist gay past.

The organization resembles Mattachine and One, Inc. in an astonishing range of details, including strong affinities with anarchist and communist groups, a peculiar, unresolved mix of openness and elaborate secrecy, and an ideological underpinning of "sex radicalism"—a far cry from the constructive engagement of current gay politics. So how can gays ever expect "a place at the table" if this disruptive intruder insists on being seated with us? NAMBLA, precisely *because* it is demonized everywhere (especially inside the gay community), has emerged as an uncanny, living trace of the early homophiles, and a deep, deep thorn in the side of gay people who want to believe that inclusion can be gained through complete openness. What to do with the pedophiles who are shouting "solidarity" alongside of us? The answer, for most gay organizations, has been to join the chorus of voices telling NAMBLA to please just shut up.

THE TALK CIRCLE

We went around the circle introducing ourselves. "Anything you're not willing to tell the police," Dennis cautioned first, "you should not tell to anyone here. We've always had undercover police at conferences, and there's no reason to believe that's not the case this weekend."

Dan from Wisconsin wasn't "out as a boy-lover," because he feared it would kill his mother, but he hoped this weekend would give him "the strength to do it." John, also from the Midwest, said this was his seventh conference (he wore an old NAMBLA T-shirt beneath his dark cardigan sweater). He just "hoped to get some good gossip."

Robert was an "anarcho-punk agitator" who thought NAMBLA might be the coolest disruption since the Sex Pistols, and he hoped to forge some links to members in other cities. Ken from Oakland had been a boy in a man-boy relationship; he was in his late 50s now, and he wanted to find some resolution to a "first love" that had ended with the man's abrupt death when Ken was a teenager.

I had only ever been to one "men's movement" gathering, but this circle of introductions was taken right from it—a litany of earnest, prayerful entreaties, cataloging past failings and setting impossible goals for the coming two days. The parallel would deepen as the weekend went on (through prayer circles, and the "speaking rock," a ritual cleansing with burning sage, and the constant romanticization of childhood); it was increasingly apparent that NAMBLA's closest corollary in mainstream "straight" culture was Robert Bly's men's movement, with its constant search for an inner child. These men were pursuing the same goals, through many of the same methods, only the child they sought wasn't "inner" at all—it was a real boy. The parallel was both disturbing and complete. A number of members were

active with the Bly-based groups, but, put off by the unspoken homophobia they had found there, none of them were "out," even as gay men.

The heat came on, finally, but we weren't going to be in the meeting room long. "Part of our strategy," Dennis told me, "is to always be in different places, like an MX missile." One man missed the entire Washington, D.C., conference the previous year because he kept arriving at one "secret" meeting place just after the group had moved on to the next one. Tonight the session would end with ad hoc "focus group" meetings, and then adjourn at 10:30 or 11, to reconvene the next morning at a new location listed on the machine. I sat in on Ken's focus group, which looked at the boy's experience in a man-boy relationship.

There were no boys there to join the group (Bill Andriette later told me boys were rare in NAMBLA; at most, three or four of them appeared at a few conferences in the '80s). Ken spoke very softly, and the rest of us listened. He wore old sweats and sneakers with a worn-out cap that said "Live simply so that others may simply live." I thought he might be homeless, but it turned out he was fairly well-off, a retired contractor. He was eight when he "fell in love." The man was 41. They were together for the next five years, lovers for four, until the man died suddenly when Ken was 13. Did his family know, I asked, and if so, what did they do about it? Ken said no one knew except his dad. What did his dad do about it? His dad was his lover.

Ken, who had the wide-eyed calm of a saint or someone who'd been critically wounded (he looked uncannily like Genet), said, "We loved each other," as if that would explain it all. What did your mother do? I finally asked. She never knew. No one ever knew.

GAY ENLIGHTENMENT POLITICS

Modern gay activism, guided by the presumption that openness is liberation, asks us to shine the light everywhere. Come out of the closet, and this move away from the shadows will set us free. Liberation will follow, on a long hard road, only after there is visibility. Which means NAMBLA is constantly at war with itself, torn between its roots in the disruptive sex-radicalism of Mattachine and the homophiles, and the practical reality of what Bill Andriette calls today's "gay enlightenment politics."

The members of NAMBLA still tend to see complicity where there is any talk of inclusion. Is it possible to be included, embraced, without being utterly changed? They tend to steer a severe course, staying true to a sex-centered anarchist ideology, while others in the group try hard to make NAMBLA politically effective. Bill sits on the fence in the middle. "Often there is *not* a community of interest, especially with gay organizations. It's just horrifying to most gay people. Man-boy relationships may be so disruptive that they can *never* exist as mock-heterosexual ones, the way gay ones can. So much acceptance of gays has been based on the perception that they 'marry' just like 'normal' people. I'm not sure NAMBLA can ever make that argument for man-boy relationships, though some of us have certainly tried."

NAMBLA's most lasting assimilationist strategy has been to present itself as an educational organization and as an advocate for "children's rights." In this incarnation, NAMBLA prints and distributes books, bulletins, and pamphlets to raise awareness about the facts and varieties of man-boy relationships. One publicity brochure quotes two boys describing their adult lovers: "He's just as

normal as anyone else, he's like a second father to me"; "...he's neat and nice and gives me more respect than anyone ever has, not like my parents treat me. He's my best friend." By shining the light everywhere, the argument goes, people will see that these relationships can be "normal," neither peculiar nor inherently destructive. If children sometimes want these relationships and benefit from them, it follows that they should have the right to choose them. So NAMBLA advocates lowering the age of consent. In the terms of the current debate, NAMBLA is asking us to set "a place at the table" for emancipated children, and, by extension, the men these children might choose to love.

Most people can't conceive of a child freely choosing to have sex with a man, or ever benefiting from it—and when kids claim they have, we rarely believe them. Indeed, the question is almost never asked in earnest. There are no broad studies tracking the experience kids have in the wake of self-described "consensual" sexual relationships with adults. (M.C. Baumann's 1988 study of criminal abuse cases in West Germany is the only one to track a large sample of "consenting" boys. He followed 800 boys for six to 10 years, and was unable to find the sort of emotional depth-charges of regret, guilt, or anger found in non-consensual cases.) This peculiar silence on a question which lies at the heart of our approach to protecting children is hard to explain. Certainly it is unsettling to ask, with any kind of open mind, what the quality of a child's sexual experience is in these relationships. I never asked Ken the question, "What was it like?"—I was afraid of the answer. Moreover, such inquiries seem pointless to anyone who is skeptical about a child's ability to evaluate experiences he or she is thought to be incapable of understanding.

The presumed destructive nature of these relationships is the keystone to our belief that age-of-consent laws protect children, rather than, as NAMBLA claims, oppressing them. Police, courts, parents, and social workers deal with the question every day when they encounter the ambiguous reality of most adult-child contacts. Forcible rape might be easy to figure out, but intimacy—sometimes not even sex—agreed to in cloudy circumstances is never so clear. When should a parent or policeman believe a child's estimation of their own willingness and pleasure? People do the best they can in these cases, but they do it with very little information. So far, despite all of our concern, we haven't been willing to shine any light on the shadowed world of kids who say they have loved adults.

Until we do, NAMBLA's central argument can only be taken or rejected on faith. Mostly it has been rejected. The age of consent has not gone down, and penalties for underage sex and possession of child porn have become increasingly severe.

To the men inside the organization, NAMBLA's position looks a lot like that of pacifist Quakers in wartime—they give needed support to men in trouble with the law, express solidarity for the oppressed (in their view, children), and simultaneously advocate for a hopelessly unpopular cause. Any optimism about NAMBLA's future in "enlightenment politics" is necessarily cast in broad ideological terms—I have heard the organization compared to the colonial American revolutionaries, the homosexual-liberationists of Weimar Germany (many of whom ended up in death camps), and the lunch counter protesters of the civil rights movement—but it is rarely, if ever, based in a practical assessment of the current political climate. Fifteen years of police surveillance, prison terms, censure, and ridicule had probably led most of them to hear one newcomer's entreaty to "rewrite the brochure so it appeals to the values of good people and helps us build a broad alliance" as both depressing and somehow beside the point.

JESUS WAS A PEDOPHILE

I arrived late the next morning at New Freeway Hall, a site I remembered from punk rock shows in the early '80s, when most Seattle punk took place in dumpy rental halls like this one. It was run by the Freedom Socialist Party, which also provided an awful catered lunch for the group. The morning was colder than the night had been, and the sky had dropped. Clouds scraped along the buildings and trees, washing over the aimless, gray traffic. Few people were out, and those that were drove like sleepers, drifting around the road, stopping to light a cigarette or look in a closed shop window. When I got to the hall, the group was in a "talk circle," passing a "sacred speaking stone" from man to man.

I had turned down an invitation to join the men for a late dinner the previous night at the Brass Connection. Apparently, the evening was loud and loose, and a few of them ended it with a local guide, exploring the bushes of Volunteer Park. (On hearing about this the next day I decided to stick around that night and see what an evening on the town with NAMBLA was really like.) With the men out so late, the morning session was slow to start.

I slipped past the "talk circle," poured a cup of weak coffee, and sat down by the door. A longtime member named Everett, gray-haired and balding, with a strange asymmetrical smirk and a snowy mustache (he looked like Wallace Shawn playing Frosty the Snowman), was holding the "speaking stone." He was silent for a while, but no one else could talk while he held it. "I want to thank Ken for hugging me. I'm frustrated by the intellectual, anti-physical bent of NAMBLA. We don't hug enough. I see boy-ness everywhere, even in 'tomboys,' and where it is I love it. Homosexuality is a myth, we all know that." Everett left a long silence, then passed the stone to a tall, fairly nervous newcomer, Pat from New Jersey.

"I think a motto would be a really great idea, and if we don't have one, we should make one up, and I want to propose 'Boys Will Be Boys' as a motto, for the brochures and for any media or publicity? Also, I think we should contact Michael Jackson, he really needs support, and maybe he would be able to donate money to NAMBLA. There are just some people who ought to give us money, and I think maybe he'd do it." Pat strode across the circle and put the stone in Tom's hands. Six feet tall and several hundred pounds, Tom was in his late 60s, attending his first conference. (Tom, it turned out, was the undercover cop Dennis had warned us about; he made contacts at the conference and, within a year, had arrested Derek Prince on child-porn and solicitation charges.)

"As you get older, youth sure looks a whole lot better," Tom said. "I know I have a lot to give a boy, but I just don't think I could keep my hands off him, so I just stay away. I've been president of the local Little League for 16 years, but I make sure I stay in the board room. I could never coach, or get myself close to the boys. It's just too dangerous. I don't know why I'm here, really, except I've been curious how other guys deal with this, and it's nice just to see all you other guys." He held on to the stone until his neighbor nudged him.

The "talk circle" ambled forward, punctuated by tears and laughter and the kind of aimless confessions that sometimes make me regret the whole history of sexual liberation. The mimeographed agenda for the day looked daunting: more talk, committee reports, workshops, and new proposals, with only an hour break for lunch and adjournment scheduled for 6:00 p.m. Ken came by and hugged me, then Ron started bending my ear about his theory that Jesus was a pedophile. The coffee burned my mouth, and

the donut I ate to stanch it was hard and stale. Still by the door, I listened to the circle go on about the beauty of boys and the horrors of the law, and I realized that in all my paranoia about NAMBLA, I had never imagined that one of the most harrowing things about it might simply be its sheer banality.

It was a hobby club like any other, with all the fanaticism, petty internecine wars, and peculiar organizational trivia of the stamp collectors or Civil War buffs who were meeting in other dreary halls, eating the same donuts, drinking the same awful coffee, and achieving the same strangely private results. The fact that this group's hobby, sex with children, was reviled and criminal gave the whole encounter a sensationalist, tabloid twist. The result was a kind of shouted, impassioned banality that reminded me of nothing more than a day spent watching TV talk shows.

TALK-TV POLITICS

That NAMBLA's proceedings could drift toward the realm of talk television—with its premium on deeply felt emotions and its voracious appetite for confession—was neither surprising nor entirely their fault. Demonized and with no plausible alliances or strategies on the horizon, there was really little else of importance they could do together. Undoubtedly, NAMBLA is a political organization, but it's one that has been forced into the margin and must conduct its business there. Despite their intention to design strategies or carry out some kind of progressive inquiry in support of their cause, there is just no context or good information with which they can do that.

In this regard NAMBLA is well along the curve of a trend which is general—the displacement of most political debate from the realm of reasoned inquiry to that of emotional harangue. We care deeply about children. Our resolve to protect them is passionate, some would say extreme. (Interestingly, the immediate gut response of the few NAMBLA members I "confronted" with this fact was the stammering assertion that NAMBLA cares *more* deeply about kids.) Knowing anything dispassionate, or even remotely well-researched, about the welfare of children has paled beside the burning importance of our depth of feeling for them. It is politics bounded by the bleak reality of a talk-television culture. We are incapable of thinking about kids dispassionately.

This climate of passion that has trapped NAMBLA also lies at the root of their power. NAMBLA is tiny, but that has never mattered. The core of their claims—that some boys want sex with men, and should have it—echoes and enlarges in our minds, like the wind scratching at a sleeper's door, becoming huge and monstrous in the vacuum left when the mind is shut down. When political debate is this blindingly emotional, numbers don't really matter. In fact, we have only ever needed a few dozen men to advocate sex with kids publicly for the country to become haunted by the nightmarish vision of an international ring of organized child molesters.

NAMBLA membership might be as high as 4,000 or as low as 1,200. It really doesn't matter. The active body—not just its heart, but its muscle and bones—has never been more than a handful of men, a few dozen at most, with several thousand dollars, a mishmash of programs supporting boy-lovers, and no hope for having any immediate political impact. But the message they send horrifies us. Their defining fantasy is one of our great nightmares. In a talk-television culture, this message holds our attention like the monstrous reflections of a funhouse mirror.

Bill Andriette, NAMBLA's young activist, perceives some kind of power in the impassioned hatred of the press and public. "Politics is really strange in the ways that power can ebb and flow, and I think we're just way too early on in this struggle to ask NAMBLA to succeed as an immediate legislative force, or ask it to be just a political group, or just a support group. A lot of power is obscure or hidden, and I'm happy for NAMBLA to just muddle forward as a kind of demon. I'm actually very optimistic about NAMBLA at the same time as I feel we are sort of tragically doomed to failure."

CHOOSING NAMBLA'S MOTTO

Lunch was terrible (a kind of vegetarian quiche with iceberg-lettuce "salad" and more stale pastries), and people kept coming over to talk to me about their take on the conference. The cramped, stuffy hall left no room to get away. A knot of men gathered in front of the TV, staring and laughing at a video called "Chippen-Diddies," some BBC piece on a troupe of pre-pubescent boys whose hobby was stage-dancing. The documentary profiled a half-dozen of them, featuring long footage of their soft-core ensemble imitations of the Chippendale erotic dancers. Shirtless, crotch-thrusting, and authentically pouting, these nine- and 10-year-old boys mimicked the vocabulary of sex-club entertainers almost exactly. The most unsettling thing was how well the gestures suited them, especially the pouts, as though these boys weren't the imitators at all—the real Chippendales, with their occasional shaven chests and boyish looks, might have been imitation nine- and 10-year-olds all along. Of course, this wasn't "real" kid-porn, it was just the BBC.

Dennis got the machine turned off, and kick-started the long, dreary afternoon of debate. Discounts on NAMBLA publications were approved for active members. An attempt to make the brochure "more broadly appealing" was okayed in principle, but no one agreed to actually do the work. Tom, the undercover cop, proposed "networking" (now I know why), which he described as "just for a bunch of us, on a weekend, to get together and see a new feature film that has some wonderful kids in it, then go to a restaurant and just jaw about it."

After Bob pointed out that last year's motto had been forgotten, the men considered some possible new ones, including: "Enjoy Your Kids," "Boys Will Be Boys," "Proud to Love Boys," "Boy Support," and "Helping You Cope With Your Sexuality" (which received zero votes in the final tally). The eventual winner was "The Law Sets Boundaries—Love Knows None."

Bored, I got up and joined four or five men browsing NAMBLA publications at the side table. John from the Midwest showed me an old issue of the NAMBLA bulletin. A smiling shirtless boy, 13 or 14, with water beaded on his chest and unkempt hair twisted and wet from the swim he'd just had, beamed out at us—an amateur snapshot, blown up to full-page size. "This is the point," John said, "not all of that." He gestured vaguely at the circle of agitated men.

"And the Chippen-Diddies?" I suggested.

"No, not that." John seemed shocked by my poor judgment. "That was so stagy. Tiny little boys. Look at this one, he's so natural and happy."

Stanley, who had enjoyed the Chippen-Diddies, overheard us and leaned in. "He's also at least 14, John, which is why you like him."

There were shrugs, then John whispered to me. "Stanley's a pedophile."

I raised my eyebrows. "But aren't you too?"

Again a look of shock. "Not at all, I'm a pederast. I like teenage boys." He pointed at the smiling photo. "Pedophiles are into *little* boys, like on that awful video." Stanley couldn't hear us. He watched the debate, grimacing. "Derek's a pedophile too." John went on. "That's what his proposal was all about. He thinks the pederasts have got it out for the pedophiles, and that NAMBLA's just turning into a regular old *gay* organization with a bunch of teen-lovers, like all the other gay groups." John turned back to the magazines and showed me another photo, two boys at the beach, a nude beach, walking away from the camera, casual, very tan, androgynous. "The one on the left is gorgeous. You can see he's *just* gotten tall, the way his shoulders are still so skinny, and those ribs, then that big butt and knock-knees. It's a terrific age, 13, 14. They're still so awestruck about their bodies, and everything being so totally new and mind-blowing. You know, like, 'Whoa, what's this big dick doing here?'"

NAMBLA'S FAMILY VALUES

In the light of thousands of pages of publications detailing the tiniest minutiae of boyhood (cross-cultural analyses, diaries, photos, fantasies, interviews, social and psychological studies, catalogues of boy-images in film, books, TV, fine art, and the testimony of scores of men who devote their lives to boys), no one could doubt the sincerity and totality of NAMBLA's obsessive attention. A police investigator in New Jersey said, "If husbands and wives devoted just a fraction of the attention and love to each other that pedophiles show to boys, the divorce rate in this country would plummet 99 percent." This love knows no boundaries, which is perhaps why it's so troubling. NAMBLA transforms our culture's broader obsession with kids into a radically transgressive, omnipresent sexuality.

The picture of the desired child painted in their literature is eerily familiar. The boys described in column after column look an awful lot like the cherished children of the "family values" Right—innocent, forthright, magical boys, the same angelic, mythical beings the "family values" forces want so badly to protect. In testimony after testimony in NAMBLA's bulletin, the desired boy is rendered "full of innocence and ignorance," "impulsive and egocentric," "a little tornado of beauty, energy, and spontaneity"—a fitting twin to the "idealistic, innocent, impulsive and self-centered" child of the right-wing Family Research Council. This mythical boy functions as a locus of spiritual redemption for the men, and families, who love him.

In the rhetoric of NAMBLA and of family values, the child is angelic, otherworldly, and burdened with the task of spiritually redeeming his protectors. For a boy-lover, the redemption becomes erotic precisely because the eroticism of boys has been made "unthinkable." The eros of children takes the boy-lover outside the grid of social realities within which adults are usually trapped.

Man-boy relationships unfold like dreams: silent, uncontained, and unreachable. If this love knows no boundaries, it is because the boundaries learned through socialization and taught-morality haven't been brought to bear.

And so, paradoxically, to the extent that our culture protects kids by denying their sexuality—and never socializing it—we also insure that kids remain erotic in the most profoundly disruptive way. It's an intriguing paradox of which many of the longtime NAMBLA members, especially Bill Andriette,

seemed acutely aware. If they are content for NAMBLA's educational and legislative missions to fail, for NAMBLA to "muddle forward as a kind of demon," it is partly because they recognize that the "redemptive" power of man-boy love—its heart and soul and eros—can only be defused by a victory in the fight for "a place at the table." If our culture were to recognize the independent sexuality of kids and grant them the right to exercise it, we might also begin to teach them to do so responsibly, within boundaries that diminish the power of childhood eros. NAMBLA's greater battle would be lost.

A NIGHT OUT WITH NAMBLA

The afternoon's debate finally collapsed, more than actually concluding. It was almost 7:00 p.m., and more than half the men had left the circle to chat and smoke. Steve, a local member, offered to host a group that evening at his apartment near where I lived, for beer and "whatever," and I asked if I could join them. The men were shuffling and jockeying around the various evening options, like teenagers deciding which car to go in. I drove home, ate a sandwich, and grabbed some beer to take to Steve's.

Eight or nine men were there already, slouched on couches, some gathered around a table to look at photos. There was chit-chat about the NBA, the Sonics, and some talk of Seattle's virtues and vices. Outside it poured. The photos were mostly clippings from Sunday ad supplements and mainstream movie advertisements where boys were featured. The notorious Calvin Klein ads were there, 13- and 14-year-old boys, shirtless in baggy jeans, awkwardly posed beside a ladder. They weren't very shocking. They were so like the *rest* of the ads Steve had clipped. On one page, the bared tummy and bunched boxers of a preteen hanging by his knees from a tree branch in an ad for Tommy Hilfiger. On the next, a boy in big khaki shorts, shirt undone, standing in the dunes with his dog, a leather-string necklace laid softly over the hollow of his collarbone. Little, skinny-shouldered boys in wet swimsuits from Kmart, Gap boys in loose jeans and boxers, shirtless and languorous. Levi's, Target, JC Penney, and the Bon Marché. Steve had cut them all neatly from the papers, and kept them protected in folders.

Another notebook held plastic-sleeved synopses of Steve's videos. Phil, the redneck from Cleveland, was flipping through these, while John looked on over his shoulder. I slouched behind them and watched the titles flip past: *Chris Cross* (Goldie Hawn as a single mom with her perpetually sweating, shirtless 14-year-old son, Chris, trying to stay afloat in the late '60s drug bohemia of Key West), *The Adventures of Huck Finn*, *Shipwrecked* (featuring a Norwegian boy, who fills the camera from start to finish, rescuing treasure from a very hot and steamy desert island). They were mainstream, mostly Disney, movies. The boys in these films were great stars to Steve—David Arnett in *Chris Cross*, Elijah Wood as Huckleberry Finn, Stian Smestad in *Shipwrecked*.

"That *Chris Cross* is terrific," John pointed out. "Very sexy."

"So what else is good?" Phil passed the catalogue back to John and pulled a video of his own from a bag. He stuck it in the machine while John told me his top 10.

"*La Luna* by Bertolucci is definitely number one. I only ever saw it when it came out [in theaters]. I can't find it on video. *The Outsiders*, of course. A real smorgasbord. And *Grandview, USA*, which you can see on TV sometimes, but usually it's all cut up. C. Thomas Howell is in that one. Jamie Lee Curtis seduces him in a trailer, which is the part they usually cut out."

"Any porn?" I asked.

John shook his head. "No, it's not porn. It was a teen movie. I think it was PG."

"I mean, is there any porn in your top 10?"

John laughed at this. "Jerk-off stuff? That's not very sexy to me, because it's all just sex. I like plots and characters. That's sexy, when the boy is actually some kind of *boy*, and then it gets hot. I mean some kind of developed boy-character."

John kept talking, even as I leaned away from the table for a better view of the TV and Phil's tape. It was a home video, with the blinking red clock in the corner, and all the vertiginous lurching of amateur camerawork. Blurred heads kept cutting in front of the action, which, it turned out, was a middle-school wrestling match in a cavernous gymnasium. The men watching had the stalled attentiveness of stargazers during a meteor shower. Long silence, and then oohs and ahhs. It was tedious. Even while I sat, straining for a glimpse, all that really interested me was John's ongoing monologue about "porn."

"I mean, of *course* I'd like to see more skin sometimes, which is why European films can be so good. Now there you've got plot and character, and also a lot of sex. But real porn has nothing to do with boys—that's what's so strange about, you know, 'boy porn.' I mean, what boy would ever make *boy* porn? It's not sexy to anyone who really likes boys, it's just sexy to gay men. It's *gay* porn, and the boys just happen to be in it. Sometimes I like the boys, but in a porn movie they're not doing anything sexy, you know, like just being boys. Now, if some boys actually got together with a video camera and made their own porn, that could be sexy. But the gay stuff reminds me of the Chippen-Diddies."

More men showed up, there must have been 15 by now, and Steve suggested we go to a local pizza parlor for a bite to eat. Used to the paranoia of the conference, I wondered if we could do this, just go to a regular place together and eat—but of course we could. How would anyone even identify us? We looked more like a church or civic group than a gathering of man-boy-love activists.

The pizza place was fairly crowded, and we filled the front entryway, waiting for the host to push a few tables together. I got wedged into a corner with John and Ron, the historian of Jesus. It was impossible to hear anyone but them. Conversation, since leaving the apartment, hadn't changed in any noticeable way. The video fans continued "jawing" about the comparative virtues of the seventh- and eighth-graders they had been ogling, while John expanded on his survey of the pederastic imagination. We had become a *little* more subdued, and I think the phrases "NAMBLA" and "man-boy love" were left at home, but our topics remained the same. In this roomful of kids, families, and couples, gay and straight, I wondered if anyone cared that 15 NAMBLA activists were meeting in the pizza parlor with them. Would the conversation offend them? Probably not. Ron had gone from Jesus to talk of Caribbean vacations. John was cataloguing his favorite TV shows (*Home Improvement*, *Doogie Howser*, and the short-lived Fox version of *The Outsiders*). The wrestling fans might have been discussing the victories of their own children.

John was the most interesting: "...and there's really never been a show better than *Flipper*, I mean the first *Flipper*. The boys were always *always* on camera, and the plots were so beautifully simple. I mean, just the two boys and a dad, and a dolphin, of course. Why was there no mother? Who ever knew? I loved *Flipper*, even when I was a kid and it first came out. You know, Sandy surging along through the foam straddling that great huge dolphin of his, and Bud, who really was becoming very

sexy in the last episodes. I don't think he ever went on to anything else. Not that anything would have been as good. Just those wonderful boys, far away in their little paradise."

I had found NAMBLA's "porn," and it was Hollywood. It was network television, Sunday ad supplements, Nickelodeon, and the Disney Channel. NAMBLA doesn't need to manufacture porn, because America manufactures it for them. It was astonishing just how rich and satisfying the vast ocean of mainstream kid-fare was for these men. Steve's video folder was three inches thick, and he felt he could barely keep up with important new releases. Disney's *Tom and Huck* was due into theaters within a few months. New episodes of *Home Improvement* were on the way. It was wrestling season again.

An evening at home with Steve, it seemed, would look pretty much the same as an evening at anyone's house. Browsing the newspaper, sprawled out on the couch with a beer, considering a movie or two, then settling in for that evening's rerun of *Picket Fences*—the only important visible difference being that Steve might masturbate during any one of these activities. And therein lies the rupture which makes NAMBLA our worst nightmare. They find and pursue eros in the bosom of mainstream American culture—which is to say kids—and they celebrate it. We care deeply about children; NAMBLA cares more deeply. We treasure "that special honesty, frankness, and play of kids" (to quote the American Family Association); they covet, in NAMBLA bulletin writer Hakim Bey's words, the "unbridled play and clarified senses" of "wild children." Boys are special to these men for the same reason they are special to the rest of us: because of how we have constructed them—separate, idealized, and pure, not human at all.

There are men who make child-porn, who pimp kids for sex, but that isn't what we attack when we attack NAMBLA. NAMBLA is our doppelgänger, our monstrous double, aping back to us the myth of childhood that we have constructed, and hauling out of its center the bloody heart of eros we thought we had buried deeply enough to never have to face directly.

KEEPING SECRETS

Walking back to Steve's apartment, John spotted an announcement for a kids' bodybuilding contest posted in a grocery store window. "Stan," he called over his shoulder, "this one's for you." A half-dozen boys, none older than 10, shirtless and greased, struck muscleman poses in the black-and-white photograph. Stanley wanted it, but he wasn't willing to ask the shopkeeper. "I would," Stanley said, "but I don't even live here, and I'll be gone by tomorrow morning. The contest isn't even until next week."

"I'll pick it up for you," another man volunteered. "I mean, if he'll give it to me when he takes it down."

"You would do that?" Stanley asked back.

"Of course I would."

"No, that's great. You live here, after all. I mean, you probably even shop here."

"Yeah, they know me." There was a long silence, and I wondered what exactly they knew *about* him. Most of the men had continued on, hurrying toward the warm apartment and the conclusion of the wrestling video.

John leaned in. "Maybe you should, you know, just bring some of the brochures along with you," he whispered sarcastically. "Get the grocer to join up."

"Maybe I should. Imagine if everyone came out. That'd blow their minds."

John laughed at this. "Oh, no way, I could *never*. That would ruin everything. My mother would have an opinion about every boy I dated. She'd be out at the schoolyards trying to set me up with a doctor's son. God, it would be simply awful." He shook his head, smiling. "It's exactly *that* sort of thing that's made gay life so hideous."

John's deep antipathy for "gay life," the butt of most of his jokes, echoed against the whole history of NAMBLA, with its stumbling fight for inclusion in a community which reviles it. What must it look like, to any man camped in the prolonged shadow of our most demonized subculture, gazing out at the bright, noisy shambles of victoriously liberated gay life? Alternately at war with the shrill gay spokespersons who condemn them, and dazzled by the promise of further gay political victories (however provisional), NAMBLA is faced with a stark choice—assimilate with this community, or finally accept the radical margin into which they've been shunted.

NAMBLA won't resolve its troubled relationship with the gay community until broader changes from the "outside" intercede. The gulf is too enormous. Pedophilia, as it is constructed by men like Bill Andriette, involves a core of autonomy, transgression, and social rupture which has been completely erased from most gay sexuality in the course of our move toward inclusion. Gay people "marry" just like "normal" people. Men locking gazes across dinner tables with "wild children" don't.

NAMBLA's stumbling course forward is partly due to their false perception, in the long wake of Stonewall, that gay liberation had returned to the path Harry Hay charted—toward an embrace of all the perversities of sex and affection. Why *wouldn't* liberated gay people defend their pedophile brethren, and the kids these men loved? Because, like the rest of America, gays still see kids as separate, special, not at all like the rest of us—the very vision which powers the eroticism of pedophilia.

None of NAMBLA's impassioned appeals for solidarity with gays will change this fact. For the gay community, NAMBLA will remain a troubling reminder of its own past, an anachronistic trace of the shadowy homophile sex-radicals, condemned to their peculiar utopian visions by the impossibility of assimilation. Only in a distant future—if we ever step back from our deep, deep feelings about children and begin to rationally assess their sexuality, particularly that of teenagers—will the age-of-consent laws be changed. This will be possible only if we care enough about kids to stop condemning them to the role of angels from some realm apart, and to begin to grant them power over their real experience as human beings.

To hear John talk, this will be a sad day indeed. Boy-love, he told me, *ought* to be a crime. It is that meaningful. From John's point of view, the 25-year victory of gay assimilation—with its beer-sponsored pride celebrations, slick magazines, greased and shaven models, its 1-800-RAINBOW catalogues, boyish baseball caps, and lavish travel plans, its ubiquitous, bland images of gay life amplified by the ravenous machinery of the mass media, this whole desiccated, commodified ghost of a once richly perverse and autonomous subculture—has been a Pyrrhic victory at best. Now the "twilight

men" and homophiles float through catered dinner parties like ghosts, creatures from a world which has disappeared. Amid the noise, their private codes, and a core of powerfully transgressive sexuality, have been washed away in the light of the bright, bright gay future. There is some power in the keeping of secrets, a power which gay men and lesbians have mostly lost.

GOING HOME

The last morning was anti-climactic, a spent shell of the previous days. A bomb threat was phoned in, a mysterious man kept knocking at the locked door, claiming to have come from Portland for the conference, but he wasn't registered, and Dennis turned him away. John and two others immediately gathered their bags and left for the airport, John telling me, "Things are about to get dangerous." They didn't. The conference closed with a prayer circle. Holding hands, each man spoke in turn. When Derek's turn came, he announced that he was quitting the organization for good, and then he left. Within a year he was in prison, arrested by his friend "Tom," facing three to seven years for child-porn and solicitation charges. Ken hugged me again, the men drifted away, and I drove out of town to return the car to my mother. Heeding John's advice, I didn't tell her where I'd been.