

Surviving the Closet

Canadian Peter Gajdics thought he'd find the answers to his sexuality and sexual abuse problems through a charismatic psychotherapist and his household. He soon realised that his safe place was anything but

I was 24 years old. It was 1989, and I'd just moved from my hometown, Vancouver in Canada. I had come out to my Catholic family two years previously, and it had soured our relationship, which moved from one filled with constant criticism to outright rejection. Isolated and confused, I sought professional help. I needed to see a psychiatrist and was referred to a Dr Alfonzo (not his real name). In turmoil, I asked how I could best deal with my homosexuality and the psychological effects of the childhood sexual abuse I'd suffered.

Alfonzo seemed to offer hope in the form of something called "Primal Therapy", the goal of which was to erase the mental imprint of the biological parents via intense primal sessions, and then to replace them with the healthy imprint of surrogate parents.

Within months, Alfonzo told me that I'd never be happy as a homosexual, and presented me with conflicting causation theories. He directed me to release my anger and feel my pain in an effort to unlearn the error of my homosexuality. If I dared say that I really was gay, he would become enraged and threaten to throw me out of therapy.

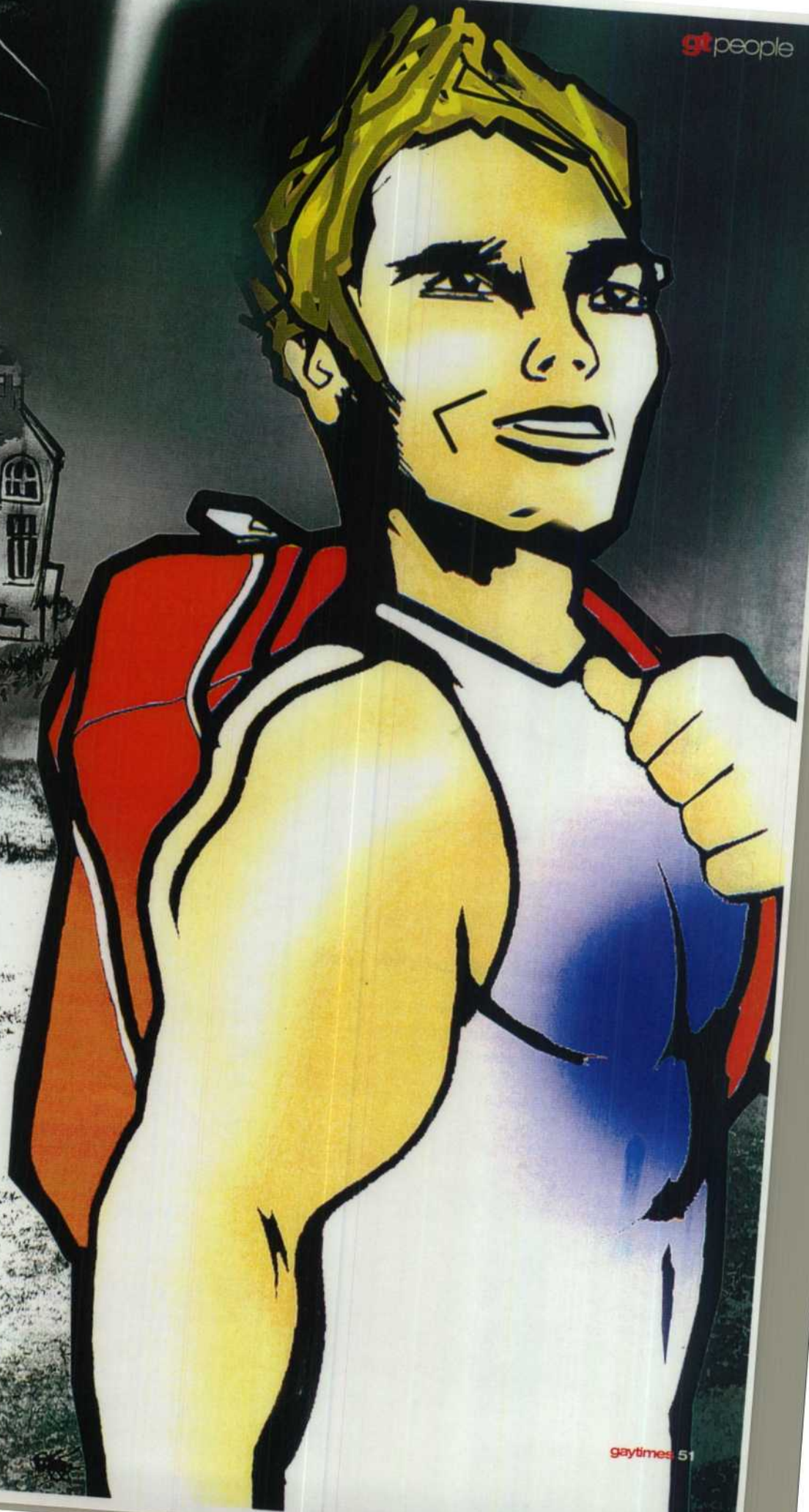
In deep primal sessions, howling and beating a mattress in Alfonzo's

downtown office, I began to accept – or, at least, to not contradict – the doctor's beliefs that I had self-identified as gay because of poor parental role-modelling, the childhood sexual abuse I suffered at the hands of a stranger in a public washroom, and that I'd spent years acting out of that abuse by training my body to respond only to men.

Alfonzo suggested I move, with four of his other patients, into a therapeutic house that he called The Styx. Smoking, drinking and sex were prohibited. Evening meditation and a vegan-only diet were mandatory. Members were discouraged from leaving the house during non-work hours except in the company of other members, or from social contact with anyone outside the therapy. Visitors weren't allowed, except for patients who were sent to our home for three-week intensive cures.

Alfonzo referred to himself and all The Styx' members as a family: we were given chores, we cooked the doctor's meals, cleaned his office and home, cared for his pets (one of which, a dog, he'd had us drug and steal from a nearby farm), helped him with his autobiography and renovated his retirement home on a remote island, where he said we'd all one day live communally. ▶

Illustration by Gavin Dobson



► Over the next two years, Alfonzo systematically denigrated my homosexuality, characterising it as learned behaviour and comparing it to a drug addiction. He told me to "carry my cross with dignity" (ie, to remain celibate). He prescribed increasingly higher doses of medications, including weekly injections of Ketamine (a hallucinogenic and disassociative drug, sometimes used in veterinary practice) for which he never received proper informed consent. The medication's side effects included blurred vision, short-term memory loss, breathing difficulties, hallucinations and excessive weight-gain.

In 1993 I suffered a breakdown, brought on largely by extreme medication toxicity. Alfonzo prescribed more drugs, this time antipsychotic, and placed me on Medical Disability. He prescribed yet more medication to deaden my sex drive. In the most bizarre form of treatment yet, he ordered me to bottle and sniff my faeces whenever I was attracted to a man, in order "to remind me where homosexual men stick their penises". When none of that worked, he threatened to hook my genitals up to electrodes. "Without my help", he told me, "you'll probably just get Aids and die".

In 1994, I was placed on what Alfonzo described as a short therapeutic holiday. As my sessions were reduced and the medication dosages lowered, I began to think more clearly. Despite five years of so-called therapy, I was still attracted to men.

The Styx household disintegrated in late 1995. During our last meeting, Alfonzo voiced his concerns for me: "You've stepped back out into the world

enhanced primal sessions, where he told us he was Christ and that he'd been crucified in a past life. When asked about his use of excessive over-medication, Alfonzo said that such high doses were required for me because I was "quite mentally ill".

"Are you trying to tell us, Dr Alfonzo", the Chair responded, "that this young man is a very, very damaged human being who required 550mg of medication per day just to function?"

After a moment, Alfonzo turned to me. I turned to him. Then we both turned back to the Chair and he said, "Yes".

I caught the eye of one of the Committee members, a woman doctor. She winked at me. "He looks great now", Alfonzo added. "Obviously my therapy worked".

In the coming months, two independent psychiatrists reviewed Alfonzo's practice. Five months later, I received a copy of that review, which amounted to a slap on the wrist, and concluded that the doctor was "clearly trying his best with a difficult patient mix", and that he was "well-intentioned and approached his work with diligence". He was not instructed to alter his forms of treatment.

I filed a civil suit in 1999, four years after I left Styx House. The Court scheduled a four-week trial, and two more independent psychiatrists interviewed me for 20 hours. During my seven-hour Discovery of Facts, the Defence counsel asked about my visiting "bars frequented by male homosexuals". It struck me how homophobic the context of the suit truly



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with all those homosexuals", he said. "I'm one of those homosexuals," I replied, "and nothing's going to change that fact." After several moments, the doctor turned back to his desk, wrote another prescription and made me an appointment for the following month. But this one I failed to keep.

Much of the next two post-therapy years I spent in solitude, shell-shocked, weaning myself off all the medication while struggling with memories of Alfonzo and "the Family". Despite the doctor's on-going attempts to "revert my sexuality to its base heterosexuality", there had been no heterosexual waiting to emerge. Instead, I felt more like a shell that had had its innards scooped out.

Returning to the outside world proved difficult. If I tried to have sex, I sometimes still smelled faeces, which made me nauseous and so overwhelmed with anxiety and repulsion that my ability to function sexually was destroyed.

Gradually, though, I thawed out and deprogrammed from the therapy. With the assistance of a new, healthier counsellor, I dealt with issues relating to my childhood sexual abuse, as well as Alfonzo's systematic attempts to erase my gay identity.

In May 1997, I mailed a five-page letter of complaint about Alfonzo to one of Canada's Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons. Though he had 14 days to respond to the complaint, he didn't respond for seven months. He sent in a 500-page rejoinder, in which he denied all inappropriate conduct. The College consulted an independent psychiatrist, who advised them that Alfonzo's behaviour was considered "acceptable within the framework of his therapeutic model".

Following a two-year investigation, Alfonzo was directed to attend a conduct review by one of the College's committees. For two hours, they questioned him about everything from his attitude toward homosexuality, to the fact that Styx members had witnessed his own Ketamine-

was. Would they ever ask someone if they visited bars "frequented by female heterosexuals?"

Finally, when Defence asked what harm or ill effects were caused by the doctor, I tried to tell them something of the emotional harm his therapy caused, but after so many years, and all that had happened, my words felt stilted, inadequate and pointless.

Six months later, my lawyer, a gay man himself, told me his firm had decided to settle out of court. "This is a business decision", he advised. "It's about money". He mentioned the "shit in the bottle", and said that "within the confines of Alfonzo's paradigm, it had its own internal logic".

I was shocked and tried to argue, reminding him of why I filed the suit in the first place – to create legal precedent, to bring to public awareness this kind of abuse, and to stop people like Alfonzo inflicting this type of harm on anyone else. My lawyer was reassuring. He told me that physicians would be dissuaded from practicing similar therapies, because the doctor's Mutual Defence Organisation sent documentation of all mal-practice suits to all Canadian doctors.

Months of offers and rejections later, in December 2002 I received a settlement of \$30,000. In the aftermath, I tracked down and read through every one of the Mutual Defence Organisation's 2003 Information Letters. No details of my suit in any shape of form appeared. When I called my lawyer, he told me that if the Defence Organisation chose not to document my case, there was nothing he could do about it "after the fact". I also read through four years of Bulletins from the College. My complaint was never mentioned. It leaves me wondering now: who has learned from my experience? ■

Peter Gajdics lives and works between Vancouver, Canada, and Europe. He has produced plays for Canadian television, theatre and radio, and has completed a memoir about his experiences in the therapy