

*Boy of Steel*  
by Steve Montgomery

**Outline**

**Boy of Steel** - *Tonight, I hope my father sees past the tights, acknowledges that my costume is in service of something masculine—the brave warrior armed for battle. Look Dad—tonight I am invincible. I am brave Sir Steven. Tonight, I’m your Boy of Steel.* I have embarrassed my father once again. My mother and I have created an elaborate knight costume for my Cub Scout pageant, but my father takes one look at the glittering tin foil and glowing orange tights and he is not pleased. Later that night, another disappointment—I’ve wet the bed again. But this time I am at my den mother’s house and I have to find a way to erase the evidence before morning reveals my secret.

**Black-eyed Birth** – *“Your mother has given birth. The baby was still born. It was a boy.” These are the words I hear. There are others, but these are the ones that emerge from the fog. My father is on his knees. He begins to cry and I realize that I have never seen my father cry. It frightens me more than the news he has just delivered. He buries his head in my blanket and I do not know what to do.* In the decades since that night, I have clung to the language of misfortune rather than the language of loss. When I tell people, which I seldom do, I say: “My mother had a miscarriage when I was in junior high.” Miscarriage is easy. Clinical. A concept, not a person. Until recently, it had never even occurred to me to say: “I had a brother who died when I was eleven.”

**Learning to Burp** - *I loved watching my mother play hostess—the clothes a bit more colorful, the hairdo just a bit higher, an extra couple of mists of Estee Lauder before her guests arrived. She was truly in her element entertaining others.* From Sarah Coventry to Tupperware, my mother sold everything. The many lessons I learned from my mother as she taught me the fine art of sellertaining.

**Tough Guys** - *His league was made up mostly of boisterous men who liked to drink beer and shout at the pins. Like a scene out of A Streetcar Named Desire, these were males with something to prove, and this was their Kowalski kingdom. I always felt suspect in their presence, sure that they knew how I felt when I first saw Marlon Brando yelling up those stairs in that ripped t-shirt.* In my family, bowling was king. I came from a long line of bowlers, and spent a lot of time in bowling alleys when I was young. There, I would meet Superman, the alley attendant who pinned me to the bathroom floor and began thrusting his hips into me.

**Y’all Come Back Now, ‘Hear?** - *The Stein’s, a vigorous young couple who could easily grace a Redbook cover, stood on their front porch and watched the five of us tumble out of the spudmobile. We were the Clampetts without the Texas tea.* I had always dreamed of living in California; in fact, I was convinced that my *real* parents must live there, so out of step was I with the rest of the inhabitants of the state of Idaho. Finally, in the summer between fifth and sixth grades, I was going to California for the first time! Unfortunately, the trip was with my aunts and Grandparents, all trapped in my grandfather’s 1952 Chevy station wagon. Not exactly the trip I had elaborately planned out in my head.

**X Is Not a Word** – *The silence inside the car only amplifies the brilliant scene unfolding before us. Strange gray cones emitting plumes of white smoke. Expansive cauldrons of water dyed iridescent shades of green and blue, with names like Beauty Pool and Vermillion Spring. A landscape of limestone and lava seething with steam and liquid, all threatening to rip apart at every seam and fissure of this mysterious world. I imagine that I am Neil Armstrong and that I have escaped to some exotic moonscape where time and gravity and fathers no longer exist. My father is always about the rules. It doesn't matter if we are playing cribbage, golf, or Go Fish, the rules must be obeyed. It is summertime, and we are on our way to Yellowstone National Park. I am ten, and from the back seat of our dark red '69 Chevy Impala, I am desperately trying to beat Dad at The Billboard Game. But the fun ends with my father's explosion—I have broken a rule and I must pay the price.*

**The Joy of Sax** - *Our family, and hundreds of others, cautiously climbs the ramp onto Performing Arts Parkway, and dad silently takes the exit marked Band Alley—dubbed by kids in those other cars as the “Road to Nerdsville.” My mother had always wanted me to play the saxophone. I wish her love of the sax had been inspired by someone cool, like John Coltrane; instead, she was in love with the sounds of Mr. Boots Randolph. Whatever the inspiration, in the summer of 1971, my parents bought me an alto saxophone and it would be my constant companion for the next seven years.*

**Mr. B.** - *While everyone else had tidy little rooms with chairs and desks in neat little rows, Mr. B's classroom was filled with sights and smells and sounds that gave me glimpses into a life far beyond Pocatello. He sparked within me a passionate curiosity that continues to burn long after the heat of those fiery Louisiana peppers. Mr. Beauregard was my sixth grade teacher—one of the most influential teachers in my life. He had a syrupy southern accent, loved to play songs from Broadway musicals on the school's upright piano, and had a classroom that contained exotic plants, a baby alligator, a chinchilla, and many other fascinating creatures. It was only later that I figured out that Mr. B. was gay.*

**What Then I Was** - *With Adam's dull knife, it took several tries for us to pierce our thumbskins. Once beads of blood appeared, we pressed together our punctured thumbs, stared solemnly into each other's eyes, and waited for a sign that our lives were now indivisible. A sign that, whatever the future held, nothing could ever breach the fortress of our boyhood bond. In the summer of 1971, Adam Johnson and I became blood brothers. Adam was my best friend, my next-door neighbor, and the boy who taught me how to have sex. He was also the first boy to break my heart.*

**For Ever Young** - *I would stare into the mirror, envisioning my parents' grief, the elaborate funeral, the sorrow that everyone would feel for not letting me know that, although my secret was horrible, it wasn't worth dying for. That year, when Mrs. Harten taught her mythology unit, I understood Narcissus's fate immediately—suicide by staring. During my senior year of high school, Kimmie Black committed suicide in her parents' garage while her mother and stepfather slept soundly in their second-story bedroom. Kimmie and I had gone steady, years before, until Kimmie began going unsteady. In a strikingly different narrative style, I tell Kimmie's story, revealing how her death enabled me to live.*

**Just a Tad to the Right** - *This used to frustrate my father, as he was usually the one holding a plaque or wall clock or painting, moving it two inches this way, just a tad that way until my mother was satisfied with its exact placement on the wall. She would be standing across the room, hands on her hips, head tilted, a cigarette burning in a nearby ashtray. Home Interiors products covered every inch of our house. My mother especially loved sconces. More lessons fused inside my DNA. Only after her death would I understand how much of my mother's passion was hanging on those walls.*

**Water Babies** – *Although I never actually saw the water babies, the image of those ethereal spirits is vivid in my mind. I picture their shimmering shapes, tiny droplets of water glistening against a midnight canvas, a pointillist masterpiece dancing beneath an illimitable sky. The legend of the water babies and the first and only time I went swimming in the Great Salt Lake.*

**Zeus, the Father Almighty** - *Mom and I used up an entire jar of Vaseline, wanting to make sure that the wet plaster would not be able to permeate it. Dad was in good spirits, telling dumb jokes as he lay there in his Skivvies waiting for Mom and me to add water to the white powder that would become the goo that would cover his body. In order to WOW my eighth grade English teacher, my plans to make a man-sized statue of Zeus—using my father as mold-maker—go terribly wrong.*

**Passing** – *This is the wide world of sports and I have managed only a narrow point of entry. I am not a flipper of towels or a grabber of genitals. In the locker room, I become an anthropologist. I study them—their unstudied movements, the jocular cadence of their speech, the way they put on underwear. These are the boys my father conjured during those joyous nine months of waiting, anticipating, longing. I was not in the picture. My encounter with a famous gay athlete and my humiliating and erotic adventures playing football in ninth grade.*

**Avon Calling** - *In a series of television commercials, I watched slim Nordic women dressed in knock-off versions of chic Coco Chanel suits, boldly ring the doorbell of some nice woman's home. When the woman answered the door, faux-Coco would repeat that happy, ubiquitous advertising gem: "Avon Calling!" In my eyes, my mother's greatest cachet came from being an Avon Lady. I loved helping her deliver those little white bags. My own selections were supposed to come from the Avon For He-Men pages, but I was secretly drawn to the tiny hostess soaps and elegant bottles shaped like beautiful women and French poodles. And then there was Miss Carlisle, the mysterious science teacher who was the most intriguing Avon customer my mother ever had.*

**Best Boy** - *I cannot say, exactly, when I began leading two distinctly different lives. It feels like it happened earlier than it should have. Every gay man of my generation lived a life divided. I just wish I'd had a few more years before mine began to split in two. My selection as Alameda Junior High School's Best Boy of 1975 was proof that I had fooled them all. My public self was a carefully crafted chimera that provided cover for a private self that was flawed, shameful—even monstrous. But now my onstage persona was being rewarded with a medal of honor, with my mother as witness. I saw it as the encouragement I needed to continue being a keeper of secrets.*

**One of These Nights** – *Charlie and I never once spoke about that day, but the message was clear. Like the barbarian who mounts severed heads on stakes at the entrance to his village, Charlie had shown me that there were consequences for revealing his secret. Charlie Woods and I didn't talk about our sexual encounters. He simply called it "the next best thing." My desire to be with Charlie was far stronger than the hurt I felt at being the choice of last resort. I learned to accept that if I wanted to be with Charlie, pleasure would forever be coupled with pain.*

**Next** – *"You'll take drama, of course." On this, my memory is clear. Every journey has its place of origin. And as is usually the case, I was unaware at the time that a revolution of spirit was being unleashed. Drama saved my life. Finally, a place to belong. A place where I could, at last, be free.*

**Joseph Smith and the Temple of Doom** - *It was in junior high that I began to discover that Mormonism was not just a religion, it was the religion. In Pocatello, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) dominates every aspect of civic life. It was a profound influence on me, and shaped the way I view religion, politics, and a whole range of social issues. Being a non-Mormon in Pocatello is challenging—being a gay lax-Lutheran is Hell.*

**Pomp & Circumstances** - *In six months she will find The Joy of Gay Sex in his roll-top desk, there will be a confrontation, tears, "maybe it's just a phase"(both of them will say this), a look in her eyes that won't go away. In just over a year he will be gone—Hollywood, movie stars, police helicopters overhead. It is the day of my high school graduation, the first stamp on my ticket out of Pocatello. A day for looking forward, and backward, while trying to manage a bittersweet present.*

**Bernie's** - *The people who found a haven at Bernie's usually belonged to one of two distinct communities: you were either white and gay or straight and black. Although Snowflake was a member of the second group, as a self-described "fag hag," she felt more at home hanging out with the boys. Even Pocatello, Idaho had a gay bar when I was growing up. It was a fascinating study in the power of both hope and desperation.*

**Epilogue** – *An obscure mosaic of memories. Kaleidoscopic glass scattered about, forever shifting—this one buried, that one unearthed—configuring some abstract design that I am unable to interpret. An invocation to the muse of memory, the Epilogue is a rumination on the elusive act of remembering. From the painful point of my nursery school teacher's high heels, to the crotch-grabbing wrestler in junior high, to Burt Reynolds in *Cosmo*—my attempts to excavate buried memories from long ago, and decipher the patterns that will lead to my salvation.*