

Paul Is Gay



Warm-up

The word *gay* can have different meanings. Find at least two different meanings.

Extract from *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan

I've always known I was gay, but it wasn't confirmed until I was in kindergarten.

It was my teacher who said so. It was right there on my kindergarten report card: PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS A VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF.

I saw it on her desk one day before nap-time. And I have to admit: I might not have realised I was different if Mrs Benchly hadn't pointed it out. I mean, I was five years old. I just assumed boys were attracted to other boys. Why else would they spend all of their time together, playing on teams and making fun of the girls? I assumed it was because we all liked each other. I was still unclear how girls fit into the picture, but I thought I knew the boy thing A-OK.

Imagine my surprise to find out that I wasn't entirely right. Imagine my surprise when I went through all the other reports and found out that not one of the other boys had been labelled DEFINITELY GAY. (In all fairness, none of the others had a VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF, either.) Mrs Benchly caught me at her desk and looked quite alarmed. Since I was more than a little confused, I asked her for some clarification.

“Am I definitely gay?” I asked. Mrs Benchly looked me over and nodded. “What’s gay?” I asked. “It’s when a boy likes other boys,” she explained.

I pointed over to the painting corner, where Greg Easton was wrestling on the ground with Ted Halpern.

“Is Greg gay?” I asked. “No,” Mrs Benchly answered. “At least, not yet.” Interesting. I found it all very interesting.

Mrs Benchly explained a little more to me – the whole boys-liking-girls thing. I don’t say I understood. Mrs Benchly asked me if I’d noticed that marriages were mostly made up of men and women. I had never really thought of marriages as things that involved liking. I had just assumed this man-woman arrangement was yet another adult quirk, like flossing. Now Mrs Benchly was telling me something much bigger. Some sort of silly global conspiracy.



“But that’s not how I feel,” I protested. My attention was a little distracted because Ted was now pulling up Greg Easton’s shirt, and that was kind of cool. “How I feel is what’s right ... right?”

“For you, yes,” Mrs Benchly told me. “What you feel is absolutely right for you. Always remember that.”

And I have. Sort of.

That night, I held my big news until after my favourite Nickelodeon block was over. My father was in the kitchen, doing dishes. My mother was in the den with me, reading on the couch. Quietly, I walked over to her.

“GUESS WHAT!” I said. She jumped, then tried to pretend she hadn’t been surprised. Since she didn’t close her book – she only marked the page with her finger – I knew I didn’t have much time.

“What?” she asked.

“I’m gay!”

Parents never react the way you want them to. I thought, at the very least, my mother would take her finger out of the book. But no. Instead she turned in the direction of the kitchen and yelled to my father.

“Honey ... Paul’s learned a new word!”

It took my parents a couple of years. But eventually they got used to it. Besides my parents, Joni was the first person I ever came out to.

This was in second grade.

We were under my bed at the time. We were under my bed because Joni had come over to play, and under my bed was easily the coolest place in the whole house. We had brought flashlights and were telling ghost stories as a lawn mower grrrrred outside. We pretended it was the Grim Reaper. We were playing our favourite game: Avoid Death.



“So a poisonous snake has just bitten your left arm – what do you do?” Joni asked.

“I try to suck the poison out.”

“But that doesn’t work. It’s spreading up your arm ... ”

“So I take my axe and chop off my arm.”

“But once you chop off your arm, you’re bleeding to death.”

“So I pull off my shirt and tie it around the stump to stop the blood.”

“But a vulture smells the blood and comes swooping down at you.”

“So I use my right arm to pick up the left arm that I cut off, and I use it to bat the vulture away!”

“But ... ”

Joni trailed off. At first I figured I had her stumped. Then she leaned over, her eyelids closing. She smelled like bubblegum and bicycle grease.

Before I knew it, her lips were coming near mine. I was so freaked out, I stood up. Since we were still under my bed, I crashed into the bottom of my mattress.

Her eyes opened quickly after that.

“What’d you do that for?” we both yelled at the same time.

“Don’t you like me?” Joni asked, clearly hurt.

“Yeah,” I said. “But, you know, I’m gay.”

“Oh. Cool. Sorry.”

“No problem.” There was a pause, and then Joni continued.

“But the vulture pulls your left arm out of your hand and begins to hit you with it ... ”

At that moment I knew Joni and I were going to be friends for a good long time.

It was with Joni’s help that I became the first openly gay class president in the history of Ms Farquar’s third-grade class. Joni was my campaign manager. She was the person who came up with my campaign slogan: VOTE FOR ME ... I’M GAY!

I thought it rather oversimplified my stance on the issues (pro-recess, anti-gym), but Joni said it was sure to generate media attention. At first she wanted the slogan to be VOTE FOR ME ... I’M A GAY, but I pointed out that this could easily be misread as VOTE FOR ME ... I’M A GUY, which would certainly lose me votes. So the A was struck and the race began in earnest.

My biggest opponent was (I’m sorry to say) Ted Halpern. His first slogan was VOTE FOR ME ... I’M NOT GAY, which only made him seem dull. Then he tried YOU CAN’T VOTE FOR HIM ... HE’S GAY, which was pretty stupid, because nobody likes to be told who they can (or can’t) vote for. Finally, in the days leading up to the election, he resorted to DON’T VOTE FOR THE FAG. Hello? Joni threatened to beat him up, but I knew he’d played right into our hands. When the election was held, he was left with the rather tiny lint-head vote, while I carried the girl vote, the open-minded guy vote, the third-grade closet-case vote and the Ted-hater vote. It was a total blowout, and when it was all over, Joni beat Ted up anyway.

The next day at lunch, Cody O’Brien traded me two Twinkies for a box of raisins – clearly an unequal trade. The next day, I gave him three Yodels for a Fig Newton.

This was my first flirtation.