



CHRISTOPHER LOPEZ

# Readers Write

## PARTIES

**I NEVER CUT LOOSE IN HIGH SCHOOL,** but in college I threw a lot of parties. My house was known for indoor softball games, food fights, and dancing on tables.

When I was twenty-eight, I returned to my hometown to go to grad school. My eighteen-year-old brother was still living at home and having trouble with drugs and school. I had spent the previous five years doing drug-rehabilitation work with at-risk youths, and I tried to tell my parents how to set boundaries for him, enforce rules, and be consistent, but they didn't listen.

Despite my training, I did everything wrong with my brother: advised, scolded,

reprimanded. Not surprisingly, he ignored me. Over the course of the next year, my brother got arrested and, for a separate offense, was kicked out of school, yet he continued to do drugs.

When my parents took a vacation, I suggested they get a housesitter to keep their home safe. They didn't take my advice. The night before they came home, I got two phone messages. One was from my parents' neighbor, explaining that she liked my brother, but if the three-day party didn't end soon, she would have to call the police. The second was from the guy I was dating, saying he'd just been invited to a party at my parents' address.

When I pulled up to the curb in front of the house, I saw garbage and beer cans fanned out across the lawn and the neighbors' lawns on both sides. Inside, carpets were pulled up, chalk marked the floor, and everything was a mess.

I started swearing, crying, and yelling at my brother that he had no appreciation for everything our parents had done for him, that he walked all over the people who loved him most, and that he was ruining his life. My brother just sat there at the kitchen counter, too stoned even to take in what was happening. Later I'd be glad he couldn't remember.

Six months after that, I moved across the country, and my brother came along

for the ride. As we traveled over mountains and across the desert, we talked — or, rather, he talked, and I listened for a change. He asked me whether I'd ever used drugs and what my college years had been like. And, for the first time, I told him about my parties.

*Leah L.  
Berkeley, California*

**IN SIXTH GRADE, PRESSURED BY MY** best friend, I go overnight from being a member of the girl-haters' club to attending boy-girl parties with dancing and music. When the girls aren't dancing with the boys, they can dance with each other, but the boys have no such luxury. So we have to either ask a girl to dance or stand in groups, tapping our feet and mouthing the words along with Elvis, Frankie Valli, and the Everly Brothers, afraid to sing in our cracking adolescent voices, trying to divine from the lyrics what it will take for a girl not just to dance with us, but to actually like us.

At the party's end, the host's parents turn up the lights in the basement rec room, and I walk out in a daze, music ringing in my ears, the image of the girls in their party dresses on my mind. Even at home, as I lie in bed and my mother kisses me good night, I hear Paul Anka, Neil Sedaka, Lesley Gore, and the Beach Boys. I toss and turn, replaying every conversation and every dance, kicking myself for bungling the steps I'd practiced, for making the conversation starters my stepfather taught me sound so wooden.

Hours pass before the rock beat quiets in my head and the images fade and I drift into fitful sleep. Why is this so difficult? Why am I so tormented? And why does no one tell me that the others are lying in bed feeling exactly the same?

*John Unger Zussman  
Portola Valley, California*

**ON SUNDAYS WHEN I WAS A TEEN-**ager, my mother's large extended family came to our house for a midday meal. As the years went by, the guest list expanded to include friends and my father's family until my parents were feeding a crowd of twenty or so every week.

One Sunday my Great-Uncle Marco from Mexico City showed up unan-

nounced. My grandmother's youngest brother, he was the classic unmarried uncle who returns to tell tales of his exotic travels. He fascinated us not only with his stories, but with his constant innuendoes about sex.

At dinner, when someone made a toast, Marco downed his wine as if it were cold water and he'd just returned from a hike in the desert. Then, before anyone could react, he jumped onto the table. My brother, my sister, and I exchanged glances: what was he doing? Marco held his glass up to the other guests and made his own toast: "A veinte mujeres con cuarenta tetas!"

Not everyone at the table understood, but my brother and I certainly did, and we began smirking. Soon everyone began laughing, clinking glasses, and repeating the toast to "twenty women with forty breasts."

I learned much later that Marco was gay, which made his saluting women and their breasts all the more provocative. I never saw him again and could not tell

you any longer what he looked like, but the image of him standing on the table with his outstretched glass endures.

*Nancy S.  
Northampton, Massachusetts*

**I AM ALBINO, WHICH MEANS MY SKIN** and hair are paler than pale, and though I have partial vision, I'm legally blind. I grew up in a town where it seemed everyone worshiped at the same handful of churches and was white and voted Republican and wore the same clothes. I was white, but I was *too* white. I was an agnostic atheist, a bleeding heart, and I dressed like the grunge-rock musicians I admired. I didn't even fit in with the delinquent kids, because my parents were too strict and my grades too good. I felt like the town freak.

Nothing emphasized my feelings of alienation like a school dance, where I'd sit at the back of the cafeteria and eat chips to numb myself. One time I tried to mingle, but a girl I'd ridden to the dance with told me to stop following her around

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Saying Yes	July 1	January 2009
Instructions	August 1	February 2009

like a puppy. I went back to the food table and tried to disappear.

Parties became more painful as I got older and developed crushes. I watched the boys I was attracted to dance with other girls, girls I would never resemble. I didn't even know how to dance, and I hated the music the DJs played. Often I just sat in a corner and tried not to cry.

Now twenty-six, I feel a little more comfortable in my pale skin, but parties still scare me. I don't always know how to approach strangers, and I suspect they don't know how to approach me. I'd rather drink champagne with the older women in my writing group than go to a party with people my own age. I still prefer heavy rock music to dance beats and deep intellectual conversation to small talk.

Every once in a while, though, I'll go to a social gathering and find it bearable, even a little fun. Inside me the little girl who wants to be like everyone else battles with the rebel who says, "Fuck what everyone else thinks." I hope someday the two sides of me can live comfortably together.

*Chrys Buckley  
Orcas Island, Washington*

**IT'S THE SUMMER OF 1966, AND MY** friend Jane's mother is having a party at her Greenwich Village town house. Jane and I are not exactly guests at the party, but I am sleeping over, and we brush shoulders with the real guests on our way to the kitchen to get ice cream. We have on miniskirts and sway when we walk, aware of how pretty we look. Some women at the party are wearing high plastic boots and dresses that are almost see-through.

Jane's mother is an artist. Her long blond hair is streaked with gray, and she is wearing a green caftan and drinking a cocktail one small sip at a time. Her paintings hang on the walls, including portraits of Jane and her older sister, Diane, who was born with one ear and only half a face; she has had many surgeries but still doesn't look normal. Diane usually stays in her room on the second floor during parties, and most other times as well. I say hello to her when I pass her in the hallway, but I never stop to talk.

On the stereo Billie Holiday is singing

a song called "Strange Fruit," about black people being hung from trees. I know the world can be cruel and bad things can happen, but I feel insulated from all that. After the song ends, Mitch Ryder begins to sing "Devil with a Blue Dress On," and guests gyrate to the music. Jane and I join in, watching our pretty, young reflections in the wide windows.

From somewhere in the house comes a hot, muffled *bang*, and Jane's mother runs up to the second floor. Seconds later she shouts down, "Call the police!"

Diane has shot herself with a gun her mother kept in the closet. She is dead. The note she left says she was tired of being ignored because she wasn't beautiful.

*S.H.  
New York, New York*

**WITH OUR EXTROVERTED MOTHER'S** fifty-third birthday approaching, my siblings and I decided to throw her a surprise party. We'd failed to mark her fiftieth with real fanfare, and now that she had been diagnosed with breast cancer, we wondered how many birthdays she had left. The oldest of seven, I took the lead, writing to as many friends and family members as I could, imploring them to come — or, if they couldn't make it, to send a letter of fond memories. I also asked, with some embarrassment, that they send money; my mother, though a hospital nurse herself, had no health insurance.

The January day of the party dawned cloudy and cold, and there were forecasts of snow. On our way to our mother's house, my brother and I watched a car pull over to the side of the road because of the ice, and we knew there would be no party. We were grateful just to make it up our parents' gravel road without incident, bringing a scrapbook full of cards and a check for \$441. Our mother was chagrined to learn of our foiled plan, but she appreciated our thoughtfulness.

Seven years later, the summer before my mother was to turn sixty, an MRI revealed that the breast cancer had migrated to her spine. There was risk of paralysis, and the doctors hospitalized her for emergency surgery. After the eight-hour operation, the sight of my mother's pale skin and swollen-shut eyes was almost too much to bear. Again

we all wondered how much time she had left.

Two months later, our mother was walking with a brace, and we began planning another birthday party. This time we decided not to make it a surprise, hoping the anticipation would help her pull through her illness-induced gloom. I baked cupcakes, and we asked guests to bring only a dish to share. (Our mother was applying for Medicaid to cover her hospital bills.) The weather for the party was clear and unseasonably warm, and our mother looked happier than we'd seen her in a long time. When our shy father, who'd been the stay-at-home parent, stood at the microphone to offer a tribute, he began, "Living with Carolyn is like living with an angel." Our mother broke in: "Keep in mind he's older than me — and more forgetful." The room rang with laughter.

*Melissa M.  
Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

**WHEN I WAS EIGHTEEN, MY PARENTS** hosted a debutante party for me at our country club. The theme was India, and the preppy clubhouse had been transformed into a rajah's palace. An elephant stood at the door, and a tame tiger nuzzled guests' hands as they waited in the receiving line for me to greet them.

I wore a purple and gold sari and bangles that pinched my arms. I was hot and nervous. As I kissed people on both cheeks and made small talk, a friend kept me refreshed with the club's special vodka-mint cocktail.

Before the receiving line had reached the end, I felt sick. My escort quickly dragged me out to the garden, where my high heels stuck in the earth, and I tripped and ripped my sari. He brought me upstairs to our private room, and I bent over the toilet and puked. When I looked up, I saw my father. "I'm so sorry, Daddy," I cried. Then I passed out.

The next few days were awkward. No one in my family said much to me. My parents just seemed relieved the news of my disappearance hadn't made the newspaper's society column. I felt bad for having let them down.

One night, about a week after the party, I was washing dishes, and my dad

was helping. He paced anxiously in and out, returning wineglasses to their proper shelves. Suddenly he hugged me, and we cried. "I just wanted the best for you," he said. "I love you." It was the first time he had ever said those words to me.

*Name Withheld*

**MY TWO SISTERS AND I WERE DRESSED** in our pajamas, teeth brushed and hair combed, when our father came home from the office at seven. We begged him to let us stay up while he ate his supper so he could read us a bedtime poem afterward. He agreed, and once he'd finished his liverwurst sandwich, we followed him down the hall to the living room, where he kept volumes of German poetry by Goethe, Schiller, and Heine.

When my father opened the door to the living room, a burst of applause greeted him. It was his birthday, and many relatives, friends, and neighbors had gathered to celebrate. Our father's eyes filled with tears, and he hugged, kissed, and shook hands with his guests. My sisters and I quickly changed from nightclothes into pages' uniforms so we could hang up coats and help people find the bathroom.

When all the coats had been hung up and the party was in full swing, my youngest sister, Helga, became bored. She wiggled into the middle of the crowd and in her loudest voice asked, "Doesn't anyone have to go to the bathroom?" A line of laughing adults formed.

My mother had hired musicians to play my father's favorite piece: Schubert's *Trout Quintet*. (My father was a devoted fisherman.) To add to the show, my sisters and I donned costumes and acted out the parts of the angler and three silvery fish on an improvised stage in the corner of the room. After the jumping fish had escaped the hook and the music had ended, we ran over to our father and landed on his lap.

Our mother, in her long tulle dress and dangling gold earrings, glided among her guests, the perfect hostess. She did not know that this would be the last party she'd give at which her Jewish and non-Jewish friends would mingle.

This was Germany in 1932, and not

long afterward my father's youngest brother was beaten up by the Nazis in the street. He escaped to England, alive but penniless. One good friend and neighbor became a prominent Nazi Party member and informer, and he never entered our house again. Before my father's next birthday, my sisters and I left for Holland, and our factory and home were confiscated.

Our father eventually was sent to a concentration camp. Our mother's sister and her husband were killed in the camps. When I think about that evening of friendship and laughter, I wonder: What changed? What made friends become enemies?

*Renate G. Justin  
Fort Collins, Colorado*

**WHEN I WAS SEVENTEEN, MY FRIENDS** and I went to all-night dance parties called raves. Around 4 A.M., when the rest of the city was calling it a night, we'd be dancing in front of twelve-foot-high walls of speakers.

The illegal parties began late on Friday night and wound down around noon on Sunday. They changed locations often to evade the cops. Each weekend we drove through ghetto neighborhoods in search of the party, following the vague directions a fellow raver had left on a friend's answering machine.

For the first time in my life, I was popular. Usually when I was around a good-looking boy, I had trouble remembering to breathe. But at raves cute guys told me they liked watching me dance and asked my name. For me, though, the social scene and drugs were merely a backdrop for the music. I'd dance for hours, stopping only to get water.

There was a friendly, communal atmosphere at raves. You could leave your backpack lying on the dirty warehouse floor, and it would still be there when you returned hours later. Everyone smiled at each other and left their egos at home. We called it "church," because it was the closest any of us had ever been to God.

A decade later I still listen to that music once in a while at the gym. I close my eyes and picture myself dancing in front of those enormous speakers. I wonder what the ravers I knew are doing, and

if they ever think about the way it was when we were all moving to the same beat beneath the colorful lights.

*Lisa D.  
Chicago, Illinois  
(end of excerpt)*