

[Home](#)

[Current Issue](#)

[Spring/Summer 2008](#)

[Winter/Spring 2008](#)

[Autumn 2007](#)

[Summer 2007](#)

[Spring 2007](#)

[Winter 2007](#)

[Autumn 2006](#)

[Summer 2006](#)

[Spring 2006](#)

[Winter 2006](#)

[Fall 2005](#)

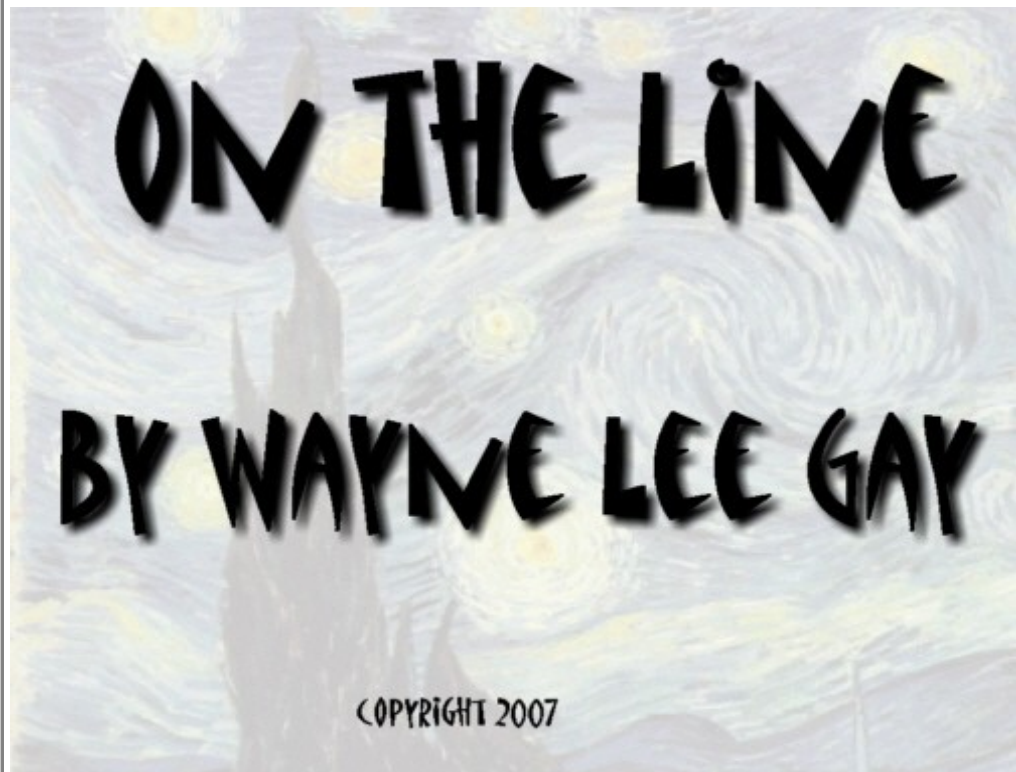
[Summer 2005](#)

[Editor's Note](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[SNR's Writers](#)

[Contact](#)



This is how it works.

You dial the number.

It rings on the other end, then clicks. One of those computer voices that sounds like a real person asks you for your mailbox number.

You punch in the numbers: 2-8-2-5. The voice asks for your password. Just like when you call up your bank for your balance. Or when you call up the credit card company to see how much you owe and the voice asks for your card number.

Your password is *D-O-G-G-I-E*. 3-6-4-4-4-3. After your Schnauzer, Doggie, who's dozing at your feet.

Click, and you're on line.

You punch four, to listen to recorded messages from other users on line.

You listen to several before you hear one that's kind of interesting.

Hi, this is Brad. I'm 42, blond and blue-eyed. I work out regularly. Well-toned. Total bottom. Looking for a quick fling at my place in far north <?xml:namespace prefix = st1 ns = "urn:schemas-microsoft-com:office:smarts" />Dallas. If I'm on line, I'm horny. Looking for somebody 18 to 35, prefer white or Latino, well-hung. I'm ready to take it. Leave a message if you're interested.

And you press two to leave a message. Put just an edge of Hispanic in your voice.

Invent a quick bio for yourself.

“Hi, this is Cisco. I’m 24, I live on Royal, east of Central. I’d love for you to come over and suck my dick, maybe do a little more.”

You pause, gasp a little, just for effect, like maybe you’re so horny already you can hardly stand to wait.

You continue: “You like to get fucked? I’m so horny tonight. Call me. 972-663-0830.”

Push two to send the message. And wait.

You’re in your study, over the garage. You’ve been to bed already. Ruth’s asleep. She fell asleep in your arms. Looked so sweet in her soft, ruffled, Edwardian night gown. Still looks sweet after twenty years. She works hard at her job at the bank. You love her. She loves you. You were careful not wake her when you left the bed to go to your study at 2 a.m.

Your cell phone vibrates.

“Hey, it’s Brad. Is this Cisco?”

“Yeah.” You shift into your Cisco character. Remember to shade your accent with a little Spanish. Not too much. “Watcha doin?”

“Just looking for some fun.”

“You wanna suck my dick?”

“Hell, yeah—I mean, I guess so. What do you look like?”

“I’m 24, got close-cropped hair, well-built. I’m 5’9”, 165. Solid. Smooth.”

“You sound pretty good.”

“What about you? You’re for real?”

“Like I said in my message, I’m 42, in good shape, blonde, blue-eyed.”

“Oh, Daddy, you want me to ride you?”

“Get over here, Baby. You got a car?”

“Uh, it’s in the shop.”

“Yeah, right.” he says, like he doesn’t really believe you.

But it turns out he doesn’t care, and he says, “Hell, what time is it? I’m so horny I’ll come out to your place. Dammit, it’s 2:30, Cisco.”

“Oh, Brad, I want you. Come and get me.”

“What th’Hell. Where are you?”

“I’m in a complex, 3300 Royal Lane. Know where that is?”

“Hell, I can find it.”

Not much chance of that, you think, since it doesn’t exist.

“Anyway, listen careful,” you say, in your best Cisco voice. “It’s kinda tricky. You have to drive up to the gate, enter admission code 6985. Got that? The gate will open. Drive around the postal center and main office, there’s a pool on the left. You’ll see building D. Come up to Apartment 16, second floor. The door will be unlocked. I’ll be waiting.”

And you feel proud of yourself, because you know that the postal center was a nice touch.

Pause for effect.

“And, Daddy?”

“Yeah, Cisco?”

“Hurry up. I’m horny as hell and can’t wait much longer. It’s been days, Daddy.”

“I’ll be right there, Baby.”

And you kind of wonder if you should do another one tonight.

No, it’s 3 a.m. You can sleep, at last. Knowing that, if you haven’t made a man completely happy, you’ve made him happy for a few minutes. That he’ll get in his car, panting with anticipation, and drive down to Royal Lane, and, at least until he figures out that 3300 Royal Lane doesn’t exist, he’ll be happy, with anticipation and desire for a moment that won’t ever happen.

And you can rest, knowing that at least for tonight he probably won’t commit the awful sin that he wants to commit. You’ve saved him from himself.

Ruth’s warm, and sighs in her sleep as you crawl into the bed beside her. The ruffle on her collar tickles your chin when you lean over to kiss her. And you feel good about yourself as you fall asleep.

Ruth stirs a little when you get up the next night, at 12:15 a.m.

You pause to make sure she’s still asleep.

It’s a weeknight, there won’t be many guys on the line. Dial the number, and wait for it to connect. Punch in your secret code. Then your password.

Pass by a 30-year-old African-American looking for his first gay experience.

Then, hey, here’s one you’ve been thinking about for days:

This is Robbie, student at TCU. I’m 20, live close to campus. Total top, won’t do nothin’ else. Just want you to come over, get down, let me take care of business. I’m real good

lookin'. You won't be disappointed. Leave me a message if you're under 25, white, and a bottom.

College boys can be the most interesting, after all. He needs you, or at least he needs somebody. And you can provide him with that somebody, at least mentally. You can help him create that somebody he needs, in his mind, and that somebody can live for a while in his mind.

You hang up, pull out your little book, look up your other mailbox number and your other password, *schнау*. 7-2-4-6-2-8.

The Schnauzer yawns and stretches and looks up you.

You start to listen to the messages, and you hear the one you made up and posted two days ago, just for Robbie, so he'd maybe hear it and respond:

Hey, this is Jason. I'm 22, six-foot-two, two hundred pounds, solid, black-haired, love to bend over and take it from behind. I live in Arlington, can get out or host.

There's a sudden beep on the line. That means that you—well, Jason—has a message.

Bingo. It's Robbie, he's taken the bait, leaves a phone number, 817 area code.

"I'm ready to fuck your face and your ass, man," he says, in the recorded message.

You call him right up.

Damn. Busy signal.

You try again, this time he answers.

"Hey, I'm horny right now, can I come over?" you ask.

"Hell, yeah. I don't have class until 11 tomorrow. Get the hell over here, buddy, I wanna take care of you."

He gives an address close to campus in Fort Worth. You pretend to take directions. You even say that you're looking for a pen to write with, and make him hold for a minute, while you pretend to look.

He keeps talking, and you pretend to write, even making him stop and repeat things. He mentions that his blue pickup truck's parked in the street in front of his house.

Nudge Doggie with your foot. Doggie pants with appreciation for the attention. You cruise the line for fifteen minutes, call Robbie again, from your cell phone, in case he has caller ID.

"Listen, Robbie, I'm lost. Did you say left at Forest Drive?"

"No, man, I said right!" He's horny and irritated. He wants you—well, he wants Jason—bad.

A few minutes later, you call back.

“Hey, I see it,” you say. “Number 2502?”

“Yeah,” he says, sounding hopeful.

“Blue truck out front?” You remember the blue truck from the directions he gave you.

“Yeah, come on, I don’t see you.”

“I’m pulling up.”

And you push the off button on your cell phone. And tomorrow, if there’s a message sent at 2 a.m. from 817-664-8203, or any 817 number, you sure as hell will delete without listening. After all, you did him two favors. You gave him half an hour of anticipation. And you saved him from sinning, tonight. And you feel good as you get in the bed with Ruth, who’s snoring gently.

She looks as sweet as ever, and you see her eyes move under her eyelids, and you know that she’s dreaming.

It’s a busy week. You miss three nights in a row on the line. Dinner with Ruth’s mother one night. Had to stay late at work one night. Just too tired one night.

It’s spring, cool outside. Ruth snores softly, doesn’t stir a bit as you rise almost silently. You wonder if all women snore like that. Ruth’s the only woman you’ve ever slept with.

On impulse, you lean over and kiss her softly on the cheek.

She doesn’t move.

Doggie’s faithful at your feet as you pad quietly up the steps to your study.

Because, tonight’s special.

Tonight, you’re going after Ben.

Because Ben is who you’d want to be, if you weren’t you.

And, failing that, Ben is who you’d want to love, if you could love a man.

Ben might not even be on the line tonight, of course.

You wonder, what if Ben found someone.

Because, unlike most of the men on the line, Ben says that he’s looking for someone to love.

You check your little book, where you’ve written the log-on you created when you decide to be Alvin—the Alvin you created to match what Ben wants. Only you can’t help remembering that Alvin looks a lot like you. And likes most of the same things you like. You’d be a lot like Alvin, if you didn’t have Ruth, and church, and a job where they think you’re just another nice, straight, middle-aged guy. And if you were gay.

“The number of users on line right now is . . . fifteen,” the automated voice announces.

Pretty good for late on a weeknight.

By the time you get to number twelve, you decide that Ben probably isn't on at all.

Then, just before you hang up, there's his message.

.Part of you is ready for the same old routine with Ben, the same trick you've played for years on guys on the line, ever since the day you saw the ad with the picture of the cute guys on the back page of the *Dallas Observer*. You listened patiently for weeks, learning the right words to say, figuring out the lingo of “bottom” and “top” and “partyin' hard” and “layin' back.”

But part of you wishes that it wasn't just a game, and wishes that you really could go and meet Alvin.

And part of you remembers that, after all, you're just saving those guys, saving Brad and Robbie and Ben and all the others, if just for one night, from making an awful mistake.

This is Ben, the message says. I'm 38 years old, looking for someone, maybe a few years younger, maybe older. I've got brown hair, blue eyes. My hair's thin, and I've always been a little chubby. I've got a few freckles. I like to read, to go to movies, to walk by the lake. I'm not looking for a one-night stand. I'm looking for lots of friends, and I'm looking for one someone special. I guess I should say I'm versatile in bed. I have boundaries, but no requirements. If this sounds interesting, leave me a message.

You shove the real you inside yourself and become Alvin, just like you became Cisco and Jason and a few hundred other invented characters. Only Alvin isn't quite so different from you as Cisco and Jason and the others were.

Alvin presses two, to record a message for Ben. Doggie whines a little, then falls back to sleep.

“Hi, this is Alvin. I'd definitely like to meet you. I'm 40 and single. Give me a call anytime, let's set something up.”

Alvin speaks the cell phone number carefully, and sends the message to Ben, and you feel Alvin going away. And you're very tired, all of sudden. After all, it's late. You leave Doggie asleep on the floor, and slip quietly across the house, and into the bed, where Ruth still lies snoring.

You don't check your cellphone for messages until the next afternoon at work. And there it is. No name on the caller I.D. You can't even stand to listen to the message, because you know it must be Ben. Or it least you hope it's Ben.

And you think, *score*.

And something dangerous happens in your mind. You start wondering what would

happen if you really did go to meet Ben.

Two a.m. that night, you slip out of bed. Ruth stirs.

“Where are you going?” she says, in the voice of someone who’s more than half asleep.

“Just to the bathroom,” you answer.

You stand in the bedroom door for a minute, just to make sure she’s asleep. You hear her snort, then slip back into her regular snore. You consider going into the bathroom and flushing, just to be convincing, but decide it might really wake her up.

The trees outside rattle in the spring wind as you cross the dark living room, toward the stairway that goes up to your study, over the garage. Doggie jolts up in the kitchen, sees that it’s you, and drops back to sleep instantly.

You log on as Alvin. Yeah, Ben’s there, awake. Probably lonely. You send him a message.

“Hey, Ben, it’s Alvin. Sorry I missed your call today. Call me now, we can talk.”

A minute later, your cellphone vibrates. You pause for a minute.

And you wonder, *Do I really want to do this?*

You decide that you do, and you answer.

You’re cheerful and almost perky in your Alvin voice.

“Hello.”

“Hey, it’s Ben. Is this Alvin?”

Before you know it, you’ve set up a meeting. Not a get-together-to-fuck. A get-together-to-talk. At a coffee house. Over on Cedar Springs Road, in the neighborhood with the gay bars and bookstores and gay coffee houses. 3 o’clock, Saturday afternoon.

You hang up, and realize that it’s about to get dangerous.

Because you’re about to wonder if you really want to do it.

A light flashes under the door of your study. Someone’s in the living room.

Then you hear Ruth’s voice.

“Tim?”

“I couldn’t sleep, Honey. Thought I’d check out the headlines.”

You manage to turn the computer on enough so that you can turn it off if she walks up the stairs and into your study.

But she doesn't.

Saturday morning, you know you're safe. Church group cookout that afternoon.

You're in your study, but you hear Ruth answer the phone in the kitchen.

"Cancelled?" she says.

You cluck with disbelief. Your disappointment is real, because now you know you'll be tempted to go meet Ben. And suddenly you feel frightened and anxious, and scared of what you'll do.

"Listen, I've been wanting to find something for your mother for Mother's Day anyway," Ruth says, standing in the study door. "Maybe you'd like to go to Dillard's with me?"

And you don't know why, but you say, "No, I think I'd just like to hang at home today."

It's getting dangerous.

You've been down Cedar Springs Road before, just north of Oak Lawn Avenue. Really, everybody has. There's the gay saloon, the bars, the restaurants. After all, you don't have to be gay to go there.

There's plenty of parking. You're fifteen minutes early. You go into the coffee shop. Order a double latte from a young man with what must be twenty piercings—ears, lips, tongue, nose—and green stripes in a black Mohawk. His look is tough, his voice soft and amiable.

You sit at a table, read the *Dallas Morning News*, and wonder, *Where is he?*

There's a young couple sitting at a table nearby. Cute blond guy in jeans and a blue T-shirt, and a tougher-looking guy, the same age, dark black hair. They stare at each other and smile, and hang on each other's words, like they're in love. They talk, constantly interrupting each other, they're so eager. You wonder what it's like to be young and in love with another man. And you wonder if you missed something.

Your cell phone vibrates.

"Hey, Alvin, it's Ben. I'm running a little late. I'll be there in half a second."

Suddenly, you're in love with the sound of Ben's voice. And you start to think about Ruth, but you stop yourself.

You look out the window and watch the cars slide down the street, slipping past each other, some slow, some fast. You watch for the green Toyota Ben says he's driving. You begin to think, what am I doing? You're a little scared and, suddenly, very hopeful. Part of you hopes he's really coming. Part of you prays he won't. And part of you wonders what you'll say to him when you see him.

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