



# ¡HOLA PAPI!

"I loved *¡Holo Papi!*  
I'm certain you will, too."  
—SHEA SERRANO

HOW TO COME OUT IN A WALMART PARKING LOT  
AND OTHER LIFE LESSONS

JOHN PAUL BRAMMER



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**¡HOLA PAPI!**

How to Come Out in a Walmart Parking Lot

*and Other Life Lessons*

**JOHN PAUL BRAMMER**

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*For Madre*

**Author's Note**

¡Hola amigos!

While the following stories recount my lived experiences, many of the characters have had their names and identifying details shifted or have been rendered as composite characters. That's when a few different people are put in a

blender and turned into one person. Some dialogue has also been re-created

from memory.

*¡Hola Papi!*

*Are you even qualified to help me?*

*Signed,*

*Reader*

### **How to Answer a Letter, Part 1**

I was warned not to download Grindr. I remember the conversation clearly. I

was a junior in college at the time. It was a sun-drenched afternoon in 2011, and

I was sitting on a bench with a Swedish guy named Erik whom I'd met on a sleazy hookup site called Adam4Adam with a nigh-unusable interface. Erik, a

senior, had taken it upon himself to show me the ropes of gay life for reasons I'd

naïvely assumed were platonic. I was twenty years old and had only been out of

the closet for a couple of months.

"Oh goodness," he said, his regular preamble to addressing my mistakes—my

not knowing what a "top" or "bottom" was, the menagerie of mediocre men I'd

arranged to have sex with, none of which ever met Erik's standards. "You haven't

heard of Grindr?”

Erik was manifestly chlorinated: an avid swimmer, he had bleach-blond hair and matching bleach-white skin. He always smelled clean in a chemical way,

always seemed like he'd rather be swimming; he'd make absent paddling motions

with his hands while walking. He'd drag me to the pool to criticize my form and

show me what a real breaststroke should look like (mine was a “stroke” in the

loosest sense of the word).

And I went, Reader. I went because I was desperate for the knowledge Erik held so casually: how to date and hook up and live as a gay person, things I didn't yet know how to do. I'd grown up in the Oklahoma countryside, where

my only real exposure to gayness had been through the judges on *America's Next*

*Top Model* and an estranged uncle on the white side of the family who was too

busy chain-smoking and drinking Franzia out of a box to make idle chitchat.

I worried, Reader, that I had gotten too late a start on this “being gay”

business. I was an all-or-nothing kind of person. I wasn't gay until one day when

I decided that, no, actually, I was. Aside from one failed romantic endeavor with

my best friend from high school, I hadn't really fooled around with guys while I

was in the closet. I didn't watch gay porn or hit up gay bars only to go back to

pretending I was straight. But once I'd committed to "being gay," I immediately

started throwing myself at whoever would have me, which at least brought a

colorful new cast of characters into my life, Erik's pal or notwithstanding.

"What exactly is Grindr?" I asked.

"It's nothing a sweet girl like you needs to know about," Erik said, chewing

his gum and staring off into the middle distance. Erik always seemed like he had

something better to do than muck about with me, which made it all the more

confusing that he kept inviting me places. "Stay away from it. You'll thank me

later."

"It's a hookup app?" I said, pressing him. At the time, during my personal

Stone Age, the only apps I had on my phone were Candy Crush and Facebook,

like a soccer mom in the suburbs. My scandalous homosexual activities were

reserved for my laptop during the witching hour, when I would log in to

Adam4Adam and exchange nudes with faceless strangers, seeking the dopamine

rush of approval. The notion that I could get such a thing on my smartphone was novel and exciting.

“It’s *the* gay hookup app,” Erik said, as if I were the world’s purest baby. “But

for, like, the worst people. Dylan is always on it. Have you met Dylan? Oh, you

wil .” Erik was always threatening me with these inevitable landmarks of my

journey, prophecies of dates gone awry and conflicts with catty gossips whom

Erik always referred to as “she” and “her,” which only confused me further.

“She’ll find you,” he said. “Don’t worry. She’ll get to you.”

The first thing I did after freeing myself from Erik for the day was, of course, to download Grindr.

I opened it up in my apartment, an orange icon with an ominous black mask on it (the color scheme was inverted back then). I was introduced to “the grid”:

row upon row of profiles—men, all within reach, mere feet away. The guys I’d

glanced at in coffee shops. The men I’d checked out at the gym. The classmates

who made me wonder, *What if?* AI made tangible with a little blue chat button.

I was instantly hooked.

It was on this app that, for the first time ever, some white guy greeted me by saying, “Hola papi.” I’d never really considered myself any kind of “papi.” I was a

mixed-race Mexican American with noodle arms who couldn’t legally drink yet.

But in the overwhelming influx of everything that came with coming out—new

customs, new vocabulary, new ways of seeing myself—I didn’t think too much

of it. I accepted it as another sideways fact of my chaotic new life and moved on.

In that long process of moving on, Grindr and I stayed together, even as Erik

faded into my past. When I took an internship with the Austin Film Festival for

a summer before my senior year of college, Grindr went with me. When I studied abroad in Barcelona, I’d hang out in cafés with Wi-Fi and open Grindr.

When I moved to DC for a blogging job, and then to New York for another gig,

“the grid” was a constant in my life. The men came and went, with varying



degrees of success. But Grindr was forever.

I wouldn't have called myself a sex addict, Reader. I wasn't having near enough sex to qualify for that. I was more of an attraction junkie. I was into the

idea of being wanted by people who didn't have any obligation to want me.

After a life spent languishing with repressed desires, it felt good to openly want

and be wanted. To lust, to flirt, to show off and to be shown—even if nothing came of it—was a destination unto itself. On the grid, I got to sit and survey all

my options, my delicious options, exquisitely illustrated possibilities, at no cost.

I developed a visceral, Pavlovian reaction to the *brrrrrp* of a new message.

After logging countless hours—years!—on the foul application, it was in

2017 that I was beamed up to the mother ship of Grindr HQ in Los Angeles. It

seemed like the natural conclusion of our journey together, but it was only the

beginning.

A friend I'd met in the New York gay Latino hive mind had recently been hired as a staff writer for a new editorial brand published by Grindr, called

INTO (a clever play on the common Grindr refrain "What are you into?," the

phrase most asked by gay men sniffing out possible hookups). My friend

Mathew Rodriguez asked if I'd be interested in pitching a regular column for

INTO. At the time, I was working as an associate producer at NBC News, commuting daily to 30 Rock and crying on the M train while composing *Teen*

*Vogue* articles on my phone's notes app about Kylie Jenner's being spotted with

a dget spinner. I'd get to work, report on the day's atrocities for NBC, rinse, and then repeat.

So, really, what did I have to lose?

In fact, I had everything to gain. Ever in the freelance mindset of "you are going to fail and bring shame to your family unless you say yes to everything," I

said yes and tried to engineer a weekly column for weekly checks. The problem

was, I didn't trust myself to come up with a new topic to write about with such

frequency. I would need an inexhaustible well of material.

An advice column was the perfect solution: readers would supply me with a weekly topic, and I could tap into the infinitely renewable resource of gay drama

to fuel it. A triumph for the young man who once sat on a park bench with a

Swedish swimmer, feeling he'd missed the boat on "being gay." I'm pretty sure

Erik was Swedish, anyway.

In the tradition of clever app lingo that fueled the INTO brand, I thought of a twist of my own: "¡Hola Papi!"

I initially pitched "¡Hola Papi!" as "Queer Latino 'Dear Abby' hanging poppers." It would be more of an advice column spoof than anything else, and it

would tackle all the common LGBT issues: dating, insecurities, and petty drama. It was given the green light with some hesitation over the name (it was,

after all, inspired by the rampant racial issues on the app, something Grindr probably didn't want to advertise), and up it went.

I just had to hope the letters would come in.

I wasn't sure they actually would, Reader. Grindr itself was, for me, a desperate bid to make connections. I was used to trying to reach out and being

met with a palpable silence—"Hello? Hello?" I dreaded that lack of response,

and I figured, based on personal history, that my column might be met with a similar quiet.

Also, it was hard to put myself in the shoes of a person who would email their

most intimate struggles to a complete stranger over the internet, which is what I

was asking people to do. The column was being pushed out through the Grindr

app every week, which connected it to the wider gay-sex-having international

community, a community I imagined was more interested in trading nudes than

in confronting their personal trauma for the sake of generating web content.

Turns out, I was wrong.

In retrospect, it's not that shocking—most people on Grindr were already

looking for connection of some kind, someone to talk to and share something

intimate with. Wasn't that what had kept me on the app for so many years, the

rush of a relation from a complete stranger, to be desired, to be seen and

accepted? I could easily see advice-giving as another form of gay a relation that,

apparently, people needed. The multimil ion-dollar sex app had faith in me, sure,

but they were more interested in my generating clicks; I wanted to deliver something more, something substantial.

The first letter I answered, elded from a Twitter follower, hit at the core of

what I wanted the column to be: “Hola Papi,” it read, “I’m a white guy who has

dated almost exclusively brown Latino men. Was I fetishizing them?” My reply

was a mix of wry humor with a nugget of wisdom: “No one needs your  
a rmative action, mija. You were with them because you liked them, and they

were with you because they liked you back.” I also cal ed him “chipotle mayo,”

for fun.

Up it went, and then I waited to see what would happen. I assumed some  
people would like it, and some people would be annoyed that they were  
receiving an advice column on their hookup app. But at least, I hoped, I  
would

get a few letters.

I didn’t receive a few letters, Reader. I got a ood. I knew then that I had  
tapped into something new and underserved. Of course it was underserved.

Hadn’t I only recently been in those same shoes, glomming on to more  
experienced gay men in my desperate bid for a mentor gure?

With that initial deluge of responses, I dared to dream bigger. I dreamed of  
making a space for the wayward Grindr users of the globe to feel a rmed,  
understood, and a little less lonely. Not just them, but LGBTQ people  
around

the world. There were letters from everywhere on “the grid”: Morocco, India,

Brazil, and Japan. The possibilities seemed endless. Ever since I’d first come out,

I’d been looking to be a part of something bigger than myself, wanting to connect to my community on a deeper level. Maybe this was it.

And on a professional level, maybe I wouldn’t have to worry anymore about

having to move back to my parents’ house in Oklahoma and return to my job

making tortillas as after all .

It didn’t escape me, however, that I’d initially pitched the column as a spoof.

To be clear, I didn’t think anybody had any business giving someone else advice,

really, unless that person was a doctor or Dolly Parton. To me, advice columns

had always felt like a phony enterprise. Who would give a stranger such authority? And, conversely, I couldn’t imagine wielding it myself.

“¡Hola Papi!” offered me the chance to poke fun at the larger advice-giving concept as a whole while also giving me an opportunity to “hone my brand,” as

the youths say.

I was fully prepared to put my jester hat on and jingle-jangle my way through

running a column. But almost immediately, the letters got serious. There were

letters about being afraid to come out for fear that your family would disown

you, letters about being excommunicated from friend and faith groups for being

gay or bi or trans.

One in particular has really stuck with me through the years. It arrived during

winter, a few months after the column's inauguration. I had ducked into a coffee

shop in Chelsea, kicked the snow off my boots, and sat down to pore over my letters, as I often did.

“¡Hola Papi!” it said, as so many of the letters began. “Homosexuality is illegal

in my country, but I find myself attracted to a man I work with. I think he might

like me back. He is showing me all these signs. Should I tell him how I feel?”

It was in that moment, Reader, that fraudulence hit me like a wave of cinder blocks. I was ill equipped. I quickly realized I had to reassess my goals with this

little project; maybe I didn't just want to be a rodeo clown after all.

It's not like I was setting out to be the Latino Harvey Milk with my online column or anything. But I did, at the very least, want to make a worthwhile contribution to the legacy I had inherited, the community I found myself in. And after all my clawing and climbing from rural Oklahoma, I was finally in a

perfect position to do so. Now came the part where I had to have something to

say, the part where I had to share something with the world, and it seemed like

all my vaults were empty. I hadn't done near enough living to be giving anyone

advice.

But what was I supposed to do when someone brought me a genuine dilemma like this? Ignore it?

I thought of Erik for the first time in years, from a time in my life when I didn't know up from down or tops from bottoms. I thought of myself sitting on

the bench next to him, how small I was then, not in size, but in understanding.

Anyone could have told me anything, and I would have believed them. I had

taken everything Erik said, for example, as law, simply because he had gotten



there first. But really, in retrospect, he was just some random Swedish dude who

was probably frustrated that his multiple invitations to hang out in Speedos hadn't registered to me as sexual advances. And yet, through this column I could

become someone's Erik: an accidental authority figure. I could hurt somebody if

I wasn't careful.

I took stock of myself. Who was I, Reader? Who was I, other than a promiscuous Twitter-addled gay Mexican with chronic anxiety and comorbid

mental illnesses who could barely answer his own emails in a timely manner

without having a breakdown? Fending for myself kept me busy enough. Did I

really have the adequate life experience to be any kind of mentor, to answer letters about complex situations that, in some cases, were literally a matter of life

and death?

I tallied up my inadequacies, of which there were many. I thought of the times in my life when I needed help, needed advice, needed a mentor figure to

reach down and tell me what I should do. I wondered what such a voice would

sound like and what it would say.

*Oh goodness, I thought. And then I began my reply.*

*¡Hola Papi!*

*How do I let go of my childhood trauma?*

*Signed,*

*Damaged Goods*

### **How to Lose a Rabbit**

I told myself I was just going to visit the rabbit.

I used to be intimately familiar with the pebbled, bumpy walls of Cache

Middle School, where I spent three long, cruel years. I would crouch by them,

stare at them, and run my hands over them every morning while waiting for the

bell to ring.

Gray, cream, and clay red; I'd pass my time by finding constellations in the

wall, connecting pebbles of the same color with my mind's eye to make shapes. I

found a teapot, a man wearing a tall hat, a red mass with jagged borders like a

continent with coastlines and peninsulas. But my favorite was the rabbit.

This was a rabbit in the loosest sense. Damaged. If I turned my head sideways

I could make out the V of its ears, a melting face with one eye resting lower than

the other, a black button nose in the center holding the whole project together. I

liked to seek him out and spend time with him every morning. I knew exactly

where to find him and how to look at him.

As you might have guessed, a child who spent this much time staring at walls

probably wasn't the most popular kid in class. I didn't even make it into the covetable "just kind of there" tier of the middle school hierarchy, which did exist

and which I thought of as aspirational. I fell into the exact bottom rung, the standard by which all other rejects were measured.

Many years later, as an adult, I was living in a shoebox (a box for shoes) apartment in New York. One afternoon, my subway car got stuck in the tunnel

between Manhattan and Brooklyn, trapping me next to a wild-eyed preacher in a

trench coat who took the opportunity to tell me about how the bisexuals were

infiltrating the Department of Defense. I decided in that moment that spending

some time in the Oklahoma countryside might do me some good. So I booked a

ight. I arrived home on a sweltering day in July and found myself compelled to

take an overdue pilgrimage to Cache to visit my old friend the rabbit.

Cache has one major road running through it. It was a big deal when we got a

stoplight, and an even bigger deal when we got a Sonic Drive-In. Many of the

businesses, the ice-cream parlors and arcades, are boarded up. There are almost

as many churches as there are residents, some of them operating out of the shells

of former establishments. The Burger Shack, for example, an old haunt that was

feeling by the aforementioned Sonic, now houses a Baptist delegation whose

marquee threatens the general public with its weekly take on hell: "Prepare

yourself for the lake of fire," it read once. "Cold?" it asked another time on a

snowy day in December, when I was visiting for Christmas. "Hell is even colder.

Bundle up!" There was a glaring lack of consistency in the institution's perceived

temperature of hell.

I wandered through this unchanged town en route to visit the rabbit, stare it in its dumb, droopy face, and finally declare victory over it.

Let me explain, Damaged. At this point in my adult life, things were going