



A Passionate Engagement

GWM, 37, 5'10", thin, br/br,
professional, good-looking,
romantic, sensitive, caring
into film, fitness, books,
writings, music, theater, fun,
seeks similar man, 30-42
for friendship/more.
☎1238 (09/07)

a memoir
Ken Harvey

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A Passionate Engagement: A Memoir

by Ken Harvey

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CHAPTER ONE

ORIGINS

You can make history any number of ways. You can land on the moon. Discover a vaccination for polio. Hit more homeruns than anyone else in baseball. Build the first automobile.

Or you can simply ask to be married.

On March 26th, 2001, Heidi Norton and Gina Smith arrived at the City Clerk's office in Northampton, Massachusetts, to request a marriage license. They had been a couple for eleven years and purchased a home together. Heidi had borne their two sons. They had given the children the last name "Nortonsmith," combining their surnames, to emphasize the relationship between the two boys. Now Heidi and Gina wanted their relationship recognized by the law.

At first, the City Clerk assumed that Heidi was requesting the license for herself and her male fiancé who hadn't accompanied her to the Town Hall. When Heidi explained that the license was for the two women, the City Clerk politely denied their request. Same-sex marriage was not allowed in Massachusetts, she explained. The two women left empty-handed.

I can tell you exactly where I was when I heard most of the breaking news about the gay marriage debate –in the car, in my classroom, at the Massachusetts State House– but the day these two women applied for a marriage license remains elusive. Even when I did hear the news, it's likely I didn't grasp its significance. I was too jaded to imagine that getting married would be a possibility in my lifetime, so the day slipped by me.

My attitude would change. Within the next few years I would be protesting, writing letters, sending emails, and campaigning for politicians who supported my right to marry. I would become engaged in a civil rights movement that I hadn't even heard of growing up. I didn't learn about the Stonewall Riots – often cited as the beginning of the modern gay rights movement – until I was in college, at least ten years after that June weekend in 1969. But I have no reference point, no recollection of the who and the where and the when of hearing the word. I can only assume where I was during Stonewall, because summer weekends for us tended to follow the same routine.

Almost every Sunday from June to August, my mother took my sister and me to the beach while my father golfed. We'd load up the car with sandwiches, bags of potato chips, thermoses of Kool-Aid, beach blankets, collapsible chaise lounges, suntan lotion, and a transistor radio. We'd head toward the beach via the Causeway, the legendary connector between Lynn and Nahant where drag races like the one in the climactic scene in *American Graffiti* took place and young people were occasionally killed.

I never quite understood the appeal of having to pick out sand from sandwiches when you could just as easily have them at home, but then again I never was much of an outdoorsman. I left Boy Scouts the day after we held a "mock camping trip" and were

asked to bring to a meeting what we would need for a weekend in the woods. I showed up with a book and a flashlight. No food. No Band-Aids. No sleeping bag. No extra clothes. Not even an extra set of underwear.

So the beach wasn't where I would have chosen to spend those weekends in the summer, but I made the most of it. I learned to enjoy eavesdropping on my mother and her friend, Lena, who often went with us. I read and listened to American Top Forty on the radio. I watched the shirtless men with their bronzed bodies.

I didn't recognize my attraction to those men as sexual at the time. At first I felt just a little more curious than I did when my mother took off her shorts and top to reveal her jet-black bathing suit. But one day my mother let me walk to the far end of the beach, at the Nahant-Lynn line, to the refreshment stand. Next to it was a bathroom and locker room where the lifeguards dressed and showered at the end of their duty.

When I entered the building, I expected some urinals, stalls, and perhaps a sink or two. But as I turned the corner, I saw three young men standing naked in the shower room. It was the first time I'd ever seen a naked man. My heart raced. I knew I shouldn't stare, but I couldn't help it. Their backsides were blinding white against the deep tan on their backs and legs. I became anxious and tried to turn away, but couldn't find the willpower. I watched one of the lifeguards wring out his orange swim trunks. I was stunned by the hair that fanned out from the base of his penis; no one had ever told me hair grew there. For a moment my whole body seemed so overwhelmed with feeling that I thought I might burst into tears. Finally the lifeguard looked at me, a wave of disgust crossing his face, and I knew I needed to go.

When I went to the urinal, I realized I was hard. I peed, urine splashing against my legs in two or three different streams. I had no idea what any of this meant, but I knew that whatever I was feeling, whatever had caused me to harden this way, was very wrong.

Seeing the naked men in the locker room was not the first time I felt profoundly different, profoundly *wrong*, even though it might be my earliest recollection that this difference was deeply sexual in nature. The feeling of being on the periphery goes back to my very first day of school in the early sixties.

I never went to kindergarten, so my earliest experience in a classroom – save for daily viewings of *Romper Room* – was at the Edward J. Sisson Elementary School in Lynn, a city famous for its shoe factories and the jingle, “Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin, you never come out the way you come in.” My elementary school introduced me to the world of Dick and Jane. To American flags hung beside chalkboards and teachers, all women, whose names began with either Miss or Mrs. No *Ms*. No slacks for women, either. All the girls and teachers wore skirts and dresses.

On this first day I am wearing the white shirt my mother has washed and ironed, just as I will wear white shirts for the rest of the year. The wooden desks are lined up in five rows and for today, at least, I sit near the front, the *H* in Harvey falling on the second seat, second row. I can write my name, say the alphabet, but not much more. Mrs. O'Connor, a middle-aged woman with frosted hair, asks us to come up by row to sit in a semicircle of wooden chairs where she flashes phonics sounds printed in black magic marker on oak tag strips. I am told I am in the Blue Group.

There are things I don't get. When Mrs. O'Connor tells us it is time to go to the lavatory, I picture a science lab with test tubes. I don't really know what recess is, just that my mother has packed me a Devil Dog for it. But when *is* recess? Will Mrs. O'Connor tell us or are we simply expected to know? Finally she asks us to line up in front of the classroom and walks us to a large hot-topped yard surrounded by a chain link fence. There is a monstrous tree in the corner whose roots have cracked the pavement.

Mrs. O'Connor gathers us to explain the rules. Is *this* when I eat my Devil Dog? I take it out of the wrapper and cram it into my mouth. Some kids look at me. Why isn't anybody else eating? *Aghh*. I have whipped cream all over my face. My hands are sticky and I don't know what to do with the wrapper.

I've missed the explanation of the rules. Two girls begin to swing a jump rope. It swishes through the air and snaps against the ground. Other girls line up to break in and jump.

I know a little miss

A pretty little miss

Her name is Mississippi

And she spells it like this:

Capital M-I-S-S-I-S-S-I-P-P-I.

"The boys are over there," Mrs. O'Connor says, pointing me toward the other end of the yard where they are running with a red dodge ball. I have no idea what they are doing. Why would someone want to throw a ball at somebody else and hit him? Why would anyone want to play a game just to be hit? I don't understand. I've never been with so many boys before. Is this what they think is fun? Why is everyone laughing?

I retreat to the old tree, holding tight to the Devil Dog wrapper. I sit against one of the roots and watch everyone play.

I am different, I realize. I am not like these boys. I am not like any other boy I know.

This feeling did not go away with time. One Saturday morning in September when I was in the sixth grade, my father drove us to a furniture store on the Lynnway to buy a new sofa for our living room. My father liked to think of himself as *avant-garde* when it came to home decor, even though we were hardly the wealthiest in a neighborhood of lower-income families in Lynn. But we were the first to buy a shag carpet that was raked instead of vacuumed. It was our house that boasted a floor poured onto planks of wood then sprinkled with flakes – we got to choose the colors – that within a few hours hardened into the solidified liquid. Problem was, after a few months the floor began to crack, and when my father went to file a complaint, he discovered the company that poured the floor had gone out of business.

That didn't stop him from buying a sofa that none of had ever seen in any of the neighbors' houses. It was deep blue and in three pieces, the middle one curved so it wedged into a corner while the two straight sections lined up against the walls. After the deliverymen carried the sofa into the house in the late afternoon, my father retreated to his den in the basement to spend the rest of the day drinking Knickerbocker beer and smoking

Larks. Upstairs, it became clear to my mother that she would no longer be able to sleep on this odd-shaped sofa at night, so she moved her blankets to my sister's bed instead of joining my father in his.

Later that night the *Miss America Pageant* was broadcast from Atlantic City, an evening I had been looking forward to for weeks. I wanted Miss Massachusetts to win as much as most of Boston wanted the Red Sox to clinch the World Series that year. Miss Massachusetts had never captured the crown, but had come in first runner-up when a brunette from Lynnfield performed a sign-language rendition of "What the World Needs Now Is Love Sweet Love" during the talent segment of the evening, which was, along with the evening gown competition, my favorite part of the show.

I tried to get comfortable on the new sofa, but every time I pushed the tiniest bit into the cushions, I could feel the metal springs. I finally settled on my stomach, my chin on the sofa arm. When a parade of women in Catalina swimsuits crossed the screen, it hit me: *I should be feeling something for these women in bathing suits.* Why wasn't I at least as excited about this as I was about the blond ventriloquist from Oklahoma? I slipped my hands into my pajama bottoms to see if I was getting hard. Nothing was happening.

I panicked. I pulled out a medical dictionary that my mother kept in a magazine bin next to the Magnavox TV and her Dean Martin and Jerry Vale albums. The book was hardcover, old, and white; the binding was torn. In the middle of the book was a series of black and white photos. Older women in Aunt Bee dresses clutched purses while they waited in line for a cancer screening. A young boy sat in bed, hair slicked and smiling, his leg in a cast, elevated by a trapeze-like device that hung above him.

I looked up the word *homosexual* in the glossary. I wanted to see who I was; I wanted a mirror, a reflection. I then read that homosexuality was an illness. I was not comforted when I learned that sometimes it could be cured, but only if the patient was willing. The cure involved some sort of shock treatment, electrical currents that would run through my body.

I thought: *Oh, my God. I have it. I'm really sick. This can't be true.*

I slammed the book shut and shoved it back into the bin. I sat in front of the TV again, trying to will myself to be aroused. I would cure myself. I would fix myself before they decided I needed to be zapped with electricity. I didn't sleep that night, imagining my penis connected to an electrical wire in the doctor's office.

On Monday, my father uncharacteristically acknowledged his poor judgment and exchanged the three-piece sofa for a more traditional style. My mother moved her pillow and blanket back into the living room. Everything looked as it did before. But I could never approach the medical dictionary again without worrying that I might have some psychological illness I hadn't heard of, so I only consulted the book to confirm what I thought I already knew: that the cough I had was simply a cold, that the pimple on my chin was acne, and, once, that the lump that had developed behind my knee was a deadly form of cancer, even though weeks later the doctor informed us it was benign.

After elementary school, when hormones started to explode and all my friends were talking about which girls had breasts that had filled out over the summer, my feelings of alienation became public. It started in a locker room, similar to the one at the beach. There

were groups of boys to watch as I did on my first day of school, but this time they were older, well into puberty. Girls didn't stir sexual feelings in me, even Miss America contestants, but boys in the school locker room did.

Welcome to gym class.

One of my teachers was a beefy weightlifter who liked to parade around the locker room in skintight shirts and shorts to display his bulging biceps and legs. As he walked, shoulders back, chest out, he used to sing:

*I took my girl to the circus
to see what we could see
but when she saw what the elephant had
she wouldn't make out with me.*

I pretended to laugh with the rest of the boys, but I hated gym class. I hated the competition, the gang shower requirement, the dank locker room, the fact that I didn't have even a trace of athletic talent. But at least in high school, we weren't required to play basketball every period. Those who were into weight lifting, or simply wanted to avoid the class all together, went to the weight room. Most of the guys did work out, grunting and sweating as their muscles grew bulkier and bulkier. I opted to sit in the corner, occasionally sneaking in a paperback novel that I'd stash away as soon as Mr. Biceps came in to check on us. I'd even mastered the art of shower time: once Biceps checked my name off on his clipboard, I kept the towel wrapped around me and wet my hair quickly under the shower nozzle. He checked my name off once again as I returned to my locker, looking as if I'd showered like the rest of the guys.

Junior high had not been so easy. They kept closer tabs on you in the seventh grade and it was impossible to avoid the shower room.

My troubles started on the very first day of gym class.

All the boys are in the shower room. Mr. Nesson, our tanned gym teacher with sun-bleached hair, controls the water flow from a little booth with an opening that overlooks the room of naked boys. He's the one who, by turning the knob in his booth, ends shower time. He's the one who lets us know when we can leave the room.

It is my first time naked in front of other boys.

I get an erection. I look around and see that it is happening to me and no one else. And everyone else, it seems, finds this repulsive. They nudge each other as they look at me. They stare.

Finally Mr. Nesson, who is still looking from above, turns the water off. I run for a towel, but can't get to one quickly enough before some boys snap me with their towels and push me into the wall.

Faggot.

Queer.

Pussy.

The next few days, before the next gym class, I try to figure out what causes an erection. I decide, without any evidence whatsoever, that not eating or drinking anything the day of the class will prevent further embarrassment.

The day of gym class, I don't eat or drink.

Still, it happens.

That year, every Tuesday and Thursday, I wake up full of dread. I close my eyes in the shower and pray that Mr. Nesson will turn the water off before anyone notices, but he doesn't.

Many years later, when I told my therapist about my gym class, he shook his head.

"There's a word for what happened to you," he said. "Torture."

"Yes, it felt like torture."

"No," he said. "Real torture that you know is coming. Real torture that you know is inevitable. That you can't stop but somebody else can. That gym teacher looking out at you. Did he ever say anything? Do anything?"

"He just watched," I said.

Who knows what was going on outside this old factory town while I was growing up? I didn't. I didn't know about the first gay pride parade in the United States, organized to mark the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in New York City. I didn't know that the first Hollywood movie to deal openly with homosexuality, *The Boys in the Band*, was playing in movie theaters not far from where I lived. I wasn't aware that the American Psychiatric Association had declared that homosexuality, contrary to what I had read in the medical dictionary, was no longer considered an illness. I didn't even know that right in my own back yard, in Massachusetts, Elaine Noble was the first openly gay politician to be elected to state office in the United States.

I only knew of this history long after it became history. The battle for gay marriage was different. By that time I was an openly gay man in a committed relationship. I began to believe that what Heidi Norton and Gina Smith did on March 26th, 2001 – and what six other couples did at their own town halls over the next few days – could be another milestone in a long history that I learned about late, but still in time to keep my sanity. To understand I wasn't alone.

This time I needed to be there.

CHAPTER TWO

REDEFINITIONS

What if instead of opening a medical dictionary to discover who I was, I had opened the newspaper to find out that seven same-sex couples had filed a lawsuit in Suffolk Superior Court in response to their being denied marriage licenses? That rather than considering themselves ill, these couples were so certain that they were nothing more or nothing less than their heterosexual counterparts that they deserved to be treated equally? What if I had read their legal brief online, officially filed on April 11th, 2001, noting that, combined, these couples had shared over 100 years of committed partnership?

I would have read about the normalcy of their lives, how they were parents and grandparents. They were lawyers and business people and teachers and social workers and nurses. They had suffered breast cancer and heart problems. Many had children and had reduced their working hours to spend time with them. Some took care of aging parents, either visiting them frequently or moving them into their homes to provide around-the-clock support. Many were churchgoers, some holding positions of significant responsibility in their congregations. Others were active in their children's schools. They spent holidays with extended families that treated them like married couples. They cared for each other in sickness and in health.

That is, if they were allowed to. The couples told stories of relying on the kindness of strangers to visit each other or their children in the hospital. Even with health care proxies, some had difficulties obtaining medical information about their families. The financial obstacles of caring for each other were even more formidable, and certainly reason enough to marry. But these couples clearly had more in mind when they entered their town halls. Marriage was an emotional, spiritual, and legal commitment as well. In their legal brief, one couple noted that they sought “the emotional peace of mind that comes from being a married couple.”

As an adolescent I could never have heard the words “emotional peace of mind” and “gay” in the same breath. I searched for words like these, scouring any book with an index for references under the letter “h.” Old habits die hard. I still find myself searching the indices political memoirs or histories. Now I'm at least likely to find a range of opinion, but in the 1960's and 1970's, what I read about myself merely confirmed my suspicions: gay people were ill, to be avoided.

Of course there was an occasional closeted teacher, the one people whispered about, the one everyone loved because he gave everything of himself to his students without ever giving anything away. But mostly gay sexuality was the stuff of scandal. A few years out of high school I heard on the news that one of my male teachers – married to another one of my female teachers – was arrested for having sexual relations with male students. This was not news to those of us who knew him, even if his arrest shocked the community.

There is a profound difference between growing up gay – at least when I was growing up gay – and growing up as a member of a racial minority. Children of color are

likely to come home from school to a family that understands and accepts who they are. Gay children in the 60's and 70's – and even now in many places – were likely to live with parents who likely didn't understand and at worst were hostile to homosexuality. My home was no exception.

I grew up surrounded by teeth. Before he owned his convenience store, my father worked as a dental technician in a two-room office on Monroe Street in downtown Lynn.

One night in the mid-sixties my father received a telephone call: the building was on fire. We piled into the car and raced downtown to see huge flames billowing from the top floor windows. It was immediately clear to us that my father's business as we knew it was over. He'd need to find a new place to run the Northeastern Dental Laboratory.

That new place, my father announced shortly after the fire, would be in our home. He hired a balding Italian man to convert one end of our basement into a workspace. The new Northeastern Dental Laboratory had white paneling and a white-tiled floor. My father managed to salvage some of his more expensive equipment, like the high-temperature oven he used to soften the plastic for dentures. The oven was so hot that the walls inside turned red when it was on. My father tried to scare me into good behavior by turning on the oven, opening the door, and warning me that “hell is hotter than this.” He didn't need to say that living well and living a gay life were incompatible. I understood. Hell was the place murderers, rapists, child molesters ... and gay people went.

My father's laboratory was up and running a few months after the fire. My mother quit her job at a shoe factory to work for him, making his afternoon delivery of dentures to dentists around the North Shore. He wrapped the dentures in tissue paper and put them in manila envelopes. But sometimes he'd take them upstairs for my mother to do the packing, so scattered around the house were false teeth of people I'd never met.

When my father wasn't working in his new office, he was downstairs in the unventilated TV room that smelled of stale beer and cigarette smoke.

I'd watch TV with him on occasion. We rarely talked, except when he'd make a comment during a Red Sox game. One Saturday afternoon we were watching the midday news. A reporter interviewed a man with a beard, who mentioned something about “gay rights.”

I'd never heard the word gay before.

“What's *gay* mean?” I asked.

My father sighed, not in exasperation, but in repulsion. He turned and looked directly into my eyes, something he rarely did.

“*Queers*,” he said. He clenched his fists, as if to restrain himself.

I'd sit in the sofa while he propped his feet up in the La-Z-Boy chair that I dared use only when he was out doing an errand. When my mother went with him, I'd sometimes play the stereo console, which had long been relegated to a coffee table. It was an unspoken rule that it wasn't to be played anymore; the records would sit there for years, untouched except when I managed to sneak in a few minutes of music.

Sometimes in the basement my father would argue with himself. This usually started

about an hour into his nightly intake of six or seven tall cans of beer. He would bite down on his lower lip, then he'd move his jaw, and then he'd start talking, his head bobbing up and down, his eyes squinting. I could rarely make out his words; usually he emitted angry, indecipherable grunts. He could go on like this for hours, his grunts crescendoing now and then, his head jerking.

Years later, I learned a name for this behavior: "shadow boxing." I knew my father was wrestling with demons, but I had never heard this term before. Nor did I ever discover what these shadows in his life were. I only knew they seemed to follow him everywhere, all the time. The very night that he died, a rainy Tuesday in February of 1993, I approached him in the hospital after my mother and sister had left. The room was dark except for the small red and white lights that flashed on one of the machines next to his bed. I walked toward him quietly, trying not to wake him, but as I sat down the stool squeaked, and my father looked up with a start.

"Jesus Christ, Kenny," he blurted. "Why the hell did you have to scare me like that?"

He rolled over, mumbling to himself, boxing his shadows until he died only a few hours later, without ever really knowing who I was.

Who I was and would be. If he had lived, I can't imagine what his reaction would have been to discover that I was one of those *queers* fighting for gay rights. Who knows? Maybe he would have changed his mind when he found out that the plaintiffs who petitioned the court weren't the stereotypes that the media chose to portray all gays and lesbians. Some of the plaintiffs were at least a decade older than he was when he died. And especially for these older couples, the financial obstacles were severe: upon the death of one of the partners, inheritance would be taxed. None of the plaintiffs would collect social security if the other should die. Wills had to be meticulously drawn to ensure that partners received what have been joint property and savings.

Would this have moved my father? Probably not. I'm not even sure he would have understood all the reasons why these couples wanted to marry. What's especially moving about the April 11th brief is not just the usual list of exclusionary practices, but also the focus on the intangible benefits of marriage. What is stated about Heidi Norton and Gina Smith seems to speak for all the couples: they seek "to marry for their own sake, to make a statement about their love and commitment, and ... they want their two sons to grow up in a world where their parents' relationship is legally and communally respected." Another couple, Gloria Bailey and Linda Davies, wanted "the world to see them as they see themselves – a deeply loyal and devoted couple who are each other's spouses in all ways."

This was not the marriage my parents knew. I never saw my mother and father touch each other – no handholding, no kissing, not even an arm around the shoulder. When my mother's father died and she collapsed in front of the church, my father stood back, and ordered me to help her. Perhaps they had an affectionate life my sister and I never saw. The scenes of their marriage were at times so hard to watch that it wasn't until my sister reminded me of them that I could even begin to piece the fragments of memory together.

"You didn't realize it," she a few months after our father had died, "but I couldn't stop crying the day you left for college. You were all I had in that family. You were the only sane one."

My sister remembered the insanity better than I did.

“Don’t you remember?” she asked me on the phone shortly after my father had died.

“Remember what?”

When I was a child, she told me, I sat on the stairs to our basement and watched my father beat my mother. He dragged her across the shag carpeting and burnt her arm.

She remembers watching me watch the fights, but I don’t remember the fights.

My sister would scream at him but I would just sit there, numb, as if I wasn’t seeing what I was really seeing.

“You used to throw up a lot,” my sister told me. “On the way to school, almost every morning. You’d tell me to wait outside the cemetery gates and then you’d go inside and vomit. Something was really wrong.”

I remember the cemetery fence: a mile of pointed black metal poles, one of which, a neighborhood friend told me, pierced the neck of a passenger in a car that had crashed. The passenger lived, the story went, although he still had a piece of metal in his neck.

“You were a mess,” my sister told me. “You were picked on at school and tormented at home. I think you made yourself throw up, but I’m not sure. I think you stuck your finger down your throat.”

And *I* was the sane one?

I came out to my sister on a Sunday afternoon, on the telephone. She was the first family member I told.

“Ma asked me to ask you if you were gay,” she said. “She wants to know if she has a gay son.”

Here was my chance. The perfect opening. “Well, she does,” I said. I was trembling. If my sister didn’t support me, no one in the family would. I waited for a “wow,” some expression of surprise.

“You don’t think I knew?” she said matter-of-factly. “Of course I knew. I’ve known since you were a kid.”

My sister accepted me immediately; my mother didn’t speak to me for years, even though she was the one who asked my sister to pose the question. What she wanted was a denial, even if in her heart she knew. Deception was an unspoken rule in our family.

When I was ten years old or so, my sister was angry. She used to hold her breath until she passed out, and my mother would carry her to the kitchen sink where she would spray cold water on her face. Sometimes she kicked doors; other times she would, as my parents labeled it, become *fresh* or *sassy*. One day my parents had had enough. When I was growing up, she and my father constantly threatened to put me in *reform school* if I misbehaved. They made the place sound worse than Alcatraz. My sister, however, warranted a more severe threat, and they enlisted me in their plan.

I was to come up with the name of a reform school. (I think I eventually came up with something like *The Sunny Day School for Bad Girls*.) I was to type the name of the

school on an envelope, address the envelope to my parents, and send it in the mail. When the envelope arrived, they placed it near the telephone, where my sister was sure to see it. No mention was made of the correspondence, but my sister walked around in a depressed daze for weeks.

Even joyous occasions were cloaked in lies. I was informed of my sister's arrival the morning my parents brought her home. She was adopted, yet they convinced me that my mother had given birth to her.

"You're going to get a present this afternoon," my mother said. "What's the one thing you want most in the world?"

I was only five but I knew it was a trick question. Instead of naming what I wanted most, I tried to think of what they thought I wanted most: toy trucks, a GI Joe, a trip to Salem Willows. I never gave the right answer.

"How about a *sister*?" my father finally said.

I remember we were standing in the hallway. Years later, when replaying the scene in my mind, I thought: *Shouldn't we have at least been sitting down?*

"Wow!" I said. I started jumping up and down.

Then the explanation. Did I remember when my mother broke her ankle a few months earlier? How she needed surgery to insert a pin to hold the bones together?

"I had the baby when I was in the hospital with my broken ankle," my mother said to me. "The doctors have been taking care of her all this time."

I believed her, and for the next year or so I thought that anyone who wore a cast was about to give birth. When I started to realize the impossibility of this theory, I confronted my mother as she was ironing.

"The truth is," she said. "Lisa wasn't *expected*; she was *selected*."

Huh? I pictured a row of babies lined up in a maternity ward, my father pointing to my sister as he might select a new car in an automobile sales lot. *Let's give this one a test drive, Edie!*

"Your sister was adopted," my mother clarified. "*Don't ever tell her.*"

They never told her. When my sister was about eight or nine years old, we were playing in our neighbor's yard down the street. Out of the blue, one of the girls said to my sister, "You do know you were adopted, don't you?"

My sister looked at me. "That's not true, is it, Kenny?" she asked.

I shrugged.

My sister knew.

I don't fully understand why my parents wanted to deny my sister the truth about her birth. They were married in the fifties, a time when the definition of the ideal American family was exceptionally rigid. They used to tell us that my sister and I looked alike, which was ridiculous. We looked nothing alike at all. But maybe my mother's inability to bear children after my birth didn't fit into the family they had imagined for themselves.

Maybe the real family they wanted was the one that lived in a white house with a picket fence, the one that owned two cars, a color TV set, and had two heterosexual children who looked just like each other.

Well, we did have the TV set. But by the time I was in high school, my father filed for bankruptcy. We moved from the white house and in with my aunt, who lived in a trailer that she'd transported from the trailer park to a permanent lot. The trailer was expanded on either side in a failed attempt to make it look like a real house. My sister and I used to call it "the truck with wings."

When the addition to the trailer was built, the plans did not include any new walls, so there was little privacy. Only my aunt and my father had real bedrooms with doors. The rest of us slept on sofas and the one other bed that was out in the open, behind the kitchen, original from the trailer. We were in the awkward position of knowing each other's business but were prohibited to discuss our knowledge.

Along with our precarious financial situation, sex was one of those things you never talked about in my family, unless it was some veiled reference that only left me as confused as I was when I associated broken limbs with childbirth. One night my mother sat me down and warned me to "stay away from dirty girls," never considering that I'd eventually take her advice to the extreme and stay away from girls, period. At first I thought that by "dirty" she meant just that: girls with mud on their arms, hair snarled from lack of shampooing, grime under their fingernails. But I later learned that dirty meant diseased. Syphilis and gonorrhea, to be precise. It was the stigma, rather than health concerns, that worried my mother most, as if *The Lynn Daily Evening Item* published lists of the afflicted along with real estate closings for the week. Because my mother never told me exactly how these diseases were contracted, I was convinced I'd been exposed to them on nearly a weekly basis. I didn't know the symptoms, so the deepening of my voice, the appearance of pubic hair, the onset of nocturnal emissions: all that evidence suggested that I was gravely ill.

It wasn't the first time I'd make her uncomfortable with my questions. I don't know where I first heard the words "blow job," but I do remember where I first said the words aloud. In the sixth grade, Wednesday was my day for traffic boy duty, and my mother had to drop me off in front of the school early. We were approaching the crosswalk where I would stand guard when I asked, "What's a blow job?"

"Kenny!" my mother screamed, gripping the steering wheel so as not to lose control but swerving nonetheless. "What did you just say?"

"I asked you what a blow job was."

"Don't you ever say that again."

She pulled to the side of the road.

"I was just wondering," I said, convinced more than ever that I needed to find out what exactly a blow job was.

"I want to know where you heard that word," she demanded, near tears from her anger at me. It was as if I'd committed some egregious sin by not predicting I was about to hear the word so I could block my ears in time.

“I don’t know.”

“Yes you do, you do to,” she said. “Tell me *where*.”

“The radio, I guess,” I said.

“No you didn’t. They don’t say things like that on the *radio*.”

“I really don’t know then.”

My mother sighed. “Well, we’ll have to put this to rest,” she said. “But promise me you won’t ever say that word again. You can’t even *think* about that word.”

“Okay,” I said, but of course I knew I could think of little else.

My mother’s aversion to sex wasn’t based on her religious beliefs. I never knew her to go to church. But she was a member of a group of Catholic women called “Our Lady of Fatima,” even though she was raised Protestant. She served as recording secretary of the group which, as far as I could tell, meant that her singular duty was to take minutes for the meetings. While my mother was clearly honored to serve such a role, she was highly anxious about her ability to perform it, and even when I was in junior high, she’d run all her minutes by me for corrections and advice.

“This is important,” she would say. “Check it over carefully. Look for spelling and grammar.”

My mother was a horrendous speller; it was not unusual for her to write “wuz” instead of “was.”

“This is good, Ma,” I’d say, not wanting to correct her litany of errors. “This’ll be fine.”

“No,” she said. “I know things are wrong. You’ve got to tell me. This is important. I don’t want to look stupid in front of the girls.”

I knew that if I began to correct, most of the words in her minutes would have been crossed out. Despite her pleas for me to tell her what was wrong, I was sure she would take so many corrections with great offense. She often told me that my father gave her “a complex,” a term I didn’t completely understand but sensed it meant she was lacking in confidence.

“Why don’t I just type the minutes for you?” I asked her. “I want to practice typing. Why don’t I just type them for you and I’ll make the corrections as I go along?”

“Okay,” she said. “That would be good. Just give me them to me after you’re done.”

I corrected all the errors and gave the typed sheets to her.

“Look at this,” she said. “You need to *write out* the number 5. Don’t just put the number. These are the *records* of the group. Don’t you understand? You’re going to have to type the whole thing over.”

When I was thirty-seven I typed for my mother a final time: I wrote her a letter telling her I was gay. I edited it almost as many times as I’d edit one of my short stories, then dropped it in a mailbox.

My mother called me as soon as she opened the letter. She was crying. How could I upset her so? Why had I done this? She needed to talk to me.

“We need to clear the air,” she said.

We cleared the air in a dirty compact car in the parking lot of the Burlington Mall. My mother leaned against the driver’s door, folding her arms and looking directly at me.

“Why did you do this?” she asked.

“It wasn’t something I *did*,” I said. “It’s something I *am*.”

“And you choose *now* to tell me?”

“Why not now?”

“Now that your father’s dead?”

I knew he wouldn’t have been much support to her if he had been alive. I could even imagine him telling her that it was her fault I was gay. *You made a sissy of him. You let him quit his paper route. You let him buy figure skates instead of hockey skates.*

“I thought that you’d want to know this about me,” I said. “I didn’t want to keep it a secret any longer.”

“I wish I was with your father right now,” she said. “I wish I was *dead*.”

I gulped. I had heard her suicide threats since I was a child. When I was a young boy she would tell me how she had taken too many pills and had too many glasses of Wild Irish Rose wine. “I was laying on the dining room floor,” she’d say. “I wanted God to take me. I wanted to leave this world.”

“You can’t do this to me,” I said in the car. “You’ve been doing this to me since I was a kid. You can’t do this anymore.”

My uncharacteristic directness seemed to temporarily silence her. She stared at me for a moment, puzzled, then continued with more questions. *What about AIDS? What will people think? What about your job?* And the final questions, her greatest concern: *What about me? What will happen to me now? Did you ever think of that?*

So that was it. She needed to be cared for, something she never experienced in her marriage. I tried to get her to open up.

“Look, I know being married to dad wasn’t easy. I feel for you.”

Her eyes widened incredulously. “How *dare* you say that about your father!”

I said nothing else except good-bye. I shut the door and walked to my car. My mother pulled out of the parking space, floored the car, then screeched the brakes as she stopped in front of me. She rolled down her window.

“Just remember I love you,” she screamed, then floored the car again.

It was love as a drive-by shooting.

When I first read the complaint filed by the gay couples who were denied marriage licenses, I was struck by some words one usually doesn’t associate with a legal brief: love,

support, joy, commitment. The plaintiffs – carefully chosen by GLAD (Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders) and Mary Bonauto, its attorney – redefined not just everything I had learned about gay people growing up. It also redefined a great deal of what I learned about families.

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