



Portraits

My little brother must have wondered what was up. Why would a high-school senior ask a sixth grader to take a walk on a winter afternoon? I picture the puzzled look on his face and recall the irony of that day. My brother couldn't know how many reasons there were: the privacy of empty streets impassable with snow, his age and quiet personality, my desperate need for a confidant. I remember slipping on the ice until we found a pace that would let us advance up the street. Steaming like a locomotive, I breathed in hard cold air to steady my racing pulse. My brother stepped carefully, head down, gloved hands hanging loose by his side. He was silent. He knew I was the one who needed to speak.

"Something's going to happen tonight, and I wanted you to know about it before it does," I stammered, not looking at him. I didn't want to see his reaction. There was only just enough nerve. I was frightened by the words I was preparing to say to my brother, a twelve-year-old boy and the only source of safety I could identify in my world.

"What is it?" he asked calmly.

"I've got to tell Mom and Dad something about me. I groped for the least explicit of phrases to achieve what had always been unimaginable. "You know how guys like girls?" I asked in a cloud of smoke. My brother nodded. "Well, I don't. I've got to tell them that I like guys—instead of girls."

"Why?"

"I don't know. It's just the way I am. I've always liked . . ." I blurted in a rush, feeling the euphoria of release.

"No, why do you have to tell Mom and Dad?" he quietly interrupted, not looking up, trudging surefootedly through the slush.

Good question. Years later it is still a mystery to me, but the need to come out, to come clean, had as strong a hold on me my senior year as the need to play straight had previously. Each motivation was beyond a boyhood understanding. In the vacuum of my small-town experience, there was nothing by which to measure the consequences of either position and certainly no vital interest at stake demanding an immediate confession. Yet, a voice inside me called for a statement, an admission of truth. The same voice

that once exhorted me to renounce my sexual orientation begged me, at seventeen, to declare it, and in both cases the call sounded like, "You must!"

That is to say, if I let my thoughts run wild. Mostly I kept busy with more concrete matters. I worked at a department store in the mall that year, selling water heaters. Between play rehearsals, church functions, and homework, I squeezed in a few nights in the home improvements department, trying to save money to travel. I'd been invited to participate in a student exchange program in Europe. The fantasy of living abroad quickly evolved into the symbolic culmination of all my delayed, and concentrated, passions.

I was certain this would redefine me and give a dramatic new direction to my life. I wanted a clean break with the fearfully careful, deceitful boy I had been for my family and community. I was writing poetry, often at work in the margins of my training manuals leaning up against the cash register with my back to the security camera. I was dreaming of my future and the adventure of my life to come. Of course, the exploration of my sexuality was the most thrilling part of the dream.

It was almost closing time on a weeknight in January when I saw a man comparing water heaters on display. He was shorter than I but clearly hadn't been a boy for years. He had a refined air and a thin, pale face above a fastidiously groomed moustache. There were leather patches on the elbows of his tweed jacket. He read the efficiency specifications with his hands on his hips. Electric versus gas. When he noticed I was staring at him he looked up and smiled. We talked about the water heaters, but it was apparent that we were focusing on something else altogether. I had never felt that sensation before, a current that moved just below the words, connecting us. I guess you could call it a simple flirtation, but to me it revealed an entirely new and fantastic world. He was handsome. His eyes welcomed mine. I had never dared to feel desire, much less express it, in the presence of another male. It had always seemed an act beyond possibility, but there I was in the middle of it. What was I going to do? That was the question I asked myself—not could I, or should I do something. I was ready to touch the dream, to step across the threshold.

The man bought a gas water heater. I gave him his copy of the sales receipt. He shook my trembling hand with his warm one and held it for a moment. I followed him to the main aisle and watched him walk the entire length before it occurred to me what had transpired. Racing back to the register, I reviewed the receipt. Name, address, telephone number, all of it was there. My heart pounded with the significance. I had everything I needed to make contact. This was the fantasy of a boy, and like all boys' fantasies, it required intrigue and a subplot.

The next day I went to the post office after school to rent a box. Playing grown-up was my favorite game, but I wondered if I could pull it off at this level. None of it seemed the least bit familiar. Standing before the clerk, I shook with fear and excitement, trying to appear nonchalant as I filled out the forms and paid the fee. What did she think of me? Could she guess my intentions? Should I give her a story or stay blank, smile or remain aloof. I felt vulnerable. I felt naked. The clerk gave me my key and asked for the next person in line. I found the box with my number, 1019, and unlocked it. I still remember looking into that empty box and feeling a longing that made my chest ache.

The next week was hell to bear. I filled every waking minute with a vision of P.O. Box 1019. I anticipated the ecstasy I would find at the sight of a letter waiting for me. The only letter. But each afternoon brought the same disappointment, an empty box and a terrible nothingness. I cursed myself and the outrageously formal letter I had written him. I'd introduced myself as an anonymous "kindred spirit" and begged his forgiveness for my presumptuousness. I had pleaded for a moment of his time, a chance to discuss homosexuality, and apologized in case my assumptions had missed the mark. I implored him to send a written reply in the enclosed stamped envelope but understood if that was out of the question. Why had I given him a way out? Why had I set myself up for such torture. Saturday came and no letter. A wretched Sunday crawled by without even the ritual of checking the box to sustain me.

Snow was predicted the following week, the heaviest snowfall we would see for a decade. The letter arrived an hour before the storm, bringing with it a lavish, inestimable joy. Yes, he was surprised; yes, he was flattered; yes, he would be happy to discuss my "gayness" with me. Yes! Yes! Yes! I enjoyed the

moment over and over again in the post office lobby sitting alone on the cold tile, flurries beginning to dust the parking lot and my cheeks flushed red with yearning.

"Why do you have to tell Mom and Dad?" my brother asked me on our walk the next day. The farther we walked up the street the colder and messier it became. His jeans were getting wet. He stopped to poke the cuffs into his red galoshes. He looked concerned, the kind of concern a child shows when parents argue. My brother hated discord. The subject of the fight was irrelevant.

"I have to tell them because I can't stand not telling them any longer," I tried to explain. It was how I felt, but it didn't make sense. And I didn't want them to think living abroad made me gay. A "foreign, godforsaken country," as my grandmother put it, would be an easy scapegoat. No, they needed to realize that it all happened right here. The clincher for me, however, was the TV movie *Consenting Adults* scheduled to air that night. Marlo Thomas and Martin Sheen played the parents of an adult son who comes out of the closet. Mother accepts, father does not, last scene is a tearjerker. My plan was to call my parents into the living room just before the movie, give them the news, then ask them to watch it together. I would watch the movie on the little black-and-white set in my room. We would talk about it afterward. I thought it would help to get the TV involved, a mediating force to normalize the event.

I did calisthenics in my room to calm my nerves. I was shaking so badly my teeth chattered. Mother and Dad were sitting on the couch watching a sitcom when I came into the room. My brother was laying on the carpet, his head propped up on his hands. He looked up at me and frowned.

"Mom and Dad," I said, standing between them and the television set, "Would you come into the living room? I need to talk with you." They looked at me with trepidation, then at each other with horror. Reluctant, disoriented, sober as judges, they left the laughter of the sitcom and found places to sit on opposite sides of the room. I remained standing, feeling nauseous and giddy at once. Mom tried to smile sweetly but had trouble swallowing and coughed to clear her throat. Dad gave me a sideways look and squinted as if he were trying to hear something faint. "I've been doing jumping jacks in my room for the last half hour trying to calm down enough to talk to you," I said, hoping to relax, hoping to see them smile. Mom found her smile and composure, but it was tinged with aggravation.

"What is it, Son?" Dad asked, still squinting.

"Well. I'm a good student, and I've got good friends, and I don't take drugs," I began, hoping my virtues would anesthetize them.

"What is it?" Mom stammered, exhaling a tense breath in a rush.

"Well. I'm gay," I said. I might have whispered it. I can't recall. That moment and the next happened so quickly that I can't be sure exactly how I felt or what I was doing with myself, standing in front of them in the living room. But I remember my parents' reactions perfectly, each so different from the other yet so characteristic. Somehow I was able to take them both in at once, poised on opposite sides of the room like portraits that would hang forever in my memory. Mom threw her hand to her mouth, gasping, and her eyes rolled up toward the ceiling. Dad turned his head to face me, dropped his chin a little so that he was peering out from under his brows, and smiled a wry grin that said, "Now I understand."

John Ewing
1989