

CHAPTER ONE I'M ALIVE

I was born on September 14th 1962 and raised in a small town in Monmouth County, New Jersey, **

DISCLAIMER: *In New Jersey we learn to say 'fuck' before we can say 'Mommy' or 'Daddy'. There is a VERY strong possibility it will appear a number of times before the final page. I apologize (as gratuitous and insincere as it may be) in advance to those it may offend. I use it less than I used to but probably still more than I should. Oh, just a heads up, there may be a 'shit' or two thrown in as well.*

**where minds were narrow and 'different' was not acceptable, by an alcoholic, drug-abusing mother who would have lost to Joan Crawford for Mother of the Year. A few of her many transgressions included having an affair with her best friend's husband, an affair which lasted 18 years... Selling not only stolen merchandise out of our house (in Jersey things have a way of "falling off of the truck") but also drugs... And ever so lovingly, placing a steak knife into my hip because she was having a bad day. But fear not, this book is about none of that drama. I worked through all of that shit years ago and besides, Christina (Crawford) penned it better than I ever could. It is merely a quick point of reference for the dysfunctional environment in which I was raised... Now, for those of you who's only experience of New Jersey is Newark Airport and the surrounding industrial slums, or worse yet 'Snooki', let me tell you, there were and still are some truly beautiful parts of the Garden State. Monmouth County happened to be one of them. Beautiful that is if you were white (had that covered), middle to upper class (we were borderline middle class) and heterosexual (I was fucked). For as long as I have had the awareness of self I felt like a stranger in a strange land and for a very long time I had no idea why. Just these inklings and feelings that I knew I couldn't share with anyone. Like watching Lee Majors running shirtless in the television show 'The Six

Million Dollar Man' or Patrick Duffy swimming through the water in another TV classic 'The Man from Atlantis' and thinking "*What is this feeling...*" Anyone not familiar with these two men, Google them, trust me, in their day they were 'smokin'. Zachary Quinto, George Clooney and Colin Farrel kinda 'smokin' (I tend to be drawn to brunettes in case anyone missed the common denominator in regard to the gentlemen above. Useless information I know, but for some reason I felt a need to share). Then, one day in the 5th grade, all of those 'inklings' finally made sense. The clouds parted and the angels sang. Then came the tornado.

The word fag and homo were thrown around freely in my school but for the longest time I had no idea what they meant. Ah, the ignorance of youth... Then one day while waiting in line for lunch (the highlight of my school day) two kids got into a battle of wits.

Kid One: You're a fag.

Kid Two: No, you're a fag.

Kid One: You don't even know what that is.

Kid Two: Do too.

Kid One: Oh yeah. What?

Kid Two: It's a man who likes other men.

The light bulb went off. "*HOLY SHIT!* That's me!" There I was with my first major revelation about life... Woo hoo! Followed quickly by... Uh oh! '*Uh oh!*' because I lived in an Italian Catholic home where, as previously stated, dysfunction ran rampant, in a small town in New Jersey. Couldn't let that cat out of the bag! It would be skinned alive! So, I did what any level headed, reasonable, young man who had just entered the 5th grade would do. I spent the next six years retreating into myself and building walls around my heart because I felt if I didn't,

I might be found out. Come to realize in hindsight, my retreating into myself only put a bigger bulls-eye on my back. Introverts don't really do well during their adolescence. Bullying, both inside my home and out, became the norm, which only caused me to retreat further into myself. My only respite, the only peaceful place I knew, existed within the borders of a 19" television screen. Carol Brady, Ann Romano and Jamie Sommers became my surrogate mom's and Carol Burnett became my fun loving, eccentric aunt who was always capable of bringing much needed laughter into my life (I cried like a baby the day she hung up her 'mop and bucket'). As long as I had my TV shows life was good.

It wasn't until my sophomore year of high school I made a conscious decision to break out of my shell and venture back out into the world. A world that consisted of something other than, countless hours of television viewing, gallons of Pepsi, endless boxes of Pillsbury brownies and constant thoughts of suicide. It was a challenge. I was socially awkward and felt I had little in common with those around me. Initially I found that it was much easier for me to cultivate friendships with the girls in my class, so that is exactly what I did. There was however one exception, the only male friend I had during my youth. His name was John; he lived across the street from me and was raised in an equally dysfunctional home (I swear it's something in the Jersey water). He became a brother to me and was someone who, when I came out at the age of 18, surprised me more than anyone I have ever known.

John had discovered the news about me second hand and decided to confront me. Seems someone I thought I could trust turned out to be anything but. The day after I had a heart to heart with her, one that literally lasted till the wee hours of the morning, she found it necessary to get on the telephone and spread the news. News that wasn't hers to spread... News that she had been entrusted with... News that she used to hurt someone who was already emotionally fragile and who trusted her more than anyone else in his life... Here's how the drama unfolded.

Insert voice of Sophia Petrillo here (and if anyone just asked themselves “Who?” *First:* Seriously? *And Second:* Two words – ‘Golden Girls’): Picture it: East Bumblefuck, New Jersey - 1980. Archie Bunker was alive and well and living in every town, in every neighborhood and on every street... I was in my driveway washing my car when John arrived. And as I washed, he just stood there silently and stared at me. In my gut I knew he had heard the news so after a few moments I put down my sponge, looked him in the eye and said “What?” He responded, “I know.” Then, with what I can only describe as knees rattling fear and anticipated heartbreak, I replied “And?” After a long moment he finally answered... “I’m really hurt... Why wouldn’t you tell me? You’re my friend... What did you think I was going to do?” I had no words. Here was someone I was sure would turn his back on me, standing in front of me accepting me unconditionally. It was a moment that will live in my heart until the day I die. It was also a moment of extreme rarity. John would be the only friend I had during that time that would remain just that, a friend. No one else I knew was capable of that kind of generosity. And here’s the damndest thing, absolutely nothing about me had changed. What did change however was my other ‘friends’ idea of who I was... A heterosexual. And unfortunately, because my ability to rationalize and process the feelings of hurt and betrayal I was experiencing was beyond my years, I wound up doing what so many of us do. I internalized all of the pain I was feeling and developed, what I like to call, my ‘Fuck you, I don’t need you in my life’ attitude to mask the hurt; an attitude that I then carried with me through a major portion of my life. An attitude, that unbeknownst to me, was setting me up for major heartbreak because it would prevent me from ever trusting anyone completely.

It is truly unfortunate how we in the LGBTQ community take on the burden for how people will react once they discover such an insignificant part of who we are. Nothing about us changes with ‘the big revelation’. What does change however is their perception of who they needed us to be. They don’t bother to try and understand that we are the same person we were seconds before the words “I’m gay” or “lesbian”

of “transsexual” or “bisexual” were uttered and more often than not make something that has nothing to do with them just that... And then turn it around on us... “How could you hurt me like this?” then becomes the wounded cry of the wronged heterosexual who believes we’ve made a conscious choice in regard to our sexual identity and that we’ve been lying to them about who we are. And ironically that lie, that mortal wound we supposedly inflicted on them, is a wound that they themselves have caused because lying about our sexuality is all we’ve ever been taught and all we have ever known. And as deep and searing as that wound may seem to them at the time, they need look no further than their own mirrors to see the true cause of their pain, their own intolerance.

SIDEBAR: *The day I told my Mother I was gay, she actually said to me, as she cried, “I know it’s my fault... I did something wrong.” And then, in a moment of unbelievable clarity (I have them occasionally), I replied, “Don’t flatter yourself. You don’t have that kind of power.”*

This is what I believe to be true in regard to those moments. I believe we need to take them back and never again allow someone’s skewed perception of us to make us feel bad about who we are. In that moment of revelation, they are the ones who change, not us. The only issue they need to confront is their own prejudice... Their own myopic idea about what it means to be a friend or family member to someone in the LGBTQ community... If there was ever a moment of unconditional love in the relationship then they need to realize that that is the one and only thing that will ever matter. Judgment is not now nor can ever be part of a truly loving relationship... It is a symptom of fear. And if they are willing to confront their fear maybe they will once and for all realize that who we are could never possibly diminish or undermine, in any way, who they are.

Few things I know for sure but this is one I know without doubt. On that Kinsey scale I am a homo at his purest form. I do not fall into any gray area as so many others do. I also know I am so much more than who I

sleep with. Sexuality is just a small part of the many that define who I am and my needs in a relationship. Needs like intimacy, compassion, security and a spiritual connection. For whatever reason *Someone* or *Something*, I believe it to be *God*, has chosen this path for me. I can be nothing else. It would be like asking a sunflower (I like yellow. Again, useless information.) not to be a sunflower because it offends someone else's sensibility.

Here's a thought... Maybe it's time we begin to reshape this world into one where we no longer have to apologize for who we are. A world where people can just be grateful that they live on a planet capable of growing a sunflower... And a rose... And a tulip... A world that is capable of realizing our differences are merely subtle shades of who we *all* actually are... *God's* children.

SIDEBAR: *Throughout this book you may notice a spelling discrepancy when seeing the word God/god. For me, God with the capital 'G' represents the true source of all the good that we are capable of. The source of pure love... The source we are **all** born from and the source we will all eventually return to. The god with the small 'g' represents that of organized religion. A god that is vengeful and judgmental. A god that, I believe, to be a false prophet. A god created by man and imbued with qualities, by man, that would seem counterintuitive to anyone who has ever watched a sunset.*

For those of you who are either atheist or agnostic please feel free to replace the word God with whatever works for you. In no way am I proselytizing and respect everyone's right to believe or to not believe as I hope you do mine.