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Don't Ask, Don't Tell: Coming Out in an Alcoholic Family¹

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Of anything I have written, this piece required the most careful negotiation with participants. At the project's dawn, four siblings (one gay, one lesbian, and two heterosexual) gave permission to use real names and other identifying details. Each spoke at length about coming out in their "Catholic clan" and about coming of age in an environment frequently disrupted by alcohol. In 2003, I visited the family's hometown, shot photographs, and conducted fieldwork and interviews. My key informant, the gay male sibling who had moved away, called the experience "an intervention." Back home, I composed a draft, reviewed and edited the work with my key informant, sent copies to the other three siblings, and attempted to schedule a follow-up visit so that all could workshop the piece collaboratively.

Silence.

The siblings did what members of alcoholic families often do: close ranks. Letters, phone calls, and e-mails went unreturned. My key informant let me know that his siblings might withdraw consent. There would be no return trip. What would it take, I asked, to salvage our work together?

Potentially revealing elements, such as places and occupations, had to be changed. No photographs could be used. I could write about alcoholism in the family—if I didn't identify the

¹ The most updated version of this piece appears in the book *In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight* (Routledge 2015). An earlier version of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was published in the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (Tillmann 2009; used with permission, Sage Publications).

alcoholics. I could reveal general alcohol-related patterns but not specific instances. Perhaps ironically, I could expose previously undisclosed information about the gay and lesbian identities of Matt and Elisabeth Moretti (not their real names, of course), their relationships, and their sexual discovery, so long as I didn't uncover THE family secret. In the years since that fieldwork visit, I have struggled to find a way both to honor my relational responsibilities and to present "lives in a complex and truthful way for readers."²

What follows is a compromise fraught with risk. If I have allowed myself to be manipulated and co-opted by this system, I risk undermining the project's potential contributions to the practice of family ethnography and to the understanding of the coming out process and of alcoholic family dynamics. If the work reveals too much, I violate my own research ethics,³ jeopardize the relationship I have had with my primary informant since 1996, and risk alienating Matt from his family.

Thus, with trepidation, I begin.

On June 22, 2003, Matt and I convene at his place to discuss our planned trip to Tremaine, Massachusetts. Three of his siblings, older sister Elisabeth (Bets), elder brother Paul, and younger sister Ashley, still live in the area and have agreed to be interviewed. At our session, I ask Matt to talk about his family and his life before our paths crossed.

He tells me, "The Morettis are a loving and caring Italian Catholic clan. I was born in New York, 1967, but grew up in Tremaine, home of top Boston executives and children groomed for the Ivy League. My childhood consisted of family, school, neighborhood friends, and athletics. Mainstream America.

² See Ellis (2007, 14).

³ See Tillmann-Healy (2001, 2003).

“Born in 1929, my mom grew up in Brooklyn: tenement buildings, tough, working-class neighborhood. She is a saint: turn the other cheek; support your family through thick or thin. Strong belief in God and in the Holy Catholic Church.

“My father, born in 1926, was a broker, so I guess we were upper-middle class. I say ‘I guess’ because both my parents have blue-collar roots, and that sensibility persists. As a child, my dad lost both parents. Still, he got through school and went into the military; the GI bill paid for college. Earned his degree and did well enough to move our family to Massachusetts. Wonderful provider: house in Tremaine, summer home, every toy you could want.”

I sit back in the faux-finished antique chair at Matt’s dining room table. Looking into his long-lashed blue eyes, I reflect, “Over the years, I’ve met several Morettis. We had lunch with your mom and sister Patti shortly after you separated from Kirk. The moment you went to the men’s room, they peppered me with concerned questions: ‘How is he? What can we do?’ Your parents and sister came the moment they heard about your emergency appendectomy. They seem exactly as you described: ‘loving and caring.’ Because of our work together and our friendship, I know that you dated men for years before coming out to anyone in your family, including your sister Elisabeth, herself an out lesbian for more than 20 years. You spent three years with your first male partner, Nick, and were well into your relationship with Kirk before disclosing to Elisabeth and Ashley on your last trip home, in 1996. What kept you so guarded?”

Matt takes a sip of water. “I grew up thinking, as many of us did, that homosexuality was shameful and something to hide.”

“How did your family deal with shameful experiences?”

“Don’t look at them. Don’t talk about them. Step lightly. Move on. Let sleeping dogs lie.”

Given what I know of Matt's history, I can guess the roots of this, but I ask anyway:

“How did you learn those rules?”

He exhales. “This is tough for me to make public because eventually, family members will read this. I don't want them to feel exposed or hurt. But you've known me long enough to understand that, in my life, many roads lead back to alcohol.”⁴

⁴ Interested readers should consult the large (and often contradictory) literature on growing up in an alcoholic family. Classic texts (e.g., Black 1979) constructed a profile of children of alcoholics (COAs) and adult children of alcoholics (ACOAs). However, several studies (e.g., Alford 1998; Barnard and Spoentgen 1986; Bradley and Schneider 1990; Churchill, Broida, and Nicholson 1990; Hall 2007; Havey, Boswell, and Romans, 1995; Seefeldt and Lyon 1992; Shemwell, Dickey, and Wittig 1995; Werner and Broida 1991) found no statistically significant relationship between A/COA status and the characteristics and roles said to be typical of A/COAs. Much research affirms the heterogeneity of A/COAs and of alcoholic families (e.g., Baker and Stephenson 1995; Calder and Kostyniuk 1989; Kearns-Bodkin and Leonard 2008; Rotunda, Scherer, and Imm 1995; Seefeldt and Lyon 1992; Steinglass 1987) and reveals that children who grow up in alcoholic families develop similar struggles and resiliencies as children who endure other kinds of traumatic experience (Hall, Bolen, and Webster 1994; Hall and Webster 2007).

One methodological shortcoming is that most research has been conducted either on clinical populations (e.g., Veronie and Fruehstorfer 2001), which likely overrepresent psychopathology, or on undergraduate students (e.g., Beesley and Stoltenberg 2002; Hall and Webster 2002; Kelley, Nair, Rawlings, Cash, Steer, and Fals-Stewart 2005; Scharff, Broida, Conway, and Yue 2004), relatively homogenous in age, education, and social class. For exceptions, see Mathew, Wilson, Blazer, and George (1993), who compared 408 participants in a community-based study who reported problem drinking in their mother, father, or both to 1477 age- and sex-matched subjects who did not report having an alcoholic parent; Watt (2002), who analyzed data from a national sample of over 10,000 adults; Casswell, You, and Huckle (2011), who randomly surveyed 3068 New Zealand residents; and Berends, Ferris, and Laslett (2012), who conducted a large-scale (n=2649) survey of randomly-selected adults in Australia. Berends et al. (2012) found that over 27% of respondents had been negatively impacted in the past 12 months by the drinking of a partner, ex-partner, child, parent, sibling, and/or other relative. Casswell et al. (2011, 1093) correlated exposure to heavy drinking with “reduced personal wellbeing and poorer health status.” ACOAs in Mathew et al.'s study (1993, 798) “had more lifetime psychiatric diagnoses than the matched comparison subjects.” Among Watt's (2002, 260-261) participants, male ACOAs had lower levels of self-esteem and educational attainment, and female ACOAs had more substance abuse problems than did non-ACOAs. Mathew et al. (1993) did not find a significant relationship between ACOA status and likelihood to divorce, while Watt's (2002, 260) study concluded that both male and female ACOAs “are

I nod. “My mind replays that birthday party in 1999: your partner, drunk, passes out in a parking lot. You carry Kirk from the car to the house. His breathing becomes irregular. As we contemplate dialing 911, you tell me for the first time about your family and your own history with alcohol.”

Matt responds, “Clan gatherings always began as festive celebrations: first holy communions, confirmations. The atmosphere would be light, then boisterous, then raucous. Several relatives could be Jekyll and Hyde. Sober and slightly drunk, these were pleasant guys. Extremely drunk, they were aggressive and could become combative physically. Ticking bombs. If one of these guys grew agitated about something—say, Notre Dame losing a big game—the sober family members stuck around, because he would go after somebody, and when he did, we needed everybody else there to shut it down. You could see it, feel it: game over; here comes the trouble.

“As a kid, I knew if relatives were out drinking, sometime during the night there would be a major blow-up: yelling, everybody running toward the commotion. I would get out of bed, and my older siblings would order, ‘Go back to your room and close the door!’ The next morning, everything would be calm. If I tried to bring it up, nobody would talk about it.”⁵

“In many ways, clan drinking *was* my childhood. It set the patterns and shaped our identities: peacemakers, enablers, caregivers, survivors. Morettis accept hardship; we know how to handle crises. Someone has need, someone is hurt, Morettis mobilize. We got that from

less likely to marry, more likely to be unhappy in their marriages, and more likely to divorce.”

⁵ This reflects a pattern identified by Gravitz and Bowden (1985, 29), who have worked with over 1500 ACOAs. According to their research, children in alcoholic family systems frequently “are told not to believe what their own senses tell them.” The findings of Berlin, Davis, and Orenstein (1988, 578) confirm that “in a home where a full-scale battle may rage one night and everyone is expected to act as if nothing happened the following morning, a denial process develops which prevents children from having their perceptions validated by others.”

growing up behind enemy lines.

“No choir boy myself, I binge drank in high school and college. I can be the same mean drunk I grew up seeing. You wouldn’t believe the bar fights!” I try to imagine my soft-spoken, boyish friend, a lean 5’6”, engaged in a scene reminiscent of *Road House*.⁶ Matt continues, “Over the years, members of my extended family died of cirrhosis, but most Morettis eventually got our acts together on our own or through AA. I feel uncomfortable sharing this. Being gay is about me; the clan’s struggles extend beyond me. We never discussed this outside the family. None of my Tremaine friends knew.

“I love my family. Given their childhoods, my parents did the best they could. I got my needs met, though emotional support tended to come from my siblings. The game plan was ‘Grow up and get away, but not too far. Those left at home could be damaged.’ My brothers and sisters sacrificed their weekend lives to manage this. In many ways, they raised me,⁷ and I have a special connection to each of them.

“Three still live in the Tremaine area: Elisabeth, Paul, and Ashley. When Bets graduated college, she moved in with her first girlfriend. We all made assumptions about her sexual orientation, but it was ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’ In ’96, I brought Kirk home to Tremaine but introduced him as ‘my friend.’ We stayed with Bets and her partner Ruth. When my sister asked if she should make up the couch for Kirk, I said, ‘The guest bed’s fine for us both.’

“I told Ashley on that same visit. It only confirmed what she already knew. Ashley always was street savvy. Both Elisabeth and Ashley root for the underdog. Ashley’s approach: ‘Fuck anybody who doesn’t like who you are.’ My sisters ended up telling my mom, who I

⁶ *Road House* is a 1989 action film featuring epic brawls.

⁷ Research suggests that older children frequently parent younger siblings in alcoholic family systems (see, e.g., Kelley, French, Bountress, Keefe, Schroeder, Steer, Fals-Stewart, and Gumienny 2007; Seixas and Youcha 1985).

assume told my dad, because I've never said anything to him as far as 'I'm gay.'

"Growing up, I ran in Paul's footsteps. My brother was everything I tried to be: strong, independent, blue-collar masculine. Paul excelled at sports, loved working on cars. He ran with a macho crowd. Any homophobic joke—any off-color joke, really—was a riot to them.

"Paul also can be very loving, caring, and nurturing. He's reluctant to let anyone, aside from his wife and children, see that, but I've always known that part of him.

"For a while, I told myself that Paul didn't have to know. I didn't live close. I was happy with our relationship. Why risk that? I didn't want Paul to think of me the way I assumed he thought of gay men: effeminate, maybe even disgusting. I knew he loved me and saw me as a really good guy. I believed that finding out I was gay would shatter that. His wife Faye started suggesting that I could be gay. Finally, he prodded her, 'Stop beating around the bush.' She said, 'Matt's gay and frightened to death to tell you.' Paul called and left the best message: 'I love you more than ever, and you'll never change in my eyes.' What a relief!

"The hardest part of coming out to my family has been the anguish I put myself through. Never did I consider how positive it could be; I focused completely on the risks. An upcoming hurdle will be my nephews and nieces. Some are now young adults, and we'll be interacting on a different level. I've sensed that some of my siblings prefer that I don't say anything to the children. I want to take their lead, but that's a challenge when we don't talk openly.

"Before we embark on this trip, I need to do a lot of work with each of them, especially Paul. We will move past 'go' here. 'Go' was: 'I'm gay.' Moving past 'go' means: 'How do you feel about disclosing to your children? Are you comfortable coming to my home and being around my partner? Will you treat him as we treat your spouse? *What* do you accept? That I said, 'I'm gay,' or who I truly am and how I live?"

Going Home

Four p.m., Thursday, November 6, 2003. Phone to his ear, Matt greets me at his front door and ushers me inside. Hurriedly, he dons a brown leather jacket over blue Banana Republic sweater and jeans, sends a fax, answers another call, and programs his email with an out-of-office auto-reply. His frenetic pace pricks at my already-raw nerves. Matt hasn't returned to Tremaine in seven years. I will meet siblings Elisabeth, Paul, and Ashley for the first time. How are they feeling about our visit?

I drive us to the airport through intense rain and swirling fog. Matt stares silently out the clouded window. As we park, check in, and board, we communicate and soothe our personal and shared anxieties through sighs and knowing glances.

We arrive in Boston 15 minutes early: 8:50 p.m. Matt films the baggage claim area with the video camera he purchased for the trip. Our bags emerge, and we head to Alamo for our rented Chevy Cavalier.

I navigate from Mapquest directions while he maneuvers across the slick terrain from I-90 to the expressway leading into Falkland, where Ashley lives. Past their autumn prime, clusters of red, orange, and yellow hands cling to maples and oaks. When Matt settles into the drive, I ask, "How do you feel?"

"Nervous. I fear discovering that people I love are not as accepting as I have hoped. I want them to be brutally honest. How else will we learn and grow?"

Around 11:00 p.m., we pull up to the Dunlevy residence, home of Ashley, her husband Kyle, and their daughters Zoe and Ivy. Ashley and Kyle have nearly completed restoration of

their colonial house, built in the 1700s. Opening the back door, Ashley welcomes, “Come in from the cold!” When we step into the light, I see that her upswept hair has the same tones as Matt’s, varying from sunny blond to sandy brown. The siblings also share high cheekbones and straight white teeth.

Ashley draws Matt close, then turns to me. Perhaps not knowing what else to do, she and I embrace as well. Her gentle touch offers me a sense of home. “The girls already are in bed,” she says, “and Kyle’s at a jam session. But let me show you around.” Original wide-plank floors, exposed beams, gingham and toile curtains, rustic antiques and reproductions, and hand-painted crafts fill the space with warmth.

After the tour, Ashley sets out leftover Halloween treats and wine for Matt and me. Sipping a non-alcoholic beer, she updates her brother about their cousins and former schoolmates. We spend an hour chatting before Ashley directs Matt to an air mattress in the living room. She lets me know that her daughters are bunking together, giving me Zoe’s bedroom.

Upstairs, I clear the desk tucked into a dormer and type field notes. Just past 2:00 a.m., I crawl beneath a quilt adorned with stars and fall quickly asleep.

“I Really Need to Leave”

The next morning, Ashley and daughter Ivy decide to accompany Matt and me on our trek to Tremaine. Before heading to town, we drop by Paul Moretti’s large two-story farmhouse, about a mile away. An older, slightly redder-haired version of Matt appears at the door. I note the kindred shape of the brothers’ noses, jaws, and mouths. Looking stressed and under-slept, Paul lets us know, “I’m late for a meeting.” He hustles Matt and me into the kitchen to meet his infant

daughter Tyler and around the house for a rapid-fire tour.

“See you tonight,” Matt says as we move toward the door.

“Uh,” Paul hedges, “I didn’t realize you were coming *this* weekend.” My stomach sinks.

So much for the “work” Matt pledged to do “with each of them, especially Paul.”

“I have to go to New Hampshire,” Paul explains, “to put our snowmobiles in the shed.”

Matt studies his brother’s face. “Oh ... um, when are you leaving?”

“First thing tomorrow.”

“I could go with you,” Matt suggests.

With a flick of his wrist, Paul says, “Nah, stay here and do your thing.”

Time with you IS our thing, I silently muse.

“When will you be back?” Matt asks.

“Not sure,” Paul says, drumming his fingers on the counter. “Listen, I really need to leave.”

I wonder when—or if—we’ll see Paul again.

Holy Family

Damp leaves sprinkle the back roads to Tremaine. Ashley provides the local lore: who moved/lives/works where, who slept with/married/divorced whom.

We stop first at Holy Family Catholic Church, a white chapel with gothic arched windows and doors. Ashley and Ivy wander the grounds while Matt and I venture inside.

Ascending stairs to the choir loft, Matt sees long-handled baskets and smiles. “Paul and I used to hide up here, avoiding offertory duty.” Above the altar beams a stained glass window of Jesus on the cross, a radiant substitute for the standard macabre crucifix. “I feel surprisingly

comforted,” he reports. “Even the smell—candles, incense—is familiar. Eighteen years of my life. Ashley was baptized here. She, Paul, and I had our first communions and were confirmed in this church. Two of my sisters got married here. Being Catholic was our saving grace. No matter what alcohol-induced chaos occurred Friday and Saturday nights, Sunday morning would come. There were the Morettis: all together, all going to Mass. It pulled our family back together.”

I ask, “Has religion shaped your family members’ responses to your coming out?”

“One of my in-laws said that if I offered up my life to God, He might answer ‘my’ prayers and make me straight.” Matt rolls his eyes. “Mom once told me, ‘Your father and I pray every day that you’ll be in heaven.’ I laughed. I’m like, ‘Me and God are tight.’ My dad has remarked that some of the best teachers he had in school were priests that, were they not in the clergy, probably would have identified as gay.”

“Has coming out affected your faith?” I query.

Matt looks out over the sanctuary. “I have grown more aware of Catholic dogma, but coming out has not affected who I am, who I’ve always been, to God. The conversations I have with Him are as meaningful now as ever.” We linger quietly. Matt closes his eyes for a few moments, perhaps in prayer. He opens them and gestures toward the stairs.

Matt and I find Ashley and Ivy playing on the floor of a classroom in an adjacent building. “Maple Creek?” he suggests. Ashley nods, and the four of us return to the car.

Schooled in Silence

We wind along the horseshoe route to Matt’s middle school. Pulling into a parking space, Ashley says, “Ivy and I will wait here.”

Matt and I move through metal doors and veer right, down a long cement-block hallway.

We pass the office, library, and rows of aging maroon lockers. Suddenly, Matt takes in a breath. His pace slows. Reaching for my sleeve, he says, “I was not a happy kid here.” Matt’s face goes pale. We stop walking.

“How do you feel?” I ask.

“Sick to my stomach.”

“What was it like for you here?”

His brow furls. “Lonely. Awkward. I remember trying to be transparent. I never felt like I fit in. I had no network of friends. The ‘real jocks,’ who ruled the school, played baseball or football. My sport was gymnastics, and the first comment was always: ‘That’s a *girl’s* sport.’”

“And you understood the underlying message.”

“Yeah: ‘You’re a fag.’” He exhales. “Do you mind if we leave?” The moment I begin shaking my head, Matt grabs my hand and strides toward the door.

Back in the car, a concerned Ashley turns to read Matt’s expression. “What happened?”

“A visceral response, like being in 7th grade again.”

With a sigh, Ashley says, “At the height of the clan’s weekend antics.”

Matt nods. “You’re right.”

“I was still in elementary school,” Ashley recalls. “One day, my class discussed alcohol and alcoholics. Kids talked of ‘bums’ in Manhattan.”

Matt says, “I’m sure that’s how our family envisioned alcoholics: homeless men of the Bowery. In their minds, our relatives couldn’t have been addicts. They were kind, dedicated family men, solid citizens, successful businessmen.”

Ashley reports, “That day in school, I said, ‘But maybe alcoholics go to church, maybe they like to watch football.’ My teacher spoke to the counselor, who called Mom. She came

immediately, and I'll never forget the drive home, the silence thick between us. The take-away lesson: 'Don't *ever* talk about that again.'

"Too Much Disclosure"

After a driving tour of their old neighborhood, we pull up to Tremaine High. Ashley and Ivy wait by the door while Matt and I walk the indoor track. His eyes pan the championship banners hanging from the ceiling. "Only girls had a gymnastics team. I could have competed individually, but it felt like too much disclosure." Matt shakes his head. "In middle school, I threw double backs on floor. Excellent technique, probably on target for a scholarship. When I got here, I was strong enough to do giant swings on high bar, but not strong enough to be the person I was, so I quit gymnastics. I probably regret that more than anything I've ever done or not done in my life."

Finding Their Way Back

That evening, Elisabeth joins us for dinner. Ashley sets the harvest dining table with tavern dishes, serving Cabernet, pizza, and chicken parmesan buffet style. Taking a seat, Elisabeth asks, "How was Tremaine?"

"Exhausting," Matt says. "We walked through Holy Family, the old neighborhood, and our schools. Wading into Maple Creek made me anxious, almost nauseous." Elisabeth leans toward him, wide blue eyes filling with tears.

Matt continues, "In middle school, I didn't connect the pressure to suppressing my sexuality but to being constantly measured: scholastically, athletically, socially."

I turn to Elisabeth. "What were those years like for you?"

“Tremaine ... not an easy place to be different,” she says, nodding toward Matt.

“To be lesbian?” I probe.

She tucks wispy-banged, chin-length hair behind one ear. “When I was 15, our dad caught me with another girl. He yelled at us, demanding to know if we were queer.”

Matt sits back. “You never told me that. How’d you answer?”

“I denied it, of course, but I knew otherwise.”

“You felt certain at that age?” I query.

“I believe it’s inherent. This is who I am. I’m not making a choice.”

Matt adds, “Some say it’s your upbringing that makes you gay. No way. Paul and I had the same upbringing. He’s absolutely heterosexual, and I’m absolutely homosexual.”

Elisabeth asks me, “What’s your theory on that?”

I turn this over. “My standpoint emerges from studying the history and language of sexuality. The categories ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ divide us in a single, arbitrary way: according to the sex of those with whom we tend to be intimate.⁸ Politically, I think it more strategic to destabilize these terms rather than shore them up:⁹ ‘*absolutely* heterosexual,’ ‘*absolutely* homosexual.’ I take seriously your sense that it’s inherent. I view same- and cross-sex intimacies as equally natural. But ‘natural’ is itself a human-made category inseparable from history and culture. I believe that same- and cross-sex intimacies are morally equivalent, and I consider some element of choice important, because it affirms the legitimacy of how we live and whom we love.”

Elisabeth asks, “How would you answer a fundamentalist who challenges, ‘If you can choose to be gay, why not choose to be straight?’”

⁸ See Sedgwick’s (1990) *Epistemology of the Closet*.

⁹ See Gamson’s (2000) “Sexualities, Queer Theory, and Qualitative Research.”

“I would explain that, for me, the ethical considerations do not center on the sex of one’s partner but on whether the relationship is consensual, non-exploitive, and mutually fulfilling.”

“What has been the role of religion in your life?” queries Elisabeth.

“As for the Morettis, Catholicism provided a backdrop for my life and family. We attended Mass every week. I served as a cantor in church. I went to Catholic university. But from an early age, I identified with feminism and struggled with the secondary role of women in the Church.”

Elisabeth says, “I haven’t been to Mass in forever because I won’t be part of something that does not accept me. Even within my own family, I’ve been approached with ‘God’s law.’ That just floors me. I’m loving, caring, hard-working. One quality cancels out all others? Some of my lesbian friends remain quite spiritual, and I’m very, very envious. I just don’t feel it.”

“I do,” Matt says, “but I don’t see the Bible as the unquestionable word. Why would God create rational, inquisitive beings if we’re not supposed to exercise our capacities?”

I report, “We have a friend, Nate, whose closest heterosexual male friend just found out that he’s gay. The friend’s response: ‘I love you. I care about you. I can tolerate this. But my faith requires that I implore you to repent.’ Nate refused to settle. He said, ‘I love you. I care about you. And I’m entitled to more than toleration.’ His friend kept trying to shift responsibility back to Nate: ‘You must accept my beliefs just as you’re saying I must accept your orientation.’ The friend relocated the problem from his heterosexism to Nate’s same-sex orientation. But we also can employ the friend’s logic. Can we love the ‘sinner’—our friends, our family members—even as we contest their sin, heterosexism?”

I then ask Elisabeth, “Where do your family members seem to be on these issues?”

She sighs. “It is what it is. My partner Ruth and I are accepted, yet there are boundaries

we neither cross nor discuss openly.”

Matt responds, “I have perceived that. Ruth seems to become involved or stay removed from our family members according to their ability or inability to accept the relationship.”

Elisabeth says, “I know that Ashley supports Matt and me as well as our partners. She’s already begun introducing her daughters to Ruth’s and my relationship.”

I ask Ashley, “How do you navigate these issues with your girls?”

“Without any problem,” she says. “Zoe recently asked, ‘Is this Aunt Bets’ bed?’ I said, ‘This is Aunt Bets’ *and* Aunt Ruth’s bed.’” Ashley smiles. “This morning she asked, ‘Is Uncle Matt married to Aunt Lisa?’” We all laugh. “I explained that ‘Aunt’ Lisa and Uncle Matt are friends.”

I probe, “As your girls ask more specific questions, you will give more specific answers?”

“Absolutely. Growing up, we never had that. My girls will not be kept in the dark.”

“You have two siblings in same-sex relationships,” I say. “Does it occur to you that one of your daughters—”

“Sure,” Ashley says.

“Have you and your husband talked about that?”

“Yeah. And you know what? I’m glad for our experience with Matt and Bets, because if one of my daughters has that orientation, we’ll know how to handle it.” She reconsiders her words. “Not ‘handle it,’ but we’ll understand that there’s nothing wrong with it.”

“If you don’t mind,” Elisabeth says to me, “I’d like to know more about the project. In your first book, I saw you pushing yourself as a heterosexual woman, pushing your marriage.”

Matt says, “Her work also pushes the gay participants, including me. Lisa definitely has

helped me examine my internalized homophobia and sexism. As someone who can pass, I learned to suppress my feminine qualities. Femininity projected homosexuality, and that felt threatening. In my relationship with Lisa's husband, I find myself connecting to both his masculinity and femininity. That broadens the range of who we can be for one another."

"What do you hope this new project will do?" asks Ashley.

"You may remember that the first project closed with my dissertation defense. Several of the guys testified about their experiences. Everyone seemed poised for new dialogues and transformed relationships. In some ways, that promise was fulfilled. Everybody came out to his family. Some came out at work; others left jobs where they felt they couldn't."

"When I learned of this project," says Ashley, "I was psyched. Matt had been so private. What a huge step!"

Elisabeth adds, "I remember reading some of your unpublished work and smiling. 'That's my brother.' I brought it to my friends: 'Wow, look at this!' I experienced many revelations. I didn't know Matt had such a large group of friends; I'd never been exposed to those relationships. I found you very perceptive, very caring with him. The way you describe him, the way you feel about him, you get Matthew. I've seen the project's effect on my brother, and it's very positive."

Matt smiles. "A monumental journey: being honest, first with myself, then with others."

"For these guys and their families," I say, "the initial disclosure opened a door, but crossing the threshold remained a challenge. I began to wonder why and what would happen if the don't ask/don't tell dynamic were suspended, which is part of what I've asked you to do this weekend."

Ashley turns to Matt. "Have we been practicing 'don't ask, don't tell'?"

“Well,” he says, “I haven’t been home in seven years!”

Ashley speaks intently, “Everyone misses you, Matt: your siblings, in-laws, our kids.”

“I definitely sense that,” he responds. “I see that my own fears and projections played as big a role as any in this process. The ball is in my court now.”

I observe, “Interesting that this dynamic came about in a family with a lesbian and a gay male sibling. Matt, you spent years hiding a second life from family members—even Elisabeth!”

He replies, “It sounds strange now, but I feared her disapproval. Even though I knew her orientation, it seemed more acceptable to be female and gay than male and gay.”

“To her ... or to you?” I ask.

“Now I can see it as a projection.”

I ask, “Elisabeth, had you suspected that Matt was gay?”

“As we got older, I had a gut-level feeling.”

“Why didn’t you ask?”

“For the same reason he didn’t tell: fear of the other’s reaction.”

“In high school,” recalls Ashley, “I watched him read *Sports Illustrated* cover to back. When I listened to him talk to his male friends, I’d cringe. He sounded so rehearsed.

“Matt came to my wedding reception in ’96, and I remember driving with him to the caterer’s. I fought with myself. Should I ask? I haven’t seen Matt in such a long time. I don’t want to make him uncomfortable. And God forbid if he’s not!

“When he visited later that year with Kirk, they stayed at Elisabeth’s. I called and asked her, ‘Did they sleep in the same bed?’ When she confirmed that, I felt happy, for him and for us. Maybe we’ll get Matthew back. By that point, he really had drifted from the family.”

Matt remembers, “Before I left, Bets said, ‘You need to tell Ashley. You grew up the

closest together, and she's asked the most questions.' I dialed her number and said, 'Ash, I'm gay.'”

Ashley laughs. “And I said, ‘Matt, I *know!*’”

The conversation moves from one issue, one level, to the next. The siblings seem hungry to reconnect, like old friends finding their way back to one another.

Act II

Eleven p.m., we hear a car in the drive. Elisabeth heads for the window. Mouth agape she says, “It’s *Paul.*” I wonder how best to integrate him into our conversation. Matt and I move toward the side door, greeting Paul as he enters; Ashley remains seated at the table.

“Beer?” Matt offers, steering the group toward the kitchen. Paul, Elisabeth, and I follow. Several minutes pass before Ashley joins us. The additional character and change of scene edit the dialogue. Sexual orientation gets cut from the script as family drama turns to comedy.

“We had a lake house,” Matt reminds me. “Our oldest brother Alan served as both family prankster and sadist.” He takes a swig of Bud. “When Alan got you on the inner tube or skis, his mission was to give you the wildest ride possible.

“One Sunday morning, everybody’s hanging out on the dock, dressed for 10:30 Mass.” Grinning, Elisabeth and Paul exchange a glance of recognition. Matt amplifies the suspense: “All the sudden, you feel a sinking sense of *doooooom.*”

Paul takes the cue. “We turn around, and who’s at the land side of the dock?”

“You just *know* what Alan has in mind,” Elisabeth says.

Matt recalls, “Looking down at my good pants and shoes, I realize it’s every man for himself. Alan spared no one, not even Mom.”

“At the time, he pissed everybody off,” says Paul. “Now, of course, it’s hilarious.”

The brothers and Bets laugh themselves breathless with co-constructed tales from the Moretti childhood: amusing/disturbing adventures on water, snow, and the open road. Ashley, now sitting alone at the kitchen table, beseeches, “Where were our parents?” No one answers.

After another beer, Paul and Elisabeth bid their goodbyes. I later wish I’d taken a photo; this turns out to be the last time on our trip that the four siblings will be together.

“Think I’ll head up,” I tell Matt and Ashley.

Matt walks across the kitchen and pulls me close. “That conversation with my sisters ... I just ... I don’t know how to thank you.” I kiss my friend’s cheek.

An hour of field notes later, I settle into bed, anxious about the next day’s agenda: interviews with Elisabeth and Ashley.

“Beyond the Locked Bedroom”

Matt and I drive to the townhouse owned by Elisabeth and Ruth. Both greet us at the door. With her blue eyes, rosy skin, and sandy hair, Ruth could pass for a blood member of the Moretti clan. The décor features antiques set off by crown molding and textured paints in khaki and olive. As we move to the living room, I inquire about its focal point, a shabby chic door with chipping paint and dried flowers.

Taking seats, the group begins discussing relationships. Matt says, “Growing up, I assumed my life would include marriage and children. By the time I entered Boston College, I knew that I might be gay. I told myself that my family—worth more to me than my own happiness—would never approve, so I buried it and immersed myself in my studies.

“I graduated, returned home, and got a great job. All along, I always had a girlfriend.

Maybe that helped me fit in. I consider those good relationships as far as respect and caring. Physically, I felt turned on by women, but my heart had yet to be aroused.”

I ask, “Would you say that, for you, this is more an emotional than a sexual orientation?”

“Absolutely. As I got older, I became increasingly aware of the imbalance in those relationships. Definitely the women experienced a depth of feeling I didn’t.

“By this time, I’d met gay doctors: professional, ‘normal’ men who showed me that being gay was not as different as I’d imagined. Still, I knew that exploring my sexuality meant leaving Tremaine. I took a job with a traveling healthcare company and made my way to Florida, where I began dating Nick. Sexually, I found it similar to my experiences with women. Emotionally, I felt deeply attached for the first time.

“Very masculine and athletic, Nick attracted me because he so defied the stereotypes. I now see that I also was drawn to his ability to *pass*, and I desperately needed to pass. I still believed that my life would revolve around straight people. Neither of us was out at the time, so our relationship occurred between seven at night and seven in the morning. We appeared to be roommates; we even had two bedrooms set up. In public, we would go to movies and leave an open seat between us. Because Nick was so closeted, I wasn’t met with the same caliber person as in my relationships with women. Eventually, I had to end that relationship—or we had to wake up in a more accepting culture!

“When we broke up, I finally told a female friend: ‘Nick and I were more than roommates.’ I felt as though I would throw up from the stress of saying those words.”

Tears come to Elisabeth’s eyes. “You went through this relationship and break-up alone.”

“We *all* do it alone,” observes Ruth.

“That doesn’t change how sad I feel.” Elisabeth turns to Matt. “After Nick, you met

Kirk.”

“Yes. Joining his softball team, I discovered a supportive group with whom I could talk about my relationship. I felt as comfortable as with our Italian Catholic clan. With Kirk, I grew beyond the locked bedroom. I plunged into a gay life, which came to feel completely normal. Once I knew that my gay family would be there the rest of my life, I could risk sharing that part of my experience with our family.”

Ruth says, “I clearly remember the night you and Kirk stayed here. Elisabeth came in and told me you two were sleeping in the same bed. I said, ‘For heaven’s sake, Bets, he’s *gay*.’”

Elisabeth smiles. “Still I said, ‘I don’t know. Wouldn’t he tell us?’ Then a knock on our door. Matthew squeaked, ‘May I talk to you?’ We went downstairs. My heart pounded. He said, ‘I’m ... I’m gay,’ and I said, ‘I know.’ We reached for each other.”

Matt recalls, “We cried, we hugged, we told each other ‘I love you.’”

Elisabeth ventures, “What happened between you and Kirk?”

“I needed more nurturing. Both of us stretched, a long ways and for a long time. We valued our love and our life together, but I found that level of stretching unsustainable.”

I think about the plotline Matt omits: Kirk’s substance abuse. Early on, Matt and Kirk enjoyed clubbing together: the music, the camaraderie of friends, the lowered inhibitions that allowed them to open to each other in ways they couldn’t seem to otherwise. Skating close to a line he’d seen too many relatives cross, Matt eventually pulled back from that scene. On a few occasions, Kirk stayed out all night. Hour after hour, Matt would lie awake, awaiting his partner’s return.¹⁰

Elisabeth asks Matt, “What drew you to your current partner?”

¹⁰ For the five years following this trip to Tremaine, Kirk vacillated between self-imposed sobriety and heavy drinking. He joined AA in 2008.

“Josh has the nurturing piece. Our needs and abilities align.”

“You Expose Him to the Family”

The four of us visit a while before Matt and Ruth head out for lunch. When they leave, I notice Elisabeth’s trembling hands. “I feel really nervous,” she admits.

“Should we have some wine?” I suggest.

“Great!” she says, moving to the kitchen to pour two glasses of Merlot. We chat at the library/dining table until Elisabeth seems ready.

“I will start with your background, then ask you to reflect on Matt, your relationship, your and his coming out, and your family’s responses. I will transcribe our conversation and send you a copy. If I misheard or misunderstood, if you need to add or clarify, let me know. I also will send you a draft of the manuscript.” She nods.

Early in our conversation, I learn that Elisabeth Moretti, born in 1959, graduated from Tremaine High in 1977. She earned a liberal arts B.A. and has worked for a small business since 1989. “Describe your brother Matt,” I request.

“Extremely kind, loving, and caring. You can’t help but like him. When friends and I visited Orlando, I felt so proud to have them meet him. For a time, we lived together in Tremaine, and we were ‘best buds.’ Matt understands me and I him.”

“What turning points stand out in the history of your relationship?”

“Coming out to him. I could no longer take the pain of both a broken relationship and being unable to talk about it. Matt drew me out in a very non-threatening way. I felt safe. The moment I said ‘I’m gay,’ he gathered me in his arms and told me how much he loved me.

“Then his coming out. I always pictured my brother as heterosexual, though it had

occurred to me that he could be gay. Very different from my other brothers. He didn't play lacrosse or football. From an early age, Matthew had characteristics people stereotype as gay: he was very sensitive; he wasn't athletic."

I write "wasn't athletic" in my notes, knowing that my friend—a former gymnast, lifeguard, and centerfielder—will take issue.¹¹

Elisabeth continues, "When Matt confirmed he was gay, I didn't have the same reaction that he had for me, maybe because I knew the difficulties. I felt afraid and protective."

"What do you see as your place in the Moretti family?" I ask.

"It's changed. My older sister and I used to be the core. She thought we would grow up, live around the corner from each other, and have our families together. My coming out burst that bubble. I've gone from being central to peripheral in both my immediate and extended families."

"Last night, I heard you reflect on your family with: 'It is what it is.'"

She nods. "That's come with maturity. I relate to Ashley. I had a lot of anger about the years of clan drama, and I was very confrontational. I now see that as wasted energy."

"What about Matt's role in the system of relationships?" I ask.

"A peacemaker, Matthew wants everybody to be happy and get along."¹²

"Seeing Matt this weekend has been...?"

"Wonderful. He and I have communicated more this weekend than we ever have."

"You grew up in a family your brother describes as 'loving and caring.' Among his friends, he again has found support and compassion. Matt has expressed to me a desire to bring those networks closer together. What would that require?"

¹¹ At a workshop session on June 9, 2009, Matt told me that, after reading the draft, Elisabeth apologized for this remark, admitting that it revealed her own stereotypic assumptions.

¹² In her clinical work, Black (1979, 24) encountered numerous children from alcoholic families who take on the role of "placater," the child needing to "smooth over conflicts."

“Some family members worry that, without a spouse and children, you’ll be alone. They need to see that he’s loved. Both Matt and I have ‘family’ outside our blood family. You may know my brother better than I at certain stages. I don’t feel threatened by it.”

“Elisabeth, what hopes do you have for the project?”

“I hope that, by coming back, Matt will have this kind of relationship not just with you; you’ve now brought us into it.”

I ask, “Any fears or concerns?”

“No fear whatsoever. I only see the positive. Through this project, I learn about my brother. You expose him to the family, which is very helpful.”

“Any questions for me?”

“Tell me about your attachment to my brother. Out of all the guys...”

My cheeks rise. “I find Matt warm, giving, understanding, inherently trustworthy. He respects intelligence. He respects women. When I met him, we were making different but parallel journeys. Raised Catholic in upwardly-mobile families with blue-collar roots, we both lived geographically distant from our hometowns. Matt had embarked on life as an openly gay man; I was learning to listen and bear witness to, study, and document the group that had become our surrogate family.”

Elisabeth asks, “Do you see the project going in a positive direction?”

“I think more in terms of process than direction. I expect that, as in *Between Gay and Straight*, turns of consciousness will occur organically in conversations like the one we had earlier with Ruth and Matt, in interviews such as this one, through fieldwork at key sites, and in our follow-up contacts. Collectively, those insights will become the project.”

She then queries, “Have you ever been around gay women?”

“More now than during my dissertation fieldwork. My closest friend and colleague identifies as lesbian. I’ve grown as attached—emotionally, socially, politically—to Kathryn and her partner Deena as to my family of gay male friends.”

“Do you relate to gay men and lesbians differently?” asks Elisabeth.

“I tend to feel more aligned with lesbians. Sexism can be as rife among gay men as heterosexual men. I connect to lesbians both as a woman living in a sexist culture and as a heterosexual ally.”

She observes, “In some situations, your voice carries more weight than mine or my brother’s.”

“Different weight, certainly. In 2002, Kathryn and I joined OADO, the Orlando Anti-Discrimination Ordinance Committee. In Kathryn’s and my first OADO initiative, we fought to add sexual orientation to the classes protected by Orlando’s city code. Both of us wrote editorials, met with council members, and testified at public hearings. As a member of the dominant group, I felt empowered to confront the opposition directly; I even ridiculed their toxic rhetoric at a public rally. The LGB activists tended to be consummately dignified, respectful, and diplomatic; perhaps they believed they could not afford to be otherwise.”

Sensing closure, I place my hands atop hers. “Thank you so much, Elisabeth.”

She reflects, “How fascinating to look back on my life, Matthew’s life, and how they intertwine. Other than coming out, he and I have not ‘gone deep’ with each other. You would think two gay family members would do that! I need to get to know him again. I trust what I have to give, and my love for him is...” Her voice breaks. “You see, I get so emotional. Excuse the tears. That’s it.”

“Peeling Back the Layers”

Late afternoon, Matt and I return to Ashley’s for today’s second sibling session. She directs me to the master bedroom, where I set up for our interview. Afternoon sun pours through multi-paned windows as she settles into an antique rocker. “How do you feel?” I ask.

“Good,” she says with a grin. “Not as nervous as Bets.”

I take down biographical details. The youngest of the Moretti clan, Ashley was born in 1970. Around her graduation from Tremaine High in 1988, her parents sold the family home and moved away. Ashley characterizes herself during the years that followed as “a lost soul.” By age 21, she had relocated to Florida and returned to Massachusetts twice. Ashley and her husband dated four years; they eloped in March 1996 and were pregnant that September. “Do you live the life you imagined?” I ask.

“I never projected that far ahead. Growing up, I was a chameleon. I did what people expected. Never formed opinions.”

“I’m a middle child,” I tell her, “between two brothers. Has being the youngest impacted you?”

Ashley exhales. “I’ve been seen as a screw-up, immature.” Her voice goes soft. “I was put in a lot of adult situations before I was ready. But, you know, that happened to all of us.”

I nod and hold her gaze a moment. “Complete this thought for me: being a member of the Moretti family means ...”

“Fucked up,” Ashley says. “We project an image of this wonderful, happy-go-lucky team. And it’s not. For me, it’s not.”

I respond, “Underneath the stories told last night by Paul, Bets, and Matt, I heard a theme: lack of boundaries, structure, supervision, protection. I sensed that you experienced the

conversation differently than the others.”

Ashley presses her lips together. “Those stories bring up hurt and resentment, even toward my siblings.” Tears well in her large brown eyes. “It took a lot for me just to come into the kitchen. It’s always been, ‘Ignore it. Don’t talk about it. Forgive and forget.’”

“Last night, you, Elisabeth, Matt, and I took a different tack. We talked about your life journeys, the sibling relationships. Then, when Paul arrived, our course reverted. It became—”

“Humorous,” Ashley finishes.

“Exactly. Very different from the deeper, more personal exchange we’d been having.”

“Our family never engaged in that kind of talk. It was always, ‘Wild party!’ and, ‘Fun, fun, fun!’” Then, almost pleading, “Where was the serious and mature side of everybody?”

I say, “How appropriate that the conversations took place in different rooms. Each group behaved like a different family. We all participated in the shift. None of us said—”

“Join us, Paul,” she interjects.

“Right. We could have given Paul an update and invited him to sit down. Instead we accommodated, offering what we thought would keep Paul comfortable: the usual pattern.”

We sit in silence a moment before I request, “Tell me about Matt.”

“A perfectionist. A people pleaser. Sensitive. A good guy. *Private*. Very private. Does his own thing.” Emotions seem to swirl beneath “private” and “does his own thing.”

Gingerly I ask, “What about your relationship with him?”

Ashley leans back. “I feel very resentful because he pushed the family—me—away.” Her voice cracks. “I ... I think Matthew might care about his...” she glances at me, then looks away, “*friends*. But he doesn’t put me in a special place like he does his friends. That hurts.”

I wonder how my presence here has called up, even exacerbated, these feelings. “What

would you like to see in your relationship?”

“More openness. Bets and I have that. She can tell me anything about her relationship with Ruth or her friends. Maybe, in time, Matthew will feel that he can talk to me. I hadn’t spoken to him in, like, a year. That much time passed! I get frustrated and say, ‘Oh well, he has his own life. I don’t fit into that.’ That’s fine, you know? I can accept that.”

“But it isn’t what you want,” I reflect.

“It’s not what I want, but you can’t push yourself on people.”

“What might you do to cultivate a different connection?” I ask.

She takes in a breath. “The easiest is to call more. We can say, ‘Go visit,’ but would that really happen? In my ideal world, we’d talk all the time, and when we did, he would share more, like when he talks about ... uh ... Joe, right?”

It takes me a second to understand. “His partner? Josh.”

“*Josh*,” she slowly repeats. “I’ve heard Matt mention his name many times.” Brow furled, Ashley seems distressed by the mistake. She continues, “I asked, ‘Are you partners?’ but he never said anything, so I wasn’t going to ask anymore.”

Sensing multiple open wounds, I move to what seems like more neutral ground. “Four of your siblings identify as heterosexual, one as a gay man, one as lesbian. Talk to me about that.”

“I don’t think much about it. Last night, Matt spoke of your husband’s feminine and masculine sides. I later said to Kyle, ‘I must be really stupid. Such a simpleton. I don’t analyze things like that.’” Hearing her self-descriptions of “really stupid” and “simpleton” stirs my compassion. I consider the edicts under which Ashley grew up: don’t be too perceptive, don’t talk about what you do perceive—canonical rules in alcoholic family systems. Being or portraying a “simpleton” would have been a survival mechanism.

“Has having gay and lesbian siblings enhanced your life?” I ask.

“It enriches me, helps me appreciate what Bets and Matt—lesbian and gay people—endure. I admire them for believing in and being true to themselves.” I bear in mind Ashley’s difficult and unfinished journey from “chameleon” toward believing in and being true to herself.

“Seeing Matt this weekend has been...” I prompt.

“Great,” she says. Then, gently, “Um ... I miss him. I’m happy he’s here. It felt good to talk last night. When speaking to him on the phone, I haven’t wanted to pry for fear of pushing him away farther. You keep things on a very surface level. But peeling back the layers and talking, you learn about his journey and what he’s gone through ... which has been a lot of pain.”

“For you, too, Ashley. Perhaps now you can share more of that with each other.”

“This weekend has opened the door,” she says. “This is the first mature weekend we’ve ever had.” Awestruck, I write “first mature weekend” in my notes. She continues, “As stupid as that sounds, but seriously, I don’t think we’ve *ever* been like this. What you’re doing ... I’m really grateful.”

“We’ll Pass”

After my session with Ashley, Matt and I make our way to Paul’s place. The brothers reminisce about Matt’s visit with Kirk in 1996. “You were just moving into this house,” Matt says, laughing. “I remember you looked at us and said, ‘Hey you two *homos*, pick up that sofa.’”

Paul blushes. “At the time, I didn’t know you actually were ... um ... together.”

“Relax. I knew you were kidding, though I later took some heat from Kirk.”

Eyes downcast, Paul says, “Sorry about that.” He shifts quickly. “Faye and I are going to a pub with friends tonight.”

All I can think is: *more avoidance.*

Paul prods, “You should come.”

Matt sighs. “Man, I’m beat. We’ve been going full steam for two days. Could we just stay here and get caught up?”

“We already promised our friends.”

“I think ... we’ll pass,” Matt says. “We won’t really be able to visit at a pub anyway.”

Paul shrugs.

On the ride back to Ashley’s, I ask Matt, “What do you make of that invitation?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we’ll find out tomorrow.”

Excavation

Sunday, November 9, 2003: our last day in Massachusetts. Matt and I head back to Paul’s, finding the family gathered in their kitchen. As Paul feeds baby Tyler, the couple shares foibles from Faye’s recent pregnancy and birth, her first in 10 years.

“Before we knew Tyler was a girl,” Paul says, “Ms. Faye almost went crazy.”

She retorts, “One son and a husband already, I was not about to have another boy in this house. Somebody would’ve had to go!” Faye shoots Paul a look of “Probably you, bud.” Paul begins working the griddle, filling the space with scents of bacon and blueberry pancakes.

A car pulls up. “Who’s here?” asks Matt.

“Same couple we went out with last night,” Paul replies.

I wonder about their presence today. Is Paul diluting the visit? Avoiding our scheduled interview? The couple enters the kitchen. As they cross to shake our hands, Paul says, “This is my brother, Matt, and his friend, Lisa.” As her son files in and out of the room, Faye gives their

friends a detailed, matter-of-fact history of my work.

After breakfast, the brothers haul from the attic a trunk of Matt memorabilia: school and prom photos, notes from old girlfriends, report cards, and assignments. We marvel at Matt's spelling (e.g., "sheey" instead of "she"). Paul quips, "What was that from, eighth grade?"

Matt banters, "*Neither* of us made the highest reading group." He then uncovers a pamphlet entitled *Examination Prayer*. With a chuckle, Matt says, "Mom's idea of help with test preparation." Then, "Paul is an awesome father, totally involved in schoolwork and activities."

My friend also discovers four paperbacks explaining the rules of football, basketball, baseball, and hockey. "Knowledge of sports was my cover," he recalls.

Like an archeologist, Matt slowly sifts through the artifacts, handling each with reverence. He removes a poem, written longhand, about living in Paul's shadow. Matt reads it aloud, then passes the poem to his brother. "I've never seen this," Paul tells us.

"You two better get going," Matt says, reminding me of the time.

"If You Weren't Here Asking Questions..."

Tissue and Bloody Mary in hand, Paul leads me into the den. He seems on edge, so I take extra time going over my list of questions. Early in our session, I learn that Paul Moretti, born in New York in 1964, graduated from Tremaine High and earned a degree in manufacturing. Since 1989, Paul has ascended the ranks of the postal service. He met his wife Faye in college. They married in 1990, had their son in 1992 and their daughter in 2003.

I offer my best comforting smile. "Please describe Matt."

"Very caring. Would never wish harm on anybody."

"How are you similar and different?"

“Similar ... I feel concern for people. For example, I see a neighbor struggling to rake leaves. I know she has a baby inside, so I help her out. Like Matt, I don't ruffle feathers. I'm more 'Take the easy way around. Don't make a lot of noise. Tread lightly.'"

“Different ... communicating with family. If a month, a year, passes before I talk to somebody, it's okay.”

I ask, “What's your relationship with Matt been like over the years?”

“Tight. Growing up, we did everything together. Had the same friends. Didn't compete.”

Paul grins. “Best man at my wedding.”

“What role has Matt played in your family?”

“In the past, the focal point, the glue keeping people together.”

“Have you played a particular role?” I ask.

“I didn't think so. I'm more of an outsider. I don't take the initiative, which I know is something I have to work on. Then again, that's just not me. I'm not one who has to be involved in everybody's affairs. But listening to Matthew in the last day, it seemed that I was someone he looked up to. Like the little poem about my shadow. I never felt that way, but I guess I was there to make sure that he was okay and pointed in the right direction.”

“How does geographic distance affect your relationship?”

“If you said to Matt, 'What would you change about our childhood?' it would be having more direction, focus. If he lived here, Matt would make sure my kids had that. If he had children, I'd do the same. A family is there to support, to share experiences. If you're not there, you're not sharing experiences.” Paul rattles the ice in his glass. “I have two kids. My son and little girl don't know Matt; he doesn't really know them.”

I then say, “Complete this thought in reference to your family of origin: being a member

of the Moretti family means ... ”

He turns this over. “It means deep down, knowing you have siblings to support you, back you up, assist you in a time of need. The siblings move the boat forward, all oars in the water.”

I reflect on this. The Moretti brothers and sisters shared a sometimes-chaotic childhood. Ashley tends to frame events in terms of deficiency, asking, “Where were our parents?” and calling the system “fucked up.” Her descriptions express experiential truths, but do they serve her well? Paul uses a more neutral metaphor, a ship. He seems to acknowledge that no parent stands at the helm but praises his siblings for “mov[ing] the boat forward.” Would this way of narrating events ring true to Ashley’s experience?

Paul goes on, “So what being a member of my family means to me is that even though we’re far apart and don’t communicate weekly, we’re tight deep down. *Tight*. Move that ship forward. So a lot of pride. I’m a Moretti. I *love* Morettis.” His eyes well with tears.

We absorb this before I alter our focus: “How did you learn that Matt identifies as gay?”

He sits back. “It was ... I’m a little cloudy, but I would say ultimately from, I guess, your work. I’m not sure if my wife said something to me.”

I’m struck by the contrast between Paul’s “cloudy” recollection and the seemingly verbatim account Matt provided of Faye breaking the news, Paul’s supportive voicemail, and the brothers’ subsequent phone conversation. “Has your siblings’ coming out challenged you?”

“It really hasn’t. You’re only challenged when you face something you’re not sure you can handle.”

“Has it enhanced your life?”

“It’s ... openness. If I’m channel surfing and come upon a gay parade, I don’t just flip by. If you see issues—whether it’s legal to wed, if they can get health insurance for each other—you

take note. With Elisabeth, we don't converse like: 'What is being a lesbian? How is your relationship?' We've never gone into that. Then with my brother, I've never ... last night was the first time ever discussing anything about being homosexual with him present."

I write "first time ever" in my notes. "The conversation that unfolded in Ashley's kitchen—laughing, joking, reminiscing about crazy times—is that typical?"

Paul laughs. "*Exactly*. It's always: what happened in the past, how much fun we had, and how incredible that we're still alive."

"Have you and Faye talked about how to navigate issues related to sexual orientation with your kids?"

He processes a moment. "If you weren't here asking questions, I might continue to do what I'm doing. Because you're asking, you start thinking, right? The next step has to be a talk with Elisabeth to see what she's comfortable with. In turn, she might ask what I'm comfortable with. Same with Matthew. We've never scratched the surface beyond: 'Hey Paul, I'm gay.' 'Okay, great.' As far as explaining to the kids, I would have to know more so that I'm not just making stuff up. What would I go to my son with now? 'There's boys and boys, and there's boys and girls.' That's the extent of what I know."

I say, "Two of your siblings have primary relationships with persons of the same sex. Has it occurred to you that one of your kids could identify as gay or lesbian?"

Paul shifts in his chair. "You think homosexuality is genetic?"

"Some evidence suggests—"

"I don't rule it out. I hear all kinds of stuff in the news about this. I think that you're wired, and significant emotional events can cross those wires. You're very delicate as a child. One show I listen to, they drill callers: 'What happened? How were you raised? Your mother and

father, were they alcoholics?’ Nine times out of ten, the caller doesn’t say, ‘Oh, my parents were perfect.’ If it’s genetic, then it is what it is, and you are who you are.”

I ask, “Have you ever wished that your siblings weren’t gay?”

He stares at his feet. “Elisabeth, not so much. Matthew, definitely. Only because of the fight. It’s got to be a tremendous fight.” I note Paul’s assumption that Elisabeth, who faces both homophobia and sexism, has less to fight. He continues, “I don’t think anybody ... In my mind ... I don’t know. Would you want to take that path? It’s got to be extremely difficult. So if you choose ... If you do take that path, it can’t be of your own ... It can’t be. You wouldn’t ... What I’m saying is: you wouldn’t choose that path. It’s got to be a freaking hard path. So it must be ... It must be that that’s who you are. So it could ... It could still be the wiring; it could still be genetics. What’s done is done at this point, and that’s who you are; that’s who he is, if we’re talking about Matt. So yeah, of course, I wish he wasn’t, because I’d like to see him, you know, with a wife and kids—and not to say that he can’t have kids; he can adopt if he wants. But his fight has got to be hard.” Paul’s response is typical of our conversation. He seems to simultaneously discover for himself and express to me what he thinks and feels.

His lips curl into a grin. “Provincetown, P-town. Here’s a funny story. Real quick. I know we’re time sensitive. I’m walking down the road with a friend, my wife, and his wife. Never been there before, so I don’t know it’s a whole gay community. All the sudden, my friend slips his hand into mine. Now I feel like everybody’s looking, you know what I mean?” Though I imagine that *nobody* in P-town outside their party thought anything of it, I nod, wondering why this memory came to mind. Paul continues, “Really awkward, like, ‘What are you doing?’ My friend won’t let go, and of course, the girls start laughing. They knew where we were. I had no idea. It’s Cape Cod. You know, you go up there and surf. Afterwards, it was funny as hell.”

Paul returns to his previous point. “But the fight, yeah. It’s got to be a tough fight.”

Changing gears I say, “Let’s talk about the work that preceded this project.” I then pose what I assume to be a rhetorical question: “Did you have an opportunity to read—”

“Not front to back,” he admits.

During a pre-trip interview, Matt told me that, years ago, Faye and Paul sought out copies of unpublished pieces featuring Matt. Why would Paul forgo the opportunity to learn about his brother’s experience, especially after agreeing to participate in *Going Home*? Instead of my real question (“Why not?”), I ask what feels less confrontational: “What was it like to encounter Matt’s story that way?”

Paul takes a swig of Bloody Mary. “I was a fly on the wall. In some cases, I wasn’t ready for that. I didn’t talk to my brother. I don’t know anything other than, ‘Hey, I’m gay.’ Now it’s in your face: sitting in a tree kissing a guy—stuff that, to me, is like ‘Holy Christ!’ Then I’m not reading; I’m flipping through and finding out who he is, what he’s doing. I’m looking just for Matt. Because of your work, I’m able to peek into his world. Maybe if I did read the entire book you wrote about his friends, I would see different experiences and how others relate to their families. It could uncover a lot of emotions and what they battle also.”

“Do you have any hopes for this project?”

“For the public, to open eyes, to show them who they put down, to build more cognizance of what my brother deals with—the battle. Family wise, there’s nothing to be resolved. We just need to communicate more. How do I support him? What does he need? If I don’t ask, I’ll never know. The ball’s in my court on that one. I’ve now asked those questions; maybe others reading the story will do the same.”

“Any concerns or fears?”

“Confronting relatives that I’ve never spoken to about it. If they read your work, they also can see Matt kissing some guy. That’s a little awkward—like getting your pants pulled down in public.” I register his simile of shaming but do not interrupt. “You think, ‘Didn’t know that. Don’t *want* to know that.’ I’m afraid to look under the bed.”

“When someone cracks a gay joke, how do you respond?”

“I’m opposite you on that,” he says. “To me, it’s funny. I’ll tell an Italian joke. It doesn’t matter. Bring ’em on. One scene I did read in your book: you were at a restaurant, and the waitress asked, ‘Is he flaming?’ There *are* flamers, you know? I probably would’ve said the same thing.”

I compare the label “flamer” to Paul’s stated hope for the project: “For the public, to open eyes, to show them who they put down, to build more cognizance of what my brother deals with—the battle.” Later, while transcribing the tape, I ponder the ethics of my own complicit silence.

“That concludes the questions I have for you,” I report. “Do you have any for me?”

Paul clears his throat. “You’ve talked with three of my siblings. I’m not asking you to tell me what they said, but what do you think needs to take place in order to support Matt and Elisabeth better and then eventually be able to talk to my kids?”

I study his face, trying to ascertain his readiness for my response. “At my dissertation defense, many of our friends talked about how the project increased their self-acceptance and facilitated their coming out. But for some, including Matt, the process stalled after the initial disclosure. Your brother has been away for seven years. He knew that the family loved him but felt afraid that if he scratched the surface, he would find out he wasn’t really accepted.”

Paul leans forward. “He’s accepted. He’s loved. Why dig any deeper?” Then, answering

his own question, “I guess to make sure I’m there to support him because he does have a tremendous fight. But I don’t dig into my sisters’ marriages, so what needs to be scratched?”

“Of everybody here,” I say, holding his gaze, “you were the one Matt felt most anxious about. He knows that you love him, but he also sees you as a guy’s guy who deep down may be disgusted by—”

“I don’t need to know the details of his sex life!” My pulse quickens as Paul continues, “I don’t perceive it as dirty. I just don’t need to know.”

We sit in silence a moment as I contemplate how best to address the ways Paul reduces Matt’s identity to his sexuality. “His fear of your disgust provokes Matt to censor himself. He knows that you’re not going to talk about your sex lives. You’re the *last* person with whom he would want to talk about that. But love ... relationships.”

“I suppose that’s not a hurdle,” he says. Then, perhaps reconsidering, “My brain doesn’t work like that. So when he tells me, ‘I love Doug or Kirk,’ or whoever he’s with, it’s tough to understand.” I listen in disbelief to Paul’s search for the name of Matt’s partner, the engine generating the names of my husband and of the man from whom Matt separated nearly two years ago. Paul then says, “If I keep it guy/guy, it’s like, ‘What the hell are you talking about?’ I have to tell myself, ‘Okay, he means me and Faye.’ To get my emotion into it, I have to say, ‘Did she ... he support you? How did she ... he feel?’”

“You have to translate,” I paraphrase.

“Exactly. So my question to you was: what would everybody need to do? For me, it’s probably asking him, ‘How’s it going with ... uh ...’ Who *is* Matt with? I don’t even know.”

“Josh,” I tell him, remembering the parallel moment in my interview with Ashley.

He admits, “I do know my brother’s and my sisters’ spouses, so to be fair, I need to treat

Matt and his partner the same.”

“Do you want to say anything about the process of being interviewed?”

Blood rushes to his cheeks. “I got emotional: ‘What does Moretti mean to you?’”

“Well, your sisters both cried.”

Returning my smile, he opens his palm, revealing a now-crumpled Kleenex. “I didn’t bring this in for a cocktail napkin. You know what I mean?”

I turn off the recorder, and we keep talking. “I’ve enjoyed getting to know your family.”

“Faye and I were sorry you didn’t go out with us last night,” Paul says. “That couple out there: our best friends. I told them about Matt and about your project—the first time I ever talked to any of my friends about having a gay brother.”

My mouth falls open. “I had no idea, Paul. I completely misread. Going to a pub seemed like a way to avoid conversation.”

“After you and Matt decided not to go,” he explains, “we asked them to come over today. We really wanted them to meet you both. That’s why they’re here.”

“Well, thanks for your persistence on that.”

Matt and I return to Ashley’s for the last time. As we load the car, everyone looks tired but not quite ready to part. Placing the last bag inside, Matt says, “Ash, an amazing time.” He pulls her to him, and they hold on for several seconds.

“Come anytime,” she says over Matt’s shoulder, reaching out to grasp my hand.

“You Forget What You’ve Left”

Matt and I debrief for the six hours between Ashley’s door and Matt’s. Aboard our flight,

Matt takes the aisle seat, I the middle. We glance at the young professional occupying the window seat. I wonder what she'll think of our conversation but decide not to censor. Matt asks, "What's your overall impression of my family?"

"Resilient. I felt such respect for the lives they lead and experienced a unique connection to each of them: to Elisabeth's empathy, to Paul's honesty, to Ashley's vulnerability."

"So," he says, "did you find what you were looking for?"

"I think I *figured out* what I was looking for: an understanding of—and potentially, a transformation in—family dynamics. Coming out tends to be narrated as an individual journey, but that journey is situated in larger contexts, including the family of origin. I see roots of the way your family has communicated—and not—about sexual orientation in your history as an alcoholic family. Ashley recalled a fateful ride home from school. Whatever your mother's intentions, Ashley deduced: 'Don't trust your perceptions, and above all, don't talk about them.' Ashley suspected your orientation for years but never asked directly. The question must have felt threatening; picture her in the car with you, torturing herself: 'God forbid if he's not!'"

Matt points out, "Ashley's childhood coincided with the highest levels of clan chaos."

"A message she heard over the years has been: 'Ignore it. Forgive and forget.' That must feel very dismissive. Paul learned related but distinct lessons: 'Take the easy way around. Don't make a lot of noise. Tread lightly.' No wonder your and his communication halted at: 'Hey Paul, I'm gay.' 'Okay, great.' Elisabeth, like Ashley, came to fear others' reactions. She learned to wait for others to open doors; you followed her lead. For you, it began quite literally: 'Go back to your room and close the door!' Today, the adult children frame experiences differently. You, Paul, and Elisabeth narrate through comedy: 'now, of course, it's hilarious,' and resignation: 'it is what it is.' Ashley's darker themes of neglect and abandonment are equally legitimate. Her

constructions allow her to face life's brutal facts but may close off opportunities to reframe experiences in more empowering ways."¹³

Matt responds, "Early on, I told you that 'many roads lead back to alcohol.' I've been thinking that this weekend felt like an intervention. You witnessed and disrupted old patterns. You asked questions we skirt. You sparked conversations we've never had. You opened yourself in ways we avoid." He pauses. "You don't get paid nearly enough!" We laugh.

"I'm seeing new merits of friendship as method,"¹⁴ I say, "and its dual role of friend/researcher. Alcoholic families tend to be closed systems. To trust an outsider, your siblings needed to see and experience our authentic connection and to be approached with an ethic of friendship: transparency, validation, support. My researcher role allowed us to accelerate relationship building. It gave me license to ask 'nosy' questions, probe for details, offer reflections." I then turn over his last statement. "You know, it probably wouldn't have worked had I been a paid counselor. The Morettis have loving sibling relationships. I can hear Paul asking, 'What needs fixing?' With specialized knowledge and experience, a therapist comes to help, potentially putting the family in a one-down position. *Seeking* knowledge and experience, an ethnographer says, 'Please help me understand the complexities of this system.' Hopefully, in making their contributions, participants reap therapeutic rewards, such as self-awareness, mutual understanding, and improved relationships."

Matt nods. "I certainly gained insight into my siblings and myself. I learned that, from their perspective, *I* was the one staying away, not communicating about my partner, my life. My silence was conveying, 'Don't ask me.'"

"In our session today, Paul asked what he could do to open lines of communication. The

¹³ See Kiesinger (2002).

¹⁴ See the Appendix and Tillmann-Healy (1998, 2001, 2003).

whole weekend, I sensed avoidance: his hurried pace Friday morning, the ‘mix-up’ over weekends, his snowmobile trip, the rigid pub plans, his inviting friends over today. But during the interview, Paul explained that, last night, he ‘came out’ to friends for the first time. Paul told them the purpose of our visit; they talked about it all the way to the bar. Your brother intended to introduce you—his brother, a gay man participating in a research project—to his best friends. That’s why they were there today.”

Matt’s shakes his head. “I had no idea. Gosh, I miss them all so much. You had this whole other life, and you forget what you’ve left.” We talk on, barely noticing the beverage and snack services and our eventual descent into Orlando.

As Matt and I board the tram to the terminal, the woman who had been seated in our row asks, “Okay, what’s the name of this book, and where will I be able to buy it?”

I walk him to the door of his darkened house. Hugging me tightly, Matt says in my ear, “This was one of the best things that ever happened to me and my family.”

Three days later, Matt calls to say that he spoke to his parents about the trip. Matt explained the project, telling them that I interviewed Elisabeth, Paul, and Ashley about the family and about his being gay. This was the first conversation of this nature between Matt and his father.

Home Again?

I had hoped to interview the Moretti parents, but Paul, Elisabeth, and Ashley would not consent to sharing this piece with them. I followed the siblings’ wishes but have questioned

many times: did Mr. and Mrs. Moretti, whose identities I masked but who appear as characters nonetheless, have a right to see the work? Who should decide?

Mrs. Moretti's health declined from stroke and Alzheimer's. She passed away in 2009. According to Matt, his father, born in 1926, would be mentally incapable of reading and responding to this account.

The years since the *Going Home* fieldwork also have been difficult for two other members of the Moretti family. Seeking a life free from alcohol's grasp, each has attended AA. Knowing this, I reflect back on the actual and symbolic presence of alcohol during our visit to Tremaine: wine upon Matt's and my arrival at Ashley's, beer or wine with every lunch and dinner, the sweating Bloody Mary Paul brought to the interview, the Merlot I suggested to ease Elisabeth and me into our session. I am conscious today, in a way I wasn't then, that Matt and I drank throughout our time in Tremaine.

I cannot say whether Paul, Elisabeth, or Ashley benefited from participating in this project. Perhaps their initial reactions to the draft reflected their wish to protect not only long-buried family secrets but contemporary struggles as well. I worry that the project stripped them of "the self-protective function of denial"¹⁵ and may have caused emotional harm.

When I began this project, I considered Matt's seven-year absence from Tremaine a family problem. My view today is more complex. I now see Matt as a kind of "adaptive distance,"¹⁶ someone who struggles to maintain a life organized not around alcohol but around "activities and relationships that allow breathing room for reparative work."

Matt and Josh, together since 2002, still live in central Florida. At their home, the couple has hosted Elisabeth and Ruth; Ashley and her daughters; Paul, Faye, and their kids; and several

¹⁵ See Burk and Sher (1988, 293).

¹⁶ See Berlin et al. (1988, 579).

other relatives. Paul and Faye's son has read my prior work featuring Matt and has written a class paper about having a gay uncle. Matt and Josh both have become active participants in caretaking for Mr. Moretti. According to Matt, Josh has earned full son-in-law, brother-in-law, and uncle status. Despite the couple's otherwise complete integration into the Moretti clan, until 2014, Matt returned to his hometown only once, for a family wedding complete with alcohol-induced drama. In June 2014, Josh will visit the Tremaine area with Matt for the first time.

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