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Revisiting Don/ovan¹

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A note about voice: the first-person voices of the sections to follow belong to the study's participants.² Donovan narrates the opening and closing sections.

My friend Stacy got married in 2002. For singing at the wedding, she gave me *Between Gay and Straight*, a book written by a graduate of Lincoln High School in Lake City, Minnesota, where I grew up. Blown away by the journey described, I felt touched by the author's openness to and unconditional love for her gay male friends and proud that she came from my small, rural hometown.

In the first chapter, "Before," the author chronicles experiences from the 1980s that show the silences around same-sex orientation and the heterosexism she witnessed and, in some cases, enacted. How surreal to see a straight person describe Lake City—and herself—in these terms! As I read, I kept trying to place her. "Lisa Tillmann. I know that name; I *know* that name." "Before" includes a scene called "Something in Common," about a crush the author had on a guy named Dev, someone rumored to be gay. *In Lake City?* I thought.

On February 7, 2003, I sent an email to the address provided in the book to thank the author for writing it and to introduce myself, Donovan Marshall. I told her that I came out near the end of my senior year, quit school abruptly, and left town, just shy of graduation in 1986.

¹ This piece appears as chapter 4 of *In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight* (Routledge, 2015).

² For other narrative works containing first-person prose from participants' perspectives, see Kiesinger (1998) and Cherry (1996).

The response stunned me! Lisa had not known me as Donovan, but she had known *Don* Marshall, the boy I was in high school. She remembered me from track, choir, and theater. In 1985, Lisa reminded me, she had been the youngest cast member in the school's one-act play, *That's It, Folks*; I played Otis, a satanic bartender. Lisa also remembered my younger brother and my father, then a janitor at the high school. I explained that my folks now owned a vineyard on the edge of town and that I had returned to Lake City to help them manage it and to live with my partner since 1997, Jackson Jones.

She informed me of her follow-up project, *Going Home*, collaborations with gay men that involved traveling to important sites and interviewing family members. Lisa indicated that each of her participants now lived more than a thousand miles from where he came of age. She wondered if I might be interested in exploring my experience of living in, leaving, and returning to Lake City. I was totally interested!

Lisa asked me to check with Jackson, my parents, and my brother to find out if anyone would consent to be interviewed. My parents signed on immediately. I'm not yet sure if my brother will participate. With a hawk-like protectiveness, he prefers not to expose the family to outsiders.

Similarly private, Jackson expressed reservations. Raised in the small town of Three Rivers, Minnesota, Jackson suffered constant harassment throughout his school years and was assaulted in a gay bashing near his college campus. Life for us in Lake City, population 5300, had been quiet. Jackson wondered, *What might the project stir up?* Though I am fully committed to this work, I also have fears. How many people in Lake City will see the published work? Will we encounter backlash?

Lisa and I scheduled our reunion for September 2005. Her husband Doug joined her for

the first part of the trip. Jackson and I agreed to meet them for breakfast in Lake City on Wednesday the 21st, the first time I would see Lisa in 19 years. Walking up to the Galley restaurant, Jackson asked how I would know them. I reminded him that the Galley's midmorning clientele skewed retired. I surmised that Lisa and Doug would be the hippest couple in the diner. Later, I learned that Lisa and Doug came to a parallel conclusion about how to spot Jackson and me. Lisa and I made eye contact. She and Doug stood up and stepped away from the table. Like an old friend, Lisa hugged me, then Jackson. I don't recall the details of our conversation, only that it flowed freely and we laughed a lot.

[Insert photo F.1 Donovan Lisa around following 3 paragraphs]

That weekend, Lisa brought her videographer, Dave Dietz, to Lake City. We spent Saturday shooting footage at Jackson's and my home, Bluff View Elementary, Roschen Park, St. Mark's Church, and Lincoln High. On Sunday, Lisa conducted a "life history interview" (her words) on our deck. That afternoon, she spoke with my father in the vineyard and my mom at their house.

During our session, Lisa revealed that the person she called Dev in her book had, in fact, been me. That scene did feel familiar: an autumn night, an old car, a kiss between 14-year-old Lisa and an older boy whose sexual orientation others questioned. While reading, I dismissed my initial reaction: *Could this be me?* I am famous for thinking, "*It's all about me.*" But apparently, sometimes it really IS!

Lisa let me know that, to create the first draft of "Revisiting Don/ovan," she drew from seven hours of video-recorded footage, from a transcript of her audio-recorded session with Jackson and me, and from field notes of her trip to Lake City. To center my experiences, Lisa wrote the opening of this piece as first-person vignettes in my voice. Next appears what she calls

a “dialogic poem” featuring the voices of my parents, Barb and John Marshall. This she compiled from reflections each offered in a separate interview. A single-voiced poem from Jackson’s standpoint follows. Lisa closes the piece by portraying a “focus group session” she facilitated in April 2006 with my parents, Jackson, and me.

The Beginning

Lisa asked me to “begin at the beginning.” I was born in St. Paul in 1968. We lived on Londin Lane, site of my happiest childhood memories. Our house sat on a seven-acre hobby farm complete with apple orchard, barn, and chicken coop. We had horses, cows, a pig, rabbits, a dog, and like 16 cats.

I’m a lot like my mom, Barb Marshall. Fun, energetic, she could be a Carol Burnett or Lucille Ball. Many talents, especially musical. She’ll see somebody playing a mandolin, get her own, and learn to play. Then she moves on to something else: “Oh, I should have a banjo.”

On my mom’s side, I have cousins who are like my brother and sister. Years ago, I periodically would pack up my life and move 1000, 2000 miles away. As much as I loved living on the west coast and in D.C., I would get so homesick for family that I’d end up moving back.

John Marshall, my dad, is the only surviving member of his immediate family. His mother died young, leaving him and his sister Judy in the care of their strict, stern father. Both my grandfather and my Auntie Judy have been gone many years now.

John is not my biological father; that guy left when I was two. Mom and I lived on our own for a little while, then she met John. They got married, and he adopted me. John is the only dad I remember, the only dad I know, so he is my *dad*.

I have a mixed ethnic heritage: Irish, French, German, Polish, and a little Native

American. I don't know my birth father's ethnicity. Based on his last name, I would guess it's German.³

Early on, Mom told me that if I wanted to meet my birth father, she would bring me to him when I turned 16. A very emotional meeting. He started crying and apologizing. We spent the afternoon together and kept in periodic contact. At 18, I saw him again and disclosed that I was gay. He had no problem with it. We maintained a connection, but at some point, I said to myself, *I have a father; I don't need a second family*. I haven't spoken to him in years. Lately I've been wanting to, because I heard he's not doing well health-wise, and because he has three other children. Two of them I've seen only once; one I've never met. I look at old photos of my biological father, and we could be twins. I would love to see my half-brother and my two half-sisters—if anything, just to know what they look like. But I don't want to disrupt their lives; they may not even *know* about me.

I was five when my brother, John's biological son, was born. We became constant and sometimes wild playmates. I remember the occasional flying ski pole and butter knife! We were each other's best friend. Even today, I do not consider him my *half*-brother; he is my *brother*.

The New Kid

My dad got a job in Lake City in the middle of my fifth-grade year. I was devastated, traumatized, ripped out of my comfort zone and thrown into a small town. Everybody knew everybody. The other kids were like family; their *parents* had gone to school together. I felt like the new kid for years.

As far as my orientation, nobody discussed it—this was the late 70s—but I always knew.

³ When we met with Lisa on April 24, 2006 to workshop a draft of this piece, my mom confirmed my assumption, letting me know my birth father is half German, half Polish.

Second grade, I had a crush on a sixth grader who resembled Leif Garrett, and of course, I was totally into Sean Cassidy and Parker Stevenson, the Hardy Boys. Not so much sexual (I hadn't gone through puberty), just: *I really like them*. Other guys were all about Farrah Fawcett. I dug Farrah too, but for a different reason: fabulous hair!

In St. Paul, I'd gone to Lutheran school. Thirty-two kids in my class. I had my niche; my cousins went there. Coming to Lake City, I wondered, *Will they figure out who I really am?* I knew others would see that part of me as different, but to me, it simply *was*. I've always been comfortable with my sexuality.

Running, Rising, Falling

Lisa asked for a tour of key sites from my past, so I drove us to the school track. My dad recalls my sprinting—the 100, the 200, the 4x100 relay—but the long and triple jumps were my main events. In eighth grade, I placed first in region and made varsity. Two nights before my sophomore year district championship, I took a practice jump, thinking the pit had been raked. My foot caught a divot, snapped up and under. I tore everything in my ankle and spent two and a half months in a cast. Doctors told me I'd never walk the same again. Also a competitive swimmer, I headed straight to the pool as soon as the cast came off. The next year, I went to state in triple jump.

Though I had locker room crushes (older guys, athletic guys, *naked* guys), track was never really sexual. The experience centered more on the physicality, the team bonding, the total acceptance I felt.

If not for track, theater, and singing ... I don't know. I don't know if I would be here. I was a cutter, a self-mutilator, in high school. You still can see the scars. It always happened

between: between track and swimming, between the one-act and all-school plays, between the holiday and spring concerts. I felt as if others' approval hinged on my performance in track, my portrayal of a character, my rendition of a song.

Watching friends cycle through crushes, dating, and breaking up, I felt desperate to experience that. Boy/boy *sex* was available, even in this small town. I had sex for the first time in the summer between fifth and sixth grades. But those occasional encounters *never* involved intimacy, never even kissing. You get hot, you get off, and: "What about that history test tomorrow?" Then you pretend it never happened.

I had a lot of friends, wonderful friends, but I felt completely alone. The pain sometimes cut so deep that I would slash myself with a razor blade. I would see the blood and feel the stinging release. I could channel the agony from my heart into visible, physical pain.

A Source of Comfort

[Insert photo F.2 Donovan Lisa around following 4 paragraphs]

I drive past St. Mark's Church all the time, but until Lisa's visit, I hadn't even walked the grounds since I left Lake City at age 18. I was baptized Catholic, raised Lutheran, and confirmed Episcopalian. Choir, Sunday school, church camp. Small community, small congregation—always a source of comfort.

After my confirmation, the priest invited me to become a lay reader. Ordained by the bishop, I could conduct non-communion prayer services. Ladies in the church said I should consider seminary. One Sunday, I was 16 or 17, while giving the sermon I realized: *It's just like being on stage*. People watch me, praise me—and *that's* the pull. I sat down with my parents. "I can't do this anymore. Spirituality, not self-fulfillment, should inspire service to the church."

That experience led me to question my faith. I began reading about world religions as well as energy, crystals, goddesses, paganism, Wicca. I came to draw a bit from each of those.

I go to church on holidays with my parents. Over the years, there have been times when I considered attending more regularly. Part of me aches for that sense of belonging in a church family, but another part recoils from church politics. My coming out sent shock waves through St. Mark's.

"At the Height of It All"

Around ninth grade, emotions began to boil. Everything felt raw. My dad and I constantly butted heads: hair, clothes, music. I didn't know my "real dad" at all, but I would lash out at John: "My biological father wouldn't treat me like this!" We drove my mom crazy.

Senior year, everything fell apart. I started closet drinking, even at school. I would steal alcohol if necessary. When my grandmother passed away, I took tranquilizers from her medicine cabinet.

At the height of it all, drunk and stoned on pills, I went back to my locker and cut myself on both wrists. Blood all over the floor. Olivia O'Connor, my sweet, timid classmate, passed by, eyes wide. In front of her, I took the razor blade and again sliced my wrist. Friends dragged me kicking and screaming to the counselor's office. Someone notified my parents. In the car on the way home, Mom chided, "I can't believe you did this to us. So embarrassing!" I thought, *Can't you see that I hurt? Help me. Listen to me.*

There Are Other People

Every time I pass Roschen Park, I think of Mr. Pratt, who suggested we meet there one

afternoon. I had known Mr. Pratt for many years; he worked in Lake City. Mr. Pratt said that he and his *partner* had lived together for a long time in a neighboring small town. They weren't out, though I had heard speculation. As he talked, this feeling came over me: *It will be okay. There are other people.* Very, very powerful.

Coming Out/Dropping Out

Never internal, my struggle to come out centered on others. Will I be accepted? Will my family still love me? You didn't hear much about being gay back then. You didn't have gay average Joe living next door. You saw how they portrayed it on TV (if at all): effeminate, flamboyant, promiscuous. I thought, *How am I going to fit into that? That's not me at all.* I had strong moral and family backgrounds. I didn't want to sleep around. I wanted one partner, a home, kids.

I began telling female friends in seventh or eighth grade. I didn't say "gay"; I said, "I really like this guy. No, I mean I *really* like this guy." Senior year, I told a male classmate. He was totally cool about it.

I regret that I came out to my parents in anger. My mom listened in on a phone conversation with Scott, who became my first boyfriend. When she confronted me, I fired, "Yes, I'm gay, and there's nothing you can do about it!" My parents said they had no problem with me, but I couldn't date a guy while living under their roof.

I had dated girls in high school. Thank god, back in the 80s, you weren't expected to have sex with everybody you took to the movies. I connected with girls, but when I met Scott, I recognized my first chance for a real relationship.

[Insert photo F.3 Donovan around following 2 paragraphs]

All forces converged: in love, not speaking to my parents, and finishing high school. I can't say for sure how everything went down. All I know is that it felt like I came into school one day, everybody staring, nobody talking to me. Total alienation.

I decided that day. Went to the school office and said, "I want to drop out." Fourth quarter, senior year, just about to graduate top of the B honor roll. One administrator, Ms. Allen, replied, "Okay. Your teachers need to sign this drop slip." Great support, right? When I appeared outside his door, my English teacher stopped class, pulled me aside, and said, "You have a bright future. You're better than this." I made the rounds and went back to Ms. Allen. "Nobody would sign." "Not a problem," she told me. Boom, boom, boom. Ten minutes later, out of high school.

I do beat myself up about that. So close! I received scholarship offers from the U of M Duluth and Viterbo University. UCLA expressed interest for track and swimming.

A degree I would pursue now: psychology. The best therapists have "been there, done that." I would counsel gay youth. The suicide rate breaks my heart. Every day, young people kill themselves, and folks around them say, "We can't imagine why!" The majority of gay people I know have experienced a level of pain that culminated in a brush with suicide or a problem with alcohol and/or drugs.

Leaving

Another one-day decision: leaving home. My parents had gone out. I sat down with my brother, then in seventh grade, and said, "I can't deal with this." Didn't speak to my family for a year. I thought, *You can't fully accept me? That's it.*

I moved to Rochester and lived with my friend, Tammy. She helped me stop the self-mutilation. Home drinking one afternoon, I cut myself. Tammy found me and slapped me up

verbally, saying, “Enough! Your life is not that bad.” Tammy and the city became my hub for the next 10 years. I would relocate to far-flung places, then back to Rochester.

The early years in Rochester also centered around Scott, my first boyfriend, whom I grew to love deeply. Three years into our relationship, and five years older than I, Scott wanted to settle down. Coming out of Lake City, I needed to see and experience more, so I ventured to San Francisco. The scene there turned me off. It’s a long way from Rochester to the Castro!

Eventually, I made my way to Minneapolis. Took courses through the U of M to get my GED but never finished. A closed chapter; time to go on.

Reconnecting

Over the years, I came to appreciate and understand my dad. Serving in Vietnam messed him up emotionally. Never talked about it. He wrote a book but kept it from my brother and me. When I finally read the book, I saw him so much more clearly. We started talking on an adult level. One day, we saw each other as ... friends. We respected each other. We left the past behind. Now we hug every day. A different man, he laughs all the time. He’s very loving.

My brother has undergone his own transformation, from wild young man to husband, father, provider. He remains intense and passionate, like our dad, especially about family. Beyond seeing each other at holidays and “How you doin’?” we didn’t speak for a long time. Finally he shared how deeply my leaving had pained and angered him, not only because his brother abandoned him, but also because he paid the public consequences. While I embarked on a new life, he went through small town junior high and high school being teased about my identity. I think both of us would like to be even closer, but we’re very different. We love each other so much, and we do talk, but we have our own lives now. Also, there still may be

unresolved issues. I'm not sure his wounds have healed fully. I don't know how my brother will react when he sees all of this. Very open, he tells everyone that his brother lives with a partner. His protectiveness may come out. He won't fear backlash for himself. He'll worry about me, about Jackson.

Bumpa

My extended family never had a problem with me being gay. Early on, I invited a boyfriend home for Thanksgiving. My grandpa, Bumpa, took him aside: "What are your intentions? If you're not good to my grandson, you'll have to deal with me." Fantastic!

[Insert photo F.4 around following 3 paragraphs]

Lisa asked about "turning point experiences" in my family, and the details surrounding Bumpa's death in 1995 came rushing back. Though our life history sessions called up many painful memories, I broke down only once during Lisa's visit, while telling her of losing Bumpa.

After his quadruple bypass, we learned he had cancer. Beat it once, but when the cancer came back, Bumpa said, "No more chemo. I've lived a full life." He got sicker and sicker, and they brought him home. Every other family member had gone to Forest Lake and said goodbye. I couldn't do it. He held on, and he held on, and he held on. Finally, my mom insisted, "You *have* to go."

I made the trip and entered the bedroom where he lay dying, totally emaciated, curled up in the fetal position. I sat down and took his hand. Crying, I told my grandma I didn't know what to say. She said, "Honey, he just needs you here." When Bumpa died the next day, I felt like I couldn't breathe.

Jackson

Before I met Jackson, I'd taken a year off from dating. I lived in Rochester with my best friend, Sue. Her closest friend from college was Jackson's best friend, Lana. Those two girls had been scheming. They arranged a meeting at the Smiling Moose, where I later bartended. I told Sue, "If he comes in, and I feel no vibe, stay there, sitting between us. If I'm interested, we'll switch places." I saw Jackson walk in: Mr. Boy Toy, Ken Doll, 90210. "Switch places! Switch places!"

Qualities that define Jackson: devoted, patient, loving, open, accepting. Very lighthearted. A catchphrase of ours: "I can still make you laugh after all these years." He understands when I need him and when I need to be alone. I trust Jackson completely. I am more myself with him than I've ever been with anyone.

Many challenges of our relationship stem from my self-centeredness: "It's all about me." Like any couple, we've had our major fights, but we always make it through because we know that we want to be together forever. I can't see myself without him. He is my best friend.

Return

Jackson and I had a place in Burnsville. Living in the city, and especially my working in a bar, made for crazy times. I knew every server in Uptown. Free drinks every night, everywhere we went. After partying, Jackson and I would have these "white trash fights" (Lisa bristles at the term, but that's what we called them): high volume, high drama followed by hangovers and hazy recollections. Eventually, we felt ready for a change.

By this time, my parents had bought the vineyard and offered me a part-time job. I worried about Jackson's transition from the Twin Cities to a small town. He had a flood of bad

memories from Three Rivers. Would this feel like treading back into those waters? We talked long and hard before deciding to move.

I planned to supplement work at the vineyard by commuting to Uptown a couple nights a week. Then the Smiling Moose closed with no notice. My parents generously hired me full time. The nursery is *very* hard work. In the dead of winter, you'll find me in the snow-covered fields, pruning stock and grooving to my favorite tunes. Never expected I would fall into this, but I really enjoy it.

The return felt comfortable. Jackson and I had been together five years. Because I came out at such a young age, when I returned to Lake City, it wasn't like, "How are we going to explain it?"

Jackson and I like seeing familiar faces at the grocery store. People know us as a couple. Never had any problem here. I can't think of anything in Lake City that undermines our relationship. Lake City is small town but not small town. I see this place as green, growing, accepting. It's got a great energy. I think we'll be here a long time.

Biggest highlight recently: buying a house. Even dealing with the realtor and loan officer was a non-issue. They weren't aloof, and they didn't tiptoe around or go overboard to show their acceptance.

I'm happy with our life. My family loves Jackson intensely, *intensely*. Our families have become close; that's very, very important to me.

Emerging Politics

For a long time, I didn't get involved. Didn't know anything, and I never talked politics. Didn't even vote until 2004, so who was I to condemn the president or governor? Then I joined

the Human Rights Campaign, started getting newsletters and action alerts. In 2004, Jackson and I marched with our parents on the capitol in support of same-sex unions and against a proposed amendment to the state constitution.

I don't know enough yet about the parties to label myself a Democrat. Definitely not a Republican. No Bush for me!

Though I'm angered by anti-gay, so-called Christians, I saw the backlash coming. Queer Nation and ACT UP made headlines just as I was coming out. Perhaps their tactics were necessary to get AIDS on the national agenda, but kiss-ins? Did those really change anyone's mind? Let people digest. Be out in your neighborhoods. Let people see you on a day-to-day basis. I have hope that the climate will get better.

"If Only We Could Have Talked about It"

I passed on my five- and 10-year class reunions. *Too soon*, I thought. When the 15-year came along in 2001: *Okay, I'm in a secure, loving relationship. Ready to go back.*

Terrified to walk in, I assumed that certain people would be uncomfortable; maybe they wouldn't even talk to me. But everyone seemed genuinely excited to see me, and they welcomed Jackson as much as anyone's spouse. I asked, "What happened after I came out and left school?" They said, "We missed you and wanted to graduate with you."

The reunion normalized the experience of feeling separate, which can stem from almost anything: skin color, acne, body size, being an effeminate guy or an athletic butch girl. What differentiates being gay is lack of visibility and the ways you closet yourself. I got into conversations: "How did you see your high school years? Mine sucked." "Oh my god," I heard, "mine too!" I found out that some people believed *I* had the charmed life. I realized that I wasn't

the outsider that I thought I was. All of us felt the same things, only about different issues. We were *all* confused, sad, lonely, and angry—if only we could have talked about it.

Synchronicity

After the first day of interviews, Jackson, Lisa, cameraman Dave, and I had dinner. At Bronk's restaurant, our table was approached by someone who graduated from Lincoln a few years before I would have, someone who also returned to live in Lake City. He'd seen us filming by the high school and asked Lisa about it. She deferred to me. Though I appreciated the respect Lisa showed, I had almost no hesitation telling him about the project. I did wonder how he would handle it, but what's the alternative to being open?

I once ran into another Lincoln grad at Minneapolis Pride. Blood drained from his face when he recognized me. I asked how he maintained his double life. "Total separation," he told me. I can't imagine living like that.

People either will like me or they won't. If they dislike me for that reason, their loss. I've been down this road many times. All my life, I associated mainly with straight people. In Burnsville, Jackson and I had very few gay friends—not by choice, just how things worked out.

In many cases, we've been the first openly-gay couple our straight friends have known, so they ask a lot of questions. In one sense, great; we all need to learn. But for a long time, that was all they wanted to talk about. You know what? Sexuality is a small part of my life. I'm a lot of other things; *we're* a lot of other things. I don't want to talk about being gay all the time.

I really valued Lisa's approach to the project. She sought the full scope, the depth, not just about gay issues but about my whole life, my family, my feelings.

For me, this process reflects, in a word, synchronicity. There is a reason Lisa and I

crossed paths in high school, a reason we reconnected, and a reason for doing this work together. At first, I just wanted to be part of something that might promote acceptance and understanding. I didn't realize that talking about my past would be so therapeutic. This has helped me to see the good things about my past and to heal and grow from all the pain. I wonder how it might do the same for my family, especially my dad. Over the years, our relationship has become so open and loving. I don't know how he will feel about calling up the tension and strain we endured, especially when I was in high school and when I first came out.

As Lisa and I have revisited my past, I've been thinking about the relationship between Donovan, the man I am now, and Don, the boy who grew up in Lake City, who clashed with his father, who felt so alone he cut his wrists, who tried to numb the pain with alcohol and drugs, who abandoned his education and his family. I've been reflecting on Don—not *myself* as Don, but Don, the boy over there. I still feel detached from him. Lisa says she wonders if this project will more fully integrate Don into Donovan. I guess we'll see.

<i>“A Stepping Stone”:</i> <i>Barb Marshall</i> ⁴	<i>“A Great Blessing”:</i> <i>John Marshall</i>
[Insert photo F.5 Barb here]	[Insert photo F.6 John here]
	I was born in St. Paul, May 12, 1945. My family came from the east, Pennsylvania and Nova Scotia.
I was born in St. Paul, 1947. I grew up there, various locations around the east side.	
	I went to grade school in East St. Paul.
Sheila Rawls: my grade school best friend. Fun and outgoing. We pitched fast pitch, elementary through ninth grade. Not a clue that she was gay. When I found out, no big deal.	
	Graduated from Harding High School in 1963.
I graduated from Harding. Drama and band all through high school.	
	I went to the University of Minnesota for one year. Wasn't ready for college. Way too immature at the time. Bored me stiff, frankly.
Registered for classes at the U of M. I planned to be a renegade: get women into the marching band and be a comedian on Carson. Instead, I got my tuition money back and bought a 1957 yellow Ford—the end of my formal education.	
	Joined the army for three and a half years. I'm fortunate to be here. Vietnam showed me how bad things can get. I know a lot of guys who came back scarred, feeling terrible. I have no regrets. I went to Vietnam because I believed communism was trying to take over a defenseless country.
Basically worked in St. Paul, various places, electronic assembly mostly.	
For years I played softball with—I know	

⁴ This poem brings together overlapping and differing perspectives on family events. Constructed from interview transcripts, the text may be read either one column at a time or back and forth.

<p>now—a lot of gay women. Because I was such a tomboy, some people made assumptions about me. I worked at Thermal Options, and as it turned out, one of my best friends there was gay. Not something I thought about until my boss said, “She follows you into the bathroom.” So naïve at age 18, I asked, “Why?” Duh! That opened my eyes. I thought, <i>Well, I really like her. Great sense of humor.</i> I went to her desk and said, “So, you’re gay.” She looked at me. “Well, just say it right out!” I said, “I <i>did</i>. So you are?” “Yeah. I thought you knew.” It didn’t make any difference.</p>	
	<p>I spent two and a half years in college in Colorado. Never graduated. In the summer I would work for my sister’s husband, who owned a construction company. I learned to be a carpenter and was being groomed to become one of the owners.</p>
<p>I met my first husband in 1967. He was going out with some tramp. My girlfriend and I flipped a coin to see who would try to take him away from her. I don’t know if I won or lost, but I ended up with him, and we got married. I guess I would call it winning, because without that, Don wouldn’t be here.</p> <p>Don was born on Groundhog Day. I went bowling the night before. I slipped and bounced, like three times. They said that’s why he came three weeks early. A small baby: six pounds, 12 ounces. We called him Donny. The first grandchild. That’s where “It’s all about me” comes from. It was ALL about him!</p> <p>I call it my “practice marriage,” lasted three and a half years. What can I say? Two Scorpios.</p>	
	<p>As things worked out, I met my wife back here in Minnesota. She was having trouble with her husband. Eventually their relationship broke up, so I became</p>

	<p>interested.</p> <p>Don was two years old. As a young boy, he had a very unusual personality. He'd say stuff nobody else could think up. One time, Barb said that he could answer the phone. I thought he was too young. He goes over, picks it up, and says, "Whobody?" It just cracked me up!</p>
<p>Don kept everybody laughing with his comments. He didn't know he was funny. He came home from Sunday school: "Quinn tried to get me to do something not nice, and I said, 'Get thee behind me, Satan!'" In kindergarten, his teacher called me up. "Where did he learn words like 'ludicrous,' and how does he know how to use that?" That was Don, always animated and outgoing.</p>	
	<p>Growing up, he wasn't serious about anything of substance. His hair became enormously important. I would try to explain the superficiality. He would feel cut to the core. His values were so different from mine. We clashed all the time. I was way too hard on him. If I had it to do again, I'd just let him be who he was. I didn't appreciate that he had a very unconventional personality and a great sense of humor.</p>
<p>A drama queen—no pun intended—since day one. By four or five, he would put on a wig and make-up; anything to be the star of the show.</p> <p>His best friends were always girls. He was athletic, but he didn't like team sports. Then again, neither did my other son. Yeah, I can look back at high school: the singing and the acting. There was always a hint, and I think Don knew a long time before that.</p>	
	<p>I didn't think he was gay, just rebellious, always wearing bizarre clothing and listening to music that I don't think he enjoyed, frankly.</p>

<p>It wasn't that big of a deal until a 35-year-old man called our house. I told him exactly what I thought and made Don hang up. I don't know if he remembers that or not. Don tends to block out unpleasant things.</p>	
	<p>It crossed my mind many times that he'd pull something like announcing, "I'm gay!" When that happened, I thought of it as just another stunt.</p>
<p>He always played the part. He would be whoever people thought he should be. That goes back to my ex-husband, to the rejection at age two. Don was very smart, very aware.</p> <p>Counselors didn't help at all. They asked, "Does Don do drugs or alcohol?" I knew he smoked pot, but that wasn't the problem. He couldn't share anything. He was crying out for help—but not from Mom and Dad. He would stay in his room for two, three days at a time.</p>	
	<p>His pattern of deceit led us to counseling. The counselor suggested a contract. Seemed like a good idea, so we wrote one. He stomped on that the very next day; he did every single thing we asked him not to do—the very next day! At that point, I realized it was hopeless. The alienation was complete.</p>
<p>He was in a play at school. I don't know if we've ever talked about this. It was very traumatic. His character had blood on his shirt. Unbeknownst to us, Don actually had cut his wrists. He didn't know how else to deal with his pain. A classmate went to the Catholic priest. He contacted our priest, who called us and said, "Don has drugs and booze at school, and his wrists are all cut up." I went to his room, and he had a suicide note with blood on it and almost the exact words from the play. The gay part was never a problem for us. The problem was how Don struggled to cope.</p>	
	<p>He'd been going to Rochester, saying it</p>

	was to see “a girl” or “some friends.” We suspected that wasn’t true. His mother confronted him. “It’s a guy. He’s my boyfriend. I’m gay.”
I don’t know if he ever said, “I’m gay.” Did Don remember that? I must have blocked that out. I wonder where he gets that tendency.	
	He came out. Told everybody in a small town that he was gay. Adolescents just can’t deal with that. They’re insecure with their own sexuality. They harassed the devil out of him. Humiliated him. Harassed him right out of school. He quit, even though he had completed every requirement. He <i>had</i> graduated high school; he just didn’t stay long enough. The kids drove him out, essentially. It’s the saddest thing you can imagine. Maybe in a big city, it would have been different. I thought the school was at least neutral. Ms. Adams tried her damndest: “Keep your butt in that chair, and you’ll graduate. Show up one day a week.” But he couldn’t bring himself to do it.
I worked at a gossipy local business when he quit school in ’86. I did not want to make up stories. I told them, “Don is gay. He came out in physics class. His friends have turned against him. He could have attended one day a week to graduate, but he quit school.” Many people came up to me after all this happened. Walking by the drug store, I felt an arm come around my shoulder. This person said, “Don’t feel bad. My son left his wife for a stripper.” Another person said, “Ha! That’s no big deal. I got a brother who went from Harry to Hailey, and we all accept him/her.”	
	Shortly after that, he left home. That was awful. We never had the choice of accepting or rejecting. Just like that—gone.
Don was angry at me, but he was angry at everybody then. He felt he had to get away.	

	I felt confused. That he would just walk out on us like that, just leave us behind. Weeks turned into months, and he made no attempt to get in touch with us.
But we were still in touch; we still talked.	
	Barb seems to recall being in touch with him from time to time. I remember <i>months</i> of not knowing where he was. Literally <i>years</i> of knowing very little. A painful process. I think if Don hadn't run off like that, we could have dealt with it more quickly. He wasn't ready to do that; maybe we weren't either.
My younger son had a hard time with it. He got the backlash at school. He said, "Anytime anything was mentioned about gay, everybody looked at me like I was some authority on it."	
	Eventually Don moved with some momentary boyfriend to San Francisco. Thought sure he'd get AIDS. It was awful. Terrible.
Don went to "live the dream" in San Francisco. All I could see was a very naïve young man going into a very dangerous situation.	
	We always kept the door open. His grandfather, whom he thought a great deal of, wanted to get in touch, to let Don talk. "You and me are buddies. What you got to say?" His grandfather never had any problem with it.
A week before Thanksgiving, I told my father, "Don is gay." Totally accepting.	
	From time to time, Don would show up dressed in outlandish gay clothing. We wouldn't have conversations; he'd just be there. I think he expected us to moralize. We never did—never <i>would</i> , frankly. Some people <i>are</i> gay. When the family would get together for holidays, he always received an invitation. After a while, he started to come.
We brought a gay friend of Don's—it could have been the next Christmas—to	

<p>my parents' place. This young man's family would not allow him home because he was gay. I never thought to call my dad and stepmother beforehand. They put another plate on the table, Evie played the organ, and we sang Christmas carols. The gay Norman Rockwell!</p>	
	<p>He slowly realized that it wasn't going to be a problem being part of the family again. Little by little, the wounds healed. They're not totally healed, though it may seem that way to the eye. As I said, I regret being so hard on him.</p>
<p>We introduced Jackson to the family at Easter. Probably 24 people in the living room. After the blessing, I said, "Oh, by the way, we have someone new here: Don's boyfriend Jackson from Three Rivers." Everybody began to eat. I heard: "Oh, Three Rivers. Remember that vacation we took?" But poor Jackson, white as a ghost, sat hyperventilating, like someone should give him a bag. He didn't know what to make of it, but that's how the family accepted it. And everybody just loves Jackson now.</p> <p>Having a gay son absolutely has enhanced my life. If Don wasn't gay, we wouldn't know Jackson and Jackson's family. What would we do without Jackson? Oh goodness, he's a stitch. He's very loving, very affectionate.</p>	
	<p>The biggest surprise to date is the way Lake City has accepted Don and Jackson. That astonishes me. No harassment, no machismo. According to Jackson, if they were up in Three Rivers, they would not be living this lifestyle. But Lake City feels almost like <i>we</i> feel about it, like what's the big deal? What <i>is</i> the big deal?</p> <p>Don and Jackson complement each other remarkably. What would you call it? Symbiotic. Don's weaknesses are Jackson's strengths. I find Jackson</p>

	meticulous, self-disciplined, mature.
<p>Those two are perfect for each other. I'm very lucky. I have two wonderful sons, a daughter-in-law, and a son-in-law. I couldn't have handpicked a better partner for Don.</p> <p>My life is an open book: "This is my son Don and his boyfriend Jackson." Any negativity that comes in, I send it back. Send it back positive.</p>	
	<p>His mother makes a point of saying, "Don and his boyfriend Jackson." I usually don't do that. If it comes up, I'll say, "Yeah, they're gay." If it doesn't, I let it pass. People have asked me, "If you could make him heterosexual, would you?" I say, "<i>He</i> doesn't want to be heterosexual, so why would I even enter into that?" I know at St. Mark's they were talking about the fact that Don had come out.</p>
<p>I practice Reiki, and that's helped me respond to negativity. When word got out that Don was gay, folks at St. Mark's immediately assumed that he had AIDS. "He cannot take communion anymore. No more communal cup." I had it out with them.</p>	
	<p>The deacon told them, "Well, the <i>other</i> gay people in this community don't feel that way." "Really?" the church gossips responded. "Who would they be?" Like we're looking for communists.</p> <p>On a personal level, having Don and Jackson here has been wonderful, a great blessing. We get to see them all the time.</p> <p>Since working together, we've become a great deal closer, and we understand each other a great deal better. Don has so much ability. He's very talented.</p>
<p>When I think of Don, the first word that comes to mind is compassion. Awareness of other people and how they feel.</p>	
	A lot smarter than he gives himself credit

	for, Don never feels like he's proven himself. I'm as proud of him as I can be. But he's always struggling to feel good enough, even though he's much better than virtually anybody I know at most things. Much better at most everything than <i>I</i> am.
Did he tell you that we don't use Donald Wayne anymore, that it's Donovan John?	
	I still can't call him Donovan, frankly. To me, he's Don. He accepts the fact that I got to call him Don. I don't think he'd know what to make of it if I started calling him Donovan.
Donald Wayne was a different person than Donovan John is.	
	My advice? If you have a gay child, accept that fact. It's not that big a deal. It seems like it's going to be because society has engrained us with that. Now it just seems like a very normal part of life. I hope that the project will help parents accept their children and gay people to accept themselves.
This project is a stepping stone. My hope is that someday Don can walk down the street and hold Jackson's hand.	

*"It's Not My Whole Life":
Jackson Jones*

I was born in northern Minnesota.

My family lived outside of town.

We had a river running through our backyard.

I would take nature walks, blaze cross-country ski trails,
snow-shoe, swim, fish

—the whole bit.

"Close-knit family" is probably an understatement.

What more do you need to know:

we're in the middle of the woods;

three generations of family as neighbors?

At the same time, it's not like a ...

cult.

I'm basically Polack and Svede.

We went to see my great grandma in the nursing home;

I was probably five.

First words out of her mouth: "Now, ooo 'er yew?"

"I'm Jackson." "Yackson ooo?"

"I'm Jenny's son." "Oh, yer
Yenny's son!"

Confirmed Lutheran

and haven't been to church much since.

Religiously, like Donovan, I will pull a bit from
everything.

One older sister.

I followed in her footsteps: swimming, track.

Always there for me if I need her.

We call each other for major life issues
and every Thursday during *Survivor*.

She had my nephew;

that's been a joy

for Donovan and me.

My mom taught elementary school.

Did everything for those kids,
would put in her own money
for things they needed.

She's very much the caretaker
of the whole family.

Dad was a union rep, gone a lot.

Standoffish in my childhood.

Not so emotionally attached.

When I went to college, it was a big deal
for my dad to hug me goodbye.

As with Donovan and his dad,
we became closer and closer over the years.

Now the hugs, the "I love you"s are just ...
natural.

In my hometown, kids called me "gay," "queer."

Walking the halls, I'd get that the whole time.

Every day.

Beginning in sixth grade,

I would count the days

until the school year was

over.

Middle school seemed like it would be better.

I was making all these friends.

Then one guy started it
all over again.

Somebody came to our house

—I was probably 15—

and wrote “fag”

in shaving cream

underneath my window.

When I cleaned it,

it took the paint off our house.

For prom, we submitted predictions for classmates:

what they would be doing in 10 years.

These were read aloud.

They came to my name ...

and skipped it.

Weird, because everybody was on the list.

Years later, I found out that everything

that had come in about me

was bad.

And so, rather than make up something,

they skipped my name.

I kept all this from my parents and sister.

I'd take my walk in the woods

and vent.

When I finally had a breakdown in high school

my mom was heartbroken

that I hadn't shared those feelings,

those problems.

I do think all this made me stronger.
 At a high school dance,
 one of the harassers came in and yelled,
 from one end of the cafeteria to the other,
 “Jackson, are you gay?”
 Before I could stop, it came out:
 “No, but I’m sure if you keep looking,
 you’ll find one to suit your tastes.”
 That was really the first time
 I bucked back.
 Normally, I’d just ignore them.
 That was how Mom raised me:
 “Ignore them, and they’ll go away.”
 Well, they weren’t
 going away.

I ran into another harasser after my first year of college.
 For some reason, he showed up at my workplace.
 He’s like, “Hey, Jackson. How’s it goin’?”
 It was all I could do not to say,
 “Fuck you”
 and punch him.
 I looked him straight in the eye. “You know what?
 I have absolutely nothing to say to you;
 you made my life
 a living hell.”
 I turned around
 and walked away.

Once out of high school, I wanted no contact
 with the people
 or that town.
 Years later, I got a call.
 “They’re going to tear down our school.
 I’m in charge of contacting former students
 and asking them to come for a reunion.”
 I said, “I have *no* interest
 whatsoever.”

Donovan has said that when people refer to him as “Don,”
 it brings him back.
 I have the same thing, because some people
 —being that I’m Jackson Jones—
 used to call me J.J.
 Whenever I hear that, I immediately will be like,
 “Noooo.”

Prior to college, I thought of *gays* the same way
 many up-North people did.
 I didn't kiss a man full-on until age 20.
 I *wanted* to,
 but the first time,
 I found it almost
 repulsive.

I dated girls, even into college.
 While coming out, I actually had a girlfriend.
 I finally reached that point where:
 "This is totally unfair to her."
 I was suicidal, I guess;
 I mean, I was ready to jump off a bridge,
 you know?

I hadn't planned to come out to my parents when I did.
 It would have been right before I turned 21.
 They called me at college
 and asked where I'd spend the summer.
 "With Peter and Terry";
 I explained that they were together.
 My mom's like, "What do you mean 'together'?"
 "They're gay."
 She said, "You'll be guilty by association."
 My dad piped up: "That's not something
 you can see *yourself* doing,
 is it?"
 At that point, I was coming out to all my friends,
 so I just said, "Yeah, it is;
 I am gay."
 Mom started crying,
 couldn't really talk anymore.
 Dad didn't say a whole lot.
 And the phone call
 was over.

I called my dad the next day.
 He said, "Come home so I can set up an appointment;
 we need to get you in for counseling."
 "Dad, for one time in my life,
 I *don't* need counseling;
 I think I've finally gotten it
 together."

They've come through like troopers.
 I think it helped both of them to get involved.
 Mom went to a couple PFLAG meetings,
 met some other parents.
 They've even marched with us.
 My dad, the union rep, had signs ready
 —further than *I* go with it, almost like,
 “Pull back a little here;
 you're overdoing.”
 At one march we turned around.
 A former student came running up to my mom:
 “Mrs. Jones?!”
 He burst into tears.
 That was a big, big step for my mom
 —just to see that her son's
 not the only one.

When I first came out
 my mom had to face the things
 that I'd been facing.
 She would be in the back room with all the teachers,
 and someone would crack a gay joke.
 My mom would get furious
 but wouldn't say anything;
 she'd walk out.
 Eventually, she started saying,
 “I don't appreciate that.”
 Now, she's like, “Yeah, my son's gay.”
 Point blank.

My mom had a gal from our church pestering her:
 “So what's Jackson doing?
 Is he dating anyone?
 Is he dating anyone?”
 “Yeah, a *boyfriend*
 —since 1997!”

I went to college in Wisconsin.

Was in the main choir and the chamber singers;

I could sight-read like no tomorrow.

Degree in biology; that's the nature boy in me.

After college, the best pay I could find in my field, medical research,
was about eight bucks an hour.

I took the first job offered that paid over ten an hour
and have worked my way up ever since.

I design webpages and work from home

—where else can you get a smoke break
right at your desk?

Lana and Sue had been trying to set up Donovan and me.

We both figured: it's the two straight girls
who know exactly one gay guy.

"So they must be *perfect* for each other!!"

One night, Lana said, "We're going to the Moose to see Sue.

Donovan's there too,
and he's single."

I'm like, "Oh, god! Do I need to go home
and try to look pretty?"

But then I thought, "Screw it.

Let's see what the guy's all about."

We walked in,

I saw Donovan,
and that was pretty much

it.

Outgoing, always laughing, always pleasant:

those were the main things that attracted me, I think.

Not that he wasn't pretty,

but it was mainly personality,
the public display of "holy buckets,
here he goes

again."

Donovan's and my coming out journeys
 are pretty different.
 One of the primary differences:
 I got gay bashed in college.
 Hanging out with a friend at a bar,
 I heard someone in the back:
 "That guy over there
 is a fag."
 I ignored it;
 he got louder and louder.
 I'm like, "Let's head out."
 We got about a block down.
 Behind me, I heard,
 "Hey!"
 As I turned around, I got sucker punched by,
 I later learned, one of the football players.
 My glasses went flying;
 I went down on the concrete.
 Five or six other guys stood there calling me names.
 The disempowering thing: there was no way
 I could have defended myself.
 It was just, "Hey!" Smack!
 All of a sudden,
 I'm the "fag" that got beat up.
 I ended up in the emergency room
 thinking I had a broken nose,
 blood gushing everywhere.
 We did track down the football player
 and took him to court.
 But my nose wasn't *technically* "broken"—
 the reason officials gave
 for charging the guy who assaulted me
 only with "disorderly conduct."
 I still have all that documentation filed away
 somewhere.

Getting bashed changed my whole view of the world.
 Donovan is much more "Go for it."
 I'm more "Got to know the facts."
 I had just come out in college;
 everything was great;
 all my friends were still my friends.
 Then ... smack!
 It made me realize that,
 no matter where I go, this could still
 happen.

Moving to Lake City was scary at first.
 To me, small town life meant Three Rivers
 and the place I got bashed.
 I immediately thought: rednecks.
 Same kind of people,
 same kind of views.

People in Lake City may know about us,
 but it's not in their face.
 A lot of people harbor feelings that you *don't* know about,
 you *don't* hear about,
 you *don't* see.
 Of course, after this project,
 a lot more people are going to know.
 What happens when Joe Schmuck down the street,
 who hates fags,
 finds out about us?

I think the best outcome for this project
 is not to need this project.
 Just to have kids be who they are
 and not have to explain,
 not have to worry,
 not have to
 hide.

This is like therapy!
 The project has made us step back and examine things
 that we haven't thought about for years
 and draw on the experiences that we've had since.
 You can look back and have a more grown-up approach
 versus this frightened kid
 you once were.

Still, to be interviewed about being gay ...
 to me, it's such a small part.
 It's weird to zoom in on it;
 it's not my whole life,
 you know?

Family Meeting

The close of this chapter marks both endings and new beginnings. Shortly after Lisa's

visit in September 2005, Jackson and I began talking seriously about our relationship. We had developed a dynamic similar to one I have had with my family: avoidance of underlying issues. A lot of emotions surfaced through our participation in this project. I don't think we initially saw our work with Lisa as a catalyst for change in our relationship, but it may have been. I came to understand that I had a lot of work to do on myself. Just before Thanksgiving, I moved from our home to my parents' place. At first, everything in my body pulled me back toward the relationship, but it now seems like both of us are the happiest we've been in a long time.

When I emailed her, Lisa responded with shock and sadness. I knew that she and Doug had been in counseling themselves and that Lisa was struggling to hold onto her own long-term relationship. Then, a week before her scheduled follow-up visit, Lisa contacted Jackson and me with an announcement: she and Doug also had separated. Lisa declined my offer to postpone the workshop. She mailed me a draft, and we collaborated by phone and email. Lisa sent a slightly revised version to my parents and to Jackson. On Monday, April 24th, 2006, Jackson agreed to rejoin the Marshall clan so we could discuss our reflections on the project.

I return to the vineyard from running errands to find my mother making coffee and Lisa setting up her laptop and recorder in the dining room. When I pull Lisa in for a hug, I notice how weary she looks. She says in my ear, "Lots of change since we last crossed paths."

"*Lots*," I affirm.

My dad arrives, smiling warmly. "How *are* you?" he asks Lisa.

"Hanging in," she says.

We take seats around the oval table, Lisa and Mom at the ends, Dad and I at the sides. Mom sets down a tray of cheese, crackers, and fruit. Lisa refuses when I pass this to her. "Are

you eating?” Mom asks.

Lisa quips, “The loss-and-grief diet: more effective than Atkins or South Beach!”

“Take care of yourself,” Mom warns. “When my first husband and I separated, I lost so much weight I wound up in the hospital.”

After a pause, I ask, “Is Jackson coming?”

Checking her watch, Lisa says, “He should be here in a few minutes.”

“It’s been a while since I talked to him,” I report, swallowing hard. “We haven’t spoken about the chapter at all.”

“Did reading this call up any thoughts or feelings about Jackson or about your relationship?” Lisa asks gently.

I reply, “I wouldn’t change anything I said. I still feel that he is my best friend.”

“It was a good nine years,” Mom says. “Even though Jackson is not part of Don’s life in that way anymore, he’ll always be part of our family.”

Lisa nods. “Did you speak as a family about what transpired during my visit?”

In her usual style, Mom recalls, “After you took us to dinner, I think I said, ‘Wasn’t that nice that she bought us chicken?’” Lisa laughs.

I say, “I held back on quizzing my parents: ‘What did you tell her?’ I wanted to read the narrative first.”

Mom offers her serious response: “I prayed that it wouldn’t cause trauma.”

I tell the group, “I had that fear too.”

“And did the visit or the document cause trauma or conflict?” Lisa asks.

“Conversation,” I tell her, “not conflict. For example, I remember an extended period of being away and not talking to the family.”

“I do too,” says Dad.

“But Mom remembers differently; she recalls seeing me in Rochester.”

“Frankly, I don’t think that happened,” Dad insists.

Mom says, “We had at least three dinners at Red Lobster, and we met twice for lunch.”

“I remember those meetings,” I respond, “but *after* a long separation.”

“You’re probably right,” she quietly concedes. “In his section, Don also commented on the day that we picked him up at school. He recalls that I said, ‘I can’t believe you did this to us. So embarrassing!’ Reading that pained me. I can’t imagine myself saying that. I don’t care what people think. But he remembers it that way.”

Lisa points out, “You certainly had different perceptions of Ms. Adams. John remembered her trying to get Don to stay in school—”

Mom interjects, “She said, ‘Six weeks to go. If he comes on Mondays, he’ll get a diploma.’”

“That may have been what she told *you*,” I say.

Jackson appears at the door and teases, “What are you trying to retract?” All of us rise and cross to greet him. Lisa comments on how healthy he looks and how she likes the vibrant henna rinse in his hair. He takes a seat between my parents.

Lisa reports, “We were sharing experiences of reading the narrative.”

“Very enlightening,” says Mom.

“Incredibly moving,” I add. “I feared it would come across as detached, cold, but I actually cried several times. To see my life, and the lives of people who are important to me, on paper ... you took care of us so well. I found the way that you wrote really safe and loving.”

Jackson offers a wry smile. “I marveled at how you condensed Donovan into so few

pages and how smooth you made him sound. Quite a feat of editing!”

Returning his grin, Lisa asks, “Jackson, have you had any conversations about the manuscript?”

“I did call my mom and read my section to her over the phone. I’d forgotten how much I had, in prior conversations, downplayed the harassment at school and the gay bashing in college.”

Mom responds, “I felt so angry when I read that!”

Jackson continues, “My mom got all sad again: ‘I didn’t know so many things.’”

“I don’t think you told *me*,” I point out. “Nine years together, and even I didn’t realize how often and how severely your peers bullied you.”

Jackson sighs. “It was like, ‘Oh god, just get me out of this town!’”

“Given that,” Lisa says, “how brave of you to live again in a small town, to stay even after your separation from Donovan. My project’s other three participants live with their partners in urban environments. Their friendship networks consist almost entirely of other gay men. This has a protective yet isolating impact on their lives. One recently told me he felt ‘alone’—politically, spiritually—in his family. You two are much more integrated into non-gay community networks, and you have far more day-to-day contact with family members.”

Lisa then asks Jackson, “Have you talked to your dad about the manuscript?”

“My dad actually answered the phone. I said, ‘I got Lisa’s work in the mail and wanted to go over it with you and Mom.’ He hedged, ‘Uh ... you’ve talked to your mom more about that, so I’ll hand you over.’”

“Your parents could read our part too,” Mom offers, “if they want to.”

Jackson tells us, “My mom asked me to read aloud Donovan’s section as well. I’m like, ‘I

don't have that much time!" We all laugh.

"Anything you would add about what you've learned as a result of our work together?"

Lisa asks the group.

Jackson speaks first. "I learned to keep growing. You look back and see things in a different light. You say, 'That thing that got me so upset was dumb.'"

"You endured years of experiences I wouldn't classify as 'dumb,'" Lisa responds. "In our time together, I found you warm, pleasant, funny—even while telling me about the harassment and the bashing." Her voice breaks as she continues, "Terrible things happened to you. I felt a lot of compassion while hearing you speak of them and in the process of writing about you."

Eyes downcast, Jackson quietly offers a one-word reply: "Thanks."

Into the silence that follows, I say, "I found interesting the question Lisa posed at the end of my section: will Don and Donovan become one? I don't know. I know I need to continue dealing with what happened, but I don't know if I want that person to become part of who I am now. This project changed me. I don't keep emotions as bottled up, and our work helped me see how others remember experiences differently."

Mom responds, "It's not so much, in the end, what you remember as fact; everyone sees the 'facts' differently. It's the feelings you had, how you can look back and re-experience those feelings, and grow from that. Whether I'm totally accurate doesn't matter. I still felt that way."

"That's part of it, too," I say. "The important thing is how I cope with what I feel. I was angry; it was okay to be angry. I was hurt; it was okay to be hurt. But it's now time for different *responses* to those feelings."

Dad tells the group, "In those days, the three of us spoke words, but we didn't communicate. Barb and I were too angry. He was totally withdrawn. Even now, I see that

sometimes. You shut yourself off, Don, and that's really, really bad for all of us.”

I nod. “I know I do that. At least now I'm aware of it.”

Dad says to Lisa, “Over the years, our communication evolved, but some of the same crap is still there. Your project brought that out in our minds. That's a big deal.”

We continue talking about the draft. Jackson and my mom correct a couple factual errors and offer a few clarifications. We spend the most time joshing my ex about his chosen pseudonym: Jackson Jones. Afterward, over pizza and beer, the group sits down to a less-than-conventional “family” dinner (with mother, stepfather, son, former partner, and researcher). When coping with separation, loss, and grief, and moving toward healing and reconciliation, we small town folks find it best to work—and eat—together.

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