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## Life Projects (Chapter 5 of the book *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation*)

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***Between Gay and Straight:  
Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation***<sup>1</sup>

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## 5: Life Projects

### He Said/She Wrote

In September 1996, I enroll in an anthropology class on life history. I decide to use the course as an opportunity to become closer with someone in my research community. Though I feel confident that David or Tim would consent, a sibling-like rapport has emerged in my relationship with Gordon. I decide to see what that sparks.

My finger quivers a bit when dialing his number. I'll get course credit from this project, but what will *he* gain by sharing his story? When Gordon picks up, I immediately blurt out, "I have another class assignment."

"Oh gawd!" he says, playing up his Northeastern Jewish accent. "What now?"

"I only need one thing—your life story."

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“Is that *all*?” Gordon quips. “Hey, it’s no problem, Lis. Just tell me what to do.”

After determining that Wednesdays work best, we schedule three meetings for October.

### Behind the Mask

I’m preoccupied for most of the trip to Gordon’s. Will my questions make him uncomfortable? Might he share experiences *I’m* not prepared to confront? How emotional will he get? In what ways could the revelations impact our relationship or his relationship with Doug?

Before I know it, I’m pulling up to his apartment. I gather my equipment, take a deep breath, and make my way to the entrance. My knock is met with a shout, “Come in!”

I open the door and take in my surroundings. Gold-framed prints and original art hang from the paneled walls painted white. The room bears the scent of his new leather couch, and a wall-unit air conditioner hums, loudly offering its chill. Gordon greets me with a hug. “How’s it goin’?” he asks. “Something to drink?”

“Soda please,” I request.

He moves to the white-on-white kitchen, returning a moment later with beverages. Gordon hands me a can before sinking into his forest green sofa. He props his feet upon the wooden trunk that doubles as a coffee table for his Snapple. I sip Diet Sprite as we spend several minutes chatting about his hair replacement company. At a pause in the conversation, Gordon asks, “Should we get started?”

“Okay,” I respond, turning on the tape recorder. “Tell me about your mom.”

“My mom, Marilyn, is 55. Born and raised in Philadelphia. Her mother came from Russia; she had 12 sisters and one gay brother.”

The last reference grabs my attention. “Really?”

“Yeah. My great uncle, Maurice, has had a girlfriend, Gary, for about 60 years.”

Noting Gordon’s choice of “girlfriend” as opposed to “lover” or “partner,” I wonder if he means this affectionately or demeaningly.

“Maurice is super feminine,” Gordon continues. “He could pass for a woman in a heartbeat. He lives on the other coast of Florida, but I really don’t know him.”

“Do you believe Maurice had any role in the development of your sexual orientation?”

“No,” Gordon insists, “none.”

“Anyway, my parents met in Atlantic City. My mom was seeing somebody else at the time, but I guess Dad got her to the altar first. They dated eight or nine months and were married in ’61.”

“Quite a good mother,” he says. “Always there if you need her. She’s a friend, someone I can talk to about a lot of things, *but not everything.*” Gordon shoots me a look of “Get my drift?”

“What about your father?”

“My dad is 66. The name he goes by is Tex. Born and raised in South Philly, finished high school, joined the coast guard, and went to college. He was a teacher.”

“I enjoy doing things with my dad. Watching a ball game, walking the beach.”

“And siblings?”

“I have an older brother who was born in ’64; I came around in ’69, and I have a younger sister who was born in ’75. My mom also had a number of miscarriages.”

“Has she talked about that?”

“No,” Gordon answers, adjusting his round, silver-framed glasses.

“That must have been painful for her,” I push.

“In my family, we’ve never had any real outpouring of emotion. My mom has watched two of her best friends die and both her parents, but I’ve never seen her cry.”

Later, I wonder if this unemotional family environment discourages Gordon from disclosing his sexual orientation. Is he afraid this will crack the armor? Or might Gordon be seeking an affective response that, given his family history, he knows he’s unlikely to get?

“Anyway,” Gordon resumes, “my brother’s name is Steven. Always the top of everything: high school, college, the military, his business. He and his wife Tobi have a three-year-old son, Harris—great kid, love seein’ him—and a newborn baby, Jacquelyn.”

“And your sister,” I prompt, “tell me about her.”

“Liz has been a gymnast since I can remember. I’m probably one of her biggest fans. My parents put their little girl on a pedestal. She’s ‘the golden child.’”

“What child are *you*?”

“I was always the nice one, the one who balanced everything out, the easy one. And I’m probably the one who most needs my parents’ approval and support.”

*Approval/support*, I write in my interview notes, *two resources risked by disclosure*.

Not wanting to push too hard too soon, I request, "Tell me about your childhood."

"I grew up in Northeast Philadelphia, where the majority of people have college degrees and are middle to upper-middle class, white, and Jewish. Not very representative of the world.

"Started school at Bustleton Elementary. I was the best math student, bar none. My comprehension in reading? Pathetic! My attention span was *the worst*. I always remember this on the back of my report cards: 'Gordon seems to find his neighbors' work more interesting than his own.' Thank god I was sort 'a cute." We both laugh.

"I remember playing handball in the schoolyard. I was into soldiers and superheroes. Rode my bike a lot, was on the swim team. Started baseball when I was seven or eight."

*A boyhood not unlike my brothers'*, I scrawl in my notes.

"Thirteen was a big year. Being Jewish, I went to a bar mitzvah every weekend."

Since we've never talked about his Judaism, I ask, "What role does religion play in your life?"

"I go to synagogue maybe once or twice a year. Do I believe in a higher being? I can pretty much say, 'No.'"

"I was raised Catholic," I tell him. "I'm not sure I believe in sin as it is traditionally constructed, though sometimes I wonder if I'm living an ethical life."

Gordon processes what I have said. "Guilt has been Big in my life. It's always looming over me, over 'the gay thing.' When I'm with a man, I have a sense like, 'This is not right.' *That* I still have not been able to block out."

As I read them now, his words move me to reflect on my socialization's sexual scripts. "Good girls," I was told, wait until marriage. It took me years to realize that goodness and chastity weren't necessarily related, so I can understand why Gordon still struggles to sever an even more powerful cultural linkage—that between "right" and straight.

We return to junior high. "I was an average student," he says. "That was sheer laziness. Outside class, I golfed and started playing tennis. Oh, and I had a girlfriend."

"What kind of sexual relationship did you have?"

He grins. "*Never* intercourse. Lots of playing, lots of kissing. My hands up and down her chest. That would be about the extent. I don't think she ever hit below the belt."

"And then high school?"

"Ah, puberty! The bad skin, the really nasty hair!" I laugh. "Dated a couple girls, nothing serious. Had my first sexual experience. I was a junior. One night, I went over to watch a movie at my girlfriend's house. It was ready to happen. Wasn't good sex by any stretch, wasn't passionate, but I scored The Big One."

"As for friends, most were from the neighborhood—very homogeneous social scene."

"Senior year," he continues, "I was prepping for college." Gordon pulls off his cap and rubs his scalp. "Freshman year at Pitt was *tough*. I was pretty homesick, very close to dropping out. I think things were going to my head about the sexuality."

"Had you thought about your sexual orientation before college?"

“It was always there. I remember I must have been eight or nine and playing football. A dream that went off in my head was that the quarterback would get hurt, and I would get hurt too just to hang out with him on the sidelines.”

“Any sexual experimentation?”

“Not with a guy,” he says. “Not until 25.”

“Was there a moment when you knew for sure that you were gay?”

Gordon inhales deeply. We’ve hit something. “I read a book called *Behind the Mask*.<sup>2</sup> It’s by a baseball umpire who’s gay. I was in the middle of reading it the day of my college graduation. This hit me harder than anything ever in my life. The next week was *awful*. I would look at myself in the mirror and break down. No one knew what was wrong with me.”

His eyes fix on the ceiling, as though envisioning a scene. “I remember my dad and I went out to dinner. He said, ‘Gordon, if anything’s the matter—if you got a girl pregnant—I’m there for you.’ And that shattered me because I thought, ‘If only it were that easy.’”

“This book ran my life for more than a year. I wrote the author, almost obsessively. He wrote me once, and I still have the letter. I’ll get it.” Gordon strides to the dining room, opens his briefcase, and shuffles through the top pocket. He grabs an envelope and hands it to me saying, “You’re the only one who’s ever seen this.”

He leaves the room, and I open the letter. It reads, “Just a note to tell you to hang in there. Things do work out. Stay well and always be proud, Dave Pallone.”

Gordon returns with a well-worn paperback. “Here’s the book.”

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<sup>2</sup> See Pallone (1990).

Gazing at the handsome, athletic man on the cover, I ask, "Why do you think *Behind the Mask* spoke to you that strongly?"

"Pallone was the first gay man I could look at and say, 'He's a lot like me.' If he'd written about how he dressed up in his mom's clothes and pranced around in heels, it probably wouldn't have had such an impact."

Gordon's tone becomes more insistent, "You've been torn up inside for so many years, knowing something's there. This opened the floodgates, and I was a mess." He pauses, then quietly continues, "I always think of myself as my dad's boy, and being gay is not what he would envision for his son. It's probably one of my biggest hang-ups. There are certain songs, certain sayings that relate to your father ... " Gordon struggles to find the words, "They hit a soft spot."

Not sure how to approach this, I paraphrase his statement, "You feel like you're not living the life he would want you to?"

"Well, they always say the apple falls close to the tree. And in so many ways, I have, but in one very important way, I haven't."

I gently press for specifics, "Can you give me an example of something that would, as you said, 'hit a soft spot'?"

Gordon picks up his Snapple and takes a long swig. "One is a song you probably know. It's called 'Cat's in the Cradle.'"

"Why does that affect you?"

"Because it says, 'I'm gonna grow up and be just like you, Dad.'"

I sense he's ready to move on, so I ask, "What happened after graduation?"

“Moved to San Francisco for five months. That was a true running away. Came back to Philly and got a job selling hairpieces. This was '93.

“I was bouncing off the walls, still doing the straight scene and going home with nothing but a void. I don't know where I came up with the money, but I went to a gay dating service. Met this guy, Lou. He seemed 'normal' to me. He was professional, a nice guy. We played around a bit, but I did *nothing*. I was *not* comfortable. I never even kissed him. I wasn't ready. It's still a little awkward, kissing a guy.”

“Does that apply to all sexual things?”

He sits back. “That would apply to a lot of sexual things, actually. In the past, I've had problems reaching orgasm with guys. There are times I can't even get it going. I guess it just depends on the person, the comfort level.”

Moved by the depth of his candor, I ask, “Have you ever been in love?”

“No,” he says. “I've cared for people, but you're always holding back something. You're not really letting yourself go.”

In my field journal, I note his shift to second person. Gordon seems to do this at times when he might need some emotional distance from the subject at hand.

The chronology resumes. “Anyway, back in Philly, I picked up the gay newspaper a couple times. Watching me had to be a joke. It literally took me an hour to go down and grab it. And there were times I couldn't; I wouldn't open that mailbox. I thought the whole world was watching me.”

“November of '93, I get a call out of the blue. It's Pallone, the author, on my phone. He's in Philadelphia. He asks if I want to have dinner. I couldn't believe it! I expected our meeting to be this total catharsis for me, but it was nothing like that. It was just a meal.”

“Soon after, I got an offer from another hair place down here. I knew I had to take it. I had to get away. I was exploding, to say the least.”

Just then, the phone rings. When Gordon returns from answering it, he says, “I don’t know how far you want me to go.”

“Would you like to stop?”

“Yeah,” he answers. “I’ve had enough. All this talking about myself—please!” I gather my tape recorder and notepad, and Gordon hugs me goodbye.

On the drive home, I reflect on what he shared. In some ways, I’m struck by how closely his narrative matches those of most boys with whom I came of age: middle-class upbringing, boyhood superheroes and baseball, awkward sexual experiments with girls. In other ways, I’m touched by the particular details of his struggles: the stereotypes that prevented him from associating his experience with that of other gay men, including his own great uncle, the epiphany of reading about a baseball umpire, the “shattering” when confronted by his father, the lingering guilt associated with male intimacy.

He shared so much, I marvel. If we can maintain this openness to one another, I suspect that both my project and our relationship will blossom.

### Saying the Words

The following Wednesday, we pick up the chronology where we left off. “I came to Tampa for a weekend,” Gordon tells me. “Met Steve Hornsby, who’d placed an ad for a roommate. He told me he was gay; I told him I was. That was the first time I said those words. Went home to Philly, packed up my car, and drove down, basically with nothing.”

“A week later, Steve took me to Tracks, my first gay bar.”

Mine too, I think.

“My eyes must have been like a little kid’s. I was staring at everybody. I’d never seen a transsexual or drag queen. The butterflies in my chest were so intense that I don’t remember the night that well. For almost a year, I had those same feelings every time I walked into a gay bar.”

“July of ’94, Steve took me and his boyfriend to Atlanta. Did an AIDS walk there. Steve had told me, probably about a month earlier, that his boyfriend was HIV positive. You see the concern on a good friend’s face. Even though his lover is still healthy, you know what could happen.”

As Gordon talks on, I again note the shift away from first person.

“Soon after, I met Terry, who introduced me to the softball league.”

“What does it mean to you,” I ask, “participating in the league?”

“Coming into a gay softball league was a little odd for me. I don’t fit a lot of the gay stereotypes. I’m very competitive, and even though we’re playing in a competitive league, I don’t classify it as such. But I’ve gotten a lot more patient with people who don’t understand the game, people who can’t hit, people who can’t catch. I’ve learned that the league is, yes for sport, but it’s equally important as a social setting. It gives people who’ve never felt comfortable playing a forum to do that. Suncoast Softball probably has been my best experience as far as meeting people. Some of my closest friends are from the softball team.”

I see an opening to ask something I’ve wanted to know for a long time: “Were there any thoughts about Doug being on the team?”

He smiles. “There were definitely some kicks and jabs about the ‘straight guy,’ but not that often. I never even *thought* about it as a problem.”

“Do you have a sense of where Doug and I fit into this community?”

“I give you a lot of credit, because I don’t think I would be as comfortable as you are. *I’m* still not totally comfortable with a lot of people in the gay life. But I’m learning.

“I think Doug genuinely likes playing,” Gordon continues. “I feel that when we socialize, he doesn’t see us as ‘gay Gordon,’ ‘gay Pat,’ ‘gay Al.’ He sees me as Gordon, who likes sports but happens to be gay. And I don’t look at him as Doug, my *straight* friend. I see a good guy with a nice wife who plays on my gay team but happens to be straight.”

While transcribing, I wonder if it’s truly possible to see someone’s sexual identity in “happens-to-be” terms. After all, I probably wouldn’t know Gordon if he were straight. I can’t say he’s my friend *because* he’s gay. I’ve met lots of gay men with whom I haven’t become friends. But neither would I say that Gordon is my friend *in spite of* his gay identity.

He then looks at me and observes, “You’re friendly with everybody on the team. You know people better than some of us know each other.”

I smile, then ask, “What else happened after you joined The Cove?”

“Went to my first gay softball tournament. We played a team of lesbians, and they beat the shit out of us.”

His playful tone fades. “We had one guy there who passed away a couple months later, Michael, whom you knew. He was sick as a dog from AIDS, right near death, but out there to play hard and have his last hurrah.” Gordon’s voice softens. “When he did die,

they had a memorial for him. Michael was always attractive, a very outgoing, athletic person. You see somebody—one day he’s alive; the next, you’re sitting with your friends who also are HIV positive. It makes you more compassionate.”

He changes the subject. “As far as relationships, I dated a couple people here and there, but nothing more than a month. That was usually my doing. There were times when it was very lonely.

“Then, in March of this year, I went to Vegas with my friend Hope. She was the first person from Philly I told. Hope kept pushing the questions: ‘You go out much? You seein’ anybody?’ So finally I said, ‘Listen, I’m gay.’ I didn’t bounce around too much. It was like, ‘This is it; deal with it.’ Hope sat back, and she goes, ‘I’m shocked.’ And I said, ‘Bull shit.’ I know my old friends, and my gut feeling is that they all know. Still, it threw Hope a little, because now she was confronted with it. She asked questions like, ‘How long have you known? Why are you gay?’ I told her, ‘This is not a phase; it’s something that’s been in my head since I was a kid.’ Then she wanted to know about the sex, but I wasn’t willing to tell her about that. I basically copped out: ‘I haven’t done that much, so I’m not the best person to ask.’ I didn’t want to get too personal; besides, I’d never ask Hope what position she takes in the bedroom.”

“How did it feel to tell her?” I ask.

“I had a little rush,” he recalls. “It felt good.”

“How has the disclosure impacted your relationship?”

“I went to see her a couple weeks ago. Nothing’s changed, except now we can talk about it. I still don’t want to discuss it too much. I don’t like throwing it in people’s faces.”

Later, while reading the transcript, I write in the margin, “What’s the assumption here? That any reference is somehow ‘throwing it in people’s faces’? We don’t think of references to heterosexuality (e.g., mentioning one’s wife or husband) in this way.”

“Memorial Day,” Gordon continues, “we went to a softball tournament in Atlanta. The Friday night I got there, I saw this guy and could not catch his attention for the life of me. Oddly enough, I got an introduction to him the next day. We had dinner that night and went back to his house. As usual, nothing happened. Sex is one thing that I do hold in some regard. I don’t give myself up to a lot of people. I’m a big flirt; I have no problem admitting that. But as far as what I do in my bedroom—with others anyway—it’s fairly minimal. Still, it’s nice having someone next to you in bed. This Atlanta guy was my ‘type’: strong personality, well built, a little older, probably in his early 40s. But nothing came of that.

“Around that time, I also was in the midst of opening Progressive Hair Designs.”

“Everybody at your office knows, right?”

“Now they know, yes. There was a gay night at Busch Gardens, and my receptionist got free passes. So I went, and she saw me there. From that moment on, it was understood.

“Then my sister was down a couple weeks ago. We’re pretty close; we talk a couple times a month, usually about what’s going on in her life. But this time, she had to listen. I’d waited until I thought she was mature enough to handle it, but when she got here, I still saw my sister as a kid. That was probably why I held off.

“I was hemming and hawing,” Gordon remembers. “Finally, I sat her down in my office. I said, ‘Liz, we need to have a talk.’ I asked her, ‘Do you have any idea what this

might be about?’ And her, her, her words were, ‘*Are you?*’ And I said, ‘Yeah, I am.’ So she knew.” He then adds, “She had a look of disappointment on her face.”

“Mmm,” I utter, nodding my head and thinking, *I’m sorry for that.*

He must read my nonverbals, because Gordon reassures, “It didn’t really bother me, because I love my sister, but we’re not on equal levels. She’s still a kid. You know, the disappointment didn’t really bother me. And really, she didn’t say anything else.” As Gordon removes his cream Nike cap to rub his scalp, I note the repetition in his statement and wonder if he found his sister’s response more painful than he’s letting on.

“How did all of this feel?” I query.

“When I told her, there wasn’t much anguish; afterward, there was no big relief.”

Then he says, “I took her to a gay bar that night—not to throw it in her face.”

That phrase again, I note. Does Gordon believe *I* would think that?

“Liz already knew a lot of my gay friends; she just didn’t know they were gay—until I said so. She was shocked about Al and Pat. Taking her to The Cove, I wanted Liz to see that my life was nothing to freak out over.”

As Gordon speaks, I remember meeting Liz at that bar. By their presence there, I knew he’d told her. When Gordon and Doug struck up a conversation, I went over and said in her ear, “You and Gordon must have a very special relationship. It’s nice he has family he can trust.” She nodded and smiled, seeming to appreciate the compliment.

“I’m glad you were there,” Gordon says. “You guys helped out a lot. Liz could see that people who aren’t gay can be totally comfortable around us.”<sup>3</sup>

This gets me thinking. For some time, I’ve wondered about the roles Doug and I play in this community. In addition to teammate and friends, perhaps we also serve as confidence-builders and ambassadors. That is, our friendship can give these men hope that other straight associates will be supportive. Moreover, by *showing* our acceptance and support to their family and friends, we might help cultivate such feelings and behaviors *in them*.

Gordon then says, “I was very open with Liz, but I did ask her to keep things between us. When it’s time, and I need to tell other people, I’ll handle that on my own.”

When he pauses, I nod, sensing that he’s completed his chronology.

On the drive home, I think about Gordon’s coming out. I wonder why he told his friend Hope first, and why then? I next consider his conversation with Liz. Was he really so unaffected by her look of disappointment? Are there no other emotions there? Finally, I wonder about the nondisclosure to his parents. Why hasn’t he told them? What’s at stake? What does he fear? Maybe I’ll learn next time.

### “There’s No Looking Back”

To make our final session more interactive,<sup>4</sup> I bring along my photo albums and high school yearbook and ask Gordon to dig out his. In our first half hour, he shares pictures of his

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<sup>3</sup> In Hopcke and Rafaty’s (1999, p. 199) *A Couple of Friends: The Remarkable Friendship Between Straight Women and Gay Men*, a gay male respondent talks about how his friendship with a straight woman impacted his father’s perceptions of him. He says, “I think his seeing my friendship with her reassured him I could have a normal life—something he was worried about.”

family, his old house, girls he used to date, the street he lived on in San Francisco, and softball teammates. We pause longest on a photo of Michael at a tournament in Boston.

In the next half hour, I give him a visual history. I share my parents' courtship story, my birth story, and tales of growing up in rural Minnesota, going to college, meeting Doug, and coming to graduate school in Florida. During this time, Gordon becomes my interviewer, asking about, for example, what it's like to live in a small town, what separated me from my last boyfriend, and how Doug and I handled our once long-distance relationship.

When I close the album, he asks, "So where are we?"

"I'd like to talk more about disclosure, how you decide whom to tell and when."

Gordon exhales. "One problem is that I tend to see my family on special occasions: Thanksgiving, my sister's graduation. A conversation like that isn't meant for a time of celebration. It wouldn't be fair to them."

What's fair to *you*? I silently query.

"If I'm going to have The Talk with somebody, it has to be the right time, one-on-one, and preferably in the privacy of my home or that person's home. I don't know if it's necessary to tell everybody. My sister was 'cause we're close, but my brother doesn't need to know. My parents, in due time. When they want to hear it, I'll tell them."

I wonder how Gordon will know that they "want to hear it."

As if reading my thoughts, he says, "I don't think they'll ask, 'Gordon, are you gay?' But someday, my mom will give me an opening. If she's ready for the answer, I'll give it.

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<sup>4</sup> See Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997) for a discussion of interactive interviewing.

She asks questions now, like, 'Do you want to get married?' But she does it in a way that ensures we can't have a conversation. She'll ask when she knows I'm walkin' out the door."

"What about your dad?"

"He's clueless."

"Would you tell both your parents at the same time?"

"I've talked to people about that, and some say, 'Tell them together,' but then I've heard, 'Tell them separately.' I probably would tell Mom first. I talk to her a lot more often.

"That conversation won't be very emotional," he predicts. "I'm not gonna spill my guts and cry. I've done that a thousand times by myself, going over it in my head."

*There's* the emotion, I reflect, perhaps already exhausted from those "thousand" private moments. I then ask, "Is there anybody you hope never finds out?"

"No," Gordon answers.

"Who would be the most difficult for you to tell?"

"I don't think 'difficult' is the right word."

I decide to push, "It doesn't scare you to think about talking to your dad about this?"

"No. It won't be like a conversation about a ball game, all smiling and laughing. It'll be a pain in the ass. Will it help him know who I really am? I don't think so."

Will it help *you*? I wonder.

"He's not gonna ask me a thousand questions. My father wants to know that the weather's nice and the car's driving well. My fear is not rejection but that he'll look at me differently. Like I said, this isn't a life my father would envision for his son."

"Do your parents have any gay friends?" I ask.

He laughs. “How many married couples have gay friends?” I raise my hand, and Gordon shakes his head, saying, “Would you classify yourself as *anywhere* near the norm?”

“What would your life be like if you still lived close to your family and your old friends?”

“If I hadn’t come to Florida, I would be living the straight life today, I can guarantee it. I’d be miserable, probably suicidal, because I wouldn’t have anyone to talk to.

Eventually, you’re going to bust. So I’m glad I did what I did; there’s no looking back.”

I finish with, “Do you want to say anything about the process of being interviewed?”

“I don’t talk about myself that often,” he reflects. “I’m much quicker to listen. Most people know me as always pleasant, always happy. I’m definitely good at putting on a show. I’m actually very sensitive, very affectionate, very caring. But I don’t give that up to everybody.” Laughing Gordon observes, “You probably know more about me than just about anybody else does.” I smile, and Gordon says, “I enjoyed this.”

### Returning to the Field

The life history interviews inspire me to invest even more of my personal and professional selves in this community. On occasion, however, I’m reminded of my old straight(er) self.

### Fundraiser Feelings

The Cove begins to bustle this Friday night. The place has filled rapidly in the last half hour, making it difficult to navigate with my tray of shooters. I’ve already made three passes around the establishment and am not looking forward to another. I suck a pineapple square from its plastic cup, hoping for some sticky courage.

I approach a group of African-American males, put my hand on the tallest one's forehead (as if checking his temperature), and say, "Mmm, gelatin deficiency."

Smiling, he asks, "Is it serious?"

"Well, it has been known to cause boring conversation, bad dancing, and [lowering my voice] *impotence*."

"Quite a sales pitch," he replies, pulling out a five. "Is one enough?"

"Better have two," I suggest.

I move on to a couple standing at the edge of the dance floor. "Jell-O?" I offer. "Like your mother used to make."

"How's that?" one asks.

"With vodka!"

"Ah," he plays along, "you've met my mother."

After this sale, it's time to take inventory. I've eyeballed a dozen remaining shooters when I feel a hand on my backside. I turn, expecting to find my husband or maybe a guy from the team. Instead, I meet the chocolate eyes of a stranger—muscular, well oiled, with bare, shaved chest. Must be a stripper. He winks, then turns away.

I'm speechless. I feel a bit flattered, a bit more violated, but mostly surprised. Has it been that long since I set foot in a straight bar? In here, I realize, my guard goes down, *way* down, wonderfully down. Too far perhaps.

As I continue learning about my research community, I continue learning about myself. Each day, I'm reminded that my connections with the Cove men shape, maintain,

and transform my identities. But sometimes, I wish a self that is maintained could be one transformed.

### Fussing Over Me

“Lisaaa?” Doug calls from the living room. “It’s 10:37.”

“I know,” I say, changing my shorts for the third time. “I’ll just be a second.”

“You said that 10 minutes ago,” he replies with more than an edge of impatience.

Rushing into the bathroom, I take another glance in the mirror. I blot my lipstick and tuck unruly bangs behind my ears. When I reach for a pink bottle of perfumed lotion, Doug appears in the doorway. “What are you doing?” he asks. I put down the container and begin a search for my dangling gold earrings. “Lisa,” Doug pleads, grabbing me by the arm and catching my gaze, “we’re going to the *softball field*.” I nod. “Why are you fussing then?”

I freeze. “I, I don’t know.”

“Besides, they’re all *gay*; if anyone should be worried about looks, it’s *me*.”

I know he’s right, but at some level, being attractive to them *does* matter to me.

Why? Do I so need male validation?

As a feminist, I should be able to release myself from our culture’s impossible ideals. If I can’t do that in the company of these men, where can I? Then again, some of them can be equally fixated on appearance. How did we get this way? Are straight women and gay men predisposed to obsess about physique or complexion? Is there a gene named Maybelline?

What about the economics and politics of appearance? Don't entire industries flourish by manufacturing discontent over so-called "problems" (from thin hair to wide hips) whose solutions always are product-based? Is it a coincidence that the more women and gay men advance socially, the more unattainable our standards of attractiveness become? At the same time, are we still so disempowered—personally and politically—that we cling to appearance because it offers at least the illusion of control? Isn't it true that the more emotional, physical, and economic resources we can be convinced to expend on our own bodies, the fewer we have left for the social body? Whose interests are served by keeping straight women and gay men in a perpetual state of anxiety?

I look at myself. I look at these men. I look at our culture(s). And I wonder how we can learn to accept ourselves, and each other, as we are.

### Confessions

Al and I take adjacent seats and begin studying the café's menu. When the waitress comes, he orders lobster bisque and pasta marinara, and I request lemon linguini.

I ask my companion about his parents' recent visit. With his index finger, Al traces the rim of his water glass and reports, "They reminded me that they're not getting any younger." Then, in his mother's genteel drawl, he says, "*Nothin' would make us happier than to see you settle down.*"

"With a woman," I add.

"What else?"

His folks' wish stirs my compassion. Sensing Al's vulnerability, I decide to share my own most stigmatized identity. I swallow my trepidation, then say, "I know how difficult it

can be to reveal a secret part of yourself to your parents. When I was 15, I began bingeing and purging. To varying degrees, bulimia has been part of my life since that time.”

Silence. I hold my breath, waiting. With expansive eyes, he at last remarks, “You *do* that?”

Al’s tone of surprise, tinged with an older brother’s disappointment, gives me pause, but I decide to continue. “This is something I’ve only begun to tell my family. Out of shame, I avoided the possibility of their hurt or disgust by keeping my struggles to myself.”

“Well,” he says, waving his hand dismissively, “I’d have *no* problem telling my parents something like *that*.” My heart drops.

I flash back to my third interview with Gordon. At the end of the previous session, I gave him a piece I wrote about my conflicted relationships with my body and with food.<sup>5</sup> I shared it because he had shared so much, and I wanted to show him that I was willing to take risks too. But when I ask if he has anything to say about my paper, he replies, “Which?”

The question catches me off guard. “The, ah, bulimia paper.”

He stumbles into a response. “Oh, right. Um, it was very short and sweet and to the point. I don’t know what to say, really.”

I drive home that night second-guessing my decision to share my secret life. Was it too much? Too graphic? Too shocking?

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<sup>5</sup> See Tillmann-Healy (1996).

Sitting here, I similarly question myself. Obviously, Al thinks that my experience with “coming out” as a bulimic woman is trivial when compared to coming out as a gay man. Emotion rises in my chest. I consider the attention, empathy, even love I’ve tried to show these men. Is *this* what I get in return? Fuck you Al, I think. Fuck your ignorant, self-absorbed response.

But then the anger dissolves into pain, a pain of reaching across difference and falling into a lonely abyss.

The fiery-maned server returns with our food. Picking up my fork, I stare into the oily layer sitting at the bottom of my dish. “I’m sorry, Al,” I say quietly and without looking up, “I didn’t mean to suggest it was the same.”

For some time, I’ve been asking myself, “Why aren’t there more women in this community?” At first, it seemed obvious: many straight women are heterosexist, and gay men retreat from that. But the picture keeps taking on new dimensions. It now occurs to me that, as in straight cross-sex friendships, women involved with gay men may not receive the kind of emotional support female friends tend to offer. My interaction with Al serves as an example. For lesbians and (other) feminists, moreover, the misogyny alone could keep them away. If I hear the term “fish” one more time, I’ll scream!

In spite of my budding critical consciousness, I sometimes wonder how I’d react if another woman came on the scene. Anna, who played for *The Cove* in the fall of 1995, hasn’t been around much since. I’ve been to dinner and movies with Tim and his friend Linda, and I’ve met some of Jeff’s female co-workers out at the clubs. Still, for better or worse, I’m currently the only woman who’s well integrated into the whole group.

Doug, on the other hand, must now share his “token” position. Hank, an old friend of Rob’s, has moved to Tampa and agreed to join Suncoast Softball. This stocky, jovial character proves so aggressive, so competitive, so *straight* that I wonder if his visit to this community will be brief. Still, I extend him credit for responding supportively to Rob’s coming out and for giving the league a try.

A few of the Cove men express skepticism, wondering if Hank is “a Doug.” Occasionally, they push the envelope to see if the new token will take it.

### Tokens

Savoring an 11-0 mercy-rule victory, the team gathers on the concrete slab outside the park’s storage shed. While their teammates rehash the day’s solid fielding and unusually strong batting, Rob and Hank engage in a private conversation about to go public.

“Can’t someone else do it?” Hank loudly complains. “Have Doug be the nun.”

“Doug is in South Dakota,” I tell him.

“We always make the new people do Miss Suncoast Softball,” Jeff fibs.

“C’mon coach,” Hank whines to Pat, his coffee eyes pleading.

“I had to be *auctioned off* at a fundraiser,” he retorts, “you’re getting off easy with *Sister Act*.”

“Tim and I will be up there too,” Rob reminds, “looking just as stupid.”

His every utterance rejected, Hank finally concedes. With that, Pat adjourns the meeting.

As we leave the group, Al tells me, “We pushed that boy too hard. A *drag pageant*? Please! Is that really the best place to break him in?”

I shake my head. "Five bucks says we don't see his face tonight."

"No bet," Al replies.

That evening, Al and I arrive at The Cove and discover that, sure enough, Hank has dropped out of the routine. Jeff takes his place, and for the rest of the season, he'll refer to his teammate as Sister Mary No-Show.

Our trio doesn't win the pageant, but I have a boisterously good time watching our nuns doff their habits. Still, that Hank agreed to participate (however reluctantly), then backed out, then failed to attend at all is a point of contention.

It isn't long before Hank's status with the team becomes even more precarious.

Heads hanging from a 13-17 loss, The Cove gets in line to shake the hands of their opponents. Players from both sides praise one another with the obligatory, "Good game."

Suddenly, a commotion erupts. Hank stands chest-to-chest with a player from The Wet Spot. Glaring, they shout angry words I can't decipher from the bench. "Back off, Hank!" I yell as someone steps in to pry the two apart. Hank stomps off the field, grabs his bag from the dugout, and darts for his car.

Meanwhile, the rest of the Cove team congregate. Everyone's animated, most laughing, a few shaking their heads. "What happened?" I ask.

"Their guy called Hank a 'pussy,'" Tim answers. I shake my head. "And then Hank called him a 'faggot.'"

My mouth falls open. Of all the stupid things to say! This is a gay league, you dolt!

“Caaalm your liberal self down,” Gordon instructs before I can speak. “I found it rather entertaining. For a moment, I thought we might have a fag brawl!”

Seeing I’m unconvinced, Pat attempts, “It’s just trash talk. Part of the game.”

“Insulting gay people is part of the game?” I protest, looking at Gordon, then at Pat. Unfortunately, I then think, *it is*. After all, what context has been more homophobic than competitive sports?

“C’mon,” Gordon nudges, “let’s go to Beef O’Brady’s and forget about it.”

I go to the bar, but I don’t forget, and I don’t allow Gordon, Pat, or Al to forget either. “How could Hank say something that idiotic?” I ask as we gather around the table.

“He was provoked,” Pat points out. “The guy called him a ‘pussy.’”

“Besides,” Gordon explains, “gay men call each other ‘faggot’ all the time. The guy’s probably heard it a hundred times this month.”

“It’s not the same,” I insist. “Just because two Black guys call each other ‘nigga’ doesn’t mean it’s okay for us to use the same word. There’s a big difference between insider and outsider usage.”

“I must say,” Al agrees, “I’d be much more offended if Doug called me a ‘sissy’ than if Pat or Gordon did.”

“Oh, have a beer,” Gordon offers, pouring me a glass.

Still annoyed, I settle in for the football game blaring from the nearest big-screen.

On the way home, it strikes me that all my attention has been focused on Hank’s comment. It almost didn’t faze me that the other player called him a “pussy,” a term that

assaults my feminist consciousness. Anger rises within me. Why did the gay player say that? For him, is a woman's genitalia as "low" as it goes?

I don't understand gay men's sexism. Hegemonic masculinity is as oppressive to them as it is to women. Yet so many seem to embrace it, spending hours at the gym, even using steroids, to construct a muscular, hyper-masculine body. Many take pride in being (and desiring the) "straight looking" and "straight acting." I hate those terms! What do they mean anyway? That straight men are the standards by which gay men are to be judged, even by themselves? That gay men who look or act "gay"—read "feminine"—are not "real" men and therefore not as desirable and valuable?

The chapter on Hank doesn't close tonight. When Rudy, the Wet Spot coach, files a grievance, Doug suggests we attend the hearing. "Few straight men play in the league," he says. "How many are there—three? What if someone questions whether *any* of us should participate?"

At the meeting, Rudy talks first. "I have a real problem with the Cove player's use of the term 'faggot.' One purpose of this league is to provide an environment where gay people can feel safe, physically and mentally. Anything that diminishes that sense of safety should raise a red flag for us." Scanning the crowd for Hank, I exhale nervously.

The commissioner then recognizes David. "The word 'faggot' is as insulting to me as anythaang," says our friend. "But the Wet Spot player—"

"Who also happens to be straight," another man adds.

My eyes widen. “I didn’t know that,” I whisper to Doug, wondering if that makes the situation better or worse.

David continues, “He began the verbiage by callin’ our player a ‘pussy.’ Our league has players and spectators who find that term equally offensive.”

“The Cove player *at least* should get a written warning,” Rudy suggests, “and another violation should result in expulsion from the league.”

“That’s fine,” David responds, “but your player needs the same warning.” A vote is taken and the decision passed.

As we file out of the meeting, I overhear David say, “Would have been nice to see Hank.” I’d been thinking the same thing. Why didn’t he come? Was he afraid, ashamed, indifferent? Will he stay with the team? More importantly, will the incident impact relationships between the league’s gay and straight (or male and female) participants; and how might it affect Suncoast Softball’s openness to heterosexuals? My unease lingers.

Thanksgiving weekend, Doug and I drive to Ft. Lauderdale for our first out-of-town softball tournament. The only player who doesn’t attend is Hank. The first day, the team has just two games, leaving plenty of time to hit the town. Our initial stop is a place I’ll never forget.

### The Vice Squad

Stewart parks his new Explorer one lot over from the bar. “Guys,” Gordon pleads, “let’s go someplace else.”

“What’s your problem?” asks Al.

“The Vice is not appropriate for ... mixed company,” Gordon suggests, directing his eyes toward me.

“We’re already here,” says Joe, slamming his door. Al and Pat hop out as well.

“I’m okay,” I tell Gordon.

“I know,” he replies, “but this might be a little much, even for you.”

As we stride to the entrance, a car pulls up. Hands out their windows, Rob, Tim, and Doug wave. They find a space while Gordon and I approach the line. Just then, a man jogs over. “Excuse me, miss,” he says, grabbing my arm. “Do you, uh, know where you are?”

“She’s with us,” Al tells him.

The man narrows his gaze, responding, “It’s your call, but there are some places in the establishment she does *not* want to visit.”

“We’ll take care of her,” Pat assures.

A bouncer wearing a denim jacket and black biker cap sits at a table. I hear him tell those near the door that although there’s no cover charge, they are collecting for a local AIDS coalition. When I reach the front of the line, his jaw drops. “If I were you,” he says intently, “I’d stay out of the backyard and the dark room.”

“Why? What’s—”

“She will,” Gordon promises.

I make my donation and push open the door. A few feet ahead, I note an iron cage, about the size of an oven, suspended from the ceiling. To its left is a small shop selling plastic-wrapped magazines, silver-studded collars and harnesses, and various flavors of lubricant, everything from lemon to leather. Gordon takes my hand and leads me into the bar. “Drink?” he offers.

Taking in my surroundings, I reply, “I think I should be sober for this.”

As we approach, the sleek-haired bartender abruptly stops pouring a shot of Jagermeister. “Lady, you’ll want to stay out—”

“Of the backyard and the dark room,” I finish. “Sir, if I may ask, is that for my protection or for theirs?”

“It’s definitely for yours,” replies the Vice rep.

Turning away from him, I wonder what the fuss is about. What is there to see: mutual masturbation, oral sex, anal sex, group encounters, sadomasochism? At one time, these practices—especially among men—would have been outside the boundaries of my consciousness. Now they seem rather ordinary terrain on the landscape of human desire.

Still, something keeps me from asking for a tour of the dark room and backyard. It’s not disgust; I don’t even think it’s fear. Maybe it’s respect. Respect for my friends. Respect for pleasures I may not fully understand, but perhaps only because I haven’t experienced them—pleasures that could be associated with anonymity, which my presence as a heterosexual, a woman, and a researcher would violate. My explorations, I decide, will be confined to this room.

Orange-red lights cast a hazy glow, and the air smells of suede and cigarettes. Around the bar sit nine men, three pairs and three loners. Two televisions mounted in the corners drown their conversations. On one screen, a man performs oral sex on another. I wonder if I should be noting his technique. A second video shows a live Prince Albert, where a hoop is pierced through the urethra at the base of the penis head. Gordon looks just as the ring comes through. “Uh!” he gasps, “*what* are you watching?”

Suddenly, a man approaches Doug. Licking his lips, he moves his hand across my husband's pectoral. Doug stares back at the man, his mouth a bit agape. I think he just experienced how truly invasive men can be.

"That's it!" Gordon proclaims, rounding up the group. "We're out 'a here!"

"We're fine," I tell him, trying not to laugh.

"No straight woman needs to see any more of The Vice," he replies. Maybe so.

In spite of Gordon's protectiveness (or embarrassment), the night doesn't get any less interesting. Our next stop is The Stud.

### Stud Suds

"Sign here," orders the pretty-boy bouncer.

"What for?" I ask.

"It certifies that you enter the foam at your own risk."

"The foam?" Realizing I'm holding up the Stud line, I dutifully take the pen from his hand. I loop a large 'L,' print the 'isa,' offer my middle initial, and follow with the full, hyphenated last name. Before handing back his clipboard, I glance at the other signatures—all indecipherable scratches and scribbles. Either everyone inside is a doctor, I think, or I'm the only one with nothing to lose by being here.

A shorter, bulkier bouncer smiles when he says, "I don't believe we've ever had a woman in here before."

"First time for everything," I reply.

I follow Pat and Joe into the bar. Turning the corner, we stop to marvel. The dance floor has been walled up like a hockey rink. Inside, waist-high ivory suds provide a bubble bath's cover. A few couples kiss intently, running their hands down one another's slippery chests. Small groups circle dance or form trains, grinding one another from behind. I watch for a few moments, then, feeling too voyeuristic, turn away. "Goin' in?" asks Joe.

In my mind, Carolyn Ellis tells me (half-jokingly), "A *real* fieldworker would."

"I don't know," Pat says. "In there, pretty much anything goes."

What might go *for me*? I wonder. Am I prepared to confront (and perhaps transgress) the boundaries between women and men, gay and straight, friendship and marriage, mystery and experience? What would happen to my identity and my relationship with Doug? Could we "cross over" together? Would such an attempt reinforce rather than challenge the binaries?

Carolyn's voice again meets my ears. This time, however, she speaks as a mentor and friend. In words I've heard before, she encourages, "Trust your instincts."

I turn to the guys and say, "Think I'll skip the foam."

For all our evening explorations, The Cove plays just as hard during the daytime. Everyone gives his all, none more than Pat in this game, the team's third on Sunday.

### Blood on My Hands

Thwack!

"Ah shit!" Pat exclaims. His veteran eyes can map the line drive's path, but his weekend-wearied body lags a half second behind. The ball sneaks under his glove and rolls

into left. Pat's right forearm and tricep skid across the infield. "Fuck!" he curses, spitting out dirt.

"Get up, old man," teases Al from third.

"Not much older than *you*," Pat reminds. The inning closes when the next batter sends an easy grounder to Rob, who steps on second for the fielder's choice.

Our injured shortstop jogs to the bench. With blood dripping from a scrape the size of an egg, Pat asks for the first aid kit. He pours a bottle of Evian over the wound, cringing as crimson grime washes down his arm. "Peroxide?" Pat then requests.

He nods when I ask, "Want me to do it?" Cradling his elbow, I uncap the container. "This will sting," I say, then dump a few ounces onto his arm. The liquid bubbles as I blow on it. I then tear open an alcohol wipe and pat the affected area. We finish wrapping the gauze just as he's called on deck.

Recapping the peroxide, I stride to the tackle box that holds the medical supplies. As I glance over the Ace bandages, ice packs, and athletic tape, it occurs to me that we have no latex gloves. I look down at my bare, bloodstained hands.

AIDS. It echoes in my mind. AIDS. An intensified pulse thumps in my neck. AIDS.

*Calm down!* an inner voice orders. *You have no reason to believe he's HIV positive.*

I'm just being cautious, I silently reply.

*You're being a homophobe!* the voice corrects.

Am I? I reach for the peroxide bottle, pouring the liquid into my cupped left hand. I set down the container and close my eyes. As my palms rub together, a tear of shame moves down my cheek and off my jaw. AIDS, I tell the voice.

*Homophobe*, it responds.

In the end, The Cove loses that game but takes second in the tournament. The team leaves Ft. Lauderdale exhausted but proud.

Doug and I ride back to Tampa with Gordon, whose sister Liz is coming for a visit. We're picking her up at their brother's place, where we also meet Gordon's parents. It proves an important but anxious encounter.

### Don't Say the Wrong Thing

Gordon winds his Acura through the curvy, middle-class subdivision. Whipping over to the curb, he says, "Here we go."

"Any advice on meeting your parents?" Doug queries.

"Just try not to *out* me," Gordon says with a smile. His statement rings of lightness and good humor but falls upon my ears with solemnity. The tournament's open, celebratory atmosphere quickly recedes as we approach the house.

Gordon knocks on the door. Footsteps clonk; the bolt clicks. "Come in!" greets a woman I recognize from photographs as Marilyn, Gordon's mother. "Can you stay a while?"

"A little while," says her son.

"Nice to see you again, Liz," I tell Gordon's sister.

She points to the living room, saying, "That's my uncle." He waves without looking up from the TV. Liz gestures toward the kitchen, "My brother Steven, his wife Tobi, and their kids." Tobi, holding baby Jacqueline, gives a grin while Steven chases Harris, their toddler son.

Gordon goes off to visit with his uncle and siblings, leaving Doug and me in the dining area with his folks. Tex pulls out the piano bench and motions for us to sit. “How are you feeling?” I ask Marilyn, remembering her recent tumble down a flight of stairs. Doug and I laugh as Marilyn offers the step-by-step replay.

Not to be outdone, Tex recounts the clumsy fall he took while strolling along Tampa Bay. “My face was one big scab,” he says.

Marilyn shifts gears. Leaning forward, she asks, “How was your weekend?”

Wringing my hands, I reply, “A lot of fun.”

Tex turns to Doug, “You play on Gordon’s softball team?” I swallow hard.

“For almost two years,” Doug says.

An awkward pause follows, and a single thought turns over in my mind: *don’t say the wrong thing; don’t say the wrong thing*. When Marilyn asks, “What kind of league do you play in?” Gordon eyes us from the other room. *Don’t say the wrong thing*.

Doug initiates, “It’s a—”

“City league,” I finish, a little too eagerly. “A city league.”

Marilyn follows up with, “And who sponsors the team?”

“The Cove,” Doug responds.

“What’s that?” she asks.

“A BAR,” we say together. I stare down at my braided leather sandals, waiting for the next question: what kind of bar?

“Like a ... sports bar?” Marilyn inquires. I glance up to answer but am startled by her sudden change in appearance. Marilyn’s red-framed glasses, each lens the size of a small yam, had been atop her head; they now cover most of her face.

*Don't say the wrong thing.* "I'm sorry," I reply, trying to focus, "what did you ask?"

"It's a pub with a poolroom and dance floor," Doug answers.

"Our son never wants us to watch him play," Marilyn muses. At this, Gordon rises from the couch.

"Performance anxiety?" I suggest.

"I can't understand—"

Gordon cuts her off, "We really need to go."

In unison, Doug and I rise from the hard, wooden bench. "It was so nice meeting you," I tell them. We bid goodbye to the rest of the family as Marilyn and Tex see us out.

"Drive safely," they tell their son.

Gordon and Liz take the front seat, Doug and I the back. When the fourth door slams shut, we breathe a collective sigh.

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