



# INSIDE OUT

STRAIGHT TALK FROM A GAY JOCK  
MARK TEWKSBURY

 HarperCollinsCanadaLtd

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 HarperCollins e-books

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## PREFACE

For years various people told me that I *should* write a book. “You have had such an interesting life,” they would say. But having an interesting life and capturing that life on paper are two very different things. Every time I made an attempt to write, the project led nowhere. The problem was that I didn’t really know where to start, and every endeavour to create ended with yet another blank page and more feelings of frustration. After endless tries I decided to simply abandon the idea.

I had written a book before, a motivational memoir after my Olympic win in Barcelona in 1992, and I knew how difficult the creative process could be. At that time I was a closeted gay athlete sharing his “story,” but the story that I was sharing avoided any details about my personal life. It had to. For as long I could remember I had done everything in my power to keep the worlds of sport and gay apart. In fact, this denial of who I was had actually become the very story of my life. It was no wonder I didn’t know where to begin.

In July of 2002 I went for dinner in Toronto with a colleague from my former days at Canada AM celebrated author and parenting expert Barbara Coloroso. Barbara is an incredibly persuasive person who does not take no for an answer, and by the end of the evening she had convinced me that I *must* write a book, and that the time was now. Her lawyer was also a literary agent, and she convinced me to have lunch with him before I left Toronto to go back home to Montreal.

Later that week I took the elevator up one of the highest towers on Bay Street to meet with Aaron Milrad, an elegant, charming, distinguished gentleman who told me straight up at the beginning of our meeting that he didn’t take any new clients. Then he hit me with another bombshell. “Every one thinks they have a book in them,” he told me. “Other than the fact that it’s your story, what makes it unique and interesting?” Gulp. Good question. I scrambled to think of something clever to answer his tough question, giving a long rambling response that, by the look on his face, I thought had convinced him not to spend one more minute with me. Instead he surprised me. “I’m not gay, but I am Jewish, so I can relate to what you are saying,” he told me. “Let’s see if we can sell this story.” Maybe Barbara was right, I thought. Maybe it was time.

With my good friend Louise Lemelin, I prepared an outline, and over the next several months Aaron sent it to every major and minor publishing house he knew. Polite decline followed polite decline, until finally we all abandoned the project for the short term, essentially leaving me right where I had started, only this time with a slightly bruised ego.

Two years later the phone rang. It was Aaron. He had met a great couple who worked with authors and publishers to get their projects ready for production, and he had a feeling that we might work well together. I met with Ron and Adrianna Edwards shortly thereafter, and although I had the lowest of expectations before the meeting, I left it highly encouraged that this partnership might actually work. Intelligent, savvy, and supportive, I could sense that they got what the book was about. Within a

month I had a new outline. Within three months I had a publisher. And six weeks after I sat down to start writing, I had a first draft. “That came so easily,” everyone said. Yes, six weeks and *seven years* in the making, I thought to myself.

I am indebted to many people for making this book a reality. To the early support of Jennifer McGuire, Benjamin Kiss, Jacques Legris, and Henri Davies for believing I had another book in me even when none came. To my friend Alexander Chapman who reminded me to stick to my stories and I couldn't go wrong. To Bertrand Pappathomas, the first person to read this manuscript. As I finished each story, it was Bertrand who encouraged me when I sometimes felt overwhelmed, and inspired me with his enthusiasm when I wondered if anyone would care. Thank you to Thomas K. Dolan and Debbie Muir for your authentic leadership. And to the amazing team at Wiley, led by Karen Milner, who made turning my ideas into a product more enjoyable than I had ever imagined possible.

This book is literally inside out—an insider's perspective on Olympic politics, media, fame, gay life, friendship, family, and leadership. “Straight talk from a gay jock” is, on one hand, a play on words. But talking straight was essential to me, as this is the first time I have ever told my whole story, not the abbreviated motivational memoir typical of many athletes, including myself the first time around. Inside are stories from my life, which in the telling includes stories about people who have helped shaped my life in one form or another. To the best of my ability I have reconstructed events from my past, catching the spirit of a conversation if not the exact wording. People's names, other than public officials or my family, have often been changed to protect their identities (as indicated by an \*). I appreciate that just because I was ready to write about my life, it doesn't necessarily mean that everyone wants their lives to be written about. To the thousands of people who have made each part of my life so rich and colourful, I am deeply indebted to you. I hope you recognize yourselves in some of the stories within.

For years I lived with an intense feeling of difference, desperately wanting to be something other than what I was. It is a feeling I believe that is shared by millions of people around the world. As hard as that was, I am enormously grateful for the first-hand understanding of what it is like to live as a person of diversity. My own circumstances have allowed me to move ultimately to a place where I am not only open in my life, I am truly proud of who I am.

To this day there are still no 'out' gay male professional football, soccer, baseball, basketball, or hockey players competing openly in their sports. In the end that was what Aaron decided made my story somewhat unique. I have seen first-hand the climate of shame that comes from silence and secrets. As I have moved beyond this in my own life, I appreciate that the real shame is that this cycle continues. I hope that in another ten years, straight talk from a gay jock will just be a simple accepted reality of the world we live in. But until then, I hope this story does its own little part in changing that. Enjoy the read!

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was on a promotional tour in Vancouver following the 1992 Olympics when my path crossed with another celebrated athlete, rower Silken Laumann. Looking at me she could tell something wasn't right. I went with her and her partner at that time, Olympic champion John Wallace, for a drink. I couldn't stand the burden of carrying my secret anymore, so I finally shared my real story. They were both incredibly supportive. Silken would later write me a letter that I would keep for years.

At that time in my life, I did everything to cover up the fact that I was a gay athlete. CBC Radio's award-winning *Inside Track* did a story on gays in sport, and I participated, but on the condition that my voice be disguised beyond recognition. It worked, but I was still terrified that someone would figure out it was me. I have remained friends with the executive producer of that show to this day, so intense were her feelings of responsibility to keep my secret.

Sylvie Bernier, the Olympic champion diver, came to me in 1996 when I was no longer an athlete but still very much involved in amateur sport on the political side. She was open and frank, and wanted me to know that she was there if I needed to talk to someone. Marnie McBean, Olympic champion rower, was proudly in the audience at my stage show when I publicly came out.

Unfortunately, over the many, many years that I was involved in the world of sport, the people that I felt I could speak to about such a sensitive issue can be named on one hand. If homophobia is going to leave the world of sport, then a lead role needs to be taken by our coaches, teammates, officials, and administrators who can openly promote a positive space for all to participate. Issues of difference are not necessarily easy to deal with at first, but before something becomes a non-issue, it must first become an issue. And not necessarily for long.

This book is dedicated to those individuals and organizations brave enough to make this change; to speak about the unspoken; to take away the stigma of being gay in the world of sport.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Childhood Secrets

#### GRANDMA'S CLOSET

It was the summer of 1975 and Grandma McDonald was preparing me for something. My usual two-and-a-half-hour trip south to Lethbridge, Alberta had taken on a special significance this year. For as long as I could remember I had boarded a Greyhound bus every summer to spend three to four weeks with both sets of my grandparents during my summer vacation.

It had started after my brother, Scott, had been born. My younger sister, Colleen, and I had both been adopted, so the birth of Scott was a pretty big deal in our family. To give my mom some time to recover and adjust, Colleen and I had been sent to stay with our grandparents for a short period.

Colleen hated being away, but I loved it. In fact, the only way I could be coaxed home to Calgary was with the promise that I could come back to visit any time I wanted. For the next twelve years I made good on that promise. But this particular year was different. Grandpa McDonald had died in the spring, and this summer I was determined to spend more time with Grandma McDonald to help ease her loneliness.

Grandma McDonald and I had always been close. I was her eleventh grandchild, but there was something about me that Grandma recognized as different, and she did everything possible to encourage that difference to flourish.

One of my earliest memories is of visiting her and Grandpa at their condominium, which had a pool, during the brief time they lived in Calgary. I had learned to swim in Dallas the previous year when my father had been transferred there with the oil company he was working for, and every time I saw Grandma she would encourage me to join her for a swim in the condo pool. We would spend about fifteen minutes swimming, and then spent just as much time prepping to go back to see the family. Grandma would wrap me in a towel that was so big it would cover me from just below the armpits all the way to the floor. She would then dry herself and wrap a towel around her head, like a turban, and would watch me watching her do this. "I think you need a head wrap too," she told me as I sat transfixed by her getup.

There was spunkiness to Grandma that I was completely drawn to. A woman who was fun everywhere but church, she wasn't afraid to push boundaries as long as she felt she was allowing her grandchildren to express themselves. It didn't matter that her husband as well as my father looked horrified when they saw Grandma and Mini-Grandma arrive looking like twins. We were both in our element and that was all she cared about. I publicly credit watching the 1976 Olympics as a major



inspiration for me to eventually become an Olympic Champion, but if I am to be totally honest, being dressed from head to toe like Grandma was what sparked my love of swimming in the first place.

This particular summer visit with her was like a test for me. Since her husband's funeral, Grandma had obviously been contemplating her own mortality, and when I arrived at her apartment I learned that she had begun the process of placing small white stickers with names on them on the back of all of her possessions to be clear who got what when she died. My first exercise after I arrived was to pick out something that I would like to remember her by when that fateful day arrived. Although this was slightly morbid, I understood what Grandma was asking me to do.

My grandfather had been a successful businessman, owning a local car dealership that continually blurred their last name and made both him and Grandma celebrities in their community. In their lifetimes they had acquired many beautiful things, most of which were now crammed into Grandma's swanky one-bedroom apartment. There were expensive antiques, including a stunning grandfather clock, and a massive wooden console with a television built in. In her bedroom there was a solid set of oak furniture that included a king-sized bed, a vanity, and chest of drawers complete with a solid silver brush set that must have been worth a small fortune.

After much contemplation I narrowed down my finalists to two items. The television console was still unspoken for, and as a seven-year-old I thought this was pretty impressive. But there was one other item that really captured my imagination. It was a black-and-white picture taken of my mother and her sister as little girls that had been hand-tinted to give it color. My mom was about the same age that I was at that time, and I thought it would be great to have that in my house one day.

I finally decided to go for the picture. I knew that Grandma was expecting me to ask for the television, but I thought this picture was the one thing that was truly irreplaceable.

Grandma was surprised by my choice, but completely delighted. Going for something of sentimental value as opposed to material worth made a lasting impression on her, and from that moment on Grandma and I were closer than ever before, if that were possible. Whenever someone came to visit, the first thing she would tell them was that I had chosen the picture over anything else, allowing her to beam with pride at the sensitivity of her young grandson. To this day I still have that picture hanging in my office.

During my visits I would share her massive king-sized bed with her. She would crawl into one side, taking up the smallest amount of space imaginable. In the morning she would still be in the exact position she had started in the night before, a little lump in the sheets the only evidence she was still actually there. I would sleep on the side of the bed closest to the large mirrored doors of her closet.

One morning the mirrored closet door was open just a crack, and I awoke to a creepy, white, disembodied head staring out at me. I was startled and really freaked out. "Grandma, what is that head doing in your closet?" I asked. She smiled a big, reassuring, toothless smile at me. Then she got out of bed, popped in her false teeth, and opened the door to expose three heads with wigs that she once wore to make her more glamorous. "My beauty hair," she called them.

At one point I think my grandma had been quite a socialite, paying a lot of attention to her clothes and how she put herself together. But by my time, I knew her as more of a sensible pantsuit kind of gal. That morning, because I had opened the topic, she took me on a trip down memory lane. Grandma pulled out her wigs and put them on one at a time, and talked and laughed at how they made her look

Since it was just the two of us, it didn't take long before she wanted to see what I looked like in her wigs. It didn't end there. Grandma had never had her ears pierced, and before you knew it we were clipping on earrings of all shapes and colors to go with the wigs. Then she pulled out some of her old dresses, with a bit of jewelry, blush, lipstick, and face powder as the finishing touches.

I will never forget sitting at her dining room table at 10:30 a.m. on a Tuesday morning in conservative Lethbridge eating breakfast in full-blown drag. I was a seven-year-old drag queen! We were laughing the entire time, playing like we were two ladies in a cafe in Paris, asking the other if they might be kind enough to pass the jam, pass this, pass that, and then cracking up as my bracelet fell off when I reached.

Always up for an adventure, Grandma decided after breakfast that she would pull a prank on one of her friends, Irene, who lived in the same apartment building. We went running down three flights of the emergency fire stairs to Irene's floor. Grandma made me stand in front of the door while she knocked and then ran around the corner so her friend wouldn't see her when she opened the door. The result was hysterical. Irene didn't recognize me at all, and was trying to figure out who I was after I called her by name and asked about her grandchildren. Grandma couldn't stand it anymore and came running around the corner with tears of laughter streaming down her face. Irene was let into the joke and we all went inside to have tea together. On one hand, it was a strange thing to do, but it was done with such a spirit of fun that it all seemed just like a game. Grandma had such a sense of pride, showing me off to her friends, that it was easy for me to just go with it.

My dressing up became a huge hit with the older ladies of Lethbridge. It became something of a ritual and a high point of my visit for Grandma and me. At least once every trip we would spend the afternoon dressing up. Then we would play cards and talk at her dining room table. Every summer before I arrived, Grandma would get on the phone and start calling her friends to organize the big tea party that we would host. I was the official server in all of my finest, roaming the room with twenty of these senior ladies, all of us dressed to the nines. It was a chance for them to revisit their past.

It was also a chance for me to explore my future—a part of me that only Grandma was willing to acknowledge. There was no way that she knew that I was gay. Her generation didn't think in those terms, but she did know that I was different from any of her other grandchildren, and this was her way of saying it was okay.

She also knew the limits of this fun. At the end of every summer trip we put all of the clothes back into a box that would then be put back into the closet, where they stayed until the following summer. Although she was willing to share this with her friends, it was our little secret. No one from the family ever knew about this. Keep it in the closet. Even at this young age I got the message loud and clear.

The most colorful person in my childhood was my Auntie Dot, although it would take me years before I came to understand just how truly original she really was. Grandpa Tewksbury had two Dorothys in his life; one was his wife, the other his younger sister. Because Grandma went by Dorothy, I came to know my great aunt—my grandfather's sister—simply as Dot. She was a tall, strong, vivacious woman with jet black eyebrows, shocking white hair, and an unforgettable laugh that started as a chuckle deep in her belly and ended with both of her shoulders rising and falling, all connected by the biggest, most adventurous spirit and compassionate heart imaginable.

Until the age of seven I not only had all four grandparents in my life, I also had one great-grandparent. Grandma Coupland (my grandfather's mother) also lived in Lethbridge, but I was always a little afraid of her because she was so old and frail. As a young child I found visiting her creepy because her house smelled of mothballs and impending death. She was wheelchair bound, and couldn't communicate clearly anymore. When I went to kiss her goodbye, I had to avoid the drool that is an inevitable part of a very decrepit elderly person's life.

The saving grace was that when I saw my great grandma, I also saw Auntie Dot. A military woman who had become a much loved and celebrated teacher, Dot was the only one of her siblings without a family of her own, and she had committed herself to taking care of her mother.

In the summer between grades three and four, Dot planned a huge family reunion to bring all of our extended Tewksbury family together for perhaps the last time in Grandma Coupland's life. That year two significant things had happened to me. First, I had won the part of Prince Charming in my elementary school's production of *Cinderella*. I was pretty proud of that accomplishment, but truth be told, only three guys had tried out for the part, and I won simply because my voice was the loudest. My entire performance consisted of singing two lines that I remember to this day. "Try on the shoe, Cinderella; try on the shoe; it might fit you." When the shoe fit, I rejoiced, "The shoe, the shoe, her foot fits the shoe." Because this came near the very end of the play, I also doubled as one of the horses pulling the carriage to the big ball.

The other memorable moment that year was watching *The Sound of Music* on television. It was one of my mother's sentimental favorites, and although the movie finished airing close to 11 p.m. and my bedtime was usually 9, she decided that on this one occasion it was worth letting me stay up late.

Somehow these two events collided that summer through my Auntie Dot. I was sitting outside in our backyard when Dot approached me. She had a recording device in her hand and a mischievous look in her eye. "I heard you are quite the singer." I blushed and then said that sure, I had been in a play, but I only had a couple of lines. She then played my own voice back to me. Unbeknownst to me the play had been recorded and she had the evidence. Then she asked if I would participate in a production later that summer at our family reunion. She had always loved the song "Edelweiss," and wanted to know if I would be willing to sing it. It would ultimately become a lasting memory for the

attending adults when I forgot the words halfway through the song and my other great aunt, Aurora, started singing from the piano for support, exactly as Julie Andrews had done in the movie. I stood there traumatized, wishing it hadn't been so impossible to say no to Auntie Dot in the first place. Not that she would have taken no for an answer anyway.

Dot was the glue of the Tewksbury side of our family, undertaking whatever was necessary to bring people together. You never knew what to expect when going to her house for a visit, but you could be sure that something interesting would happen. The minute you arrived, she assigned everyone a specific task to get some part of the meal ready. No sitting around idly at Dot's house. She was one of those people who made things happen.

Her legend still lives on in Banff, where she once poured an entire bottle of bubble bath into a whirlpool tub and left the hotel room to get some soda, only to return to find a trail of bubbles leading out of her room and halfway down the hall. When her school's summer trip to the Calgary Stampede was canceled, it was Dot who rented a van and said to her students, "To heck with it, we are going!" She was the one who taught my younger brother to use a jigsaw, took me hiking in the mountains, and got my sister on a two-person bike. She was unlike anyone we had ever met, and we adored her.

For many years Dot had lived with another woman, Jean, who had rather seamlessly become part of our family. I don't remember the day Jean appeared for the first time or ever thinking twice about who this Jean person was. Ever since I was a little boy I had watched Dot take a caregiver role, and I, like my family around me, never thought twice about Dot looking after this lovely older woman as she neared the end of her life.

Jean was older than Dot by many years, and where Dot was extremely modest in her appearance, Jean was a glamour puss. Giving Jean a greeting kiss meant avoiding the bright red rouge on her cheeks and getting a lovely whiff of expensive French perfume. They were the eccentric pair in our conservative group.

In my early twenties, Jean died, and not long after, Auntie Dot became very ill and was hospitalized in Calgary. A simple cold had turned to pneumonia, which had serious implications given Dot's age. To me, that was a signal that it was now time for someone to do for Dot what she had done for others. I decided that I was going to visit Dot regularly and monitor her progress. But from the moment I entered her hospital room I knew that something wasn't right.

For the first time in my life I saw that the enormous spirit that I had associated with Dot was missing. She lay in a sterile white bed with her white gown and white hair and was so small and washed out that at first I didn't even recognize her. She looked completely worn down and defeated. I tried to talk, to get her to laugh, to show me anything that would help me recognize the woman I so adored, but she barely made eye contact with me. I had a sense she had given up on living, that she didn't seem to care if she survived this, and it terrified me.

When I went back the next day it was the same thing. I didn't know what to do, and I actually ended up getting angry with her. "Dot, you don't seem to care about living right now, but I am coming

back here tomorrow, and I'll be back the day after that, and you had better still be here when I arrive, I yelled at her. But I still didn't know what to do. I left her room, went to my car in the hospital parking lot, and burst into tears. What was going on? Where was the Dot I knew? How could this illness have taken away her will to live? Here I was, urging her to live, when she was always the one we all looked to for inspiration.

It would only be many years later that it dawned on me that perhaps Dot lost her will to live not because she was ill, but because Jean died before her. These two women had shared a one-bedroom house and were inseparable for many years, yet I never thought twice about the nature of their relationship. None of my family had. We all just assumed that when Jean died, Dot lost a friend, but perhaps the pain Dot was feeling ran much deeper than that. Maybe she hadn't just lost a friend. Maybe Dot had lost all that she had in her life. But there was no place for that kind of admission at that time in our family, no place for her to share that kind of information with anyone. I was a young gay man at the time, and even I didn't consciously clue in to it. I was part of a family, like many others, that was well-trained to see only what it wanted to see.

I went to see Dot every day for the next couple weeks. She finally went on to recover, finding her fighting spirit once again. It was slow going but her trademark deep laughter finally came back, so much so that even the hospital staff were sad to see this fun-loving character leave them. Auntie Dot would, thankfully, go on to live for many years.

When she did eventually die, this woman of seemingly modest means, who only wore second-hand clothes from the Salvation Army and drove the same car for decades, left close to a half-million dollars in savings to be shared by all of her remaining family. Just another hint of the many hidden surprises Dot kept so masterfully from us during her incredible life.

## **BARBIE IN THE BATHTUB**

Spending time with my Grandma and Grandpa Tewksbury was always interesting, but it was also slightly confusing because they called each other mother and father. And as a small child I could never work that out, especially if my own mother and father were there.

My grandparents loved to pack picnic lunches and go to parks and exhibits, play eight-track tapes and Frisbee, and hang out, but at the same time they were incredibly rigid in their opinions of what was right or wrong. Theirs was a black-and-white world. I saw this early in my childhood when we visited the zoo. After seeing the elephants and giraffes, we headed over to the monkey house where on this particular day the baboons were giving us a show. With each step we took toward the cage, a new baboon would swing against the glass wall to show its big, red swollen behind to us. It was monkey mooning. The other baboons would make a screeching, laughing noise, and then another would do the same thing. I was in hysterics being mooned by the baboons when my grandma freaked out, screaming, "Oh, Father, this is awful. This isn't right behavior at all. We have to get out of here now."

My Grandpa responded, “Absolutely Mother,” grabbed me by the arm, looked into my eyes, and with the most serious look said, “We don’t ever do this kind of thing.” Not that I was thinking of running into the wall bare-ass naked, but it was good to have clarification. This incident would later give me great insight into the ways of my own father. After all, these were the people who had raised him.

The only thing I could count on in childhood, at least until age eight, was moving. I was always the new kid at school, and just when it seemed like I was making friends and getting settled, we moved again.

When I entered grade three that changed for a while. We found a three-bedroom bungalow in Calgary that had everything we were looking for in a house. It was yellow, which was my mom’s favorite color. It had a big backyard and deck, which my dad liked. And finally there was enough space for every child to have his or her own bedroom. Unfortunately, there was a catch. I slowly came to realize as we were taking the first tour of the house that a three-bedroom bungalow meant there were three bedrooms upstairs. There was one for my younger brother, one for my younger sister, and one master for my mom and dad. That was when it hit me. Gulp. Where was I supposed to sleep?

Down the stairs into the basement, in the absolute farthest corner of the house, too far for anybody to ever hear anything should someone break in through the window that was located directly above where my bed logically should go, was my room. I hadn’t laid eyes on it for more than two seconds when I burst into tears—those huge crocodile tears you only cry when you are a really upset child. “Why do I have to stay down here by myself?” I blurted through the tears. “Because you are the oldest,” my mother replied.

She tried to point out all the great things about the room. “You get this big sliding closet all to yourself.” Sure, but it was the scariest closet in the world because it was so deep and big that no matter how hard you tried you could never get light into both ends of the closet at the same time. I spent years thinking someone was in there, jumping from side to side, hiding from me, and waiting until the middle of the night to get me. “You get your own bathroom.” Sure, a bathroom with two doors, one side connected to a laundry/storage room, which was a perfect place for some fiend to hide and attack me in the middle of the night.

My dad had listened to my mom’s niceties long enough. “Stop your crying. You are the oldest and you should be happy that you finally have your own room.” I just cried harder.

As the only girl in the family, my sister, Colleen, had inherited the bedroom set that my mother had been given by her father when she was ten. It was lovely, with a big double-bed frame made of the same wood that matched the dresser and vanity mirror. I would come to know it well.

Night after night I stayed downstairs, feeling safe in my bed as long as I heard the television set in the recreation room outside my door. Without that noise I lasted maybe thirty minutes before I would so terrify myself that I would run and join Colleen in bed upstairs. We came to have a very close bond in those years, not just because we slept in the same bed, but because everything we did drove our parents crazy.

Maybe it was because we both had been adopted, but Colleen and I both sucked our thumbs at night. We did this until really late in life, like still in grades three and four. Our favorite thing to do was to get our pillows nice and cold in the summer, and then as we placed our faces down and heated the pillow up we sucked away on our thumbs. It was better than chocolate and ice cream.

When Mom and Dad found us in the morning sleeping together in the same bed with our thumbs in our mouths, all hell broke loose. They tried everything to get us to stop. The worst were these iodine-like drops that tasted like sour acid on your tongue. But Colleen and I were both very determined, enduring the really disgusting seven-minute tortuous ordeal it took to dissolve the foul fluid to make it go down through to our nightly ritual.

The only thing that drove my dad crazier than the bed-swapping and thumb-sucking was my playing with Barbie. As fate would have it, my sister Colleen was a girl who could care less about dolls and girlie things. I was a boy who *loved* Barbie and girlie things. A match made in heaven, or so it would have seemed.

A tradition began when I was just a kid visiting Grandma Tewksbury that every night I could take a bubble bath and spend time playing in the tub. Grandma had a set of plastic animals that entertained me for years. But as Colleen became an age when Barbie entered her life, I set my sights on a new bath mate in Calgary. Barbie could bend and click, and that hair could entertain me endlessly. Getting the Barbie away from Colleen wasn't the problem; it was making sure Dad didn't catch me.

It became clear pretty quickly that my love of Barbie was not a good thing. In my dad's bipolar good-and-bad universe, boys with Barbie equal bad. Period. One day he saw me playing with the doll and it was too much for him. "Boys don't do this, Donna. This is not for him to play with," he told my mom. I think my mom on some level, even though she loved me dearly, agreed. But once you've had Barbie, it's impossible not to go back.

Many hours of my life were wasted on figuring out how to get Barbie, and then how to get her back without getting caught. For a long time it was easy because nobody cared about Barbie. I would casually carry her out under my shirt, and return her when I had finished playing later in the day. It became much more complicated when my sister and I turned the ages where brothers and sisters no longer enjoy sharing things, such as the back seat of the car on road trips—and Barbie. So, even though Colleen didn't want to play Barbie herself, she would tell my dad if she found Barbie missing just to see me get in trouble. My dad would grab the wooden spoon, his favorite weapon of discipline, and let me have it.

There were some very close calls. Sometimes, when I got older, my family went out and I stayed home alone so that I could take my bath. One day, when I had finished and Barbie still had wet hair, instead of putting her back I decadently decided to watch some Saturday afternoon television and dry her hair in front of our fake glass fireplace. Her hair dried much fuller looking that way.

Between the TV and me in my faraway Barbie land, I didn't hear the car drive up or the front door open. Then, all of a sudden, I heard my father's footsteps coming down the stairs. I stood there with a

towel over my head, one wrapped around my waist, and Barbie with her half-dried hair. I was so shocked that I turned in the direction of the noise. Barbie's perfect face hit the glass plate of the gas fireplace. Part of her face melted and a good patch of her long, blond hair was singed. The room smelled like burning plastic, and there was a long, black, streaky patch on the glass. I had maybe ten seconds to recover. I whipped into the bathroom, threw Barbie under the sink, opened the door on the other side, and met my dad there to help put away the groceries. Although I denied any knowledge of the black streak burned onto the glass plate of my dad's sacred fireplace, it was only a matter of time before Colleen discovered the burned Barbie and my dad put two and two together. I got a whooping that broke the wooden spoon over my behind.

I was only caught with Barbie in hand once more, if you will. I was in the middle of taking a bath and in came Dad through the door on the recreation room side, so I had a split second to hide Barbie. I shoved her as far under my butt and between my locked legs as possible. My dad sat down on the toilet, bottle of beer in hand, and decided it was time to have a little heart-to-heart on this glorious Saturday afternoon. I was about twelve. As I listened to him talk I could feel the air bubbles collecting under my legs. I was doing everything in my power not to budge, but in spite of my efforts, my legs slipped on the bare porcelain tub and midway through my dad's sentence, up popped Barbie. He was so shocked he just looked at me and left. Well, maybe gave me a look is a better way to say it. That time I escaped a physical beating, but got one with his eyes instead. It was the last time I played with Barbie for a long, long time.

## **THE ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW**

It came as a shock to my parents when I finally told them that I was gay, which came as a shock to me because I thought they must have figured it out along the way.

When I visited Grandma McDonald for one of the last summers before I had to forfeit my trips to Lethbridge in order to continue with swimming, something very strange happened. Grandma eventually developed serious Alzheimer's, and I now realize that this must have been the beginning of her forgetfulness. I was around fourteen, and it had been a year or two since we had done dress-up. I had begun to bring friends down with me when I visited, so some of our rituals had to be adjusted slightly.

But at the end of my trip, as I was leaving her apartment and my friend was already on the way to the elevator, she pulled me aside and said, "Take these old things home with you." She handed me a brown paper bag filled with two wigs and dresses. I was shocked, but thrilled. For years she knew the rule, but she seemed to have forgotten it herself this time. The clothes were let out of the closet, and with it my sexual exploration had been unleashed.



I think the only thing we boys spoke about at that age was sex. Well, we were teenage boys, after all! At school it was all about how far you could go with what girl, and at the pool there was this wild, untapped energy from a bunch of teens running around half-naked and physically exerting themselves.

Needless to say, my sexuality was awakening, and at the same time it wasn't able to express itself in a typical way. None of the guys were talking about how far another guy might go, unfortunately. Like a godsend these clothes arrived, and I found a new way to express myself.

I was fascinated with dressing in Grandma's clothes. It was different from when I was younger. Then it was just play. Now they became sensual, sexual. And even better, now that they were mine I had the freedom to use them when I wanted—well, up to a point. I still had to be careful.

I used to look forward to Saturday nights because often my parents would go out, and I would lock myself in their bedroom and play dress-up for hours. My brother and sister would be downstairs watching *Charlie's Angels*, *The Love Boat*, and *Fantasy Island* on TV while I was living my fantasies upstairs. I would put on this blue, low-cut, busty dress of my grandmother's that made me look really sexy.

I would fish through my mother's jewelry box, although I was limited to necklaces and bracelets because she had pierced ears. She worked at Shoppers Drug Mart and had every beauty product imaginable.

At first I would put on only the clothes and jewelry, but with time I graduated to makeup. I would pull out the elegant, long, black-bristled brush and gently apply powder, then do my eyes, with lipstick always last, just like Mom. The wig was always the final touch.

Although I would eventually become a very hairy man, I went through puberty quite late, and I was smooth-skinned and looked very pretty all made up late into my teens. The years of swimming, however, had left me looking muscled and strong.

I would look at pictures in a magazine, imagining these guys wanting to sleep with this woman I saw in front of me. Dressing up was a thrilling outlet for me to explore. Somehow I didn't think of myself as gay because I was fantasizing about having sex with a man while being dressed as a woman. For me it made sense, although I also knew it was a dangerous game.

I might have stopped there in the privacy of my own home had it not been for a fortuitous intervention. At that time a big hit song was "The Time Warp" from the movie, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. It starred Tim Curry, who plays a transvestite. I went to see this movie with my swim team, and we all loved it, but nobody loved it more than I did. There on the big screen was someone acting like I did in my parents' bedroom, but for the whole world to see. And everyone loved this guy. From that moment forward, I put all of the energy that other kids were putting into flirting and fooling around into *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Because it was such a cult classic there was a soundtrack and even a picture book complete with the comments the audience yells at the screen throughout the

movie. Finally I was not alone.

I only knew “fag” and “gay” as being ugly, bad things because already at school, people were calling me these things and treating me like crap, but through this movie I transformed. It was like a Transsexual, Transylvanian seal of approval. Not only is it okay to be different, it’s a full-blown blasphemous. In a sense I came out through this movie, although that hadn’t been my intention.

How could I not participate in a movie that was all about interacting with the crowd and getting dressed up? I picked a scene from the movie when we first meet Dr. Frank-N-Furter in his laboratory. The camera shoots the scene upward, giving the perspective of someone entering the space above them via an elevator. We first see high-heeled shoes, then fishnet stockings, then a green laboratory jacket, then this over-the-top made-up face with wild, curly, black hair. Dr. Frank-N-Furter breaks into his first song, which is the one I would stand in front of the audience and perform. The show only came to town on long weekends, and Easter was just a few weeks away. Now I just needed a plan.

Because I didn’t consider this a gay thing, I asked for help. I needed some fishnet stockings and makeup, which two girlfriends from Bishop Carroll High School said they would take care of for me. They said that I could get dressed at their house, because their parents were going out for dinner that Saturday night. Perfect. A friend from swimming whom years later would come out as well offered to go with me. He had a car. I desperately needed a car. I didn’t know how I would have used public transportation. Imagine sitting in full drag on Calgary Transit for an hour to go to the theater. Imagine the stares. Imagine the comments.

The only other challenge was my curfew. I had to be home by midnight, but that was exactly when the movie started. Another friend from swimming, Jonathon\*, was living with his divorced mom, who wasn’t very strict about what time he got in at his house. I arranged to stay there after the movie. Everything was in place.

All that was left to find was the green hospital smock. I remembered that my mom had something that might do buried in the back of her huge walk-in closet. There was this nasty looking green dress that I had never seen her wear. Under the chiffon was a layer of green plastic that would be a perfect double for the surgical gown. One night a few days before the weekend I took a pair of scissors and cut all the fabric away. What I found was that the seam in the waist was elasticized, creating an hourglass shape. That was less than ideal, but I took it anyway. It was better than nothing.

In the end, it turned out I didn’t need it. When I got to my friend’s house she had a real hospital smock, and when my makeup was done and my outfit was on all she could say was, “I hate you. I would kill for your legs.” The years of swimming were good for something, I thought.

I went to the cinema and joined the other people dressed up in line. Not everyone dresses up, but at least a good quarter of the audience had some getup on. I wasn’t the only Frankie, but was the only one dressed from the laboratory scene. My heart started racing as my part came up in the movie. “Am I really going to do this?” My friend gave me a bit of a nudge. I swallowed hard, stumbled to the front of the theater in my heels, and lip-synched the part, stretching out my hand to the crowd just like Tim

Curry was doing behind me in the movie. It was terrifying but when I later arrived at Jonathon's, I was still shaking with excitement.

The next day was Easter Sunday and Jonathon lived up north by the university, which was a fair commute, so I called my mom for a ride home. I called in the early afternoon so I'd have time to get home for the big dinner. I was still high from the experience the night before, amazed that everything had come together so well. When my mom answered the phone I could tell immediately that something was wrong. Her voice was small and strained. "Mom, is everything alright?" "Yes," she replied, but so quietly I could barely hear her. "Where do I come again?" I gave her directions to Jonathon's place.

Forty-five minutes later we were on our way home when my mom pulled the car over and broke down sobbing. Her face was teary and blotchy. I tried to imagine how she might have found out about the night before, but I couldn't. "How could you?" she demanded and started crying again. I was freaking out inside but wasn't willing to come clean. "What, Mom?" I whispered. There was a dramatic pause before she responded. "How could you cut up the dress that I wore as a bridesmaid to my sister's wedding? What possessed you?" I sat stunned. I had really screwed up.

The bridesmaid dress she wore to her sister's wedding. Gulp. No wonder it was so nasty, with all that chiffon and plastic. But I had no idea that dress that I had never seen outside her closet was so deeply meaningful to her. And in the end I didn't even use the damn thing. What a waste!

I didn't know what to say. This was Easter, not Halloween. Where do you begin? There was no place for me to begin, I couldn't even think of any lie good enough to make sense of this. I was stuck and speechless. "What is going on?" my mom demanded. I stayed silent.

My father was equally unimpressed. Instead of facing him I went straight to my bedroom and hid my head under my pillow in shame. After about twenty minutes my sister came to get me for Easter dinner. Even she had a mixed look of "what have you done?" and "poor you" on her face. My mom had cleaned herself up but still looked like she could burst into tears at any moment. My dad was waiting for me at the head of the dining room table. The look of disgust on his face was deeper than any I had ever seen before.

He was positively perplexed by my actions. "Look what you have done to your mother," he hissed at me. I hated seeing my mom so upset. I was sick with guilt, but could offer no explanation or excuse that they would understand. My mom started to cry, and so did I. "I am really sorry, Mom." But my dad continued, "Do you have anything to say for yourself?" I didn't. Not really. How could I begin to explain? What could I say? The truth? I wasn't even sure what the hell was going on myself. How would I start? "Well Dad, I think I like boys but since I can't find any to play with, I dress like a girl and then get aroused because I imagine the guys I like will have sex with me now because I am a girl and that is good because in conservative, moral Alberta boys only sleep with girls." But I thought things were bad enough as they were, so I didn't say anything.

My silence was interpreted as contempt, making my apology ring insincere. I really meant it. I was

sorry for everything. Sorry for ruining my mom's dress. Sorry for ruining Easter dinner. Sorry for being a boy who dresses up like a girl. Sorry that nobody seemed to understand me at all.

There had been a chance to get the truth out. Certainly the window of opportunity was there, but nobody was ready to take it, so no one spoke. The inevitable question didn't get asked, and nothing further was offered by me. It was one of the most painful holiday meals I ever sat through, just the clanging and scraping of knives and forks on plates and the quick exchange of looks, followed by the asking of permission to leave the table. We never spoke of this incident again, which speaks volumes about our family relationships and my secret.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### See Mark Run

#### THE THREE MUSKETEERS

I had a great start to junior high school. I had moved with my family to a brand new development in southwest Calgary, so new that none of the houses on our cul-de-sac had a lawn and most were still uninhabited. Across from us lay a vast area of undeveloped land, more wide than deep, that bordered an Indian reserve. The transit system in Calgary at that time left something to be desired; buses didn't come out as far as our house yet. To go anywhere you had to order a minibus, which meant a one- to two-hour wait for the 45-minute shuttle that took you to a centralized hub, where you could connect to the limited 1980s bus network.

I went to a new school in the area, a large, rectangular slab of concrete, with different wings, some portables, and a playground with new grass that hadn't quite settled yet. I had been in the public school system until now, but there had been a teacher's strike, so my mother decided to pull her Roman Catholic rank and got all of us kids into the Catholic school system. This was not only a new house in a new area and a new school; it was also a new education system.

At this new school I became friends fairly quickly with a great guy named Matthew Brown\*. Matthew was a tall, thin, but remarkably athletic guy. He had dark hair and pale skin and was smart. We hung out throughout grade seven, and slowly became part of a larger clique of guys at our school. This was where Jim Stone\* entered the picture. Jim was the real classic jock among us, playing quarterback and having the build of a young, muscled athlete early in life, surrounded by a kind of Clark Kent exterior, complete with glasses and floppy hair.

The fact that we were all athletic created a bond. I had started to swim six years earlier, but the irony was that on land I was completely physically challenged. I was enormously clumsy and my accidents often meant stitches, along with having twisted ankles and an oft-bumped head. But because I was a good swimmer and a fairly good runner, I was welcomed into this group of jocks.

Entry came with a challenge. For as long as I can remember, whenever I get startled, or tickled, or surprised, I make this shrieking, girlish, high-pitched noise. Once I have made it, it is guaranteed that someone around me will make a comment about how a man like me could make a shrill noise like that. This was the unfortunate sound I made in grade school whenever any flying object came speeding toward me, such as volleyballs, basketballs, and especially footballs. I would shriek before I could stop myself.

This certainly marked me as different in redneck, suburban, teenage, '80s Calgary. One reason that

Matthew and Jim left such a lasting impression on me was that they looked past that high-pitched noise and spent hours at Matthew's house throwing me a football, trying to teach me how to catch and throw and respond more normally. It never really worked; I still shriek to this day, but their efforts were greatly appreciated.

By the beginning of grade eight the three of us had all become very close friends. There were other people in the clique, like Bob Harvey\*, Chris Marcil, Donny Little\*, and with time, girls. That year saw the beginning of weekends with house parties and "sexploration" games like Truth or Dare, testing how far we could go with a girl. It was a fun time, with a good group of people. Life couldn't have been better. And then came Halloween.

Jim, Matthew, and I were going as the Three Musketeers. We dressed for school that day in our costumes and after school were going to hang out at a party then sleep over at Jim's house. It was quite a day. At one point I remember feeling absolute bliss—my teenaged life in the suburbs of Calgary was perfect. I had my friends and we had such togetherness, like the other musketeers. We were literally "all for one and one for all."

After school we met other people from our clique, including the girls that we were dating or flirting with, at one kid's house. Jim, Matthew, and I were each "going out" with someone, which in my case essentially meant there was a girl I would dance with when a slow song came on. Our teenaged games included kissing, sometimes deeply, accompanied by a little petting but nothing more. The Halloween party was charged, raging with hormones, and you could feel the sexual frustration in the air when the room of teenagers was told it was time to go home.

When we finally ended up at Jim's house it was around 11 p.m. We turned the recreation room area in the basement into a large bedroom for all of us, and as we got our sleeping bags ready, I stopped briefly in Jim's room to say something.

I had always thought that Jim was a great guy, but since the beginning of the school year earlier that fall I had started to develop strange feelings toward him. Earlier that night at the costume party I found myself staring at him as he was kissing a girl, feeling something confusing like envy, not because Jim was with a girl I wanted to kiss but because I wanted *Jim to kiss me*. I pushed the thought out of my head, trying to ignore it. But then something happened that I could no longer deny.

Jim had grown hair under his arms, which hadn't happened yet to any of the other guys. He was very self-conscious because he was the first, primarily because he didn't want to smell. As he was talking to me he lifted his arm to put on deodorant, and I caught a very slight smell of him. Forget musketeer, Jim was the musky-teer!

I had the most intense chemical reaction to his scent, like a bomb went off in my stomach. I think I did a good job of hiding it, but it was mortifying. I didn't want to feel this way, to have this kind of reaction. I wanted to forget that I had these strange feelings for him. But there was no stopping it. As we went back to the group all I could think to do was to keep my distance, which I did.

Later that night we all slept by the dim flickering light of a gas fireplace while the radio played. A

one point we were all conversing, but a few minutes later I realized that I was the only one still talking; everyone else had fallen asleep. I sat up and looked over and saw Jim. He was lying on his sleeping bag in his underwear, arms raised with his underarm hair exposed, and I couldn't take my eyes off of him. I just wanted to go over and cuddle with him, smell him, touch him. I stared for a moment and then, like it or not, my body moved toward him of its own volition. I hovered over him for a moment, wanting to play my own "sexploration" game, but before I went too far I forced myself to stop.

I remembered the flushed feeling I had when I saw Jim changing for gym class earlier in the month. I tried so hard to keep away that feeling of being attracted to him, but no matter how hard I tried, it just came back stronger than ever. And it came from the inside, out of my control.

I went back to my sleeping bag but didn't sleep a wink that night. There was nowhere to hide from the fact that I was in lust with my best friend, the quarterback jock who was the pride and joy of our Catholic school in conservative suburban Calgary. What the hell was I going to do?

## **A KISS OF FATE**

People often ask me when I first knew I was gay. For a long time, I didn't know exactly what it meant to be gay. Nobody ever spoke about this word in my world, except when thrown around as a form of slander. If you did anything out of the ordinary, or something that people thought was stupid, then people would say you were being "gay." It would be years before I understood the literal meaning of this word. But for a long time I sensed that I was different. As I was discovering sexuality with my adolescent peers around me, I was always the one who seemed to push things too far.

In grade school I fooled around with my neighbors, a set of twins who lived across the back alley from me. We used to play spin the bottle or wrestle, stripping or rubbing our bodies next to each other under the auspice of fun and games. That in itself was not so extraordinary, as many guys fool around in some way with other guys when first discovering their sexuality.

What made it so confusing for me was how disappointed I was when the session was over. Where the other guys would switch instantly to something else, say, going to play sport outside after five minutes of fooling around, I would secretly wish it would last for hours. Before we played together I would pray that the twins would be horny and something would happen. Thankfully in those days my prayers were often answered.

One afternoon we were downstairs in my basement bedroom fooling around. This had been going on for a few months, and as the stronger twin wrestled me to the ground I could smell his hair and sweat as he pushed himself against me. I could feel the warmth of his cheek against mine.

I got lost in the moment, and before I knew what I was doing I gave him a kiss. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to do. Not so for him. He stopped dead in his tracks. "What the hell are you doing? Boys don't kiss boys! What is wrong with you?" It was a fair question, but at the time I didn't

have an answer.

I always regretted that kiss. It was the kiss that sealed my fate, crossing a line that exposed me as different, a place from which I would never be able to return. My friendship with the twins was never quite the same after that day. Whenever we saw each other we were embarrassed and uneasy. The distance between us began immediately, forever replacing the closeness that had been what I cherished about our friendship.

This change in how I related to my friends would become a problem for me in my formative years. The closer I became to certain guys in friendship, the more emotional I felt about them. Instead of responding like a friend in situations, I would act more like a spurned lover, needy and possessive and jealous. The more my inner feelings showed, the stranger I seemed, and the greater the distance grew between my former friends and me.

In the weeks following the Halloween party, my feelings for Jim became impossible for me to keep under control. Once I identified the fact that I felt something for him, I was desperate for him to feel the same way about me. Unfortunately that would never be the case. Instead, my stares and demands and obsession remained unreturned, and my strange, new behavior took its toll on the clique.

Sensing that something about me wasn't right, my friends began to withdraw. One Friday afternoon late in the autumn of grade eight, I became terribly upset when I learned through the grapevine that there was a party at a friend's house and I hadn't been invited. Nobody had told me about it, including Matthew and Jim, as if they had forgotten about me, or worse, didn't want me there.

As I was being cut out, I watched Matthew and Jim, my two former buddies, become closer and closer. I was completely beside myself, wishing I also could have the close relationship Matthew had with Jim. I coveted them and became jealous, envious, and insecure. I wanted so badly to go back to the way things were, to be a part of what they were doing. To be invited to play ball, to hang out, to sleep over on the weekends. But there was no going back.

And no matter how hard I promised myself that I would change, that I wouldn't feel this way about guys, that I would act normally like the other guys at my school, I couldn't. The harder I tried to be accepted, the more my friends pulled away. Finally I gave up and withdrew. It was just easier not to have anything than to constantly want what I couldn't have.

I became a loner during this part of my life. I hated going to school. I constantly felt like a loser, someone who had been on the inside but now was out. But I found ways to make the most out of it, to minimize the damage. I lived only a five-minute walk from the school, so I would arrive just before school began, go home for lunch, and leave right at the end of the day, usually because I had swimming anyway.

Every once in a while there would be situations where I had to interact with my fellow students, like in the locker room at gym class, in the science room, or the industrial ed lab. Those were the moments I hated most, because those were the times I would see just how alone I really was.



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