

# INTRODUCTION

## Terrence McNally & Tom Kirdahy



**T**he best thing I've done in my long life is marry Tom Kirdahy. It was that moment, just a year ago, in the shadow of the Kennedy Center in our nation's capital when I understood who I was and all I still could be. The total commitment of two lives to each other is a profound moment for anyone, but for a gay man born in 1938 it was an overwhelming one.

Many of the men in *Gay in America* are younger than me, but we have shared many of the same years of furtiveness, fractured relationships with our families, and the feeling of exclusion from those most basic of constitutional tenets: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I wish I could remember how old I was when I first knew I was gay. I remember the sun on my back, the living room rug, the hard floor beneath, and the boy I was thinking of. I wish I knew the year now, because it feels like forever. It felt good down there and it felt right, I remember that. There was some remorse, of course (I wasn't a parochial school boy for nothing) but there was never enough of it to deeply scar and it was always trumped by the erotic longing I felt for my classmates. My church was strong; Eros was stronger.

The emotional attraction to men came later, in high school. It was another man's love and approval I needed. It was a man I wanted to share my life with. Both attractions,

physical and emotional, defined me as gay. I liked women; I loved men.

I'd seen enough movies to know that New York City was the only place to be for someone like me. I went to college, I had lovers, I began a career as a playwright. We went to all the out of the way gay bars, down dark stairs to rank basements to meet our kind. We let our hair down completely for three months every summer at Fire Island. Some of us even got into long-term relationships. Life was good. Well, it was good enough. After all, we were gay.

We would manage a life for ourselves. We would cope with the status quo. We would improvise. But we would never really belong. Words like "husband" would never be in our vocabulary except as a lame joke. We could go to church but knew to keep a low profile at God's table. We would probably never be parents. We were free to love but not to be legal. As I said, we managed. Some of us got very good at it.

But first Stonewall, then AIDS changed everything. The former showed us that we could fight back, that hiding out in our traditionally safe places—the bars and summer resorts—was not the only alternative. We had voices and we began to use them. AIDS taught us that our very lives depended on it. If we did not stand up now and take our rightful places in the world, we never would. Being gay became being serious.

It still is. Homophobia is shrinking like the malignant tumor that it is, but total remission is at least one generation away. When the battle of Stonewall finally ends it won't be with a bang but probably with a grateful whimper as an exhausted mentality accepts what it has known all along: good will among men, not hate, is the meaning of life.

To say "I do" to a man like Tom Kirdahy, my activist lawyer/producer/hero husband is a very long, very successful journey to this kid from Texas who spent half his life thinking being gay always meant coming in second. I write this as a happy man, approaching the end of my life. The stories of the men in *Gay in America* are part of my story, too, and why these last years are, truly, going to be the best. —Terrence

**T**errence and I have a twenty-five-year age difference. He came to New York City via Corpus Christi, Texas, in the mid '50s. I came in 1981 for college when I was eighteen. It seemed there were gay bars on every corner and gay characters were even beginning to make appearances on television. Gay pride was being celebrated on the anniversary of Stonewall. The parade had become one of the biggest in the city. Progress was in the air. The landscape was shifting for anyone who was gay in America.

But shortly after I arrived it seemed that all of New York was talking about a new disease decimating the gay community. Suddenly all of our progress was being challenged by a health crisis. It only made us stronger. The LGBT community of Terrence's generation taught my generation a lot about courage in the face of adversity. In what seemed like a flash, groups like ACT UP, Queer Nation, and Lesbian Avengers were taking to the streets, demanding the government take action. We made headlines everyday. We lost heroes but we developed leaders.

When I began law school in 1985 I was convinced I'd become a gay rights lawyer. Atticus Finch was my hero in literature and as a young boy I fell in love with Gregory Peck's portrayal in the film of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, so it seemed fitting that I'd try to become a gay Atticus Finch (okay, maybe I was also a little in love with Gregory Peck the handsome

actor). But AIDS altered the course of my dreams. Civil rights took a back seat to survival. I found myself representing people with HIV/AIDS with bread and butter issues: access to health care, housing, nutrition, and disability entitlements. Those issues took priority over laws that concerned themselves exclusively with sexual orientation.

Over time the landscape shifted once again. HIV meds improved dramatically. What was once a death sentence became a manageable chronic illness. And as the urgency of our needs surrounding HIV/AIDS receded to the background, our political demands brought other issues to the forefront. Nondiscrimination laws began to sprout up everywhere, more and more openly gay officials were being elected to office, the gay baby boom came into full flower, and same sex marriage became part of a national dialogue. In the '80s we read the obituaries first to see which luminaries we had lost. Now we go straight to the Styles section to see who got hitched. It is a testament to the resilience of our community that the narrative shifted from a health crisis to family planning.

In 2003, Terrence and I registered as domestic partners in both Southampton and East Hampton on Long Island. Later that year we were civilly united in Vermont by a justice of the peace. In 2010, we were married in the District of Columbia. We've been chasing marriage in New York for a very long time, and as soon as it's legal we'll once again exchange rings as we get hitched in our home state. Neither of our early lives could have prepared us for what we experienced on the banks of the Potomac last year. It's an exhilarating time to be gay in America.

Scott Pasfield's epic book is testament to the complexity, challenges, and joys of being gay in America. From cities like San Francisco to rural environments like Delta Junction, Alaska, and suburban locales such as Spartanburg, South Carolina, Pasfield has documented the lives of gay men who have found homes for themselves all over the country. It's a personal, funny, surprising, inspiring work that probably raises more questions than it answers. What does it mean to be gay in America? I think it's an unanswerable question. But after meeting the men of this book, I'm reminded that I'm sure glad I am. —Tom