

PREFACE Scott Pasfield

with his partner Nick



Ever since I can remember, I've known I was more interested in boys than girls. It has always been a part of who I am—it was never a decision or choice that I made. I also believed from a young age that it was entirely unacceptable. So I hid those feelings and tried my best to be straight. Nothing is worse than the self-hatred you feel when you are taught that something so integral to who you are is wrong.

We'd never had an out gay person in our family, so I was breaking new ground when I came out at twenty-five. For the most part, everyone was accepting. The only person I didn't tell right away was my father—I waited two more long years. Our relationship was so complicated and stressed, I feared his response. Dad spent his whole life searching for some elusive feeling of happiness, trying many different religions, philosophies, partners, and drugs along the way. At the time I came out to him, he was on his third marriage, to a woman who was a born-again fundamentalist, and he'd converted to her religion. When I first told him, he said he'd

need time to process and think about it. The following day he sat me down in my living room, turned on the TV, and left. He had made a video of himself talking to me—he couldn't bring himself to do it in person. On the video, he told me that he disapproved and that it was wrong to be gay. He said his associating with a known sinner would be problematic. But there was hope, he added: if I gave myself over to the Lord, salvation was possible. After watching the whole tape, I was devastated. We didn't discuss it again for many years.

I learned so much about how not to live by my father's examples. He beat himself up constantly for his addictions and desires. He believed deep down that he might go to hell for all he had done, and in the end, it seemed to me that religion brought him more fear than peace. I have such great memories of my father when I was young—he was so smart, creative, and talented before he allowed his self-hatred to chew him up. The man who I had known and admired was long gone, his hopes and dreams along with him. I would not make the same mistakes.

Dad was diagnosed with lung cancer at fifty-seven; it took him down in a matter of months. His wife wanted to put him in live-in hospice care. He would have no part of that—he wanted to die at home. So, I flew down to Florida and spent the last three weeks of his life by his side. It was one of the most difficult things I've ever had to do, but I wouldn't trade the experience and the time we had together for anything in the world. His opinions didn't change in the end, but mine did. He wanted to be forgiven for all the ways he felt he'd let me down. And I forgave him. It brought us both a lot of peace.

A year before my father's death, I had started going to a regular group-therapy session for gay men in New York City. That is where I met my partner, Nick. When I was struggling through my father's illness, he was there for me, calling me in Florida, making sure I was okay. When I came back to New York, we both realized that we had fallen in love over the past months and we couldn't ignore it anymore. The hard part was, Nick was with someone, and he still wasn't out to his family. He had two major hurdles to jump before our relationship could begin, and he did so, with grace and courage. This year we celebrate our thirteenth anniversary together.

People always tell you to shoot photos of what you love, and that objective is what led me to this project. I knew I wanted to photograph a subject that I cared deeply about, and to create a body of work that would make a positive difference in people's lives. Focusing my lens on gay men also meant looking more closely at myself, and I was finally ready to do that. I decided that I would find and meet a gay man from every state, listen to their stories, and photograph them in the hope that I could turn the material into a book that would change opinions and educate—the book I wished had existed when I was a kid. I wanted to produce a profound collection of ordinary, proud, out, gay men who would otherwise never find the spotlight. My idea soon became an obsession, and I set out to see the country through their eyes.

I placed ads and plotted out small trips, no more than two weeks at a time. The ads went something like this: "Looking for great out men, happily living their life where

they choose, who are willing to share their stories for the greater good and ultimately for a book that will make a difference." I asked them to write me stories about themselves for consideration and was amazed at the number of wonderful responses, far more than I could ever possibly hope to shoot.

The men I met and photographed taught me a great deal. Through their stories of love and heartache, pride and shame, courage and regret, I was able to reconcile my own lingering struggles with self-acceptance. My hope and belief is that others will find the same healing and love in these deeply honest words and images. This book speaks for the gay community, not through any one story or portrait, but through its collection of diverse and varied experiences and faces. I want it to educate people about the realities of what it feels like to be gay. I want young people to have it as a constant resource as they move forward in their lives, comforting, inspiring, and reminding them that they are just as normal and precious as any straight kid.

Gay rights are human rights, and if we focus less on general concepts like gay pride and more on the personal story of each individual, it becomes instantly clear that our similarities as human beings far outweigh our superficial differences. Our cultural views about sexual preference are evolving, but there's still a long way to go before we are all treated equally and fairly. By highlighting these great, complex, humble men who defy clichés and stereotypes, I am making my contribution to the slow process of positive change.

Up until this last year, having a uniformed gay soldier on the cover would not have been possible. In the president's State of the Union Address, he said, "Starting this year, no American will be forbidden from serving the country they love because of who they love." How powerful and moving to finally hear these words. And we owe thanks to people like Dan for making that possible. His stand against Don't Ask Don't Tell and its injustice is admirable. He helped right a wrong that was the basis for so much hatred. When I photographed him on that snow-covered street in Cambridge, I saw a man who was proud of all he was and had accomplished, and who just happened to be gay. That is true of every man in this book.