

## “A Confession & Regret”

This is the thing.

My brother George is gay.

I'm not supposed to know, but I do because a number of months ago I happened to find a set of photographs he had taken of a man who, it turns out, was his boyfriend at the time. Nothing explicit, but these photographs were intimate: The man sitting at George's dining table, first thing in the morning, drinking coffee with his hair mussed. I found the pack of photographs in my mom's car - George had either given them to my mom or left them there by accident - and I thought they were the last set of pictures we had taken of our family dog, just days before we put her down last July, so I opened the pack and looked. And found what I said: The sort of candid shots you might take of a spouse, moments that you would want captured but no one else would understand. He drinks coffee, has sleep in his eyes. These moments, captured when no one is made up or posing, no one presenting anything studied to the camera - these are the kinds of moments that people who are in love share with each other and no one else.

So I asked my mom about the pictures. "Who's this?" Straight out with it, my suspicions now all but confirmed in my head, just waiting for my mom to betray the truth in what I suspected.

She made a good show of it.

Mom looked at the first picture I showed her and said, "How should I know?" But I already had her. I said, "You should know because these pictures were in your car, mom. Something maybe dad should know about?" And this is how I had her: My mom, maybe believing for a split instant that I really thought these were photographs of her lover, something she had going on the side, allowed herself to smile at the absurdity of the question.

You have to understand: My mother and father are ridiculously, almost frighteningly in love with each other, even now, some 31 years into their marriage. They have the kind of love you see in movies, where two people knock into each other - actually, the story is better than that ... My mom and dad worked in the same office building in Elizabeth, New Jersey. She was sort of a glorified file clerk. About a week into her tenure, she was bent over a cabinet when my dad - who swears he was too shy to introduce himself otherwise walked past and, in a moment of uncharacteristic bravery and undeniable sexual harassment, spanked her. She protested, of course (Shakespeare quote here), but she told her mother that would marry him. Anyway, two people knock into each other one day and are together fifty years later, rocking away on their porch.

So I suggest that my mom might be having an affair, and with a man who (judging by the pictures) cannot be more than 25, and she cracks a grin. It is a look of incredulity mixed with relief, and I read it like a book. She tries: "No, nothing your father should know about." And I say, "Right. If George's gay it should be his little secret." And now the smile goes from my mom's face and she says, "I swore to him I wouldn't say a word."

A presentation I saw recently told of how gay men in the Caribbean often go so far as to marry women to keep their homosexuality a secret. The fear of ridicule and even physical humiliation is ever-present for these men; their presentation got to me, because I know I made my brother's homosexuality a secret.

This is how.

I have two brothers. George is 25, Henry is 21. I have always been closer to Henry.

When George was born, something went horribly wrong and he did not breathe for the first several minutes of his life. My mom will joke now that all babies are beautiful, and Henry and I were beautiful babies; George was a beautiful shade of green. It is not clear how the oxygen deprivation may have affected George - we laypeople might expect brain damage, but a 1570 SAT night score and a six-figure salary seem to suggest that he's OK upstairs - but what is perfectly clear is this: His body did not develop normally. All three of us are grown now, and these are our vitals: I am 6'0" and weigh about 170 lbs. Henry is shorter, 5'9", but thickly muscled at 165. George is 5'6" and maybe - maybe - 125. Growing up, his body did not develop muscle tissue normally. He could (and sometimes did) eat 5,000 calories a day and never put on weight; he had spindly arms and legs and the distended belly of an Ethiopian.

Because he had almost no muscle, George was something less than athletic as a kid. He was also terribly uncoordinated. Watching him run would make you giggle even if you were not his horse's ass of an older brother. If you were, watching him run would make you positively giddy. Henry and I were always close and always had similar interests. George, whatever his interests might have been had he developed normally, liked to stay inside and read. Understand: He was going to be our middle brother regardless of his muscular deficiency, so George was going to get picked on. But the muscular deficiency gave us ammunition that other older and younger brothers lacked.

We were savage.

We made fun of George for not having normal muscles, for not having normal coordination, for not having what we considered normal interests. called him weak and we called him goofy and we called him a wimp - and he all of those things - but we also called him gay.

We called him fag. We called him Cherry Boy. We called him damn near anything that came to our little brains. From the time George was maybe 7 to the time he was at least 12, I picked on him as relentlessly as any older brother ever picked on anyone. And for whatever reason, the biggest insult I could think to hurl at him was that he might be gay. It made a kind of sense back then: I thought of myself as athletic, rowdy, tough. Gays were delicate, sensitive, soft. Kids seldom question the stereotypes, and all kids know the stereotypes, so using homosexuality as an insult is a way of spending the world's most readily available currency. Here you have these words - chief among them fag - already invested with the most poisonous meanings, and all you have to do to heap the poison on your younger brother is utter them.

So I did it. For years. And George ran home crying from more neighborhood play sessions than I can remember.

And now he really is gay - not the gay I meant back then, the gay that means I hate my little brother and want to call him names - he's just gay. He happens to like men instead of women. And so what, right? So fucking what? I love my brother and I want him to be happy. I hope he finds a partner who makes him as happy as my mom and dad have made each other for decades hope he finds happiness regardless of whether he finds a partner.

You understand?

I have grown up. I believe homosexuality is as valid (yes, and normal) as heterosexuality. I believe people are people and no group of people is any one way, no one should be disliked without doing something to earn the disliking. Timothy McVeigh? Good candidate for disliking. The people who threw ice cream parties the morning of McVeigh's execution, celebrating the death of a human being? Even better candidates. But gays? Gays? All of them, the whole lot?

My brother is gay.

And my brother remembers the savaging I gave him when we were kids.

And as much work as I have done to repair our relationship - as many times as I have told my brother I love him - congratulated him as he hits milestones in his life his high school graduation, his 21st birthday - as many ways as I have tried to tell him that I am proud of him and want the best for him - my brother is gay, and he does not trust me to know that, even as certain as I am that I have changed, that I would never think less of him whatever the anatomy of his partner.

My brother thinks his sexual orientation is a thing that has to be hidden from me.

And that kills me.