

Pillow Talk

by Wayne Gregory



AN EXCERPT FROM

Fashionably Late

GAY, BI & TRANS MEN WHO CAME OUT LATER IN LIFE

Coming Out October 11, 2016

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Pillow Talk

Wayne Gregory

I slip into the warm bathwater and drape my arm over the side of the tub. My glass of iced tea and my cell phone are within reach. The phone rings the familiar Westminster Abbey ringtone. It's Terri, my ex-wife.

"Hey. Whatcha doin'?" I say.

"Soakin' in the bubble bath with my book." Terri's voice is calm.

"Me too."

"I thought you always took showers."

"Yeah, but just wanted to soak tonight."

"Look," Terri says, "I called 'cause I gotta know something. What's the right way to do oral sex?"

"Oh my God," I say. "This is like that scene in that movie with Rock Hudson and Doris Day."

"Which movie?"

"You know, the one where it's split screen and they're both in the tub on the phone."

"*Pillow Talk*," she says with her familiar, easy lilt.

"Except she wasn't asking about oral sex," I say.

"She could have."

We both laugh, and I ponder how far we have come in just two years.

Terri and I had been married for twenty-five years, although the last couple had been years of separation and unraveling. Unhappiness and depression had crept into our relationship and into our individual lives, but

we held on to our Christian dogma against divorce, genuinely hoping that there would be some chance of fixing things or, at least, some way to learn to live with the pain and disappointment. The only plan we ever had to end our marriage was *death do us part*, but our best efforts at keeping it together came to a screeching halt with a simple question one late summer afternoon.

I sit on the patio under the shade of the Asian pear trees. The August sun splashes its orange light across the yard. I am expecting Terri back any moment from her weekend trip to California. She comes out from the basement door and walks back to the patio. Her steps are slower than usual, almost hesitant. She sits in the Adirondack chair across from mine and looks away.

“How was the trip?” I say.

She grips the wide arms of the chair and turns slowly toward me. Her voice is deliberate, yet gentle. “Are you gay?” Her face is almost hopeful, as if the answer to years of frustration is finally at hand.

My breath drains out of me all at once, like someone has punched me hard in the stomach. The words I have dreaded to hear. The words I haven’t been able to say even to myself. The words I have hoped I can somehow avoid just a little longer until something can change me to normal. Deep down I have known that this might happen one day, and now, here it is. I’m incapacitated by irrational fear. I freeze in the face of her simple, damning words. I have no response, only reaction.

“Why would you ask something like that?” I say.

She tells me she has found the email message and the half-naked picture of myself that I sent through America Online to a man in Portland who calls himself MusclemanPDX.

This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening. The words rumble over and over through my head. I clutch the arms of the chair and begin to rock back and forth. Everything outside me and inside me spins like a whirlwind, unbalancing my world. I am losing my grip. I’m falling.

Terri stands up. “We *will* get through this.”

Her last words hang in the air as she walks away. I want to grab them, to pull them into my head and hold them there. But I know they are an illusion. She means it now, but she’s in shock. We will not get through this. I am going to lose her. Lose everything. For almost fifty years I have kept the lie together, only to have it shatter in a moment of hushed summer twilight.

That night, I stand in the doorway of our bedroom. Terri has been in bed since she left me on the patio a few hours before. My whole body aches from the weight of my guilt.

She studies me through red eyes. “I don’t know who you are.” Her voice is far away. “All those years thinking something was wrong with *me*.”

I hang my head, and my face melts like a candle.

“I’ve never had a relationship with anyone. It’s always just random. I never even knew their names most of the time.” The words sound foolish and unconvincing, but I want her to know that it isn’t because I didn’t love her. I’ve never wanted to find someone else.

She shakes her head. “But you were living a lie all those years.”

“I’ve tried so hard to fight it off, but I can’t make it go away. I think I’m demon possessed or something.”

She runs her hands through her hair and stares at the ceiling. “I can’t talk about this right now. I don’t even think I can get out of the bed. My legs won’t move. Everything’s a blur. We’ll have to do this later.”

I close my eyes and brace for the worst. “Do you want me to leave?” I say. I think I want her to say no, but I’m caught off guard by the flicker of desire for her to say yes.

“No,” she says. “But you can’t sleep in here.”

Tears drip down my face. I sag against the doorframe to steady my legs. I wish I could wake up, that this would all be just a bad dream. I have tried all my life to spare her this pain, to spare myself this shame.

Terri turns over on her side with her back toward me and turns off the bedside lamp. The light from the hall pushes past me and presses my shadow across her body. She almost disappears in the darkness. I close the door. Stagger through the house. Turn off all the lights. I want the darkness.

I slump into a chair on the patio. The moon slips behind a cloud and the stars are nowhere in sight. I weep into my hands and sob a helpless prayer, “Help me Jesus. Help me.” It’s pointless. The end has been a long time coming.

My life wasn’t supposed to end up this way. I grew up in the 1960s and 1970s in a small south Louisiana town full of religion. I was reared in the Southern Baptist Church and eventually became an ordained Baptist minister at the wise age of twenty. Two years later, after graduating from the mothership of Baptist higher education, Baylor University, I ended up back in my small town as the youth and music minister at a newly formed, interdenominational, “charismatic,” evangelical church. It was evangelical because we believed that those who weren’t born again were going to hell. It was interdenominational because it was full of people from a diversity of religious traditions—Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Mormon—and those with no religion at all. It was “charismatic” because it was a church where people raised their hands when they sang, spoke in tongues when they prayed, and anointed with oil to heal the sick. I was filled with the Holy Spirit and led by God. How could I go wrong?

Terri and I met in this church when we were very young, very devout, and very idealistic about serving God. Our first date was to a Christian rock concert by a group called 2nd Chapter of Acts, who was performing in nearby Baton Rouge.

All the way to the concert and back again, we listen to Christian rock music and talk about spiritual things, side by side in the cab of my baby-blue Ford F-150 pickup truck.

I tell her I am called to the ministry.

She tells me she wants to work as a missionary in the inner city.

I tell her that I want to one day have an international family.

She tells me she isn't sure she wants to get married and have kids, but if she does, she wants to adopt kids who don't have a home.

I tell her I want to serve God with my whole heart.

She says she wants to do the same.

By the time the date is over, I know I want to marry her.

"I'll call you," I say when I tell her goodnight at her door. I drive home, praying out loud. "Thank you, Lord. I know she's the one you ordained for me. I'm as sure as I've ever been about anything. Put the same love in her heart for me." I think of the ministry we will do together and the family we will raise. A thrill runs up my body. Now, I am going to be free from this unnatural urge inside me. "Thank you, Lord, for delivering me from those sins of lust that have been tormenting me for so many years. I knew that wasn't the real me. I knew they would go away." Amen.

Within three years of our first date, we stood together at the front of the sanctuary saying our vows and committing our lives together 'til death we did part. We had formed a deep friendship more than a romantic bond, but we never imagined that there was any way to live out our relationship other than in a good Christian marriage. We had come to the point that we couldn't imagine living life without each other.

The next twenty-five years brought a Ph.D. in Linguistics for me, a Master's in Education for her, and six adopted children for both of us—the international family we had dreamed of. After finishing graduate school, I left the ministry and we loaded up the family to move across the country to Oregon, where I hoped a new location and a new job opportunity would give me a chance at a clean slate. Yet my ordeal persisted.

Struggle. Hiding. Denial. Futile hope. I prayed, but with less conviction that it was going to do any good. Finally, well on my way to middle age, I realized that this “thing” I was fighting against was not something I had or something that had me; it was who I was. And it wasn’t going away.

While I realized I was thoroughly and hopelessly gay, I had built my external life around the illusion of heterosexuality. When the façade came crashing down on that August afternoon in our backyard, I went into a functional shock. Dazed. Disconnected. Depressed. But, plodding through the monotony of my life, trying not to reveal that anything was wrong, I felt as if I were standing on the edge of a precipice, staring into a wall of fog, forced to leap into the unknown. I had come out. There was no going back on that. But I didn’t know what it meant to come *in* to a full life as a gay man. I was afraid to find out. For the first six months after being outed, Terri tried to hold things together and get me to engage. She finally confronted me about getting help.

We sit across from each other in the wingback chairs of the great room one morning.

“If we’re going to make this work, we’re going to need help.” Terri leans on her knees and pushes her face toward me. “You’ve got to find a way to accept the fact that you’re gay.”

The naïve hope that I could always count on in her face, the optimism that glimmered in her eyes, it is all gone. She stares at me like she’s scrutinizing a stranger.

“And I’ve got to find out how to live with someone who’s gay. I need to find out if I even can,” she says.

But, I don’t want to be gay and I don’t want to be out. What does being out even mean? My only experiences with anything gay have been the random, clandestine encounters with men over the years that left me engulfed in shame and self-hatred. Being gay has been about hiding, not

about revealing who I am. I don't know how to start my whole life over, but I'm sure I don't want to.

Terri made an appointment with a Christian counselor, the first of several we tried. It was the only place we knew to go. For months we went from one counselor to the next, but nothing they said helped. It only seemed to make things worse. Terri was beginning to disconnect herself from me. Each day, she was drifting farther away, wandering in her own direction.

I wished I could muster up the hope and faith to crawl out of the hole I was trapped in, but the weight of shame and fear kept me buried. So I drowned those feeble wishes with more shame. And liquor. Lots of liquor. Jack Daniels. Vodka. Southern Comfort. Being a good Baptist boy, I'd been a teetotaler all my life. I had no experience with alcohol. At first it tasted like fire. I had to wash it down with Coke. But too soon, it started to go down easy. I'd drink more to forget, but I couldn't forget. I couldn't forgive myself. I just felt more ashamed, and the days all seemed to mash together. The thing I'd always been able to most count on was Terri. She listened. She championed me. She understood and shared my dreams. There was a lie between us, but all the good we had together had always sustained me, and I was terrified it would never come back. The emotional rift between us had taken that all away. I wondered if our truth and our nearly twenty-five-year history together would be enough to overcome the lie. I didn't know if I could live without her.

One night, I am drunk out of my mind. Sitting at my computer. Over half a bottle of 100-proof vodka in my empty stomach. Terri taps me on my shoulder. The room is a blur. Her body spins in front of me. My insides push out of me as if my body were coming apart. My gut convulses. I throw up on Terri's little white feet.

The next day, a steel gray morning. Terri leans against the kitchen counter waiting for the coffee maker to finish its gurgles and drips. Her arms crossed

on her chest. Her lips tight. She tells me she wants me to move to the basement apartment as soon as our youngest son goes away to college that fall.

“Is this it, then?” My voice sputters like a dying engine. “We’re not going to work things out anymore?”

The aroma of dark roast coffee saturates the room as she fills her mug. “I don’t know what we’re going to do. But you’re drinking yourself into a hole and getting more depressed by the day. You’ve got to at least accept the fact that you’re gay or else we can’t get anywhere.”

“I don’t want to be...that way.” The words tighten around my tongue and stick in my throat. I stare at the floor.

“You can’t even say the word,” she says. “The counselors can’t help us if you can’t be honest about who you are. That’s got to be the starting place.”

I stand in front of the sliding glass door at the end of the breakfast nook and stare into the dingy gray fog that conceals the valley below us. “I just can’t get past the fact that I’ve hurt you and I can’t undo it.” My words leak out like a deflated tire. “I just wish things could be right with us.”

“I want things to be right, too, but I don’t like to see you passed out drunk,” she says. “And I don’t like to be thrown up on.”

“I’m really sorry about that,” I say.

“I’m sure you are, but I just need some space right now.” She holds the mug tight inside her hands. “I’ll always love you. But I’m really angry right now.” Her words sound clinical and unemotional.

I don’t have the strength or the words to say anything. She is only a few feet away, but looks so distant.

“I’ve spent all our married lives trying to prop you up,” she says. “The more depressed you got, the more I tried to do whatever I could to make you happy. I can’t make you happy. I realize that now. No one can make you happy but you.” She puts down the mug and folds her arms. “I’m spending too much time and energy worrying about you. I need to worry about me for a change.”

Her words dump at my feet. So heavy. So final.
Outside, the fog thickens and smears the day gray.

The next month, I moved downstairs. We went days without talking or seeing each other. Every so often I could hear her light feet on the floors above me. It was better than no sound at all, but it made me lonely still. A few months later, she announced she was moving out altogether.

“We need a separation,” she said. “I don’t want to live in the same house right now. That’s not where this is going to end.”

We both knew where it was going to end, but neither one of us could bring ourselves to utter the word *divorce*.

“I just wish there was something I could do to make you forgive me,” I said.

“That’s not my problem. I can’t do anything to help you get rid of your guilt,” she said.

Her words hit me ice cold. I couldn’t hear a trace of sympathy in her voice.

“I need time to heal and I need you to make restitution,” she said.

“What do you mean?”

“You pulled the rug out from under me. My whole life has been wrapped up in yours. And now it’s all come apart and I’m left with nothing. I need you to give me the money I need to start over and get on my own two feet. You owe me that much.”

I did owe her that, and so much more. I determined I’d give her whatever she needed no matter what it took. It was the right thing to do and I had to do it. I couldn’t buy her forgiveness, but maybe the gesture could keep some part of her life open to me being in it.

She moved to the little college town nearby where she’d studied for her Master’s Degree. She had always felt something special about the place, but I suspected it was mostly because the move would take her away from

me, from the house, from everything that represented the marriage that was falling apart around us. We took out a second mortgage on our house and bought a fully furnished B&B a couple of blocks from the college. She decided to make a stab at turning it into a profitable business. She quit her teaching job and decided to make a stab at supporting herself. She was gone, and the gulf between us seemed ocean wide.

When she moved out, Terri took a few things to the B&B and left the rest with me. Furniture, art, pots and pans, once artifacts of the present, were now relics of our past. Living alone in the expansive two-story house we'd filled full as a family for nearly fifteen years was like roaming through an empty, after-hours museum.

We eventually overcame our reluctance to even mention the word *divorce* and began to talk about when, not if, it would happen. My life began to fall apart even faster around me. I lost interest and energy in things that had once stimulated me. I moved slower. I cared less about everything. The everyday responsibilities that had once gotten my attention, and sometimes my worry, now seemed irrelevant. I now had only my income to pay the bills, which began to pile up. We put the house on the market to get some financial breathing room. Its value had more than doubled since we'd bought it, but the real estate bubble was beginning to deflate. No one was buying. I got behind in payments. Warning letters began to come—first from the bank, and then from their lawyers. Bankruptcy was a serious possibility. Divorce was inevitable. I had always persevered through whatever challenges came along in my life, believing that somehow I could fix them. I had always been determined and unflagging.

“Once you set your mind on something, you're like a dog with his bone,” Mama used to say to me.

“You've got more energy and get more done than anyone I've ever seen,” Terri had often reminded me.

Yet, for the first time, I was powerless to control where my life was taking me. I had lost everything I had spent my life trying to hold on to. There was no fight left. I could only watch as my world fell apart. Soon, she insisted we get an official divorce. I met her one day at the lawyer's office to sign the papers.

Terri is cordial, nothing more. Her face seems a bit brighter than it has been as we sat at the desk to go over the papers. She nods at the lawyer's explanations, then signs quickly.

I stare at the pages. Couched in legalese, the words seem cold and indifferent. They begin to blur on the pages as unexpected tears gush down my face. My chest gives way to sobs I can't stop.

The lawyer says nothing.

Terri stays put and doesn't rest her hand on my shoulder the way she would have once done.

It takes a moment to pull myself together, but I wipe my eyes clear and sign the papers.

"I thought you were ready for this," Terri says to me as we stand next to her car outside the office.

I start weeping again. "I thought so too."

I think I see some pity in her eyes at this point, but she lets me cry and offers nothing in response.

"I never dreamed we'd get to this point," I say.

"Neither did I." She folds her arms. "I thought being married was for life. I bought the whole idea. But that stuff we used to believe about marriage? About two becoming one flesh? We had it all wrong."

"What do you mean?" I say.

"It's not just giving up who we are and just melting into each other. Being one doesn't come from two halves. It comes from two wholes. And I'm not whole." She puts her hand on my arm. "Neither are you."

We say goodbye and go our separate ways.

Over the next few weeks we spoke only sporadically. The house where I lived alone seemed even more desolate than before. The marriage was over, but the end of it all was yet to come.

One day as our Japanese magnolia tree begins to unfurl its purple-white blossoms, I'm cleaning out the garage. The large door is open and a fresh breeze disturbs the pile of dirt I'm trying to sweep.

Terri pulls into the driveway then steps into the edge of the garage with a box in her arms.

My pulse begins to race as I see the grim shape of her mouth and the dark sunglasses that hide her eyes.

We stand silent for an awkward moment.

I step forward to take the box out of her arms. "What's this?" I say.

Terri shifts her body ever so slightly. She appears to stand taller. Her feet press against the concrete floor. "I can't keep this anymore," she says.

I set the box down and open the top. "It's all our wedding albums and family pictures."

She takes off her sunglasses and moves toward me. "It reminds me of our marriage. Of you. And, I can't—" She stops short.

"Can't?" I say.

Her face tightens. "I can't have you in my life right now."

The last pieces of what I care most about crumble with her words.

"I have to move on with my life without worrying about you anymore," she says. "My body is sick. I'm not going to survive if I don't take care of me."

I know she's right. My denial of myself all those years has also denied her an authentic life. She vowed at our wedding altar to stay with me through sickness and health, for richer or poorer, 'til death we did part. But she didn't pledge to stay with a lie.

Terri holds out a small box. "I don't want this anymore either."

I take the box and tilt back the top. It's her wedding and engagement rings. "You always planned to melt them together with mine one day and make a pair of rings for us. Remember?"

"Well, there's no reason for that anymore," she says.

My wet eyes stare at her. She doesn't look angry, just empty.

She turns to leave, then stops at the edge of the garage. "I don't know if this is forever, but it has to be for now. Don't contact me."

My shoulders sink and my head begins to reel. "But when will you be ready to talk to me again?"

She slides on her sunglasses. "I don't have to answer that."

My life, whatever it might become, will be lived without her. There is no us anymore. It's just me.

I watch her drive away, and the sensation of relief surprises me. I wonder why I don't feel upset, why I'm not depressed and crying. Now I understand. The inevitable I have dreaded is over. The tears dry up. My heart settles down. The sadness and pain I have anticipated take another route. Something like hope rushes through me as if I have burst through the surface of a dark pool just as my breath is about to give out. It is not just the end of our marriage, but the end of any life together. Single and alone. It is time to start over.

The funny thing about losing everything is that there is nothing more to lose. And with nothing to lose, I had nothing to fear. While I didn't have any idea of what being openly gay would mean for me, it was the only life I had now. I knew I had to leave the place of my past and transplant to new surroundings. I had a little help from the busted real estate market when the bank foreclosed on the house. For the first time in years, I needed a place to live. So I looked forty miles north to Portland, a city I had fallen in love with since first moving to Oregon twenty years before. It was a place where I had only secretly explored a life that I was now on the brink of embracing full on.

Yet even though I had begun to tell work colleagues and other friends that I was gay, I still resented having to *come out*. It wasn't fair that I had to go through some odd ritual to explain who I was based simply on who I wanted to sleep with. Heterosexuals didn't have to do that. Why should I have to explain myself and bare my personal life to everyone?

Then, one day, I understood.

At the university where I work, a visiting poet is holding a reading in the community room of the university library. I'm sitting in the back behind a row of three openly gay, male students. I don't know them, but I know about them and their popularity campus-wide. In all, there are about fifty people in attendance, a mix of students and faculty, gay and straight. Like me, the poet is from Louisiana but relocated to the West Coast years earlier. In his skin-tight jeans and partially unbuttoned shirt, with a white silk scarf garnishing his neck, he embodies the stereotypical gay artist. His poetry is sharp and funny, made all the more entertaining by his breathy and sonorous cadence. As he reads each poem, the audience responds with laughter and applause.

Sitting tall on the edge of their seats, the bright-faced gay boys in front of me seem mesmerized by the poet's every word and animated movement.

I can only imagine the solidarity they must feel with him and the normality it reinforces in them. I remember back to when I was their age. What might have been different had there been just one openly gay man I could have watched the way these boys watched this poet?

Maybe it wouldn't have mattered, given the time and place of my youth. But, then again, it might have given me a sliver of hope that there was an explanation for those dangerous sensations that were churning inside me. But no one in my world was openly gay back then. The only thing close to gay men were the few flamboyant television personalities like Paul Lynde, Charles Nelson Reilly, and Liberace. No one acknowledged the obvious

about them. No one in my world ever used the word *homosexual*. Eccentric, they were called, and it was always said with a tone of reproach. Whatever they were, I knew I didn't want to be like them.

But when I see the gleam in those gay boys' eyes in front of me, I realize right then that coming out is not just about me. It's about the collective power of authenticity that gives everyone the freedom to be normal. The reason I felt abnormal and wrong all those years is because I had a skewed presentation of what normal is. Normality is numeric. Being gay becomes accepted when everyone who is gay lives like it's acceptable. Now I can finally say out loud those three little words that have been so impossible and unthinkable: "I am gay."

From that moment on, I was out with abandon. Things began to change. I had been unhappy in my university job for some time but never felt I could leave. I had a good salary, benefits, a growing retirement. It would be reckless and irresponsible to leave a job like that unless I could move to something equal or better. The trouble was, nothing ever seemed to come along. But what had once seemed impossible or foolhardy now felt necessary.

I quit my job, cashed out my retirement, moved to Portland, and wandered into the gay community. I joined the Portland Gay Men's Chorus, began to make friends, and learned about drag shows, Pride parades, and hookups. I also began to write. I had wanted to be a writer since I was fourteen and watched John-Boy scribe his life in a Big Chief tablet each week on *The Waltons*. Over the years, I had only written in fits and starts, and all of it was self-indulgent, brooding, and smothered in religious platitudes. But now the writing poured out of me in a voice that was loud and liberated. The more I wrote, the more I changed. Everything I had never found in religion, despite my monumental efforts, now sprang up in me like April blossoms. Faith. Fearlessness. Persistent joy. What I felt on the inside, I lived on the outside. Someone new was emerging in my skin.

It wasn't happening just to me. Terri was on her own path to healing and self-discovery. She started calling more often, and we talked about the changes that both of us were experiencing. She still felt distant, and there was still a Terri-shaped gap in my life. Yet we shared the realization that it's much easier to find what you want when you live who you are. I was standing on my own feet. And she was standing on hers. The experience we shared of each becoming singular was bringing us back together in a different way. We were becoming best friends again, which is all we both had ever really wanted.

The tub water sloshes when I reach for my glass of iced tea. The ice tinkles as I take a long sip.

Terri is still laughing about Rock and Doris. "So what's your advice on the oral sex thing?" she says.

"Go slow and watch the teeth," I say. "And just ask him what he likes. It's not that hard."

"No. That's not the problem," she says, and we both burst into breath-grabbing laughter.

"Can you believe we're talking about this stuff?" I say after a moment.

"Who'd have thought?" she says. "We've come a long way."

I stare at the irregular yet deliberate pattern of black, white, and gray bath tiles on the wall and think how understated her words are. "But how did we get here?" I say. "This ain't exactly the norm."

"I think I had to believe that you were really out of my life before I could get on my own feet and find out who I was, for a change," she says.

"Too bad we didn't know this back in the day. We could've just been best friends and missed out on all the pain," I say.

"Back in the day, getting married was the only option for a man and woman who were as close as we were," she says.

"And as religious," I say.

Terri's voice sounds gentler, softer. "I don't want to do go through it again, but it got us where we are now, and I'm just thankful to be here."

"Same," I say. "Life's too short, and now that I know how to live it, I don't want to waste any more time on regrets."

The bathwater has cooled, and I am ready to get out. "Yep. Just like Rock and Doris, us two." We both chuckle. "How does that movie end anyway? I don't remember all of it."

"Same way they all did," she says. "Happily ever after."

About the Author

Wayne Gregory, author of the memoir *The Tongues of Men and Angels*, is a graduate of the Attic Atheneum and a former Hawthorne Fellow. His work has appeared in *The Sun*, *Alltopia*, *Ashe Journal*, *The Hawthorne*, and the Lambda award-winning anthology, *Portland Queer*. He is a linguist and a faculty member at Portland State University and also teaches creative writing at the Attic Institute. Wayne is a proud father and grandfather and a card-carrying member of the Portland Gay Men's Chorus. Originally from Louisiana, he now lives in Portland, Oregon.

About *Fashionably Late*

Fashionably Late: Gay, Bi, and Trans Men Who Came Out Later in Life is a collection of stories by men who came out well into adulthood. It covers topics ranging from divorce, conversion therapy, dating as a newly out man, finding community, experiencing biphobia, and transitioning during middle age. The collection was curated by Vinnie Kinsella, a Portland-based book publishing professional who himself came out as gay at thirty-four.

Contributing Authors: Patrick Cornelius, William Dameron, Clayton Delery-Edwards, David Gillespie, Wayne Gregory, Andrew L. Huerta, Anil Kamal, David B. Livingstone, David Meischen, Samuel Peterson, Robert L. Ramsay, Joseph Schreiber, Joseph A. Shapiro, Reid Vanderburgh, Jean-Pierre Vidrine, and Van Waffle.