

I,
ROB
GRAVES

My Struggle with Childhood Trauma,
Homosexuality, and Bipolar Disorder

A M E M O I R

ROBERT P. GRAVES

I, ROB GRAVES

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I, Rob Graves is a work of nonfiction. Some names and characteristics of some individuals have been changed.

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Preface



Such an odd title for a book: *I, Rob Graves*! But I cannot take credit for the naming of this book. My dear friend Matt said that I must name it *I, Rob Graves* after I told him what I had been dealing with for the last 20 plus years. We were on vacation together with a group of friends, drinking poolside, when I announced that I would be writing this book. I was not going to hide any longer and confided in Matt and my other friends. They could not have been more supportive, and for that, I thank them. Matt and I were chatting about our lives, and he turned to me and said, “You know what you need to call the book?” He paused, and I encouraged him to continue. He said, “*I, Rob Graves*,” which I have been doing for the last 20 plus years. Every time I put myself in harm’s way, I was cheating death and robbing a grave of my body. I fell in love with the idea, and the book title was born before I wrote one word.

Now that we have the business of the strange title out of the way, let me introduce myself. Hi! I am Robert P. Graves. My family calls me Robbie, at work I go by Robert, and at home I go by Rob. I am going to tell you a story, and that story is based in Buffalo, New York. Yes, I am proud to be a Buffalonian. We are a strong group of people, known as the city of good neighbors, and where our winter weather is legendary. Oddly enough, this book was written at sea in the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico. The outline for the book was primarily written in the Caribbean Sea while on a cruise just before the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The book itself was written on a houseboat moored off the coast of Clearwater Beach, Florida, for a period of ten weeks at the height of the pandemic in 2021. It was the best experience of my life. I was alone with my laptop and my memories where I could cry whenever I needed to, burst into uncontrollable laughter when I wanted to, and write day and night.

This story is about me, my life, what I did to overcome great adversity, and the journey I took to get here. This story is about my life as a gay man growing up in a rust-belt city and struggling with the issues of divorced alcoholic parents. My life was littered with deep depression that appeared at an early age and bipolar disorder that manifested itself early in my adult life. I tell the stories of my real-life struggles with childhood depression, anger, and rage, and

an anonymous sex addiction that went unchecked during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. These are just some of the topics that I will tackle because of my mental health battle. Struggles that these mental health disorders created for me like the millions who suffer from them.

Throughout the book you will read stories of my life that will make you cry and make you laugh. More importantly, they will make you think. They will make you think about the concept of forgiveness and the concept of acceptance and how both these when used together can be powerful tools in your own healing journey. You will read stories that may seem redundant or peripheral, but they all help paint a broader picture of my life in which I was always fighting for acceptance whether it be acceptance at one of my many jobs or acceptance among my friends.

I will spend a good deal of time talking about the art of forgiveness and the art of acceptance and how I was introduced to the concepts in talk therapy by an amazing therapist, George, to whom I have dedicated this book. Throughout my story, I reference my time with George and the fundamental changes he made in my life through introducing me to these two live-affirming concepts.

Now I welcome you to take this journey with me and in the end, I hope that you will look at your own life, your own challenges, and be able to find forgiveness and acceptance where needed.

Derby



Moving day is my earliest memory. I was almost five, and it was my job to gather all the wire hangers in each of the closets and put them into bags so we could throw them out. To this day, I still find it ironic and somewhat amusing that of all the things I could remember, I chose to remember wire hangers. Mommy Dearest would not be too pleased. It was the spring of 1978, and my parents were keeping up with the Joneses and moved my brother, sister, and me to the suburban town of Derby, New York, about thirty minutes south of Buffalo. It was your typical raised ranch 1970s-style house. The house was white, and the walls inside were white; my father did not want any of the walls to be painted any other color but white. The only color in the house was the red shag carpeting in the

family room. This was in stark contrast to our city home with its bright yellow kitchen, deep orange living room, and the black-and-white main bathroom, with a checkered floor and newsprint wallpaper. Both houses were on busy corner lots with lots of traffic, perfect for families with small children. I want to believe that I loved the house in the city, but I do not even remember any of the events during my four-plus years there. There are so many events before collecting wire hangers that I should remember. There was an infamous blizzard—that killed dozens and left tens of thousands of people stranded, including a dozen or so of my father’s coworkers, who were stuck at my house for days—that I should recall, but I don’t. I have seen plenty of photos with snowdrifts taller than me, but all I know is what I learned about the event from the history books.

The real story starts in Derby, New York. It was your typical rural town on the cusp of being suburban, with tract-home developments on any plot of land a farmer would sell. It had a McDonald’s and a Pizza Hut. The house without color was ironically on Black Road, alongside 18 Mile Creek, on a large corner lot with lots of trees. It had three white bedrooms, one and a half white bathrooms, and a great big family room on the ground floor. Even our furniture was without color—it was black-and-white tweed.

We were right across the street from the town pool. It was great—all the benefits of having a pool in your backyard without having to clean or maintain it. It was a summer

ritual on the first day of the season to go to the Parks and Recreation Center and get our passes for the summer. I loved the pool and quickly grew fond of the many lifeguards there. They quickly grew to love me as well. Hell, I was a great kid; I was kind with a warm smile and an infectious laugh, what was not to love? And when I say I was there every day, I mean every day the sun was shining. The lifeguards were so fond of me they even threw me a big birthday party with cake and gifts. The only problem with this party was that I was not there. It was one of the few days that it was raining that summer.

One of the lifeguards that I became friends with was James; he was tall and thin, about eighteen, with golden blond hair bleached from the combination of the summer sun and the pool chlorine. One day, James picked me up and grabbed me around the waist. His tight grip gave me goosebumps on that sweltering summer afternoon. His grip around my body made me feel secure, safe even, safer than I had felt in a long while, since moving to Derby and starting my short life over again. I straddled his torso, his muscular flat torso. I could feel his tan skin against mine. I wanted this feeling to last forever, and then without warning, he jumped into the water with me attached. It is what I had been asking him for, and he was finally giving it to me—taking me to the bottom of the deep end of the pool. Somewhere I had never been. I held him even tighter, and he responded in the like. Deeper and deeper

until we reached the bottom. When we surfaced, I thanked him with a huge hug and asked to do it again. I was seven and still in that childhood phase of wanting to do things repeatedly. Truth be told, I did not want James to ever let go of me. With much disappointment, I finally had to let him go and let him get back to work. When I look back at my relationship with James now, I realize that I had a massive crush on him. This would be the first of many crushes I would have throughout my childhood on members of the same sex. I did not know what gay was in 1980, when James grabbed me and jumped into the pool's deep end. What I did know is that James made me feel safe and secure when he was around.

Throughout the year, there was always something to do, rain or shine. Springtime in Derby meant we could get out of the house without looking like Randy from *A Christmas Story*, and we would often go for hikes in the woods alongside the creek or take our annual trip to the daffodil farm, not far from the house. It was a beautiful sight to see—acres and acres of daffodils in bloom, just ready to be harvested and sent off to the local farmers' markets. My siblings and I, along with some of our friends, would hike to the back of the farm so as not to get caught by the farmer and bring home big bouquets of daffodils for our mom.

Winter in Derby was just as fun and just as memorable. There were colossal sledding hills in the forest alongside the creek that we would go to on weekends. One of the

dads even put down an old wooden ladder alongside the hill to make it easier for us little ones to get back up the hill. This went on for years until one of the older kids from the neighborhood hit a tree, broke his arm and leg in several places, and had to be carried out from the base of the hill by the fire department. The ladder was quickly taken away and our parents forbade sledding on that hill, which sucked because it was the best sledding hill in the history of sledding hills.

So, what are a bunch of kids to do when you cannot go sledding? You build massive forts in the snow piles created by the snowplows on the side of the street. You see, Derby was in the heart of the western New York lake-effect snow belt where narrow bands of heavy snow would form over the warm waters of Lake Erie and dump the snow within miles of the shoreline. We would get as much as three feet of snow during a lake-effect snow event, and the piles alongside the road would get to eight-feet high and just as wide. We would build massive forts in the snowbanks and tunnels up and down the road to get from one end of the street to the other without being seen. Why you ask, do you need these tunnels? Well, so we could hit cars with snowballs, then run and hide and not get caught.

My tenure at Highland Elementary School was another story; my first day of kindergarten did not start well. I remember getting on the school bus without issue, and my brother was there to help me. My parents told him

to make sure I got to my classroom, but that did not happen. We somehow got separated in the craze of hundreds of students trying to find their way around the school; one minute Ryan was there holding my hand tight, and then we got bumped, separated, and boom—I was lost and scared, and I began to cry. Not just a little cry; I mean a good old-fashioned Oprah ugly cry. Some kind soul brought me to the office, where they found out who I was and got me to my classroom, but I was so distraught that I could barely breathe. This scene repeated itself the following year in 1st grade, complete with the ugly cry. I was hopeless.

My only real memory of kindergarten was that of the much-beloved lunch ladies. There was one that I will never forget—well, I forget her name; I am terrible with names, so we will call her Lunch Lady Jones. Lunch Lady Jones was as kind and caring as they come. She always greeted you with a smile and was always willing to help. She was in her forties, and she was an average-sized woman with one exception; how do I put this politely? Her butt was enormous. So much so that she could rest a small child on her posterior. And that is what she would do if your birthday fell on a weekday during the school year. She would pick you up, swing you around and bounce you on her butt while the whole lunchroom cheered and sang “Happy Birthday.” I was always so thankful that my birthday was in July, and I could live vicariously through the other kids.

Life in Derby was good, at least from what I can remember. We were doing just what my father wanted—keeping up with the Joneses. We had left the colorful house in the city for the house without color in the 'burbs. I look back now and just laugh to myself because for all that my father saved us from by moving to the 'burbs, specifically the rising crime and poverty rates, I do not have a single memory of him ever living with us; he was always working to afford the house. I can recall the day my parents sat us down to tell us that Dad was leaving, but I do not recall the emotion I felt that day. Was it because I did not think anything would change? I do not recall huge fights between my parents; I do not remember anything about their pre-divorce relationship, other than mom wanting to get a job outside of the house while I was in school. That summer between kindergarten and first grade was like any other summer. I swam, I biked, and I played with my friends. The first memory I have of my father is when he picked us kids up in his new green Ford Mustang and took us fishing well after the separation took place.

It was several months after the separation, Christmas-time, and I had spent much of the day alone with my mom running errands. We drove up to the house with no color to find my siblings, Ryan and Renee, putting up the Christmas tree. The artificial tree was only half up, and I could tell they were having trouble. The tree was straight out of the '70s, with big, bushy branches and very few tips. The

branches' bases were color-coded for easy assembly and even I knew how to do it. Even before Mom and I got into the house, I could see through the large picture window they were having trouble, and I was furious for no reason at all. We were parking the car and I was screaming, mad that they were doing it wrong. I carried on in a rage of anger as I made my way into the house. My brother and sister looked at me as if I had two heads; what I found only increased my rage. The tree was together all wrong, and even Charlie Brown would not be happy. This battle would continue well into the evening as my mother fixed the tree, following the color-coding that Renee and Ryan neglected.

The rage had come from nowhere. It just appeared. I ended up passing out from exhaustion and slept until late afternoon the next day. When I woke, the tree was up but not decorated. We would do that as a family later that evening.

MY AUNT LAURIE was living with us in Derby, my mom was working full-time as a server at a local bar, and my father was only coming around on his court-appointed visitation days. When I was not at the pool, I was tooling around the neighborhood on my BMX bike, which I had gotten for Christmas that previous December. My friend Jimmy and I had an ongoing debate about who had the better BMX bike. Jimmy was a great friend; he and I were friends from the start. We both came from a broken home and we both

accepted each other without judgement. One of the few kids in the neighborhood that did not look down at me for my parents being divorced. One summer day, right before my ninth birthday, we decided to switch bikes and race down the big hill on Black Road. We started at the top of the hill at his driveway, and at the bottom of the hill was the finish line at my driveway. The first one there got bragging rights for the rest of the summer. I was halfway down the hill, going much faster than Jimmy—I had to admit his bike was faster than mine—when suddenly I hit a huge pothole, and the bike stopped. I went flying over the handlebars, landing face-first on the pavement with the bike landing on top of me. I could not move; I could not breathe as the air had been knocked out of me by the impact. Jimmy ran and went to get help from the neighbor whose house I had landed in front of. I just lay there motionless, with Jimmy's bike on top of me. The neighbor came out and got me, carefully removing the bike, and carrying me into his house, leaving my four front teeth there on the pavement, never to be seen again. Jimmy had summoned my aunt, and when she arrived, she and my neighbor tended to my wounds. My mother, who had been at work, quickly raced home, scooped me up, and took me to the hospital. Thank God nothing was broken, but I was without those front teeth for the better part of a year before my adult teeth grew in.

Jimmy's bike was a mess; the tire was destroyed, and the frame was bent. It was totaled, but my mom bought

him a new bike, so he ended up with the same exact BMX bike as mine. So ended the great debate of who had the better bike.

THIRD GRADE LEFT me scared. By now, my parents had been separated for well over a year. The house without any color was on the market to be sold. Unlike my first three years of school, where I have little or no memories about the teachers or my classmates, I have a strong memory of my third-grade teacher. She was tall, well over six feet, and would walk down the hall with her head always tilted to the left. She managed her classroom with an iron fist. There was no joy in that classroom, at least not for me; you see, I was a poor-performing student at that time and could never, ever, seem to get my work done on time. While other kids played with their friends, I tried to get caught up on my work.

There were other kids in the class with similar issues with the amount of work that she handed out, and we were all relegated to the back of the classroom with our desks in single file. Those students with good grades and their homework assignments completed got to sit with their friends in groups of four at the front of the class. I can remember my mom trying to help me with my homework on several occasions, but it was a lost cause. I had lost all interest in learning and there was extraordinarily little that

brought me any joy; I was in the midst of my first bout of depression. I would remain at the back of the class for the entire year of third grade. This caused me great stress, and I can recall many times not wanting to get out of bed to go to school. I was eight years old and in a deep depression. What was there to be happy about? My parents formalized their divorce and my father remarried soon after, to the local drunken bartender and part-time stripper. But the real problem was the man my mom started dating that year.

This gentleman caller was Salvador, a local police detective. He was a bull of a man, six-foot, four-inches tall, and he was a proverbial brick shit house. He always carried his service weapon. It was the first time I had seen a gun. To say that Salvador scared me was an understatement. And for good reason.

He and my mom were not exclusive and had only been dating a brief time when my mother agreed to a blind date with another gentleman, which had been set up by her lifelong friend Jerri. Jerri had known this other gentleman for a while now as they went to the same church. The babysitter, our neighbor Heather, had just arrived and mom was finishing getting ready for her date when I heard the garage door open, which I thought was odd because we weren't expecting anyone else to come over, especially someone who would enter through the garage door. Suddenly I heard the entry door smash open as if someone had kicked it in. It was Salvador, and he was coming up

from the ground level of the house. He looked pissed. He was wearing the blazer and dress pants typical of his position as a detective for the local police. Our eyes met, and I could see the anger and rage inside him. He and my mother started yelling, and a few minutes later, Heather told me to go get my shoes and jacket on quietly. The yelling escalated. I quickly got dressed and put my shoes on. Then I heard a sound that no child should ever hear—the sound of a 6’4”, 275-lb. man hitting a petite woman of 5’4” and 105 lbs. My mother let out a scream that sent me into a panic. Heather quickly rounded up my brother, sister, and me, telling us to run to her house; we ran down the stairs and out the open garage door. The door into the basement was off the hinges, with the frame lying next to the door. The four of us ran through the field between our houses, screaming for help. Heather’s father, Mr. Hartal, came running out of the house. Heather quickly told him what she had just witnessed. I was crying; that ugly cry was back where I could not breathe and could not speak. I was terrified that Salvador would kill my mother, and I had left her there to fight on her own. Mr. Hartal returned outside with his eldest son, Michael; both had shotguns in their hands. I later learned that Mrs. Hartal called the Sheriffs’ office. By now, Mrs. Hartal had us kids inside, and my sister was trying to console me. We heard the deputy’s sirens go speeding past the house, then stop. Shortly after that, my mother appeared in the kitchen of the Hartal home, her face badly bruised,

her lip bleeding. Mrs. Hartal gently led my mother into the bathroom, where she attended to my mom's wounds. This sight haunted me for years and left me paralyzed with guilt until therapy taught me that there was no other choice but to run. It took years to forgive myself and to accept the fact that I made the right decision that night.

Mr. Hartal and Michael returned to the Hartal home and stayed outside with their shotguns in hand until Jerri and her husband John arrived to gather up my mom and us kids. We would spend the night at the DeRosa home, the adults drinking coffee at the kitchen table while the kids slept on the living room sofa. At least I pretended to sleep.

It was just a few months later the house without color finally sold and we left suburbia for our next adventure, moving back into the city of Buffalo, leaving the pool, leaving my friends, leaving my life. I did not know what was in store for me next. Would moving change anything? Would it end the pain of the divorce and the violence?

Edson Street



While moving day in the summer of 1978 was an adventure, moving day in the summer of 1983 was an adventure of another kind. We were moving back to Buffalo after living in Derby for the last five years. We went from living in the house without color to living in a second-floor walkup apartment on the city's Southside. Edson Street was your typical South Side City Street with mainly two-family homes known in Buffalo as a “double”—one apartment on the first floor and one on the second floor. This new apartment had three bedrooms and a bathroom, a living room, a dining room, and a huge double kitchen. What it did not have was a central heating system or a stable electric system. The only heating source was a modest gas-burning stove in the dining room, centrally located in

the house. This was fine for my brother and me, whose bedroom was right off the dining room and got plenty of heat from the stove, but my poor sister and mother, whose bedrooms were on the front and rear of the house, were left to freeze during those frigid winter nights. For the three years that we lived there, I lived in fear that the house would burn to the ground because of the frequent electric problems we had. My mother could not use her curling iron and blow dryer simultaneously, for it would blow a fuse. We had to get a cat, which none of us minded, to control the mice issue. It was a slum, and I was mortified by it all.

Ryan and Renee quickly made friends in the new neighborhood. It would take me a few months into the school year before making friends of my own. This was thanks in no small part to my father. You see, because of the school's mediocre performance record, my father did not want his children to go to Buffalo public schools. God forbid. He quickly worked up a scam to use his friend's address in the town next to us, West Seneca, to get us into the West Seneca schools. Edson Street was on the border of Buffalo, with the lower half in Buffalo proper and the upper half in West Seneca proper, so all we had to do was walk to the end of the street to catch the bus. No problem. This scam worked for exactly one semester. When the school mailed our report cards home, they were returned by the post office, which opened an investigation. We were caught red-handed walking from the bus stop in West Seneca to our

apartment in Buffalo. We were forced to leave the school the next day. This was how I started the fourth grade, in scandal. The following day my mother took us to register at the local Buffalo public school. School #70, Indian Park Academy. We started at School #70 that very day, and I can recall walking into the classroom wanting to cry again. I was so nervous, so many things going through my head. Would I make friends? Would they accept me? It was all so overwhelming to go through this again for a second time. I held it together. I did not cry. I walked into the room and quickly took my seat.

That summer was the summer of *Star Wars*. The epic *Star Wars* trilogy had just been completed with the release of *Return of the Jedi*, and Ryan and I were huge fans. We spent a lot of time at Grandma Bridge's house playing with the neighbor boys Scott and Jamie Rayburg. We would ride our BMX bikes over to Woodside Avenue, where my grandmother had lived for years and years. We would play *Star Wars* in the back of my grandmother's yard. It was perfect; the tall bamboo grass weeds that plagued my grandmother's yard for years were the makings of a perfect Forest Moon of Endor. Mr. and Mrs. Rayburg were good people and kept us fed while we were over there playing with their boys. Never did they tell Ryan and me that we were not welcome when it came to meals. Mom would try to help at the first of the month by sending over a package of Sahlen's hot dogs that we all loved. Even though Mr.

and Mrs. Rayburg were gracious hosts, over that summer and into the next, Scott and Jamie made sure that we knew that they were better than Ryan and me. They made sure we knew that they had better clothing, better toys, and a better life.

On my Eleventh birthday, the summer of 1984, my mom wanted to have a party for my new friends and me. Scott and Jamie would indeed be invited, as were my new friends that I had made in 4th grade at School #70. The party would be the first time that Scott and Jamie were over to the Edson Street slum. We always went to their house, played with their toys, and played the game they wanted to play. They showed their true colors that day and commented about the apartment, making a judgment that Ryan and I had to share a bedroom. They even made a judgment about the gifts I received from other friends as if their gifts were the best gift and, therefore, the only gift worth having. I did not know that this behavior was wrong. Mom saw everything that took place that day and pulled Ryan and me aside just as the party was winding down. She let us know that it was wrong for them to be so judgmental and that we had every right to be upset. Ryan understood this more than me, but we decided as a family that day to be treated with respect. Later that day, Mrs. Rayburg picked up Scott and Jamie from the party, and while saying goodbye, I let it be known that it would be the last time we would be seeing them.

Mom was drinking heavily now. She would drink Miller High Life by the case. She worked at Chandy's, a bar in Hamburg, New York, a small town halfway between Buffalo and Derby. That is where she had met Salvador, who was now back in the picture. The first Christmas was great at Edson Street. We got a windfall of *Star Wars* toys thanks in part to Salvador, I am sure. Mom did not have two pennies to put together, so I am sure that Salvador, to gain forgiveness, paid for most, if not all, the Christmas gifts that year. We were on food stamps. I hated that and refused to use them if mom sent to me to the corner store.

For the most part, mom would keep us away from Chandy's except for the rare occasion when she could not get a sitter for us. We had just moved into the Edson Street slum, so mom was without the neighbors to watch us. On this Sunday afternoon, she would take us with her to Chandy's for what would be a day of drinking. My siblings and I were relegated to the basement banquet area to watch TV and play. Mom was dating Salvador, who made it clear not to bother the adults upstairs. There was endless soda-pop at the bar that my sister figured out how to use, and Mom would bring us down chicken wings for a snack. The day quickly turned to night, and Mom realized she needed to take us home when she found us all asleep at one of the banquet tables.

We all piled into the driver side of my mom's red Ford Gran Torino. The passenger side was smashed in and did

not open without a great deal of force due to a recent hit and run while the car was parked on Edson Street. I was half asleep at the start of the drive but would awaken as my sister and mother argued about mom's driving. Mom was all over the road. Cars were passing, honking, and flashing their lights at us. Mom finally pulled over into the parking lot of a motel on the way home. With all her might, Renee forced that passenger side door open and jumped out of the car. She ran into the motel office and asked for help. The desk clerk allowed Renee to use the phone to call Grandma Jean for help. That help never came as Grandma Jean could not drive at night due to vision problems. The only help we got was from the motel clerk feeding Mom coffee and helping us get the passenger side door closed. The fear and anger in Renee's face led me to be paralyzed far into that night. Mom drove us home the remainder of the way after the hours-long break at the motel. The silence on the remainder of the drive home was profound. We never spoke of that night again until the issue came up in therapy years later. Just one of the many things I would need to grant forgiveness for.

FOURTH GRADE WAS the first time I saw another naked male. It was in a magazine that my brother's friend was showing us. I was more into seeing the men than the women. Why? Why did I want to see the photos of naked

men? Why did I feel so secure when James held me in his arms at the bottom of the pool? I felt I was the only one in the world who felt like this; certainly, there were no other boys like me at my school. What was this feeling? I was nine years old in 1982 and I had no idea what gay was. There were no gay role models on TV or in the public eye for that matter. I had a very narrow view of the world. There was no CNN or cable TV. My world revolved around my *Star Wars* toys and making sure my brother did not steal my Hans Solo action figure. There was no way I would ask my mother or father what gay meant; hell, I did not know there was even a word to describe my feelings or even try to tell them what I was feeling. The safety of the closet was where I would feel most secure.

One summer day, we went to play with our old friends on Minnetonka Ave where we had our first city home. The one with all the wire hangers. It was better than hanging out at Grandma's house, who was watching us while Mom was working, and there was no one else to watch us. We were playing cops and robbers. I was a robber and loved getting caught and put in our play handcuffs. It aroused me! To be dominated by another man gave me an erection even at such an early age. Fourth grade is where I started coming of age with feelings of being gay. This feeling caused me great stress to the point of feeling suicidal. I was doing homework and feeling very overwhelmed. I could not focus. All I could think about was the guns downstairs and how I

could end it all if I could just get into that locker. I told my mom about the suicidal thoughts. Mom was very passive about the whole thing. Salvador was there, and they were on the couch. She said I would be OK, hugged me, and told me to finish my homework.

Something inside me knew that I was different from all other boys like I have said. I needed to make sure that no one would ever know my secret. I did what the other boys told me I should be doing, going after tail. That is a quote from Jimmy and Chris, not my words. Anyway, my friends all encouraged me to go after Jennifer. She was a tall, pretty, blonde girl of Polish descent. She was convenient to date because she was on the way to and from school, so I did not have to go out of my way to pick her up and walk her to school every day. We were the “It” couple at School #70, Indian Park Academy’s fourth grade class. Things were great, I was going steady with one of the prettiest girls in the class, and she was the perfect cover for my secret. That was until we hit a rocky point in our relationship.

I do not recall what we were fighting over, but it was probably her fault. We were fighting on her front porch or in her front yard when her father came out and told me to go home. I was nothing if not respectful of adults, so I left. But I was pissed at Jennifer for whatever the fight was about. I came home to find my mother and Salvador in the kitchen of our Edson Street apartment. Mom could see I was mad and did what any good mother would do,

offer me cookies and milk to find out what was wrong. Then something happened that would forever change the course of my relationship with Jennifer. I told what I thought was a little white lie. I told my mother, and even worse, I told Salvador, that Jennifer's father had hit me. Why? I have no idea what came over me or why I said it; it was like vomit coming out of my mouth, and once it was out, you could never put it back in. As they say, the shit hit the fan; Mom and Salvador went rushing over to Jennifer's house to confront the man, who did nothing but yell at me to go home. The next day, I would be called down to the principal's office for a stern lecture... We had a long talk. More like he had a long talk with me, telling me the consequences of my lie if I chose to keep up with the story. I went home that day and told my mother the truth. She quickly called Jennifer's father to apologize and ask for his forgiveness. Jennifer never spoke to me again. I did attempt to contact her and ask for her forgiveness, but my request was rejected by Jennifer and her family. We ended up in different homerooms the following two years, so we did not have a chance to interact with one another in school, and she was forbidden to interact with me outside of school. I was forbidden to talk to her, go by her house, and was grounded for a month. This was a huge lesson in consequences in that it taught me that my actions have them, and even the sincerest request for forgiveness can be met with rejection.

IT WAS SHORTLY after Christmas when the next beating happened. I was with Peter playing a board game in the dining room. Mom and Salvador were drinking beer in the kitchen. Ryan was babysitting downstairs. Renee was who knows where. I needed to use the bathroom, and that required passing by Salvador. He would not let me pass even after I said please. I said please again, and he must not have liked my tone because he pushed me back so hard that I fell backward over the chair and onto the ground. I got up, adjusted my clothes, and went to the bathroom. Mom told Peter to leave, which he was more than happy to do after seeing what happened to me. I told him to leave his front door open. I knew what was coming. Peter left, and I went to my room. I heard the beating start. The yelling, the screams of pain as I heard his fists hitting my mother. I ran out of the house without even my shoes to call the police at Peter's house. Thank God, Peter listened and had left his front door open. Once again, as a child, I am forced to choose between staying and be beat myself and protect my mom or leave and get help. I chose to leave. The police arrived very quickly, this time to get Salvador out of the house. He was kin to the police, so he was never charged with any crime. It was the early 80's, and domestic violence was still considered the woman's fault. The last time I saw Salvador, he was being put into his truck by the police and driven away down Edson Street. That was the final time. I went home as soon as I saw him pull away. I found my

mother sobbing at the kitchen table. I grabbed her and held her in my arms for what seemed like an eternity. She was bruised but alive. Mom quit Chandy's the next day. Chandy's was Salvador's hangout, and, in those days, there were no restraining orders we knew of.

For me personally there was no loss when Salvador left that night for the final time. We had no relationship to speak of. He was not attempting to replace my father in any way. His only redeeming quality was that he filled our freezer with food and made sure we did not go hungry. To me he was a meal ticket. Years later I tried to understand their relationship in therapy but that understanding never came. What I was able to accomplish was forgiveness for his actions against me and my mother. That was the goal after all.

Middle School



Mom left Chandy's. Thank God. She would go back to school for Cosmetology and do something she had wanted to do most of her life: be a Cosmetologist. This was an interesting time for our family on Edson Street. My mom was not working, and we were living on my dad's child support of \$140 per week. We did get food stamps, but we did not qualify for a monetary welfare payment because of the child support payments. We did not have Salvador around to stock our freezer with food, so we learned to make do and relied on the school breakfast and lunch program for our primary source of decent food during the school year. Summertime, we relied on the free lunch program at the local park. I am not saying this was my only meal while mom was going to school, but it was a big part of our food

plan. This was the norm for our neighborhood. We lived in the inner-city and everyone I knew got free lunch at school and we all went to the park during the summer for food. I did not know any different.

While mom was going to school, she made many new friends, as one does in school regardless of age. One friend was Randy. Randy was gay. Yes... GAY... can you stand it? It was 1985, and a grown man in Cosmetology School came out as GAY. What are the chances? Randy was the first gay man that my mother had met and the first gay man I had ever met. He was super friendly. He was tall, with bleach-blond hair, and thin as a rail. He would even come to spend the night during bad snowstorms that were frequent in the winter of 1984/1985. This was a significant event for me. Up to now, I only knew gay men to be freaks and queers and faggots and any other derogatory name that my father and uncles would come up with. Here was Randy, a regular guy, and I was glad to know him. He made me realize that if mom could like Randy, then maybe, just maybe, mom would like me. Mom and Randy lost touch after they finished school; even today, I often wonder what happened to him.

Fifth grade was just like any other year. I was sad all the time. I thought about death a lot but got out of bed to go to school and lived my life as best I could on Edson Street. I had my friends, but I knew I was different from all the other boys I was friends with. Jimmy and Chris both

played on the Pee Wee football team and were on the Little League team. I could not be bothered with sports. When Mom introduced me to Randy, her friend from Cosmetology school, she explained what gay was after Randy's boyfriend came to the house one morning to pick him up after heavy snow caused his car to get stranded on the side of the road the night before. Mom's acceptance of Randy and his boyfriend did not help matters. Would she accept me if I told her I was gay? Was I gay or was I simply confused? Those feelings were so confusing for me. I knew I should be attracted to girls, but I had a massive crush on Greg Louganis on the U.S. Olympic Diving Team, and I cried when he hit his head on the diving board and fell into the pool. Oh, and seeing him in his Speedo made my heart race. I knew that it was *not* normal for a boy to have those feelings for another boy.

We did not see much of my father around this time. He had been remarried to a local stripper bartender three days after my mother signed the divorce papers. Suzy was a peach of a woman, a pill-popping raging alcoholic who would drink vodka Kool-Aid by the pitcher. She was super thin, with big fake tits and bad bleach blonde hair. My mother did not want us kids to be around her, so visits with Dad were few and far between. Several years into their marriage, we went over to their house for dinner; it was a mild day for mid-December, there was no snow on the ground, but the Christmas tree was up. My father's house fronted

the town park, so Ryan and I would play in the park whenever we would visit so I did not have to interact with Suzy, who was drunk much of the time. It was rather ironic that my mother did not want us around Suzy considering she herself had become a raging alcoholic by this time. Was Mom just being spiteful towards Dad? It was hard to say.

I can recall the last time I saw Suzy; she was bombed and in a bad mood, so Ryan and I did what we always did when we went to their house—we played in the park. My father was yelling for us to come home. We assumed it was time for dinner, but boy, was I dead wrong. When we got up to the house, my father was hit with a pot of goulash that he was making for dinner. The pot bounced off my father and onto the ground; the goulash went all over. My father quickly yelled for us to get into the car that was parked out front. We did just that. We watched the house to try and see anything, and we did. About ten minutes later, we saw the Christmas tree go flying across the living room in front of the big picture window. Shortly after that, my father emerged from the house and quickly drove us home. That was the last time I ever saw Suzy. Dad's second marriage would end in divorce shortly after that.

SIXTH GRADE WAS more of the same. Good grades and deep sadness are how I would describe the sixth grade. There was another term that I would use too... closeted.

I was in the closet and was not coming out. By this time, I knew I was gay, but never in a million years was I going to come out. It was 1985, and the AIDS epidemic had been raging for a few years now. Ryan White, the Indiana teenager who had contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion, was all over the news. I saw what those people did to him and his family. I was not going to have that happen to my family; after all, AIDS was known as the gay plague at that time. No way was I coming out. I was content to be in the closet. It was the safest place for me at the time as in my eyes gay equaled death. The fact that gay men were dying at an alarming rate scared the hell out of me and for good reason. Was I going to die just for being gay? This is the thought that went through my head at this time, and I had no one to speak to about my feelings. It was for that reason and that reason alone, I kept quiet about my sexuality.

I WAS STANDING in the living room of our Edson Street apartment, and I was looking out the front window. The house was cold that early March day. I asked my sister why she and my mother had been fighting so much; when she told me she was pregnant, I wept. She was only fifteen and I was afraid for her, afraid for our family. As the months passed, the fighting between her and my mother eased up. My sister knew that she needed my mother's support more

than anything. My sister was going to a private Catholic high school, and she was expelled when the school learned of her pending birth. She would transfer to the Our Lady of Victory Homes of Charity, a school and boarding house for teenage girls who were with child. My mother never told my sister she had to leave the house and was incredibly supportive of the pregnancy in general. Was she happy about it? No. But she was not about to kick my sister out of the house to live God knows where. Towards the end of my sister's pregnancy, she was huge; she could not fit into any shoes that she owned, so she wore fuzzy slippers everywhere she went. We lovingly called her "Waddles" for the last eight weeks of her pregnancy.

Was my mother's support of my sister during her pregnancy a sign of what would happen if I were to come out of the closet? Would my mother have the same unconditional love for me that she showed my sister? For me, I did not see how Mom's support of my sister would correlate to support of my homosexuality. In my eyes the two were vastly different. At the time, the only example of what might be a response was when my mother told me to stay away from one of the local parks where it was widely known that gay men were "*spreading the AIDS*" as she said. This comment did not bode well for me or my cause and gave me the nudge needed to lock the closet door from the outside as well.

Around that time, Mrs. Pecoraro came over for a visit and told my mother that they would be moving. Mr. and

Mrs. Pecoraro were the parents of Tony, Jeff, and Mikey, all great friends of my brother and sister. We are still friends to this day with the Pecoraro boys. Mrs. Pecoraro, on that visit, would offer my mother a chance to leave the Edson Street slum for a new apartment on the other side of the creek in a better neighborhood and a much safer home for us kids. No mice, no shoddy electrical system, and a central furnace. My mother jumped at the chance. We would move the weekend of Labor Day, 1985. Renee was forever trying to get out of doing things. Now that she was pregnant, she did not have to share the chores. She was with child, and God forbid she scrub the toilet. This was true with the packing and moving. She was two weeks past her due date when we moved and went into labor during the move. My brother and I went over to my aunt and uncle's house while my mother attended to my sister in the hospital. My sister would labor for two days and gave birth to a whopping nine pounds two-ounce baby boy on September 2, 1985. Anthony Edward Graves was and is the jewel of my sister's eye.

Renee would bring Anthony home to Heussy Street a few days later. Renee was an awesome mom, even at such a youthful age. She took to motherhood very well. This would prove to be problematic for my sister's and mother's relationship. Mom was very protective of Anthony, and this caused great stress between the two of them. Renee was also extremely independent by now and chose to leave the

house before Anthony was even crawling. It was shocking to me, but Renee moved back to an apartment on Edson Street, where she had all her friends and a support system that did not consist of her mother.

My sister's pregnancy caused a great deal of stress in our household. In the end there was a great lesson to be learned from it: the lesson of a family's unconditional love and acceptance for one another. I never for one moment stopped loving my sister and accepted her choice to keep the baby. At the time I did not know what acceptance was or that it was a thing. All I knew was that she was my sister and I loved her regardless. It was not till years later in therapy that I learned that this selfless act was something to be proud of.

IT WAS CHRISTMAS 1985; it was a rare occasion for my father to see us those days. However, he was separated from Suzy now and back living with Gramma and Grandpa for the time being, so Mom, feeling the holiday spirit, agreed to let Dad take us for the afternoon. We were at the Seneca Mall, where my grandfather had played Santa for years. It was always tremendous to go to the mall where Grandpa was playing Santa to see him. He loved doing it; he was the perfect Santa too: thinning white hair that perfectly blended in with the wig and beard, about six foot tall and a belly that would make the real Santa proud. The mall was

bustling with holiday shoppers as it was only two weeks before the big day. There was a line of kids to see him at least thirty to forty deep, a line that would even make Ralphie from *A Christmas Story* cringe. My grandmother was also in the mall, doing some shopping for us kids, no doubt. We were sitting in the center concourse of the mall, watching the shoppers go by and taking a break while Renee fed Anthony a bottle when a commotion broke out, and people started screaming. My father told us to stay put while he went to see what was going on. At that very minute, we saw my grandmother running down the concourse screaming for my father to come help.

We all got up and started running; even my sister was sprinting down the concourse with the baby in her arms. As we got closer to Center Court, where the mall had set up the Santa display, we could see parents consoling their distraught children. We arrived at Center Court to see mall security attending to my grandfather, who had collapsed, falling out of his chair to the floor right there at Center Court in front of all those kids! It was surreal. The paramedics would arrive shortly after we arrived at the scene and took over from mall security. My father and grandmother were standing by my grandpa's side, who was now on a stretcher; his wig and beard had been removed, but he was still in his Santa suit. My brother, sister, and I were standing off to the side, and my sister was sobbing, holding Anthony as tightly as she could. I can remember a stranger

come up to us and ask if we needed help. We politely declined. My grandfather was transported to the hospital by the paramedics, and my father took us kids home. We later learned that grandpa had suffered a stroke right there at Center Court in front of all those poor kids. My grandfather would make a modest recovery, but there was damage to his one side just as there was damage to the kids who witnessed his collapse.

My grandfather's stroke at the Seneca Mall and his subsequent death years later had a deep impact on me for years. It was one of those great life lessons that we must all endure. The first great loss of a loved one is always the hardest to take, or so I'm told. The start of my grandfather's illness, the stroke, which took place in such a public and shocking venue, left me scared as I felt great guilt for the children that witnessed his collapse. To this day I can't look at a mall Santa without a tinge of sadness. There was no forgiveness to be asked for, only acceptance of what transpired with a prayer that those children learned the true meaning of Christmas that day.

Author's Notes



In writing this book, I have realized that my guardian angel may be a little tired. Watching over me to keep me safe was a daunting task for her. Hell, with my life, I've probably had a fleet of angels watching over me. George taught me forgiveness early on and acceptances, and for that, I am grateful. That is why the book is dedicated to George because he taught me two amazing life lessons, how to forgive and how to accept. Each is hard to do. Together it is a monumental feat.

Together, forgiveness and acceptance can be done; you just have to want to do it. Just like I had to want to be free from my addiction, I had to want to do it before I could escape its deadly grips on my life. It's the same for forgiveness and acceptance. You have to want to do it before you

can achieve it. It's also not something that just happens, and it's a process that you must work on over time. It took me a year or so to accept my diagnosis of Bipolar Depression. It took me even longer to forgive myself for the 20 plus years that I was putting myself in harm's way. I honestly did not find peace with myself until I forgave and found acceptance in myself and those around me, including my own family. If you are working on an issue that requires one or both of these things, give it time. It will come. I promise. Just remember, you have to want it.

There are two quotes that I love on these topics. Both are from Dr. Wayne Dyer. The first on forgiveness says, *"It takes much more courage, strength of character, and inner conviction to forgive than it does to hang on to low-energy feelings"* and the second *"Give love and unconditional acceptance to those you encounter, and notice what happens."*

MANY HAVE ASKED why I wrote this book. Why air all my dirty laundry in such a graphic and detailed way? My reply has been, "Why not?" I have nothing to hide. We need to end the stigma of mental health issues in this country and around the world. I will no longer accept the scarlet letter on my lapel that says I'm mentally ill. I refuse to accept that label. Yes, I have a chemical imbalance in my brain, but I am not mentally ill; I refuse to own that 1950's label that is still so prevalent in today's society. We can, and we must,

move past the stereotypical labels of people and accept them for who they are. Love them for who they are.

In closing, I need to take a moment to thank my higher power for giving me the angels that protected me for the last 20 plus years. I am not a religious person by any means. But I do believe that some things are better left unanswered. Like why I never contracted HIV when I spent years risking my life for the next sexual high. Only by the grace of those angels around me am I healthy today, and for that, I will forever be grateful!