

# *Murphy's Bed*



*By Ed Harris*



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*To Anne*

*As it is written:*

*Aishet chayil, mi yimtza?*

*A woman of valor, who can compare, for her price is far above rubies.*

*“Where were you when I laid the foundations  
of the earth?”*

Book of Job: Chapter 38, Verse 4

Other Books by Ed Harris

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## **Book One**

## Chapter One

My name is Bobby Murphy. I'm gay. And I'm Catholic. I was raised in a conservative family and sent to a Catholic school, St. Thomas Aquinas. Catholic schools basically fall into two categories. The first kind, which are often found in the working class neighborhoods of older cities, stress strict discipline and obedience to authority. The kids dress in uniforms and sit quietly in perfectly aligned rows, following the nun's lesson on the blackboard and not daring to open their mouths unless called on for an answer (or so many non-Catholics imagine). That's what most people picture when they hear the term, "Catholic school."

The education in these traditional parochial schools is probably perfectly adequate, but they do have their social drawbacks. Most of the families that send their children to the strict-discipline type of Catholic schools are on the lower-half of the money list, maybe middle class at best. I don't know if the nuns *really* beat the kids or not. My guess is that it's probably exaggerated, like most things about the Church, but the important point is the kids, especially the ones in the lower grades, *think* they do, which keeps everybody terrified about the potential consequences of misbehaving. Lots of non-Catholics even

send their kids to parochial schools just because the discipline is reputed to be so rigorous. Supposedly, that allows you stay out of trouble as you grow up (although if you're gay like me, I don't think anything can keep you out of what most people would consider *trouble*). Also, the regular parochial schools are pretty cheap, for private schools, that is. That's another reason why they get the shop-at-Wal-Mart crowd that they do.

Fortunately, I went to the *other* kind of Catholic school, a top-drawer private school in the suburbs that just happens to be Catholic. St. Thomas Aquinas was just as snobby as any other private, expensive prep school that only a small percentage of the population could afford to attend.

Being an exclusive school, virtually all of the graduating seniors from St. Thomas Aquinas go on to college. Every year we send about a dozen kids to elite places like Harvard and Stanford, plus a bunch to Notre Dame, of course. My dad was a Vice President over at the gas and electric company when I was growing up, so he's always wanted us (and by *us*, I mean me, my older brother John, and my older sister Mary; more about them later) to get a good education, while still associating with the right type of people. But we're Catholic, so it has to be a good *Catholic* school. Dad didn't want us going to Westside



Catholic, at \$4,000 per year, with a whole bunch of kids that had names like Gonzalez, or even worse, Asians that aren't even Catholic but whose hard-working immigrant parents want their kids to study their asses off and not hang out with stoners. As if some Asian math nerd is actually going to hang out with a stoner, anyway.

Actually, St. Thomas Aquinas (or STA, as it is more commonly known) really isn't that bad. With everything I had to go through as a gay kid in a school whose governing church teaches that homosexuality is "fundamentally disordered," you could certainly do a lot worse. The Headmaster while I was in high school, Father Adriaan Martin, who is originally from South Africa, is quite a nice guy (by saying this, I obviously don't bear him any lasting grudge for what he did to me at the end of my senior year). I think he was a bit sensitive about people suspecting he might be a racist, given the nature of South African society that he grew up in. He always went out of his way to be friendly and seem interested in the students, but in an old guy's crotchety kind of way. Still, you could kind of tell he wasn't about to hit anyone in anger, or for that matter, even raise his voice too much (except ultimately at *me*, although it was under extremely extenuating circumstances), so no one particularly minded having him as Headmaster. All in all, I've got to admit that

if you're gay, STA wasn't such a bad place to end up. Also, the teachers were surprisingly competent (for *teachers*, that is), especially at the high school level.

STA runs from kindergarten all the way through high school, although the lower school and high school are in different wings. In elementary school, they basically taught us that the Bible is literally true. The "Inerrant Word of God," they called it. Inerrant was kind of like "indivisible" in the Pledge of Allegiance. As a little kid, no one had the slightest idea what it meant, but it sure sounded serious. I still remember making it all the way to fourth grade thinking that we were, "One nation, under God, *invisible*, with liberty and justice for all." That made America pretty cool, to be invisible. Kind of like an entire country inside of a *Harry Potter* invisibility cloak.

On the subject of who got saved and who didn't, they never actually taught us that only Catholics were allowed to go to Heaven, although that's certainly what all the kids thought. One time in third grade, Timmy Newman raised his hand and asked Sister O'Conner if his father, who was raised Lutheran but now claimed to be an atheist, could still be saved, and be in paradise for eternity with the rest of the family. Sister O'Conner fixed him a look for about half a minute, as she figured out what to say in reply. Finally, she sighed and said, "Timmy, we must never

underestimate Our Heavenly Father's capacity for grace and forgiveness." She was only trying to be helpful, but in the meantime, during that long, anxious wait for an answer, poor Timmy had wet his pants.

Anyway, by high school, we had real teachers, especially in academic subjects like English and math. As one particularly bold geometry teacher, Mr. Bonfilio, instructed us, we didn't need to be mindful of what the Pope's position on the hypotenuse was in order to solve the equation for a triangle (unfortunately, he didn't get his contract renewed at the end of the year). But I think all the staff, including the non-Catholics, had to sign some kind of morality clause, saying they wouldn't use drugs or have illicit sex or whatever. Especially the part about the sex.

It was sometimes unclear to me whether anyone could ever legitimately have kosher Catholic sex. Forget about us gays. I know what we do isn't just wrong in the eyes of the Church; it's an abomination. I didn't need any reminding that my lusting after people with reproductive organs that resembled my own was clearly the work of the devil. I recall that at around age ten, when I didn't quite yet realize I was gay, but I knew the biological facts of life (way to go, Mom, for buying me that illustrated "Where Babies Come From" book when I was six. If only you had bought me one entitled, "Where Fags Come From," too), I had the

vague sense that sex was somehow dirty and forbidden, under virtually all circumstances. I also knew the various categories of people who couldn't use their genitals for anything other than elimination of bodily wastes, no matter how badly they burned with lust (one of the seven Deadly Sins, of course): single people, priests and nuns, kids, you name it. At this age, I also didn't quite realize the fact that conception was a hit-or-miss proposition, and I somehow had the notion that even married couples could only have sex if they wanted to have a baby (not too far off actual Catholic doctrine on the matter, which in fact bans the use of artificial contraception even by a husband and wife within the sacred bonds of marriage).

Most of the Catholic families I knew at STA usually had no more than three kids, like us, and quite a few had only one or two children. So, either *no one* was getting laid very often, or some couples who had become "one flesh" took the liberty of concluding that the Catechism on contraception was merely optional (unlike the Catechism on, say, two grown men playing hide the salami).

Dad had his own private secretary and a big office over at the company headquarters building downtown. We belonged to the local country club and lived in the estate section of town. We may have been named Murphy, but we weren't one of those Irish Catholic families from the

1850s who had seventeen kids, fourteen of whom survived to adulthood, with at least one son becoming a priest. We had a 32-inch color television set in the family room, and ate off of matching china every night for dinner. We were also fortunate enough to have full time, live-in help: Mrs. White, our ironically named 300 pound black housekeeper

But getting back to matters of nature, I thought that, even after you got married, you only had sex about three times in your entire life. Like most kids who learned about the birds and the bees at an early age, when I understood the mechanics of sex but had no understanding of sexual desire, when “Where Babies Come From” said the way to conceive a child was to have the man insert into a woman what James Joyce once referred to in a love letter to his mistress as the “manroot,” I assumed that once the *manroot*, as it were, went in, the probability of a resulting pregnancy was one hundred percent. After all, if the instructions to cook pasta are to place it into boiling water for eleven minutes (ten for *al dente*), you don’t think to yourself, “Well, maybe it comes out the right way one time out of every twenty-five, and the other twenty-four times it stays as brittle as when you took it out of the package.” If it’s true that babies do, in fact, come from (hetero) sexual congress, then three kids must mean three consummated couplings, or so I thought at the time.

As it turns out, Mr. Butler, the STA tennis coach, once confided in me that he averaged “laying pipe,” as he so delicately put it, about once a year with Mrs. Butler. So maybe in some cases my presumption about adult married sex was correct (although having seen Mrs. Butler, I think that once a year may have been just about right for a man with a sensitive stomach).

But I was brought up Catholic, and somewhere along the way, not long after my sexual organ began drawing attention to itself, I realized I was turning out gay. It was not an easy realization to come to terms with. It took a long time, a lot of family drama, and even an old-fashioned school yard fight, to navigate my way through the challenges of growing up queer.

## Chapter Two

Three big things happened to me the summer I was twelve years old. First, I became best friends with a Jewish kid. Second, I realized I was gay. And third, I told my parents.

The summer after sixth grade, a Jewish family moved in next door. Not only were they Jewish; they were *Israelis*, and their last name was Barak. I had been going to STA since kindergarten, so I certainly didn't have any Jewish friends at school, and the country club, Fair Lawn, where I spent most of the summer hanging out at the pool, didn't have any Jewish members. I don't think any of the club members were openly anti-Semitic. The grownups were all too successful in their various professions to take the risk of looking like lowlifes by expressing a sentiment as crude as Jew-bashing. Appearing to be anti-Semitic or racist was as bad as walking around with your fly open, in terms of a breach of social etiquette, this being more than a full generation since Dr. Martin Luther King had been assassinated. The Fair Lawn members may have been shallow and pompous, but at least they were polite. Still, let's face it – Jews were not eager to join a club whose major social events were the Christmas party and the Easter egg hunt. There actually was a Jewish club over on

the other side of town. I've heard they were worse golfers but had a much livelier card room. For years, I fantasized over the sound of the game of "pinochle" without even knowing how it was played. Plus, I knew that Jews put this big religious emphasis on circumcision. According to the Bible, Abraham circumcised himself at the direct command of God, and every Jewish male infant since has to be circumcised or they can't be considered fully Jewish when they become adults. If it isn't done in infancy, then in the case of conversion it has to be performed as an adult. That's gotta hurt.

As it turns out, I was circumcised, just like everyone else I knew (I checked in the showers after gym class), but only because it was standard American medical practice. A circumcised penis is a healthy penis.

Still, I figured that any religion that placed a major emphasis on the appearance of a guy's cock had to have something going for it. On top of that, I even like the sound of their slang words for the male reproductive organ, like *putz* and *schmuck*. These were people worth knowing for a budding homosexual like me.

Anyway, we lived in a neighborhood where most adults kept to themselves, but we kids rode our bikes around after school and during summer vacation, and played ball over at the public school yard of Whitman



Elementary down at the end of the street. One June evening after dinner, I saw a moving van unloading next door, and a dark, swarthy man of about medium height and build came over and waved at me as I watched from the curb, sitting on my bicycle. He had an astonishingly thick growth of curly black hair covering his legs, along with the same substance spreading in profusion over his forearms, and in the small patch of chest where the top buttons of his polo shirt were open. He sure wasn't Irish. But he looked friendly enough.

"Hi there. Don't be afraid, we won't bite. C'mon over and to say hello."

I wasn't used to neighbors being so, well, neighborly. I got off my bike, and walked it up the driveway.

"What's your name?"

"Bobby. Bobby Murphy. I live right next door." I pointed to our house.

"Well, Mr. Bobby Murphy, my name is Shmulik Barak. My wife, Shoshana, is in the house. We have three kids, Roni, Vered, and Yona (I wasn't sure at this point who were the boys and who were the girls). *Roni*," he yelled to a boy coming out the side door, "come over and meet a new friend."

Wow, "new friend." I sure wasn't used to people being this forward. Didn't it take a while to make a new

friend? But anyway, Roni came out of the house and wandered over. Turned out we were the same age. And we really *did* become friends, best friends, in fact. I think we spent just about every waking minute of that summer in each other's company.

Roni was a great guy to be friends with, and I also really liked his family, too. His dad is some kind of engineer who works on computers and invents stuff, and his mom is an artist. I also found out that Vered and Yona are girls. They all speak Hebrew and English, which is pretty neat. I've had Spanish since fifth grade, but my oratory ability is pretty much limited to "*Me llamo Roberto.*" Of course, with a Spanish teacher like Dr. Wolf, that makes sense.

I didn't know anything about politics or history or world affairs at this point (although I was pretty good on Catholic dogma; I definitely knew what could make you go to Hell, like the flogging I gave my wiener every day), so of course I had no idea what it meant to be from Israel, except that I knew everyone that lived there was Jewish. STA was pretty low-key about Jews. I mean, they didn't ever say, or for that matter, even imply, that the Jews killed Jesus, which, if you think about it, is pretty decent of them. We learned that although Jesus was killed by people of his generation, some of whom were Jewish, his disciples and earliest followers were also Jewish, and that Jews as a

group bore no collective guilt for his death. We also learned that Jews still had a “Covenantal Relationship” with God and therefore were not required to be converted to Christianity in order to be saved (unlike, say, Chinamen, Hottentots or Navajos).

The STA families were fairly well educated themselves. The parents who paid the big tuition were all college graduates, and a lot of them had professional degrees, like Dad (Notre Dame Law School). Some people have some strange impressions about believing Christians. But it’s pretty hard to get a degree from a modern American university and still walk around thinking that God killed off all the dinosaurs in a big flood five thousand years ago because they didn’t fit in Noah’s ark. You can pretend to believe it secretly, but you still have to acquire real knowledge to pass all your tests in college.

Anyway, Roni and I started hanging out right after breakfast the next morning, and continued until bedtime. Our daily socializing turned into a routine that lasted all summer. We swam, rode bikes, played basketball, and of course, talked all the time. Our subject matter was what pre-adolescent boys always talk about: sports, our parents, other kids, Nintendo, Harry Potter, stupid grownups, and of course, girls. At first, when we talked about the fairer sex I tried to fake it, like when Roni would start speculating on

who was the hottest girl in the neighborhood. He observed, for example, that while Cindy Martelli might only be ten and a half, “she had the body of a twelve-year old.”

I had starting going through puberty in the sixth grade. Like most adolescent boys, my pecker just one day up and took on a life of its own. When I first started jerking off, it was not too dissimilar from going to the bathroom; I felt that if I didn’t do it, I ran a good chance of exploding from an internal buildup. Mrs. White asked me one laundry day if I would stop “blowing my nose” in the hand towels in the bathroom, and use the tissue box, instead.

Since this was all solo, it was just me and my hand, me and my hand, me and my hand, so it wasn’t gay or straight, it was just a standard boy’s marathon jerking off phase. But as I heard other guys constantly talking about girls, I genuinely wondered *why* I didn’t share in their excitement.

“Holy Mother of God, look at the size of the tits on Julie Lockhart.”

“I’d risk hell to fuck Cindy Toscano just once.”

“Troy Baxter’s sister leaves her bedroom curtain open when she changes into her pajamas at night. You can see *everything*.”

“Hey, pass that *Penthouse* over here already.”

I felt like a blind man at a fireworks display. I understood that other boys my age were getting excited over girls. I also knew that my own member would demand that I pay it tribute at least once every twenty-four hours, so it's not like I didn't have first-hand knowledge of the sexual urge myself (and it was first *hand*, all right). But I just didn't get worked up over Julie Lockhart's tits. Yes, they were big, I had to admit, but so were the watermelons at the supermarket, and both left me equally un-aroused.

One day, over at Arthur Rooney's, a few of us went online in his bedroom while his mom went to the store to do some grocery shopping. Arthur typed the phrase "blow job" into Yahoo. I swear to God, I had never even heard of the term before. Suddenly, Arthur's screen was filled with pictures of women, photographed from every angle, with guys' dongs in their mouths. By accident, a picture of a man sucking off another man appeared on the screen.

"Get rid of it. Gross."

"Oh man, that's disgusting."

"That is so sick. If there really is a Hell, then God should send you there for doing that with another guy."

*Hmm, I thought, what's that stirring going on down there in my lap?*

That evening, before going to bed, I furtively checked to make sure that Mom and Dad were downstairs watching TV. “Good night,” I called out. “I’m going to read for a little while before going to sleep.”

“Okay, good night, Bobby.”

I closed my bedroom door, propped my desk chair underneath the doorknob, turned on the computer, typed “blow job” into Yahoo, and looked for the images of guys that I had seen just few hours ago. It was a bit hit-or-miss at first, as I got mostly pictures of women, but after a couple of minutes, I realized that if I added the word “gay” to the search term, I’d be off to the races. In a mere instant, my cock reached the tensile strength of industrial grade tungsten, and in another fifteen seconds, there was a drizzle of cum dripping from my bedroom ceiling. *Well, how do you like that?* I was gay.

Mom wasn’t crazy about me hanging out all the time with Roni. “Why don’t you want to come to the club with me like you used to? I see all your school friends at the swimming pool. Just the other day, Mrs. Dineen was asking me why she hasn’t seen you all summer.”

“Aw, I don’t know Mom. I just have a better time hanging out with Roni.”

“What do you boys do all day long?”

What I was thinking was, “*We talk about which girls have the biggest tits, mostly, and then we tell each other dirty jokes.*” What I said was, “I dunno.”

Dad added his own advice as we were eating dinner. “Well, just don’t forget your upbringing, young man.” I think what he was implying was that even if Vatican II affirmed the legitimacy of the Jewish faith, well, “For God’s sake, Bobby, these people completely reject the notion that Jesus is the son of God who died on the cross for our sins. That’s not anti-Semitic. That’s a fact.” Or so I imagined him thinking.

Well, maybe I was being unfair to Dad. Maybe he wasn’t thinking anti-Jewish thoughts at all. Maybe he just meant that they’re foreigners who speak with odd sounding accents and eat strange foods that no normal person ever heard of. *Tzatziki? Hummus? Tahini?* “Are you making these names up, boy, to make me look foolish?”

“Funny, Dad, real funny.”

“No, you know what I’m talking about, Bobby. Remember when Matthew Broderick plays that Jewish recruit in *Biloxi Blues*, and he tells his sergeant, Christopher Walken, that he has to take off for a Jewish holiday. Walken says ‘But, soldier, that can’t be, Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippora were last week.’ Broderick is quick on his feet, and counters back with, ‘No Sarge, its El

Malaguena.’ ‘El Malaguena? I’ve never heard of that’, Walken replies. ‘No, of course not, Sarge. It’s a holiday just for Spanish Jews.’ Even I laughed, because the audience realizes that the clever Jewish private is talking advantage of the dumb goyish sergeant.”

*Goyish?* I had just heard of that term last week, over at the Baraks. Where’d Dad learn a word like that? I’d better be careful; he might be smarter than I thought.

“Dad, *tahini* is sesame paste. It’s pretty good. Mrs. Barak makes it all the time.

“Who ever heard of making a paste out of sesame?”

*Actually, Dad, about half a billion people who live in the Mediterranean region of the world.* Well, I didn’t really know that when I was twelve years old, but I wished I could have made a snappy comeback, just the same. Instead I picked at my plate, sullenly, exactly as you’d expect from a moody pre-adolescent.

“Mistah Murphy, would you like some more potatoes and gravy?” Mrs. White was circulating back through the dining room to see if anyone wanted seconds. I have to admit, even though I might sound a bit condescending about my parents, having enough money to pay someone to do your cooking and cleaning wasn’t all that bad. I mean, on one hand I was sort of embarrassed



that we had a full time maid, but on the other hand, it was kind of nice to not have to do any chores around the house. Plus, a lot of kids' moms nagged them all the time about things like leaving the bathroom a mess after a shower or not putting their dirty dishes in the sink after dinner. Mom just let Mrs. White do everything, so she didn't really need to yell at us. Well, at this point, I should say need to yell at just *me*. John, who had graduated from college the year before, was living in Atlanta, working at a big insurance company through a connection of Dad's, and Mary was in her junior year at Notre Dame.

I have often wondered about the big gap in age between me and my sister and brother, who are only two years apart. Like most people, I literally cannot bear even for one split second to picture my parents having sex (yuck!), but later on, I often thought that the nine year age difference between me and my sister was an indication that I might be an "accident." I sure felt like one, especially after I came out as a Nancy boy (British slang for homosexual).

"No, thank you, Mrs. White. I'm saving room for dessert. What'd you make us tonight?"

"Oh, Mistah Murphy, just a pecan pie."

Dad patted his stomach. He actually was in decent shape, especially for a guy his age, but he liked to pretend

he had a gut like Mr. Celentano down the block, who looked like he had swallowed a basketball. “Well, I shouldn’t, but you know, Mrs. White, I do love your pecan pie.”

“Oh, Mistah Murphy.”

“Bobby, where are you going so quick after dinner? You’ve hardly had time to let it settle.”

“Oh, I’m just going over to Roni’s, Mom.”

Dad gave me one of those constipated looks he specializes in, and called out, “Don’t forget to compliment Mrs. Barak on her *baba gannouj*.”

Okay, Dad, I got it. I don’t know more than you, at least, not yet.

## Chapter Three

The first person that I told I was gay was Roni, of course. One of the great things about twelve-year old boys is their ability to talk about anything without getting grossed out. Or, more precisely, one of the primary sources of entertainment for twelve-year old boys is by *making* themselves get grossed out. There is no subject so disgusting that a twelve-year old male can't find a way to make it inspiration for amusement.

"Roni, I think I'm gay."

"Whadya' mean, Bobby?"

"You know, gay. A homo."

"C'mon. How could you be gay? We love doing all the same things. I'm not gay. If I'm not gay, then you can't be, either."

"Roni, just because I'm gay doesn't mean I still don't like all the stuff we do. Setting off firecrackers in a garbage can is still way cool. I still think it's funny the way we put that dog shit on Mrs. Esposito's front porch. And I still like teasing your sisters and stuff. Just cause I'm gay doesn't mean I've stopped being a normal person."

Wow, talk about out of the mouth of babes. Like the animators at the Walt Disney Corporation, who turned the

character of Pocahontas into an Arcadian philosopher/savant, I was suddenly, at age twelve, expressing profound thoughts. The mysterious chemical cocktail that was causing my loins to burst into a feverish pitch also seemed to be activating my brain, turning on neural connections, and making me smarter, or at least more articulate (When Disney's animated Pocahontas sings you "can never step into the same river twice," she is actually quoting the famous Greek philosopher, Heraclitus of Ephesus. We learned that in Greek History at STA. Way to go, STA).

Roni told his mom and dad about me. Unlike my family, they actually shared real personal information with one another. I was invited that evening to stay for dinner, which required a bit of negotiation over the phone (*"Please, Mom. I know Mrs. White went to a lot of trouble to make fried chicken, but please, Mom, I can have it for leftovers tomorrow"*).

We were sitting down to some homemade cheese lasagna with a salad made out of tiny little chopped up squares of tomato and cucumber. They didn't eat regular salad out of a big wooden bowl with Thousand Island dressing like we did. Mrs. Barak, well, actually, Shoshana (they insisted on first names), was a vegetarian who made

most of the stuff she served herself. To be honest, I actually preferred Mrs. White's fried chicken, but I definitely would still rather be eating with the Baraks than at home. Plus, I could always raid the refrigerator and microwave a piece of chicken when I got home. Shoshana's, homemade bread was really, really good. After some getting used to the taste of these new foods, I really started to enjoy bread dipped into tahini. The Baraks pronounced it *t'cheyna*, with this hard, guttural "ch" sound that I was never able to get quite right.

Shmulik, who was a direct guy, came right to the point.

"So, Bobby, Roni tells me you learned something pretty important about yourself recently."

"What do you mean, Shmulik?" I threw a desperate glance at Roni, who was busy looking down and staring at his fingernails.

"Well, Roni asked me a few days ago to explain to him what being gay meant. So I told him. Then I asked him why he was so curious. He said that he had a friend who was gay. At first I thought he might be talking about himself, because that's actually a way a lot of adults talk. They go to the rabbi, well, in your case, they go to the priest, but it's the same thing, and they say, for example, 'Rabbi, I have a friend who is cheating on his wife

(Shoshana's left eyebrow shot up), and he wants me to find out if he should tell her or keep it a secret to preserve family harmony.' The whole time the rabbi knows that the guy is really asking about himself, so if he's smart, what he usually says is 'ask your friend to come see me himself, so I can meet him in person, and we'll discuss it together.' But then when I asked him who his friend was, and he said *you*, I realized he had to be telling the truth. Roni's a smart kid, and he may even be a good liar at times, but that's the kind of lie that I know he isn't yet capable of."

This was extremely awkward. Roni was embarrassed because he had betrayed his best friend's secret, and I found out about the betrayal right in front of him. I was embarrassed because this conversation was unfolding in front of his entire family. Well, not the whole family. Vered and Yona had left the table and were playing on the swing set in the backyard. Kids didn't have to go through the rigmarole of "getting excused" over at the Barak's. They just got up and left the table when they were done with dinner. Still, most kids, heck, most *people* at any age, don't like their sexual preferences discussed over the dinner table.

Then an unexpected thing happened. Roni's dad, Shmulik, was a special undercover commando in the Israeli army. It's supposed to be an official secret, but Roni

told me about it. He served an elite unit like the Navy Seals or Army Rangers and learned all kinds of hand-to-hand combat techniques, like in the kung fu movies. And he went on real missions, where they destroyed enemy targets and killed people. Plus, he was an alternate for the Israeli Olympic judo team when he was younger.

“Well, Bobby, we are going to have to teach you some self-defense.”

“What do you mean, Shmulik?”

“Bobby, it’s going to be pretty hard for you to keep being gay a secret. Trust me, when you get older, people will just sense it. By the time you get to high school, *everyone* will know you’re gay, no matter how hard you try to hide it. After college, you’ll move to a big city like New York or Los Angeles, and hang around with gay friends, or with friends that don’t care where you like to stick your *shmekele* in the privacy of your bedroom. But, as a teenager, unless you plan on running away from home, you’d better be prepared to become a guy that they don’t want to mess with.”

“But still, why do I need to learn self-defense?” I was starting to get nervous. I didn’t think through that part of being gay might mean having to worry about getting beaten up. I was just glad to look at porn online, fantasize,

and flog my dummy. Why did such an innocent pleasure have such a heavy price tag?

“Bobby, have you learned anything about the history of Israel?”

“Well, Shmulik, I know there have been a lot of wars and stuff.”

“Right, Bobby. There *have* been a lot of wars, and there still are countries whose leaders dream of wiping Israel off the map, and terrorists who wake up every day with the hope of getting into crowded buses and restaurants and shopping malls, laden with explosives, so they can blow themselves up, just for the chance of killing as many innocent Jewish women and children as possible. It sounds *meshuggah*, I know, but it happens anyway. And the Arab leaders still hate Israel as much as they ever did. But even though we were attacked by their armies *four* times – in 1948, in 1956, in 1967, and in 1973, they haven’t dared to openly send their military forces against us since. Why do you think that is, Bobby?”

“Well, maybe they stopped hating Jews?”

“No, Bobby, try again.”

“I don’t know, Shmulik.”

“Let me tell you why Bobby. Israel is a tiny country. We are about the size of just one of the smallest states here in America, and we only have a few million people.



We can't afford to lose a war, or our country would be completely destroyed. America sent soldiers over to Vietnam, and after fifty thousand got killed and the war became unpopular, they turned around and brought everyone back home. Well, for Israel, Bobby, there is no 'turning around and going back home.' My brother, Eli, was in the Golan tank brigade, stationed at our border in the north, with Syria, that nearly got overrun in 1973, during the Yom Kippur War. At the same time, the Egyptians broke through our defensive line at the Suez Canal, which we had thought was impenetrable. Most people outside of Israel don't know how close the Syrians came to crossing through our tank lines and completely invading the country. Israel would have been finished. It would have been another Holocaust (*I was learning for the first time how earnest Jews could be when they got worked up, especially when it came to the survival of the Jewish people. I had never seen Shmulik this intense*). Well, what do you think the situation was within just a few weeks, Bobby?"

"I don't know, Shmulik." I was getting a bit nervous. I could actually see the veins in his neck starting to throb.

"Within two weeks, we had their armies completely encircled, and had taken the war onto *their* territory. Just as we were about to completely wipe out their fighting

capability, they started calling the U.N., Russia, and America, begging to arrange a cease-fire. 'Please, we're just poor defenseless Arabs. Please don't let the Jewish bullies take advantage of us. We didn't really mean to attack them.' You see, the Arabs know that the next time, no matter how hard they hit us, we'll hit them back ten times, even a hundred times harder. We want to live in peace, but we most of all want to *live*. If you try to kill us, we'll kill you first. If you don't try to kill us, then okay, let's be good neighbors. But what kind of lunatic would say to a person coming at them with a gun and a murderous gleam in their eye, 'Go right ahead, please kill me if it makes you happy.' You Christians don't translate the Ten Commandments the right way. People who have only read the Bible in English translation think the sixth commandment is 'Don't kill.' In Hebrew, it's *lo terzatch*, which means 'don't *murder*.' But 'don't murder' and 'don't kill' aren't the same thing. It's not murder if you kill someone in self-defense. The legal system of every country in the world recognizes that a person has the right to preserve their own life. If a homicidal maniac broke into your home and tried to murder your family, wouldn't you want your dad to kill him first, in self-defense, and save everyone? And if your dad saved you, wouldn't you be grateful? I know you Christians like to say 'turn the other

cheek,' but I don't think you really mean it. If we all became total pacifists, there wouldn't be any Christians left. After the Muslim terrorists finished killing all the Jews, they'd go after you Christians next. Listen to me, the first kid who punches you in the nose for being gay is going to get hit back harder than he hit you. You may get in a couple of fights, but it will be worth it. After a while, the jerks in middle school who think beating up homos is fun will decide to skip you and beat up the next guy. They're the same idiots who used to think that beating up Jews was fun. You can't get rid of all the *shmuks* in the world, but you *can* make them leave you alone."

So, that was the conversation which kicked off what became, in effect, a summer boot camp for me and Roni. When Shmulik came home every evening, we would go into their basement after dinner. He set up a small gym, and we worked on weightlifting, calisthenics, agility drills, and, of course, hand-to-hand fighting techniques.

He gave us a lecture on his philosophy of self-defense. "Bobby, if you happen to find yourself in a fight, after training with me, you are going to have a big advantage. Most people who live in a nice country like America have never thrown a punch in their entire life. Their natural instinct is to wind up and throw one like this,

in a big loop coming at you from the side (which he demonstrated as he explained – it indeed looked like the kind of punch I would throw if I ever had to). People without combat training don't realize that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and they also don't realize that you don't really 'throw' a punch, you 'snap' one. If you ever watch footage of an old boxing match on TV, notice the jab. Most of the time, a really great boxer hits the other guy so fast, that you can't even see how much he hurt him unless they replay it in slow motion. So make sure you remember, If you ever get into a fight, it's almost guaranteed that you're going to have the advantage, because you'll be trained and ready, and whoever it is who is stupid enough to mess with you, won't be."

He continued on. "Now watch me as I throw a regular punch like a guy who doesn't know any fighting technique. See me turning my shoulder to wind up, and pivoting on my front foot? I'm basically telling you, 'get ready, a punch is on its way.' So here's what you do. Crouch down, and take your arm, keep your fist clenched and your elbow at a ninety degree angle, and just come straight up and out with your arm and block the punch." The stance looked odd, but I wasn't worried about appearances at this point.

We practiced that one maneuver for a couple of days in a row. Once we mastered the punch block, Shmulik said we would move on to learning how to attack. He explained his belief in keeping things as simple as possible.

“Do you guys follow baseball much? How many different pitches a really great pitcher has? Usually it’s just two, a fastball and a curveball. Maybe, in some cases, a changeup, but that’s about it, and some of the best pitchers of all time really only had a fastball. But the other thing they have going for them is timing and location. They are always aiming the ball just a little bit away from where the batter expects it, and so they keep him guessing. They win by keeping the other guy off-balance. It’s the same with fighting. All you really need to know is how to block a punch and how to deliver one. That, and keeping the other guy guessing what your next move is going to be is all it takes. Tonight, we’ll learn the second part of this drill.”

So, Shmulik showed us how to take the punch-blocking move and make it into a two-step combination. He explained that unless you really practice, you don’t naturally think in combinations of moves. When you block a guy’s punch, you are going to take him by surprise, and he said that in the split second that follows, you can end the fight before it’s even started.

“Bobby, in Israel, a lot of times we liquidate the terrorists before they even get out of their own village. Once you realize they are out to kill you, there isn’t any point letting them shed innocent blood if you can stop them beforehand. Same with a fight. If you know how to win, end it as fast as you can. So here’s what you do. As you step forward and block the incoming punch, in one single motion, take your other hand and snap it forward, with your wrist bent back. Aim right for the other guy’s nose, and hit it as hard as you can with the heel of your hand. If you time it right, he’ll be leaning forward, because he still hasn’t quite realized how effectively you blocked his punch. In one instant, if you catch his nose squarely, you’ll break it, just like that. Don’t worry about getting him mad. He’ll be screaming from so much pain he won’t be able to do anything in retaliation. By the way, the nose is just cartilage, not real bone, so you won’t do permanent damage. God forbid you decided to go for his eye, you could blind him. Don’t do that unless you think your own life is in danger. Actually, depending on the angle you hit him, you might leave his nose permanently bent. Wouldn’t that be funny if you end up giving a gay-basher a Jewish nose?”

So Shmulik showed us the follow-through punch, and it really was as simple as he explained it. You just

block the punch and continue moving inside. And if you work at it, you really can put a lot of snap into it. Shmulik had hung a heavy bag like they have in the *Rocky* movies, so we could hit as hard as we wanted.

He showed us other moves, which he said we probably wouldn't need. They included a knuckle-punch to the Adam's apple (potentially lethal), and how to throw someone over your back if they grab you from behind (dramatic looking but surprisingly easy). He also showed us a variety of leg kicks. He explained that the range of a person's leg is longer than that of their arm, and demonstrated how a sideways snap-kick could dislocate a person's knee, and the same kick aimed a bit higher into the mid-section could knock the wind out of them.

He also gave us a stern lecture. "Boys, I've shown you some ways to hurt a person really badly. But remember, your primary motivation should be self-defense. The level of your attack should always be matched against the level of threat that you are facing. If your life is at risk, that's one thing. But your average American, raised on videogames and television, doesn't have a violent instinct in real life. Attacking imaginary game characters on a screen, while sitting in a comfortable couch, is not the same as attacking someone in real life. Trust me, I know the difference. I've known Jew-hating Arabs who would kill

a busload of women and babies with no more emotion than it would take for either of you to drink a glass of milk. In America, it's different. Although I do have to admit that *sometimes*, albeit on very rare occasions, there are people who do try to kill gays.”



## Chapter Four

As luck would have it, Shmulik was right. The other kids at STA *did* figure out I was gay. I guess because so much of sex is primitive animal instinct, we queers must give off some kind of distinct pheromone. We just radiate our gayness, no matter how hard we try to hide it. My troubles started in seventh grade with Vinny Desai. Vinny's given name was Vinod, but I think he Americanized it to fit in. His parents came over from India or Pakistan or somewhere like that when he was little.

One day in September of our seventh grade year, about three weeks after the start of school, as I was standing by my locker, Vinny pretended not to see me, and walked right into my back, knocking me against the metal locker door, which made a surprisingly loud rattling noise, and causing me to scatter my books all over the floor.

"Watch out, faggot." Al Gargola and Joe Paxson, his two toady buddies, snickered. Vinny turned to the cluster of kids who quickly formed to see what had happened, and who were eagerly anticipating a potential escalation of hostilities.

“I guess queers are so busy thinking about their pricks they don’t watch where they’re going,” Vinny said as I bent over to start picking up my books and papers.

Emboldened, and recognizing that picking on a suspected gay kid was giving him some kind of cool middle school status, Vinny Desai became a permanent annoyance. In gym class, when we were choosing sides for teams, he always would say, “Don’t stick me with any homos like Murphy,” and then bask in the resulting chorus of adolescent mirth that would inevitably ensue.

I complained about the situation to Roni, who I continued to see every day after school. He was going to JFK Middle School, and was taking Bar Mitzvah lessons twice a week at Temple Beth Shalom. We still were working out every chance we could get. Shmulik had bought a set of weights and a special bench for doing bench presses. We were carefully tracking our progress by computer, and printing out charts and graphs, which we hung on the basement wall for extra motivation. We were both still pretty skinny. I think I weighed all of 95 pounds at this point. But, for a scrawny seventh grader, I was surprisingly strong, although I kept that to myself, and my lack of conspicuous muscle development helped me keep my potential power hidden from view. I was a fairly shy, nervous kid, and I certainly wasn’t looking for a fight. I used

up enough nervous energy just keeping my incessant whacking off hidden from Mom and Mrs. White. Besides, no matter how confident you are about yourself, a life of hidden gay masturbation does take a bit of a toll on one's self-confidence, especially if you go to a Catholic school.

One rainy November afternoon, as Roni and I were playing Nintendo, Shoshana looked up from the picture she was busy painting. She had overheard me telling Roni about Vinny.

"Bobby, don't worry so much. Jews and Catholics are more alike than you'd think."

"But Shoshana, we believe in Jesus and you don't."

"Bobby, I'm talking about the guilt. To be a good Jew is to be guilty. You didn't call your mother when you should have. You didn't return the favor from the neighbor. You weren't loving enough to your children. Listen, there were Jews before there were Catholics. We invented guilt before you did. If we can learn to live with it, so can you" (*Omigod, did she suspect the whacking off somehow? Was she in cahoots with Mrs. White? Did they share laundry tips on how to get dried up jism out of bed sheets?*).

Roni asked, "Why don't you challenge this kid Vinny to a fight and just get it over with, once and for all."

“I can’t, Roni. We have this really strict student code of conduct at STA. I can’t get in a fight, or at least, I can’t be the one who starts it, or I’ll get in all kinds of trouble. Vinny is really clever. He keeps on making it look like everything he’s doing is an accident, like that time he spilled his milk onto my lap in the cafeteria. And everyone is calling everyone else ‘queer’ and ‘faggot.’ It’s a pretty common insult. If I make a big deal about it, then it’ll look like I *am* a faggot.”

“But you are. If someone calls me a dirty Jew, I wouldn’t pretend I’m not Jewish.”

“But it’s different, Roni. No one is proud of being gay.”

Shoshana spoke up from across the basement. “Maybe you should be the first one to start, Bobby.”

At this point in my life I barely knew anything going on outside my family, Roni’s family and school. I certainly didn’t know about the gay rights movement, and it’s not as if over at STA they were going to say, “Listen up, children. We’re now going to give equal time to sinners, to share with you their perspective on the issue of homosexuality in America.”

I remember Dad railing one night after *60 Minutes*, when they had done a piece on Woodstock. “Kids, those

stoned kids with their long hair and dirty clothes think they invented sex. If they really did invent sex, than how was humanity able to reproduce itself for so many thousands of generations? They *had* to get stoned, because if they were sober, how else would anyone be able to stomach embracing a dirty, smelly person rolling around in mud?"

"Now, dear."

For a while, I was able to regard Vinny as just a nuisance, like getting up early in the morning to an alarm clock or doing homework. Finally, something in me snapped. It wasn't any single incident. I just got tired of being continuously harassed. One morning, in April of our seventh grade year, as he passed me in a crowded hallway, he poked his elbow in my ribs and said "keep your distance, you fucking queer." This had now been going on since September. I stewed about it for a couple of hours, and later that day, in math class, I went over to Vinny's pimply sidekick, Joe Saxton.

"Joe, can you deliver a message to Vinny."

"Sure, faggot. What should I tell him? That you want to suck his cock?"

"Very funny, Saxton, very funny. Tell him to meet me at the playground at Whitman Elementary, at 4 o'clock today. Tell him he can fight me if he wants to."

As we were getting on the school busses at the end of the day, Saxton came over. “You had better be there, Murphy. We’re riding our bikes over from our neighborhood. If you chicken out, you’ll just get an ass-kicking twice as bad tomorrow. Man, I can’t wait to see a faggot try to fight.”

I ran over to Roni’s house as soon as I got home. “Roni, can you skip Hebrew School today? I’m gonna be in a fight with that kid Vinny I’ve been telling you about. I need you there, man.”

“Okay, I’ll pretend I’m riding my bike over to the temple. I’ll go down Hawthorne, circle back, and meet you over at the 7-Eleven.”

We got to the school yard at about 3:45. There must have been about a hundred STA kids waiting there. There even were kids from Eastside Catholic. Apparently, news about the fight must have gone out over the Catholic jungle tom-toms.

Vinny was there with Al Gargola and Joe Saxton. I later thought to myself this must have been the same social phenomenon that drew crowds to lynchings in the south, with picnic baskets and cameras. What could be more fun than watching a homo get beat up?

I'd like to say I was strangely calm, but in fact I was scared so bad I thought I might pee in my pants, even though I had gone twice in the half hour I was home after school. I heard a voice speaking, and then recognized it as my own.

“Okay, Desai. Here’s how it goes. I’ll fight you, but if I win, you have to promise to lay off all the shit at school.”

“Since when do I have to listen to you, you cocksucking faggot?” Gales of laughter in the background.

“Okay,” I said, “Let’s get this over with.”

The kids formed themselves into a circle surrounding us. It was clear that Vinny was the crowd favorite, by a measure of about 100 to 0. I could see that even Roni looked pretty nervous. Vinny wasn’t that big, maybe an inch taller and about fifteen pounds heavier than me. Looking back, I guess that he figured since he was bigger than me, he therefore must have concluded he was stronger, as well. Plus he probably genuinely believed I was gay (he was right!), so how could anybody be afraid of a gay kid? Of course, he didn’t know about the weightlifting and hand-to-hand combat drills that Roni and I had been diligently working on for nearly a year, poor sap, although he was moments away from finding out.

Vinny and I stepped forward. I went into the stance that Shmulik had taught us. It obviously looked funny. I could hear laughter and catcalls from the kids surrounding us, and Vinny said, "Come on, you homo, fight like a man, not like a male nurse." He was playing to the crowd, and it was working, judging from their laughter.

We approached to within about five feet of each other and started warily circling. My heart was beating wildly, and my brain was working at only a subconscious level, but I slowly began to realize as he moved hesitantly that, just like Shmulik had predicted, Vinny had never been in a fight before. I started to become less panicky. The crowd was egging him on. "Come on, Vinny, kick his ass." "Get him, Vinny, he's a faggot."

I think I unnerved him a bit by waiting so patiently for him to make the first move. I was scared, without a doubt, but I think he was getting pretty nervous himself. Given the mob's urging, plus his fear over his reputation if he would be afraid of a homo, he finally decided to take action.

I watched him take a step forward, and he turned and threw a big, looping right hook, aimed at the side of my head. After all of the hours of training with Shmulik and Roni, it looked like his arm was coming at me in slow motion. Just like Shmulik taught me at least a thousand



times (*I finally understood his painstaking attention to detail*), I thrust my left arm upwards and outwards, catching his wrist with my forearm and causing his punch to sail harmlessly two feet wide of my head. And, in one continuous motion (*thank you again, Shmulik, for saving my life in more ways than you can ever possibly imagine*), I shifted my weight to my left foot, leaned forward, snapped my right arm with a level of impact powered as if by a hidden, primeval force, and caught Vinny's nose full-on with the heel of my hand, exactly as I had practiced. My blow to his face caught him as he was lunging forward, carried by the momentum from the first (and, most certainly, the last) punch he would ever throw in his life. He went down so fast it looked like he had been clothes-lined. Lying on the ground, he began screaming:

“MY NODTH! MY NODTH! MY NODTH! MY NODTH!!!”

Not only did I break his nose about as badly as a nose can get broken, the anatomy of cartilage notwithstanding, I caught him so perfectly, with my weight and his each going forward towards each other, and therefore doubling the force of the impact, that I even gave him a concussion and a case of whiplash, I later learned. He lay on the ground writhing in agony.

“MY NODTH!! HE BROKE MY NODTH!!  
HEEEEEELLLLLPPPPP!!!

I was now so pumped up on my own adrenaline, testosterone and endorphins that I would have failed a post-fight urine test. I was surging with electricity.

“Okay, who’s next?! Come on, motherfuckers. Who wants a piece of me?!” (I guess I had seen too many bad action movies, and was not up to original dialogue at this point).

The crowd starting edging nervously backwards. What started out as a fifteen-foot-wide circle had turned into thirty. Everyone had a forced, nervous smile on their face, as if they hadn’t been calling me “faggot” and yelling for my blood just seconds ago.

“Now everyone listen, and listen good.” Heads nodded up and down, and I could hear audible gulps. Meanwhile, Vinny lay moaning, having not changed position since he hit the ground with a thud like a felled tree.

“You all saw what happened. Vinny called me a homo, and came here to fight me. He threw the first punch, and I defended myself. If anyone dares to lie, and say that I started this, I’m coming over to your house and kicking your ass, too. That goes for you too, Desai. I better not

hear of a different version of this tomorrow at school. Did everyone get that straight?"

Nods and more gulps. A nearly imperceptible head movement from Vinny, who, after ten minutes, was helped his feet by Al and Joe, and shepherded to the 7-Eleven, where they phoned his mom to come and get them.

The phone rang in the middle of dinner.

"Mistah Murphy, it's for you."

"Mrs. White, can you take a message and tell them I'll call back. You know I don't like being disturbed during dinner."

A minute later, Mrs. White came back into the dining room.

"Mistah Murphy, it's one of the parents from school. They said it's important and they need to speak to you right away."

Dad shot me a look, then got up, made a big show of folding his napkin and pushing his chair in, and went to his office to get the phone. I could see him thinking, "I wonder what kind of trouble that son of mine got himself into this time."

Mom and I sat there, not even bothering to pretend to eat. We could hear the muffled sound of Dad's voice

coming from the office. I couldn't make out the words, but the tone didn't sound that great.

Dad came back into the room.

"That was Mr. Desai. Do you have any idea what why he might have called, Bobby?"

"Yeah, Dad, I know why he called."

"Well, since your mother is the only one in the room who didn't know, why don't we tell her?" Mrs. White, apparently did not fit into Dad's calculations.

"Well, Mom, I got into a fight with Vinny Desai."

Mom immediately cried out, "Oh my goodness, Bobby, why did you get into a fight? And what about school? You might get suspended. Why didn't you think about your future?"

"It's okay, Mom. Vinny and I fought after school, over at Whitman. And he started it. I was just defending myself."

"But why would a nice boy like Vinny get in a fight with you. I met his parents at the open house at the start of the school year. I know they're not Catholic, but they seemed awfully nice. I think his mother gives private piano lessons, and his dad works for one of the big pharmaceutical companies as a researcher." *Mom sure knew how to keep score, that's for sure.* As for Vinny being

a 'nice' boy, I'm guessing that Mr. Desai didn't share with Dad precisely what led up to the fisticuffs.

"Well, Mom, I wasn't looking for a fight, but Vinny challenged me to one." A very slight alteration of the facts, but generally in line with the reality of the situation, that he had started the whole thing in the first place.

"But still, why would Vinny challenge you to a fight?"

"Well, Mom, he called me a faggot and said he wanted to beat me up."

"A what?"

"A faggot, Mom. A gay, a queer, a homosexual."

At this point, Dad appeared to be comfortable with how this was unfolding. Apparently, Mr. Desai must have given him the "official" version that Vinny had started the altercation, and I had simply defended myself. Mr. Desai told Dad that they had to take Vinny to the emergency room of the hospital. "The emergency room," and he let out a soft whistle. Someone called his boy a "homo," and the boy had defended his honor and delivered such a haymaker to the miscreant who insulted him that urgent medical attention was required. Dad was starting to think he had underestimated his youngest son. By how much, he was about to find out.

“Bobby, I don’t understand how a fight between two boys the size of you and Vinny could end up with a trip to the emergency room.” Dad was clearly thinking the same thing, from the look on his face.

“Well, Mom, I guess I just got lucky.” Lucky, my foot. I had been training for that moment longer than the average professional boxer prepares for a championship fight. “I only threw one punch, but I somehow managed to hit him right in the nose.”

Dad finally spoke up. “Well, according to Mr. Desai, Vinny is going to need to wear a neck brace for the next two weeks, and they did a brain scan at the hospital, just to make sure he didn’t have anything more serious than a concussion.” I noticed Dad eyeing me from the side, trying to figure out where the heck that punch had come from. I hadn’t really gone through my adolescent growth spurt yet, so you wouldn’t think I could pack a punch just by looking at me. Clearly Dad didn’t think so, either.

“But Bobby, couldn’t you just ignore what Vinny called you? Don’t you boys all tease each other back and forth a bit? Weren’t you over-reacting?”

*Mom, you don’t know the half of it. I think I heard, “Watch out, you fucking faggot,” and “hey, cocksucker, did you suck any good gay cock last night?” every single day*

*since the start of the school year. I was a goddamn Mother Teresa for taking it calmly for as long as I did.*

“Well, Mom, I really felt like I didn’t have a choice.”

“What do you mean, Bobby, that you didn’t have a choice?”

If this were a movie, here’s where the scary soundtrack would come in. “Well, Mom, you see, it’s like this: I actually *am* gay.”

“Oh, lawdy.” Poor Mrs. White couldn’t help herself. She had dropped the gravy ladle with a clatter and scurried, well, waddled, out of the room as fast as those massive thighs could carry her.

Dad shifted in his chair so he could stare at me without having to turn his neck. His nostrils started to flair. I almost was tempted to start counting his nose hairs, just to distract myself from the tirade that I knew was about to commence.

“Bobby, can you please repeat what you just said?”

“Sure, Dad. I got in a fight with Vinny because I felt I had to defend myself. I am gay, and I didn’t want to get bullied for it.” God, it felt like a congressional filibuster coming out of me. I had one of those out-of-body sensations that people who have near-death experiences describe. I felt like I was simultaneously sitting at the table *and* hovering above it, watching the scene unfold.

“GODDAMNIT, YOU WILL *NEVER* SET FOOT IN THAT, THAT, THAT *STRANGE* HOUSE NEXT DOOR!!!!!! YOU ARE THROUGH YOUNG MAN. YOU ARE GROUNDED. KAPUT. FINITO. NOW YOU LISTEN TO ME, AND YOU LISTEN TO ME GOOD. YOU ARE NOT, I REPEAT, *NOT*, GAY. STRIKE THAT WORD FROM YOUR VOCABULARY FOREVER. YOU *ARE* CONFUSED. HELL, YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT SEX IS. DO YOU REALIZE THE BEAUTY AND THE GLORY OF HUMAN LOVE? OF COURSE NOT. YOU'RE A PUNK KID WHO'S WATCHED TOO MUCH TV. NO MORE TV. AND NO MORE INTERNET. YOU'VE BEEN BRAINWASHED BY THAT, THAT... *LIBERAL* PROPAGANDA FROM NEXT DOOR (*Even in the midst of an apoplectic fit, Dad had enough sense of propriety to not to say anything that could even remotely be interpreted as anti-Semitic*). OH, I'M CERTAIN OF THAT. WHAT'S THAT GUY'S NAME? SHMULIK? WHAT HAVE THEY BEEN TEACHING YOU? WELL, I DON'T CARE, IT'S OVER. THAT'S IT; YOU ARE FINISHED WITH THAT...*LIBERAL* CRAP FROM THAT FAMILY NEXT DOOR!”

Dead silence. Dad, breathing heavily, looked like he was going to have a stroke. Mom sitting there, broken-hearted. Fighting back tears, I got up and said, “I hate you,



Dad.” I ran out of the dining room, straight to my bedroom, where I slammed the door so hard it rattled the windowpanes. Mrs. White knocked about an hour later. “Your parents said to go to bed, Bobby. You have to turn off the light now.”

“Thanks, Mrs. White.”

Fathers love their kids, but want to make men out of them. Clearly, based on the bombshell I had just laid at Dad’s feet, I was not ever going to develop into *his* idea of a man. But a mother loves in an unconditional and instinctive way, without limitations. If there is anything we Catholics do well, it’s glorify the love of a mother for her son. Mom may have been a lot less than perfect, but she still loved me. That love left just enough of a handhold for Dad to grab onto.

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Yours truly,

Author Ed Harris