

"A Perfect Son"

By Alice (2001, Riverside, CA)

I never meant to have a gay son. I had other plans. I volunteered at the right places, prepared the right foods, lived in the right neighborhood. My grammar, dress and manner spoke of my proper upbringing and sound education. I was the quintessential doctor's wife, involving myself in community activities and having correct dinner parties. Nothing in my life could go wrong, particularly with my children. And, of course, my parenting skills were impeccable. When Will entered into our family, nothing about him refuted these beliefs.

From his first day of life, Will was pure joy. Even the word, "joy" is disgracefully inadequate to describe his nature. He delighted us daily and returned love to us in reckless excess. No child could ever have given his parents more bliss than that which Will effortlessly bestowed upon us.

He was such an enchanting child that he seemed too good to be true. And so it was that sometimes, in those deep hours of the night, fear whispered at my insecurities. Will was too good, too wonderful, too thoughtful, too sweet. I was afraid that I would lose him tragically. However, in the morning, his sunny greeting would chase away my fears.

When he began kindergarten, I volunteered at the school. I arranged my work schedule so that it matched his school hours. I drove him to piano lessons. I took him to soccer and to Cub Scouts. He had doting relatives, loving parents and all the worldly advantages.

As he grew older, I was able to put more energy into my work as a psychologist, particularly focusing on adolescents and their families. Working with teens and parents, I helped them to negotiate those difficult waters of self-definition. I counseled parents in their interactions, coaxed kids into conforming to rules, and went home to my own well-behaved, kind-hearted, studious and intelligent teenaged son. I knew that many teens had problems charting the waters to adulthood. I understood, I was kind and benevolent, I was relaxed and comfortable, content in the knowledge that I would never have to face these things in my own home.

Helping kids give their parents difficult news was something I was especially skilled at. Some teens needed to reveal that they weren't exactly what their parents had wanted. Some had difficulty with eating disorders, others had problems with substance abuse. Many had the darkest moods in the private places in their hearts. And there were those who needed to tell their parents that they were sexually different. Not what their parents expected. Not what they had wanted for their children. I helped these teens tell their parents the hard things, and I helped the parents hear them. And always, always, I went home with the easy comfort, no, the smug satisfaction of knowing that I would never confront any real pain at home. No matter what, I wouldn't bail my son out of jail, take him to a special treatment center or grieve over his careless impregnation of acne-faced girls. It never occurred to me that he might be gay.

October 31, 1999 began as all days begin; coffee, stiff knees, letting the dogs out. I sat at the computer, cleaning up files and found a love letter from a male to my son. Confused, I had to read it twice to understand. My heart pounded, the walls were closing in, I could hear the blood hammering in my head. My face felt hot. My arms and legs were rubbery. My stomach churned. A swell of sickening panic arose. The psychologist in me recognized my sympathetic nervous system. The mother recognized those primitive mother-fears from the deepest of night. Disbelief, shock, fear all rolled into one, swept over me in a giant tidal wave of pain. My son, my beautiful, perfect son was gay.

My first thought was of Matthew Shepard, draped over a fence on a lonely road. Murdered for being gay - for simply being who he was. I recalled the AIDs patients I had worked with, helping them to face a terrifying death, saying goodbye far too soon. I recalled, with the brightest of pain, those late night moments when I feared losing Will too soon, too early, too young... Now, these minutes, sitting at that computer, would congeal into the most vivid moment of my life.

The irony was not wasted on me; since his very first breath, Will had never given us pain. He was in so many ways a perfect son. Loving, kind, helpful, generous, thoughtful, accomplished... he had a creative and intelligent mind. I always said he would be the perfect husband and father. Now, I sat at the computer, looking at a poem, but seeing instead, the diaphanous ghosts of my daughter-in-law and grandchildren evaporate.

He came into the room. I asked. He answered. And his answer was so typical of his bountiful generosity. He told me of how much he loved me, of how every day of his life had memories of my contributions to his happiness, of how when at friends' houses he always was reminded of my kindness by the hard edges of other parents. He spoke of how grateful he was that he had me for a mother. He told me that no matter how long he lives, he cannot repay me for all that I have given to him.

Sitting there that morning, I did the hardest work I have ever done. I listened to him, not as a mother who has just heard terrifying news, but as a therapist. I thought about what it meant to him to tell me this. I thanked him for trusting me. I told him that it must have been so hard to keep such a secret for 17 years. And I explored the painful realization that he had not trusted me, really; he had not volunteered. He had kept this secret hidden away in his heart for his entire life. He told me only because I had asked. He explained that it wasn't so much a matter of trusting me, but of the deepest privacy.

Somehow I was able to find the skills I had learned so that this very important moment would be one we both remembered positively. I kept up my inner mantra, "what do I want the outcome of this event to be?" It helped keep me in line. But my innermost voice was screaming, "He's gay! He's gay! Oh, my God, he's gay!"

My fears threatened to overwhelm me. Complete strangers would hate him. He would not be able to express romantic affection openly in public. And oh, God, what torment high school must have been, hearing the extreme prejudice and hatred which adolescents so freely to express toward homosexuality. But, most of all, something so terrible that I had helped others battle, what if he became infected with HIV? What if he developed AIDS? What if I really did lose him too soon.

We talked and talked. When I felt a need to go to my room to cry, I asked, "Well, are we through talking?" Typical for Will, he responded, "I don't ever want to stop talking."

From that day on, everything has been different for me. Everything I see and hear is experienced through that filter; my son is gay. I find the comic relief of an effeminate gay male in films offensive rather than just plain stupid. I find jokes about sexual orientation intolerable, instead of tasteless. I had been a proponent of understanding sexual orientation prior to Will's disclosure, but it was no longer simply an important part of my personal mission to foster understanding between people. Now it was far deeper; it had become a critical part of expressing love for my son.

Every significant event changes us. In my work, I must be more careful how I respond to sexual issues in clients. I must be watchful of my own reactions. I must terminate therapeutic relationships with persons who express hatred for homosexuals. In the classes which I teach, I must not display my outrage when a beginning psychology student insists that there are cures for homosexuality, that gays molest children, or labels it a sinful behavior of choice.

In my work with parents, I will probably be more understanding than before. Regardless of all of my training, education, skills and experience, learning that my son was gay was acutely painful and difficult for me. Having now "been there," I will be more empathetic with them. However, I will advise them, as I do about everything, to never lose sight of what they want in the end. And what they always want is a closer relationship, to see their children attain their goals, and for their children to have rich and rewarding lives. Parents never say, "I want to say something really awful which will stand out in my child's memory as the worst thing I ever said, and which I will spend the rest of my life regretting."

Over a year has passed since that day in October. For Will, the day was liberating. For me, it was painful and frightening. Despite our divergent experiences of that day, it has drawn us even closer than before. Like all parents, I want him to have a rewarding life, to be physically and emotionally safe, to have love and belonging and family... I want him to have every good thing. As he launches his adult life, I watch him using his intelligence, creativity and drive to succeed. With people, he consistently shows his kindness, his gentle spirit and his loving heart. As his mother, I could not ask for a more rewarding experience. And I realize that he is, after all, the perfect son.