

## Tom's Story

*“Out of the forthright admission of one’s frailties and the determined commitment to go on, comes a laminated strength powerful enough to overcome those who have not made such a struggle.” –from “Fantastic,” by Lawrence Lerner*

By the time, at age 32, I began to seriously address my SSA, I had been struggling with it for so long I could barely remember life without it. There are no words to adequately express how consuming and crippling it was. As I write this, I am thirty-five and continuing on my journey of recovery, moving toward the reclamation of my true masculine potential which lay dormant for so long. Although two and a half years have passed since I decided to finally confront my SSA, the start of this journey seems like it was a lifetime ago. In some ways, it was.

It all began when I was six years old. My father was at that time a raging alcoholic, my older brother (seven years older than I) was rebelling against him, and my mother was desperately trying to hold our family together. At about this time I started school, and I began to see how other kids behaved with their parents and how life appeared to be in their homes. I was and am a very sensitive person, very quick to read the surroundings and underlying mood of a situation. I recognized quickly that something was not entirely right in our home, not only with my father but with our entire family. As the years went on, it was very painful to watch my father deteriorate into his addiction, and along with him our family life deteriorated too.

When I was 10, my mother gave my father an ultimatum: “Stop drinking or I am leaving you!” He did stop, and never touched a drink again. Still, although the nights of wondering if my father would come home drunk ended, I still never felt comfortable with him. Particularly in the early years of his sobriety, it was as if our family was playing a game of make-believe; as if the turmoil caused by his drinking, or the anticipation of that turmoil, had never existed. To this day, my father has never once acknowledged that he was ever wrong. Even after nearly twenty-five years of sobriety, he cannot speak of his drinking days, and worse, he takes no responsibility for them.

As I’ve grown and come to better understand my father, I recognize that he is in many ways what Alcoholics Anonymous calls a “dry drunk,” someone who is no longer drinking but whose thinking is still distorted by the thought patterns of addiction. I also

recognized very early on that I would rather die than be like him. It gives me no pleasure to say that; it is in fact profoundly sad to do so. But it is true. While my father was staying sober, my brother—with whom he never got along—was going his own way. My brother had the unique ability to infuriate our father on many occasions. Why couldn't he just shut up and keep the peace? I made the decision somewhere around the age of 13 that I was never going to be like my brother, either.

During those turbulent years, the one thing I wanted more than anything else was to protect my mother. In my view, she'd been through enough. My father's insensitivity to her, the stress she took on mediating between my brother and father, the pain the entire situation caused her—it was too much. I vowed that I would never hurt her. I would be the perfect son. In the process I became her sounding board, in a sense her emotional "husband." To say I became overly attached to her is an understatement.

Meanwhile, I was discovering that my extreme sensitivity and lack of athletic ability in a hyper-masculine hometown were crippling me. I did not fit in with the other boys. I was passive, afraid to fight. I liked to dress nicely, and I was weak and overweight. I felt in some ways, really in many ways, crushed by the circumstances of my life. I wanted to be someone else. By this time I was 13, in the spring of the seventh grade, and now my SSA began.

The first boy I became attracted to was a year older than I, and he was everything I could have been "if only." He was smart, athletic, preppy, and seemed very nice. At that point I didn't consciously think it was weird for me to be constantly thinking about this guy. What I remember asking myself was, How can I be more like him? How can I turn into him? How can I get him to like me?

As I entered high school, I re-experienced those feelings for other boys. They were always the same—lean, preppy, baby-faced, safe. I studied how they dressed and acted, what they liked and tried to emulate them. Above all else, I worked hard to get them to like me and be my closest friends. The tension and excitement that this all-consuming quest caused me cannot be overstated. I often masturbated while thinking about them, trying to relieve the anxiety that all of those feelings caused. Yet I remained in deep denial about the nature of my feelings.

In the rare moments when I reflected on what I was doing, I recognized that it was highly unlikely that these boys, whom I so admired, felt the same way about me. But this

didn't stop me—my emotional cravings and need for belonging were too strong. Time after time, no matter what guy I pursued, obsessed over, and longed to be with, every single time I got my heart broken in some way. Nothing ever worked out the way I wanted it to. Before long I would turn my attention toward someone else, and the same thing would happen all over again.

My religious tradition was Roman Catholic, and my SSA feelings were a source of guilt and shame to me. I had “girlfriends,” but only because it was what was expected of me. I would never have admitted to anyone that my feelings for guys were stronger and more intense than what I felt for girls. It was an exercise in stamina and required tremendous acting to pretend that I was “normal.”

In the summer between seventh and eighth grades, a man I had come to trust and tried to emulate offered me a ride home from an event. I was shocked when he started asking me questions about how often I masturbated, how I did it, and whether I liked it. His questions made me extremely uncomfortable, but I wanted his attention too much to say so. Then, after a few minutes of this kind of talk, he softly said, “Show me how you do it.”

It has been twenty-one years since this incident took place and I still cannot adequately explain the fear I experienced in that moment. Why did I accommodate him? Why did I do what he asked? Because I was afraid—too afraid not to. I was afraid that if I didn't do what he wanted, he wouldn't like me anymore.

As I complied with his request and pulled down my pants, he took one look at me and then began to mock and laugh. I was humiliated beyond words. Even more confusing, minutes later, as he continued to drive me home, he kept talking about nothing in particular, as if the incident never had happened. In the months and years to come I saw this man frequently and he never again asked me to do such a thing. But what he did, which was perhaps even more devastating, was continue to belittle me as he had done during the incident.

I promised myself not to speak of that event to anyone—never, ever. I tried to put it out of my mind, but for the next two decades I carried it within me, feeling deep shame and confusion. As I got older, I heard about other boys who'd had absolutely horrifying experiences of sexual abuse over long periods of time. I tried to convince myself that

my own experience was really nothing—a moment too insignificant to remember. But in my heart I knew that simply wasn't true.

Meanwhile, even as I tried to pursue a normal life, my attraction to guys continued. There were still girlfriends, too, but as soon as our relationships led to intimacy, whether physical or emotional, an automatic barrier closed in around me. Finally, after “fooling myself” for a couple of years, when I was 24, I concluded it was very likely that I was gay.

Now I actively began to seek out other gays. I wanted to explore my feelings further, even though I felt almost nauseated every time I did so. Gradually my emotional attachments to men turned into physical relationships. Every time it happened, I came away more sad, confused, lonelier than ever, and sickened by my behavior. I tried to convince myself that everything was OK, but something inside me knew very well that it was not.

This pattern of playing straight while having a double life went on for the next three years, until the night I met the man who would ultimately set me on the path to self-recovery. He was the ultimate combination of all the qualities I had sought for the past fourteen years. He was impossibly good looking, preppy, baby-faced, physically unimposing—everything I had ever desired in one package. I fell not into love but into an obsession that I now shudder to think about. I clearly remember thinking, if I could win his friendship, my life would be complete. I was convinced that, with him beside me, my life of longing and loneliness would be over.

For the next year and a half, I pursued him with sick determination. And every time I went out of my way to prove myself to him, every time I sacrificed, every time I drove past by his house in the middle of the night, I knew deep inside that I was in serious trouble. To the best of my knowledge, he never knew the extent of my feelings. Or maybe he did. The point is my yearnings were never reciprocated. Worse than that, I got the feeling he didn't really care at all.

The pain was crippling. I could never stop thinking about him, and to alleviate my obsession, I impulsively went out in the middle of the night to hook up sexually with the first guy I could find. This went on for months, until one winter night, I sat down alone in my apartment, lonelier and more isolated than I had ever been. I cried bitterly, thinking of the wreckage my life had become, thinking of all the men I had pursued, especially

over the last year. I wrote down a vow that I fully intended to keep, even if I didn't know how to do so. All I knew was that this emotional torture could not go on. This will never happen again! I promised myself. Of course my SSA desires continued despite my best intentions. For the next few years, I emotionally cut myself off, despite the fact that I occasionally slipped up and hooked up when the craving became too strong. Three years after I made my vow, and after I repeatedly broke it without really wanting to, I admitted to myself that I needed help.

But my fear of seeking help was overwhelming. What would I find out if I actually talked to someone about my life? Was I truly gay? Was there any hope for change? I continued to struggle with these questions for close to a year. At last, shattered by one more intolerable relationship, I finally did a search on the Web for some kind of an organization that could help men like me. I found the International Healing Foundation website, where I read, "No one is born with SSA." That was it. I had been right all along. I wasn't supposed to be gay.

Then I read Richard Cohen's book *Coming Out Straight*. I identified with so much of what he wrote and recognized in myself several of the causes of SSA that he listed. I learned that I was a classic SSA male—extremely sensitive, with an alcoholic and abusive father, a very close connection to my mother, and a history of sexual abuse. This confirmed what I had always suspected, that my SSA feelings did not happen by accident. After wrestling with my fears a little longer, I made an appointment to talk to Richard.

I thought we could figure all this out in his office, just between the two of us, until he stressed to me the importance of reaching out to other people. Tell other people? He had to be kidding. But he affirmed and reaffirmed this necessity, until I finally agreed to try. "You'd better be right about this!" I warned him.

Before long I discovered that I was blessed with a handful of men in my life with whom I could share the most intimate details of what I'd been through. These men were fantastic. I kept them and Richard captive for hours on end, talking through the heartaches, disappointments and failures I had never talked about to any one before. It was radical for me to open up like this.

Meanwhile, Richard explained that I had to spend the next year reconnecting to my inner child—the wounded little boy within me. Now at first I thought this was crazy. I did

not sense any connection to any child, inner or otherwise. But I slowly realized that it was indeed my inner child who had to be healed, not the 33-year-old adult. This process was not easy, and it took a lot of time for me to connect with my inner child, because “he” had been hurt so deeply. I learned that I had to become a loving father to him—the kind of father I’d never had. Only in doing so could I overcome the lifelong pain, fear and loneliness that had led to my SSA. As I followed this healing path, slowly but surely my SSA feelings started to disappear.

Other difficult issues arose. Confronting the man who had humiliated me became necessary. Looking back, I am still surprised that I was so gung-ho, because being confrontational has never been part of my nature. When the moment finally came, seventeen months after I started my healing journey, I can honestly say that I have never felt God’s power more strongly than I did as I spoke to him. As empowering as that experience was, it was still only a part of the larger process of setting things right.

I wish that I could say the attempts I made in connecting with my father had gone well, too, but I learned something I had never considered: That I had the courage and insight to confront my demons, even if he could not. This process of confrontation, of setting things in order, of dealing with the pain, of listening to my inner child, of sharing with other men, and of embracing what I felt was my true nature, slowly but surely took away the underlying fear I had of “losing myself.” At last I am getting to know the man that I was truly meant to be.

My next step is to speak about these things with my mother and heal my opposite-sex wounds. I am not sure how it will turn out, but I am not worried. I hope to establish a relationship with a woman soon, and believe that I will. The healing process takes a lot of time. You cannot rush healing. But I can say with certainty that I cannot imagine returning to my past behaviors. I am living proof that change is really possible.