Farm Boys
Fellows, Will

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Connie Sanders

Connie was born in 1962 and grew up with three older brothers and two younger sisters on a farm in Franklin County, southern Illinois. They farmed about 120 acres, on which they grew corn, wheat, soybeans, and hay, and raised beef cattle, hogs, and chickens. Connie’s father worked full-time as a coal miner. Connie lives in Chicago, where he teaches in a college.

MY MOTHER CALLED last night and was telling me about all these people she knew who were sick or dying. I told her I had just come from visiting a very sick friend at the hospital. She asked what was wrong, and I said, “He has pneumonia, and I think he has AIDS—actually, I know he has AIDS, and he knows it too.” And my mother said, “Oh, that’s really sad.” Her tone made me think that she meant it was sad that people do that to themselves. She said, “How do you know him?” and I said, “He’s a friend. I’m better friends with his friend Gary.” I didn’t allow myself to go ahead and say, “Actually, Gary and Kurt are lovers, and I’ve been friends with Gary for years, and they’ve been such a support for each other, and Gary’s being so strong and so nurturing right now, and I don’t know what Kurt would do without Gary being there.” I wanted to say all those things, but I didn’t.

Sometimes I think it makes sense to come out to my parents, and then I go home to visit and I’m back in a world that’s so completely different from the world I know now. Where I grew up, everybody was pretty much the same—white, working-class, rural, Protestant. People trusted each other, neighbors kept an eye out for each other, and the church was like an extended family, very communal and secure. But it wasn’t a place where diversity was valued. It was like homosexuality didn’t exist, except in a sermon or in a Bible verse condemning it. There was no one to talk to about things like that, at least no one I knew of.

I rode horseback every chance I got from the time I was nine years old until I was about fourteen. Sometimes I rode with friends, sometimes with Dad, but most of the time by myself. I craved the time alone in the wide-open countryside, the physical contact with my horse, the sense of independence. And I spent a lot of time in my bedroom, reading and writing in a journal, with a sense of being alone. I think that kind of experience
contributed to my being a spiritual person. I’ve had to go inside myself so much to get a sense of who I am and how I fit into the world, what’s important and what’s not.

Sometimes I feel that I was this person sort of planted on the farm. I always felt sort of outside of them all. Now that I’m in an urban environment I feel so comfortable, it’s almost like coming home. But I have a good time when I visit my parents now, when it’s just my parents and me. I dreaded it for a long time because I’d have to edit out quite a bit of my life to be with them. One of these days I’m going to stop limiting myself, and I’m going to talk to them about it.

I wasn’t as involved in the farmwork as my older brothers. I helped deliver baby lambs and calves, and my everyday chores were gathering eggs, carrying hay, and watering the cattle—sometimes by using an axe to break the ice on the pond. I liked doing things that let me get out on the tractor by myself and just go from one end of the field to the other. I would daydream or sing—songs from church camp, songs from musicals, or songs we had sung in choir at school.

I hated picking corn. We had a corn-picker that was pulled behind the tractor, with the wagon hooked on behind it. It was a jalopy of a thing, and a hassle. I’d have to ride in the wagon, and when the corn piled up too high I’d knock it down and even it out. Before we got the corn-picker we picked corn by hand, which took forever. When I was five years old, I missed being in the big Halloween parade in town because we were out picking corn. It got late, and my dad had to get the job done. Mom said I wouldn’t be able to go because she thought I was coming down with a cold—but I was out there on that corn wagon, for god’s sake!

The next year, in first grade, I was on a float in the Halloween parade. It was supposed to be about Illinois history; there was a farmer, a minister, and an Indian. Agriculture, faith and heritage. I was the minister. I represented faith. I had a big Bible and my little black suit, and I waved at people. I really liked that, because I was a very religious kid and I enjoyed being the star. My parents were involved in the United Methodist church, and my mother especially was very religious. I was sort of the favored child with my mother, and I was the only one of the kids who ever took religion as seriously as she did.

Dad would come up behind Mother at the kitchen stove and start rubbing her neck, and she’d start giggling. They were very lovely-dovey with each other. Dad would sometimes tease Mom by putting her over his knee and spanking her while she giggled and pretended to try to stop him. They obviously wanted us to see a healthy, playful attitude about sexuality in
marriage, but they were embarrassed to talk about it, especially Dad. One

time, when we were breeding rabbits, I asked him about how rabbits had
babies. All he would say was, “Well, they do it just like any other animal
does. The buck fucks the doe, and she has babies.”

My dad was very hard-working, he knew what his priorities were, and
taking care of the family came first. He was a fairly typical farmer, blue­
collar kind of father and could have a coarse sense of humor. I, being a
self-righteous little kid, sometimes got offended by things he said. I liked
to watch shows like The Waltons, but Dad was more into cowboy shows. And there was nothing worse for him than having to watch TV musicals
like Oklahoma! or The Sound of Music, which I loved. Dad and I were so
completely different in so many ways, we just didn’t connect. With my
brothers, at least he had to do things like giving them condoms to keep
them out of trouble with girls. I guess he thought I was such a goody­
two-shoes, he didn’t need to bring that up with me.

Fall was my favorite time of year, but I always knew there would be a re­
vival meeting at the church. From my infancy until I was about fourteen,
I went to revival meetings every fall, where I’d hear a lot of preaching and
fist-pounding about hellfire and brimstone. In high school, I started going
to a holiness camp where they were into something called sanctification,
which they interpreted as instantaneous perfection and holiness. I yearned
for perfection, strived to attain the love of God, and had constant guilt.
When I noticed my attraction to another guy at school, I would pray,
“Thank you, God, for beautiful people. Help me not to be lustful.” I had
gotten this prayer idea from an advice column in a Christian youth mag­
azine.

I was usually a gregarious kid, very good in school, and active in band,
speech team, church youth group, and other things. During my junior
year, however, I started dropping out of activities and didn’t talk to my
friends as much. My grades went from A’s to C’s and D’s. I was depressed
and started feeling guilty about things like being in the marching band,
because of the baton twirlers’ sexy outfits, or because we played “The Strip­
per” at some of the basketball games. When my parents talked about buy­
ing some new furniture, I told them they didn’t need it, that they should
save their money and be good stewards.

My church often had altar calls during the invitational hymn at the
end of the service. The minister would ask those moved by the sermon to
come to the front of the church to kneel and pray, to get right with God.
It was not something most people did every week. Maybe they did it once
and considered themselves “saved.” I started doing it a lot. The fall of my
junior year, I'd spend whole days thinking about what I could possibly have been doing that was sinful in the past half hour, and asking God to forgive me. My parents saw how depressed and fanatical I was becoming, and Mom got upset and started crying a few times. She took me to the family doctor to get a prescription for an antidepressant, which didn't seem to help much.

One Sunday morning when I had been praying and crying by my bed, my dad told me, “Look, your mom’s going to church and we’re going to have a talk.” Dad and I went out to the backyard and sat under a tree. He began by saying, “You’re hurting your mother, and I want it to stop. You’re a good-looking young man, it’s the fall of the year, you’ve got everything going for you—you’re smart and you’re popular. You have to pull yourself up by the bootstraps and get over this.” Then we actually started talking about things, and he asked me a lot of questions. “Do you have homosexual desires?” He didn’t ask it in a judgmental way, but I lied and said no. He asked me about erections and masturbation, and I told him I believed I had arrived at a spiritual plane above all that. I think that was one of his first clues that I was really fucked up.

As I got worse, I spent hours on my knees by my bed, praying and crying. I could hardly eat, and started choking on my food. I’m a diabetic, so my parents decided they had to do something. They called another farm family, because one of their sons had had a breakdown, got the name of his psychiatrist in St. Louis, and took me there to get treatment.

The hospital was a liberating experience for me. Here were all these people who were urban, educated in a different way, who didn’t measure everything by the church and by what the neighbors thought. They challenged my beliefs in ways that sometimes seemed harsh and cynical to me then, but they helped me begin to look at belief more critically. Though it was painful and terribly frightening, it helped to free me. After a few weeks I was released, and after a few more weeks I got off the medication. I had never before realized that I could be just a normal kid. Finally I was able to believe that God loved me as much as anyone, and I could stop spending so much time worrying about it.

When I was sixteen, after I got out of the hospital, I started dating girls. My parents always liked the girls I dated; they were all pretty safe choices. I became very close with a girl who was active in the church youth group. We both ended up going to the same Free Methodist college, where students had to sign a statement promising not to have sex or to drink or smoke on campus. My junior year in college, I dated a girl my parents liked very much. Karen was a Baptist girl who used a lot of makeup and was pretty in a sort of artificial way. She worked with handicapped kids and
was a very sweet, giving person—almost neurotically giving. When Karen met my family, she really won them over, so much so that everybody was upset with me when I broke up with her. I later started dating a girl who was not very physically attractive in the traditional sense. Diane was very intelligent, a math major. We watched Masterpiece Theatre together and talked about philosophy.

After my parents met Diane, they sat me down and told me how girls like Karen only come along once in a lifetime. My mother did this whole psychoanalytical thing about how I always rejected the things I wanted. She recalled how she had tried to buy me some cowboy boots when I was five years old, and I cried and cried in the store because I didn’t want them, I didn’t like them, and then when she brought me home, I wouldn’t take them off—I wore them and wore them. Now I was rejecting Karen, this girl they loved and thought I was in love with. Why was I doing this to myself? Why couldn’t I just give myself what I wanted? When I tried to explain what Diane and I had together, my dad said, “Don’t give me all this about intellectual and spiritual relationships. Physical attraction is very important.” I’ll be sure to remind him of that when I explain my sexuality to him.

As a young child I saw Cinderella, with Lesley Ann Warren. I was just enchanted—with her, but also with the prince. I was very concerned about whether I would grow up to be handsome like the prince, perhaps because I was very drawn to him—wanting to be like him and wanting to have him. I had crushes on men who were authority figures—my minister, several teachers. When I got into high school, I started having crushes on other boys my age.

In a religious magazine for kids called Campus Life, a guy wrote a column about dating and sex, and every once in a while he would respond to a letter about gays. He would give advice like, “It’s a wrong way to live your life, but God loves people that feel this way.” I was fourteen or fifteen, and that’s when I started realizing, “Yeah, this is more than just a passing fancy. This is really the way I am.” That’s when I started acknowledging in my prayers that I desired other boys, and asking God to help me not to lust after them.

On a school trip to St. Louis we went to a shopping mall, and I wound up in the gay novels section of a bookstore. I was fascinated, but it bothered me because I thought people shouldn’t really be reading about homosexuality, except as a problem to be solved. One book, with a picture of two young men on the cover, was described as “one of the best homosexual love stories ever written.” I could hardly tear myself away from it, but I couldn’t bring myself to buy it.
“Sometimes I feel that I was this person sort of planted on the farm. I always felt sort of outside of them all—the farm kids and even the other kids at school.” Connie Sanders on his home farm as a preschooler. Courtesy of Connie Sanders.

My masturbation fantasies were always about a man and a woman. That was how I got around feeling guilty. Once when I was in college, I worked up the nerve to buy a *Playgirl*. I had two orgasms in the car in the parking lot and another one while I was driving. Throughout college, I remained celibate, telling myself that although I had these feelings, I could never act on them.

After graduating from college, I went to Urbana to work in the library at the University of Illinois. It was a few months before I realized there was a gay community there. I resisted exploring it for a long time, but my life seemed really empty and depressing, so one night I went to a discussion at the student union about safe sex. I thought I could hide in the crowd, but there were five people there that I knew from campus, including my boss and a couple of co-workers. I was amazed, and decided that since people had seen me anyway, I might as well go to the gay bar.
In the bar, I was so scared that I couldn’t look anyone in the eye. I struck up a conversation with the first person I made eye contact with and we left together almost immediately. He was from out of town, about ten years older, and very melancholy. I had no interest in him, except that I had to try it, to get it out of my system. I was twenty-three when I had my first sexual experience with a man. It was just an experiment—I told him I didn’t want to be gay, which is what I believed. After him, I met another guy I had nothing in common with. He was an alcoholic and a mess emotionally, and we had a very short and awful affair.

The first time I met someone I really cared about, he was a law student at the University of Illinois who approached me in the bar. He looked like the boy-next-door and we had a light summer romance—we actually had fun together. When he broke up with me I began to understand why
people use the term “broken heart.” That’s when I realized I was no longer just experimenting.

What first allowed me to feel okay about being gay was the realization that there were gay people who were married—committed to one another and monogamous. So I decided the only way I wanted to be sexual was to be in a committed relationship. If I had sex with someone, we were automatically going to be lovers and it was going to last forever. It didn’t take long to realize that that wasn’t realistic.

Then I started just dating around and picking people up—being safe, but realizing that sometimes sex was just fun. But after living in Chicago a couple of years, I decided to give up casual sex for Lent. I tried to get through forty days and forty nights without being with anybody unless I thought it would be something significant. I sort of broke my promise once when I couldn’t resist going to an underwear party, but that was the only thing the whole time.

On Easter morning, I decided to go to church. I hadn’t been for a long time. At the coffee hour after church, I met Matt. He gave me a ride home and called me two days later. He said he’d get me up to go running if I would get him up to go to church the next week. We had a date that weekend and ended up having pretty wild sex.

Matt and I have made a beginning commitment to be monogamous and just see where it goes. We both want it to be a long-term thing, but we’re trying not to write a script. We decided to meet each other’s families before we moved in together, and it turned out to be a very positive experience. Dad took us horseback riding and we all had a good time and my parents liked Matt a lot. They’ve always liked the guys I’ve dated, but they haven’t really known who these guys have been to me.

Terry was a rough-and-tumble girl, a year or two older than me, who grew up next-door. When we were out horseback riding or camping, she’d say things like “Goddamn it!” and then she’d apologize because she knew it offended me. Terry has been living with a woman now for about thirteen years. She had a daughter when she was about fifteen. One time when I was home from college, Terry and her lover came to the Christmas program at church to see her daughter. Her lover kind of fit the stereotype of a masculine lesbian. My mother and I got into a conversation about them at home, and my mother said, “I don’t want to talk about this. You know about Terry and that woman, but we don’t talk about it.”

About a year ago, when I was home, Mom told me that Dad had been horseback riding with Terry and Joanne. I said, “Wait a minute! You mean
Terry from next-door and Joanne, the woman she’s been living with for years?” Mom said, “Yes, they had a great time,” and she just went on with the story. I know my parents know they’re lesbians. In the country, I guess, it’s the kind of thing that’s okay if you don’t talk about it—if you don’t “rub it in people’s faces.” My parents’ attitude is that God intends sex to be something within a marriage and between a man and a woman. But I’ve heard Mom say that she thinks people should have the right to live their lives the way they want to, even if she doesn’t approve of their choices.

My mother’s experience is so drastically different from mine, on their little farm out in the middle of nowhere, where the center of her life is the little Methodist church up the road. I haven’t talked with her about being gay because I feel guilty about hurting her. I’ve always been the good kid. My older brothers got in trouble, my little sisters got in trouble, but I never got in trouble. If there’s something painful in my life, or something that would make my mother unhappy, I don’t tell her. We’re not a communicative family about a lot of things. Everything is indirect, and we don’t talk about things that make us uncomfortable.

I was in a show with a community theater in Urbana, and Mom said she wanted to come see it. I said, “Well, Mom, I don’t know,” and she said, “Oh, Connie, you know how much I love to come see your shows. What’s the show?” I told her it was La Cage aux Folles and she said, “Oh, I’ve heard of that. Didn’t that win a Tony award? I’d like to see it.” When I said I thought she should know what it was about, she said, “Isn’t it about a bunch of men who dress up like women and perform?” She probably got it from a talk show. She loves Oprah Winfrey and all those shows.

I said, “Well, Mom, there’s one more thing I should tell you. The two main characters in the show are a homosexual couple, and they’re portrayed in a positive light.” She said she wanted to see it.

She came for the last performance, and during the whole show I kept thinking, “My mother’s here! What am I going to do?” The show has a lot of sexual innuendo, and we really milked that for all it was worth. I came out in crinolines and fishnet stockings, doing the can-can, and in a bird suit with nothing but a skimpy leotard and high heels and feathers. I came out in big blue pajamas and a boa, tap dancing in fishnet stockings and high heels. I also had a brief scene as a male waiter and danced in “The Masculinity Dance”—so I got to be a man too, which was sort of comforting.

A man who weighed about three hundred pounds had come to see sixteen performances of the show in various states of drag. Sometimes he’d come in full drag and sometimes he’d come in a three-piece suit. The last
night he came in a suit with a tiara, and we presented one of the boas to him at the end of the show. I wondered what Mom thought about that.

After the show, I was in the back with one of the few straight guys in the chorus, and I started to cry. He said, “What’s wrong, Connie?” and I said, “I think I just came out to my mother, and I don’t want to go out and talk to her.” He said, “Come on, let’s go meet Mom.” She was dabbing her eyes, and I thought, “Oh no, she’s upset.” But my mother’s a sucker for a happy ending, and this show had one—the two lead men dancing off into the moonlight, celebrating their love for each other. She said, “Oh, I just had the best time. That was so good! You know, I couldn’t figure out whether that was a man or a woman. Almost to the end of the show, I just wasn’t sure. And it took me forever to figure out which one was you.”

We had to strike the set that night, so she sat and looked through photographs and watched people. There was no way to get away from the campy comments and affectations. She just sat there soaking it all in. Every once in a while, she’d look at someone kind of funny, but she was really a good sport. I worried a little bit about coming off to her as a big drag queen, but I think she knows I just love to be a ham and to be on stage.

I’ve known people who were just sure their parents knew they were gay—they could even sort of joke with them about it. But when they directly confronted them with it, it became messy, because then their parents had to really deal with it. They couldn’t use denial anymore. My parents are probably doing major denial. With all the stuff my mother would have to deal with (did she cause it? am I going to hell?) it would be important for her to have some kind of support. I just don’t know if there are enough people there who would give her the support she needs and tell her the kinds of things she needs to hear, or if she’d be surrounded by people who were just as uninformed as she is, or more so.

My dad I’m not quite as concerned about. He sort of reacts to things according to how it affects my mom. His attitude tends to be “I hate to see your mother hurting like this.” My prediction is that he’ll be upset because my mother is, or he’ll hide his upset feelings. I can see my mother working through it, dealing with the emotional things and loving me anyway. I think my dad is a lot less flexible, less verbal, and less able to grow. I can see him saying, “It’s sick and it’s wrong.” But my parents have both surprised me many times by coming through with amazing intelligence. My mother watches a lot of television, and I think she sees more and more images of people who aren’t sick or unhappy because they’re gay. And in many ways, my dad is a very practical, sensible man. So who knows?
All through my life, I've been influenced by the church. An assumption of evil and rejection from God taints my perception of almost everything, and it comes out in very subtle ways. That voice in me—a former therapist called it "The Preacher"—had to do with my breakdown, it had to do with my difficulty accepting myself as gay, and even now it interferes with relationships. One of the first books I read when I was struggling to come out was Embracing the Exile, by a Christian psychotherapist. It was all about the spiritual journey of recognizing and embracing yourself as you are, as a gay person loved by God.²

My favorite show when I was growing up was The Waltons. The show's values comforted me, and I identified with John-Boy, the sensitive son who wanted to be a writer. He belonged there on the mountain with his family, yet he sensed that he was different and that he was often misunderstood. At times I would lay in my bedroom feeling like I was missing everything. There were boys I wanted so badly to be close to, and those were exactly the ones I avoided. I was frightened by boys who were very uninhibited and masculine and joked around about sex. I realize now that I was drawn to them, and I was afraid of giving that away, afraid I was too transparent to them. So I spent a lot of energy acting uninterested, or being shy, or thinking they shouldn't curse the way they did.

Sometimes I still feel like a misfit, even with gay people. My values are much more liberal than the values I was brought up with, but in an urban gay environment my values make me look sort of moralistic. There's something about camp humor, for example, that I've never been comfortable with. It seems like it's easier for urban people to have a harsh, cynical sense of humor about everything. Maybe it's a guy thing—wanting to make everything into a joke—and maybe it's an urban gay subculture thing too, but sometimes I want to say, "Just drop all this shit and be real. Stop thinking you're always on stage and talk to people like human beings." Matt says I need to loosen up, but it's hard for me to just let loose and think anything's okay. I still see certain behaviors as healthier than others. Matt is a lot more comfortable taking people at face value, without judgment. So he helps me loosen up a little, and I help him think about things in ways he wouldn't have before.
NOTES

1. *The Waltons* (1972–81) was a long-running television drama series that portrayed the life of a large family in rural Virginia during the 1930s and 1940s. The stories were seen through the eyes of John-Boy, the gentle and emotional eldest son and hopeful writer. Though the series was not a big hit in large cities, it was one of the most-viewed television programs in middle and rural America.