Farm Boys
Fellows, Will

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Ken was born in 1964 and grew up with two older sisters and two younger sisters on a small dairy farm in northwestern Minnesota, seven miles from Ponsford, in Becker County. He lives in the Minneapolis area and works in horticulture and plant biology.

THROUGHOUT growing up, one of my goals was to please my parents, and by working hard on the farm I pleased them exceedingly. I was not a rebellious child and I tried to maintain the best relationship possible with them by doing all the right things. I thought it was just the greatest thing when the neighbors, who had a son about my age, would tell my mom they wished their son could be just like Kenny. I thought, “Wow! I must really be doing everything right.”

From the beginning, I went out to the barn with my dad and was extremely involved in the work on the farm. As a little kid I started out feeding milk to the young calves and as I got older I learned how to drive tractors. But in the back of my mind, I didn’t know if I’d be good at farming. I could handle the animal husbandry and field crops part of it, but I wasn’t very good at all the mechanical work. I was just amazed at how my dad did it, but I never really learned it from him. If he was working on something and needed help, he would ask me to help him, but I never had an interest in it and he never pushed me.

My dad became extremely allergic to cattle and hay dust. On top of that, we had a bad drought in ’76, and hay prices were very high. He decided he wasn’t going to feed the cattle through the winter, and sold them all. Six months later, in the spring, my mother decided she wanted to start farming and asked me to help her. I was all for it, because I actually missed the cows. From that point on, my mother and I did most of the work. We were responsible for milking the cows twice a day, feeding them, and cleaning the barn. My dad had found a job in Detroit Lakes, about thirty-five miles away. He did a lot of the fieldwork, but that became a big part of my responsibility too. Putting up the hay was a never-ending summer chore.

Before I started college, I considered farming. But that was in the early ’80s, and the farm economy was just horrible. Farms were going under
left and right, and prices were very poor. In order to take over my parents' farm, I would have had to borrow a great deal of money. When I went away to college, my mother sold all the cows. I've often wondered if I did the right thing. If I had stayed at home and not gone to college, I'm sure I'd be farming today. But my parents always told me I needed to do what I really wanted to do. They would have been very pleased if I had taken over the farm, but I knew farming was not what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.

There was a division of labor in our household: the girls were in the house and I was in the barn. I would usually get up around 5:00 or 5:30, do milking for an hour, grab a bite to eat, take a shower, and catch the school bus around 7:15. When I got home I did milking, and after supper I had homework. So it really got to be a long day. I was never encouraged to do
any of the household activities, but I liked doing those things. I would bake on occasion, and my mother was very much into canning and freezing and often needed help with that. We would can chicken, peaches, pears, and canning tomatoes was a big one in the fall. Vegetables would always be frozen. I really liked helping to pick them, clean them, cut them up, and blanch and freeze them. When I was married, I did a lot of canning and freezing. I would call up my mother and ask her, “How do I do this? What’s the recipe you use for this?” I’m sure she kind of wondered about me sometimes, but she was always very encouraging and willing to share her recipes and ideas with me.

In high school, I really wanted to do acting, but I couldn’t because of the farm. Most of the play practices took place in the evening, and there was no way I could do that because we lived twenty-one miles from Park Rapids. So I got involved in technical theater and did that all through high school. Light design was my specialty. I worked on it right after school, so the late bus would get me home in time for milking. I would have just loved to do the summer musical, but we were busy with making hay and other summertime farmwork. I envied the freedom enjoyed by the kids who lived in town.

Our community 4-H club was started my senior year of high school, and I got involved in it right away, but I wasn’t interested in doing any of the farm activities. I wanted to get into drama and speech. They had what was called “Share the Fun.” Each club in the county put on a skit and competed with each other, and one skit from the county went on to perform at the state fair. That first year, I designed the whole act and got costumes for everyone, and we made it all the way to state.

We had a Finnish sauna in the basement, and one time when I was in junior high my cousins came over to take a sauna. Two or three of them went in together. My bedroom was in the basement, so I went down and laid on the floor under my bed and tried to peer into the sauna through the cracks in the wall and watch those guys who were several years older than I was. Then they came out of the sauna and started walking around without any clothes on. They thought they had the whole basement to themselves. Oh god! There I was, a gay adolescent with those naked guys in front of me, and I couldn’t even look at them because I was so afraid they were going to find me and beat me up. When they went back in the sauna, I was so disappointed I had missed most of it.

On the school bus, all the older guys would ride in back, and I would listen to their rough and gruff conversations about women. I was intensely turned on by those guys. During junior high, my hormones were just rac-
ing, but it wasn’t something I thought about at all. It wasn’t until I got into high school that I realized I was different from most people. It became very evident to me that I didn’t have the same interests the other guys did, and an awful lot of my friends were girls. I just didn’t relate well to guys my own age.

Whenever my parents went to town—and then when I got old enough to drive—I would go to the drugstore and buy Playgirl. I’d buy a Playboy with it, to make it look like I was buying one for me and one for my girlfriend. Detroit Lakes was usually where I went, because I didn’t go to school there and didn’t know anybody in the store. When I first got my driver’s license, I wouldn’t even make it all the way home before I ripped open the Playgirl on the side of the road. I didn’t keep too many magazines around at home because of the chances of someone finding them. After I had used one for a couple months, I would burn it. I would hide the magazines at the bottom of the garbage, so if something happened to me and I suddenly died, they wouldn’t find them. They’d just take out the garbage and they wouldn’t know any different.

Saturday night was sauna night, and as an adolescent I went by myself. I’d always take a magazine into the sauna with me because it was a perfect place to jack off. One time I forgot my magazine on a bench in the dressing area. It wasn’t until late that evening, after everyone had gone through sauna, that I realized I’d left my jack-off magazine down there. And it wasn’t just a Playgirl, it was an obviously gay magazine. I was mortified that someone had found it. When I went down and looked, I found that it had slipped behind the bench. If anyone saw it, no one ever mentioned a thing to me.

Paul was about my age and lived on another farm in the area. I would sit next to him on the school bus, and then we started doing things together, like going for snowmobile and horseback rides. One beautiful summer afternoon, when I was fourteen or fifteen, I was painting my parents’ house and Paul came over. He asked if everyone was gone, and I said they were. Then he said, “Let’s go inside.” We went down to my bedroom in the basement and jacked each other off. Paul knew exactly what to do—led me through the whole thing—and I really liked it. I was just shocked, couldn’t believe it. I’d never had anyone touch me there before, and I was so turned on. I was thinking, “I shouldn’t be doing this, but, oh, it does feel really good! Oh, well, I’m not doing anything. I’m letting him do it all. I’m not encouraging this at all.” But when he went home, I was so guilt-ridden I was ready to tell my parents and my pastor everything that had happened. But I was so terrified, I couldn’t even bring myself to do that.
I vowed I would never let it happen again, but Paul came over a couple of days later and the same thing happened. This continued all through high school. He would come over, or he’d invite me to go do something. He was always the one who instigated it. I thought if I didn’t instigate it, it was okay—I wasn’t really like that. But if a week had gone by and I hadn’t heard from Paul, and I was really horny, I’d get on the phone. “Do you want to go do something? Let’s go horseback riding.” If he wasn’t home, I’d want to know when he was coming back. We arranged that if I was home alone, I would call him. And whenever he went by my place, he would look at what cars were in the yard to see if maybe I was home alone. Then he’d call, and if I was alone he would come over and we could do it wherever we wanted in the house.

Paul knew where my crotch was all the time—he knew how to get me hard right away, and then give me a good blow job or jack me off. It was strictly sexual gratification on both of our parts. We never kissed. I hated his guts a lot of the time, because I was really guilted out by the whole thing. But if I hadn’t seen him for a couple weeks I’d want to call him up and have him come over. We did it just about any place we could. We’d go out in the middle of the woods on horseback or on the motorcycle. We’d go swimming at Big Basswood Lake, down the road about a mile, late at night when no one could see us. We’d soap each other up and have a really good time. In the wintertime, we’d do things in the barn loft because it was fairly warm, and if we knew no one was in the barn, we’d do it there too. One time my parents and sisters were gone for three or four days to visit relatives in North Dakota. I stayed on the farm to milk the cows and take care of everything. Paul helped me with some of the chores, and for three or four nights we slept together in my bed. We’d wake up in the middle of the night and get each other off. I felt guilty as usual, but I thought, “I’ll grow up and get married, and it’ll be okay.”

My parents never once sat down and told me the facts of life. But if a girl in the neighborhood would get pregnant, my parents made sure they pointed it out with comments like, “I just can’t believe it. I don’t know what she was doing. Why couldn’t she wait till she was married?” We never had any real sex education at school. I would read anything I could find about sex. I would pore through home medical books, and whenever I’d find a new term I’d look it up. I wasn’t looking for things about homosexuality, because I was trying to deny that. Even though one side of me was having fun fooling around with Paul, the other side of me was really wanting to find out how things worked heterosexually. On the farm you see how nature does it, but you don’t really know. As a little kid I asked my dad how a cow gets pregnant, and he said, “Well, the bull gets up there
My parents had me baptized and confirmed in the Apostolic Lutheran church, which is very conservative and primarily Finnish. I did everything in church I could do. I didn’t miss Sunday school and I made sure I had my lessons done. I went to Bible school, and when I got old enough I taught Bible school. All through my teenage years I was very much involved in the young people’s group at the Ponsford Community Church, where they preached born-again Christianity very strongly. I had a wonderful time at their summer camp—Camp JIM, which stands for Jesus Is Mine. A lot of people sent their kids to Camp JIM to become born again. I had so much conflict as a teenager, because Paul would come over, and then I’d go to church. The pastor emphasized making sure you came to communion with a clean heart, so I’d make sure I had confessed and asked forgiveness in a personal prayer. But that always reminded me I was a sinner.

Most kids, when they go away to college, go out and party and get drunk. Instead, I got so intensely involved in religious-oriented campus organizations I would sluff off schoolwork because I had Bible study that night. I fell in love with a guy who introduced me to some of those groups, but both of us were so involved in our religious activities there was no way anything could ever happen. I remember once giving him the biggest hug and not wanting to let go, and he wouldn’t let go either. That was the closest I’d ever been with a man emotionally, but I wouldn’t acknowledge anything about being gay connected with those feelings. After he graduated, I went up to visit him at his parents’ farm, and he said, “I think I’m going to get married.” I said, “You are? To who?” “I don’t know yet, but I’m going to get married,” and within about three months, he was married. I was crushed.

Eventually I got away from the religious groups, started dating, fell in love with this wonderful woman, and we got married when I was twenty-three. I was married for four years. My wife was the turning point in my coming out, because she had been raised very differently than I had, in a very liberal family in the city. She didn’t take any shit from anyone, and she taught me a lot about being who you are, expressing yourself, talking back to your parents. People have said that I was such a conservative thing, and that she’s the one who really brought me out and made me gay. She didn’t make me gay, but she helped me feel comfortable in being who I am. The summer of 1991 was when I really came out to everyone. I came out to myself about a year earlier and had gone to a support group at the
Men's Center in the Twin Cities. It was safe to go there while I was married because it was not a gay organization.

I was sleeping with men while I was married, and when I got divorced I told my wife I would never expect anyone to be faithful to me. I would just expect that somewhere down the line they would probably cheat on me. That sounds really sad, but some part of me really does believe it. I've been seeing a lot of men and getting involved in relationships with them, and I feel like I'm walking on very unstable ground. I thought one guy I was involved with was really honest and up-front, and I found out he was cheating on me. It just ripped me apart. How do I adjust? Do I not expect honesty from now on? Do I not expect people to be faithful to me? Did I set myself up for that because I expected it to begin with?

Honesty within a relationship is very important. You talk about how you feel, what you want. Everyone changes, but that’s okay as long as you're honest. I want more than anything else in a relationship for both of us to be happy. That means if one of us decides it's not for him, that’s really the end of it. You want it to work and you hope it will work, and everything tells you it should, but is that reality? I think honesty and happiness are more important than long-term commitment. I don’t believe relationships should be like typical heterosexual marriages where the couple stays together just because they’re married. You should be together because you really love each other and you really want to be together, not just out of habit, because that’s all you know and you’re scared.

I’m trying to come to terms with the guilt the church put on me for being gay. I felt guilty about doing something that was wrong, and would go over and over passages in the Bible that were supposedly referring to homosexuals. I never really understood it, but I had to believe it, and I had so much conflict. My mother would watch *The 700 Club*, and a lot of their programs really denounced gays. I would watch it and think, “Thank goodness I’m not really gay—it’s just a passing thing.” Every once in a while there would be something on the news about a gay pride parade, and I’d think about “those faggots that live in the cities—I’m not like them at all. I’m not one of those.” I tried very hard to be straight—got married and did that whole route—and it didn’t work. Finally, I was able to come to terms with the fact that this is who I am and it is okay, it’s fine. I was created with just as much purpose in life as any heterosexual. I wish there was some way I could convince my parents and my sisters of that. God made me exactly who I am, and God wouldn't make me like this just to be cruel, or to live the life religion teaches: If you’re gay, well, it’s okay, but just don’t practice at all.
Paul, my high school friend, identifies himself as gay, but he will never admit it to anyone else. I think everyone in the community knows, but no one talks about it. Paul's life is the flip side of mine. I strove to please my parents, to work hard and to excel, and he did just the opposite. When I went away to college, Paul was still on the farm, and sometimes when I'd come home on weekends we would get together. When I started seriously dating women, I really didn't want to see him at all, so it ended. Occasionally, Paul would call me when I was married, and I would tell my wife it was just a guy from back home. He called this summer, when I was home for my high school reunion. He had heard I was divorced, he was drunk, and he wanted me to come over to his place really bad. I told him I had a boyfriend, and even if I didn't I wouldn't want to come over to his place because it was nothing more than just sex.