



## Divided from Ourselves

*You're on the playground during recess. You're about nine years old. You see a group of kids playing and you walk over to join their game. As you approach—half-expectant, half-apprehensive—one of them sneers at you and another laughs. You hesitate a moment, wanting to move forward, but wanting to retreat. They decide to let you play after all. Later, you blunder badly and several of them call you "Faggot!" Not knowing what that means, you look down anyway, hanging your head for a moment, feeling despised. Everyone standing around begins to mock you.*

*You're older now, thirteen, just on the threshold of adolescence. Everything about you is changing. Your face, your body, even your feelings. Inside, you feel different from everyone you know. You just don't seem to fit in anymore. But did you ever fit in? Even the way you look at people has changed. You find yourself staring at someone you like until suddenly you're noticed. Then you quickly lower your eyes and look away, off to the side, embarrassed at being caught. Other kids don't seem to stare the same way you do. Sure, they stare too—but not at the same indi-*

*viduals you stare at. And you don't particularly notice the ones they do. Something's different about you. Something seems wrong. Better not let anyone find this out about you. It's safer to hide.*

*Remember that time in class when everyone crowded around the big table for the science demonstration, and you actually got to press against that certain person you'd been staring at? But you were noticed—you'd been seen. Then, later, in the hallway between classes came the crash: "You're a queer! Look at the homo!" Instantly, everyone's eyes were on you. The silence was deafening and you just wanted the floor to open up so you could disappear—vanish from sight. The world was spinning. You wanted to get out of there, escape, find somewhere to hide. But you couldn't. There was nowhere to go—you felt trapped and exposed.*

These experiences are universal scenes of shame, of being exposed as something lesser and despicable. Shame is one of our most powerful emotions and, until recently, one of the least understood. This is especially true in contemporary American society, where we overvalue competition, success, achievement, and perfection. We are taught that we must be flawless. A culture that worships achievement brands anyone who falls short of the mark as imperfect.

One thing that makes shame so crippling is that it usually feels impossible to talk about, to express openly in words. That's because of the inevitable shame *about* shame. Simply revealing our shame, and thereby exposing the way in which we feel lesser, deficient, or inferior, can actually cause us to *reexperience* the very shame we long to hide, disown, or anesthetize. In a competitive society, telling someone we feel inferior can seem like opening up the castle gates to the besieging enemy.

*You're fourteen now and you've found a best friend. You go everywhere together, share everything. You tell your friend your deepest secrets and feel closer because of the revelations. You like to touch, even hug each other occasionally—when no one's looking. You feel a rush inside, a thrill you don't fully understand, or want to understand. One day you're out walking, arm in arm, oblivious to the world, when all at once your serenity is shattered:*

*A group of kids walks by and suddenly begins to jeer, "Look at those homos! They're sick." Instantly your head goes down, involuntarily. Both of you silently drop your arms to your sides. Neither of you speaks about what happened. But your friend suddenly becomes busier, has less time to spend with you. Something is wrong, and also feels wrong inside—but neither one of you can talk about it. Gradually, you're surrounded by a deepening silence, and that silence also spreads within you. You begin to hide more of yourself.*

*You sleep over at your friend's house, you know, that one. The one you've been staring at and have even imagined touching. You're older now, fifteen. It's quite dark and you're both under the sheets—sleeping in the same bed. You want to reach over and touch, feel, caress—but you're afraid. So you hope your friend reaches for you instead. You pray for it. You lie there listening to your own breathing, listening to your friend's breathing as well. At last you summon up your courage and you do it—you actually reach over, holding your breath, praying that your friend is sound asleep. Hesitantly, your fingers explore. You caress softly, hoping your friend doesn't wake up. The next day in school, you notice your friend whispering to everyone as you come in. They're all staring at you, pointing, sneering. Something's up. Then, later that day in gym class, one of those tough kids walks over to you while you're all sitting on a bench and looks down at you, sneering, "I know what you want. I know what you are. You're a faggot, a queer!" The words scream in your mind. Everyone is watching, hushed, while you're paralyzed, trapped, exposed to all those watching eyes. All that day, you're followed around, taunted, jeered at. As much as you try to hide, to escape, you can't. Afterward, the watching eyes are inside of you as well, as if you're jeering at yourself.*

In this book, we'll be exploring what it's like for men growing up gay and women growing up lesbian in contemporary society. In particular, we'll examine how experiences of shame can become embedded in our emerging