

## **Defining Brave**

A young man's journey through grief and romance leads him to resiliently embrace who he is.

**By: Andrew Richard Norlen**



This is the devastating, yet inspirational memoir of a young man’s journey through grief and romance, to resiliently embrace who he is.

When unexpected loss tore through the fabric of his family, Andrew Norlen unraveled. Confronted by immense death, he manufactured connections with men in every season, convinced that each new relationship was the answer to healing his unresolved grief from six unprecedented passings.

A mission to find a partner whom he could love, fix, crave, and boast about, became a way to hide from himself, his loss, and even his childhood abuse that sex now triggers.

But Andrew’s world was filled with more bravery and truth than he could fathom, the moment he finally defined his existence himself—instead of through the eyes of his mother, his queerness, his abuse, his string of lovers, and his crushing grief.

In *Defining Brave* Norlen names each chapter after a different man, and names each man by the quality and lesson he gained during his time spent with each of them amidst his unending loss.

Growing up in the church Andrew’s idea of identity was always rooted in marriage, or the aspiration of marriage, but heterosexual marriage. Fighting to feel loved for the kind of person he wished to love was an exhausting battle—a reality for so many LGBTQIA+ young people today.

Andrew’s memoir bridges the gap between two groups. First, a generation of parents—just like his mother—presenting them with a book from someone just like their child. Secondly—and most importantly—*Defining Brave* will empower a young and queer man to listen to his own vulnerability and share his story, without apology.

*Defining Brave* gives words to anyone who needs to know that the way they love is okay. Men are taught to be strong, tough, and “the best”—but here, Norlen champions vulnerability, kindness, and finding bravery from within.

Andrew’s narrative non-fiction tells a unique and true story, from the voice of a young man, from a small town, arriving to adulthood with the same fears and insecurities that every twenty-something does.



A full manuscript can be delivered to the publisher upon request.

Projected book length is: 86,000-87,000 words.

10-20 photos are available in color, and can be B&W too.



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Andrew Richard Norlen

531 West 151st Apt. 34  
New York, NY 10031

Cell: 503-957-4480

Email: [AndrewRnorlen@gmail.com](mailto:AndrewRnorlen@gmail.com)



Andrew Norlen is an author, actor, singer, performer, and podcaster. Norlen was in the closing national tour company of Broadway’s smash hit, *Kinky Boots*. He received his BFA from The Boston Conservatory of Music with an emphasis in dance and directing in 2016.

Originally from the small town of Troutdale, Oregon—only twenty minutes east of downtown Portland—Norlen now resides in Manhattan full-time, continuing his career in the theater and the literary world.

Norlen’s 1st publication is now available everywhere books are sold. *When The Lights Are Bright Again: letters and images of loss, hope and resilience from the theater community*, shares testimonials about the 2020 Broadway Shutdown and the ripple effect that COVID-19 had on the lives of those in the theater community worldwide. This book features Norlen’s writing, 200+ letters from arts workers coast-to-coast, and photography by Broadway’s Matthew Murphy. A portion of the profits from these book sales directly benefit *The Actors Fund*.

Norlen sits down bi-weekly with powerhouse, female identifying pioneers, to interview them and discuss “the shit that matters!” on his podcast, *Everyday Heroes with Andrew Norlen*, on Spotify.

Giving back is the energy that keeps Norlen inspired and grounded. His merch campaign, *#SpreadYourBrave* is an ongoing fundraiser for *Broadway Cares/Equity Fights Aids*. *#SpreadYourBrave* is a community of people championing one another through the celebration of having overcome adversity, an opportunity to normalize vulnerability.

Norlen has been a guest on Melbourne, Australia’s twenty-seven-year-old/queer-friendly radio station—Joy 94.9— where he was featured on *The Drive Thru with John O’Hara* discussing his writing and his four-month love affair with Oz, a time that actually birthed his memoir—*Defining Brave*. He has also been featured on the popular theater podcast, *The Ensemblist*, endorsing his first publication as well as a debut feature in *Variety* for the same title.



## Target Audiences.

*Defining Brave* is ideal for a wide range of readers. Those most likely to gravitate toward this story include:

- PRIMARY AUDIENCE:
  - **Young Gay Men, ages 14-25** — The exploration of identity, societal expectations, relationship to sex, and internalized homophobia are all at the forefront of this memoir, creating visibility and conversation on subjects we need to destigmatize.
  - **LGBTQIA+ Youth/Young Adults** — For someone coming out, *Defining Brave* will allow them to not feel alone. It will create a narrative for them to find their own story in and find hope for the difficult road ahead.
- SECONDARY AUDIENCE:
  - **Mothers (Parents) of Gay Sons-** The mother/son relationship is a complicated and precious one. The burden mothers choose to take on when their son comes out to them is all-consuming. This memoir not only presents a story about a son's queer experience for a mother to relate to, but it also begins a conversation between that mother and son, rooted in a queer experience, beyond the saturated market of parenting books written by other parents of queer children. This allows the child to feel seen and empowered.
- ENGAGEMENT / SPECIALTY MARKETPLACES:
  - **Reading Groups-** This memoir is filled with questions and conversations that many parent reading groups, especially female/faith centered reading groups will want to discuss more. The conversation surrounding queer people of faith is often a tumultuous and taboo one, but it is vital to understanding, to growing, and to embracing humanity. Whether a reader is interested in the queer experience or has an aversion to it, this book will help to bridge those divides.
  - **Young Men with a History of Trauma/Sexual Abuse-** The numbers show that one in six men have been abused sexually as a child or as an adult. This memoir is aimed at normalizing male vulnerability and celebrating men for wearing their hearts on their sleeves, while creating a community where we can discuss our trauma and our triggers in a healthy and safe way. Through a partnership with *The Trevor Project*, *Defining Brave* can be a conduit for both young adults navigating grief on their own for the first time and especially members of the queer community struggling to find and define what community is in their own story.



## DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

*Defining Brave* differs from the competition in three clear ways:

1. **Relatability**—A universal appeal to any young, queer person anxious to see someone like them in writing. No fame. No glitz. Just story.
2. **Style & Form**—A narrative memoir told through the duality between death and romance. Characters named by their quality, for a deeper personal connection and understanding in the reader.
3. **Access**—Normalizing a queer person’s story. Sharing a mother/son relationship. Honesty surrounding male sexual abuse. De-fetishizing gay sex.

## SIMILAR TITLES

1. ***Over The Top***, by Jonathan Van Ness (*Harper One, 2019*)
  - *Defining Brave* is *Over The Top*—absent the fame and fortune. Both memoirs approach sexuality with an honesty and a levity that brings the reader into the writer’s mind. Both memoirs fearlessly call out their own weakness and champion readers to find hope in the midst of adversity. Both pieces start from a place of vulnerability and transparency, forging a relationship with the reader from start to finish. Where Jonathan uses pseudonyms for his characters to develop a comedic device with his audience, Norlen uses pseudonyms to develop relatability and depth with his. The parallels between these men’s small-town-to-big-city moves while navigating familial death amidst trying to negotiate who they are, is strikingly similar. But *Defining Brave* has it’s own specific voice—making it equally as informative as it is raw and heartfelt. Norlen’s voice in *Defining Brave* grows up throughout the memoir; as the writer learns and blossoms, so do his words—and thus—the reader, too.

2. *Don't Fall in Love, Sam*, by Sam Morris (*Self-Published, 2020*)

- Morris self-published this series of personal and provocative essays in 2020. *Don't Fall in Love, Sam*, and *Defining Brave* dive deeply into the pain and relentless struggle of being queer in a straight-built world. Both men explore their sexuality, desire, and their encounters with love with careful thought and nuanced storytelling. Morris's background and massive social media platform as an erotic photographer, filmmaker and creative artist is the most distinctive difference between his work and Norlen's. *Defining Brave* has the ability to reach a more mainstream audience within the queer world, because—although Norlen is completely open and honest in both his detail and storytelling—Morris's writing is inherently more erotic. *Defining Brave* is a piece that a parent could feel comfortable picking up and finishing without being turned off by Norlen's honesty. *Defining Brave* is genuine and written from a place of truth and love; however it leaves space for a reader to connect to the humanity within Norlen's personal and sexual encounters, while avoiding the most intense, graphic details.

3. *Too Much Is Not Enough*, by Andrew Rannells (*Crown Archetype, 2019*)

- Rannells says in *Too Much Is Not Enough*, "I was falling in love like a kid falls in love at summer camp—quickly, completely, and with irrational passion." This notion embodies *Defining Brave* entirely, too. Both writers approach their journeys with an honesty and wit that bring the reader into their corner. Both are men in the musical theater world and these memoirs shed light on their natural tendency to encounter unrequited love in their transient industry, where all one seeks is connection—a longing for a significant other in a business already ripe with rejection. These memoirs also have a unique, and almost wise, self-awareness in their writing and the way these men both remember, retell, and choose to grow from their trials. *Defining Brave* breaks away from Rannells's overall theme in one distinctive way. Where Rannells' story is guided by his passion and determination to make it inside of a competitive industry, Norlen's *Defining Brave* reads much more like a novel. His narrative nonfiction is centered around his self-discovery and his determination to learn from his mistakes, embrace chaos, and come out stronger on the other side.

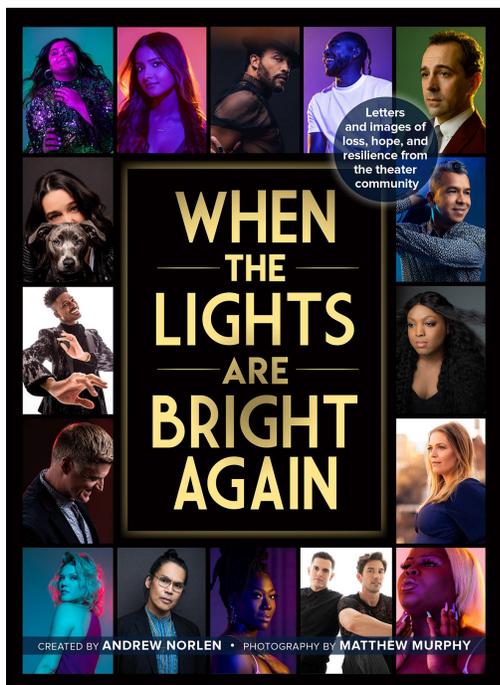
# Platform & Marketing Plan

## SOCIALS

Website: AndrewNorlen.Com // WhenTheLightsAreBrightAgain.Com  
 Instagram: @Anorlen // @WhenTheLightsAreBrightAgain  
 Facebook: @WhenTheLightsAreBrightAgain  
 Youtube: Andrew Richard Norlen  
 Podcast: *Everyday Heroes with Andrew Norlen* (on Spotify)

When it comes to being my own advocate I have no fear. As a professional actor, taking a “no” and turning it into gold is one of my strongest skills. *Defining Brave* has been a part of me for five years now, and no matter what new endeavor or business venture I tackle, all roads seem to lead me back to this book.

In the fall of 2021, amongst Broadway’s long-awaited reopening, Applause Books published my book *When The Lights Are Bright Again*. The previous fall, I found myself in a



funk, completely paralyzed by everything I had lost six months earlier, due to COVID-19—my apartment, my theater career, my community of chosen family back East, my three survival jobs, and simply, the life I’ve spent almost ten years manifesting. On the phone one afternoon, my best friend urged me to write a letter to myself as a means to grieve everything I was missing. The moment she said this, I got an idea: *We need to do this; we all need to do this!* I thought. Twenty-four hours later, I had settled on the name, bought the domain for the website, and connected with fifteen friends who agreed to help me launch this idea into reality. One month later, I made it live, and the letters started pouring in. This is a book *by* the theater industry, *for* the theater industry, and immortalizing this time of

theater history into a time capsule—forever. Broadway photographer Matthew Murphy joined the project as a collaborator to create a brand new photo series—just for the book—to accompany the 200+ letters. A portion of the profits directly benefit *The Actors Fund*, thus putting the money right back into our community, all the while creating a piece of lasting

art—together. We have already reached over *one million* followers, just from the seventeen individuals featured on our cover alone. In six weeks time we sold out our initial *4,500 copy print run* and are already confirmed for a second print run in March. My photo and author bio, along with all of my social links will appear in the back of this publication for readers to connect and follow my journey towards *Defining Brave*'s publication date.

When I originally created my bi-weekly podcast, *Everyday Heroes with Andrew Norlen*, I was hard-set on giving myself an outlet to create between my theater jobs; little did I know that by sticking to my intention and goal I would create a following—predominantly of young adult and middle-aged women—who are eager to support each other and elevate the messages my guests continue to inspire in my listeners. At the same time, I have inadvertently groomed myself on the intricacies of interviews, preparedness, and how to say more with less. This self-training has prepared me for the full-time job that begins once a book is published—the talks, the interviews, the tours, the brand, the promotion, the hustle. My theatrical background gives me the tools to never be camera-shy, but my podcast has created a new depth of professionalism and focus on cross-promoting my entire brand in all that I do. In only one year's time I have received over 2,500 streams/downloads for *Everyday Heroes* across its 6+ streaming app options. Moving forward I plan to include ads for my upcoming publications within these podcast episodes to funnel listeners into my book endeavors.



foremost, a percentage of the funds at checkout go directly to support *Broadway Cares/Equity Fights Aids* and all the amazing work they do. Secondly, it was

important to me to create a community where we are willing to talk about the hard things we

In February of 2021, I launched a campaign called *#SpreadYourBrave*. This is my online store for *Defining Brave*, themed merchandise directly related to the book. Sold online through Bonfire.Com, customers can select the color and style of garment they desire, and lastly, select a word that—for them—embodies how they choose bravery inside the most difficult moments of life. The words to choose from are the names of each man in my book (ie: Joy, Confidence, Passion, Connection, Admiration, Love) My intention for this campaign was twofold. First and



have been through and champion each other because of them, instead of shaming ourselves. This community of people now carry with them a piece of my story that they have adopted as their own to wear with pride. **#SpreadYourBrave** is the easiest and most foolproof way for me to access, connect, and target an audience of future readers who are already invested in my brand and in the book itself, folks who are literally wearing that brand in their everyday lives to spark conversations.

In the spring of 2021 I was asked to be a guest speaker for a Q and A with high school students from my alma mater. The social worker at Sam Barlow H.S. reached out and asked me to come and speak to their students about the year I had been having during the pandemic, discuss my career, and share about how I find ways to choose resilience in the midst of pain. This guest series picked up at the school, and I returned 3 more times throughout their spring term amongst other guests. This series, **“It’s Okay Not To Be Okay”** is available on YouTube where anyone can now view these conversations. These interviews sparked in me the realization that I am exactly where I am meant to be at this current crossroads in my life. I plan to use my platform, use my writing, use my books, and use my passion for giving back—to launch my career beyond just performing. I wish to tour around the country and the world speaking with college students, high school students and young adults everywhere to be a vessel of encouragement, inspiration, resources and above all else—to share my story in order to help another person, just like me, feel seen and heard and valued in this world.

An integral part of my life and this memoir is music, my relationship with music, and how it has inspired, shaped, and even saved me throughout my life. On the eve of *Defining Brave’s* official publication date, I have created **a cabaret-style evening of stories, songs, and readings from the book** that I will perform at the *Yotel New York* with a full band, back-up singers, and a packed house of family, friends, invited press, and theater industry VIP’s. This event will be both a benefit for *The Trevor Project* and an opportunity for audience members to walk away with a signed copy of my book the night before it is available everywhere. I have already done this benefit cabaret, on a smaller scale, in the winter of 2019 in Portland, Oregon. That trial run was crucial for me to learn precisely how I would want to execute my book’s launch in NYC in the coming years. The overhead for this event will be almost non-existent, allowing all of my energy and focus to be about generating the investment in the writing, the exclusivity surrounding the cabaret night to generate buzz and boost my following/as well as the books pre-sales—and above all else—to give back generously to *The Trevor Project*.



Social media is its own animal that I have created many of the aforementioned platforms to combat; however, nothing sells books like word of mouth and relationships. If there are two

things my entrepreneur, bad-ass mother has taught me, it would be “on time is early” and “kindness is everything.” I have already created **Small Business Partnerships** with over twenty local/family-owned style businesses. But not just in my home town of Portland, Oregon—no—I have connected with owners in almost every location I speak about or visit throughout the memoir, and more. Whether it be my best friend’s hair salon in Melbourne, Australia, or the queer-owned food market in Ogunquit, Maine, or my college coffee house in Boston—these business have agreed to partner with me and sell copies of my book in their stores when it hits the shelves. The pride for them to be my book’s advocate is a connection that I don’t take lightly. The potential word of mouth within this pre-existing network of my life was too fabulous an asset to not take full advantage of.

My steady growing **email list** of loyal subscribers is the foundation that keeps me grounded and the community that inspires me to not give up. My mentor and dear friend—author of *American Daughter*—Stephaine Thornton Plymale, has agreed to write a beautiful **endorsement** in support of the book. Australian actor, singer, and queer radio host at Joy 94.9—John O’Hara—has also committed to writing an endorsement.

As I said before, “No” isn’t in my DNA. If the door is closed for me, I will find the smallest hole in the wall to create space for others, give back, and continue to reinvent myself at every turn. If I stop being brave to share *Defining Brave* with the world, then every word I’ve spent these five years writing has been a lie.

Simply put, the market for this book is in that young person that feels alone inside this saturated highlight reel we’ve all allowed ourselves to call “real life,” and also, in the mother who is itching to understand the depth of her gay son more, but feels paralyzed by her own ignorance—this book is for her too.

#### **Endorsement Ideas:**

Glennon Doyle — Author of *Untamed*

Jonathan Van Ness — Author and *Queer Eye* star

Jerry Mitchell — Tony Award Winning Director/Choreographer

Amanda Kloots — Author and *The Talk* TV host

Harvey Fierstein — Author, Writer, Producer

Jay Shetty — Author, Former Monk, Life Coach

Justin Baldoni — Actor, Director, Author of *Man Enough*

#### **OTHER POST-PUBLICATION TACTICS:**

- Paid marketing during gay pride month every June to push the book out.
- My theatrical agent will negotiate for my books to be sold in the lobby of any regional space I work in as a leading actor moving forward.



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## Chapter Summary

### **Prologue: Defining**

The day I lost my virginity.

This critically important moment solidified my curiosity and fear of sex, cemented in me from over a decade of shame left inside me from sexual abuse. It was my second year of college, and I changed after this day. This day was the first time—since my abuse—that I could fully explore my body’s deepest desire, the way I’d always pictured love would feel—but this time, I was in control.

Men became my drug. Men became my answer. Men became my medicine.

Meet the first pivotal man in my journey; each man will be named by the lesson, quality, or gift they brought into my life. His name—the virginity taker’s name—is Defining.

We are who we are because of everything we take or leave from everyone we encounter. Telling my story of finding myself through my determination to learn something from heartbreak and death—instead of walking away broken and jaded every time—is perhaps the most defining quality of my life. Self-awareness along a celebratory adventure to accept myself and understand my demons.

### **Chapter One: Rainbow**

I’m at the windowsill of my childhood home. Four-year-old me has just discovered a rainbow and wishes to relish in this moment for eternity.

We meet my mom—the backbone of my life and the heartbeat of this memoir—and begin to understand the undeniable bond between mother and son.

Next is my spark with theater; at eleven years old, a local summer camp gives my anxious and passionate energy a fortress for creation, setting me onto a path that will become my entire career.

Then, an integral family wedding memory explains my love for love and my family’s deep relationship to finding “the one.”

Finally, my traveling across the country at eighteen years old. Boston for college. It’s a family affair as I also meet with loneliness and isolation for the very first time.

“Are you gay?!” she asked me, not even an hour after I had watched my family disappear toward their rental car. My first opportunity to decide who I am, but presented to me in the most abrasive fashion. I must decide how I will write my own future without my support system.

### **Chapter Two: Out**

The definition of the word “out” is moving away from a place that is enclosed or hidden, and after three and a half months of doing just that at school, I returned home to Oregon for the Christmas holidays. I must come out to my family.

It’s all I can think about. My chest is tight, my heart feels heavy, and this burden of feeling like two different men is weighing on my conscience, my ego, my integrity, and my confidence. I figured being alone at school was hard? Now I was simply terrified of feeling alone while surrounded by my own flesh and blood.

I finally sit my parents down, at 2am, the morning after Christmas dinner and present them with a letter I’ve written to tell them I am gay. The conversation quickly spirals and explodes with my mother blaming herself and my sexual abuse.

“This is my fault! This is because of what happened to you when you were little!”

In one fell swoop, she plants a wedge between us that night. We spend the course of the book trying to understand the unspoken pain festering in the silences of our relationship.

### **Chapter Three: Doubt**

Another definition for doubt is fear. Fear was the only thing I felt when an older boy scared, manipulated, and trained me to play his games when I was five years old—for this I’ve named him Doubt.

Just when I think I’ve let him go, or quieted my fear, or let go of my insecurity, Doubt always resurfaces and makes me feel small and powerless.

I must place this memory to serve my truth, and if it comes any sooner, I reckon many readers may connect my queerness to my abuse, and I don’t want to entertain that narrative.

We encounter my mother’s own shame as a parent, too, the choices she made that will inevitably hurt me long term, and the struggle within our family to have it all together, when all I really wanted was to fall apart so I could change.

Next, I must also flash back to explain the death of my Grampy: the first familial death of my life, foreshadowing what is to come as I begin to use men to numb my unprecedented loss in my college years in the chapters ahead.

This chapter is vital for normalizing this conversation around young men sharing their vulnerability.

### **Chapter Four: Attraction**

This moment in time has always felt like the perfect storm, a meeting of vastly different adult heartbreaks, but relentlessly, all at once.

The summer begins with my first professional job, a summer production of *West Side Story*. A dream show, with a dreamboat of a leading man, a man that I would be in every scene with. I'm not sure if the crush, the infatuation, or the lust came first, but when they did—I was smitten to say the least. I tested the waters of hooking up with Attraction, but I hated how transactional and bleakly it left me heart open.

So, I pursued him instead, and he invested back. I don't know if this came from boredom on his part or from genuine interest and love—regardless, I was writing a story in my head about him and I, and I kept trying to fight for the story I wanted to tell.

I named him Attraction because of the desire he triggered inside me, a new need I hadn't explored under my parents roof as a kid.

At the end of our summer under the stars, he leaves for New York City, and I return to college for my senior year. Next, my best friend of four years asked me for space from our friendship, a breakup of sorts, where she pushed me away for “knowing too much about her,” a moment that made me question and doubt my own humanity and capacity to love another human.

One month later, my Grammy died and I felt unsettled, unsupported, and totally alone. My best friend wanted space, the guy I fell in love with had moved into a new chapter of his own, and I had to find it within my soul to find support and peace on my own. But how?

### **Chapter Five: Admiration**

Our first holiday without Grammy passes, and I return to school for my last semester of college.

My first committed relationship since coming out. He is a family man like me, a romantic like me, passionate like me, and he loves with all of himself—like me. He'll attend church with me on Sundays, a part of myself that I avoided for a few years after coming out, but a foundation of my life I rekindle now with him at my side. For this, his name is Admiration. I had nothing but respect and a warm approval for his stake in my life.

Three months into our dating, I woke up after a night out for my twenty-second birthday to a phone call from my father that would change my family forever.

“Andrew—Uncle James was in a horrible motorcycle crash yesterday and—”  
*Don't say it!* I thought “He died at the scene.”

With their third son on the way and only thirty-eight years old himself, James's death felt impossible, impossible for my family to bounce back from.

By this time, two deaths in, my mother was gone. She was standing in front of me, but I had never encountered a human so numb.

A month after James's death, I returned to Boston. Following his funeral service, I knew I had to end things with Admiration. I told him we must part ways, "But I'll come with you to New York!" he said. I remind him how close he is to his graduate degree, as I realize I must break his heart.

I had to choose myself, despite my deepest fear of never finding another like him.

### **Chapter Six: Maturity**

Maturity is told in poem form.

It's a break in the pattern, because he was a break in my patterns.

He was a blip, a rebellion, a rebound.

No one died while I was with him—that was new.

It was like an escape from how sad I was.

And just like that, it was over with him.

He helped me grow up.

Mature.

I wonder if Maturity even knew how much he helped me that July?

My mom would have loved this man.

### **Chapter Seven: Joy**

Later that same summer, I met Joy.

He is in the ensemble of my first job—post graduation—and I fell in love with this man from the very moment he first spoke. A summer romance quickly blossoms and keeps me satisfied and preoccupied for every spare minute I'm not on stage for that eleven week contract.

We find routine, bliss, a lot of sex, and a friendship I wasn't expecting. In the end, I move to New York City for the first time to start my new life as an actor, fresh and green—and all I wanted was to be his. Joy tells me, "I need to be alone." New York life begins with this let down and only four weeks later a total bomb.

I get another call from my father, and this time he informs me that my Grandpa Ron—my mom's dad and my uncle James's father—has had a stroke and is in a coma.

I fly home. Days later we take him off life support and let him go. All I ached for at his bedside was to tell him who I was and that I wasn't living a lie anymore, but I never got that conversation. I believed Grandpa died because of a broken heart, wanting justice for his son's horrific death, and I just wanted him back to be proud of me one last time. I wanted him to see my Joy.

### **Chapter Eight: Passion**

I spotted a beautiful man at the gym one day; next thing I knew we were trying to fool around in the steam room downstairs. I waited outside for him to leave so I could meet this chiseled God myself. Our chat left us both wanting more that day. Passion was leaving town in a week, so I bravely asked for his number because I secretly loved the idea of intimacy without the

strings, even though deeper down—I just wanted a partner. An hour later, he texted and asked to go for a walk in Central Park. I asked my best friend MiMi, who I was supposed to see later that night, and she told me, “Today is your day of yes!”

So that’s what I did for a solid week; I just kept saying yes with Passion, and it changed my entire life.

He showed me that the fire inside me doesn’t need to be less or is “too much” like I had always been told growing up. He taught me that my passion is what makes me beautiful. He made me realize that I didn’t need to keep bringing my own shame and trauma into the bedroom with me, because when I was present with him in bed, I finally stopped thinking about my shame, the church, my mother, and my own self-hatred—instead—I just fell. I fell into his arms, his embrace, and his vitality for life—for that I name him Passion.

The next night he returned to find my open suitcases packed and ready for a trip. I was stuck and had to explain to him my approaching weekend filled with two funerals. First would be for my grandpa, and second for my Great-Grandma Weir who had passed away only one week before meeting Passion on the street. She died the very same day Grammy had only twelve months earlier. I was still in denial that another person had died at all.

Now I was numb. Critical of my mother yet surviving the very same way she was.

Passion was a stranger, but he listened and supported me through that weekend from afar and back in the city once I returned like a brother might. Our bond was instantaneous and electric. He was a guardian angel through my pain. I didn’t deserve him, but he taught me how to start loving myself again.

### **Chapter Nine: Connection**

I met Connection on Instagram. I know, I wished it stopped there, too.

Connection was working on the cruise ship I would soon perform on myself. For over six weeks we talked every day and told each other everything. It was all-consuming, and inside my pain and loss, I just liked having someone tell me everything I wanted to hear. I gained Connection but totally lost myself in the process.

I numbly went along with his plan, desperate to be strong and not fall apart. If I wasn’t strong and resilient through everything that I had lost, I would feel weak and unworthy, so instead, I ran straight toward this person so determined to connect with my heart.

While I was home for Christmas in Oregon, Connection asked me to come to the ship early and join him to sail. I said yes without even considering it, then when that wasn’t approved, he had a new plan. He asked me to fly to Cancun, Mexico, to be with him at an AirBnB for eight days, just the two of us and the ocean. That is how much he wanted to meet me. So I leapt, I said yes, and despite my mother’s—and truly my own—fear of something bad happening to me, I cared more about appearing independent and in control. Thinking about what my heart required in this moment would have meant I would have to face all of the feelings about the people dying around me, so I chose the danger instead.

## Chapter Ten: Confidence

### Part One—*Letters*

Chapter ten is told through a series of letters to my pen pal, Betty.

This chapter chronicles my time on board the cruise ship—another attempt at running from my grief.

First, my determination to be strong and single, then my quick rebellion against that plan as I start crushing on a new Aussie boy in my cast—and then in true fashion—our relationship escalates into a complicated commitment, riddled with insecurity and unanswered questions from the nature and complexities of ship life. The detachment from reality brings out the worst parts of my insecurities.

We meet each other's parents, and I eventually present him with the idea for me to come to Melbourne after we finish the job. I yearn to try our relationship on land; he doesn't say yes but he doesn't say no either. Despite his non-committal interests, I am convinced it can be different with him once I am there. I keep setting my heart up for the highest of expectations, expectations completely out of my control.

In the end we learn that Betty is in fact my Grammy Betty, and that these letters were never real, but instead, a daily prayer from me to her while at sea.

### Part Two—*Oz*

One month after we parted ways at port, I arrived in Melbourne. I settled in with some family that conveniently lived there at the time and began trying to set myself up for success for the next four months with a job and housing.

Confidence and I reunite, and something feels off from the moment we reconnect. I help him move into his new apartment, but he never asks me to stay over. I meet special people in his life, but I am just a guy from the ship. We sleep together again, but it feels as transactional with him now, nine months in, as a one-night stand would. I feel him drifting away, as I start to wonder if I ever even had him close in the first place.

Finally, I confront him on a street corner late one night. He ends things then and there, only six days since my arrival. I feel cheated out of our opportunity to really test us out, as I also learn he cheated throughout our month apart.

Alone in a foreign country that I took a risk on for love, shame rises up in me when reality sets in. Feeling foolish for pining and caring so deeply for a man who might have simply seen me as a convenient lay.

I had a choice to make, would I stay? Or would I run back home? Would I keep trying to create self-confidence that looked like his? Or would I try out something a bit more original this time? I had to quiet the voice inside saying, *What would your mother tell you to do?* And ask myself this question instead.

### Chapter Eleven: Self

Crushed and embarrassed, I researched flights, but my aunt makes me promise to give her a week of my thought. I take the full moment to truly consider if running back home is from fear or for control.

Seven days later I made a pledge to stay, a choice for myself and no other man. I was tired of running and tired of losing. Now, a choice to pursue the man I could never lose or continue running from for another moment.

I begin to work in a local café, forging new relationships one latte at a time. I start to take dance classes, which had previously scared me, determined to carve out space for myself and growth inside of the things I'm afraid of. I rekindle relationships with friends from the ship, friends whom I held at arms length while all my focus was latched onto Confidence while at sea. I stop seeing men as an answer to feeling, allowing my mind and heart to begin their own healing.

Then, slowly but surely, I return to myself, stronger and wiser and healthier still. My anxiety slows into peace and contentment, as my heart remains open for whatever comes next.

### Chapter Twelve: Love

Ten days before I would depart for the States I met a man. This man was solid and settled. We went on a date, and for the first time I noticed myself listening to him instead of giving my fear center stage. I wasn't eager anymore. I wasn't desperate anymore. I wasn't ashamed and hiding anymore. It was just a date, and the simplicity inside my reality changed me.

I had spent those months doing the work, choosing myself each day, and navigating life on my own terms, my own time. Then when I met Love, he never felt like a piece of myself I thought I'd been missing that I would work tirelessly to keep as my own; he just felt like a bonus, a cherry on top of the life I was manifesting, that I was finally proud of.

We spent every day together until I left. He showed me his city through his eyes, and I fell madly in love with the authenticity of being myself in a romance.

The day came for us to part, and I was devastated, and not because I wouldn't know how to go on without him; I would. I was finally content being with myself. But I preferred life with him than without him. That is when it all finally clicked.

In the Melbourne airport that morning I stood, holding this man in my arms, completely in love with who he was, not what he was—that was new.

*This is love; this is what it was always supposed to feel like,* I thought.

I said goodbye, turned around one last time, and disappeared behind the wall toward security. I thought for sure I would feel crushed again, empty, a void, incomplete without him, but no. I was invigorated.

I had just said goodbye to what was possibly the truest love I had or might ever have with another human, but it didn't break me. It didn't break me because I am complete as I am.

Partnership was never the goal; self-love always was. But I had to come here to learn that. I see that now.

### **Epilogue: Brave**

It all comes back to the rainbow for me. The day I saw that gradient in the sky at four years old. I knew I was different, but I didn't have the words or the examples to tell me it was ok to take up the space I deserved to in this world.

My family loved me with the tools they had, but my road to self-discovery and self-acceptance was one I had to take alone.

I don't regret my story, my pain, or these men; if I regret my past I can never move on, I won't ever grow. Bravery is not the fear of regret, it's the promise of growth on the other side of hard things.

Don't spend your precious time trying to define anything; spend your time living and those definitions won't even stand a chance against your brave.



## Prologue

### ***defining***

*Adjective.*

decisive; critically important.

## Defining

I will never forget my first time. It was spring break, during my sophomore year of college. School was out and my guard was down. The roomies had both gone home for the week and before they had even left the state of Massachusetts I knew it was going to happen, because I couldn't stop thinking about him. Let's call him, Defining.

I loved Defining, or maybe I loved the idea of him, or maybe those are the very same thing.

Pacing around my uncommonly quiet apartment, I began thumbing through the many photos he had sent me over the many months. *Maybe some inspiration or excitement can drum up my courage to ask him upstairs*, I thought.

Defining and I had almost every class together. He was thoughtful, focused, pensive, forward, brave, and very connected to his emotional center. His exterior was made of opposites, strength and softness, appearing to the beholder as the perfect meld of masculine and feminine. But his heart was broken and sad beyond his tailored posturing. He operated and survived from that place of sadness for the first few years I knew him, more complicated and troubled than any other man I had ever met at that point in my life. When Defining talked, the focus in a room would shift—eyes turning, mouths gawking, boys and girls loved him alike, the professors too, and he them. His talents were unparalleled, but so was his grief I would come to learn.

I had never seen anyone like him, known anyone like him, or loved anyone like him.

“You were amazing in class today, Andrew!” Defining said to me once, as we ran down Mass Ave. toward our next class together. That year was ripping each of us open, like exposing the damage from an old wound that had been a healthy—or not so healthy—scar for years and years until we arrived at the conservatory. It was a time and a curriculum created to make us uncomfortable and face our demons, a method to make our acting better, or some might call it the most expensive therapy I never asked for.

He saw me, my pain, my ghosts—despite the little I was willing to expose in class—and I saw his. Without sharing words for some time we seemed to validate the others' pain with just our eyes, simply holding space for the other.

It was as if he created this little extra compartment for the tears from my fears during our song interpretation classes. Sitting in his chair at the back of that white and musty music room, with one foot up on his seat, arms wrapped around his knee, head cocked to his right, leaning back into the wall with a relaxed and approving smile on his face, as if my song was helping him the very same way his always helped me.

Defining and I would partner up some days in movement class, a course riddled with vulnerability that took you to the highest of your highs and the lowest of your lows, led by a professor that pushed against our limits with sensitivity and intellect. The exercises and scene work often got physical. I would feel my fingers begin to tingle, my bones become heavy, my heart seemed to flutter, and it was like my body was choosing Defining. He knew it too, I could see it in his charming and delighted eyes. Although we were inside that room—with those twelve other students—we were also escaping those exercises with our every stare, smile, and sensitive touch.

We always said so much to the other with just our eyes, so much before we were ever able to touch the way we'd been craving for some time.

My palms began to sweat that morning when I suddenly realized we had yet to even discuss who would top and who would bottom, and to put it plainly—for those of you who may still be confused—gay sex. As we toyed with the prospect of hooking up sometime that week, it almost seemed like we were scheduling this spring break secret. A panic began inside me, like the panic I feel when I can't remember if I've turned off the stove or not—anxious and afraid.

My roommates and I were over at his place many, many nights, as it was only one flight down the stairs in our own apartment building. Dangerous proximity, *I know!* The wine would flow, board games were played, and stories of all our upbringings would fill in the gaps of our

quality time together. A group of friends blowing off steam and sharing life, yet, the more often we went downstairs, the more intense my laser focus to have Defining became.

Defining was a “man about town” for sure, and from the rumors I’d always heard, I don’t think I was the unique owner of his provocative selfies. I always knew that, but I kept trying anyway.

It was the middle of that spring break week—following some incessant flirting and our own kind of technological advances— when I finally asked if he wanted to come hang out upstairs with me. I probably said something about watching TV, or snacks, or something stupid and calculated, but Defining knew exactly what I wanted, and I prayed he wanted it as much as I felt he did.

My door was unlocked, as we had an open door/non-knocking policy established at that point between our two apartments. I heard him arrive and then heard the door lock behind him. It was as if to say, “I want this too.” He walked in and announced his presence as he appeared in my doorway. He smiled that grin that sent a rush of joy directly through my veins anytime I was lucky enough to encounter his shine, as he said to me, “Hey, how’d you sleep?” I answered him with a smile on the outside, but with the nerves of a rookie on the inside. As he made his way toward my bed, where I was lying down, I couldn’t help but stare at the movement within his thin, stretchy, and oversized gray sweatpants. I could tell he wasn’t wearing any underwear. My skin started tingling again the way it always had around him, but this time it wasn’t just the little pricks dancing underneath my flesh—no—this was a rush, a current, a stream of endless electricity pulling him to my horizontal side. Nothing had even transpired, and yet, I was already so satisfied. *Why*, I wondered for a brief moment, as my heart raced with anticipation.

He jumped in bed beside me and turned around to be the little spoon. I started to kiss his neck and suddenly we were off—fast, furious, and untamed.

*He makes me feel like an animal*, I remember thinking, which scared me at the time.

His skin was softer than I could ever have imagined it would be. He loved kissing just as much as I did—the playfulness, the sound, the connection, and above all else the intimacy. Our foreheads would find each other as we rested, brow bones pressed together. He stared into my eyes with a kindness and a gentleness that made me feel like it was his first time too, even though we both knew that was far from the truth. I remember him over me, grinning, playing with my hair and laughing. That laugh! It filled the entire apartment. *Thank god we are alone!*

As our sweat grew and our skin made it's entrance, the clock ticked louder and louder inside me, as I felt us getting closer to the inevitable. The more I let myself enjoy it, him, the more fear fought me to take the reins. I'd only fooled around with a few other guys during that year, but for some reason it was as if I already knew this secret afternoon would change everything for me.

I wanted this so badly. I wanted him so badly. I wanted this to be special, despite an inkling in the back of my mind that it wouldn't ever be, it couldn't be. I hadn't even told him he was going to be my first time—*well, too late.*

Transient moments of electricity together, I let them be enough for my heart and my soul; so they were.

In the thick of the sex I felt high, electric, seen, and a little unhinged, but as I stretched out beside him after we finished, breathing heavy and drenched in his sweat, suddenly I felt disgusting. The animal instinct that felt so foreign before—and yet completely empowering too—had left my body entirely. I felt weak now, unworthy, a disappointment to myself. I laid on my back and stared at my ceiling, wondering what he must be thinking about, but much too afraid to even ask.

*You're a fraud, you're not even brave enough to tell him this was your first time.*

I asked myself, *What would my mother say about this afternoon? What would she think of me?* If only she knew how present she was about to feel in my mind, at every sexual encounter for the years to come.

I ruined it. I wanted him so badly, but this act might have meant I lost him all together. Every single way Defining showed up for me in public impacted my heart more than I think he ever understood and I wanted to feel all of that value and vulnerability in the bedroom too. But when we finished it appeared to have just been another afternoon of sex for him, it was nothing like the event I had come to manifest it might become in the end.

I blinked, and my expectations passed away that afternoon with Defining, as briskly and aggressively as my understanding of intimacy had as a little boy at the hands of sexual abuse.

Now— alone in my apartment—I sat and imagined what my roommates would say when they found out. I hadn't even told them yet, evenso, the shame was already inside me. I could hear them, "But Andrew, he is with Connor!?" *What would his boyfriend say if he found out?* I thought to myself, as I sat on the arm of the couch in my bedroom, blankly staring at my tousled sheets and fractured array of bed pillows strewn about the floor, covered in sweat and self-loathing.

I hated myself. I assumed it would be special with him because of everything we had outside of my bedroom walls, yet the difference between us was he had a fully realized relationship, and *I* was the other man. I hated myself for using my first time on someone I knew I could never have, the way I'd always wanted someone to define this moment of my life.

I hated myself for wanting Defining.

I hated myself for loving Defining.

I hated who I was becoming.

I hated who I was running away from.

I hated my present dialogue of fear.

I hated the twenty-something looking back at me in the mirror.

I hated the way I was continuing to define intimacy through loss.

***rainbow***

*Noun.*

an arch of colors formed in the sky in certain circumstances, caused by the refraction and dispersion of the sun's light by rain or other water droplets in the atmosphere.

## Rainbow

### A New Friend

“What’s that?!” I exclaimed

“What is what, Sweetie? What do you see?” my mom answered from the kitchen.

“That!” I yelled, as if pointing and getting louder would give my four-year-old curiosity the answer. As my mom made her way to the front of the house she locked eyes with my transfixed predicament.

“That! That! It’s so beautiful!” I boisterously announced.

As I questioned its reality, a stirring of uncertainty began within me. It was every color I had ever seen, but all together. *What is that thing?* I thought. It was too beautiful to explain simply, yet my curiosity was extinguished by the immediate peace this vibrant unknown brought.

A quick and sparkling smile washed across my mom’s face as she observed my bewilderment. Bending at the knees, she joined me face-to-face at the base of our front door windowsill. She relished in my joy with glitter in her gaze, as I silently observed what I would grow up to understand was her pride and happiness. I saw her thanksgiving for my eager and inquisitive heart, to seek out the answers and understanding for what I didn’t understand.

“Andrew, *that* is a rainbow!” she said, while gently rubbing my head to soothe my anxious energy.

*Rainbow.*

That word sounded as beautiful, coming out of her mouth as it was to behold with fresh eyes, and each time she repeated it my understanding seemed to grow. From the blending of the rainbow’s colors, to the gradient it was painting through that afternoon sky, I was hooked.

As my heart slowed I grew quiet. Still a toddler learning to speak, I jumped back inside my list of questions, wrestling with whether to ask her what a rainbow was, but I remained silent. I desired an explanation, but with one short and deliberate sigh, my heart accepted my dear new friend, the rainbow. I was overcome with an almost knowing comfort that we would meet again.

When I narrow it down to define my story, I see colors—an endless stream of colors, ebbing and flowing, fighting and weaving their way towards a richer hue. I spent my childhood fighting the blending of those colors. As a “Type A,” strong willed, and passionate aries—I craved control over the curious mystique my new comrade, the rainbow had brought me.

### **Colors, Like Choices**

“Has your son ever acted before this?” asked a kind and forward mother at my summer camp.

“No, actually a friend from our church suggested we check out Susan’s camp—to give him something to do this year—so here we are.” Mom explained.

“Wow! Well, he is a real natural on stage, especially for an eight-year-old.” said the mother. Then she opened up her black leather purse and began briskly searching for something.

“That’s very kind of you to say. We are pretty proud of him ourselves.” My dad told her with a grin, then a chuckle when he locked eyes with mom. “We truly didn’t know what to expect, he has tried a great deal of sports and after school activities, we weren’t sure if this would stick, but he seems to be enjoying it! And ohh! Im sorry— I’m Donnie and this is my wife Cindy.”

“It’s wonderful to meet you both! My name is Katherine, Katherine Zeiman. I would love to give you my card and some information, if that’s ok? During my free time I actually help direct and choreograph shows at the local theater out here in Corbett. Nothing overly glamorous or anything, but we put on some pretty quality productions. Your son is special on stage. I think he would really thrive there!”

“Oh that is so sweet of you to—”

“No—truly!” She said, interrupting my mom with conviction. “I mean it. He’s got *it*. That thing. Like the thing you can’t teach someone.”

Potential, connection, and an outlet for my gregarious vitality—they were sold.

As a kid I tried it all.

Little league T-ball was a time that came and went, similar to my years of girlfriends I had in high school. They both taught me to be present, to work hard, and to show up, even when the task might make me uncomfortable. T-ball and girlfriends never gave me the butterflies I so desperately ached for in both love and hobby, so we parted ways.

Karate seemed easy and promising in my mind— show up, fight a bit, get corrected, become a black belt. Simple, right? But the moment I found out the logistics of how many belts it would take me to get from white to black—I quit.

Soccer was the highlight. But let's be clear, I was mostly there for the snacks during break times, I mean who doesn't love a chocolate granola bar and a fruit punch Capri Sun? Oh, and those jerseys! THOSE REVERSIBLE JERSEYS! Holy shit! They were mesh and one side was purple and the other side was black. God, I thought that was so chic and fabulous! When team picture day rolled around, I took a knee and held that ball like the winner I thought I could become if I opened my mouth and just smiled wide enough.

The last saga in my 50 shades of sporting attempts as a small blond being was the swim team. Now, I joined the swim team because my sister already swam.

**Lesson 1:** Sometimes just let your sibling stay in their lane and don't steal their thunder.

**Lesson 2:** Don't pick the most naked of all the sports as a young and closeted gay boy that just wants to stare at those Hercules-like older high school boys in their tiny tiny speedos, because you will never know what to do with your eyes, or your excitement.

**Lesson 3:** Swimming is in fact a competitive sport, a race, if you will. I know, I was just as surprised as you currently aren't. So when I heard "butterfly stroke" I took this very seriously. No, I mean like very seriously. So seriously in fact that instead of progressing horizontally in the lane as my arms flew forward, I shot up vertically every time, barely moving forward at all. I may have been the very last in my heat—most times, but I felt like a mermaid dammit! I was Ariel in Disney's *The Little Mermaid*—circa every day of the late 90's—singing "Part of your

World” when she climaxes on the rock and the water splashes all around her and you finally know she’s had a bit of a wild side within her the whole time. Yup, that was me.

In my head, the swim team was my calling, but in actual reality I ended up being much better at bringing the trail mix and Gatorade to the parent volunteers on deck. Hospitality—am I right?

So later that summer—after Katherine’s nudgings—I found myself auditioning for my first play, *A Christmas Carol*. Discovering my life’s passion as an eight-year-old boy, in the damp and pungent green room of that old Corbett, Oregon, Springdale School was a transcendent journey toward authenticity, and possibly some asbestos exposure. A homecoming—almost.

That place, those people, my mentors, and lifelong friendships fostered a drive, a tenacity, and a work ethic I only learned by doing.

The first time I was ever on stage, it was as if I’d finally found words I never knew I was searching to voice. The children’s theater gave me an opportunity to explore pieces of myself I could only access by becoming somebody else. The more I created, the more questions I asked. The more I discovered, the more my confidence changed. But the more fearless I got on that stage, transported inside the escape, the larger the void became within my truth.

Something always felt off, something I couldn’t quite explain because I’d never seen it. It was the part of myself that felt as true as the first day I saw that rainbow, but wrapped up in a question that would remain unanswered until I was ready to click my own heels together and ask it of myself.

I remember our car ride back home the last day of that summer camp, the day we met Katherine. As we drove through towering greenery and winding rivers, discussing my masterful performance as Alfalfa in our outdoor adaptation of *The Little Rascals*, I felt the feeling of purpose for the first time. I didn’t yet have the vocabulary or understanding to express it, but I felt ignited. I felt a spark inside called drive. That day changed everything for me, because Katherine put value into my head. She opened a door that revealed a path I’d never imagined

would be in the cards for me. My dream actualized itself on that humid Friday afternoon in July and it has never left me. The value and spark she saw in me solidified that dream, and thus, my purpose—to bring others joy.

### **White, like Weddings**

Seconds before opening the wedding venue's doors to begin letting arriving guests in, the photographer had one last shot they wanted to snap. Uncle James—my mom's baby brother—and my soon-to-be Aunt Allison had yet to see each other, or connect that day, until this very moment.

The family found ourselves in the lobby outside the room where the ceremony would soon be held, waiting for the go ahead to open the flood gates of family and friends eager to celebrate this impending union. *But not before this picture is seared into the filing cabinet of my mind!* I remember thinking.

With the traditional approach, where they don't see each other until she walks down the aisle, Allison was nervous about this photo because she didn't want to ruin the plan. Their photographer slowly brought each of them from a different room and asked them to stop at a corner of the wall in the lobby. Once in position, with the entire family watching, and filled to the brim with excitement the photographer urged them,

“Will you please reach out your hand and find the other's?”

*Look at the ease and comfort in her eyes and the eagerness and overflowing of joy in his smile. It's like watching a movie that I have a front row seat to.*

Suddenly love was an entirely different novelty to my eleven year old mind. *Love isn't just something we do, it's a choice*, I thought, as I stared at their love story coming to life. Every single day it's a choice and the love I was witnessing was a proclamation to fight to choose love every day for that one soul, no matter how hard the storm might become or how hard it is to see

the other somedays. Love allows us to find the others' hand in the darkness, to stretch around the corners, beyond our comfort zones, and fall—madly.

*I want that! I thought. When do I get to have that?*

My Uncle James is a very tall and big man, and anytime he hugs you—or when anyone hugs you for that matter—our family has coined them the “James Hug,” because there is nothing else quite like a hug from him. It’s the kind of bear hug that lasts much longer than most, but reminds you just how loved and safe you truly are.

Our hug, James and Allison’s wedding day, that picture at the corner when they made a choice, together— I think my relationship to physical touch is rooted in all of these. These were the only visual representations of affection that connected all of the links in my mind's eye. I never saw two souls holding hands or kissing the way I pictured it might feel, for me. I had never witnessed two people falling in love and manifesting a life together the way I secretly imagined mine could look someday. I wanted to feel normal, I wanted to feel like the whispers and thoughts inside me would be celebrated if I were to let them out, yet I knew it was best—that even now, at eleven—I kept this longing to myself.

I accepted this as my truth, because the hugs and their image of authentic love filled my empty well sufficiently, at least for a very long time.

### **Green, Like Home**

I was as anxious as I was bouncing-out-of-my-chair excited as my family and I boarded an early morning flight to Massachusetts. Beaming and rollicking, like a kid on Christmas morning, waiting to open his presents—with Mom, Dad, my sister Kaela, and her husband Jake in tow—the Norlen’s never do anything small. It’s always a family affair.

I would attend The Boston Conservatory for four years. Boston was where my early childhood dream would continue actualizing itself into a career, but my education preceded my hankering for my eventual life in show biz.

I sat in my window seat bursting at the seams, it was like I was the energizer bunny, but someone had put me in a straight jacket to keep me calm. I leaned over to my Mom beside me and said, “I just can’t believe we are finally going?!”

“I know!” She said with a grin.

“No—but—how did we get here? How do I even get to do this?” I asked.

“Andrew. You have worked so hard for this, just enjoy it—don’t try to control it. It’s better that way.”

I had submitted every application, I rehearsed my various audition cuts in preparation, my parents and I had flown down to LA to the west coast “Unifieds”—a gathering of top musical theatre colleges in one city, allowing the aspiring students and parents greater opportunity and access for exposure, in such a competitive field of education. At Unifieds I was seen by eight different schools, the schools I had chosen to take a crack at, to fight to be someone they needed for their program.

“But what if I made the wrong choice?! What if I’m supposed to be in New York now? Or maybe I should have taken the money in Ohio instead?” I said to Mom, spiraling.

In the end, I had to make a choice between a full-ride to Ohio, an NYC dream school, and a Boston staple, this choice seemed difficult, yet unanimous within me.

“Stop. Does this feel like the right choice—for *you*?” Mom asked.

I was silent.

The first school I heard back from was Otterbein, a very small program, but reputable nonetheless. Something in my gut told me to choose the harder path, choose the daunting city schools over the pastoral Ohio full-ride. You can imagine with the astronomical price of college, my family and friends found me naive, foolish, and almost creating a recipe for hardship in choosing the \$60,000 a year tuition over the full ride so easily presented in my path. But I had to listen to the voice in my gut.

I closed my eyes.

My choice had come down to picking between education and my desire to learn, over the inevitable distraction I knew would come from my being in New York before I was ready, so Boston it was!

I took a deep breath.

“It does. It does feel like the right place for me—” I paused. “to be honest Mom, it sorta scares me how right it feels.”

“That’s a good thing, that means you’re open to receive what this place and time in your life is going to give you, teach you.” She said, with an I told you so sort of smile in her eyes.

“Thanks Mom.” I said as they announced our descent into Logan airport.

I’d never been to the East Coast, ever! We’d never even visited this school. I only saw pictures, read about it, taken virtual tours, and spoke to various alumni we’d met at the stage door of Broadway national tours back in Portland. I signed on the dotted line for four years in a city I’d never even set eyes on before, this was a leap of pure faith.

*Trust is my only weapon today*, I thought to myself, and just then—

“We would like to welcome you to Boston and thank you for flying with us.” As I write that sentence, even now, I can hear the stewardess’ voice, I can see the Boston Harbour through my window just before we landed that day, I can feel the goosebumps inhabit my heart for the journey I was about to take when I walked off that plane. *Go!* I heard my heart tell my head, and then my legs followed.

The Norlen’s arrived a week before move-in day, giving ourselves time to explore the city and get to know the campus. My head-over-heels love affair with Boston was an instantaneous match. We biked the Freedom Trail, walked the lush Harvard campus, enjoyed dinners along the peaceful waterfront and tracked down the best cannolis in Little Italy, because hello! We found a gamut of mom and pops stores, after becoming lost in the city’s public gardens. *It’s pure magic here!* I whispered to my buoyant heart.

After checking out Fenway Park we walked in the direction of the school's main building. I was high in the clouds, taking in everything around me, I thought: *I love how there is no grid, no blocks, or avenues.* The roads seemed to meander with a gentle ease, but also a historic structure, each building more grandiose than the last. I eyed the gray concrete and the red bricks, but as my soul argued with those colors I was transported into the middle of a green moment. Amidst the polite hustle and bustle of those Boston streets I saw green like the river banks I grew up driving parallel to. The fall trees had begun shedding their leaves, leaving behind their mark of change, all strewn about those vintage Boston pavements. *I can't stop staring at the immaculate architecture.* Like the secrets the wildflowers kept in the field across the street growing up, it's like every building here has its own story it itches to tell. My respect and adoration for mother earth—deeply instilled from a very young age—had overcome my attention with gratitude as I took a deep breath back into reality from my self-induced la la land of giddy excitement and fond memories.

“Andrew—look!” my mom said pointing toward my new school.

Stoic and proud, nestled between old and new buildings, a palace for creation and a sanctuary for growth—there stood my new home. I saw an institution built on the immediacy of an artist's beating heart. I saw a building rich in history, boasting both inspiration and expectation. In a stand off of sorts—in my moment of witnessing—I relished in this impact with reverence, while acknowledging the humbling challenges ahead. I shook hands with this pressure and agreed to take it all for a bumpy ride.

*Why me?* I thought.

I felt the corners of my mouth slowly rise as a proud, but nervous smile climbed up my cheeks. This moment was much less about beholding a building, and so much more about visualizing potential, growth, change, a new me. *I want that-* I whispered again inside my heart's thoughts, as if to keep a secret from the rest of my head. I had no idea what to expect behind those doors, but I knew that I was *one* of very few students selected to be there.

I took a deep breath. *Today is one of my proudest moments*, I thought, as I took a step toward my future. As we walked to the school's main entrance all I could think about was my mom's advice on the airplane, "Think about what this place and time in your life is going to give you, teach you."

### **Blue, Like Water**

"Well, I think that's just about it, yeah?—Can you think of anything else you need for your dorm, Bud?" My dad asked me, after putting the last storage bin under my bed.

"For all of you to not leave!" I wanted to say back, but didn't.

Mom, Dad, Kaela, Jake and I stood silently in a semi-circle facing my new home. Photos were hung to ease my anxiety, a handmade quilt of childhood memories that my Grandma Linda had made for my graduation gift dominated my small corner of the dorm room, bringing with it a warmth and a familiarity to rest beneath. Lastly, an overwhelming amount of cup-a-noodles rested below my bunk in a plastic bin to appease my mother's deepest fear, the fear that I was going to starve without her there.

Then the moment I'd been dreading was before us.

No one wanted to let this goodbye train leave the station, but it was inevitable. The family had a plane to catch, and I had orientation to continue. We said our "see you soon's," accompanied by a fair amount of happy tears. I said goodbye to my mom last, kissed her on the cheek, and gave her a great big "James Hug." A farewell shrouded in the most visceral meeting of each of our love languages.

"Just take care of yourself, okay?! We are always here for you." Mom said as the water works welled up in her eyes. Leaning in to hug me one more time, she whispered in my ear, "I am so proud of you. Just—be yourself." Little did she know that I had no idea who the hell that was—yet.

Standing at the window of my second story dorm room, I watched my family walk down the sidewalk toward their rental car. Eyeing the bright autumn leaves and bold golds of a New England fall floating past my window pane, I was perplexed, as I watched my people head back to their reality, but this time without me. *I wonder if this is what alone feels like?*

An isolating fear rushed through me for the first time in 18 years, accompanied by an unmatched tenacity to make this time what I wanted it to be, for me, and me alone. I could pinpoint exactly where the lump in my throat and ache in my chest was coming from, fear. I closed my eyes and tried to feel each of them hugging me again, to remember. Their embrace would help me through the trials to come, trials revealing a truth about me they didn't even know yet and unearthing a memory of pain all of us never wanted to touch again.

Physical touch is like water.

Water gives us life,

it takes us on adventures,

and it brings us back to ourselves.

Water is also dangerous,

it can appear kind on the surface,

while it plans your demise from below.

Water can decimate populations,

and end your life without your consent.

Water can glisten with the most radiant blues,

but turn black before you have time to swim to shore.

As they walked down the street, around the corner, and out of view— I knew I would spend the next three months, before returning home for Christmas vacation, doing everything I could to make my black water blue again.

## Red, Like Fear

After my family left I cleaned up my puddle of tears and changed my clothes to wander 'round the dorm. I quickly found a group of girls that were the only others in the building in my program. These girls became my cheerleaders, my shoulders to cry on, my tough love givers, and my reality checkers for the next four years, and beyond.

As the daylight turned to an evening glow the girls and I ventured down our block. Walking down the street we found another group of musical theater majors and started 'round the circle, introducing ourselves, when suddenly one girl looked to me and said,

“Hi - I'm Mandy, are you gay?!”

Suddenly I saw red, I felt red. Fear bubbled up inside me. Red was the color I felt from my middle school bullies' vitriol. Red was the burden and unhealthy scar left inside me from my secret game with Doubt, and the anger wrapped around my grandfather's passing when I was six-years-old. Red it is the shade of my rage.

My heart stopped beating. My hands began to sweat. I felt my face flushing and speaking words seemed like the most improbable outcome to follow up this stranger's blunt and abrasive question.

I had no idea how to answer her, “Are you gay?” So much of my excitement for being away at school came from finally not having to hide who I knew I was. College was supposed to be an outlet for me to express myself in a pressure free environment, and I thought others would let me figure that out, figure me out, but at my pace. *What is happening?*

I was trapped, stifled, invisible almost. Every person standing around us was silent, it's like Mandy was waiting to decide if she would hit on me or fight with those other girls present over who could reserve me as their weekend shopping buddy. I was becoming a stereotype before they even knew my name.

It felt like a week passed by. I didn't know how to answer her. I felt immense pressure to know who I was right then and there by so many confident women around me.

In no frame of mind to say yes or no, I looked down at this stranger's outstretched arm—a stranger I would have to spend the next four years with— I shook her hand aggressively, forced a wide smile, and said, “My name's Andrew, nice to meet you!”

As my feelings of red blurred to the hazy purple I was fighting to find, I finally reached some peace. Purple is the color of my faith, and faith is my constant.

My mom has told me many times that I've always had a spiritual connection, beyond myself, something she noticed in me early on in my life. She remembers the rainbow being a large part in that connection to my faith, a desire to connect to something bigger than me.

Colors help me navigate my unanswered questions. I associate them with places and things, places and things that trigger a feeling in me. My feelings rise up within and when I don't have the answer, or the coping within me, I can sometimes rely on my colors to bring me back to myself, center my thoughts, and almost trick myself into a different or better space of emotion.

I've never shared this with anyone till writing this book, because it has always felt a bit childish to be honest, but now as an artist—and even simply as a human being—I realize I had to find my own way of understanding myself. I had to find a way to understand my thoughts, and with the colors, it is often triggered by my sense memory and sometimes I don't even know I am focusing my energy on a color when I have something specific to release, but the memory of the color helps me to stop judging what I don't yet understand about myself, or a situation, or a place. Color brings peace into my anxiety.

So, the constant that always shows up for me in my most desperate moments of emotional scarcity is purple. Even during the times as a little boy, of what felt like the church's quiet judgement of who I might become, purple persisted.

This moment with a confident and direct new classmate has always stuck, because it was the first time—maybe ever—in 18 years where I didn't say what was needed to make someone

else happy, or edit myself to appease authority. I didn't know how to define myself in that moment with her, I didn't want to and hell—I shouldn't have to. Her boldness was terrifying, but she also presented me with an option to define myself how *I* wanted to be, with no preconceived notion of the kind of human being I was before meeting her, before meeting anyone outside of my Oregon bubble.

My innocence died with her one question, because I had nothing else to fall back on, nothing—but me. Insecurity might have been untuning my heart strings, but all she got to see was my solidity. *Today I started defining my story on my own terms.*

*When all the world is a hopeless jumble,  
And the raindrops tumble all around,  
Heaven opens a magic lane.  
When all the clouds darken up the skyway,  
There's a rainbow highway to be found,  
Leading from your window pane,  
To a place behind the sun,  
Just a step beyond the rain.  
Somewhere over the rainbow,  
Way up high,  
There's a land that I heard of  
Once in a lullaby.*

*-The Wizard of Oz*