

## MARGARET

I took matters into my own hands. I bought Michael a set of weights. Michael grew muscles. By the time he was eighteen and announced he was moving to New York, he stood six feet tall and weighed two hundred and twenty pounds of pure, solid muscle. I sent Michael out into the world certain that, however effeminate he might be, at least his imposing physique would keep the queers away.

Well, what the hell did I know?

The night before he left, Michael and I stayed up late talking. I kept putting off sleep because I knew that the morning would bring with it his departure. I told him to find a church when he got there and to find himself a nice girl. Get in good with her family, I said. That way he'd be sure to get a decent meal every now and again. And when he told me – and I'll never forget that look of calm, knowing certainty when he did – he told me there would be no girls for him, at least not in the way that I meant.

“Mama,” he said, “I'm homosexual. I am going to New York to fall in love.”

This was more than I could bear to listen to. “No,” I told him. “You're confused. You're afraid. You're still so very young.”

In truth, I was the one who was afraid. Afraid of losing him. Afraid he'd be harmed. Afraid for his soul. I told him he would die of disease or violence. I told him he would spend eternity in hell. And do you know what he said to me? “Well that's better than spending your life in South Carolina.”

I admire the moxie now, but I wanted to hit him. My only consolation is that I didn't. But the damage had been done. I was no longer his mother, his protector, his one safe person in the world.

In that moment, I made myself a stranger to my son.

If I had know that night he would only live another seven years...I would have held him in my arms and told him I loved him.