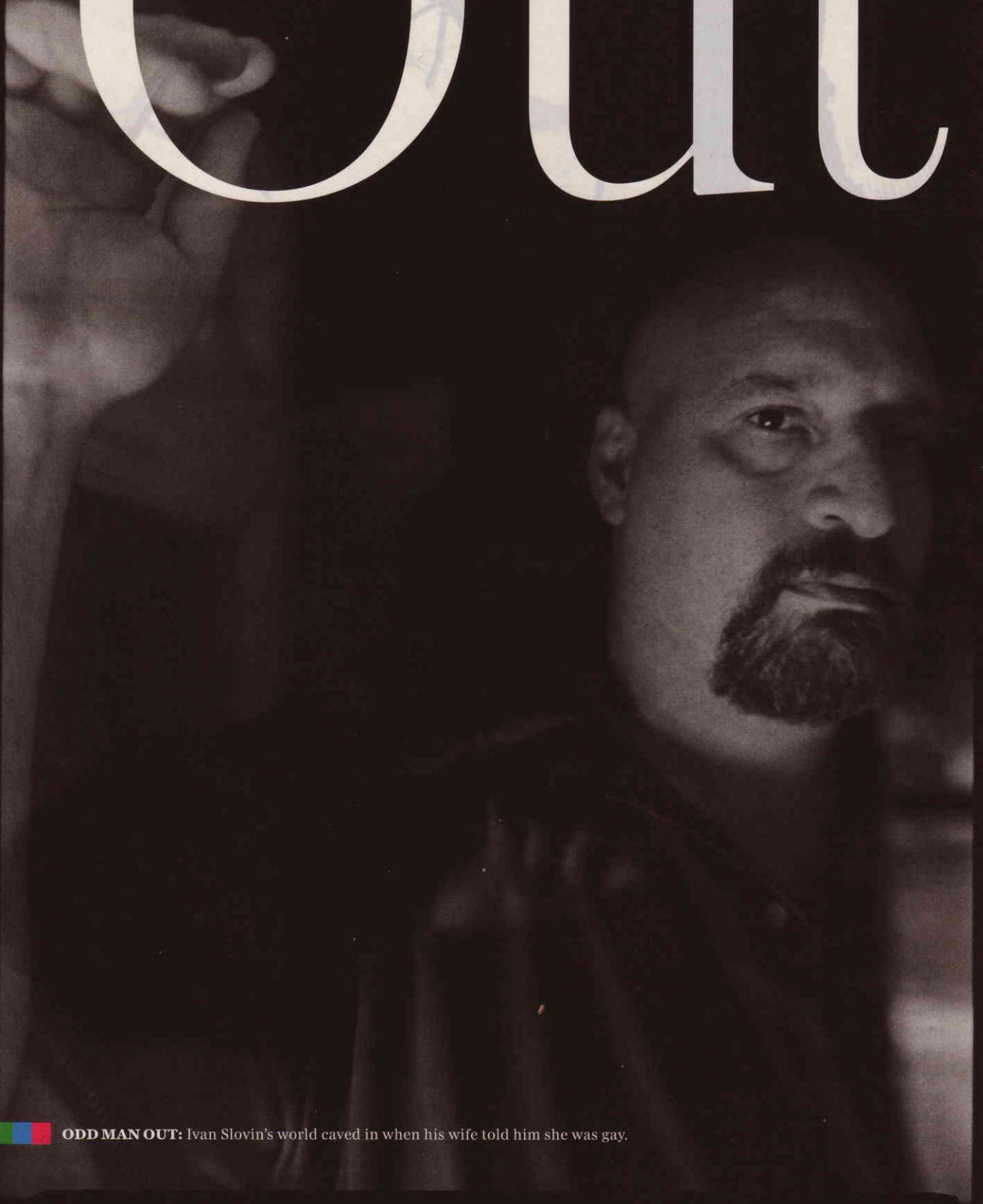


Out



ODD MAN OUT: Ivan Slovin's world caved in when his wife told him she was gay.

When gays come out of the closet, one person in the room is often more shocked than anyone—their straight husband or wife.

By Kris Frieswick

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK OSTOW

Nowhere



SECRETS AND LIES: Lisa doubted her dying dad's confession until letters from his lover turned up.



PATRICIA STARTED TO CRY

before the first words came out of her mouth. It had taken her weeks to build up the courage to share the news with her family, weeks more to make this appointment with a therapist. She had always been so strong for everyone else. Now, it was her turn to cry. * She took a deep breath, let it out, and began. "I've been married to my husband for three years," she said. "We've been together for seven. He just told me he's gay, and he moved out."

Taking another breath, she looked up at the therapist. His jaw had dropped open. He was staring at her, speechless. *That can't be good, she thought. You shouldn't be able to shock a therapist.*

When Patricia's husband, Mark, came out, no one talked about this. No one knew how to handle it, especially not

Patricia—and evidently not her therapist. She was the only person she knew to whom this had happened, and she felt like the only person in the world to whom it had ever happened.

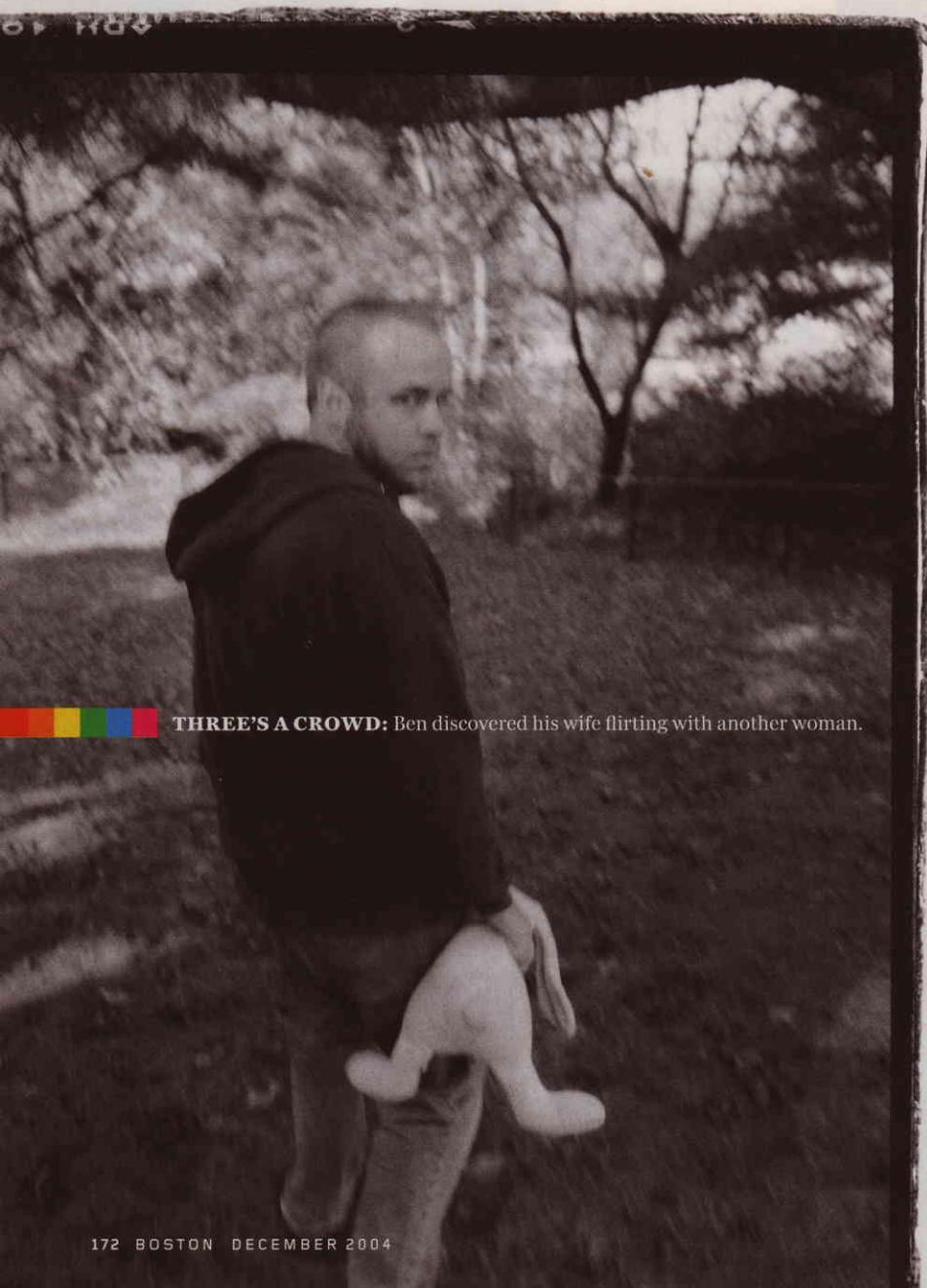
Her mother told her to get over it. Her friends wanted her to be angry with Mark. *His* friends and family came to her

in tears, begging her to help them make sense of Mark's announcement. When she finally confessed to her mother what had happened, her mother's response was, "That poor thing. I'm so scared for him out there in that world." No one, however, seemed scared for Patricia.

It was only after she recognized this that Patricia grew upset—not with Mark, but with the gay community, which showered her ex with support, while she felt she was left hung out to dry. "They kept telling him, 'Don't worry about her,'" Patricia recalls. "She's going to be fine. She's in regular society. She's got all the support she needs."

Not quite. But Patricia wasn't alone. Not nearly. There are as many as 2 million gay, lesbian, or bisexual Americans who are or have been married to straight spouses, according to Amity Pierce Buxton, who founded the support organization Straight Spouse Network after her husband of 25 years told her he was gay. Calls to the Straight Spouse Network tripled after married then-New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey came out in August, and the group has added five new chapters around the country; there are now two in Massachusetts.

Buxton—she is also the author of *The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families*—and others involved with the Straight Spouse Network contend that some gay men and women marry straight partners because of the social expectations and legal impediments to same-sex marriage. With 11 states banning same-sex marriage in last month's election, that seems unlikely to change. Yet many gay spouses say same-sex marriage rights weren't a factor in their decision to wed. They say they married for love, rejected the gay lifestyle, and, in some cases, didn't realize they were gay until later in life. Those motives offer little consolation for the straight spouses whose lives are upended. When a gay spouse comes out of the closet, [continued on page 183]



THREE'S A CROWD: Ben discovered his wife flirting with another woman.

(OUT OF NOWHERE)

[continued from page 172] the straight spouse's love, happiness, and self-esteem often retreat there, taking the newly liberated partner's place.

AN ATHLETIC BRUNETTE with a sarcastic wit and crystal blue eyes, Patricia (like most of those interviewed for this article, she asked that her real name not be used) looks back now from the safety of a second marriage. Like so many straight spouses whose partners come out, she says she never saw a clue that her husband was gay until the cold March morning when he dropped the bomb.

It was a few weeks before Mark's 30th birthday. She'd been thinking about throwing a surprise party and had mentioned it to a few friends. A strange distance had formed within the marriage, and she hoped the party would improve things. As they had planned their wed-

There are as many as 2 million gay, lesbian, or bisexual Americans who are or have been married to straight spouses.

ding, Mark, then 27, had told Patricia, then 24, that he was more sure of their marriage than anything he had ever done. Three years later, she found herself begging him to tell her what was wrong.

After avoiding the subject for weeks, Mark finally said he didn't think Patricia was the same person he'd met in college. Young and still insecure in the role of married woman, she didn't recognize it as a diversion. A few months later, they bought a large mirror to hang over the fireplace in their colonial-style house southwest of Boston. She saw this as a sign that things would be okay. Surely he wouldn't make such an extravagant purchase with her if he were planning to leave. But things got bad again a short time later. The night before Mark's announcement, Patricia gave it her last shot.

"I told him, 'I don't know what's going on with you, but I am your biggest advocate and your partner,'" she says.

The next day, she sat in her kitchen, feeling uneasy. Something was coming; she knew it. As Mark got dressed, "he was palpably more free and relaxed than he'd been in six months," she remembers. He practically glided around the house. Then he came downstairs to Patricia and said, "I think I'm a bisexual."

She couldn't immediately process the words. "I don't want to be gay," he continued. "I don't think anyone would choose to be gay, because it's just too hard."

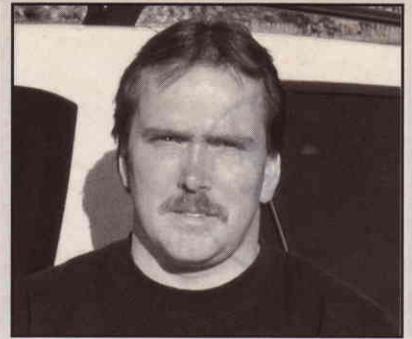
She began to cry. She told him she loved him. She assured him they could work things out and that everything was going to be okay. It wasn't. He packed his bags and moved out within the hour.

BEN NOW REALIZES there were major warning signs that his wife, Karen, was gay, but he chose to ignore them. They were married, after all. Both were 29, and she had been so involved in planning every single detail of their August 1998 wedding that it never even crossed his mind she was confused about being with him. They had a new home in Franklin and a bright-eyed baby girl, with the round cheeks and blue eyes of her daddy and the button nose of her mom. He figured you'd know something like that about yourself by the time you were 25.

But the past looks different when you fill in the blanks. Karen made out with girls at college parties, which Ben thought was just "crazy hedonistic college shit." There was the sophomore girl who followed Karen around like a puppy dog, pledging her undying devotion to her. After Karen and Ben were married, there was a string of female friends from work, women with whom Karen seemed infatuated.

There were problems in the bedroom. "Whenever we'd have sex," he says, "we'd get to a certain point and then she'd just shut off. There was no explanation, and I thought it was me." He rationalized it away. Wasn't losing your passion just part of the deal when you got married? All couples go from lovers to best friends, especially after the baby comes, right? It didn't raise alarm bells. It was just something they'd have a lifetime to work out.

Ben, a solidly built man with an infectious grin and closely cropped hair, eventually went into therapy to deal with their sexual problems, along with self-esteem issues. He now realizes it was easier for Karen to let him think he had done something wrong than to confront the truth. It all fell apart, though, at Karen's brother's wedding. After the ceremony, there was a big party in the bride and groom's backyard. Ben couldn't find Karen and went looking for her. She was in the couple's apartment talking to another woman, Jane. Ben didn't think anything of it at the time. Not until later. That's when he watched from [continued on page 184]



Ray Welch is 34 years old and serves as the Lead Roadside Technician for Foreign Motors West and absolutely loves his job.

He began his career with Foreign Motors West in 1996 as a car washer and now serves the greater good providing customers with quality roadside assistance. Since 1997, Ray has served as a trained Mercedes-Benz Technician. As a family man with a wife and three children Ray has a genuine dedication, not just to his job, but to the people that he helps. He treats people the way he would like to be treated or more importantly, the way he would want his own family to be treated if they were ever stuck on the side of the road.

By striving to go above and beyond the call of duty on a daily basis, Ray ensures his customers will receive the best customer service possible. In one instance, he was called to a woman's house to repair her car. Upon arriving, he found the woman's son crying over a cut. Ray not only repaired the car, but also helped to calm the boy and bandaged the cut for him.

On another occasion, Ray and his wife were on their way to a wedding when they passed by a family that was stranded on the roadside. Ray dropped his wife off at the wedding and then went back to help the family. He fixed their car in his tuxedo.

"Helping others and making them happy is one of the best parts of the job", Ray says. The response that he gets back from the customers also makes his efforts worthwhile. Ray receives countless customer service letters and phone calls thanking him for his assistance, courtesy, and generosity. (Ray will even help to put up stranded customers in hotels.) It's hearing back from the people he helps that makes Ray happy, knowing that his efforts truly make a difference.

Everyone at Foreign Motors West feels that Ray is an exceptional employee and Ray himself loves working with great people. He also enjoys getting to meet different people everyday. (Ray even had the opportunity to work on a celebrity's car.) The fact that Ray is on call 24 hours a day does not diminish his passion for his work. As Lead Roadside Technician for Foreign Motors West, Ray considers this to be the best job he has ever had.

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(OUT OF NOWHERE)

[continued from page 183] the deck as his wife and Jane got all over each other in the pool, giggling and generally making a spectacle of themselves. "I'm not going to be the jealous husband," he remembers thinking. "Call me naive. But I just wasn't paying attention to it."

The next day, his wife called him at his office at a financial publishing company in Boston. "We have to talk tonight when you get home," she said ominously. When he got home, she was waiting. "This life isn't for me," she said. "I want to separate."

Ben was flattened, as confused as it was possible for a man to be. "She had some lame excuse about how we don't have sex very much anymore and I'm on the computer all the time," he says. "I asked her if she wanted to go into therapy, to try to work things out. She said not really. She said it just wasn't right."

Ben cried. He cried all night. "I didn't know what to think," he says.

The next night, Karen told him she was going out for a while. She didn't come home until 7 a.m. When he asked where she'd been, she said she'd been with Jane. "That's when it finally all came together for me. I was like 'All right, I get it. But I had to get it out of her.'" Karen explained to Ben that she had strong feelings for Jane that she did not understand and was spending time with her trying to sort them out. The women's relationship blossomed into a love affair a month later.

Ben agreed that, under the circumstances, a divorce would be the best thing, but neither of them had anywhere to go, so he slept in the basement. That didn't work out, so they took turns spending a week in the house—until a neighbor called and told Ben that Jane had been spending nights in the house with Karen. "That's when I flipped out," he says. "I said, 'If you're going to do that, you have to move out and get your own place. It's my house. I'm still paying for it, and you're not working or paying for it.'"

Karen moved in with Jane. Then she sought sole custody of their daughter and the maximum amount of child support allowed by law.

A year and a half later, Ben sees his daughter on weekends. He and his wife are about to finalize their divorce. He is in a new relationship, but is still angry. "She made this huge decision," he says. "It was a whole new life for her, but she felt she bore no responsibility for it at all and expects me to foot the bill for the whole thing."

Ben now wrestles with searing self-

doubts about his judgment and his ability to know people, despite being in what he calls a "healthy heterosexual relationship. Or at least I assume I am. But what do I know?"

BILL, WHO IS IN HIS EARLY 50s and lives north of Boston, knew he was attracted to men before he married his wife. He says he was deeply in love with her when they wed two decades ago, but he eventually cheated anyway. They had two children, now in their teens, and an active sex life throughout their marriage: They had sex three times a week, Bill says. But there was always something missing.

"When you're a gay man in a straight marriage," he says, "your needs aren't being met." So he did what many gay men do: He compartmentalized. It wasn't cheating as long as it was with a man.

"It was just different worlds," says Bill. "Men can go out and have sex. It's available. There's cruise areas, gay video stores. It's not like a straight affair, where you have to romance them. It's horrible, but that's how it is. It's a part of the gay culture that I can't stand."

Sex and love became two different things in Bill's life, and he lived like that for years. But eventually, the guilt caught up with him. He became depressed, overweight, and perpetually angry. "I'm

Ben watched his wife and Jane making a spectacle of themselves. "I'm not going to be the jealous husband," he thought.

an open and honest person," he says, "but two or three times a year, I wasn't behaving like that, and then the guilt would hit. I felt that I hated being gay."

In 1995, the guilt became too much, and Bill told his wife he was gay. He also confessed to cheating. "There were a lot of tears," he says. But once the initial shock wore off, she had the same reaction that so many straight spouses have: She wanted to work things out. She wanted to stay together, and so did Bill. The couple went into therapy but eventually realized Bill wasn't going to stop needing gay sex, and she didn't want a husband who was slipping out of the house for trysts. Aside from the feelings of betrayal, she was afraid of contracting AIDS, the ultimate dread for anyone who learns he or she has a gay spouse.

The couple finally divorced in 2002.

According to Buxton, this fate, even for couples who truly want to work things out, is not uncommon. Nearly all marriages in which one spouse comes out eventually end in divorce, she says, although some hang on longer than others.

Lorraine Hamwey of Norwood says her intuition told her in 1980 that some-

"He used to say these horrible things about gay people," Lisa recalls. "I mean, how much can you deny who you are?"

thing was wrong with her eight-year marriage. "I didn't have access to all the ways that people find out now: strange numbers on the cell-phone bills and computer chat-line charges on the credit cards," she says. But her husband suddenly had lots of new friends she wasn't allowed to meet. Little things were causing blow-outs. Finally, she confronted him. "I asked him if there was another woman," she says. "And he said no. Then I asked if there was another man. He just sat there with his mouth dropped open. Then he said, 'Not one man in particular.'"

They wanted to stay together for the sake of their two daughters, aged 5 and 6. "We weren't at each other's throats or anything," she says. So they decided to tell no one and continue living as husband and wife. "I went into a closet when he came out of his. I went into denial," she says.

They lived like that, keeping his secret, for another 11 and a half years. When their oldest daughter graduated from high school, they finally told the girls. "One was angry, furious that we'd been living a lie," Hamwey recalls. "The other one was upset but said, 'You're still my father, and I still love you.'"

Hamwey, however, went through the self-doubt that so many straight spouses feel. "I thought, *Who would ever date me?*" she says. "I thought people would look at me like *How could she not know? What's wrong with her?*" She finally allowed herself to be angry at her ex-husband. "They think because they've finally become honest with you, it's all going to be okay. It's freeing for them, and you're grieving the loss of your marriage." Confronted with a lack of support for people like her, Hamwey founded the Boston chapter of the Straight Spouse Network in the early 1990s.

AT 6-FOOT-1 AND 275 POUNDS, Ivan Slovin is like a giant teddy bear, friends say, a man used to taking care of others. When his pretty, petite wife, the mother of their two young daughters, told him two years ago that she was gay and wanted a divorce, his world caved in around his broad shoulders. *What is this going to do to the kids?* he thought. *How are they going to deal with this? How am I going to deal with this?* He and his wife both cried. She was in obvious pain as well.

Things are infinitely better now. Slovin, 42, is dating a woman he is crazy about. He sees his daughters all the time. It doesn't hurt anymore when he and his ex drive past each other on the streets of Hudson, where both still live. That doesn't mean things are great.

"People who have been through this are all permanently scarred," says Buxton. "They wonder when they are going to be able to trust their own judgment again."

For months after his wife's announcement, Slovin struggled with self-doubts. He was at rock bottom when she told him about the Straight Spouse Network, and he now credits the organization with saving his life. In a small room at Newton-Wellesley Hospital on the fourth Monday of every month, he began to look into the eyes of people who knew how he felt. "It was incredible to be able to see people who knew what I was going through," Slovin says, "to hug them."

LISA'S FATHER CAME OUT one year before he died, and the news rearranged everything she thought she knew about him, about herself, about her family. She suddenly understood why he had seemed like such a closed, unhappy person. He had always seemed consumed by his work. The only time she saw a glimpse into his true heart, she says now, was when he was playing the piano. "It was obvious that he wasn't living his life the way he wanted to," says Lisa, 32, who lives in Brookline. "When he was playing his music, he was full of passion, and you could tell that there was this other person inside."

Her parents had been considering divorce before they found out that her father was sick with the degenerative brain disease that would eventually kill him. Had it not been for the disease, which attacked his frontal lobe and had the effect of lowering his inhibitions, he may never have told his wife that he was gay.

Lisa's father [continued on page 187]



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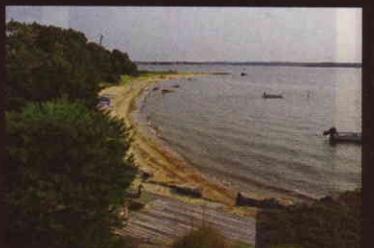
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[continued from page 185] came from a fundamentalist Christian family in the Midwest. They were so devout that his parents called him "our little minister." They were bitterly disappointed when he became a heart surgeon instead.

Eventually he married and had two daughters, but the forces in his life sometimes butted up against one another. "He used to say all these horrible things about gay people, like people with AIDS deserved to die if they wanted to live that lifestyle," Lisa recalls. "I mean, how much can you deny who you are?"

Finally, the façade collapsed. According to Lisa, her mother came home from work one day and found her husband distraught. She asked what was wrong.

"I need you to take me for an AIDS test," he said.

"Why?" she asked, thinking his dementia was taking hold faster than anticipated.

"Just please do it," he begged.

"Why?"

"Because I went to a gay bar last night."

"Why?"

"Because I wanted to hook up with a man."

She paused. "Why?"

"Because I'm gay."

Lisa says her mother didn't believe him. It seemed too improbable for someone as constrained and conservative as her husband. It had to be the disease. Then, shortly after he died, they found the letters. "They were from a married man in another city that he'd been having an affair with for years," says Lisa. "His lover had daughters, too. They would brag to each other about what we were doing in school."

That put an end to the doubts, and Lisa's mother started to look back over her marriage, recognizing signs that, consciously or unconsciously, she realized she had worked hard to avoid. "She participated so much in his shadow world, even though she didn't know what was going on," Lisa says. "I think she was simply protecting her own world. You just make your reality, and that's the way it is."

Lisa has had a harder time piecing together her father's life. "I know he loved me," she says. "But I didn't live with a gay dad. It's been tough having him pass away and then constantly questioning who it was I knew."

This is the core of the struggle facing every straight person who learns that his or her spouse is gay. It is the realization that the most fundamental assumption of the most important commitment they ever made is wrong. "It's the deception that angers a spouse far more than the knowledge that their husband or wife is gay," says Buxton.

But that sense of betrayal is surmountable, as Patricia can attest.

"I found out my husband is gay," she says. "Does that mean that everything in our life together was a lie? You have to get over that. You can't go back and repaint your life or second-guess it. If you were both having a great time, you can't second-guess that."

Still, Patricia has no desire to find out whether Mark, with whom she hasn't spoken in six years, was telling her the whole truth. "My best friend asked me if there isn't a part of me that wants to call him up and say, 'Hey, is it really true that you didn't cheat on me?' I said to her, 'I don't know if I really want to know.'" **B**

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