

**OUT**



**BOB FIFE**  
WITH  
**RON**  
**HUGHES**

# out

ONE  
CHRISTIAN'S  
EXPERIENCE  
OF  
LEAVING  
THE  
GAY  
COMMUNITY

 **Kregel**  
*Publications*

*Out: One Christian's Experience of Leaving the Gay Community*

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The story contained herein is the author's personal story based on his own recollections and perception of events. Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect individual privacy.

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# Introduction

**O***ut* traces the story of my life. I am grateful for the nurture and care of friends who have blessed my life and encouraged me to write this book. Looking back, I can see God working to redeem even the most trying and difficult aspects of my life. My own attempts to deal with these often led me into paths of self-indulgence, which I regret. Yet as God restored my relationship with himself, he also began healing broken relationships with others and giving me new, healthy ones that were beyond my deepest longings and wildest dreams. I look forward to what God will do as he continues to work in my life.

Because of the long time period covered in this memoir, I am unable to recall conversations with precision. The dialogue portions of the book have been re-created to convey their sense and intent. Where possible, they have been corroborated by the participants.

I offer this book not as a blueprint for everyone whose life shares some of the same challenges, temptations, or weaknesses as mine, but as a bold declaration that when God is welcomed in, anything can happen. I have seen God work in totally unexpected ways in the lives of those who surrender the broken pieces to him.

Regardless of the specific nature of one's failings, there is hope for

new, overflowing, abundant life in relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ.

I'd like my story to stand as a testimony to God's unfailing love and grace in the face of sin and rebellion. I trust that it will serve to start conversations and open the hearts of all who read it.

Some may find the account of my early life deeply distressing. Those who prefer to bypass the painful parts of my story may do so at any point by skipping from the end of chapter 1 to chapter 23, entitled "The Story Continues."



## A Few Hours

The slim young man with short blond hair fit in with the others. Dressed casually in shorts, T-shirt, and sandals, he moved easily through the crowd, scanning those waiting at the rail that separated travelers from their families and friends. I caught his eye, and after exchanging awkward smiles and a quick hug, we headed out of the arrivals lounge at Pearson International Airport. The superficial chatter that characterizes airport conversations kept serious conversation at bay.

We tossed his bags into the trunk and got into the car, where, for the first time since he was a toddler, Sean and I were alone. As we headed downtown, I kept him busy talking about himself, his success at university, his plans, his friends, his mother, and anything I could think of to keep the attention on him—and not just because of my discomfort with what would eventually come up for discussion. I desperately wanted to get back into my boy's life. I'd been even more absent from Sean's life than my father had been from mine.

In spite of the traffic, we reached the apartment before the conversation had truly warmed up. I showed him in and gave him a quick tour. Then I grabbed a couple of soft drinks from the refrigerator and led him to the balcony, where we'd have a view of the sun setting over the

city. The air was warm but not stifling, and we settled into our chairs to resume our conversation.

Eventually, Sean turned the spotlight on me, asking about my work, my friends, my life. I couldn't guess what Audrey might or might not have told him about me, so I asked him, "Do you know about me?"

"What are you referring to, Dad?" He turned the question back on me.

"Well, you know that I'm . . ."—the word stuck in my throat—"gay."

"Yeah," he replied, "I know."

"Your mom tell you?"

"Yeah."

"When?" I asked.

"Last week while I was with her in Texas."

"What do you think about that?" I asked.

"Well," he paused for a moment. "I guess if you are, then you are, and that's the way it is."

That bit went better than I'd thought it might. He didn't put me down. He didn't tell me I should try to change. But before I could respond, he continued.

"And Dad, I want you to know . . ."—now he choked on his words—"that my love for you is unconditional."

Well! I couldn't remember the last time I'd heard of "unconditional love." Anything that had passed for love in the last twenty years of my life always came with strings attached, with conditions, with an expiration date. Sean's simple statement cut me deeply. Here was my son, showing real love to me, a man he barely knew. Something about it stirred my memory. He reminded me of another young man who might have done such a thing once. One with a distant father unworthy of his love. Tears brimmed over my eyelids and ran down my face. My father had already passed beyond my reach forever.

Our conversation abated, and only the roar of the traffic below, punctuated by the occasional blast of a horn, broke the silence. Impulsively, before I could stop myself, I blurted out, "Sean, I'm going to tell you something I hadn't planned to say. But as I sit here looking at you and

thinking about my own life, I swear that if there's a way out of the life I'm living, and if I can find that way, I want to get out."

What I didn't say was that I honestly didn't think getting out was at all possible because I was enmeshed in everything gay. But here was my son, calling me "Dad" and talking about love. I had to at least make an attempt. I was hungry for reality—for what I had known long ago with my own family and lost completely.

We sat for a while in emotion-laden silence. I wanted to touch him, to put my arm around him, to hug him, but I couldn't. *How would he take it?* I wondered. *Would he think I was coming on to him?* Touching had been a prelude to sex for so long for me that I couldn't imagine anything different. So we sat there—he in his chair, I in mine—mourning the gulf between us and trying to find a way to bridge it.

We'd only been together a few hours, yet we were into one of the most profound conversations of my life. I suggested we go back into the apartment and find something to eat. Sean watched as I prepared pasta sauce from scratch. I avoided using canned sauces; my own sauce, though time consuming to make, was better. We were in no hurry, and meal preparation allowed our conversation to flow naturally into lighter areas.

As I chopped onions, sliced mushrooms and celery, and gathered the spices to add to the tomatoes simmering on the stove, we chatted about cooking, music, and sports, particularly the Blue Jays. Having had so little interaction in the past, what would normally be trivialities came as great revelations. The hundreds of similarities and differences between fathers and sons were laden with significance. Something as simple as sharing a meal of penne in rich tomato sauce with a salad and toasted garlic bread assumed an importance far beyond what anyone could have imagined.

We lingered over the food and, even after it was all gone, sat there chatting as the minutes turned into hours. Eventually our stamina gave way to fatigue and we were ready to call it a day. I wasn't sure how comfortable Sean would be with me, so I decided to let him have the

apartment to himself at night. We said our good-nights, and I drove over to the house where I had started to set up my new living space amid the rubble of the past.

I got into bed, and as I lay in the darkness waiting for sleep, I thought about what I'd said to Sean. I couldn't believe my own words. I hadn't intended to say them, but I had to admit to myself I truly wanted to get out of the life I'd been living. I just didn't know if I could. I was in deep. My whole life revolved around gay culture. I couldn't think of a single experience I wanted but hadn't had. My life investments certainly had paid well in short-term dividends that satisfied my immediate desires and stroked my ego. But long term? These few hours with Sean confronted me with a world of good on which I had turned my back. The awareness that I still valued these things hit me like a wild pitch. *I did it once*, I thought. *I left one life for another. I'll do it again.*

Scenes from my past drifted through my mind as the sleepless hours passed.

## The Mirror

At first the noises were indistinct to my drowsy mind, but a sudden cry of pain snapped me to full consciousness as surely as one of my father's backhanded slaps. My body stiffened with fear as I became aware that my father was beating Mom. The sound of hushed voices, one menacing, one pleading, were punctuated with the sounds of rough hands striking soft flesh.

I'd heard this kind of thing before, but tonight seemed different. The snarling threats were crueler, the stifled cries more intense, the sound of the blows louder. I became convinced my father intended to kill Mom. Already awake, Ronnie rocked quietly in his bed trying to comfort himself. Though eight years older than me, my mentally challenged brother would be no help to me. He feared our father more than I did—and with good reason. Of all the children, he was the only one who might have experienced my father's wrath more than I did. With total disregard for Ronnie's disability, or maybe because of it, my father would brutalize him with words and blows.

I slipped from my bed and silently opened the door to the room shared by my sisters Barb and Gwen. Only two years older, Gwen was closer to me than my other siblings, both chronologically and emotionally. I roused her and she joined me, crouching near the top of the stairs,

listening to the sickening sounds coming from our parents' room. She pointed down the stairs, and our bare feet made no sound on the heavy pine boards as we crept down and slipped through what we called "the breakfast room" into the kitchen, where the phone hung on the wall. Gwen suggested we call the police. Shivering with fear, I agreed.

I stood watch by the foot of the stairs to ensure that our father didn't surprise us. When Gwen finished the call, she looked at me in a way that said, "Now we've done it!" I remember how her pigtails jiggled as she trembled. What would come next? Would our father beat us with his horse harness? Would he do something worse? Would the police arrest our father and put him in jail? Would Mom be alright?

The terrifying noises were getting louder. My other sisters would be awake now too, lying still in their beds, praying our father's anger would not spill out of Mom's room to be unleashed on them. Gwen motioned toward the back door. It would be safer outside if things boiled over upstairs. Our shoes and slippers were in our rooms, but we had no intention of returning for them. The heavy door creaked softly as we eased it open on its frozen hinges.

We stood on the concrete slab outside, our feet melting little patches of frost as we shuffled back and forth. In our hurry, we hadn't thought to grab our coats. So there we were, wearing nothing but our pajamas, trying to keep from freezing on this early December night. Still, the fear of what might await us inside kept us from returning to the warmth of the house. To be safe, we'd have to stay where we were until the police arrived.

My father, who had a knack for starting businesses and seducing women, left us in a state of constant tension wondering when he might show up. When I had arrived home after finishing my paper route that evening, I sensed the calm that announced he was distracted elsewhere. His absence was as palpable as his presence.

When present, my father bolstered his sense of authority with belittling comments, slaps, and backhands. Occasionally, when he got extra worked up, he'd come after me with a piece of light horse harness

gripped in the cigarette-yellowed fingers of his bulky right hand. His handsome face would be red with rage. His aim was wild as he chased me around the table with his improvised whip, but his strength guaranteed a welt wherever the leather made contact. Sometimes my mother would make me stay home from school for as long as it took the marks to fade.

I had smiled to myself and relaxed when I realized that my father was away. I expected a quiet evening: some supper, a couple hours of listening to the radio or reading a comic book, and then bed. Mom always insisted we get a good sleep on Saturday nights so we could get up early for Sunday school.

Ronnie and I used the wide hallway at the top of the stairs as a bedroom, though it lacked privacy. Gwen and Barb, two and four years older than me, shared one room. Yvonne, ten years my senior, had her own room. Our parents used the third bedroom; since my father spent more time away than at home, I thought of it as “Mom’s room.” All three bedrooms opened into the hall where Ronnie and I slept, but we were used to living in close quarters and never thought of our setup as unusual. In fact, things had eased considerably since my oldest brother, Ken, left home to join the Canadian military.

The evening had unfolded as anticipated, and Ronnie and I had tucked ourselves in by nine o’clock. Delivering the afternoon papers in the cold, fresh air had left me eager for rest, and I quickly fell asleep. Now, shivering with my sister in cold and fear, I realized that my father had crept up the stairs, his mood as dark as the stairwell, in order to surprise Mom in bed. I wondered what had started his rage, how long he’d been abusing Mom, and what would happen when the police arrived.

Mercifully they came quickly. When we heard the car, we hurried back inside and ran through the house to let them in the front door. We didn’t want their knocking to alert my father. The two big officers quietly asked where our parents were. We told them and followed them up the stairs. They approached the door, and one of them raised his hand to knock on it with his knuckles. The sound of a crash and

breaking glass from inside the room masked the sound, and the police burst through the door without waiting any longer.

We watched Mom trying to cover herself in the presence of these strange men and my father trying to act nonchalant and belligerent at the same time. Pieces of the big dresser mirror glinted among the odds and ends on the dresser top, stuck out of a half-opened drawer, and lay scattered over the floor. The Vaseline jar that shattered the glass had rolled to a stop near the foot of the bed. We couldn't tell whether my father had intended the mirror as his target or if it merely became collateral damage when my mother dodged the missile.

I had never seen my father play any part but that of absolute authority, so I found this role change strange to witness. The police lectured our father about the legal ramifications of domestic abuse. They assured him they'd not treat him so leniently if they caught him repeating this night's mayhem. My father blustered and groveled by turns, attempting to get them out of the house, but they took their time and made their point.

Until he left again on business, Gwen and I lived in terror of punishment for our intervention, but it never came. It was as if the visit from the police had never happened. To be fair, our father reduced the physical aspect of his abuse of Mom for a while, though the verbal assaults continued.

Whether or not any relationship existed between that night and what happened a few weeks later, we couldn't know. For the first and only time I remember, our father bought us children a big Christmas present: a toboggan large enough for all of us to share.



## A Family Secret

I patted Tippy's head. The little black-and-white terrier sat by my side as I gazed through the wooden porch railing, watching for Mom. After a few minutes she came out of the grocery store down the street, where she worked. I could tell by the way her steps dragged and her shoulders heaved that she was weeping.

As she drew closer, Tippy and I went out to meet her. She hadn't had her fiftieth birthday, yet with her white hair and wrinkled face, she looked more like my grandmother than my mother. She told people that her hair had started turning when she was in her late teens. For years she wore it pulled back from her face, emphasizing her pronounced nose and coarse features. Mom was of medium height but had a generous bosom, which usually went unnoticed because of her chronically apologetic posture—shoulders rounded, head slightly bowed. On Sundays, though, when she played the piano at church, she liked to wear bright clothes, a string of pearls, and a hat, and in that outfit she stood a little straighter and displayed some inner strength.

On this day, as she walked home from work in her plain print dress, she would have been invisible to me if she hadn't been my mother. When she saw me, she wiped her face with her hand and tried to smile.

“Hi, Mom.” I ignored her red eyes. “Tippy and I were waiting for you.”

“Have you finished your paper route and done your chores, Bob?” she asked.

“Yes, Mom, all done.”

“That’s good. You know your father would be angry if he got home and found you playing if there was still work to do.” Her voice was tired, but more than that, it was sad.

“Is he coming home tonight?” I asked.

“I don’t expect so, but we never know.”

“Mom?” I screwed up my courage. “Why are you crying?”

In response, she hurried her steps and covered her face. I jogged to keep up as we turned off the sidewalk at our house and climbed the steps to the long veranda. “What’s wrong, Mom? I just wondered.”

With her hand on the doorknob, Mom looked down at me. I could see her face wavering between warmth and hardness. “Listen, Bob,” she said with steel in her voice. “Today I got my pay. I had to give most of it back to the store to pay for the food we’ve been eating for the last week. I still have to make payments on the hydro and telephone. Thank God it’s warm enough that we don’t need to buy oil this time of year. I don’t know what’s going to happen this winter.”

“It won’t be winter for a long time, Mom,” I reasoned. “You can save some by then.”

“Don’t be giving me advice about what I should be doing,” she snapped. “You’re starting to sound like your father.”

Her words stung. I’d been trying to understand her sadness and make her feel better, but I had only made things worse, and now I felt bad as well. I knew she didn’t like my father and now it sounded like maybe she didn’t like me either. I didn’t have much time to think about it, though. She opened the door, slipped through, and closed it firmly behind her. I stood staring at the doorknob, wondering whether I should follow her in.

Thinking better of it, I called Tippy, and with the one family member I could always count on, I walked toward the railroad tracks, hoping to find someone to play with. It was late spring and still bright and

warm enough, but no one was there. At that hour, most of the moms on our street would be serving the evening meal to their husbands and children. My mom had to work to put food on the table.

I threw sticks for Tippy, but he wasn't in the mood to play. When I threw one, he just lay down and gnawed on it. So I called him and returned home. I entered quietly and heard Mom and my oldest sister, Yvonne, in the kitchen. Yvonne already had a job and was looking for a boy to marry her and take her away. My sisters didn't have the freedom that my oldest brother, Ken, had. The Second World War was over by the time he was old enough to sign up for the army, but he did anyway. Was his motivation purely patriotic or rooted in his desire to get away from home—far away? The regular visits to the paymaster only sweetened the deal for him.

With five of us depending on Mom's salary for food and shelter, meals were always simple but sufficient. We didn't linger long at the table, engaging in warm or stimulating conversation. Mealtime had a specific function—to fill our bellies as efficiently as possible—and once that was realized, we moved on to other necessities. After supper, I went to the breakfast room to read a comic book before going to bed. Yvonne followed me.

"You shouldn't be bothering Mom when she's sad," Yvonne said. "It only makes her feel worse. Mom doesn't earn much money, and Dad won't help her. It's not fair."

"I only wanted to know what was wrong so I could cheer her up." I paused before taking a guess. "Maybe she was thinking about Jack."

Yvonne looked startled. "What do you know about Jack?"

"Not much," I replied. "Only that when they talk about him, our father gets angry and Mom gets sad."

"I guess you should know about him so you don't say the wrong thing sometime and get everyone upset," she said.

At seventeen, Yvonne already knew enough of the ways of the world to empathize with Mom in ways the rest of us couldn't, and she was able to explain things to us that Mom would never talk about. "When Mom

was about my age,” my sister began, “she fell in love with Jack. She was crazy about him, but Grandma and Grandpa didn’t think he was good enough for her. Jack and Mom tried to keep their relationship secret, but they were caught together often enough that Grandpa decided he had to break them up permanently.

“He knew our father was very ambitious and had a good business sense. Grandpa thought that he would be able to give Mom a better life than Jack could. So he told Jack to stay away from Mom and forbade her from ever seeing him again. At the same time, Grandpa and Grandma began inviting our father to their house. He started being friends with Mom. He was very kind to her and cheered her up a little. Once Mom trusted him a bit, he started to take advantage of the situation.”

I understood all the words but, at the time, was just beginning to grasp their significance.

“Mom didn’t really love him,” Yvonne continued, “but he was there. He was friendly. He made her feel good. Even though she was still really in love with Jack, she found herself becoming more involved with Grandpa’s choice for her. Before she knew it, a wedding was arranged and she was married to this man who was not her true love.

“As soon as it was too late, she realized that she’d been tricked by our grandfather and father into doing something she regretted. Someday you’ll understand what this meant between Mom and Dad as a husband and wife, but she had already given her heart to Jack. Father sensed this. He knew that she didn’t really love him and had given something to Jack that he could never have. That hurt his pride. He hated Mom for loving Jack even though she could never have him. He hated Jack for being Mom’s true love. Now our father tries to punish her by having other girlfriends, but Mom says she’ll stay with him until you’re grown up enough.”

*This isn’t good, I thought. Am I somehow responsible for keeping the family together? When will I be “grown up enough”? What will happen then?*

“Now you know the story and why we must never mention the name

‘Jack’ around our parents. Mom gets a beating every time our father is reminded of him.” She paused to think for a moment and then continued. “And Mom? All she can think about is how much happier she would have been with Jack.”

She leaned back and looked deeply into my eyes. “Do you know how important this is, Bob?” she asked.

Wide-eyed at the revelation, I nodded. It explained some things. It also produced a lot of questions, but I sensed that now wasn’t the time to ask.

## Shut Out

Unbidden, a sob sputtered from my lips. Immediately three pairs of eyes swung upward to the grate in the ceiling. I kept still, knowing they couldn't see me above them in the darkness.

"Get back into bed, Bob," Yvonne said from her place at the table behind one of three piles of penny candy, licorice, and chocolate bars. Yvonne, simple in every way, was plump, unambitious, and usually jovial. But she was easily influenced when the sisters were together, and I often served as the outside enemy that bound them together.

"This stuff is just for girls," added Barb with a red Twizzler hanging from her mouth. My middle sister was a big, buxom girl with dark hair cut to a medium length. I'd say she was more attractive than pretty because her warm personality outshone her looks. With everyone else she was friendly and personable, but I was only her irritating little brother—someone to be generally avoided and, when that wasn't possible, pushed to the periphery.

"There's nothing here for you." Gwen delivered the deepest wound of all because of our closeness. Even as an adolescent, Gwen was self-aware and maximized her considerable physical beauty. She was outgoing and attractive, and she carried herself well. From childhood she had always aspired to bigger and better things. One of the ways girls got ahead in

those days was through the men they could attract, and Gwen knew how to attract masculine attention. She put a lot of energy into looking good and was always ready for the occasion, whatever it was. A natural leader, Gwen had considerable influence over her older sisters, and I knew she could have changed the tone of the moment. But she hadn't the inclination.

Half an hour earlier, as soon as Mom left to work her second job at the service center, they had sent me off to bed and then slipped out of the house, leaving Ronnie watching *I Love Lucy* on the TV in the breakfast room and me alone upstairs, contemplating the injustice of being banished to my bed.

I could picture everything. The girls would have headed straight to Nelly's Hot Dog Stand—the rendezvous point for all the kids in the neighborhood. The older kids gave most of their attention to each other, flirting and quietly inventing ways to ditch their younger siblings if they could find someone to go with them to the woods by the railway tracks. The younger kids focused on the treats to be had: black balls, bubble gum, licorice and strawberry Twizzlers, caramels, jujubes, and other assorted delights.

I had heard them talk about their trips to Nelly's so often that I could picture the scene. Along with the laughing, joking, and chatting, Gwen and Barb would be manipulating Yvonne into spending money on them. She alone had a full-time job, so she had the most dollars. Luckily for her two younger sisters, she also had the least sense and could usually be convinced to buy them treats.

I didn't have to imagine them at home splitting up the loot. They did it on the table directly under the grate that allowed warm air from the first floor to pass upstairs. As soon as I'd hear them come in, I'd scoot out of bed and lie on the floor with my face pressed against the chilly metal. From my vantage point above, I could watch them eating their goodies and listen to them talking about the other kids they'd seen at Nelly's. Sometimes I'd betray myself with a sound, and immediately, as now, they would turn on me.

Disheartened, I returned to my bed and lay there, tossing. *Why are they so mean? Why don't they share? Maybe they just hate all boys*, I thought, remembering the mayhem of the evening before.

It was Ronnie's turn to do the dishes, and as soon as Mom had gone, Yvonne announced loudly that she wasn't going to let him watch *I Love Lucy*.

He immediately became belligerent. "Why not?" he shouted. "You know I always watch *I Love Lucy*.' It's my show. I always, always watch it."

"You can't watch it 'cause we want to watch something else," said Gwen.

"I'm going to watch it and you can't stop me." Anger tinged his voice.

"I'm going to watch it and you can't stop me," parroted Barb in a singsong voice.

Immediately the others joined in. "I'm going to watch it and you can't stop me," they cried over and over, sometimes together, sometimes one by one. Ronnie glared at his tormentors in frustration.

"Don't get mad and hit us or we'll tell Mom and she'll never let you watch *Lucy* again." Yvonne's threat both baited him and expressed fear that his anger would translate into actions.

"I'll hit you if I want and you can't stop me," he shouted.

"I'll hit you if I want and you can't stop me," Barb sang out.

This initiated another round of mockery to fuel his growing rage.

My sisters played this game with Ronnie every so often. They were amused by the intensity of his reaction to being told he couldn't watch *I Love Lucy*. The show meant nothing to them but everything to him, rating as the highlight of his day. Ronnie couldn't imagine anything worse than being deprived of this simple pleasure. To miss it would upset his whole routine.

Last night the girls had gone too far. Their cruelty pushed Ronnie past shouting to lashing out with superhuman strength. If Ronnie ever hit you when he was in a rage, you never let it happen again. Mom feared he'd do some real damage, and she had forbidden the girls from egging him on. But in her absence, sometimes temptation overtook them. I



watched in fear as Ronnie flung the tea towel to the floor and charged toward Barb. She screamed and the girls scattered, fleeing out different doors into the safety of the yard. I kept quiet and waited, listening to Ronnie muttering under his breath, grimly warning his absent tormentors that they'd "better not come back in here." He settled down when the *I Love Lucy* theme came on the TV. The girls knew they would have been in real trouble if Ronnie had gotten hold of one of them. Now they'd leave him alone for a few weeks.

I could never understand the girls. One-on-one they could be OK with me, but put them together and something happened. Something bad. They became unkind. I confess I thought of them in fairy-tale terms as the "three ugly stepsisters." While they routinely pushed me away, I just as routinely attempted to have a relationship with them.

As the years passed, the tension between us eased. Yvonne and Barb got married and moved out. Throughout our middle teen years, without our older sisters to shift the balance of social power, Gwen and I became quite good friends. We walked to school together and I became her protector, defending her from the kids she often provoked with her quick wit and sharp tongue.