

## 'MUM... I'M GAY!'

Since coming out, I've noticed that gay people love talking about how it happened for them, discussing at length over a dinner or drink the ins and outs of people's individual circumstances leading to the very moment they finally muttered those two words: 'I'm gay.' There have been countless occasions when I've told my story to an audience and, in return, asked others how they stepped out of the closet and into the unknown. It's a rite of passage for gay people to experience, and hopefully come out the other end a stronger, more rounded person.

For me, I have a complex history surrounding coming out. I had two major coming-out experiences – work and family – but also whenever I worked somewhere new or with different soldiers. When I'm asked, when did you come out? I can't just say, 'When I was eighteen and in the Household Cavalry.' I have to say, 'Which time do you mean? Initially? To my folks? To my friends? When I arrived in Iraq? Every time I've stood up in front of a classroom of soldiers?'

But the most traumatic of all these occasions was by far the morning I told Mum that her baby boy was actually dating men and not, as I'd made out for a long time, women.

I woke up on that Sunday morning thinking about seeing Thom and our date on the golf course. I remembered that he'd

said there'd be friends with him... It wasn't just going to be the two of us. I had slightly mixed feelings about this. It was pressure on top of more pressure: seeing Thom again, being introduced to his friends, being exposed as a terrible golf player, probably talking about my job to strangers for hours and then coming home, without getting any time to myself with him. Maybe I was just over-analysing everything. Maybe I should relax a little and go with the flow.

It was another bright day and as I was rising, Mum called me down for breakfast. The three of us ate away while Radio 2 played in the background.

'I'm heading out again today, Mum.' She quickly lifted her head and looked at me.

'Where are you off today? Are you seeing your new friend again?'

'Yes, we're going to play golf.' I'd already told her more than I wanted to.

'Golf! You can't play golf!' She was right, I couldn't at all.

'Well, it wasn't really my idea to be honest.' She nodded and seemed to be settled with the snippet of information I'd fed her.

About twelve months before, something happened between Mum and me that could have cleared everything up. Indeed, it's amazing it didn't. When I joined the army, we were told from the start to continue having our private mail sent home. The army's postal service isn't very well known for its efficiency, so it was generally agreed it was best to have things sent home rather than risk it getting lost in the service mail system. Everything that needed to get to me was sent to my mum's. Mum enjoyed this very much as she'd phone and tell me off for spending too much money or being overdrawn.

I used to bank with HSBC and monthly they'd send out a statement pointing out how little or, in my case, how very much I'd spent over the previous rolling thirty-day period.

One evening as I was pottering around my little room in the barracks before heading out, my phone rang. It was Mum calling me from Phil's mobile, a very normal occurrence. As soon as I answered the call I could tell she was a little anxious.

Mum began by telling me my bank statement had arrived and that I'd been spending far too much of my wages too early in the month. But this was all background information, what she really wanted to know was something else...

'You're spending a lot of money in somewhere called Gay, James.'

I couldn't believe I'd been so careless. I couldn't believe I'd been using my credit card at the bar, practically outing myself in my bank statement. How had I been so silly?

Wonderfully, HSBC had very kindly decided to take the hyphens out of G-A-Y; what Mum was now reading was line after line of the word 'GAY'.

GAY 5.99

GAY 10.99

GAY 6.50

GAY 9.00

On the spot I made up some terrible lie that Dean, whom she knew well, had recently announced his sexuality and that I was supporting him by joining him in G-A-Y every now and again. Incredibly, she bought it. I was surprised she was so accepting of my poor excuse. But she did; I was off the hook.

How very different things would have been if the news had been dealt with back then. It'd be old news. Going on a date with a guy would be quite the norm and Mum would've completely understood.

About an hour later I was putting the finishing touches to my hair before making the walk to the golf club, which was just

through the country park at the bottom of the village. Phil had gone to the shop to buy his Sunday papers and Mum was beginning her ironing in the living room. As I put my jacket on, she shouted me into the living room.

'Will you tell me who this young lady is, James?' I was gutted Phil wasn't in to dampen her quizzing flames. She had a slight smile on her face and I felt more love for her that very second than I'd ever felt for her in my life. I knew the answer to her question would hurt her deeply.

'I've told you, Mum, I'll tell you when I'm ready!' In an instant the smile went off her face. She was upset. She sat down on the chair and started to cry. I'll never forget how upset she seemed at that very moment.

'As long as you've been alive, James, you've never kept a secret from me. You've never hidden something away like this!' Seeing her so upset with me was hard to deal with. I hated, as do all sons, seeing my mum cry. Why couldn't I just tell her the name of the girl I was dating? That's all she wanted to know, but because I wasn't offering that very basic bit of information, she'd concluded that the truth was something much worse.

'Is it someone I know? Is she a lot older than you? Is it your brother's ex-girlfriend, Claire?'

She was going all out; her mind had clearly been running away with her. I had to tell her she was wrong. In the commotion of it all, it happened. I told her the truth.

'I'm gay, Mum. I'm gay.'

The tears stopped and she paused. The entire house was silent. Slowly her head began to sink downwards. Then she started crying again.

'No. Please God... no!'

'His name's Thomas... I really like him.'

'And how old is he?' I found it incredible that this was the very

next question she asked me. I couldn't understand what relevance Thom's age was to the news I'd just told her. She clearly expected him to be much older.

'He's seventeen, Mum. He's not some old man that's tricked me into fancying him. He's a hairdresser in town.' This final piece of information was little help.

'Oh of course he is.' She carried on crying and I considered giving her a hug, but I just couldn't. In my heart of hearts, I honestly thought my mum would have accepted the news and followed it up with 'I knew all along'. But she hadn't. She was devastated by what I'd told her. I zipped my jacket up and left to meet Thom. I left her crying in the living room, next to a pile of ironing and all alone. It was a horrible experience.

Heading down the hill I felt like a zombie. The previous year, when I'd come out to my friends in London, I'd felt exhilarated. This was wholly the opposite. I felt traumatised. I'd had the closest of relationships with Mum all my life and now I felt like it was all over. I'd ended it by telling her the truth.

My mobile phone rang. It was my sister, Liza.

'Hiya, baby! Are you OK? I've just had mother on the phone.'

As always, Mum had picked up the phone and called her daughter immediately, probably still crying, telling her about 'what I've done now'.

'James, I love you very much. And she does too, but you have to give her time. I've told her off for what she's said to you!'

Liza and I have always been close. It was Liza who used to mind me constantly as a boy. Mum was at work, Dad was cleaning windows or drinking in the pub, Liza would look after me all the time. Ten years my senior, she's acted as the natural link between me, my adolescence and my parents. In 1997 she gave birth to her daughter, Chloe, who I'm godfather to. Chloe is my most favourite person in the world.

On the phone at that very moment, I couldn't believe I'd not told Liza about who I really was. If there was anyone in the world who'd have supported me from the start, it was her. I sat on a bench beside a small walkway surrounded by trees. Liza reminded me how much she and Chloe loved me and said her goodbyes, promising to call me later in the day to see how I was feeling.

In the loneliness of my surroundings, and the stresses of the morning's events, I finally allowed myself to cry. I was crying because at no point in my life had I ever upset my mum to the extent I just had. I cried because I'd allowed myself to live a lie, digging a hole deeper and deeper every time I'd chatted with her on the phone and said I was dating a girl. I cried because, at that very moment, it felt like my own mum didn't love me or accept me for who I was.

The entire event made coming out to the boys in the army a year before a walk in the park in comparison. For a little while that day, I felt I'd lost my mum. Looking back, I am more sympathetic to my mum than I was that sunny Sunday morning. Mothers have a natural way of planning a son's life out, almost to the letter. She had envisaged me marrying the woman of my dreams at a huge military wedding. She'd planned children and grandchildren. In an instant I'd ripped all those hopes apart by saying two little words. Of course it was a shock.

I arrived at the golf club a little late and a little flustered. This was only the second time Thom and I had met and I worried that my swollen eyes would give away the events of the morning.

Thom introduced me to his friends: Jo, his lifelong best friend; Eleanor, who was also a school friend of his; and Sophie. Sophie had her boyfriend with her, who was a boy I'd been in school with – John. He'd had no idea I was gay so I was a little startled by his presence but he shook off the news almost immediately and was far more interested in my time in the army than anything else.

The company and general feel of the group was a huge contrast to how I'd left my parents' house a little while earlier. Here I was accepted, there I was not.

I was the world's worst golfer but Thom was a bit of a pro – well, compared to me anyway. As we progressed, we'd share the odd moment while he coached me over a shot. In the end I was glad to be so useless. The two hours spent on the course that afternoon were invaluable to my coping with what had gone on at home. It helped take my mind off things slightly and, by just being in the company of a guy I was really into, it made me realise that I had done the right thing in telling Mum.

At the end we all grabbed a Pepsi and chilled out at the clubhouse. I mentioned to Thom that I'd made a little announcement to my mum before coming along and that I'd left her alone to deal with it. He smiled and grabbed my hand. Telling me everything was going to be fine, I realised right then that Thom was very special. I'd never felt the way I did right then.

As we readied ourselves to leave, my phone rang again. This time it was 'Phil Mobile'. I drew a deep breath.

'James, I want you to know how much your mother and I love you!'

I don't remember much more about the conversation other than those important few words. For a man who'd entered my life quite late on, I was lucky to have a father figure like him. I was also lucky to have a man in my mum's life who could pick her up and point her in the right direction when things got on top of her. I thanked him and told him I'd be staying with Liza that night. I couldn't face going home and trying to play happy families. I called Liza back and told her I was coming over to stay.

I used to stay with Liza often while I was growing up after she'd bought her own house soon after Chloe was born. It was, for all essential purposes, my second home. I had my own things

there when I was a teenager and, though I'd left home and joined the army, it still felt like a haven to me.

That night, while having a takeaway, Liza's 'coming-out treat', I fully absorbed all of the day's activities, from waking in the morning and feeling excited about seeing Thom, to leaving my mother in a state of breakdown after telling her the truth; the crazy contrast only an hour later while playing golf with Thom and feeling very relaxed in his company, to crying with my sister about the years of secrecy I'd put myself through growing up with my hidden sexuality. It was a whirlwind of a day and one I will never forget. The most notable moment of the entire day, however, was that Thom and I shared our first proper kiss at the end of our golf date. It had become clear to me what I now wanted. I wanted Thom in my life. More so, I realised that he wanted me.

The remaining days of my week off were spent mostly giving Mum as wide a berth as possible. I'd seen her on the Wednesday after my announcement for coffee at the house but hadn't stayed long. By then I could tell she'd begun to accept the news.

I saw her again the day after and agreed to spend the night at the house, but was out most of the evening with Thom. The whole process was very gradual. By the time Sunday afternoon arrived and, of course, my return to London, she'd plucked up enough courage to cook me a roast dinner and sit me down for a mother-to-son chat.

I'm not sure what exactly motivated Mum's change of heart in the short space of a week. Maybe it was our closeness and the worry of never regaining our special relationship. Maybe it was the fact that I had already left home and could quite easily exist in the army if she didn't accept who I really was. As tragic as it sounds, it wasn't as if she could kick me out.

Whatever the reason, I'm sure Phil and Liza had spoken to her

constantly throughout the week; she'd turned her emotions and behaviour around completely within seven days. She gave me the tightest, longest hug that afternoon before waving me goodbye and, more surprising yet, demanded I introduce her to Thom at the very earliest opportunity. When that would be, I didn't know.

I'd said farewell to Thom the evening before. Thom had introduced me to his mum and dad, both of whom I found extremely nice and very likeable. I just hoped they thought the same about me. We spoke a lot about the army, what exactly I did and how I'd found things. It was great to share some common ground with them. We enjoyed a dinner then Thom and I headed out alone to say our goodbyes. I wasn't sure when I'd next be off work long enough to warrant a journey all the way to North Wales. I told Thom and he understood. I really didn't want to return to London and leave him behind.

After a couple of red wines, I walked him home, hand in hand. As we said our goodbyes I asked Thom if he thought we were a couple and he kissed me and said yes. I had my boyfriend. And I'd found him in the last place I ever thought I'd fall in love, the very place I'd grown up hiding who I really was.



I returned to work after my week-long leave feeling refreshed and ready to take on the coming months of the summer silly season. On the first day back, I familiarised myself with the forecast of events and realised just how very busy the Blues and Royals would be leading up to summer leave; an awkward three months away. Would it be that long until I saw Thom again?

It was quite a challenge switching back on to my duties and the way of life that goes with being a ceremonial soldier. I was to go on Queen's Life Guard the following morning and I had no

kit at all prepared for the duty. Faulkner helped me out by lending me most of his kit which was, as always, immaculate. This was quite a normal occurrence among the boys, although officially forbidden. Throughout the day and the weeks that followed, I was distracted by Thom almost constantly, whether it be by text message, phone call or the memories of the things we'd got up to over the course of our seven days together.

The first major parade of the season was usually the Major General's Parade in Hyde Park, when the major general inspects the regiment prior to commencing the ceremonial calendar. The grand parade is a giant of a spectacle for any passer-by who's lucky enough to witness the proceedings first-hand. It's also the one occasion that 'unseats' more riders out of the saddle than any other.

I sunk my teeth into preparing for this important parade. It slightly took my mind off Thom, whom I was missing already. I worried about when I'd next get to spend time with him.

As the parade drew nearer, news got around the barracks that the colonel was allowing us a regimental stand-down once the Major General's Parade was out of the way, before picking up the momentum again for the Queen's Birthday Parade. It meant that I'd get a long weekend off and therefore enough time to visit Thom. The catch was we all had to turn out immaculately and ride brilliantly in front of the general. We had our carrot and everybody set about their business with conviction.

I didn't head out into Soho at all in the fortnight leading up to Major General's. I enjoyed a few nights in the bar on camp or across the street in the Paxton's Head pub with Faulkner and the boys, but at no point considered returning to my old habits. I associated unhappiness with the clubbing scene and I didn't want to be sucked back into the pattern of late nights and early mornings. I didn't want to be chatting to Thom on the phone

with a stinking hangover from a Soho late night, not now he was my boyfriend. I certainly didn't want to run the risk of meeting another guy while out on the scene.

I told Thom about my pending long weekend off and we hastily made plans for our time together. We spoke about going shopping in Chester, about me meeting more of his friends and us all going out for dinner and drinks. I just thought about seeing him and spending time together, perhaps at the cinema.

When I told Mum I was heading back to North Wales in a couple of weeks' time, she reminded me about meeting Thom and how important it was for her to have him over for dinner. I told her, although I'd already agreed to her wishes previously, that it might not be the best idea. What if she wasn't really ready to sit and have dinner with her gay son and his boyfriend? What if she started crying? But she was very firm. I was to bring Thom for dinner on the Friday night.

I really didn't fancy the whole thing. I was worried from the off about the meeting and more so for Thom. He'd only heard fairly bad things from me about Mum. He'd only known me for a little over two weeks and in the time we'd started to fall in love I'd come out to my mum. It's amazing he didn't run a mile.

I didn't phone home as often as I used to after my announcement. Although I knew that I was very loved, I thought it best to let the dust settle a little before reappearing and introducing my boyfriend. I didn't want to find myself answering questions over the phone about my secret life and the things I'd been doing since being in London. In work I'd answered enough questions about being gay from the other boys; I didn't fancy setting myself up for the same conversations with my folks or my brother and sister. I knew the time would come when I'd have to answer some questions, but that time wasn't yet. And it certainly wasn't over the phone.

After days of endless rehearsing in the park, the morning of the Major General's Parade dawned and we all, the entire regiment, hurried about our business. I was riding my favourite horse, Quality Street, and we both looked very smart waiting for the general to ride past, looking over us as he did. The parade wasn't like any other. We'd usually sit and look pretty, or trot in front of or behind the Queen. Major General's was when we collectively showed off our equine abilities as a regiment. The culmination of the parade was an advance as a regiment in canter; basically a cavalry charge towards the major general before stopping at once and presenting him with a general salute. When pulled off correctly, there was nothing more impressive. That day we nailed it: the general was delighted with us all and naturally so was the colonel. I was heading home for the weekend! Quality Street was turned in, groomed and bedded down for the day straight after we'd dismounted; I had a train to catch.

Sat in Euston waiting to depart, I felt the stress of the previous two weeks' workload disappear. Indeed, it felt like I'd worked hard enough to warrant an entire month off, and this was only the start. The following weekend we'd be thrown deep into the first rehearsal for the Queen's Birthday Parade – the Trooping of the Colour, the most important parade of the year. I'd coped better than I had before with the crazy workload the Household Cavalry placed upon its men. I'd had a clear goal: I had to be well turned out and ride correctly with sureness, or I'd lose my weekend off with Thom. This was the first time in what seemed like ages that I could just sit down and do nothing but relax for three hours in the middle of the day.

A week before, when I'd told Thom my mum wanted to meet him on the Friday night, he'd said he was fine with it all, although I could sense the change in his voice and I realised that I was putting him into a situation he wouldn't be comfortable in. After

a movie-style reunion in North Wales, we discussed the following evening's events. Thom was dreading meeting my mum, but he knew he'd have to sooner or later. I felt the same but wanted to look as if I was calm about the whole thing, hopefully instilling confidence in Thom.

We made a plan to meet each other on the Friday afternoon in the town centre, then make our way to my mum's for the dinner. I didn't want Thom to have to make an entrance alone. I wanted to arrive with him and, if needed, calm him a little before the big introduction. I headed home late that night, deliberately waiting for my folks to go to bed to avoid any uncomfortable conversation.

The weather on the Friday was again hot. It had been brilliantly sunny for what seemed like months. When we met in the town centre, at the bar we'd had our very first date at a month before, I noticed Thom had glammed up for the occasion and looked very smart. I joked that he'd put more effort into meeting my mum than he'd done for me on our first date. We polished off a bottle of wine to calm our nerves and headed for the bus, neither of us chatting very much as we went. The whole thing felt very ominous.

Thom was certain he wanted to make the best impression possible, understandably, so we got off our bus a few stops short in order to buy a bottle of wine. Walking the few streets towards Mum and Phil's we chatted a little more and kept each other amused, taking our minds off the stresses of what was about to happen. I was so nervous. These days I remember how nervous we were and wonder how nervous Mum must have felt too. It was a very new thing for her to get used to.

As we walked and chatted, something ahead of us caught my eye. Soon Thom had spotted it too and made a remark. A small figure could be seen sitting on the pavement. At first I thought it was a homeless person, sipping on a bottle of whisky or

something, but as we got closer, the realisation of what we were both seeing dawned upon me. I was utterly devastated to be looking at my dad sat drunkenly on the side of the road.

I couldn't believe it. I considered for a second crossing the road and passing by as if he was just a stranger to me, but I automatically hurried my step to get to him and help. Thom looked at me, a little surprised by my reaction.

'That's my dad, Thom.'

Dad was in a mess. I hated myself for not being there for him, for not preventing this from happening. Thom didn't really know what to say or do, and hovered around my father and me as I dragged him to his feet. At the back of my mind I considered just what he must have been thinking. How could my family seem so dysfunctional in comparison to his?

Dad slurred a surprised greeting to me and I noticed some of the neighbours staring out of their windows. I walked the short distance to his flat with him cuddled into my shoulder.

I didn't want Thom to come into his flat with me; I didn't know what state it would be in. I worried that he might leave while I was putting my dad to bed but when I got back he was still stood there, very patiently and wearing a warm smile. I still felt totally humiliated.

On reflection, I wish I'd have done something more. I wish I'd have picked up the phone and called Liza and told her enough was enough. It was already past the stage of danger for Dad, he was visibly close to the end, but right then, with Thom on his way to meet my mum for the first time and the stress that I was under with that, I didn't act upon the situation. I left Dad in his flat, in a highly drunken, uncontrollable state, and made my way to dinner. It's the biggest regret of my life.

As I rang the doorbell, we both drew a deep breath. Could it get any worse?

Mum answered the door with an extremely graceful and welcoming greeting and ushered us both in. I was immediately taken aback by how fabulous she looked. She looked like she was on her way to a posh restaurant or the theatre. She'd really dressed up for the occasion. It was the first time she'd ever set eyes on Thom and I could see she was surprised by how he looked. To this day I don't know what she expected, but I guess it was something quite different from what she found.

Thom acted, as you'd expect, fairly quietly and was very well mannered. Everyone was acting on the whole 'first impressions' thing. I'll never forget how it felt to be sat in the dining room at Mum and Phil's that night, the pictures of me in my uniform surrounding us on the wall, and my boyfriend beside me, me holding his hand under the table and squeezing it occasionally in reassurance.

I guess, and certainly when I think back to the whole coming out to my parents situation, the rest is pretty much history. Mum took to Thom. Thom took to Mum. The disastrous meeting of my drunk father earlier on in the day brought us closer together in a way; our first crisis, if you like. We spent the rest of the weekend in a lovers' bliss; lots of laughs and lots of hugs and kisses. By the time I had to catch my train from Chester on the Sunday afternoon, I felt that Thom and I would be together forever. I was gutted to be leaving him, but excited at the same time for the future. Life was going to be alright!