

“Vivian Fransen has written an honest and brave story. Like all well-told love stories, the reader falls in love, too. We flounder to find our footing when her perfect marriage is suddenly upended, and throughout her journey to wholeness, we are reminded that human resiliency is perhaps the most divine thing about us.”

—Carolyn S. Briggs, author of *Higher Ground: A Memoir of Salvation Found and Lost*

“The struggles between a gay husband and a straight spouse are so painful because, in most cases, the love between the two partners still exists. This memoir is written from the heart, is honest, shows empathy, and ultimately provides hope, which is something every straight spouse desperately needs.”

—Francine Barbetta, PsyD, author of *A Pebble In His Shoe: The Diary Of A Straight Spouse*, website: drbarbetta.com

“Vivian Fransen’s honest and touching memoir of her process in experiencing her spouse’s coming out as a gay man demonstrates levels of insight that can be immeasurably helpful to anyone in a similar situation. Her chronicle leads the reader from an alcohol-influenced disclosure through the pain and confusion of disentangling from love and an unpromising relationship. Vivian writes this with an emotional intelligence infused with growing clarity and compassion for her husband and herself. It will be my go-to recommendation for those experiencing such a challenging life experience.”

—Chuck Rhoades, PhD

“With vivid and lively prose, Vivian Fransen has written an honest memoir of her marriage with all its love, complexity, and surprising turns. As her husband begins to come to grips with being gay, Fransen takes the reader on the difficult journey of the straight spouse. As a pastor, I know this book will be useful to clergy in helping Christian couples facing this complicated reality and to straight spouses who want to know they can find help and hope.”

—Rev. Cynthia Cochran-Carney, Presbyterian pastor

“In a no-holds-barred memoir, Vivian Fransen details the ways her world is rocked when her husband discloses that he might be gay. She expresses emotions ranging from shock and fear to self-doubt, vulnerability, anger, resignation, determination, and humor as she journeys toward new love and reconnection with her Christian faith.”

—Melanie Davis, PhD, author of *Look Within: A Woman's Journal*, website: melaniedavisphd.com

“This is a must-read for anyone experiencing the shock of a partner coming out as gay. Ms. Fransen's very personal story is filled with her pain, her questioning of her own worth, her survival, and her eventual growth and triumph. It is inspirational and heartwarming, yet a reality that is not uncommon in our fast-changing society.”

—Constance M. Bowes, PhD, human sexuality therapist, website: trans-itions.com

The Straight Spouse: A Memoir

By Vivian Fransen



Open Door Publications

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Note to Reader: This book is a work of creative nonfiction based on how the author remembers the sequence and content of events. The names of people (except the author's name) have been changed, as have some identifying details and place names.

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To my nieces, nephews, and godchildren
when they ask,
“What really happened to Aunt Vee Vee back then?”
and my therapist, “Dr. Barley,”
with never-ending gratitude for being my lifeline
throughout my journey of despair
and putting Humpty Dumpty back together again
with a renewed zest for living life to its fullest

“Dare to declare who you are. It is not far from the shores of silence to the boundaries of speech. The path is not long, but the way is deep. You must not only walk there, you must be prepared to leap.”

—Author Unknown (often erroneously attributed to Hildegard of Bingen [1098-1179])

Preface

“Let me in,” you say, as if a simple flick of the wrist will release the deadbolt lock so I can swing the door wide open.

No, in my case, the door is monstrously heavy, built to be impenetrable and now so warped, with hinges rusted and seized over time, I can barely budge it. Do you have a crowbar? Perhaps you can push while I pull with all my might. Or maybe there’s another way. Is there a window to crawl through?

Oh, you want to be in the same room as my feelings? That room is in the darkest, most unkempt, and rundown corner of the house, full of cobwebs, broken furniture, and rancid odors. Keep out. Danger zone: Wear hard hats at all times. You see, with me it’s all about mind over feelings. Minimize feelings at all cost; they only get in the way. You know, not every woman is a gushing fountain of emotions.

Let’s go in anyhow? If you insist. And only because I somehow trust you not to declare me a hopeless mess.

Chapter 1

My marriage began to fall apart in the wee hours of the morning after St. Patrick's Day 1990.

Neither Irish nor Catholic, Victor Locatelli—my husband of nearly 12 years—and I had embraced the spirit of the holiday earlier that night as a childfree couple in our 30s. We wore shamrock green shirts with comfortable jeans and made sure we had a hearty stock of wine and hard liquor in the house.

“It feels great to have a weekend at home without any job or social commitments,” said Victor, pouring a third glass of Merlot for me and a chaser of Jack Daniel's for himself. “No stress and no hassles.”

I agreed. I wanted to unwind, relax, and have fun together. I had a million things on my mind and was trying to shake off the uneasy feeling I had about our disturbing conversation two days earlier.

“Remember last year when we decided to hang out with my friends from work at the Irish pub?” I asked, sitting down on my side of the loveseat next to our terrier mutt, Champ—a Toto lookalike from *The Wizard of Oz* movie. “No more corned beef and cabbage served with those never-ending mugs of green beer. I like staying in, safe and sound, without worrying about drunk drivers.”

“And now that I finally quit smoking, I don't want to be around all those bar crawlers smoking their brains out,” he said, fidgeting with his shot glass as if silently calculating how to pace his drinking to maximize the buzz.

Victor stepped over to the stereo, watched the arm of the automatic record changer swing back to release the next album from the stack of LPs on the turntable, and then cranked up the

volume of the Robert Cray album he had recently bought. He sang along with the lyrics of “The Forecast Calls for Pain” as he settled himself into the high-back easy chair facing the log burning in the fireplace.

“Man, that’s great songwriting,” he said. “It makes me want to grab my guitar and write a new song of my own.”

“Ah, I love to hear you play, especially all those love songs you composed about me,” I said, longing to recapture the early days in our relationship when we were going to college together in New England during the mid-1970s.

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Our relationship was so fluid and easy way back then, grooving to the music of John Denver’s *Windsong* and Carole King’s *Tapestry*. Victor and I struck up a friendship early in our sophomore year at a Bible college when I was making adjustments in my social life. Allison, my roommate and best friend, had recently abandoned her education as a music major because of her personal tug-of-war between developing her singing voice and smoking cigarettes. Instead of returning to college, she decided to live at home with her parents and take an entry-level job at an insurance company. Allison was also the “first serious girlfriend” of lovestruck Victor, who was trying to pick up the pieces after she dumped him over the summer. She told me she broke up with him because she preferred a taller boyfriend as a dance partner so she could wear shoes with higher heels.

During our first year of college, I sometimes tagged along when Allison and Victor were together—crossing the street at all hours to be off campus “for smokes” (even though I was a nonsmoker) or studying for a test or playing cards or singing Jesus songs together with our commuter student friend Marty, who lived in an apartment with his wife and baby daughter. Allison was a statuesque woman with long black hair and a keen sense of fashion. (Picture a size 12 version of Marlo Thomas in the 1960s TV sitcom *That Girl*—with more

curves and cleavage.) She had a sort of edgy attitude about life and was often the object of male attention.

At the risk of being expelled from college, Allison and I sometimes drank rum-and-Diet-Pepsi concoctions in our dorm room and took excursions to a local nightclub for whiskey sours. I was a bookworm and wallflower with fantasies of someday undergoing an ugly-duckling-to-swan metamorphosis, clueless about developing an attractive appearance and consoling myself with such mantras as “I prefer to nurture my inner beauty.” Adopting the librarian look with my Peter Pan-collared blouses, smock-style clothes, and practical Mary Jane shoes, I admired Allison for her sophistication and how Victor went out of his way to cater to her in every way he could.

Our shared loss of Allison provided common ground for bonding when Victor and I returned to college in September 1975. As our friendship grew stronger, we flirted with the notion of becoming a couple. After our first awkward kiss in the dark at Cana Pond, we started to fall in love.

Victor had thick brown hair, expressive brown eyes, a clear complexion, and an infectious laugh, along with a boyish rascal look. His features reminded me of Dustin Hoffman in *The Graduate*—quite a package for me and my country girl from Vermont ways.

Victor was my first and only boyfriend; I was incredulous with the notion that somebody could actually love me. I was anticipating a life as a spinster; I didn’t think I would ever find a man who would love me unconditionally, “just as I am.” Every day I praised God for Victor, a marvelous gift from a loving God.

Much to my dismay, Allison and I drifted apart when she discovered I was romantically involved with Victor. Even though she had put him in her discard pile, it was too unsettling knowing we were intimate with the same guy. (I had never heard the popular wisdom, “Thou shalt not date thy roommate’s ex-boyfriend”—something that doesn’t show up in the student orientation manual at a Bible college.)

Victor and I spent every moment we possibly could together, inextricably linked, walking hand in hand, from our first morning class—eating meals together, working as Food Service employees in the cafeteria together, attending or skipping chapel together, studying together—until midnight curfew when we returned to our separate sleeping quarters. We shared our deepest secrets and wildest dreams. Finding solace in sharing insights about our experiences growing up in dysfunctional families, we spent hours discussing self-help books, such as *I'm OK—You're OK* by Thomas Harris, MD, and *How to Be Your Own Best Friend* by Mildred Newman, Bernard Berkowitz, and Jean Owen.

We were soul mates. We read the Bible together and prayed together. We enjoyed an active sex life (no intercourse until we became engaged because we believed that was God's plan for our lives) and were discreet enough to avoid the embarrassment and negative consequences of being caught by college authorities. A muscular, rock-solid man with a magnetic personality, Victor made me feel like the most cherished woman on the planet with his adoring eyes and masterful lovemaking.

After saving our money from summer employment and various part-time jobs while attending college, we planned, orchestrated, and paid for every detail of our wedding, which we held two weeks after we graduated. We exchanged our vows at a seaside church, reciting our carefully chosen words from memory without any prompts from the young minister who officiated our wedding. Inspired by Art Garfunkel's recording of "I Only Have Eyes for You," we claimed it as our love song. We stared with dreamy eyes at each other during our first dance as bride and groom at our wedding reception held in a fancy hotel. Victor wrote our wedding song, which was performed as part of our wedding ceremony by our good friend Marty, who played the guitar and sang these lyrics:

Lord, we come in your presence  
Two lovers for you to behold  
Bowing down, Lord, please hear our prayer  
That we would cherish and care forevermore  
That we would cherish and care forevermore

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“Hey, there,” said Victor, rising up from across the room and making his best effort to sound like David Bowie. “Ground Control to Major Tom. You ready for another glass of wine?”

“No, thanks. I’m still working on this one.”

“Oh, come on,” he teased, as he poured himself a tall glass of Jack Daniel’s and added some ice cubes from the freezer. “You’re no fun. You’re not going to let me drink alone, are you?”

“Okay, bring it on. Let’s drink the night away.”

As I held my glass of wine by the bowl, not the stem, for a greater sense of security to avoid any spills, I gazed up at the wood beams supporting the cathedral ceiling of our family room. This was our favorite space in the seven-room townhome we had recently purchased (with a generous loan from Victor’s parents to help with the down payment) in Somerset County, New Jersey, after living in rentals our entire married life.

Listening to Sting sing “If You Love Somebody, Set Them Free,” I had an odd feeling about the lyrics, something I could no longer ignore. Did Victor feel trapped these days? I found myself reconstructing the conversation Victor had started two days earlier. Cold sober, he had asked me how I would feel about having an open marriage. He insisted our marriage was strong enough to handle such an arrangement, and he wanted me to be open to the possibility should his “self-growth” warrant it.

I had felt a stab of hurt feelings but quickly dismissed them, and then silently questioned myself: Did I do something wrong? Was I not paying enough attention to him? Was he

looking for more excitement in our sex life? Why would he even consider an open marriage?

“Absolutely not!” I had declared. “Are you crazy? Infidelity is a betrayal of our marriage vows. No way! Is this your way of telling me you aren’t happy in our marriage anymore?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. Never mind. Forget I ever mentioned it.”

“Are you seeing someone else?”

“No, there isn’t any ‘someone else,’” said Victor in a sad voice. “I was just thinking. But I see you’re not gonna budge on this. So never mind. End of conversation.”

Then he had stormed out of the room and retreated to spend the evening upstairs in what we call our Things-To-Do room—a place full of yet-to-be-read books and magazines, musical instruments, games, hobbies, and a desk for sorting through the mail, paying the bills, and handling all our household paperwork. I dutifully dropped the subject, preferring to pretend his words were some sort of temporary insanity that would simply disappear.

But that conversation two days earlier was still on my mind. Strains from Fine Young Cannibals blasting “She Drives Me Crazy” from the stereo shook me out of my reverie. Victor looked quite intoxicated, slumped down in his chair, and I was inebriated, too. I took Champ outside the back door to pee and returned to the loveseat, poised for confrontation.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about all this talk about open marriage,” I said, twirling a clump of my shoulder-length blonde hair with my index finger. “We need to talk about what’s going on with you. I need you to be totally honest with me.”

“Oh, come on. Let’s not go there tonight. We’re having a party.”

“But I really need to know,” I said, feeling empowered in my wine-fueled state. “If you’re not happy with me anymore, we need to talk about it.”

“Trust me. You really don’t want to know what’s going on with me,” he mumbled.

“Of course I do. You are the love of my life!”

“Like I said, you really don’t want to know.”

“Stop saying that,” I said, making direct eye contact with him. “I’ll keep nagging you about this so come clean now. You ask me about having an open marriage and then drop the subject? I’m not stupid. Something’s going on, and you need to tell me.”

Paul Simon’s “50 Ways to Leave Your Lover” started playing on the stereo.

“By the way, under the circumstances, this is not my idea of party music,” I said, standing up to turn down the volume.

“You are so sensitive, Vivian. You’re always reading way more meaning into every word. You’re always analyzing every detail. You just don’t know how to let things go.”

“Let things go? We’re talking about our marriage, the only real constant in our lives. Nothing could be more important to me than you.”

“We all make sacrifices in life. As Mick Jagger sings, ‘you can’t always get what you want’ and all that.”

“What can that possibly mean? You think fidelity’s a sacrifice? That’s ridiculous. I don’t know what’s happened to you, Victor. Have you lost your mind? And enough already with all the song lyrics.”

“The truth is that I still haven’t found what I’m looking for.”

I paused, feeling uncertain, confused, and afraid about what else Victor had to say. “What do you mean? You found me! You have someone who loves you to pieces, no matter what, forever and ever, amen.”

“You aren’t the problem,” said Victor. “I’m the problem.”

“So tell me about it,” I said, leaning in toward him. “Have you met someone special at work?” That’s all I could figure out because we were always together except when we were both at work.

“I already told you,” he said, taking a swig of his drink. “I’m not seeing anyone. I don’t have any extracurricular activities.”

“It must be another woman. You have to tell me. I need to know.”

“Listen to me,” he spoke slowly and slurred his words. “You never, ever, have to worry about me being with another woman. That will never happen. What you do have to worry about is me being with another man.”

I stared at him, stunned and unable to accept the gravity of his words. The music stopped. I sat still, barely breathing. Was this some sort of cruel joke? It was too outrageous to be true.

“A man, not another woman?” It seemed impossible that my Italian stud husband could even think about having sex with a man. “No problem, I’ll just go for a sex change operation,” I joked.

“I’m serious. And I can’t believe I just told you this. I must be really drunk.”

I watched as he staggered out of his chair and stumbled up the stairs, too wasted to do anything except pass out on the bed.