

James Connatser, Jr.

## THE F-WORD

I've been called a faggot since the third grade. I've had the word hurled at me from passing cars, from football fans while I marched with the color guard. From my two younger brothers, from my grandfather, the kids at school, my mother. I got my first job when I was fifteen—I served coffee at the local café—and my boss, I think her name was Kathy, replaced my name tag with one that said *fag boy*. I remember slipping through the backdoor wondering *how the fuck did she know?* and walking four miles in the cold, too embarrassed to call home. And once at the bank, I couldn't cash some guy's check. No account. He threw his pen, shouted *goddamned faggot*, grabbed his kid by the wrist, left swearing. When the gays picketed the state house, protesting the potential ban on gay marriage, busses drove by with signs that read *No marriage for fags! Fags are going to burn. God hates fags*. And there was me in a tank top and Armani jeans, standing in the front lines with my own sign: *I'm just a skinny little faggot, what are you all afraid of?* I never had so many people want to take my photo. Even Mystery, a big, black drag queen, halted and said, "Honey, you are fabulous, and I do not use the f-word lightly."