DEMURRING

Ilene Alexander

"IT'S JUST ONE of life's little ironies," Jim told me.

His voice was even, his eyes confronted mine. He leaned against the bar and let his elbow rest on the edge, his left hand curled, thumb and forefinger tugging at the end of his moustache. I fixed my eyes on the spoon ring, watching the rhythm of this familiar tic, hoping the movement would pull words from his mouth.

Nothing.

I slipped from my bar stool, stood close to my friend, circled my arms under his letter jacket and leaned my face against the cool leather arms. Jim and I had never been this quiet. We'd sprinkled a decade of conversations with "darlings" and giggles and gossip and great huge laughs. Or we'd focus in on "real stuff"—Jim's suggestions for decoding my dreams and his questions about politics and plans for political activism. We'd not lapsed into silence.

But then, Jim had never before told me he had just tested positive for the AIDS antibody.

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In that time between school breaks we heard from my grandmother regularly; as usual, whatever family upsets had occurred, we didn't hear. That was the sort of information we only learned during visits to Gram's house, face to face. For two months nobody told me that he'd left. And even during one of my long weekends with my grandparents, "Your uncle's moved back to Redondo Beach" is all that I remember hearing. I sensed, from my oldest uncle and grandfather, that we were better off now that "he" was gone. Their authoritative pronouncement overwhelmed me.

For one year Uncle Dick had been the "extra treat" of visits to Gram's house. Most of the time conversations with my youngest uncle enriched my world—we spent afternoons beneath the backyard apple

tree reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Blake or Byron or Whitman, or on the front porch trying to see the details of just one more reproduction of an impressionist painting before my grandfather tuned the radio to WCCO for an evening Twins game. I was barely a teenager, fully in love with images—whether in poems, paintings, songs, or novels—and captivated by my uncle's easy fascination with the world. With that attention I could overlook the biting teasing of cousins and others who believed their words could shrink my "pudgy" body.

In the face of Uncle Dick's absence and a family stance that all was as usual, I told myself that Dick was reintroducing himself to life in Southern California, simply setting up a household, working on a relationship, saving money. I expected postcards saying, "The beach is wonderful. I miss you, and will send a plane ticket so you can visit."

Fifteen years later I still wait for the postcards signed, "Love, Uncle Dick." And I question what to believe about those 1970s months my uncle spent in Minnesota—Was he home to escape someone? or to find something? Was he really a "bad worker"? or was the family uneasy with his "lifestyle"? Sometimes, I wonder if he's ever thought of finding the niece who asked questions but didn't question him. Mostly, I piece together the story of my gay uncle's disappearance, and I understand the years of silence—his, my own.

"Get out of town you god damn queer, or I'll kill you." Words from another family member? Someone told me these words prompted my uncle to leave.

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I am looking for a relative named Edna Grace Stafford and I hear that she once lived in Denver and Omaha, so I send out query letters and hope that I've tapped into the right bureaucratic source. In the meantime my grandmother gives me Edna's address book, which includes a list of her Chicago residences. I send a Colorado friend out to investigate the Denver information, while I spend the last of my summer vacation walking down Ashland and Rogers streets in Chicago.

"What are you looking for?" asks a woman who's watched me walk the block while she unloaded groceries from her car. The bumper stickers endorse "Carter/Mondale" and a local union. I feel at ease approaching her. I explain my wandering as looking for a particular address on a block with no street numbers above the front doors. The woman points me in the right direction, hoists her bags of groceries, and wishes me good luck. I do find several of the apartment buildings where Edna had lived. Though I haven't yet pieced together all the

details of Edna's life, I find traces and evidence of the years from 1900-1967. Edna emerges as an emotionally and economically independent working woman of the 1900s.

Alas, dead ancestors—even those like Edna who are not included in official records and public resources—are infinitely easier to find than one gay man who in the 1970s disappeared somewhere into a California community. I have found, then and now, that I don't have the material resources to draw on for this search. My attempts began with letters, first addressed to the house Uncle Dick had owned—on Curtis Street in Redondo Beach—then to agencies that might help track down if and when the house was sold. For a long time I simply hoped that my uncle would appear; that he would, for example, simply be at my grandfather's funeral. Off and on I would let go of the search, and the hope. As I grew into my own life I would occasionally turn to networks my friends could provide—getting the word out in gay communities, tapping into computer bulletin boards.

Even as I came to understand my uncle's need for independence and identity, I asked the Salvation Army for help in tracking down this missing person. And I wrote to Social Security, sending along an open letter to forward to my uncle. Once, I even thought of sending a dedication to Casey Kasem's Top 40 program.

Nothing. Only nightmares.

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Jim is on the telephone making an appointment with a student who commutes to campus once a week. "Yes, we're in the student union. Don't worry," he says to the anonymous caller, while dragging the phone into the small entry room. "We don't get much traffic on this hallway, and the office door is unmarked," linking his arm through mine and escorting me into his office. He pauses and lights a cigarette. "Yes, we're experienced in counselling the families of gays and lesbians." He looks at me, I imagine that he's probably thinking, "I'm about to begin one of those conversations." He hangs up the phone. His ears are mine.

"My uncle's social security account is 'inactive.'" I continue when Jim shifts to the edge of his chair, "Now it's impossible to trace him through the government computers, I guess." The phone rings again, Jim enters another session on his calendar. I cry, facing the possibility that this "official" disappearance might mean my uncle is dead, or has changed his identity. Another STOP in this search, and it's difficult to conceive of alternative possibilities.

19 September 1984, writing in a small, clothbound journal, I ask, "Do I have any right to intrude on the new life Richard seems to have

created? Am I obsessed? Wrongly focused? Did I offer him no hope that I would be open, caring and damn accepting?" Jim had urged me to move on by understanding what I had gained during the times I spent with my uncle. No more questions, but a search for answers.

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You are dying
and I am writing on this page
because the way to show you
your death
matters
is to
live
my life
—Anne Rickertsen, 11 September 1985

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I would leave my hometown—Jim's hometown—eleven months after Anne brought this fragment of a poem to our writers' group of four women. I would leave first—with two masters degrees, and move to another state just before my 30th birthday. Anne would move to a new city and write a cycle of poems with Jim, who would also move from this hometown after the "city fathers" refused to extend civil rights protections to gays and lesbians. The writers' group, though, would meet for some months before Anne and I moved; in that time, I wrote, finally, about the nightmares I had spoken of only to Jim.

"Dear Richard," the journal entry began. So ordinary, the first few lines orderly and explanatory. Then:

> You are a non-person. Someone whom I can't grasp, throttle or *hold*. I hate wanting you here. . . . I have dreamed about you. In wakeful stares I see you sitting at a table, drinking. Sometimes white wine and we are talking about Van Gogh and Romantic poetry. Other tables are littered with bottles, all empty and in disarray, of beer. . . . Fuck you. How dare you invade my dreams. How dare you invade my days and nights. I have found you in one dream—I run toward you, bounding off the plane and into your outstretched California arms . . . no hug in this embrace, the knife in your fist cuts a traitor's heart into my back and the dream ends. Nightmares that don't go away. Fuck you. How dare you come into my dreams, awake and asleep, to die. How dare you send me hospital dreams, like rose stems and thorns put in a jar to decorate my bedside. How dare you, *you who brought poetry and art to my eyes*, bring dying to my dreams. Send me your self, your dreams, your poems, your art . . . send them as you live your life. Fuck you. Don't die. Send yourself.

I have not lived peacefully with my uncle's absence. But finally I understand that the bitterness of my writing, the intense horror of my dreams has to do with my own fears—fears that as a lesbian my family will want to be rid of me as well.

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Folks say you're bad.
They don't know you.
They only know what they scared of in theirselves.
They own living.
They own dying.
They want you
to hate you.
Me
to hate you
cause they hate
their own selfs.
—Anne Rickertsen, 1986

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As a girl I had carried a stuffed tiger to bed when I was unhappy or scared; of course as an adult I'm not supposed to admit that I still need that childhood reminder of an afternoon spent taking hold of my uncle's hand because the department store was too big. Sometimes I sit with the tiger in my favorite chair, piecing together words, worlds, and ideas. But when the world seems too big, I pick up that darn tiger, crawl into bed, and hug it til I find a way to face whatever situation.

The tiger and I attempted to understand the nightmares. It seems fairly clear to me that the dream images of hospital beds, tubes, and shrouded figure were the stock symbols of sickness and death. And certainly the pink triangle embroidered on the patient's gown was an identifying mark, a scarlet letter of sorts. Maybe years of absence plus the dreams minus the social security account equalled Death. This hospital dream wasn't the only one I'd had; it was, in fact, the introduction to each of four other dreams. Conversations were central to each of these other dreams; my uncle and I talking about our lives, about lovers, poems. And the conversations were in familiar places—a local tavern, the front porch.

The tiger and I have cried over more immediate concerns since my mother called in April 1987 with a medical report about Tracy, my high school classmate: "full-blown AIDS."

Some folks in my hometown were thriving not only on gossip about the gay activist who tested positive, but were chatting openly about the hair stylist (okay, "appearance consultant") with AIDS. My mother, I heard on a far different gossip channel, responded by sending Tracy a "thinking of you" card.

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"It *is* you!" I hear from across the aisle.

I have just spent eight hours on a bus, two hours in a car, four hours

sleeping, and an entire day drinking coffee in an office that had hosted so many conversations of students in women's studies. Sitting in the auditorium, I am ready to be welcomed home, anxious to retreat into the music of a favorite performer and the company of feminist friends.

On this night we have journeyed to this performance for the pleasure of community, and to raise money for Tracy. We had all hoped tonight Tracy would feel well enough to join us, but the AZT tires him out.

Jim is at my elbow, squatting down and whispering in my ear, "Let's have a date." But the house lights fade and I can only nod my answer, hoping we'll meet in the lobby to quibble over where to eat lunch. Yes, I'm thinking, there's so much more I am beginning to understand. About conflicts in my families. About "border disputes"—where fragments of my beliefs, my history, my personality, my community come into frictive contact; about synthesizing "parts" of my life—the seemingly incongruent ones—into a passion for involvement in the world.

I have made the journey across more than the miles between my new home and my hometown, and the measurement is in ideas explored, risks taken, relationships nurtured, relatives understood, friendships begun. More often than not, "talkin' real honest" has moved me along. Talking has captured words for my ideas, words to challenge others' assumptions, words that help explain differences so they won't become divisions.

This has been a journey toward genuinely liking the person I am: lesbian, working class, more rural than urban, educated, and a "humor separatist." ("If we can't laugh, it's not our revolution" is our first motto.)

I lean back in the chair, rest my elbow on the seat beside me, and push my hair back over my ear, grabbing a handful to twist. Throughout the night I have been welcomed home. I will see Tracy in this week. I have talked with Jim at intermission about the end of the dreams. But now I listen closely to Ann Reed:

> We cannot know what you go through, or see through your eyes, but we will surround you the pride undisguised. In any direction, whatever your view, you're taking our love there with you.

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In the 1988 summer I visit a few days with Howard, another uncle, who is dying from cancer, lunch with Jim in a city we both enjoy, return to my home university for a reunion, hide out at Tracy's house for a weekend, tell my mother and a cousin about a class I will teach in the fall— Lesbian Lives in the U.S. But I have not spoken of "it," of

being lesbian, openly with my family, nor have I really been encouraged to do so. I leave for my summer teaching job knowing that I will have to put my fall course together suspecting that I will have to pull the parts of my life together. Even with my parents I reveal only parts of these new understandings, not quite finished with examining this fear that has underscored my life.

Weeks later, at Howard's funeral, I tell the first out-right lie about my public teaching life to those who ask about the next school year—it's Rhetoric again, I tell them. I return to my summer teaching with a feeling that I am the ugly step-cousin. Riding in the car I silently recite the only Emily Dickinson poem I have memorized:

> Much Madness is divinest Sense—
> To a discerning Eye—
> Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
> 'Tis the Majority
> In this, as All, prevail—
> Assent—and you are sane—
> Demur—you're straightway dangerous
> And handled with a Chain—

I keep learning that fine distinction, in word and deed, between the adjective "demure"—quiet and serious, or pretending to be so—and the verb/noun "demur"—to raise objections, an objection raised. And I thrive on cultivating that discerning eye—sometimes astounding, sometimes frustrating those around me.

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In the fifteen years between memorizing Emily Dickinson's poem for a class assignment and writing this essay for my family, I have demurred to racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ageism, abuse, unethical behavior. In the Reagan/Bush era I jokingly tell my mother I fear being legislated an illegal presence. Even in the "liberal academy" I have been able to work as an educator and activist largely because my family has joined in the effort by providing support and sanctuary. These women and men, my parents especially, have a history of attempting to understand my ideas and of accepting the choices I've made. I have been expected and invited to share my life, my friends, and my writing. They have not asked when I'd "settle down"—marry, end school and begin a profession; they have seldom discouraged me from being outspoken and honest.

With this essay, I have begun again to demur, to break at this point from my uncle's script: I shall continue writing in the family book, showing that all of our lives matter. And it feels powerful.

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I think about how to write an ending: Quietly, with a renewed feeling of empowerment? Sentimentally, with the reactions from my Gram, parents, aunts and cousins who have responded across some silence with love and pride? Politically, with an eye toward pedagogical challenges for the university? Reflexively, with a nod toward my own reaction now that I've read this essay—which, as I face Tracy's death and others, or as I scan crowds, looking for my uncle's face, becomes an essay that won't end.

But I must close, and so I will expose a thread that cuts in and out of my life: I realize that I have embroidered several years of my life with my grandmother's thoughts from a June 1979 letter; it is her three last words in this paragraph that I want to be at the close:

> As far as Richard goes we haven't heard anything—There's some people that live out there and he lives with their son. I wrote to them & they never answered. So I figure he's O.K. & if anything should happen these people would write me. Anyway I hope.