Coming Out

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Abstract

Standing within the heliport, I watched the helicopter from the International leave in the thick coastal fog. Through the heliport’s glass doors, I recognized the powder-blue Camaro coming to a stop before the doors. I lifted up my battered Samsonite suitcases and grungy parka...
Standing within the heliport, I watched the helicopter from the International leave in the thick coastal fog. Through the heliport's glass doors, I recognized the powder-blue Camaro coming to a stop before the doors. I lifted up my battered Samsonite suitcases and grungy parka. As I approached the passenger door of the car, I took in mentally the ribbon of concrete with the evening rush-hour traffic, the tall and commanding hills, and my mother's hazy face. Through the smooth glass window of the door, my mother's face, toned down by the reflection caught by the glass of variations of cloud-gray, was a vast plain of soft whiteness eroded by time into mellowed furrows framed by puffs of white hair. Opening the door, I noticed her eyes were still innocent blue rimmed by thin lines of red.

"Oh, Steamer, you're home at last." She began to cry immediately after our eyes met. I blushed and hoped she wouldn't grab me and smash my cheek with an aggressive maternal kiss. I emerged into the car with the suitcases and parka and closed the door.

She guided the car to the on-ramp and onto the highway. The windows were sealed shut and I began to panic as I smelled my mother's familiar lilac perfume, stale Fritos and wet grocery bags, and felt intense heat. I opened my window to let in a breeze. I was still acclimated to St. Paul's sub-zero weather.

"Steamer dear, please roll up the window for mother. It is too cold." I looked at my mother's martyr eyes. I was twenty-three years old, had lived two thousand miles from home for six years, yet still I was rolling up windows because Mum was "too cold," despite my own discomfort. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her seem to smile as I turned to roll up the window.

To my left, I saw Marin City; it was a constant reminder that one of the Bay Area's richest counties did have its own
token low-income housing area. Marin City, like all the towns and cities that were built side-by-side, nestled in large hills. There were hills to my left and to my right. We were trapped in the three-lane race to the north. My breathing increased as the hills were slowly advancing to enclose the highway, as speeding cars grew in numbers around us, as my mother's lilac scented presence intensified with conquering love.

She is going to ask me the usual question, I thought. Must keep her from asking. My fingers grasped the perspiration-soaked remnant of the airplane stub and started to shred it jerkily.

"How are you, Mum?" My voice had a catch in it which I hoped she wouldn't notice.

"Oh . . . all right, lovey, now that you have come home . . . Uncle Dick seemed a bit sick when I visited him and Auntie Meg in Victoria last September. Margaret Wilson left for Carnoustie last July. The beasts have been good, except Rajah, who was a bad doggie. He dug up Father's diachondra last Sunday. Otherwise he has been a good boy. The cats are getting fatter. Poor little Gomie is sick. He hasn't been eating Little Friskies. His nose was dry all this week . . . " Damn that cat, I thought. He was always sick and belching tuna-fish odors in your face. "Gomer never goes to the bathroom, he just exists," my mother would normally reply whenever I would mention that I caught Gomer digging up Dad's blessed diachondra lawn to shit.

It was getting dark and I breathed harder to fight off the impending suffocation I felt. Splats of rain were being warded off by the windshield wipers. There was silence from Mum's side, so I assumed she was finished with her monologue on Gomer's precarious health. I better say something quick to distract her.

"Ah . . . Mum, why did you marry Dad?" My non-sequitur was my last desperate thrust against the inevitable question. Would I hit true and cause her to forget to ask the question, or would I fail in the jab and lose to her superior fencing with words?

"Why, lovey . . . well, because he had beautiful teeth and a good command of the 'King's English'." My eyes darted to the speedometer; it was slowing down. The phrase, "King's English" struck unbearable moments in my memory of her
changing serious conversations into quotations of Byron, Shelley, or Keats, or into lessons of proper English sentence constructions. Perhaps she would quote "How Do I Love Thee" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Surely she would, her voice was mushy sweet, a perfect growing medium for poetic quotations.

She was maneuvering the car to the slow lane of the highway.

"Lovey, have you met a girl? Some nice girl, some nice Polish girl, who is intelligent and quiet? Some nice Polish girl from a farm in Minnesota?" Visions of wedding bells ringing, rice being tossed, grandchildren following grandmother, were associated in both of our minds with that question.

My stomach caved in. My mind was in a tailspin from the building tension and the hyperventilation. My face was sweaty and hot. Tears burst from my eyes and streamed down my face. Past mixed with the present in the squashed mess of my mind, St. Paul mixed with Marin County; Jim's smiling face blurred into Mum's inquisitive face.

"Dearest pet, did some girl hurt you?" she said. But Jim was with me again, smiling with his comforting and endearing blue-gray eyes. Jim, I need you.

"Stephen dear, did some girl hurt you? I know some bad girl hurt you. Your brother was really hurt when Debbie told him that she didn't want to see him again. Women aren't worth it, dearest." "Kiss mother," she would say. But she would always add, "Be gentle and don't kiss me on the lips, because it's dirty." Women are weak and delicate because my mother said so. Listen to mother, mother always knows everything. But Mum didn't know about Jim.

"Mum . . . how is Dad?" My throat was dry and scratchy. My stomach was doubling up.

"Why . . . ah . . . well . . ." She paused. "Oh, he is much better. Really, he is better. Is that what bothers you, lover?"

I groaned, which she assumed was an affirmative. I didn't want to hear this shit.

"Don't worry, dear. He has been quiet and it has been peaceful since you left for school." That bastard hated me as
far back as I could remember. He would say he loved me while whipping the hell out of me because he had a bad day at work. Love was a four-letter word from him. Did she love me at all?

“Yeah, sure, after beating the shit out of one of us.”

“No, dear. Since you left he has been quite nice . . .” I looked at her icily. “I mean he doesn’t hate you . . .” She was grabbing at straws, and drawing the wrong ones. Her hands were clutching tightly to the steering wheel.

“Fuck that shit, Mum. Dad is bleedin’ well the same. He will nail me to the wall and force me to lick his ass again . . .” Jim’s face was again in front of me. “He was right about one thing.”

“What, Stephen?” The rain intensified to the point where I couldn’t see through the windows. Her face was taut, with tears streaming down her quivering lips. Somehow she edged to the emergency lane and parked the car.

“He was right about what he was accusing me of since I was five years old.” She didn’t look at me.

“I don’t know what you are talking about, Stephen.” She spoke tonelessly, but her fingers betrayed her by turning death-white under the pressure exerted in grasping the steering-wheel, like a life preserver.

“You damn well do know!” She closed her eyes tightly and started to shake in spasms with muffled cries. You don’t say naughty words to mummy.

“Don’t, Stephen, please don’t. I don’t . . . don’t want to talk about this. I beg . . . I beg you, don’t ruin my happiness, please . . .” If it were possible in the car for her to do so, she would have knelt to plead for mercy. “Your roses are blooming . . . you, you should see them.”

“Fuck the roses!” She collapsed her head onto her folded arms. Cries of anguish wracked Mum’s shuddering slumped figure. I couldn’t, I wouldn’t stop. “Dad is still a bastard and nothing has changed at home. It’s still a hell-hole! I am not your sniveling son, who can do no wrong. I am not your perfect little boy! I am a man! I am not going to marry any sweet Polish girl from Minnesota. I am not going to marry any woman! If I married a woman, I would be a hypocrite. I would be continuing a lie to please you and the world!” I was yelling,
and I was crying with and for Mum. I didn't want to tell her this in this way. I took a quick deep breath.

"Mum, I love you and I don't want to hurt you. We have been through a lot together; you should know how much I care about you. After my last suicide attempt, I realized that I had to be me and not what you want me to be. You understand?"

For a moment she didn't answer, still pressed against her arms on the steering wheel. She stopped shuddering. She looked up at the windshield. She took a breath. Controlling her sniffling, she spoke quietly, "Yes, I understand . . . I knew for a while that you were that way." A car swooshed past us on the wet highway. There may have been more cars going past us, but to me there was tense silence in the car, emanating from me.

"How long have you known?" How could she possibly know? I didn't admit it to myself until last year.

"For quite a long time." In my head, I heard, "Mothers always know about their children." She was unnerving me by revealing something about herself that I was not aware of. What was this new tactic of hers?

"Mum, you know I haven't changed, really . . . I mean I still keep many of the same old values . . ." I might as well get it over with, regarding Jim. "Mum, there is someone back in St. Paul who really loves me. His name is Jim. And I love him. He is nice, quiet, and very smart. He's Norwegian. And . . . he loves cats. I mean, Mum, isn't love what really counts, and not the sex of the person whom I love and who loves me? Isn't it so . . . Mum, isn't it so?" I looked for some sign of reassurance from her as I cried fervently, hoping she really did love me.

She turned her face towards me. I extended my shaking hand in her direction. She grabbed and held it in such a gentle and warm way that I knew that whatever she would say next would be what I wanted so badly to hear.

"You are my oldest child, and you are still the joy of my life, Steve . . . Love is . . . truly the most important thing. I know you are a man, although it wasn't till now that I realized it. I have always wanted you to be happy and I'm sorry that home was not happy for you." She paused for another deep breath. "I have faith in you . . . and I know you will always do

Artwork by Eric Piper
what is right. What makes you happy, makes me happy. As you love Jim, I know I will like him.”

I kissed her tenderly on her cheek and whispered,
“I love you, Mum.”
“I love you, Steve,” she whispered.
“You won’t tell Dad?”

“No, he would never understand. It will be our secret.” A semi’s headlight caught my mother’s face for a moment. Her jaw was set and balanced by a reassuring smile. A warm feeling wrapped around me. From out of the darkness that had been between us for years, we had come out to each other into the light.