You're Not from Around Here, Are You?

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Getting a Double Dose of It
So what’s it like, living there?” my old friend Jill asked me on the phone. I knew Jill from my days as an organizer. Those days seemed like a different world now, like they belonged to someone else’s history, back when I was fresh out of college, with long wild hair and a penchant for peasant blouses, sleeping with men, and organizing other people for better lives while having virtually no life of my own.

“OK, I guess,” I said. I felt hesitant confiding to her. I knew she lived in a community of lesbians, went to lesbian parties, lesbian restaurants, lesbian bookstores. I wasn’t sure she knew what it was really like here, in this forgotten mountain range. I twisted the phone cord around my fingers. “I don’t really have any friends, though, other than Connie.”

Jill laughed, that wry mocking laugh that I used to love when it was directed at somebody else. “Well,” she said dryly. “You’d better get some.”

I wanted to come out to Deborah. She had wild curly hair and deep lines around her eyes, and she’d tried to make friends with me before, but I’d always shrugged off her attempts, burrowing deep inside myself to avoid giving her any clues to who I really was. Now I watched her walking through the halls, her full skirts and shawls billowing out around her. She could be a friend, I thought to myself. I heard Jill’s mocking laugh and thought of Patrick throwing back his head and striding through the door to the cafeteria. I could do it.

I invited Deborah and her husband, Wayne, over for dinner with Connie and me. I didn’t come out to them with words; instead, we just made no attempt to hide our relationship. The evening went smoothly, even easily. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard, after all, I thought. I hadn’t even had to say anything. Deborah and I began to read each other’s work, the first overture of friendship. I wrote seven more stories that summer, all with lesbian protagonists in small towns in rural Pennsylvania. “Gee,” Deborah said, after she read them. “If you ever publish them in a collection, people will think there’s some small town in Pennsylvania that’s just chock full of lesbians!”

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She used the word. *Lesbian.* I hadn’t used it about myself yet. I hadn’t actually said it to anyone. And I hadn’t said it to anyone at the college. As far as anyone else knew, I had no life at all, except for a couple of pink triangles fading into the dust on the back of my truck. It wasn’t really coming out, I sensed, to sport a symbol recognizable only to other gay and lesbian people.

Aline studied me, her eyes narrowed and her scissors poised. I’d gone to her for a haircut because every woman in town with a good short haircut told me they went to her, but now that I was in her studio I wasn’t so sure. It was crowded with women, all in their mid-fifties, all with hair molded into helmets around their heads, lacquered with spray. My image in the mirror looked startlingly out of place in Aline’s salon, surrounded by pink hair curlers and advertisements for Retin-A cream, all autographed by Aline’s mother—“This really works! Ask me!!” she had written. I stole a glance in the mirror at Aline’s mother. Her face was a mask of wrinkles. “How do you want it?” Aline asked me, drawling all the words together till they sounded like one.

“Oh,” I mumbled, avoiding her eyes in the mirror. “Short.” My stomach tightened. I wondered whether I would recognize myself when she was through.

Aline stepped back, satisfaction stamped on her face like a brand. “Finally,” I imagined her thinking, “something besides a wash and set!” Behind us the women sat beneath driers and watched *The Prince of Tides* on her VCR. I wondered if, when they died, wash and sets would become a thing of the past, while the grandmothers of the future sprayed up their high hair. Aline put down her scissors and reached for the clippers, which were off to one side and covered, I imagined, with dust. She gunned them up beside my ear. “But not too short,” I said. It was too late. The clippers had already cut a swathe through my hair as if it were a wheat field. I sat back in my chair and tried to relax, strapped in for the ride. A woman behind us turned up the sound in time to hear Nick Nolte describe someone as a fucking asshole.

“Oh.” One of the women shuddered. “I just hate it when they talk like that.”

All the women nodded in unison. Close to my face, intent on her job, Aline pursed her lips. “I’ve never understood it,” she said, guiding the clippers along the edge of my sideburns. “Why can’t
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they just say something else besides THAT word?” The other women clucked in agreement. Aline leaned in closer. “Why can’t they just say: That idiot asshole?” she said. “Or something like that.” Her breath was hot on my face and smelled faintly of wet dog.

“My daughter-in-law talks like that,” one woman said, fumbling to adjust her head inside the tank of the hair dryer. “Every other word.”

Aline swiveled me around so sharply I nearly flew out of the chair. She lifted the scissors off the counter, spun them around on her fingertips. “I slapped a girl’s face once for saying that in front of me,” she said, pulling the hair off my forehead with a comb and brandishing the scissors dangerously close to my eyes. “She never said it to me again.” She closed the blades around a lock of my hair, which instantly turned into history. It was a lock I’d liked.

Something happened on the television and there was a moment of silence while it registered with everybody. “Have you seen this movie before, Louise?” Aline asked me. I told her I had, as a matter of fact. Connie and I had watched it the week before. “How does it end?” she asked.

I hesitated. Was this a trick question? Would I be punished for withholding information? My dedication to art won out. “I can’t tell you that,” I said.

The salon was silent for a moment. I wondered whether it would all be over soon. No one even breathed. Then Aline clapped me on the shoulder so hard I could feel the bruise beginning to form. “Good girl,” she said. She winked at the others. “She’s not going to give it away.”

“She’s a good girl,” her mother said, nodding in agreement.

A good girl. I fingered the cape Aline had tied around my neck. It was so tight I could hardly breathe.

Behind me the women were intent on the screen again. “That really is her son in real life, you know,” one of them said, nodding at the character playing Barbara Streisand’s son.

“No,” said Aline’s mother, sweeping feverishly at the pile of hair around my chair, a mix of the last three customers. “Who’s his father?”

“Elliot Gould,” Aline said, misting my hair with her spray bottle. One woman snorted. “So he got a double dose of it,” she said. “Poor kid.” She glanced around at the rest of us. “What’s her name in the movie?” she asked. “Epstein, Goldstein—it’s a Jewish name.”
I kept my eyes on the mirror, while Aline dusted me off with an old towel that had obviously seen a lot of necks that day.

Aline’s mother stopped sweeping to study the screen again. “Look at that nose,” she said.

I didn’t say anything, just dug in my pockets for the money to pay Aline. My neck felt naked, raw to the touch. I imagined a gun was trained on it, ready to go off at any time.

Connie and I sat in our truck parked on the side of the road and stared straight ahead. “Could you mirror what I just said?” Connie asked me. Her words were slow and careful, her jaw set like iron. I studied the windshield, feeling resistance deep inside my stomach, as if I were eight years old again, folding my arms and sticking out my lower lip. I didn’t want to mirror her. We’d been arguing for an hour, starting at the house and continuing as we drove. We were supposed to be meeting Wayne and Deborah for brunch. Now we were pulled over on the side of the road trying to use the techniques we’d learned in couples counseling. I knew we had to do it. I knew we had to get to the core of this fight now, or we’d never make it through the brunch. I gripped the steering wheel tightly in my hands. Outside, a soft wind stroked the trees, combed through their branches slowly, shaking out the leaves. I sighed.

“You said . . .” I repeated her arguments back to her, keeping my voice as level as possible. It was a draining, tedious process, but it kept me from using the time while she was talking to formulate my own arguments. It meant I had to listen to her. This was the way we fought now. Gone were the screaming irrational bouts of the past. Now we fought in measured careful tones, not stopping till we’d said everything we needed to say. We dealt with issues as soon as they came up, no matter where we were. We fought at the automatic teller machine, in the Chinese restaurant, in an aisle of the supermarket. Oh, great, I’d think each time. We have to go through this again? But every fight was a little less scary than the last. The quicker we got to it, the quicker it was over. And anything was better than those fights, when I’d had no idea what might come out of my mouth from one moment to the next.

A car pulled off to the side of the road behind us. Deborah appeared at the window, peering at us worriedly. “We saw you sitting here,” she said. “We thought you might have broken down.”

“Oh, we’re fine,” I said. “We’re just finishing a fight.” It sounded
like it might have been a meal we'd sat down to. I glanced at Connie. “We’re almost done.”

“OK,” Deborah said, backing up. She looked apologetic.

I turned back to Connie. “All right,” I said. “Where were we?”

Three times a week I worked out at the fitness center in Wellsboro that was owned by the same family that owned everything else in town. It was the only fitness center in the county, and the lack of competition showed. For $300 a year you could work out with anybody else in town who could afford it in a tiny room crowded with mediocre weight machines and trotters. I alternated between hating the little room with its grimy facilities and enjoying the company of the other members. Doc, an elderly man who’d been born and raised in Wellsboro, went there nearly every day, more to talk than anything else. He used to pick a machine and sit on it, breathing heavily, holding court to the people waiting patiently for him to move. I’d been working out with him for two years. I felt a certain fondness for him. Doc was a fixture at this fitness center. At least he was hanging out here, not down at the diner with the other men his age, packing his arteries full of cholesterol. Today he was comfortably ensconced on the biceps machine, both hands planted on his knees.

“How ya doin’, Doc?” asked the only other person in the room, a young guy working his abdominals on the incline. I sat on the floor, stretching out my calf muscles, feeling them between my hands, solid and strong.

Doc leaned back, rolling his tongue from one side of his mouth to the other like he was working a wad of tobacco. “Well, I’m worried about Clinton,” he said. “What with this gays in the military stuff.”

I froze on the floor, my hands around my leg. My muscles suddenly felt leaden, as if they might be pinning me down instead of making me strong.

“They can’t fight,” Doc said, slapping his tiny wizened thigh. “I was in the navy in World War II, he went on, “and we had one of ’em on the ship with us once.” He glanced around the room at us, as if to make sure he had our full attention. “We took care of him,” he said. His laugh was almost a cackle. “He couldn’t cut it.” Doc stretched back against the machine. “None of them could cut it.”

I stayed where I was on the floor, bent over my body as if I might
be able to disappear, if I could only stretch out far enough. My heart beat its ragged steady beat. I've got to say something, I thought. I've got to. Over at the biceps machine Doc coughed a cough that went on just a little too long. He wheezed at the end of it. The other man in the room looked at me. Our eyes met for a moment. Neither of us said anything. “Pansies,” Doc said over in his corner of the room, holding his chest. I got up from the floor, my heart pounding. I've got to say something, I thought. I'm gay, I said in my head. I willed myself to say it out loud. I'm gay. I'm gay. My tongue felt swollen in my mouth. I looked at Doc, sitting on his machine, staring contemplatively at the floor. “Goddamned fairies,” he said. His breathing was heavy. We all stayed where we were, surrounded by images of ourselves in the mirrors around the room. Say it, my head urged me, but I couldn't do it. I picked up my towel, left the weight room, and went into the locker room to shower. Go back in there, I told myself, toweling off and putting my clothes back on. Go tell him. I studied my face in the mirror above the sink. It regarded me solemnly, short hair sticking up in every direction. I looked like a kid. I picked up my bag and went out into the hall. Go back in there, I told myself again, almost pleading. I could hear Doc's voice coming from the weight room. He'd moved on to a new subject now. I stood there for a moment, listening to his voice, talking about the air show up at the mall.

Suddenly, a new voice sounded in my head. He's just an old man. You don't have to tell him, it said. Just let it go. I went back outside, started up the truck, and pulled out onto the road.

Turn around, the first voice said. Go back there and tell him you’re gay. That’s all you have to say.

What’s the point? said the other voice. It won’t change anything.

I didn’t turn around. I kept on driving, all the way back home. I felt sick inside. I thought about it all night. I could barely sleep. The next day I got up, dressed in my workout clothes, and went back to the gym. The fitness center was empty. I worked out anxiously, stealing furtive glances at the door. When he came in I would tell him. As soon as he came in, I'd say: Doc, about yesterday . . .

The door opened and another guy came in, a dentist I'd known from working out here as long as I'd known Doc. “Hey, Louise,” he said, seeing me. He walked over to one of the machines, put his towel down on it, and strapped on his weight belt. His biceps bulged. “Did you hear about Doc?” he asked me.

“He died last night,” the dentist said. “Full cardiac arrest.” He snapped on his weight-lifting gloves and rubbed his hands together. “That’d be the way to go,” he said, looking over at me. He screwed some weights onto the bar and stretched his body out along the bench. “Fast. No messing around.” He lifted the bar in his hands, grunting with the effort.

I got up and left the room. Doc was dead. My throat ached. Doc was dead, and I’d never had the chance to tell him how I felt. I went outside and started up the truck. Wildflowers bloomed along the road. Doc was dead. I’d never said what I’d needed to say. I’d never have another chance.

“I’ve got to go see my mother,” I told Connie, furiously throwing clothes into my duffle bag.

“Are you going to tell her?” Connie asked, watching me go through the medicine cabinet and pack up the essentials.

“I don’t know.” I had no idea what I would do. I only knew suddenly that I had to go. I threw my duffle bag in the back of my pickup truck and drove the three hundred miles west, to my hometown in Chardon, Ohio.

I was there three days before I could get up the nerve to broach the subject. She’s nearly eighty, a voice in my head kept insisting. Give it up. She’ll never come around. You can’t expect her to. But I knew I had to. I couldn’t talk to her at all now. How much worse could it be? I’d taken her to a movie, then out to dinner in a vegetarian restaurant in the Coventry section of Cleveland, a place I’d been before but now seemed to be seeing for the first time. Women with short haircuts and jean jackets populated the restaurant. The male servers wore double earrings. My mother and I made small talk over our tofu burgers. I couldn’t make myself say anything. Ask me, I found myself thinking, staring at my mother wordlessly. Ask me if I’m gay. Please, just ask me. If all I had to do was nod, I thought, I could do this. I could come out.

I was driving back from the restaurant when my mother cleared her throat. Maybe now, I thought, tension mounting in my throat. Maybe she’ll ask me now. “If only you’d meet someone there,” she said of the place that she must envision as a vast wasteland, sparsely populated by people without names or faces, for all I’d told her about it. “Some nice man.”

The road flashed by, punctuated by the lights from passing cars.
Outside all was darkness, heavy and languid against the glass that held us in. My heart beat so fast I thought my mother might be able to hear it. My throat ached from the pressure. “Actually,” I said, “I have met someone.” I stared straight ahead through the glass.

My mother shifted in her seat. I could feel her caution; I could smell it on her, sniff it out as if we were two animals, warily circling each other in the darkness of some jungle. “Oh, good,” she said carefully. “Who is it?”

I kept on driving, my fingers knotted around the wheel so tightly I thought for a moment I’d never be able to let go when we got back home. “It’s someone you know,” I said. My mouth felt dry. The lights of the oncoming cars seared my eyes.

For a moment we were silent, there in the darkness of the car. Then my mother spoke. “Is it Connie?” she asked softly.

Inside me, something let go, just let go, and I could feel everything rushing to the surface, washing from my pores like blood. My heartbeat slowed, my hands relaxed on the wheel. I thought, for one brief moment, that I might lose my grip altogether, send us flying off the road, careening off into the night. “Yes,” I said. “Yes.” The word felt like a dove, leaving my tongue as it might a branch, searing off into the air, bearing a message in its beak. “It’s Connie.”

“I had a suspicion,” my mother said, nodding to herself.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you,” I said. I could feel the words spilling out of me. “I’ve been wanting to be honest with you. I didn’t feel like I could even talk to you before.” I stole a look at her. Her profile was soft, in the darkness of the car, nestled into the collar of her coat. “You don’t care?” I asked her. I could hardly believe my good fortune.

My mother didn’t look at me, just kept on staring straight ahead. “There’s more than one kind of happiness in the world,” she said.

I felt something melt inside me, just like that. I reached for her hand and held it the rest of the drive home.

When we pulled into the garage, I turned the engine off, and we sat there for a moment. Then my mother looked at me. “But what will happen,” she asked, “when you part ways?”

I didn’t understand. “What do you mean?” I asked her. “We’re not going to part ways.”

“But I thought Connie wanted to go to grad school,” my mother said. “What will happen then?”

I looked at her. There was the slightest line, between her eyes. “Well,” I said. “I’ll go with her.” My mother didn’t say anything. Her
hands were clasped in her lap. “It’s like we’re married,” I told her carefully.

“We’d better go in,” she said. “Dad will wonder why we’re out here.”

I helped her out of the car and shut the garage door solidly behind us. Inside I felt light as the night air. We walked together back toward the house. The stars glistened overhead, bright against the blackness of the sky. I felt as if they held my soul, as if everything I was had spun out into the distant corners of the world, fused with the stars and the trees and the night around us. My mother was silent as we walked. I took her hand and squeezed it. Her fingers were limp in mine. If her silence touched me in any way, pressed just ever so slightly against the edges of my joy, I put it from me. “There’s more than one kind of happiness,” I repeated to myself. I took a deep breath in. The night air filled my lungs. I could feel myself expanding. This happiness is mine, I thought. That night I slept for hours in the bedroom where I had spent my childhood, in the farthest corner of the house, away from the rest of the family, and in the morning I packed my duffle bag again and began the drive back home.