

II. COMING OUT

Coming Out To Your Wife

And now, what?

You've accepted your homosexuality and may for a time get by living the double life — straight by day, gay by night, or some such ulcerating arrangement. The urge will come, will grow, will insist that you tell your wife. This revelation is perhaps the major event in the coming out process for a married gay man. One gay man sets his story as a theatre-review of this dramatic movement in his life.

New Play Tells Familiar Story: Howard's Tale

Coming Out, the new offering at the Empire-Majestic, is pretty much a standard bill of fare. An autobiographical drama in two acts by Howard Uno (a pseudonym, if not a misnomer), it charts the development and ultimate de-closeting of a homosexual member of the lower middle classes. The story it tells is by now familiar to theatre-goers everywhere; yet it retains a certain power which arises not so much from the play itself but from the basic subject matter with which it deals: facing up to the ultimate truth of one's existence. It is a subject which never fails to fascinate, whether one is in the closet, out of it, or just a disinterested onlooker.

The play opens with the central character, rather blatantly named Howard, and played by the author himself, experiencing sexual activity for the first time, at a very early age. We see him cavorting in harmless, innocent grope-play with a slightly older boy, but as the two quickly age the playing becomes not so innocent, until by puberty the two are engaged in furtive but overt homosexual activity.

There is no explanation given for the central character's predilection for same-sex behaviour. His family is paraded before us, devoid of the classic stereotypes. His mother is a warm, loving (and fun-loving) woman who, for her time (the late 1940s to early 1950s) is no more afraid of sex than most other women of her socio-economic class. The father is seen more briefly, but when he is on stage he is a real, three-dimensional character, overworked and somewhat overwhelmed but a generous and loving father to his two boys.

There is a younger brother who is rather spoiled, being the second surviving child out of four pregnancies, and the one traditionally to turn out "different." he reappears throughout the play, becoming more of a drifter and a drop-out all the time until, in a parallel to his brother's life, he is shown at the end of the play getting his life in order. The family scenes are warm, friendly, but not clichés. There are the usual quarrels, rivalries, marital spats, but the sense given, in a relatively few scenes, is of a functioning family, normal in every way.

But then it is not the author's intention to find a cause. His, and his character's, problem is dealing with the fact. Young Howard practices self-denial and self-abuse, learns to lie about himself without a flicker of betrayal in his eyes, learns to mimic perfectly his heterosexual friends

(even to some grope-play with the opposite sex) in order to live in their world, without fully understanding what he is doing or why. He is alone, he is something dirty, and it is all his fault.

Everyone is against him and, so it seems, rightly so. He reels from the confessional, staggering under the viciousness of his confessor's screamed abuse. He reads of child molesters, delinquent scout masters fondling their troops, and sees that the world considers them monsters. He begins to think: "Am I one of *those!*" He prays for deliverance and pays for his crime.

We see him fall in love with his friends, none of whom, thanks to his powers of mimicry, suspect a thing. And then we see him fall in love with a woman, truly in love. They marry, he is saved. Act One ends on this note, but it is forced, too good to be true — it portends bad things to come.

In Act Two we see what he has been saved for. As the marriage grows and deepens, along much the same lines as his own parents', the hidden feelings force themselves closer to the surface. He begins sneaking about, discovering the thrills and degradation of cruising the parks and washrooms, building a shell around his feelings and satisfying only his physical urges, all the while building a real marriage which eventually includes a child. He proves to be a good father, the marriage is a visibly happy one, while invisibly his "secret life" eats away at its foundations.

Everything you expect to happen does. But here the author plays it smart, or honest, and saves the drama from mellowing. His wife is called out of town for an extended time and Howard seizes the moment to "come out," but in a way which minimizes later conflicts. Instead of hitting the bars and discos and going home with three different fellows each night, he talks to people — the MCC, a Gay Fathers group, a gay sociologist — and finds what he is really seeking: people of his own nature who are intelligent, open, and *normal*. He is accepted by his own kind and becomes so positive about himself that he is slowly able to bring himself to the realization that he can be open with his wife without driving her away.

In the play's climax he comes out to his wife, and we see that, although he has prepared himself for the event, it is not as he has foreseen it. He is not calm and controlled, warm and reassuring. The emotion that the audience knows he has suppressed suddenly pours forth. The shock wave of his wail of declaration echoes and dies — "*IT'S GAY!*" he cries from the depth of his being — and he is seen to be truly alone at the turning point of his life; too late to go back, not willing to look forward. But he is not alone. His wife, from the shadows, moves forward in a slow movement worthy of ballet and enfolds him in an embrace of acceptance and love.

There is, of course, much weeping on both sides, much talking, but he strives very hard, with a few emotional lapses, to avoid self-pity and to convince her because he loves her and can lie to her no more. She reacts with amazing selflessness and understanding. As long as he doesn't want to leave her, she resolves to try and accept his revelations and to live with them.

It is on this note of real hope that the play ends, but with the understanding that life goes on and that the path they have chosen is not exactly strewn with roses. But because of the hope expressed in the final moments, a hope sincerely felt by the author, the playgoer is left with the feeling that somehow they will make it.

It is a play typical of its genre, differing in degree in its circumstances and characters but telling the same basic truth: that living a life in which one's inner self is constantly denied is impossible, that life will go on as *it* wants, or it won't go on at all.

More Problems and Another Play

Circumstances may vary, everyone's story is different; yet somehow all the stories are the same — different details, characters, settings, but see if this is not your story: you are gay, you are married, you are unhappy, and you have (or soon will have) reached a point where your situation has become intolerable.

It becomes increasingly necessary to have homosexual contact, both sexual and social, yet locked into a heterosexual marriage you cannot explain the absences from home, not over the long run. And since so much gay activity takes place at night — late at night, do they ever sleep? — how can you ever get away from home then?

Oh, sure, there are ways; but as we learn from the popular press, the stress of leading a double life, whether, gay, straight, moonlighting in car insurance, or selling atomic secrets to the Ruritians, can lead to ulcers, high blood pressure, heart attacks, nervous breakdowns, suicide, and probably dandruff and the heartbreak of psoriasis. And guilt. Lots of guilt.

It's the guilt that does us in. Yet what have we to be guilty about? Gay is Good, Gay is Proud, Gay is Beautiful. So they say, but you're not convinced; it's not so hot for you, not as things stand. You're not proud of the way you have to lurk about public washrooms, prowl through park bushes or slink into gay baths and bars. And if it's so beautiful why does it all seem so impersonal, so inhuman, and so ... well, dirty?

Guilt strikes again; and Fear, its Faithful Companion. Fear of being found out, fear of losing everything, fear of the Unknown. But often the fear of what will happen is worse than what actually happens, unless you have a fear of being gang-raped by sex-crazed nomadic tribesmen, which fear is definitely not as bad as the event itself. (Never mind how I know that.)

We are, however, talking of personal relationships, and in the majority of cases the human species proves to be very adaptable, surprisingly so. In essence, what will happen on Disclosure Day may be worse than anything you have experienced but it may also be very much better.

"It's all very well for you to say that coming out is good," you are probably thinking, "but you don't know my wife. I couldn't do it to her, it would break her heart."

Possibly; probably; but a broken heart need not be fatal, and the heart may be stronger for the mending. But it *is* one of the considerations you must take into account with the question inevitably arises: "How do I tell my wife?" "How" isn't as difficult, as we shall see, as the real question: "*Should* I tell my wife?"

What are your choices? Well, you could say nothing, stay married, and keep your grubby little secret to yourself. You may, of course, grow to hate yourself for being gay (if you don't already) and hate your wife for keeping you in an intolerable situation. Next stop: nervous breakdown.

Or, you may get arrested in one of the popular Police-Raids-On-Gay-Baths, or for winking-and-wanking in the subway washroom. And then everyone will know. Or you may get VD and pass it on to her, and then she would know.

Or you may balance your gay and straight lives, successfully maintain two circles of friends, fool your family, confound your employers, and go to your grave secure in the knowledge that you put one over on them all. Clever you. You could also grow wings and fly.

The second, and most popular (or at least most common) is to come out to your wife and — gently if possible — dissolve the marriage. This will set you free to pursue your own needs, to develop your full potential as a human being and a gay man. You may also discover that you are an absentee father, with few or no visiting rights; there may be a messy, highly-public divorce resulting

in changes to your life you didn't foresee.

The third, and decidedly least popular, option is to come out but stay married. Many people try this, but few succeed, because of the incredible tensions set up by being openly gay in a formerly straight marriage.

If a man chooses this path, he is expecting his wife, who was (usually) totally unsuspecting, to be tolerant while he goes out and has gay sex on a regular basis. She may be sensible, sophisticated, and liberated enough to agree to this on an intellectual basis: It isn't his fault, he has to do what his nature demands, and other rationalizations. But deep down where the emotions dwell it's a different story.

Each of us harbours a little alien in our soul called Jealousy, and it bursts forth when we least expect it, to consume us savagely and totally. Your wife, undoubtedly one of the finest people you know (you married her, didn't you?) has this vicious little beast within her, too, and despite the genuine love you feel for her, and the wish to protect her from hurt, she *will* be hurt having to share your affections and your physical expressions of love with another, or a series of others.

It's just sex to you, though, isn't it? Still nameless, blameless encounters in bar and bath where, if you're not raided, the worst that can happen is that you will pick up a few *spirochetes* or *bacilli gonocci*, collect a few crabs, or contract non-specific urethritis (it may be non-specific to them but you know *exactly* where it hurts). You take these home, slip between the covers next to her, she feels so nice and warm, sleepy-soft, and familiar and before you know it you've Spread the Word. She won't thank you for it. She will be hurt.

She may be very hurt. She may turn on you, throw you out, forbid you to see your children under court order; she may tell your friends, your boss. Jesus! The shit has really hit the fan now! If your boss is the school board, it's good-bye tenure, good-bye senior boy's volleyball, good-bye locker room privileges. If your boss is, say, the Racing Commission, it's good-bye job.

So what do you do? It seems you're damned if you do and doomed if you don't. If you protect her from a nervous breakdown you'll make her suffer, and then you merely trade one form of guilt for another. And what about the kids? You love them, they love you, they trust you implicitly, you wouldn't leave them, would you, Daddy?

Your little girl, fresh from her sex-role-stereotyping class, how could she possibly understand that you're not living with them any more because you prefer to have sex with men. "What's sex, Daddy?" Yes, well. Explain to her in detail and she'll be very silent and serious and then she'll say: "Can I have green barrettes tomorrow? Loretta has green barrettes and we're both going to wear them to school tomorrow."

Kids are marvellous organisms. They absorb only as much as they can handle, they adapt quickly to new situations, while screaming resistance all the way. Grown-ups are not so marvellous. They become set in their ways, and a wife who believes she has a happy, normal marriage may resist any move to change it. On the other hand, she may prove to be more resilient, more adaptable and understanding than you imagine.

For every wife who turns "nasty" there are those who demonstrate understanding, sympathy, and love. After all, if the love between you is genuine and based on respect, affection, and an appreciation of each other as people, it will survive. You will still be the same decent, honest person you always were (or told everyone you were), and she will come to realize this if she is likewise decent, honest, and loving.

All may not be lost. In all probability, unless you try really hard, the nature of the relationship will change, and there will be tears, hurting, and anger on both sides. But you can remain close friends — you've shared so many good experiences, including the making and raising of your children, you can't expect to want to turn your back on all of this. If you both want to keep the thing going, it will

keep going; and when one or the other of you cries "stop," it will stop, and your lives will go into a new phase.

If you decide to tell her, if you think you will benefit from the disclosure, if the things-as- they- are quite intolerable, if you think you can handle all the problems that will arise without knowing in advance what they will be; in other words, if you're at that point we all reach (and if you think you're not there, you're not — you'll know when you are) then how do you do it: how do you tell your wife you're gay?

You only come out once, so make it good. (Actually you'll spend the rest of your life coming out to someone or other, but this is the Big One — do it right!) How it eventually happens will be partly due to your initiative and a great part due to circumstance, coincidence, and both your personalities.

A couple of approaches not recommended:

The off-hand approach.

"Darling! Great news! I've just been made vice-president with a big raise in pay, and we can afford that Lamborghini you've had your eye on, and the villa in Marbella, and I'm gay, and we can move into one of those condominiums on the waterfront, and I've bought champagne to celebrate, and isn't it great?"

This approach has a success rate of 0.1 of 1% and it will cost you a Lamborghini, a villa in Spain, and a bottle of champagne at today's prices!

(The germ of truth in this absurd example is that you must be prepared and, if possible, prepare her. Slow and steady wins the race, or so the losers say; but once you've made the decision to come out, wheels are set in motion that will not slow down. Impatience usually wins out, but you may find afterwards that you've been setting her up unwittingly, that all the groundwork has been done.)

Another approach: soften her up. A good Beaujolais will usually do the trick, but use Adolph's if you have to, and when she is sufficiently tenderized, begin. And what the hell do you say?

Start with "I love you" but don't say it if you don't mean it; it's Truth and Consequences all the way, now. A sample dialogue.

You: The last thing I want to do is hurt you.

She: But you're going to anyway.

You: There's something about me you don't know.

She: You're the Hillside Strangler?

You: I've been keeping it a secret all these years and I can't keep it a secret any longer.

She: Adolph Hitler was your father, right? The moustache gave you away.

You: It's been eating away inside me for so long.

She: You drink Drano?

You: I want to tell you now *because* I love you.

She: Oh-oh.

You: Not because I want to leave you.

She: But who would get the stereo? Or the dog?

You: I don't want to leave you.

She: You take the dog.

You: Unless I have to.

She: No, I'll keep the dog, you take the kids.

You: But whatever happens, I'll be glad I loved you, and married you.
She: Boy, is this ever strong wine!
You: You see, I...
She: What is it? Are you sick?
You: Uh... I, ah... I'm...
She: Is it cancer? Oh no! That's terrible! Where is it?
You: I'm... gay!
She: Is it the lung? My uncle had that, it was . . .
You: It's true
She: What did you say?
You: It's nothing I can help, it's how I am.
She: What kind of talk is this? Who's gay?
You: Ever since I can remember . . .
She: You? You, gay? Don't be silly, you're not gay!
You: I guess you can't believe it, eh?
She: I know gay. My brother Irwin is gay. You're not gay.
You: Had you fooled good, eh?
She: Look, have some more wine. You're not gay; it's just a mid-life crisis. Get over it and sail into your fifties, a fully-rounded, mature adult. I read about it.
You: I'll do whatever you want to do. I don't want to ruin your life any more.
She: I'll probably regret this in the morning, but let's open another bottle of wine.
You: Remember this: I really do love you very much.
She: That's nice, dear; but pour this wine, will you? And oh, can you cut some more cheese?

This example demonstrates, if nothing else, that nothing goes according to plan, something you will learn — probably the hard way. In the ideal world you would tell her calmly, gently, and reassuringly, and she would cry a little, but decorously, and into her natural-toned, lace-edged, damask handkerchief, \$59.99 the set of four. You would discuss things as mature adults and come to an agreement on how your lives would change, ultimately for the better.

This is not the ideal world. In the truly ideal world you wouldn't be in this predicament and coffee would still be fifty cents a pound. Well, it isn't, and you are. Do what we have all done and bumble through.

Say the wrong things, break down, cry, become flustered, confused, angry. Apologize (you're not supposed to apologize but jeez, you've been lugging all this guilt around for twenty years and this is the first chance you've had to say you're sorry; and so you are, even if you haven't really done anything wrong). But tell her the truth. Not all of it, at first, she won't want to know too many details. Later she will, and you can tell her whatever she wants to know, although it may make you feel uncomfortable. It's very much like explaining sex to children: "We, ah... you know, he puts his... um... I... you see, diff-, ah... different people do different... it's hard to explain, but it works!

Encourage her to read as much as she can absorb. Remember, her horizons are expanding rapidly now, too. She needs to learn an awful lot awfully fast.

Fortunately, unless you live in Climax, Saskatchewan, help is at hand, and even if you do live there, the case is not hopeless. There are other gay people for you to talk to, even, in some centres, sympathetic — even gay — counselling. Get support; don't try to do it alone; and remember, it's better

that *you* tell her than that someone else — police, doctor, or neighbour — does. She will be much more hurt, and much less likely to be sympathetic, if you get caught, or beaten up, and it all spills out over the yellow pages of the press or the bitter leaves of the grapevine.

And remember also, if *you* don't come out, *it* will. You cannot live a lie forever and be happy, sane, and healthy. Any kind of compromise, any kind of ultimate confrontation, is better than suffering in silence, alone. Anything is better than the guilt, the self-hate, and the bitterness.

No matter how reluctant you are, the moment will come. We are writing to you now in the hope that when the moment does come, you will know it, use it to your advantage, and not let it work against you. You are unique, but you are not alone. You have to make your own decisions based on your own circumstances. And it's your life.

But *you are not alone*.