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Passings¹

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Gordon Bernstein and I moved to Tampa the same year, 1993. I began the Ph.D. program in Communication at the University of South Florida as Gordon, then 24, embarked on life as a gay man. I met Gordon two years later. He played leftfield for the Cove, the softball team at the center of the gay male friends about whom I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation² and first book, *Between Gay and Straight*.³

[insert photo E.1 Lisa Gordon]

Both the dissertation and book contain a chapter based on a 1996 series of life history interviews with Gordon. At that time, my friend was beginning to explore intimacy and sexuality with other men. Having internalized our culture's conflation of sex, gender expression, and sexual orientation (where male=male=male=heterosexual), Gordon was stumbling toward the integration of his masculine, athletic identity and his emerging gay identity. He had developed a wide network of gay male friends and had come out to colleagues and his sister, but years would pass before his parents knew him as gay. In 1996, Gordon described Mr. and Mrs. Bernstein this way:

Dad's real name is Morton, but everybody calls him Tex. Only child. Born and

¹ The most updated version of this piece appears in the book *In Solidarity: Friendship, Family, and Activism Beyond Gay and Straight* (Routledge 2015). Material from "Passings" has been adapted from my Ph.D. dissertation, *Life Projects* (Tillmann-Healy 1998), my book *Between Gay and Straight* (Tillmann-Healy 2001; used with permission, AltaMira Press), and an article titled "Coming Out and Going Home," published in *Qualitative Inquiry* (Tillmann 2010; used with permission, Sage Publications: <http://qix.sagepub.com/content/16/2/116.abstract>). Portions of this chapter were presented at the 2008 meetings of the National Communication Association. Doug Healy and Dave Dietz shot the images in this chapter.

² See Tillmann-Healy (1998).

³ See Tillmann-Healy (2001).

raised in South Philly. My dad finished high school, went into the coast guard, then college. He taught history.

I'm my dad's boy. Same dreams, same interests: watching a ball game, walking the beach. There's definitely that father-son rivalry. He still thinks he's 25.

Calm. Even-keeled. When he does get mad, you know it. You don't piss my dad off.

Marilyn, my mom, also born and raised in Philadelphia. Her father was quite religious, Jewish, and really stern. Her mother was born in Russia. My grandmother had 12 sisters and one gay brother, my great uncle Gene.

My parents met through her cousin. Mom was seeing somebody else at the time. I guess my dad got her to the altar first. They married in '61, had my brother in '64, me in '69, and my sister in '75.

Typical Jewish mother: super, super nurturing. Want to be involved. Want to know everything. If you were sick, "Oh, let me do this, let me do that for you." Yeah, my mom is NOT one of those. It was: "You'll be fine. Go to school."

Mom is not very emotional. She had a number of miscarriages, watched two of her best friends die and both her parents, but I've never seen her cry. I don't know if she's ever cried. But always there if you need her. She's actually a friend, someone I can talk to about a lot of things—but not everything.

I don't come from a "sit and talk" family. We never discuss relationships. We talk about sports, our days at work, but never any real outpouring of emotion.

In terms of coming out, I probably will tell Mom first. My father is clueless. Will this help him know who I really am? I don't think so. He's not going to ask a thousand questions. My father wants to know that the weather's nice and the car's driving well. I'm

not gonna spill my guts and cry. I've already done that a thousand times by myself, going over the conversation in my head.

* * *

When Gordon and I reconvened for a follow-up session in 2003, he overviewed the period since our last interview:

Milestones of the last seven years: developed great friendships, told my parents I was gay, met my boyfriend, Todd, and moved to Lauderdale.

My mom was diagnosed with Lou Gherig's, ALS. Before, we never spent much time talking. We still don't go real deep, but she has to listen now. Mom can't get up and walk away, which she did for years—literally!

Coming out happened exactly the way I thought it would. My mom was in town. I said, "There's something I need to tell you." Very matter-of-factly: "I'm gay. I hope this doesn't come as a big surprise." "Nah," she said, "I sort of figured." We didn't talk much more than that. I probably forced five extra minutes of conversation, but she really didn't want to delve into it at that time. When Mom returned home she told my dad.

Couple months later, I visited them. Dad made no mention of it—until he was dropping me off at the airport! Finally he said, "I cried for a week." I probably am not the most sympathetic. I replied, "You cried for one week. I've been dealing with this for years on my own." He said, "I wish you could've come to me." I'm like, "You're having a hard enough time today. If I'd told you in '91, when I was really struggling, you wouldn't have been there." He referred to places I could go "to change." I made sarcastic comments. I don't think anything was resolved, but you know, it did open lines of communication. Dad talked about my parents' marriage. At that time, we never discussed

such things.

My parents and I really started talking when I met Todd in 2000. Back in Philadelphia, I laid it on the line: “I want you to meet him and be yourselves but not pass judgment. If you can’t do that, you can’t come to my house, and I won’t come to yours.” I suspect I wasn’t even as “nice” as I just put it. Fortunately, they like Todd a lot—probably more than they like me! Todd is generous, caring. He cherishes the people in his life. Todd will let my dad ramble on. It’s comical: Dad runs up to him, hugs him hello, kisses him goodbye. Todd treats them like gold. I still don’t think my parents perceive us as “the gay couple.” They see us as best friends, but they know, obviously.

If I could go back in time, I would do a lot of things differently. I’m envious when I see guys in their early 20s comfortable in their own skin. I don’t think I hit my stride until about 27, probably when we did the first round of interviews.

I gave the dissertation to my mom. She might’ve opened it and skimmed through. Didn’t read it, which pissed me off, I have to be honest. I don’t even know if she read the chapter about me—a way of knowing more about her son. She didn’t take advantage of that.

For the *Going Home* project, I could see my parents saying, “I don’t want to talk about all that.” I have no idea if they’ll be receptive to it.

Going Home

[insert photo E.2 Dave Gordon around following 2 paragraphs]

Dave Dietz, project videographer, is stuck in the aftermath of a tractor-trailer jackknife on I-4. I met Dave in 1996 through Gordon’s extended network of friends, who used to convene every

Monday evening for dinner, *Melrose Place*, and *Ally McBeal*. Born in 1959, this son of working-class Democrats has an equally keen eye, wit, and heart.

Three forty-five p.m., four hours and 45 minutes late, Dave pulls into the drive. He emerges from his Jeep with a traffic trauma scowl but smiles when his eyes find mine.

At Orlando International, the checkpoint crew excavates every pocket of Dave's gear. "Don't worry," my friend assures me, "this happens all the time."

Spotting his cameras, a pony-tailed guard speculates, "Romantic getaway?"

I respond, "Documentary about a gay man returning to his hometown." Perhaps feeling outed, Dave shoots me a smirk.

Inspection complete, we schlep the equipment onto the tram. "What kind of 'romantic getaway' involves a tripod?" I ask, winking at Dave.

He laughs. "The stories I could tell, sister." Then, turning to business, "Let's mike you when we get off."

"Have to pee first," I report, "unless you want audio on that."

"Now *that's* romantic."

Our flight is half boarded before Gordon arrives from his Lauderdale connection. He takes a well-chewed straw from his mouth and embraces each of us. I run my hand over his nearly-shaved head. Dave records us walking from the jet way to our seats in row 22.

A lanky flight attendant strides toward us. Sternly he asks, "Do you have permission to operate that?"

Dave lowers the camera but keeps shooting. We attend the attendant: blond locks gelled

with precision, teeth suitable for a White Strips ad, uniform crisply pressed. Dave clears his throat. “Gord here is coming out to his folks,” he fibs. Gordon rolls his eyes as Dave continues, “We’re going to Philly to film it.”

“*Oh*,” says the attendant, hushing his voice. “I know all about that.”

“Thought you might,” Gordon replies.

Relaxing into the flight, we talk about the weekend ahead. Gordon indicates that I may have opportunities to speak with his godfather, Bob, and Bob’s wife Eve, the only confidantes of Gordon’s parents who know that he’s gay.

In Gordon’s lap lies a copy of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom’s bestseller about his rekindled relationship with Morrie Schwartz, a former professor dying from complications of ALS. “How is your mom?” asks Dave.

“Spirits are great, but she has no physical strength. Can’t move unassisted. I don’t know how much longer my dad will be able to care for her at home.”

I query, “What would be the best outcome of seeing them this weekend?”

Gordon turns this over. “I’d like my parents to understand more about my last years in Pennsylvania: the struggle, the turmoil, the loneliness.”

My mind flashes to 1996. At our first interview, Gordon described the most challenging time in his journey, provoked by reading *Behind the Mask*, the coming out story of former major league baseball umpire Dave Pallone:

It was May of ’91. I’ll never forget buying that book—a traumatic experience just picking it up. This hit me harder than anything ever in my life. Here was someone I could

identify with: how we grew up and sports. The next week I spent shaking, literally hyperventilating crying, where I couldn't breathe. I would look at myself in the mirror and break down. Couldn't eat. Couldn't sleep. No one knew what was wrong with me. I remember my dad and I went to dinner. He said, "Gord, if there's anything, you can tell me. If you got a girl pregnant, I'm there for you." That shattered me because I thought, *If only it were that easy*. A line in the book basically read, "No direction, no meaning, no life." That really is how I saw myself. I dealt with this for years on my own. Lonely times, desperate thoughts. The hardest part was not being able to talk about it.

* * *

I refocus on Gordon as he expresses his wishes for the weekend: "Given how closed my folks have been to anyone outside my immediate family, it would be an achievement if one or both of them consents to being interviewed about having a gay son. Maybe they'll even ask *me* a question or two about my experience, my coming out. They have no idea what I went through."

[Insert photo E.3 Lisa Gordon around following 3 paragraphs.]

The next morning, Gordon provides a narrated tour of his Northeast Philadelphia neighborhood. "Had quite a normal childhood here," he tells Dave and me. "I always knew how to act without being seen as different. I did what people expected. If a thought came to me like, *I'm attracted to him*, I would push it away, knowing this is not the time; this is not the place.

"Most parents in this neighborhood had college degrees, were middle- to upper-middle class, White, and Jewish. Not very representative of the world. As you'll see, we lived on a cul-de-sac, every house the same. Almost all the original people reside there today."

We stop at his childhood home, one of seven identical siblings of brick and vinyl siding

circling a courtyard. Gordon predicts having at least one neighbor encounter. Pulling over, he urges, “Don’t share what we’re doing with anyone here.”

As we step out of the car, a long-haired woman who looks like she could handle herself in a bar fight emerges from the house next door. “Gord?!” The former neighbors walk toward one another, meeting on her side of the street for a hug.

Gordon presents Dave and me to Cathy, explaining, “Lisa is a professor writing a piece on, ah ... going back.” She nods but makes no inquiries.

Instead they commiserate about Yom Kippur, which is today. Gordon asks Cathy, “Do you eat gefilte fish?”

Wincing, she places one hand about 18 inches atop the other to suggest a container’s size. “Like fetuses in jars!”

Gordon tells the group, “My family wasn’t very religious. We had an annual Passover Seder and celebrated Hanukkah a few years, but it wasn’t a big thing. Mom actually put up a Christmas tree a couple times. She got some static but didn’t care what people thought.”

Cathy chats with Gordon about Florida real estate and their shared passion for gambling before the former neighbors turn their focus to ALS. Gordon describes Marilyn’s wheelchair-bound condition and daily home health care and Tex’s struggles to serve as primary caregiver.

“Give my love to your parents,” Cathy says tenderly. “Everyone is praying for them.” Her tone brightens. “Still not married, Gord?”

“Still ... not married,” he replies, hugging her goodbye.

Inside the car, we take our places: Gordon driving, me in back, Dave shooting from the front passenger seat. Dave says, “I get the feeling that quality people—good souls—live here. Cathy shows compassion for your mother and father. You are embraced as a neighbor even

today. Why conceal the real purpose of our visit?”

Gordon exhales. “People here would be polite to my face but once behind closed doors: ‘I can’t believe it. That’s disgusting!’ In one second you go from ‘great guy’ to ‘gay guy.’ Part of me wants to put it in their faces—be the gay guy. But I don’t, mainly for my parents’ sake. They choose to be silent.”

The three of us head to the Jersey shore, where Gordon’s parents now spend their summers. As we pull in front of the Bernsteins’ first-floor condo, I note the small wooden ramp leading from their unit to a landing and the longer metal ramp covering the steps. Dave and I wait behind Gordon, who knocks on the door. Tex answers excitedly. “Gord!” His hair has faded to white, but his tanned and trim body belies his 74 years.

Taking Mr. Bernstein’s extended hand, I say, “Nice to see you again, sir.” My mind whirls to our only other meeting, in 1996. Following a festive weekend at a gay softball tournament, Gordon and I visited his brother, who was hosting the Bernstein clan. As we approached the house, my then-closeted friend warned me not to out him to his parents.

Tex ushers us inside. Gordon’s mother, strapped to an electric scooter, beams when she lays eyes on her son. Marilyn begins a barrage of commands and queries: “Come in! How are you? Sit down! How was the drive? Tex, get them a cocktail!” Her husband sets a Tanqueray and tonic on the tray attached to her scooter. She sips it through a long straw as the group banters about sun, sports, and stocks. I am reminded of Gordon’s 1996 observation: “My father wants to know that the weather’s nice and the car’s driving well.”

Marilyn turns 62 today, and she requests a casino celebration. The severity of her condition becomes evident during the scooter-to-car transfer. I hold her purse and glasses. Dave

steadies the scooter. Tex and Gordon maneuver her body, Tex facing and balancing Marilyn as she attempts to rise, Gordon bear-hugging her from behind. I try to imagine how Tex has been doing this alone. “Watch my shoulder!” she implores.

Straining, Tex responds, “Marilyn, shift!”

“My foot, my right foot!”

“Work with us!” says Tex.

“Don’t you think I would if I could?” she fires back.

Later, Gordon reflects, “My parents always bickered, but her disabilities have escalated that. It has to be humiliating for her and frustrating as hell for them both.”

I ask, “Any sense of how they experienced Dave and me?”

Gordon scoffs, “Obviously they felt comfortable enough to be themselves!”

At Caesar’s Palace, Tex and Gordon set off to play blackjack as Dave and I wheel Marilyn about the quarter slots. When she nods toward a machine, we stop and insert her tokens. The three of us chat sporadically about the active hurricane season and Marilyn and Tex’s planned winter in Florida. Most of the time, though, each of us stares silently at the blinking lights and spinning reels. Marilyn asks no questions about Gordon or the project.

Around midnight, the group heads back to the Bernsteins’ condo. Dave, Gordon, and I assist Tex in getting Marilyn safely inside and return to the Holiday Inn exhausted. I type field notes into the early morning. My mind buzzes with thoughts of the next day’s tasks: video-recorded interviews with Marilyn and Tex.

It is 7:00 a.m. I begin pacing my room, looking over notes, and packing a legal pad, pens, and list of questions. On my way to the door, I spot the audio recorder I brought for field notes. I walk over and grab it, placing it in my bag.

Gordon ventures inside the condo while Dave and I remove equipment bags from the trunk. Our friend halts us at the door. “No camera.”

I exhale my disappointment. “Audio?”

“Ma,” Gordon shouts inside, “audio recorder okay?”

“Fine,” I hear her say.

Tex emerges, and the three men pile in the Impala.

When Marilyn nods toward the living room, I set the recorder on the coffee table, between a copy of *Tuesdays with Morrie* and a pamphlet on ventilator care.

“In Our Family, We Don’t Really Discuss This”

She grins when I request, “Tell me how you met Tex.”

“Down here at the shore. He was staying with my cousin, who thought Tex was too old for me. Tex went away for the summer, came back Labor Day. We got engaged three months later, married in June. You just know it’s the right person. He didn’t make my skin crawl.” I laugh. “That’s exactly what I told him. I’m not a touchy-feely person.”

“The day you gave birth to Gordon ...” I prompt.

“Went into labor around midnight. Very, very hot that day. A blackout. The hospital elevator ran on an alternate generator. I refused to get in. The guy says, ‘You *have* to,’ so I made *him* go up and down a couple times first. In my room they pushed the button to adjust the bed,

but of course, there was no power. When it came on the next morning, the bed's going up, up, up, up, up, up." Marilyn's animated neck and head compensate for the limp hands that remain folded in her lap. "Gordon was born that morning—very hard labor but the easiest recovery."

"When you remember Gordon as a kid, what comes to mind?"

Blood rushes to her face. "Gordon was my best buddy. The easiest one to raise, said 'yes' to everything. 'Gordon, take the trash out.' 'Sure, Ma.' Very agreeable, never fought, very pleasant kid. Loved him *to pieces*. He was kind, sensitive. Once my mother baked a cake, and she gave Gordon a piece to take home. He told her, 'Oh, it's very good.' When I served it to him, he waved his hands, 'I don't like it.' I asked, 'Why did you tell my mother that you did?' 'Well, she needed that.'"

I absorb the warmth Marilyn exudes before broadening our focus. "I have a thought for you to complete: being a member of our family means ..."

She processes a moment. "A lot of commotion and noise."

"Would you describe the household you grew up in the same way?"

"No, not at all! I grew up alone, really. My mother and father both worked, and I always worked, from the time I was 13 or 14."

"Gordon has informed me about an important figure in your growing up, your uncle Gene."

Her face illuminates. "*So* good to me, always there for me—more so than my parents. When I was invited to proms and parties, my uncle always took me to the finest shops. From a young age I knew he was gay. I didn't judge him at all. My mother was crazy about her brother. My father was downright rude. If my uncle entered a room, he would get up and leave." Likely thinking of Gordon, she adds, "Imagine what my father would say today!"

Marilyn continues, “We have a lot of gay people in our family. My cousin had two sons: one was murdered; one died of AIDS. If Gordon wanted to talk to my cousin, he could ask about them. I’ve not told her that my son is gay because Tex has a real problem with this.

“I always thought Gordon was,” she reports. “He was a very, very good-looking boy who had very, very strange girlfriends: fat, ugly. I mean, I have pictures. He was *beautiful*. When Gordon was in high school, I made a comment to Eve, the wife of Tex’s cousin: ‘Gordon probably is gay.’ I just can pick up on it sometimes.”

A memory sparks a smile. Marilyn tells me, “Years ago, I was doing work for this guy. After meeting him I told a mutual friend, ‘That guy is gay.’ The friend said, ‘That’s the most ridiculous thing I ever heard!’ But I was right. How did I know? Without sounding vain, I was very, very pretty. I had long, dark hair—striking. I mean, even *pregnant*, I looked good. I got no reaction from this guy, *nothing*. I thought, *He can’t be straight*.” I feel both charmed by this self-confident account and pained to consider Marilyn’s present state: once-manicured hands now unable to style hair or apply make-up, once-head-turning body now adding girth and losing muscle tone.

Shifting our focus, I say, “Gordon disclosed that around the time of his college graduation, he read *Behind the Mask*, the coming out story of a retired baseball umpire. Did he ever share that experience with you?”

“No, but I recall that book in his room.” Her nod signifies the recollection. “All right, and I *knew*.” Putting the pieces together, Marilyn says, “Then Gordon went to umpire school.”

I report, “He indicated that reading that book hit him harder than anything ever in his life. The author, Pallone, is conventionally masculine, athletic—and gay. Encountering his story helped Gordon’s experience make sense to him, but it also confirmed his fears.”

Marilyn sighs. “I feel very badly about his struggle. In our family, we don’t really discuss this. I wouldn’t have a problem telling people, but Tex does, so I don’t say anything.

“I’m happy Gordon is in a relationship. I did worry about ... promiscuity, getting a disease and dying. But look, it’s all accepted. Todd comes to family events. We *love* Todd. Even Tex loves him. We have a problem with the relationship, but that’s the way it is.”

I decide to push. “Can you elaborate on that: ‘We have a problem ... ’?”

“Well, you don’t want your children to be this—to be homosexual. You’d prefer them to get married, to live normal lives.” I note both the heteronormativity⁴ of this construction and Marilyn’s use of second person. In 1996, I observed that Gordon tended to shift from “I” to “you” when distancing himself from an emotional topic. She continues, “That first night, the night he told me, I felt very, very sad to think that he would not have children. We sat in his living room. He said he wanted to talk about something. My response was, ‘I’m not surprised.’ He’d been agonizing. I suspect it had to do with his father, because he’s supposedly like his father, but Tex loves women. I mean, he’s *crazy* for women. Mayor of the beach, Tex strolls up and down, kisses all these women. Doesn’t run around, though. I know him. Plus I could find him at any point of the day!”

I ask, “When you returned from that visit to Tampa, how did the conversation with your husband unfold?”

“Tex swears something happened to Gordon as a child. He thinks he was ... molested.” This catches me off guard. Marilyn says, “Gordon never said anything to me about that. I don’t believe he was, but I ... I don’t really know.” Her gaze penetrates.

“I’ve known Gordon since 1995,” I tell her, “and he’s never said anything like that.” What if that *hadn’t* been the case? I wonder. What would I have said?

⁴ Heteronormativity equates heterosexuality with normalcy and defines all other sexualities as deviant.

“Then I’m right!” she exclaims, sounding relieved and resolved. “He was *not* molested!”

Marilyn then reports, “I said to Tex, ‘This is our son. We love him. If he had to keep it bottled in, he’d probably kill himself.’ I’ve read a lot about that. I told Tex he had to accept it. He just *had* to! And he does, but he can’t talk about it.”

I swallow a lump of anxiety. “Will Tex have a hard time speaking with me about this?”

“Probably,” she predicts. “He thinks it’s a reflection on him: Macho Man!”

I then ask, “Is there anything you hope your family will gain by contributing to this project?”

She shakes her head. “Tex doesn’t read a whole lot. It’s just like with my disease: not *Tuesdays with Morrie*, not one thing about it. Just buries his head.”

“Tell me about living with ALS,” I request.

“I was basically a loner,” says Marilyn. “Loved going everywhere by myself. All the sudden, I’m relying on people. It’s a real struggle. Thank god for Zoloft! When they gave it to me last fall, I said, ‘What’s this pill for?’ ‘Anxiety.’ ‘I don’t have anxiety.’ ‘You will.’ I always moved quickly, and Tex is not so quick. I take Zoloft so I don’t kill him! Seriously, though, I appreciate everything he does for me. It’s very, very hard for him. Tex is *not* a natural caretaker. He never took care of the kids.”

“What’s the hardest part?” I probe.

“Mmm ... *arms*. Legs you really can live without.” I reach out and touch her arm as Marilyn blinks away tears. “B-but my ... *arms*. Oh, man! Can’t believe I’m crying. I am *not* a crier. Gordon will tell you.”

Gordon has told me, I think but do not say.

“But Lisa, I can’t do anything. I can’t dress myself. I can barely brush my teeth.”

She clears her throat and changes the subject: “Do you think Gordon accepts himself?”

“Much more than when we first collaborated. At that time, he had just come out to your daughter.”

Brow furled, Marilyn says, “He was comfortable coming out to her?” Marilyn’s tone suggests this is new information.

“It’s not unusual to tell a sibling first.”

“So he *told* her?” Marilyn muses. “She said that she knew; she didn’t say how.” I wonder if I am fulfilling obligations of my friend/researcher role—or crossing a line. It feels awkward to be the one dispelling a family myth of sexual abuse and clarifying key details of Gordon’s coming out. I am reminded of a quote from Thomas Cottle’s family ethnography: “In life study research, family members may employ researchers as sounding boards if not unconsciously as quasi-psychotherapists.”⁵

We sit in silence a moment. “It’s good talking to you,” she says, and we exchange smiles that signify the close of our session.

Marilyn requests that I retrieve her cell phone. When I hand it over, she tries to operate the buttons, but her impotent fingers refuse to obey. After several failed attempts, she sighs.

“Will you ... ?” I take the phone, highlight Gordon’s number, and press “send.”

“The women have solved the world’s problems,” I tell my friend. “Now we’re ready for the men.” I retake my seat on the sofa, and we chat pleasantly for several minutes.

Then, sounding apologetic, Marilyn says, “I didn’t want you to videotape me because I’m very self-conscious. I’m not a whole person. I’ve always taken charge of my life. I don’t want to live on a ventilator or with a feeding tube. I’d just as soon die, really.”

We lock gazes a moment before Dave appears in the doorway. He smiles at Marilyn.

⁵ See Cottle (2000, 229).

“How you feeling today?”

“I feel good *every* day,” she insists. “I have no pain. I’m wonderful, terrific.” I consider the contrast between these statements and her previous assessments: “I’m not a whole person,” and, “I’d just as soon die.”

As Gordon crosses the threshold, Marilyn asks, “Did you go to the beach?”

“A gazebo,” he replies, then turns to me, “which is where my dad wants to take you.”

“Is he willing to be video-recorded?” I ask.

“No. They all the sudden became camera shy.”

Tex enters and treads down the hall, making no eye contact. “Give me a minute,” he calls over his shoulder. Heart pounding, I try to sense his mood but cannot.

Later, Gordon overviews the time he, Tex, and Dave spent together. “You missed nothing. We walked. We talked—very typical—about food, finances, everything *but* what was going on. I did mention the project: how important it was to me, what an ally you are to my community, but I got no response. Perfect example of an hour with my father.”

Tex returns, sporting fresh shorts and shirt. He and I exit the condo for our session. Before putting the key in the ignition, Tex takes out his wallet. He passes me a photo, perhaps 40 years old, of a slender young woman with coal black hair, standing tall and straight. “Marilyn?”

“Beautiful girl,” Tex says wistfully. He returns to its pouch this memento of days—and bodies—past.

“Not on My Side”

At the gazebo, we settle into adjacent benches. I turn on the audio recorder. “How much has Gordon told you about the project?”

“I don’t know anything,” says Tex.

I wonder what roles father and son played in his under-preparation. Clearly Tex has read neither the dissertation nor the book. Did Gordon not explain the purpose of our work? If not, why not? If he did explain, how can Tex not “know anything”?

“Let’s start at the beginning,” I suggest. “I met Gordon in ’95, when he and my husband Doug joined the same softball team in a mostly gay male league.”

“At that time,” he responds, “I knew nothing.”

I then overview my dissertation. “Coming out proved a central issue for many of the men in my research community, including Gordon. He and I did a series of interviews in ’96. We devoted more time to that issue—his struggle to accept himself and to share his identity with his family—than any other. The purpose of this project is to understand more about that struggle by understanding more about the families.”

Tex and I spend the next several minutes talking about his growing up. He describes his working-poor South Philly neighborhood of corner hangouts and family businesses, including his grandfather’s meat market. I then turn our attention to an important meeting: “Do you remember your first impression of Marilyn?”

His eyes brighten. “Gorgeous. You saw that picture. Built beautifully. Very vibrant and very ... cleansing. I use that term because I once ran around with a lot of women. Enough said.” He proceeds to say, “Married women whose husbands had gone for the weekend would come to Skinny D’Amato’s 500 Club, where Jerry Lewis and Dean Martin started out. There I was. I thought the whole world was like that.”

We chat briefly about the couple's courtship and the births of their first son and of Gordon. The details Tex provides overlap with Gordon's and Marilyn's descriptions. I then request, "Could you please describe Gordon?"

"Growing up, he was a mild-mannered boy—not that he took crap from anybody. I recall one incident. He was playing pinball. A kid came over, tried to push him off the machine. Gordon gave him a shot." I note that this story follows the attribution of "mild-mannered." Did Tex feel a need to counter this softer quality with a harder edge?

Shifting our focus to the extended family, I say, "I spoke to Marilyn about her uncle Gene, and I'm wondering—"

"Yeah, he's gay."

"Do you have a relationship with him?"

Tex narrows his gaze. "Not particularly."

"Did you know the two sons of Marilyn's cousin?"

"I know who they were. They were gay too." Tex then points out, "There are no gay people in my family at all."

What about your son? I think but do not ask.

"Listen," he says, "I don't know Gordon's whole story. I don't know how or when he became gay. I don't know if it was due to any kind of ... incident."

Our eyes lock. "By incident, do you mean abuse?"

"Somebody molesting him sexually." I suppose Marilyn's query should have prepared me for this. Still, I feel decentered, struck that both parents posed this question to me—a virtual stranger—rather than to their son. Wouldn't they have wanted Gordon either to confirm their fears or to put them to rest long before now? Tex asks directly, "Did he ever say anything?"

The breeze whistles in my ear. “Never.”

“You’ve spoken to him more times than I have about this,” Tex presses.

“He never said anything like that.”

Tex turns this over, shaking his head. “Gordon told me that he knew he was gay since age 12 or 13.”

I ask, “And did you suspect when he was that age?”

His mouth falls open. “Never, never, *never*.” Then, as if pleading a case, “He did take out girls.” Tex next observes, “The girls that he took out were not the prettiest girls that I’ve seen. Maybe he did that deliberately.”

I study his face, which appears a bit forlorn. “Has having a gay son changed your life?”

He exhales. “I’m not happy about it. I’ll be honest with you. He would have a lot to offer a woman. Look, I like Todd, but both he and Gordon seem like guys who shouldn’t be gay. Gordon’s not feminine; I don’t think Todd is either. But that’s my perception of what a gay person is.”

Tex’s view reflects our culture’s dichotomization of sex (male-female), gender (masculine-feminine), and sexual orientation (different sex-same sex) as well as their conflation. I follow up: “Has having a gay son challenged you in any way?”

“I’m a private person. I don’t like other people to know my family affairs. I don’t particularly like people to know that Gordon is gay.” I sit back, wondering why Tex consented to be interviewed. He continues, “I mean, I love Gordon very dearly, but I’m not happy that he’s gay. I’d like to change him. I don’t know how. Do you know how?”

I swallow hard. “Nope, sure don’t.”

Tex fishes, “I don’t even know if he had affairs with women.”

“He did,” I say, then wonder why. Did I feel some need to reassure Tex? Of what? I return to my previous line of questioning: “Is there any way that having a gay son has enhanced your life?”

“No,” he insists but quickly reconsiders. “I shouldn’t say that. Todd is a nice boy. But it’s confusing.”

“Their ... romantic connection is confusing?” I query.

He clears his throat. “Yes, yeah, yeah. I mean, it’s uncomfortable to me.”

I venture, “I can’t imagine a better match for Gordon than Todd.”

Tex shoots me a quizzical look. “Of anybody, you see him matched ... with Todd? That doesn’t sit well with me. If you said with a woman, yes. But that’s me. I’m trying to be honest.”

He seems on edge, but I keep going: “How did you learn that Gordon identifies as gay?”

Tex uncrosses and re-crosses his legs. “He told me.”

I pause, unsure whether to challenge his recollection with what I’ve learned from Gordon and Marilyn. “Do you remember where you were, what was happening?”

“I can’t recall exactly.”

I prompt, “Did you have a conversation with Marilyn before you and Gordon talked?”

“I don’t remember that either.”

“Gordon told me about a conversation he had with you. I don’t know if you’re thinking of the same situation: you two were in the car on the way to the airport.”

“I honestly don’t remember,” Tex says. “Maybe I blocked it out.”

I nod, pondering the significance of his last statement. “When you first found out, do you recall more generally how you felt, what you thought?”

“I think I was upset.”

I note the brevity of his last several answers. “What did you find most upsetting?”

“Him telling me that he’s gay,” fires Tex, his tone communicating that he finds the question ridiculous. “And telling me that he knew since age 12 or 13. That’s why I asked if there was an incident.”

“If that had happened to him,” I say gently, “would it be more understandable to you?”

“No.”

I probe, “Just something you’ve wondered about?”

Tex leans back. “I had a similar experience when I was 12 or 13. Two boys lived across the street from my grandfather. One of them was 14, the other 15 or 16. They wrestled me to the ground. One tried to put his penis in my mouth.” My stomach drops. “And I bit it. I *bit* it. The kid screamed. I jumped up and punched the other one in the mouth. Then I ran. They were both bigger than me. I told my grandfather and my father right away. *Right away*, I told them. They went over to that house. I don’t know what happened, but that family moved within six months.”

I consider how fresh these details are to Tex, more than 60 years later. “Good for you for fighting back,” I tell him.

When he offers no further response, I say, “A piece about Gordon’s life and growing up will come of this project. Is there anything about your or your family’s experiences—”

“I told you,” stresses Tex, “there were no homosexuals in my family at all.”

Sensing a raw nerve, I take a different tack. “If you could say something to parents who just found out that their son is gay, what would it be? Any advice?”

“No. I have none for myself. I’m not happy about it, so what can I tell other people? Be tolerant. That’s about all I am. I *am* tolerant.”

“Is there anything that you hope will come of this project?”

With a wry smile, Tex replies, “Let him find a nice girl.”

A bit stunned, I manage to retort, “I don’t see that as the most likely outcome.”

“I know,” he says. “I’m being facetious.” Tex then asks, “Ever see the movie *High School?*” I shake my head. “Frederick Wiseman filmed a documentary where I used to teach. It was derogatory. Wiseman would pan in on one feature, like fat ankles. It would look like the person was ugly, and the person wasn’t.”

I mull over possible subtexts of this recounting. “The film wasn’t honest?”

“It was honest, but why make someone look ugly when you don’t have to?”

Wondering if Tex fears being portrayed as “ugly,” I ask, “Do you have any concerns about this project?”

“I don’t like it to be known.”

“You’re a private person,” I say, repeating words he used earlier.

“Beside being private, I’m a macho person. My son knows how I am. I love women.”

“I get that,” I say with a grin.

“I don’t like to be associated with this type of project. I’m trying to tell you the truth.”

“I appreciate that, sir. Do you have any questions for me?”

“Well, I asked you a question, but you didn’t give me any answers.”

I try to recall. “Please ask again.”

“I asked you about Gordon, if you knew how he became what he became.”

In formulating my answer, I consider the Buddhist criteria for “right speech”: is it the truth; is it the right time; will it be helpful? On one hand, no honest response brings Tex closer to Gordon finding “a nice girl.” On the other, the family’s experience with ALS surely has taught Tex about living with uncertainty. I offer, “Though not the focus of my dissertation or book, the

question of what causes someone to be attracted to persons of the same and/or a different sex drives much research on sexual orientation. After more than a century of investigation, nobody really knows.”

“There is no answer,” he reflects.

“Are certain explanations more acceptable to you than others? If it were genetic, for example, does that—”

“I understand it might be genetic.” He pauses before adding, “But not on my side.”

After a drive along Tex’s jogging route, we return to the condo. Marilyn indicates that the group will reconvene for dinner at 7:15 p.m.

Gordon has arranged a visit with his godfather, Bob, and Bob’s second wife, Eve. Eve’s daughter lived with Gordon for a time in Tampa, prompting him to disclose to their family before coming out to his own brother or parents. On the drive to their place, I ask Gordon about the time spent with his mom during my session with Tex. “Had a drink. We talked—not about the project, of course. She made *no* reference to the interview.”

“I Hope the Family Can Get Back on Track”

We arrive at a small complex of two-story seaside condos. A tall, broad-shouldered bear opens the door. “Hey, Bob!” Gordon greets with a hug.

“Gooordon!” rasps the alto voice of Eve. “Let me show you the remodel.” Wide windows and decks take full advantage of the waterfront views. Gordon and Bob decide to stroll the neighborhood while Dave and I set up for a recorded session with Eve in their kitchen. I review my list of questions while Dave troubleshoots Eve’s lavalier microphone.

Once the audio is rectified, I ask, “How long have you known Gordon?”

“For at least 20 years,” says Eve. “Gordon’s father and my husband are cousins. Bob lost his first wife. He has two boys; I have two girls. Gordon used to schlep all the kids around.”

“Once you knew of Gordon’s sexual orientation, did you have any thoughts or feelings?”

Eve tugs at a patch of her wispy sun-lightened hair. “I was very concerned because of his father. This is something I would say to Tex. I’m not going behind anybody’s back. His father always talked about his sexual prowess. And I thought, Oh my god. Here is a man who liked to talk about how many times a night he could do it!”

To confirm my sense of the family dynamics, I ask, “So you and Tex have never talked about Gordon being gay?”

“No, nor has Marilyn mentioned it to me. We sometimes have good girly talks.” Eve deliberates a moment. “Never about issues with her children, though.”

“In terms of your family network, what would be the best outcome of the project?”

Eve props her elbows onto the table, resting her chin on folded hands. “Gordon recently came to a wedding—the first time he was amongst other family members with Todd. He had to be nervous. He had to have angst. What I’m hoping is that next time, he will come just as if he was with ... Karen, his wife. That he feels validated. I think that the family can be changed.

“At the same time,” Eve observes, “ALS has caused Gordon’s parents to keep very much to themselves. I hope the family can get back on track, especially with the journey that she’s on.”

When Bob and Gordon return, I check my watch, surprised that it reads five minutes to seven. To Bob, I say, “Looks like you and I will have to postpone until after dinner.”

“No problem,” Bob replies. “We agreed to drive Gordon’s folks. See you at the

restaurant.”

“You Don’t Have to Live Here”

As Gordon swings into a parking space in front of the strip mall Italian restaurant, Tex strides over, approaches my door, and opens it. “We need to talk,” he says firmly, leading me by my bicep into the adjacent space.

My mind spins back to 1996 and Gordon’s description of Tex: “When he does get mad, you know it. You don’t piss my dad off.” I brace myself.

Hands clasping my shoulders, he asks, “Why are you speaking with Bob?”

I feel like a teenager two hours past curfew. “Uh ... G-Gord reported that Bob and Eve were key figures in his growing up. He wanted our time here to include them.”

“*Why?*” he demands.

I swallow hard. “Maybe Gordon should answer that.” Later, I will read Steven L. Vanderstaay’s account of his efforts to aid participants in his family ethnography. “[F]ieldwork is not social work...” he counsels, “well-meaning efforts to help can easily go awry.”⁶

Face flush, Tex wipes sweat from his brow. “You don’t understand what you’re stirring up! You don’t have to live here. I live here. I may have to get into fights—physical fights!”

I resist the urge to ask why and with whom. *Diffuse the situation*. “Mr. Bernstein, if you don’t want me to interview Bob, I won’t.” I do not cop to the session I just wrapped with Eve.

“That’s up to you!” he snaps, walking away.

I follow him. “No, I’m leaving it up to you. You’re right. I don’t have to live here. Talk to Gordon. The two of you will decide.”

Tex paces the sidewalk while I move quickly inside. I find Gordon, Dave, Bob, Eve, and

⁶ See Vanderstaay (2005, 406).

Marilyn surrounding our table. “What’s going on?” asks Marilyn. Then, to Gordon, “Where’s your father?”

“You need to speak with him,” I tell Gordon.

Peering out the front window, Eve observes, “He does look pretty pissed.”

With a sigh, Gordon heads outside. He’s gone for what feels like half an hour but is probably no more than five minutes. When Gordon rejoins the group, he winks at me from across the table and mouths, *It’s okay*.

The mood turns light. Bottles of wine are drunk, jokes cracked, laughter shared. The subject of this project never arises.

As the waitress clears our plates, Marilyn motions to Eve. “I could use a cigarette.”

“Join us?” Eve invites. We exit the restaurant, leaving the men at the table.

Eve fishes a pack out of Marilyn’s purse. She places a cigarette in Marilyn’s mouth and lights it, then takes one for herself. Eve hands me the pack. I haven’t had a social smoke since college, but the cumulative impact of the day’s events makes the occasion feel right for one. I sit on the sidewalk at Marilyn’s feet. “Mrs. Bernstein, is Tex okay?”

“He’ll be fine,” Marilyn assures me. Then, with her usual cheer, “It’s been wonderful! It was great having Gordon here for my birthday.”

When the men emerge, our gendered groups converge around the Bernsteins’ car. Gordon and Tex help Marilyn into the front seat. “Bye, Ma,” he says, kissing her tenderly.

As we walk Tex to the driver’s side, he spins around and opens his arms, pulling me close. The sudden contact jars me, but I settle into the warm space between his neck and shoulder. “Thanks so much,” I say. “I hope to see you both again soon.”

“Maybe down in Florida,” he softly suggests. I step out of the way, making room for

Gordon. “Gord,” Tex says, lips to his son’s cheek, “so glad you came.”

Fathers Lost and Found

On the way back to Bob and Eve’s, Gordon, Dave, and I process the pre-dinner confrontation with Tex. “What happened?” asks Dave.

Gordon reports, “I told my dad, ‘You said something to Lisa. Now say it to me.’ Obviously he was uncomfortable with the project. He fidgeted, looking at everything but me. My dad worries not about his son but about how my being gay affects *his* life and what other people will think—as if the retired people he knows will be reading an academic work on gay men!”

He pauses. “In his defense, I consider my own experience. When just starting to come out to myself, I would go downtown and try to pick up the gay newspaper. I would drive around, literally for an hour or two, until no one was in sight. I would leave the car running and dart out—as if the whole world were watching me. That’s what my dad thinks.

“I talked about being a good son: ‘You should feel fortunate. I do as much as I can for you. When my sister struggled, I stepped in. I ask nothing from you.’

“I told him that I believe in this project. He couldn’t understand why I involved Bob and Eve. I replied, ‘Dad, they accept me—much more than you do.’ He said, ‘I like Todd.’ I told him, ‘I know, and Todd likes you a lot. But you don’t see us as a couple, and you don’t realize the struggles I’ve been through.’ He said, ‘I will have to fight people if they say something.’” In what sounds like utter disbelief, Gordon continues, “I set him straight: ‘Dad, Bob and Eve have known for *years*. They’ve known longer than *you* have.’ It was an epiphany. Still, my gut feeling is that it will never be discussed.”

I absorb Gordon’s account. “I feel sad to think that may be true. When writing about

friendship as method,⁷ I have advocated putting fieldwork relationships on par with the project. That system of relationships has expanded from our network of friends to include your families of origin. I honor the relationships I'm building with your parents. I feel such compassion for them as ALS brings struggle and suffering to their lives. That both consented to be interviewed at this difficult time stuns me.

“Your father proved quite candid in our session, expressing his discomfort with male intimacy ... and his wish that you could change.” Gordon exhales. I hesitate, wondering how best—or even *if*—I should broach what was, for me, the most unexpected common theme of the interviews. Gently, I say, “Gordon ... your parents probed for sensitive information they could have gotten from you years ago. Both asked me if you'd been sexually abused.”

He clenches his jaw. “It shows their assumptions.”

“Your father also seems to fear being portrayed negatively. More than anything, I don't want to make the family situation worse for you.”

“Don't worry about that,” Gordon insists. “Sometimes it's not totally accepted. You have to show that. Hopefully my dad said good things too. I don't know if he talked about Todd—”

“In a very positive light,” I say. “But your father also joked that, for him, the best outcome of this project would be: ‘Let him find a nice girl.’”

Gordon shakes his head. “That's a slap to both Todd and me. But it's also a great line.”

Dave clears his throat and begins speaking quietly. “My father died in 1994. All my adult life, he wanted to get closer, and I pushed him away. As a gay man, I felt like I couldn't identify with him. More than once he told me, ‘Don't let that get between us; I don't.’ Still I resisted. I never had the openness with my father that you have with yours right now. I watched you today, Gord, just walking down the street with him, plucking a hair from his shirt. I never had such

⁷ See the Appendix and Tillmann-Healy (1998, 2001, 2003).

intimacy with my dad, and I'll never be able to. He wanted to be close in that way. I couldn't offer him that. So that's something that I learned about you on this trip: you're very forgiving. Your father frustrates you, but you find a way to connect, to enjoy him anyway."

"I Think It Will Stay Exactly the Same"

We arrive at Bob and Eve's condo. Dave resets the video camera while Bob and I take seats in the kitchen. Plugged in and wired up, we begin: "Bob, what are your observations about how Gordon's coming out has unfolded in his immediate family?"

"It's something that really hasn't been spoken about," Bob tells me. "My cousin Tex puts out a macho image. He certainly isn't happy about Gordon being gay, and it's something that both Tex and Marilyn try to hide.

"This changed the dynamics of their family. It pushed Gordon away. With him in Florida, Tex and Marilyn don't have to accept it as much. If he lived here, I'm not sure Tex would want Gordon to come around that much, especially with Todd. Tex wouldn't want other people to know."

"You've never had a conversation with Tex about this?"

"Never."

"Marilyn?"

"Never."

"In your mind, what would be the best outcome of the project?"

Bob shrugs. "So much energy goes into Marilyn's illness. I don't know if this project will make any impact."

I then ask, "Do you have any fears or concerns? I'm thinking about what happened with

Tex at the restaurant.”

“I don’t think it will get worse,” Bob speculates. “I don’t think it will get better. I think it will stay exactly the same. I doubt Tex will say a word to me about anything that’s transpired.”

“Ready for a drink?” calls Eve from the deck. Dave, Bob, and I join her and Gordon there.

Eve turns to her husband. “Maybe you should talk to Tex about Gordon.”

“I’ll follow Tex’s lead,” he responds.

With resignation, Gordon says, “Then you’ll never speak of it.”

“That’s my prediction,” Bob affirms.

“Some Roads Lead to Dead Ends”

Later that night, Dave films Gordon and me on the Atlantic City boardwalk. When I ask for reflections on the day, Gordon reports feeling pained by what arose in my interviews with his parents, especially his father’s stated hope that he’ll “find a nice girl.” Gordon then comments on “the different feeling in the air” at Bob and Eve’s, a welcome contrast to that surrounding his parents, whom he characterizes as “so apprehensive, so uncomfortable, so awkward.”

I return to his parents’ questions about sexual abuse. Then, tentatively, “Your dad told me about an experience he had in adolescence of being attacked in a sexualized way by two older boys. Has he ever shared that with you?”

“Never,” Gordon says, no emotion visible on his face. “He won’t share what happened *today*, let alone something that happened 60 years ago! I ask questions, and he won’t answer. I make observations, and he either won’t respond or he’ll change the subject to something light.”

Then, referring to his coming out, “My dad has known for five years, and I’ve made *zero* progress.”

“What would it take to make progress?”

Shaking his head, he says, “I don’t think it’s possible. He has that right. You can’t force acceptance. On my end now, it’s *not* don’t ask/don’t tell. Every time we get together, I’m with my partner. They see our home, pictures of us traveling. That actually makes it more frustrating.”

I lean back against the railing, a mass forming in my throat. “If your parents weren’t doing the work when your mom was healthy, I’m not sure what will motivate them to do the work now. I feel, not so much surprised, as sad.”

“It’s very sad. I’ve really opened my life to them, but I don’t see how that dynamic will change. Some roads lead to dead ends.”

Ethnographic Grief

Gordon, Dave, and I resume life in Florida. I plan to compose a draft, to provide all participants a copy, and to invite them to workshop it collaboratively, but the new academic year squeezes out time to write, and Marilyn’s ALS descent accelerates. In June 2005, Marilyn catches a summer cold, the kind most of us ride out with a box of Kleenex and a couple doses of Nyquil. Her chest and diaphragm muscles lack the strength to cough fluid from her lungs. On Friday, July 1, Marilyn passes away. She was 62, her last birthday the one we celebrated in Atlantic City.

I saw Marilyn on exactly two occasions: following a softball tournament in 1996 and for this project in 2004. We shared two meals, three bottles of wine, one casino visit, and one interview session. In ways that tend to matter, we were not close. Acquaintances at best.

And yet: I know when and where Marilyn Bernstein was born. I know she grew up in tenement housing. I know about her stern father and her beloved gay uncle. I know how she met her husband, Tex. I know that her son, my dear friend, entered this world during a blackout. I know that after Gordon came out to her, she said to her macho husband: “This is our son. We love him. If he had to keep it bottled in, he’d probably kill himself.” I know she wanted to die before having to be put on a ventilator, and I know that she did die on her own terms: no nursing home, no machines.

I have been a vicarious member of the Bernstein family since 1995. I have pored over details of Marilyn’s life and relationships. Cycle after cycle of conversation, field notes, interviews, transcripts, and drafts.

What do we call a relationship constructed from hours of listening to the recorded voice of a woman’s son, of converting tape to transcript and transcript to narrative? Parasocial? In the nine years Marilyn and I “knew” each other, I surely had many more thoughts of her than she of me. Still, when Marilyn died, the loss felt more social than “para.”

Who counts—or gets counted—as a legitimate mourner? Family members, even estranged ones, count. Friends count. Friends of family members stand at the periphery of the inner circle of grief. Where does the ethnographer stand? What of her grief?

Tuesday, July 5, 2005, 1:00 p.m. Marilyn’s memorial service begins in Atlantic City. Seated at my computer, I ask her for strength: for Gordon and Todd, for Tex, for other family members and friends, and for me. I return to the transcript of my session with Marilyn and embark on writing this piece.

The ethnographer grieves, often alone, in the solitude of writing spaces as she engages

and reengages accounts of lived experience, theirs and hers. Sometimes she shares her sense of loss with fellow travelers: friends, participants, colleagues, readers. And sometimes, fellow travelers take the grieving ethnographer into their arms, inviting her into their inner circle.

April 20, 2006: outside the Ft. Lauderdale baggage claim, I spot Gordon's approaching Lexus RX. He pulls over and steps out to load my bag. Enclosing me between his broad shoulders, he says, "I'm really sorry about you and Doug."

I sigh into his chest. "Thirteen years into a relationship, it's a profound experience to wake up in a half-empty house."

After a sandwich and pint of Stella at Hamburger Mary's, we head to Gordon and Todd's place, a typical South Florida home: one level, block construction, built in the 1950s but renovated to reflect their urban style of stone surfaces, metal accents, and modern art. He and I get comfortable in their living room and workshop a draft of this piece. Gordon says, "I had hoped that reading the sections based on my parents' interviews would call up more emotion, but I guess in order for that to happen, they would have had to *express* more emotion."

I ask if he feels ready to share the work with his father, Bob, and Eve. "I feel ready, but I guarantee you'll never convince my father to sit down like this and go through it page by page."

"What about a group session with you, Tex, Bob, and Eve?"

Gordon cocks his head. "You're kidding, right?"

"Do you think your parents spoke of our visit after we left?"

"They may have spoken about the *visit*, but I doubt they talked at all about the project."

"Not with each other? Not with Bob and Eve?"

Throwing up his hands, he exclaims, "Absolutely not!"

“In the months since your mom died, how have things been between you and Tex?”

Gordon rubs the stubble on his chin. “Great, actually. As you know, my dad has an apartment about a half-hour from here. He spends the night almost every Saturday. We drink, have dinner, hang out by the pool. He adores Todd, and Todd already talks about how much he’ll miss my dad when he returns to Jersey for the summer.”

The next afternoon, Gordon has a closing on one of his listed properties. I am reading in a lounge chair by the pool when Tex arrives looking tan and lean as ever. I stand to hug him, “Mr. Bernstein, I’m sorry to say that, since we last saw each other, we both have lost our spouses, albeit under different circumstances.” I tell him that my husband moved out 10 days before. “Please know how very sorry I was—and am—about Marilyn’s death.”

Tex clears his throat and says, “I need to change into my swim trunks.”

When he returns, Tex and I talk about the transition to living alone. I report, “I’m now making coffee for one, reading the paper by myself, having no one’s return to look forward to in the evenings. If you don’t mind: how long before you began getting used to sleeping by yourself?”

“I’m not used to it,” he responds. “I like having someone in bed with me. That has less to do with sex than with wanting someone to hold. I’ve dated a bit since Marilyn passed, but it’s not the same. I don’t believe I’ll ever marry or fall in love again. I get a lump in my throat whenever I think or speak of Marilyn.” Changing the subject, he asks, “What brings you down here?”

I hesitate. “Um ... Gordon and I met to edit a draft of the narrative. Would you be willing to read it and offer us your feedback and suggestions?”

“I’m always happy to talk to you,” he says, “but not for an interview.”

Tex gives me a once-over. “Ya know, you’re a beautiful girl. I don’t understand your husband. If you were 35 years older, I’d ask you out myself.”

Gordon, having returned home and overheard, calls from inside, “You don’t waste any time!”

“What? She’s a lovely girl!”

Sarcastically, Gordon banter, “And that’s the most important thing right now!”

“You’re an expert on women all the sudden?”

Their repartee picks up speed and volume. Both father and son clearly relish the exchange. I lay back in my lounge chair, enjoying them enjoying each other. It is not a Hollywood resolution—Mom recovers from illness, Dad grand marshals gay pride parade—but I’ll take humor and love in the face of loss any day.

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