

LETTER FROM A GREAT-UNCLE

By Richard Hall

THE BUTTERSCOTCH PRINCE
COUPLINGS, A BOOK OF STORIES
LETTER FROM A GREAT-UNCLE & OTHER STORIES
THREE PLAYS FOR A GAY THEATER

**Letter from a Great-Uncle
& Other Stories**

by
Richard Hall

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For
Byrne Foyne

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Author's Note

The stories in this collection, only two of which have been previously published, need little introduction. They came out of many times, moods, places; whatever merit they possess cannot be increased by a description of my reasons for writing them.

However, the title story, "Letter from a Great-Uncle," deserves a note on its sources. The tale is based partly on the life of my own great-uncle. Like Harris Belansky in the story, he was born to Polish immigrant parents in Texas just after the Civil War, was homosexual, and had to leave home because of a sex scandal. He settled in New York City and lived there all his adult life, working at Stern Brothers, a department store on 23rd Street, eventually rising to a managerial position. He was an avid theatergoer and died at the Hotel Langwell, just off Times Square, in 1936, when I was ten. I have many memories of him from his visits to our home in White Plains and was especially aware of a bond between us. Even at an early age I knew, in some unfathomable way, that we had deep things in common.

Because of this bond, or heritage, I have long wanted to reconstruct my great-uncle's life, trying to imagine the crucial events that forced him into exile from Texas. In attempting this I have drawn on certain family traditions and records, including his own father's participation in the Civil War and later founding of a dry-goods store. I have also used public documents of the time, and have relied on the research of certain social/sexual historians, including Havelock Ellis and Martin Duberman. I am especially indebted to Jonathan Katz, whose two pioneer works, *Gay American History* (1976) and *Gay/Lesbian Almanac* (1983), gave me valuable clues to the period, and who was kind enough to read my manuscript and make helpful suggestions for change.

The photo on the cover of this book is of my great-uncle and was taken, I believe, for his high-school graduation. It is reproduced here with permission of the Austin-Travis County Collection, Austin Public Library.

LETTER FROM A GREAT-UNCLE

Letter from a Great-Uncle

The letter was a family tradition. It existed but no one knew where. When discovered it would shed light on certain mysteries—why Uncle Harris spent time in the famous state asylum in Gideon, what scandal lay behind his exile from Texas, why he passed his life up north among Yankees.

He was actually my mother's uncle, my own great-uncle. He was an old man when I knew him—tall, spare, blue-eyed, with a head like a polished knob. He carried an amber-headed cane, wore spats and a pince-nez. He spoke in an elegant wheeze that had almost erased his Texas accent—fifty years in New York City had left their mark. He was, in short, a dandy.

He often visited our home in White Plains, a suburb of the city, for Sunday dinner. He came chiefly to see his sister, my grandmother, who lived with us. He was also fond of my mother. To my father, who despised him, he was cool and polite. But of course I remember most clearly his attentions to me.

He would often make me sit beside him and tell him about my school, friends, games, stamp collection. (He too was a collector, of theater programs; he had attended first-nights on Broadway all his life.) Of course, I loved this. Grown-ups tended to focus on my older sister, a dazzling creature who would do one of her specialty dances at the slightest provocation. But Uncle Harris preferred my company. He would tell me little stories about his own childhood, which I listened to eagerly, looking for clues that might help me get through my own. Once, shortly before his death, he promised to tell me the whole story when I was older. I instantly demanded to hear it all, at once.

He died in 1936, at the age of 72, in the cluttered room of the Hotel Langwell near Times Square where he had lived for almost half a cen-

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ture. I was very upset when I heard the news. I remember quite clearly that I said to my best friend, "Uncle Harris was the only one who ever loved me." I now believe that this statement, absurd on the face of it, reflects a deeper truth. Although I was only ten at the time of his death, I knew in some unfathomable way that we had important things in common. He understood me in a way that no one else did; hence his "love" was more valuable than that of other, less perceptive relations.

Over the years my memory of Uncle Harris faded. I had my own life to live, after all. Occasionally I would think about his collection of theatrical programs, probably quite valuable, and the famous letter. I decided that these must have been among his personal effects acquired by some cousins in El Paso. I made no effort to trace them.

But not long after reaching my fiftieth birthday, I found myself thinking about Uncle Harris again. Certain remarks, uttered more than forty years before, rose from a jumble of memories. "They used to call him Miss Priss at home." "There was a terrible scandal and he had to leave Texas." "Daddy hated him, he was an awful sissie." I made inquiries. Yes, Uncle Harris had been homosexual. It must run in the family. Nobody knew what had happened back in Gideon, it was too long ago.

And then, one evening as I was planning my annual trip to San Francisco, I remembered his old promise to tell me about his childhood. The promise had not been kept and now I was curious. Who was Uncle Harris? What kind of life had he led? The next morning I realized what I had to do. I had to go to Gideon and try to find out. I called my travel agent and arranged for a detour to Texas enroute to California. It seemed suddenly, as I hung up the phone, that this journey, this engagement, had been hanging over me for four decades.

After a great deal of telephoning, I discovered that the personal papers of Harris Belansky had been sent to the Gideon Public Library, where they comprised part of the Travis County collection of historical materials. I would be welcome to examine them. I allotted two days for this—surely enough to turn up whatever documents had survived.

I confess that my first reaction, on a stifling day in June, to the four cartons of material put at my disposal in a carrel in the public library in Gideon was one of dismay. Followed by intense boredom. It would take me a week to read through all this! My trip to San Francisco, with

many pleasant diversions planned, would be delayed. Besides, the cartons contained heaps of material that had nothing to do with Uncle Harris—wedding and obituary notices, ledgers and licenses, business contracts, land sales, ladies' seminary reports, dance programs, all relating to other members of my mother's family. I really wasn't interested.

And then I discovered the photograph.

It was of a young man with clear blue eyes, a Cupid's-bow mouth, angelic hair and pointy ears. He was elegantly dressed in a high stiff collar, flowered cravat with a stickpin, jacket of heavy worsted with a yellow rose (for Texas) in his lapel. A high-school graduation picture, I thought, probably dating to 1882.

As I continued rummaging in the cartons, I propped the photo in front of me. From time to time I scanned it. Each time I found it more appealing. In the sweetness of the gaze, in the guilelessness of the tilted lips, I heard a faint plea, a subtle request: *Know me, hear me*. I had come a long way to do just that, I thought, but was not having much success.

By nightfall of the second day it was obvious that the famous letter wasn't here. It had probably never existed, I thought, piling everything back into the cartons. Except for the photo, which I planned to have copied, I had discovered nothing of interest. It was when I was standing up, stretching, that the sticker on the outside of one carton caught my eye. *Donated by Mrs. Minna Frees, 1974*. The name rang a bell—a cousin who lived in Gideon and had sent Christmas cards until my mother's death. I had never met her. Was she still alive?

The curator informed me that Cousin Minna Frees was around 80 and partly blind. I called from the hotel that evening. The voice on the other end was faint and querulous. My name meant nothing but when I mentioned my mother, there was a long pause and then the voice grew shrill. "I remember you when you were a little boy! Will you come and see me?" After a moment's hesitation—it would mean postponing my departure—I said I would, next morning.

Minna Frees lived in the new section of town—handsome brick homes, two-car garages, buried lawn sprinklers, swimming pools. A Mexican maid opened the door, then ushered me into the living room. A small woman was sitting forward in a wing chair. Her eyes were large, black, unfocused. When I went to her she pulled me down. "Kissin' cousins," she breathed. Her skin was dry and cold. It

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struck me that her spirit was stronger than her body—that, perhaps, she was in charge of a corpse.

As we talked I realized she was no ordinary widow. She had traveled widely, sat on bank and charity boards, supported all the arts and raised three distinguished children. As she spoke of these things, and I spoke of myself, I had the feeling that she could see me quite clearly despite her defects of sight. A moment later I wondered if I had merely succumbed to the delusion of all homecomings: that we are known in our blood, our flesh, our prehistory, which may substitute for more particular matters.

At any rate, after the maid had brought in coffee, Cousin Minna settled back and said, “Now tell me what brings you back to Gideon.”

As I spoke of Uncle Harris, and my curiosity about him, she kept her dark eyes on me. I had the feeling she was hearing much more than I cared to say. Finally, stumbling slightly, I came to the letter. For some reason I found myself deprecating it. “There was this story—my mother always used to talk about a letter. I think she did it to tease us.” I laughed nervously. “Nobody really believed her.”

“Oh my.” Her voice was light and high. “I thought everybody had forgotten all about that letter.”

My throat was suddenly dry. “You mean there is a letter?”

“Of course.”

“Well . . . why didn’t she get a copy of it?”

Cousin Minna gave a harsh laugh. “Your mother? The Yankee branch of the family? Why should they? They all hated Gideon.”

It was true. My mother detested her origins. It suddenly struck me that her flight to the north in the 1920s had duplicated that of Uncle Harris, earlier than her own by forty years. I wondered if the relatives who remained, like Cousin Minna, considered this a betrayal.

“May I ask . . .” I was having trouble controlling my voice, “. . . where the letter is now?”

Her black eyes searched my face. Again I had the impression she could read me clearly. She lifted a shuddery hand to her face as if to wipe away cobwebs. “You know my mother Jennie was Uncle Harris’ favorite sister.” She paused. I wondered if I was being tested in some way. Did I have to prove myself loyal? Worthy? And then none of that mattered because she picked up the bell on the table at her side and rang. “Since you came all this way,” she murmured.

The maid returned. “Alicia, please show our guest to the library.”

She turned her dark gaze toward me. "You will find an album on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. In it an envelope, addressed to Jennie, marked Private."

She reached into the crevice of her chair and brought up some tinted glasses. Behind them, she looked frail, diminished. "I will wait for you here," she said.

She waved aside my stammered thanks as if they too were cobwebs. I followed Alicia into the library, standing around while she turned on the air conditioner. When I was alone I searched the bookcases—there were four. The album was buried beneath some huge editions of Milton and Dante with illustrations by Gustave Doré. The envelope, thick and brown, lay sandwiched between two heavy cardboard pages, each mounted with photos of Uncle Harris as a boy. I recognized the innocent gaze, the pointy ears, the Cupid's-bow mouth. But to my surprise, the envelope was sealed with red wax. The seal looked very old. I wondered why it was still unbroken.

It might sound odd but I sat for a long time before opening the envelope. Now that the moment was here, I was filled with anxiety. Suppose the letter was trivial or evasive? Suppose it was full of lies or self-justification? Then there was the question of privacy. Even though I was curious, something in me recoiled from hearing confessions—especially those to which I had not been invited. But then, as I was sitting there paralyzed, an old conversation echoed in my memory. In White Plains, a lifetime ago, Uncle Harris had promised to tell me his story when I was older. Well, I was certainly old enough now. Perhaps I had the right, after all.

With a deep breath, in anticipation of pain, I broke the red seal. The sheaf of papers inside was embossed with the gothic tower and the legend of the Hotel Langwell. The first page was dated November 26, 1936, and was addressed to Jennie. I began to read.

I am writing this at a time when I imagine all of you are sitting down to the Thanksgiving Feast. I will be alone although I have had several invitations. Both Mr. Hubbell from the store and Josephine Sims, Asa's spinster sister in Staten Island, have asked me. But Dr. Burwell says I am not to exert myself so far. I will sit here by the window looking out on 44th Street and write to you, Sister. The city is quiet because of the Feast and I will have peace to think. I prefer that to traveling about nowadays.

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