



1985

Season's Greetings

1986

Well folks, my last xmas letter a couple years back is a hard act to follow. All those juicy stories, all that hilarity so skillfully served up for your jaded amusement.

What a pity life can't always be a brothel of fun --- not even for a whore monger like me. Events alternately lift our spirits, then swat them down.

Had there been a xmas letter last year, you wouldn't have wanted to receive <sup>one</sup> it was exceedingly considerate of me to simply leave you wondering about the fates of that strange cast of zeroxed images who had so titilated your imagination.

Let's see. Where were we, decades - no, it must have been lightyears ago - in Dec. '84? I was whining about working harder and earning less. But, literally as I wrote, an army of last-minute Christmas shoppers descended on the store, stuffing several thousand unexpected dollars into my xmas stocking.

Once again, my annual letter was outdated and inaccurate even as it rolled off the presses -- another fleeting snapshot of my life leaving even more false impressions.

Gorgeous George (the young thin one, not the tired old tv wrestler) was living with me. Blinded by lust, hungry for romance, delusional with desire, I'd run off with him to the Dominican Republic. And, predictably, he'd run off with those hot native boys.

Marsha was out spreading "joy to the world" at \$10, or less, per throw, being repeatedly arrested and locked up for her humanitarian efforts.

Willie had moved uptown, leaving an illustrious career of <sup>having</sup> working his way up from stripper to manager of NYC's biggest male burlesque theater behind.

So, 1985 commenced pleasantly enough. George & I spent New Year's Eve in bed, making love as the ball fell. For the next several months we got along fairly well despite his periodic drinking episodes & my own predilection for possessiveness, jealousy and insecurity.

Willie steadily progressed in his new legit job at the card shop. Ever so slowly, he was whittling away at the pathetic illiteracy which so severely limited him.

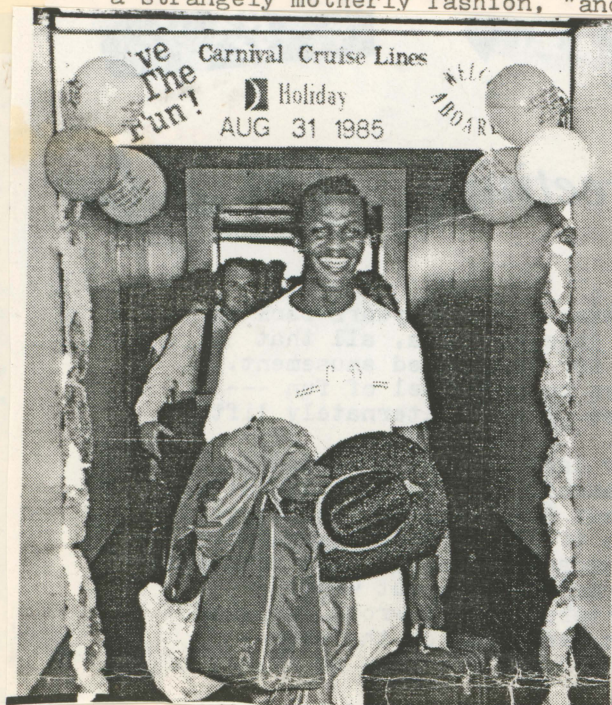
Marsha was <sup>whisked</sup> off to Beverly Hills. There, once again she was enjoying a "soul sister's" life - alternately lounging by the pool and being chauffeured through the countryside in a new Porsche by her young hustler friend who'd developed a long term relationship with a wealthy, somewhat older man. When summer '85 came, it was Marsha - not I - who dashed off for a Caribbean cruise.

With no living expenses and nearly \$500 in monthly disability pouring in, Marsha had finally foresaken her wicked ways. After all, her young friend - now 23 - whom she'd first taken under her wing nine years earlier while they'd both been living on & working the streets together, now had plenty of money.

He took Marsha on shopping trips and bought her clothes, treated her to movies and rock concerts, paid her way into discos, gave her almost anything she wanted. Marsha wasn't "a poor colored girl" any more. She didn't have to hustle.

"How do you do it?" I bluntly asked Marsha one day. "How does an old, broken-down, 40-yr-old whore like you end up with these handsome young men fighting over you? Flying you back and forth across the country. Buying you clothes and gifts. Taking you on Caribbean cruises and to discos."

"You get them while they're young," Marsha explained in a strangely motherly fashion, "and you help them out."



GEORGE HELPING ME CELEBRATE MY BIRTHDAY, FEB. '85

We all know it's "darkest before dawn," but who except a survivor of nuclear war expects a catastrophe or eclipse on a sunny day? Perhaps some equilibrium in the universe demands a teardrop fall (-) every time a burst of laughter (+) echoes through life.

The shit commenced hitting the fan, as a vulgarian might appropriately phrase it, during the summer of '85. Adversity after adversity started falling on me and mine. A personal nuclear winter began that summer and lasted for over a year.

George & I quarrelled. A comfortable lifestyle, semi-luxurious apartment and NYC's most unique lampshop may foster friendship, intimacy, even affection --- but all three are no match for a young man's innate longing for freedom, nor for that universal desire for romantic adventure. George fled the shop's searing summer heat for his folks' cottage on the Jersey shore.

John Klar, whose temper tantrums had always been troublesome became increasingly irritable. Years of virtually running Uplift himself when the shop was much smaller had understandably left him feeling the place was his as much as, or even more than, it was mine.

A spring outburst left the front window in shambles and brought a battalion of cops rushing in asking if I wanted to press charges. Faced with the alternative of doing all those lamps myself, I'd deferred, accepted John's apology & payment for the breakage, and let him stay on.

But a simmering struggle of wills was underway. My lists of "work-to-be-done" were ignored. Endless social visits by his friends and potsmoking in the work area continue despite my protests.

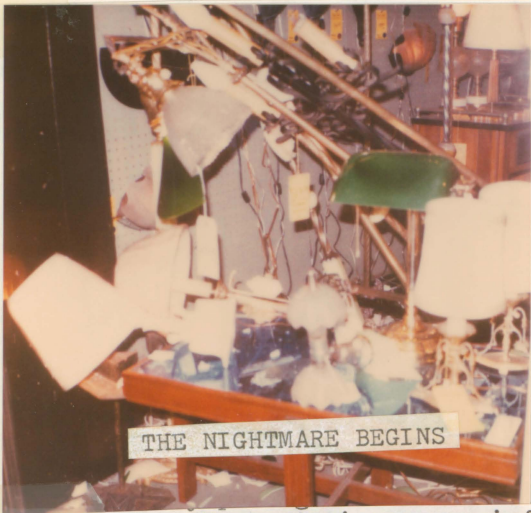
"Lay me off & let me collect unemployment if you don't like the way things are going." He'd blurted during one argument.

To his amazement, I accepted his suggestion, assuming a couple months rest would get us past the torturous summer heat, give him an obviously needed rest, and allow the intolerable tension which had developed over the last few months to subside.

The next morning, he called from the shop, threatened "to cave in my head" if I so much as came in that day. By the time I reached the city, he had smashed up his work area, broken a couple thousand dollars worth of shades, jimmied the register and given away several floor lamps to passers-by.

As my good luck would have it, as he was attempting to set a pile of boxes on fire inside, a neighborhood construction worker happened by, saw what he was doing and stopped him by punching him out.

The outcome? Three thousand dollars in expenses. Legal charges filed resulting in his being arrested, jailed for the night, --ultimately being sentenced to a year's probation and forced to pay \$500 for the damage he'd done. His many years as my protege were over.



THE NIGHTMARE BEGINS



MY PRIVATE SECURITY GUARD SHOWS OFF THE OUTFIT HE BOUGHT WITH THE REWARD MONEY I GAVE HIM FOR HELPING THE POLICE APPREHEND KLAR.

Such stories are painful. That's why there was no letter last year. Convention demands holiday greetings carry only good cheer, gleeful tidings, good will toward all men. But all in life not just "good cheer."

Years ago, I started this letter to keep in touch with those few special friends I'd not found time to talk with lately. It was my way of sharing life's experiences -- sacrificing privacy to display trust, to show affection, to avoid losing contact over time. Little did I foresee it becoming a living diary, something which would take on a literary life all its own - kept for years, sometimes even being reproduced and passed on to friends of friends. But, I wander...

In the fall of '85 Marsha's impending return from California was put on hold. Her young friend had contracted Aids. The partying ended abruptly. From now on, Marsha would spend her days in a hospital room keeping a tireless vigil, being both faithful companion and assistant nursemaid -- a common street whore transformed by tragedy and friendship into a modern day Florence Nightengale.

"The doctors gave Jamie only a week to live when he first went into the hospital," Marsha recalled later, "but he was a real fighter. He lasted four months."

Nine-hundred thousand dollars worth of medical treatment and four months of hospital care had only prolonged his suffering.

Jamie & Willie had always been Marsha's two "extra special" pals. A little bit of Marsha seemed to have died with Jamie. She returned to Hoboken more subdued, quieter, scarred and subtly changed in some indescribable way.

"Oh, I have to go out tonight," Marsha insists whenever I suggest she stay home for the evening. "I'm not promised tomorrow. I have to go out and have a good time for all those girls who aren't around anymore."

Klar's absence and the increased tempo of fall business demanded extra hours and seven days a week at the shop. All work and no play was making Randy both a very tired and very dull boy.

George had fallen into disfavor, partially of his own doing, partially because everyone suffered when we fought--which was often.

When given the ultimatum: "George goes, or we all go!" I was certainly a crushed romantic, but no fool. George got another job.

A couple months later, just before xmas, he met someone his own age, left Hoboken and set up housekeeping with his new flame out on Long Island. What wonderful timing!

During the summer and into the fall I would have been completely alone if Malu, an old friend dating back to the late 60's, hadn't moved in "temporarily."

We'd not seen each other often the past few years. Off and on, we'd dated a bit --stretching back to the days when he was an East Village hippie selling flowers from a pushcart in Cooper Union Square and I was the nation's leading slogan-button tycoon.

Malu was a godsend. Sweet. Domestic. A great cook. A kind heart. The kind of person I should have married. Except, he (but everyone says "she") was embarrassingly obvious. Even lesbians occasionally mistook Malu for a woman, even after hours of talk, and tried to pick her up.

Besides, there was a certain cultural/social gulf which separated us. Still, it troubled me that I had someone so beautiful, someone so terribly nice, someone so obviously willing to become involved, living with me but who I chose to reject.

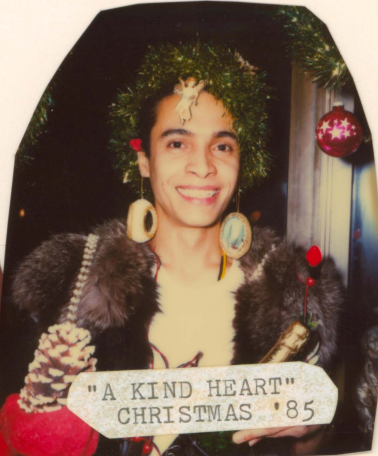
I knew to bed down with Malu would be to end up marrying her. And that I knew I could never do. My petty, superficial, prejudicial bourgeois values prevented me from becoming too domestically involved with a "third world woman."

"You can be my housekeeper," I confessed to her ashamedly, "but never my wife. I like you too much to lead you on and hurt you."

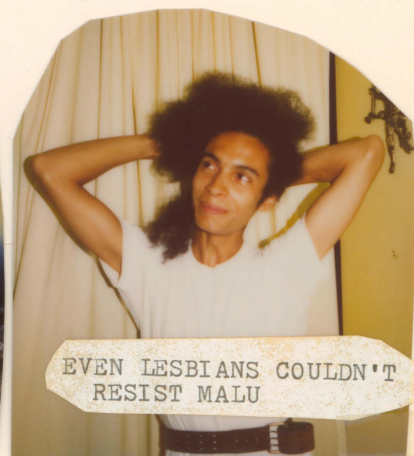
I hardly deserved the care, the concern and the undemanding sweet devotion Malu so generously proffered throughout the fall and on into what would be the worst winter of my life.



MALU - "SO BEAUTIFUL"  
HALLOWEEN '85



"A KIND HEART"  
CHRISTMAS '85



EVEN LESBIANS COULDN'T  
RESIST MALU

David Combs' and Michael Toy's relationship had always been stormy. Around the middle of December '85, they had yet another fight. Michael left David and moved back in with his mother. David stopped coming to work. The holiday rush was now reaching its annual crescendo. I hardly had time to explore the intricacies of it all.

Concurrently, Willie came storming back to Hoboken with an old boyhood chum who'd come from Baltimore to help Willie run the card shop uptown.

Their "boss," "roommate," & "whatever" had gone off the deep end with cocaine. They both feared for their lives. It was "emergency-move-back-to-Hoboken" time.

Of course, everyone was quickly pressed into service at the lamp shop. Willie's friend was good at sales. Malu volunteered to help out on weekends despite a demanding schedule at her other job.

So, you either thought you'd been dropped from my list last year -- or that I'd died. Neither of us was so lucky. The real fun wouldn't begin till Christmas morning.

I stayed out a bit late Dec. 24th, anticipating Christmas day itself -- my first chance in weeks to sleep late and just rest. A day off at last!

But it was not to be. The ringing phone awakened me at sunrise.

"Blood! Blood! There's blood everywhere!" Willie sobbed.

"Where are you?" I blurted, instantaneously wide awake.

"What happened?"

"In the West 20's." Willie answered, his voice trembling.

"I went to the baths. This man got me ...and, I think he tore me up inside."

I told Willie I'd meet him at St. Vincent's Hospital Emergency Room in the Village. A couple minutes later, with the sun still a fuzzy red ball in the eastern sky, I was running across the park toward my truck, pushing myself faster, harder, earlier than I had in months.

The Holland Tunnel was endless. How would I break the news to Willie's mother that her son was hospitalized with a ruptured intestine? Horror stories people had told me of spending weeks, even months, hospitalized while recovering from such experiences flashed through my mind.

I found Willie just outside the hospital door. He looked better than I had expected. The bleeding had subsided. But they wouldn't see him unless he had \$65. Fearing an abscess or internal infection would develop later, I paid the fee. The doctor found only "a small tear."

David Combs had invited two friends over for Christmas dinner. They called to say he wasn't answering his phone. I assured them David was probably just being antisocial, that he'd probably unplugged his phone because he'd been fighting with Michael.

"If he doesn't answer the door," I ventured, "just come here and have dinner with us. Malu has fixed a big turkey."

They arrived a couple hours later. David hadn't answered the door. I began to worry. David had always been a little manic-depressive, especially around the holidays -- leftover baggage, I assumed, from bad experiences during childhood.

Later, I went over to David's apartment a couple blocks away. After several minutes of incessant anxious knocking, he finally opened the door. He was pale and drawn, his eyes sunken. I could see he was ill.

There was virtually no food in the frig. He was unwashed and unshaven, having lain listlessly on a mat on the floor for the past several days.

Knowing how much David distrusted doctors, intimately familiar with his inclination for irritability, moodiness & depression, I knew as I walked home that evening that I faced a long grueling ordeal.

It's getting late, I thought, but it's still Christmas. Whoopee! And who was waiting, gift in hand, back at the apartment to bring me even more holiday cheer? None other than my own 'dear, devoted Miss. George.'

"I wanted to know," he asked later, quite innocently, "if you would be 'best man' at Roy's & my wedding next summer?"

"I'll have to wait and see if I approve of your relationship," I demurred. I was punch drunk with emotional & physical exhaustion. Reflecting on the day's events, I almost had to laugh. That final bizarre twist capped a Christmas day I'd not soon forget.

With the New Year, the real grind began. Now I had three jobs - Klar's, David's & my own. And double bills to pay.

Each and every day, on the way to work, I stopped by to see David, delivering baskets of food, doing dishes, taking out the garbage, etc. Usually, he'd be sleeping, curled up

in an almost fetal position on the sofa or on the floor,-- emaciated, breathing lightly, occasionally gasping or emitting strange gurgling sounds which I took as the harbingers of death rattles.

I'd return immediately after closing the store each evening. If a day or two passed without my finding David awake either in the morning or the evening, I'd become increasingly anxious -- rushing into his apartment to examine the trash basket & sink for signs he'd been up and eaten something. If both were empty, I'd become nearly hysterical.

When he ate, it would be only a few cuplets of Swiss Miss Chocolate pudding. I stuffed the refrigerator and kitchen cabinets with every tasty, high-energy, nourishing food I could find - veal cutlets, honey-coated nuts, fruits, vegetables, cereals.

I pleaded, begged, ranted and raved at David trying to get him to go see a doctor. He'd been refused private medical insurance coverage because of a previous illness in 1979 -- during which he was diagnosed as having "an impaired immune system" caused by a bout of rheumatic fever during childhood. His medical history also included an enlarged heart, an inactive tumor on the brain & epileptic fits up to the age of ten.

Friends had dragged David to St. Vincent's Hospital and gotten him admitted "for a couple days" so some tests could be done. "A couple days" stretched into a two week stay. The doctors had never seen such a strange, black, leathery-textured sore as David had on his neck. They took photographs of it. David became a curiosity to the entire medical staff.

"They'd come in together, doctors & interns, men and women," he recalls, "and pull the sheet off me leaving me lying there naked. Then they'd poke me, feel me, handle me like I was a piece of meat."

When the sore failed to respond to antibiotics, his doctor ordered a biopsy. David maintains he signed a consent form only after being drugged.

"I don't know what the hell this thing is," the attending surgeon reportedly announced in the operating room. "But I do know I'm cutting it out."

David awakened with a hunk chopped out of his neck, tubes running in and out of him. He had a "staff infection" they decided --caused by his impaired immune system. To prevent future illness, they counseled, David should receive a massive shot of penicillin each month for the rest of his life.

That doctor probably saved David's life. But that wasn't the way he saw it. Once out of the hospital, he vowed to have nothing to do with doctors ever again.

David refused all medication. For two or three years small pimples would appear here and there on his body, slowly festering into small black sores which finally healed - leaving small circular scars in their wake.

"The body is its own greatest healer," a nurse friend had advised me many years ago. And so it was with David. As time passed, the sores cam less frequently. Finally, they ceased coming altogether.

As early '86 dragged on, the strain was taking its toll. I was working seven days a week, eight hours a day, then having to be a nurse and housekeeper by night.

Nor was David particularly agreeable. He was generally fatigued, cranky and irritable. I could hardly ask when he'd awaken, or how he felt. He "didn't want to be interrogated." He assured me he would rather die there in his own apartment than in some strange hospital room with tubes running in and out of him.

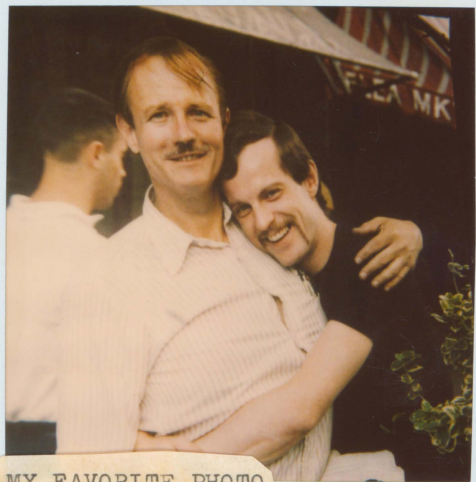
David's family couldn't care less - except for one sister in Ohio who had her hands more than full with three young children to care for and an abusive, violent husband she was in the process of divorcing.

How late we learn what's really important in life. For fourteen years, David and my lives had been entwined. Ten years of marriage had ended with a stormy divorce. Yet, while we couldn't live together & had each become involved in romantic/sexual/domestic liasons with others, that special bond remained.

7



DAVID & I IN 1973



MY FAVORITE PHOTO EVER - 1983

"You know, Mr. Wicker," Marsha always told me, "if push came to shove, the only person you could really count on to be there would be David Combs."

And that's the way it had always been. When I doubled the size of my store, it was David who had slept in the rear of the new section for six months, rebuilding it from the floor up into a stunning showplace.

It was he who had first gotten me into the antique business years ago. Our tastes clashed, but anyone could see his flair was pure elegance while I tended to become mired in kitsch.

"You can't 'remarry' anybody," George often chided. "Because you're still married to David Combs."

"That's right," Michael Toy would chime in. "The two of youse are going to be stuck with each other until the day you die." Then he'd accuse me of having instilled in David a whole series of "reprehensible, macho, sexual-social-patriarchal attitudes."

"David Combs has just become a second 'Randy Wicker,'" Michael often complained. "And I'm his new 'David Combs.' I have to suffer because of you."

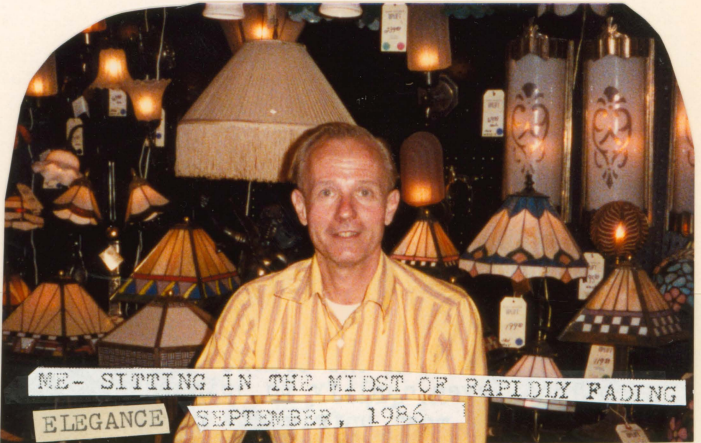
By anyone's standards, my lifestyle is bizarre. Roleplaying and all the other parameters of my existence are supposedly out of fashion. Even gays experience gender confusion whenever I try explaining that "my ex-wife" is "the husband" of the person who manages my shop.

Years ago I resigned myself to the fact that David and I had a conflict-oriented relationship -- a fairly common pattern, according to some experts, among married couples. We fight a lot. Neither of us likes that. That's just what happens when an artist like David becomes involved with a businessman like myself.

Realizing I would probably soon lose the single most important person in my life filled me with regrets. If only I had been forewarned, all the places we could have gone together, all the things I would have given him.



DAVID WORKING ON A LAMP. NOVEMBER '85



ME- SITTING IN THE MIDST OF RAPIDLY FADING ELEGANCE SEPTEMBER, 1986

I took every ring out of my safe deposit box David had ever sold, hocked or expressed a liking for. I tore prints off my walls I'd denied him for years. Every bronze he ever fancied went from my house to his.

"You're not good enough to yourself," Willie berated me one afternoon. "Now that David is sick, you realize how much you love him. You're giving him all these things, buying him all these things. But, now, it's too late."

"We've wanted a new stereo for years," he continued, "and you won't get one. We'd all be home a lot more if we had a better stereo. We're trying to make this a home."

Good ole Willie. Clever, manipulative, charming little Jewish American Princess that he is. He knows how to score points.

"You're absolutely right," I conceded. "I know when I've been wrong."

The next day we went out and blew nearly two thousand dollars getting a deluxe new stereo and two VCRs - one for David and the other for the house.



TO CHEER ME UP, WILLIE & GEORGE GOT INTO COSTUME.

IS THAT HOW A JAP DRESSES?



WILLIE WORKING THE REGISTER AS EASTER BUNNY

UPTOWN, EASTER -1985

For years I'd saved hoping to buy a house large enough to hold the two of us. We'd commenced looking a few months before David had fallen ill. Oh, how I had slaved, denying myself to save. Now, it seemed, it would never be. What a waste my life had been.

I finally got David to let a doctor examine him and run tests in February. No heart trouble. No visible KS lesions. But X-rays showed clouds on his lungs, possibly indicating pneumocystis pneumonia. The doctor wanted to put David in the hospital "for a couple days" and do a bronchoscopy.

"Oh, no!" David insisted. Nor would he allow the Aids test. He "didn't want to know" on the one hand and on the other, believed those who tested "positive" might soon be rounded up and placed in camps.

Friends, even acquaintances who also had aids, noticed how hard I was pushing myself.

"You're going to make yourself sick," they lectured. "Then you'll be unable to care for anyone, not even yourself."

They didn't seem to understand. I knew David was dying. If I didn't do my absolute best, I'd never be able to live with myself afterwards. I would do what I had to do while he was still here.

David's gasping and gurgling was getting worse. He'd not awaken for the past couple days. I had walked up to GMHC to find help and ask questions only to discover they "didn't take walk-ins."

Since David hadn't been "officially diagnosed," I sort of "fell between the cracks" by being a special case. I couldn't even qualify to join one of their care-pardner groups. A harried, most unfriendly receptionist bounced me upstairs to the Aids Hotline Room.



There I met Ken Meeks, a volunteer and founding member of the People With Aids (PWA) Coalition. May you someday encounter such a good samaritan in your hour of need.

Between phone calls, Ken heard me out and gave me a list of contacts for information and services in New Jersey. He also gave me copies of the PWA Coalition Newsline; a monthly tabloid magazine which would be my greatest source of printed information in the months ahead.

The next day, on his own volition, Ken called me at the shop to suggest I contact Anthony Salandra, a volunteer who was organizing an "Aids Buddy & Support Group" near Hoboken.

Anthony would be a real anchor in my life for the next several months, always willing to answer questions, offer advice--generously giving of his time to listen whenever I was beginning to fall apart.

My life had taken on a turbulence all its own. I'd awaken at four a.m. The thought of David lying there a couple blocks away barely eating, barely alive, prevented my going back to sleep. I wandered <sup>reel</sup> around the apartment wailing hysterically. I needed pills to get to sleep & more pills to wake up in the morning.

Ken Meeks and his lover were featured on ABC's news program, "Nightline," this past fall, just a few days before Ken died.

During last year's Christopher Street Liberation Day Festival, I had encountered Ken helping out at the PWA Coalition's "Hug-A-Person-With-Aids" booth.

"There's nobody I'd rather hug than you," I assured him dropping a donation in the basket and putting my arms around him. "I could never thank you enough for putting me in touch with Anthony.

"If only I could be Ellen Burstyn in the movie 'Resurrection,'" I continued, running my hands across his back, over his shoulders and up onto the rear of his head just as Burstyn, portraying a faithhealer, had done to a young boy dying of cancer at the end of "Resurrection."

"If only I could make you well by just doing this!"

Tears involuntarily commenced streaming down my cheeks. My emotions had welled up inside me - suddenly, unexpectedly, without warning.

It was so embarassing at the time. I blushed, bravely forced a smile and apologized. Now, looking back, I'm so glad it happened.

Perhaps I have always been an emotional wreck and just never realized it. But the events of the past year have certainly destroyed all those illusions I used to hold of being strong, calm, cool & collected.



1985 - CHRISTOPHER STREET LIBERATION DAY PARADE- MAYOR ED KOCH MARCHED AT THE HEAD OF THE THROG OF 200,000 GAYS. AND RIGHT BEHIND, MARSHA RODE AS GUEST OF HONOR WITH THE GRAND MARSHAL ALL DECKED OUT IN A SUIT. EVERYONE AGREES MARSHA WAS A PARTICIPANT IN THE STONEWALL REBELLION OF '69.

MARSHA -CSLD '86 BACK IN DRAG AGAIN.

For years, I had engaged in intellectual masturbation with fellow atheists.

"Yes, religion was just a crutch," we assured each other. "Religious people are just pathetic weaklings. ... Cripples who, as a last resort, asked their imagined 'God' for help."

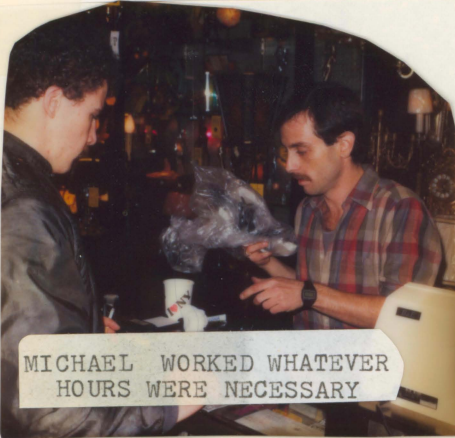
Now I, the superior atheist, lay sobbing uncontrollably in the middle of the night faced with something beyond my control. I, too, became a "cripple."

"God, if you're there," I bargained, "make David well. Just make him well. I'll give you my soul." I understood why they say, "there're no atheists in foxholes."

Although Michael had moved out on David a few weeks before his illness set in, he stood by loyally - helping out in his own way as much as he could.

Michael wasn't the strongest person emotionally. He'd finally managed to climb onto the wagon and stay there. His psychiatrist advised Michael to avoid David, fearing the pressures involved would drive him back to drink.

"You take care of David," Michael had volunteered. "I'll work overtime taking care of the store."



MICHAEL WORKED WHATEVER HOURS WERE NECESSARY



SICK AS HE WAS, DAVID TOOK A TINY KITTEN FROM A NEIGHBOR.

Once or twice a week, Michael would go over and cook David dinner. He had a knack for getting David to eat which I lacked. It was a great relief for me to have an evening off.

As the months pass<sup>ed</sup>, even the customers knew our personal business, that Michael & I were caring for an ex-lover who was dying of Aids and who refused all treatment.

If a lamp wasn't ready on time, if we forgot to order something, David was our excuse. Michael had a talent for making customers feel guilty for having ever complained.

Michael had been a universally-recognized hypochondriac for years. Now, dwelling on his dying ex-lover really enabled him to indulge his sickness/illness obsessions.

Spring finally arrived. David had taken his apartment because of the backyard just outside his window. Brick by brick, sod by sod, he had created walkways and organized the small lot into a formal garden. With the warmer weather, David seemed to perk up a bit.

"It's not uncommon," Anthony counseled. "Some Aids patients survive their first illness, recover and might have several months, even a year or two, of seemingly good health. Then they get sick again and go very fast."

When David expressed a desire to go to a nursery & get some plants, I was thrilled. The "thrill" mellowed when I discovered just a few pots and a half dozen plants cost \$250.

Knowing little about gardens, but delighted to see David with the interest and energy to go a few steps outside, I went plant crazy at spring's first flea markets.

"Randy," David laughingly advised me later, "you have to plan a garden. You just don't pull up with a truckload of plants all at once."

I didn't do it once. I did it twice, buying duplicate trays of flowers at the second market of several varieties that I'd forgotten I'd gotten on my first foray.

(11)

By early June, over a thousand of my green sweat-stained dollars had been transformed into grasshopper food. I couldn't have cared less. With each warm day, David's energy increased. He couldn't go half a block during winter without becoming winded. He could go several blocks now.



DAVID IN HIS GARDEN  
SUMMER '85



1986's GARDEN WAS FAR MORE  
LUSH AND LAVISH

I'd pick up Chinese food, or David would occasionally cook dinner. Every evening we'd sit in the garden as dusk settled in, dining, talking, perhaps sharing a bottle of wine...until only the white blooms of a few flowers could still be seen in the moonlight.

How I treasure the memory of those evenings. After a winter of struggle, we'd gotten a brief reprieve. Time to sit and be together. Time to rediscover the star-studded sky, to hear the frog croak in the pond next door, to feed "Charles" -- a hungry stray cat who always quietly appeared.

Sometimes we'd light candles set in round colored glass bowls setting them about -- as David said they did at Versailles -- highlighting a clump of flowers here, the texture of a walkway there.

Our garden seemed magical. It was, for me, truly a "garden of hope." And even little things about it pleased David so much.

"Oh look," he would enthuse, his voice trembling with an almost childish excitement and wonder, "some impatient have sprouted up over here from last year. And look! There's a new bud on the rosebush.

"It's all so beautiful now," David stoically mused one evening. "But, you know, when winter comes, suddenly - in one night- all these beautiful living things are struck down. One day, it's vibrant and alive; the next, it's all just a depressing, dead mess."

We'd discussed death and burial earlier. David had agreed to be cremated--provided I carried his ashes to Versailles and scattered them on the flower beds of Louis XIV. It was an experienced I hardly looked forward to.

"Let's close the shop and go to Versailles," I proposed early in July.

"I don't want to travel to France to lay sick most of the time in some hotel room." David responded. "There's no place on earth I want to be right now --except here in my own home, in my own garden.

12



GARDEN OF HOPE



How frustrated I had become. I could trade time for money but money couldn't buy back time. I'd realized how important it is to live each day, each week and each month so that if it happened to be your last, you had gotten some pleasure, some joy, done something you really wanted to do.

Yet, enlightenment hadn't freed me. The cruel Calvinist deep inside my atheist soul drove me to work triply hard to pay every bill. I might not be able to progress financially, but I refused to slide slowly backwards.

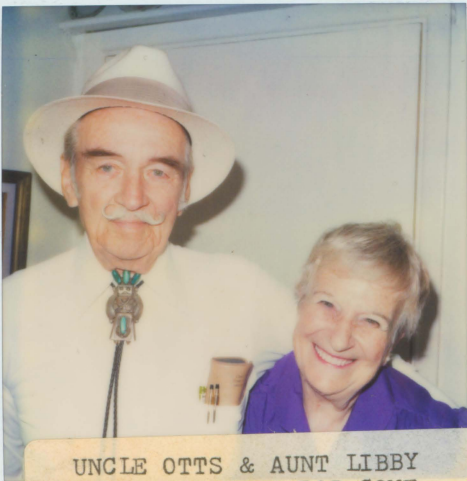
My friend, Terry, dropped by a couple times on his way to the Dominican Republic. Oh how I wanted to go. 'Next time for sure,' I'd say. I planned and planned, delayed and delayed--even though keenly aware of the error of my ways.

Still, my newfound wisdom wasn't totally wasted. In late July, upon hearing that my favorite 75-yr-old uncle in Arizona was experiencing lingering but non-critical heart problems, I hopped on a plane as soon as the next massive heatwave brought NYC to a standstill for a long overdue 3-day visit.

You gotta do it, when you can do it. I'd flown off with George in the searing heat of summer for a Caribbean fling & never regretted it. This time I landed in Phoenix where 115<sup>o</sup> days cause a third of that city's population to flee every summer.

Compared to the humid, clinging heat of the lampshop, the scorching desert summer of airconditioned Arizona was a real piece of cake. I never made it to the supermarket that week. But I did get to Phoenix.

In life's final accounting, I'm sure such small achievements loom large. Better to see and enjoy loved ones while they're alive. Why waste money on a plane ticket and a new suit after they're gone?



UNCLE OTTS & AUNT LIBBY WERE DELIGHTED I'D COME.



THE DESERT HEAT DIDN'T STOP AUNT LIBBY FROM HOLDING HANDS ACROSS AMERICA FOR THE HOMELESS. & SHE GOT A T-SHIRT



DAVID WAS GETTING STRONGER & HIS NEW KITTEN WAS GETTING BIGGER



AND THERE WAS THE GARDEN...

Indeed, life was looking up in Hoboken. George had returned and we'd resumed companionable cohabitation. Marsha was back from California apparently the wiser for her experiences.

"Those dates just aren't worth the trouble," she'd declare. "I can't be bothered any more. They give me a headache." Everyone found chores for her to do & slipped her extra dollars to keep her off the streets.

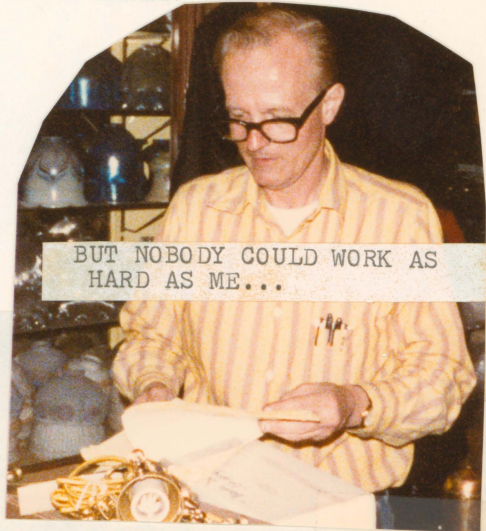
Malu's hours were increased at the video studio. She'd saved enough to get her own apartment.

Willie & his friend were both working for the teamsters union. Their first business venture, "GRIMEBUSTERS!" - an apartment cleaning service - had become quite successful and they also found their own apartment just around the corner.

"I'm going to come back to work the first of next month," David announced bravely in June, than again in July, yet again in August-- always planning for the month ahead.



"GRIMEBUSTERS" WORKING HARD FOR THOSE DOLLARS...



BUT NOBODY COULD WORK AS HARD AS ME...

Then it happened. David started appearing, unannounced, at the store. Neighboring shopkeepers were both delighted & flabbergasted. Customers gawked. Friends stared in disbelief.

After all, David had been "dying" for the past eight months. Now, like the biblical Lazarus, he was back --looking alive and eager, if not exactly well.

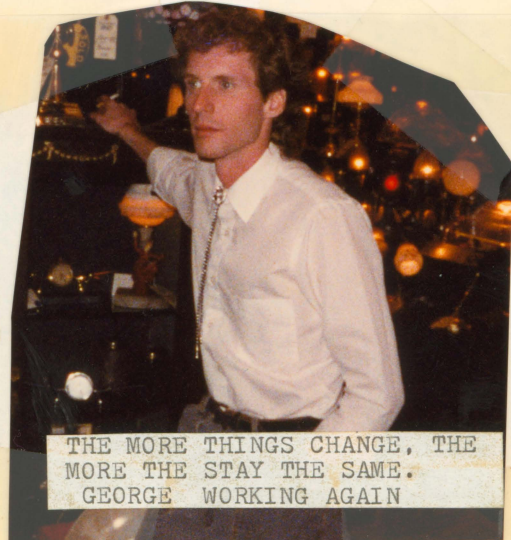
David's absence had become readily apparent. Bit by bit, that special quality which had made the displays sparkle had dissipated, the ambient elegance had dimmed.

Being neither designer nor decorator, I had helplessly watched the very essence of what David had created start slowly slipping away. Everything looked a little tired, a little tattered, a little tacky.

"This place is a God damn mess!" David exclaimed, merely stating the obvious. Within a couple weeks, he'd rehired George as an assistant. Together they dove into constructing the improvements David had laid out in the master plan of the shop several years ago.



DAVID & GEORGE DECORATING THE XMAS TREE, 12/22/86



THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME. GEORGE WORKING AGAIN

All the foregoing motivated me to get the most comprehensive, all-inclusive group hospitalization and major medical plans available for myself and everyone who worked for me.

Michael Toy, John Heliker and I were accepted in August. Filling out all applications truthfully, listing that David had gone for tests last February "for fatigue" but that nothing definite had been diagnosed, we even managed to enroll him as well.

Last month, Michael came down with pneumonia and spent a couple days in the hospital. He's still on antibiotics. His doctors are still running tests.

There's a real story here. What happens when a hypochondriac actually does become ill? How does anyone ever know for sure whether or not a hypochondriac is sick? Aren't hypochondriacs "ill" even when they are well?

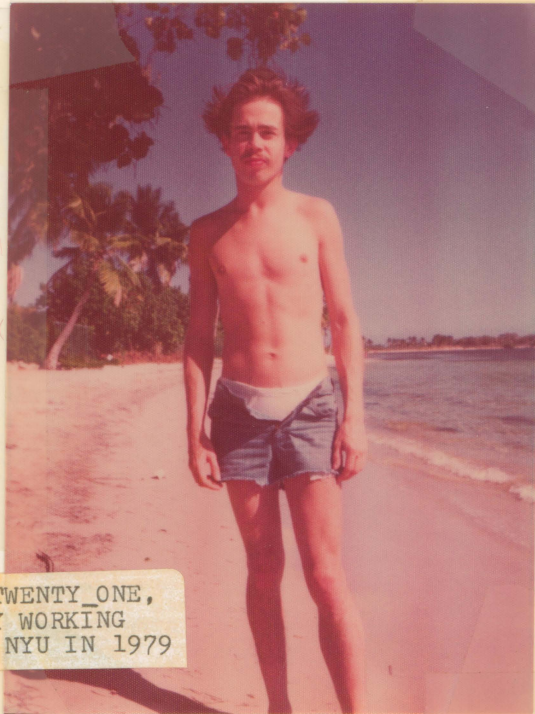
Both David and Michael now have new suitors. That should help keep them occupied, make them happier, prevent them from fighting. And old hubby like me shouldn't have to duck all that crossfire-- especially while he's still coughing up all that alimony.

"You know, this place is unreal." Andrew, an old traveling companion, confided a few days ago.

Actually, Andrew was the first hustler I'd ever liked well enough to drag off with me to Puerto Rico way back in 1979. He'd long since moved on to lucrative jobs in computer programming. But we'd remained platonic friends over the years. He and his mother were such big fans of my xmas letters, I'd always wanted to slip him into one.

"People come in here just to see what's happening," Andrew continued. "It's like a soap opera. You all are the talk of the Village."

"You mean I've been living a poor man's version of "Dynasty" without realizing it?" I laughed. "I thought Marsha was the 'talk' of the Village."



ANDREW, AT AGE TWENTY ONE,  
SEEN HERE BUSILY WORKING  
HIS WAY THROUGH NYU IN 1979

"Where is Marsha?" Andrew queried.

"In jail, again," I sighed. "She should be out in a day or two. After all the money we gave her, all the things we did to keep her off the streets!"

"Malu says it was that new blond wig she bought. Nobody had paid any attention to her as a boy for months," I continued, "but once she got in drag with that blond wig, all these handsome young bisexuals would flirt with her, sit next to her on the stoops, neck with her in front of everyone. She gets off on that. Marsha's mental, you know."

"I didn't want to date anybody," Marsha declared upon arriving home from jail a couple days later. "I just get off watching those men circle the block, again and again. I love making them waste all that gas just to look at me. I'm mental, you know."

"Yes, I know." I agreed. "I was talking with somebody about just that a couple days ago."

"Morty Manford, an old friend of mine from GAA, ended up being my lawyer." Marsha continued. "He tried defending me, saying maybe I was just innocently standing there."

"But the judge said: 'You must be crazy! Look at this record!'"

"Jail was fabulous," Marsha bubbled on. "I washed socks for all those gorgeous boys. They gave me cigarettes. I got a wonderful rest."

"And look at all the rent I saved. Now I can buy Willie those boots he wants for Christmas."

"Oh my," she declared upon seeing the xmas tree draped with white ribbons, "George has done a fabulous job decorating the house for the holidays. I'm going to cook a big turkey this year."



"YOU MUST BE CRAZY," THE JUDGE SAID. "LOOK AT THIS RECORD!"



GEORGE DECORATIONS - 1986

Marsha did a few loads of laundry. I gave her money so she could get Willie the boots he wanted. Then she rushed off to the city.

George was napping on the couch. David Combs called to tell me he planned to spend the evening tidying up the shop for this last weekend before xmas.

It was time to get back to writing my Xmas letter which, while far more somber and not so entertaining as in years past, was still quite some chore. If I didn't share my stories this year, I realized, they might never get told.

I knew Marsha would stay out late "to have a good time for all those girls who aren't around any more."

"She's not mental," I mused. "So many people say Marsha is basically the happiest person they know. That must be because she cherishes life and seizes every opportunity to enjoy it."

Shouldn't all of us do exactly the same?

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. I love you...

*Randy Wicker  
Dec. 24, 1986*



Randy Wicker's  
Uplift Inc.  
506 Hudson Street  
New York City, NY 10014





17  
P.  
S.



P.  
S.



P.  
S.



(Turn  
page)

P.S.

(Over)

18

And then Christmas came. Me and mine gathered around the tree. David played Santa, bringing such perfect gifts for each special person there, a personal message typed inside.

A saw & drill for Willie. Graph paper, t-squares, a leather-bound organizer for George. For Michael a little box and candlesticks of crystal so sparkling and bright. For me, a record, a book & a poem I'd treasure till I was old.

Whatever I'd done for David, he gave me back double that night. If there were no tomorrow, I'd had the greatest, most wonderful Christmas of my life.

Now I sat crying more than ever before. But these were tears of happiness watering a garden of joy.

The letter was finished & outdated again. But this one time, I thought, just a couple pages more. Someone dear out there might feel they were drowning in their own sea of trouble and I wanted them to know....No matter how dark the night, keep swimming for shore. As long as there's love, as long as there's life, there's hope for more--

and to all a good night...

Christmas 1986

To Randy,

Our souls are two broad boards,  
oiled & stained, set up to form  
a table.  
The jointure, planed,  
is well-defined.  
The tincture of the grain  
glistens with wax & turpentine.  
Euphonious morning light.  
The solid grains  
make scintillations  
doubly bright. At dusk,  
again affirming weight,  
they celebrate their solid state.  
The soul doth shine & glisten.  
It dances:  
It loves its substance,  
It loves its tatters,  
It loves its woes,  
It loves its laughter.

You have taught me, defined  
to me-'Love'

I love you,

David

Christmas 1986

To Willie, my little Brother

Focus on your life and it will all be yours.  
Slow down your pece and it all will come to you faster.

Be at peace with yourself,  
And you will be at peace with others.

Do not contend with the world,  
And the world will not contend with you.

Learn all that you can.  
For knowledge is gold and power  
And ignorance is poverty and slavery.

Your mind is like the saw and drill.  
They are all tools.  
Take these tools, go into the world  
And build your life.  
I know that you can.

all my love to you

David

9" x 4" x 6"

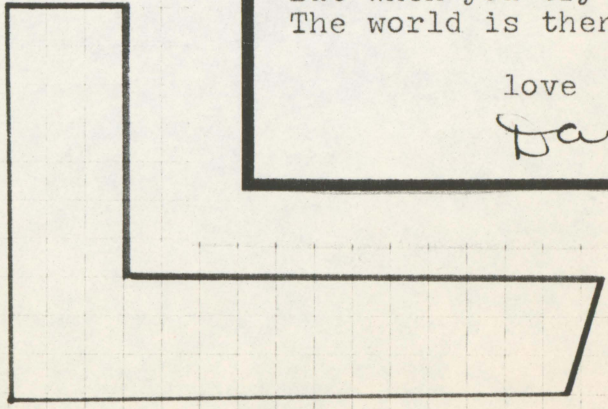
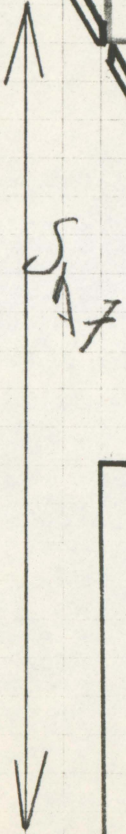
To George, the Student

The student learns by daily increment.  
Knowledge is gained by observance  
And lost in assumption.

Follow the Master's way  
And your life will function well.  
Follow the Master's way  
And your life will have order  
Follow the Master's way  
And you too will become a Master someday.

By following the Master's way, it all gets done;  
The world is won by those who learn!  
But when you try and try,  
The world is then beyond the winning.

love  
Daniel



1 1/6"

5/8"

