

LORD WIND

A Memoir of My Second Coming Out

by Richard Balthazar

PRELUDE

—in which I summarize my five years of marriage with two daughters



At a beach-house in Galveston in July, 2016 (left to right): The Author with daughter Jacqueline, First Wife Barbara, and daughter Aimée

My first memoir, *THERE WAS A SHIP*, the scurrilous tale of a wild faerie from New Orleans' French Quarter, was essentially a prologue for this one. In that prologue the faerie set sail in 1964 to Seattle for master's study in Slavic Linguistics at the University of Washington, and within the year unwittingly wound up married to a cute redhead named Barbara and in an inappropriately short while became a father. After another year we moved away for my doctoral work in Slavic Languages at the University of Michigan. But shortly before leaving town, I had an affair with a married man named Roger, which convinced me that I could stay married and still be secretly gay. So that memoir was an unusual story of going back into the closet.

The next four years, 1966-70, three spent studying in Michigan and one teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, were the rest of our marriage, which was blest with two daughters, Jake and Aimée. Ever since, my family has shaped, inspired, and graced my life. Barbara and I have stayed loving friends and are now known to our grandchildren as Nonnie and Papou (the Grampyre).

This, my second memoir, is about a gay divorcee in the carefree 1970s. I'll spare dear Barbara and you the catalog of my marital infidelities, which are probably all too typical for a closeted gay husband. Though a special few will bear noting, the rest were too meaningless or casual to mention.

Moving to Michigan in 1966, I was firmly resolved to be a good, but secretly faithless, spouse. Though Barbara had known about my sexual preference since we first met, I never talked about my gay emotions with her, knowing that she was really hoping to convert me to being straight. In truth though, I was living on an almost comatose level of desperation, all the while trying my damndest to be an attentive and affectionate husband and father.

Sadly, all my adulterous aspirations came to naught for the next two years. There were simply no opportunities to philander. Moving to Ann Arbor, Barbara and I were immediately absorbed into her wider family: her father, mother, sister, brother-in-law, and their children. We did almost everything together, spent frequent evenings in company, and consequently I had no outside friends. My only external relation was with old friend Lee back in New Orleans, who read my many anguished letters with sympathy.

After many months of frustration, I surrendered to my fate and agreed with Barbara to have another child. Nine months later on November 8, 1967, Aimée was born. The exhilaration of repeated fatherhood carried me along for some more months—until my 26th birthday the next April. That big day was categorically the deepest, darkest depression I've ever experienced.

Shortly thereafter, I started having horrible asthma attacks, indubitably psychosomatic. The university clinic put me on a white pill that worked but plunged me into more depression, near-delirium, and insomnia, not to mention impotence, all that summer and into fall. Of course, that was probably quite frustrating for Barbara, but she never complained. In the fall on a new prescription without the side effects I got back into a functional, if uninspired, shape.

Operative again, I took work on the side as a security guard, mostly at night, and suddenly found myself with hours of solitude, which were very useful for study and for writing volumes in my journal, as well as a welcome escape from the stress of family. In that privacy, my inner faerie awoke again and started raving about his loneliness and despair.

By early 1969, I started sneaking off after work for brief visits to a gay bar called The Flame and some therapeutic (innocent) socializing with other gay guys. Their companionship was comforting, and I appreciated the short moments when I could be myself again. Not long after, I began having sex with some, although it was rare, fleeting, and sometimes sordid. Barbara had no clue about my philandering, but she once remarked on my improved mood.

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That spring, as part of my ongoing dissertation work (another terribly stressful situation not worth remarking on beyond that), I went on a research trip to the Library of Congress and Harvard's Widener Library. For a week in Washington DC, I lived bibliography all day and at night prowled the gay bars with good success.

On my last night in town Lou's Hideaway, I met Steve, a realtor from Virginia. Our love-making in the wee hours of May 16 was the most intense soul-connection I'd ever experienced with anyone. After a few days in Boston and a couple willing guys found in Sporter's, the gay slut went home to wife and kids and bald-facedly claimed total fidelity.

The life-affirming memory of making love with Steve carried me in high spirits through most of that summer. In August we went on vacation with the whole family at a beach resort near Traverse City. Though we rarely even argued, while there Barbara and I had an altercation that led to her threatening divorce. I was secretly and gloriously happy that she'd finally decided to leave me. Till then neither of us had had the courage to propose splitting up.

But when Barbara cooled down, she asked that we try again and suggested seeing a marriage counselor. I insisted that counseling would never make me straight. As an alternative, she declared that our coming year in Wisconsin would be the test.

In early September, I went to Milwaukee to find us a place to live, and in about four days I found a nice townhouse in a suburb charmingly called Brown Deer. Cruising the gay bars those nights, I met a handsome fellow named John, a fashion model, and we spent two intimate nights together. When I'd moved the family there, John and I continued our affair, which was everything I'd hoped to find and a rare period of peace of mind. But in a few weeks John declared that he could no longer "share" me with my wife and called it off.

All that fall and winter, amply occupied with teaching, I didn't even think of looking for secret sex. What mostly occupied my mind was falling futilely in love with a straight Bulgarian student named Bogdan ('God-given'), an impressive folk-dancer, who hoped to become an Orthodox priest. The emotional intensity of my daily chaste association with Bogdan kept my spirits in great shape and my romantic juices flowing for many months.

In the troubled Michigan years I had dabbled at tortured poetry to vent my closeted anguish, and then in that Wisconsin fall, my passion for Bogdan inspired several portentous poems in Russian and even Old Church Slavonic (for privacy). Bogdan read some of them, but as a beginning language learner, he couldn't begin to understand their symbolic meaning. I do believe that the beautiful boy knew full well what he meant to me, but I studiously (and cowardly) kept our relationship on a scholastic level.

By late February in the brutal Wisconsin winter, Barbara got cabin fever and sorely missing her sister, took the girls to visit her in Gainesville, where the brother-in-law was teaching at the University of Florida. Suddenly a free man for two weeks, I haunted the gay bars I'd known from my first exploratory trip to Milwaukee, like the dance bar appropriately named Castaways and a quiet lounge innocuously called the Ten Hundred, where I nabbed a few feral boys and pillaged their wild haunches.

The freedom roused my muse and generated some poems, now in English, some good expressions of my emotional state. In one I characterized my married situation rather aptly as a "cloud-bound cell." Of a morning while driving the freeway to school, I was inspired to a poem for Bogdan, maybe a tad too explicit.

MESSAGE FROM ALPHA CENTAURI

*I want to have come unto your world
Like a comet, or better,
A wandering sun,
Spark of invisible systems,
Flashing a solar radiance
On the night sides of your eyes.*

*I want to burst through your bonds
Like a bullet, or rather,
A vagrant ion,
Quark of divisible atoms,
Leading fission's chain dance
Out the rare earths of your arms.*

Later that spring, I wrote a credible poem about Steve in DC, possibly influenced by the Russian poetry I was translating and teaching, maybe Mayakovsky:

A SIXTEENTH NOTE

Anniversaries
 make the lapse seem imaginary.
We should still be whispering
 spherical words
 in voluted ears.
But years are directionless distance.
 A step away
 we kiss still, suspended,
 a constellation in my mind.
If poetry could stop the motionless flight,
I'd write dimensionless lines
 in mnemonic knots
 to tangle you
 in cheap hotel sheets with me.
I'd rig up a morningless rhyme
 to fight off five o'clock.
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With the summer term I had a couple classes to teach and also started work again as a security cop. They moved me around a lot, to a brewery, an empty fairgrounds, the Art Museum, a photo-processing plant, and worst of all, the Pfister-Vogel Tannery, a perfect vision of Dante's inferno. Sinking into depression again, I passively waited for Barbara to announce the good news that our marriage had failed the Wisconsin test. I was more than ready to flunk.

But then a bonafide miracle occurred: Barbara's father offered to take her and the girls with the rest of the family for several weeks at a villa on Lake Lugano in Italy. Of course, I'd have to stay in Milwaukee for my classes and cop job. Never having been abroad, I was fairly disappointed, but the prospect of the rest of the summer on my own was a thrilling trade-off.

On the Fourth of July, before they left, I bit the bullet and asked Barbara how the test had turned out. She said she'd make up her mind while they were away in Italy. A few days later on July 9, 1970 in Chicago, with affectionate goodbyes, I put her, Jake, and Aimée on a plane to New York, and they were gone with the wind while I drove home to Milwaukee alone.

In my defense, though I may be deluding myself, I believe I was always a loving spouse and father and played the role of a straight husband rather convincingly, probably better than many straight men do. Other than that fight at the beach, our marriage didn't suffer many arguments or violence. We really had too much love and respect between us for such barbarity.

Still, I must sincerely apologize for what I should have done and didn't do. First and foremost, I should have been honest and open with dear Barbara about the depth of my distress. Instead, I let her believe that our marriage was working for me. In my youthful ignorance, I thought it a kindness to her, but it was a cruel kindness.

Of course, I was also acting under the strict social custom of a half-century ago not to discuss personal feelings or needs. That was something we never learned how to do. Barbara

sometimes found the courage (or desperation) to ask me how I was managing, always in a loving and caring way. But I'd just say I was still gay, as though that was enough.

Bound by the same repressive social custom, Barbara also didn't remark on her feelings or needs, which I was never compassionate (or courageous) enough to ask about. In my now elderly wisdom, I understand that she was suffering much the same, perhaps even deeper, distress in our marriage. For those five years, she had to deal with a passionless husband.

There's the other thing to apologize for, that I didn't offer Barbara any passion. It was beyond my capability. From our first coupling, sex was only a hormonal urge for me, and even that didn't last long. It became a duty, which I performed as rarely as I could get away with, and I simply trained my body to get it up when I had to. I'm mortified now to think how clumsy and inept I was. In fact, we were both terribly inexperienced and naive.

From the start, our sex life was just a matter of missionary position with no foreplay. I didn't know or care that a woman has erogenous zones, wasn't at all interested in fondling her breasts, and wouldn't ever have dreamed of going down on her. Apparently Barbara felt the same way about me too because she never caressed my body either and displayed no physical response during sex.

Actually, in the early years of our marriage, I doubt Barbara ever had an orgasm, but at the time I didn't even know that a woman could. When they really happened, my own orgasms were always anticlimactic. Most of the time, I don't think she realized how often I had to pretend coming, but when she did, her anger and hurt were completely justifiable.

Only later, after Aimée's birth, we started having sex spoon-fashion, and something told me to reach around in front and tickle her little nubbin, which I learned later was her clitoris. Though she didn't respond in any obvious way, I hope maybe she climaxed at least once.

If not, I'm sorry, terribly sorry, because Barbara should have had at least that much joy in being my wife. Nowadays I could ask her, my dearest friend, but it wouldn't serve any purpose for me to know. Nor to know if she really did make love with my paramour Roger before we left Seattle. Some secrets are best left to fade into the past.

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The aftermath of this marriage is the story of my second coming out. Before we start, let me warn you that this will be an illustrated memoir. Since folks nowadays are much more attuned to images than words, I'll rely on the 1,000-word worth of a picture to minimize word-count in the sometimes rather graphic text of my ancient memories.

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