

The Day the Last Lesbian Died

©Sandra Wagner 2017

As I rode my bike down the street, I passed the empty hulks of the cars that people used to drive before the Decline. There were still some electric cars. But they had to be charged off the mains like anything else electric. There really wasn't enough power left to run them. I hadn't seen a moving car in over a year. The power that was available was used just for heat and light. It was ironic that since the Decline, incandescent bulbs had become a hot commodity. They produced heat *and* light. LED and CFL lamps took less power, but didn't do anything to produce heat. And the winters were getting colder.

I was scheduled to go to the hospice where Diane was residing. I made sure I had a fresh notebook and a couple of pencils. For the thousandth time I wished my tablet was still working. I would have brought my recorder but I hadn't been able to find batteries for it in months.

I was going to stop for breakfast but I wasn't really sure what time it was and I didn't want to be late.

I arrived at eight o'clock, at least I was pretty sure it was eight, or pretty close. I had forgotten to wind my wristwatch the night before and the electric clock at home was unreliable since the power fluctuated so much. I had a wind-up alarm clock that I paid dearly for, but I couldn't be sure of the right time from my clock that ran off the mains.

I rode my bike to the hospice. It was only a few miles away and the exercise helped me wake up and frame the questions I had for her. I arrived at the hospice and locked my bike with the dozen or so other bikes that belonged to those working there.

I announced myself at the visitors' desk and asked to see Diane Trenton. The attendant walked me to her room and left me to return to her duties. When I looked into the room, I saw her lying in bed with an oxygen mask on her face. She seemed to be asleep, but I could tell the cancer, despite the morphine she was given, was making even sleep uncomfortable.

I pulled up a chair to the side of her bed. I looked at her and she was frail and withered from age and cancer.

I reached over and gently touched her hand and softly spoke her name. "Diane."

She woke slowly and moaned slightly. Her eyes opened and looked around then saw me. She looked quizzically at me.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I'm John Mulligan from the St Paul Register. I called you last week for an interview, do you remember?"

"Oh, yes, I remember. Can you come back some other time? I really don't feel like talking right now."

"I would hope that you would talk to me. This won't take long."

A nurse came in and leaned over Diane.

And in a slightly loud, direct voice she asked, "Dee? How do you feel? Do you want any breakfast? How about some juice?"

"No nothing. My stomach is doing flip-flops this morning. And this stranger is asking me a lot of questions."

The nurse looked suspiciously at me.

"I just arrived. Diane was asleep and I just woke her up. I'm a reporter and I wanted to ask her some questions about life before the Decline."

The nurse asked, "Why her? There are others who can answer questions about that time."

"But she's a lesbian! She's possibly the last lesbian. It's important that we hear her story."

Diane turned to me and said, "Will this take long? I'm not feeling very talkative today. But, I guess I can answer a few questions."

The nurse turned to Diane. "Are you sure, Dee? If this is too much, I can have him leave."

Diane turned and smiled at the nurse, "No, it's alright, Cathy. I'll be fine. If I need you, I'll call."

The nurse looked sternly at me. "Don't get her too excited. She's very weak now."

I looked at Diane and said, "This won't take long, Miss Trenton."

"It's Hamish, Mrs. Diane Hamish." She said angrily. "Judy and I were married for thirty years and I took her name proudly! It's been my name, and I swear I'll die with that name!"

I hesitated. I looked at her uncertainly. I knew she was weak from the cancer and I didn't want to upset her this early in our interview. I also looked at the nurse who was staring at me angrily. If I pushed Diane too far, I would be ejected and I might never get to talk to her.

Diane's face softened and looked at me curiously. "For someone who's supposed to ask questions, you're pretty quiet."

She laughed at me. "You youngsters always take things so seriously. Can't an old lady have some fun?"

That seemed to break the mood and the nurse relaxed as Diane adjusted herself to a more comfortable position.

"I'm sorry, Diane. I didn't mean to offend you, but with the law that dissolved same-sex marriage, all name changes were reversed. Your name has legally reverted to your maiden name."

"Well that might be what the law says now, sonny, but I'm still her wife. I'm as married now as I when I took those vows."

"I'm sorry, Diane. I will be sure to make a note of that." I wrote in my notebook, 'Diane Hamish', and underlined it. The nurse looked sternly at me and was looking like she still would ask me to leave.

"Diane, I would like to ask you some questions and get your thoughts on your life."

She struggled to get herself up in a sitting position, and pushed her oxygen mask down so she could speak more clearly. The nurse assisted her to sit up and placed pillows behind her back. She thanked the nurse who turned and left us alone.

“Tell me about your early life. What was it like growing up as a lesbian?”

“You make it sound like it is some sort of disease or something. It’s not something you catch. It’s something you are. For the most part, my early life was not too different than any other girl’s life, I suppose. I had dolls and wore dresses. I went through a tomboy phase when I was about ten or eleven, but that passed. But as I got older and started to enter puberty, I just seemed to like being with other girls. Boys were all right, I even dated a couple when I was older, but I never really felt the connection with them as I did with women.”

“What did your parents think of that?”

“They weren’t too concerned. When I was about fourteen, my mother asked if I had a crush on any of the boys at school.”

“What did you tell her?”

“I told her that I didn’t really look at the boys that much, but one of my friends, Tara, was my best friend ever.”

“What did you mean by that?”

“I was telling her that I had a crush on Tara.”

“How did your mother respond after you told her that?”

“She looked at me very seriously. More seriously than she ever had. That was the first time she talked to me as if I were an adult and not just a child.”

“What did she say?”

“She said ‘Dee, I love you very much, and so does your father. But realize that not everyone is going to be ok with you liking girls. Your father and I just want you to be happy, but not everyone feels the way we do. And lord, don’t tell your grandmother! She’ll yank out the bible and quote chapter and verse to you about how homosexuality is a sin and caused by the devil.’”

“Was your grandmother deeply religious?”

“Mostly just on Sunday. Up to that time I thought Grandma was just a crazy old lady. She and I got along pretty well. She would let me stay up late when I stayed over with her and she spoiled me with cookies whenever I wanted. I loved her very much.”

“Did that change your mind about her?”

“Not really, but I learned a lesson that day that there are some things I shouldn’t just blurt out to people. I still loved her but there were some things I just didn’t talk about.”

“Did you ever talk to Tara about how you felt?”

“Once, when I had a sleepover at her house.”

“What did you tell her?”

“We were chattering long into the night, you know how girls can be. And we started to talk about boys, and I told her that they really weren’t my thing. She asked me what I liked. I told her I kind of liked girls, and her especially.”

“Then what happened?”

“She got a kind of sad look on her face. She understood what I was telling her. She told me that we were the best of friends and everything, but she really liked boys. She felt bad for me because she didn’t like me in the same way I liked her.”

“Did you feel sad because of that?”

“Of course, I think I started crying a little bit. Tara leaned over, hugged me and kissed me on the cheek. Then she told me that we were still the best of friends and nothing would change that.”

“She didn’t feel threatened by your advances?”

“What advances? All I did was tell her how I felt about her.”

“But she still rejected you.”

“There was nothing I could do about it. I couldn’t force her to love me. She liked boys and I liked girls, but other than that, nothing was different. We were the best of friends well into college.”

“What happened to her?”

“Life, mostly. She got married when she was a sophomore in college. I was one of her bridesmaids. Then she and her husband moved away. She completed college, then had a career in publishing. She had two kids and lived a very happy life. I visited her a couple of times, but eventually we just drifted apart.”

“I presume you eventually found other girls.”

“Yes, during high school I hooked up with some other girls. We were out, but we didn’t go out of our way to display it. I had crushes on some of the girls there. But there wasn’t anything serious.”

“What was society like then?”

“It kind of depended on where you were. Overall, most people were all right with kids being gay. Though there were some parts of the country where it was more restrictive.”

“How old were you when you heard the news about the virus?”

“I was just turning twenty when the news broke.”

“How did you feel?”

“I was furious, because even though I wasn’t thinking of having kids at that point, I knew that if I did, they would be prevented from ever being everything they could be. They had a choice, a genetic choice, taken away from them.”

“Do you really feel like it was a choice?”

“No, not a choice, really. But everyone who is born is like a roll of the dice. In this case, the game was rigged. It took away part of our humanity.”

“Did you know why the president did it?”

“Besides being a buffoon, he was extremely homophobic. It was quite easy to needle him by questioning his masculinity. I think he hated everything in the gay community because he was in denial about being queer himself. But people like that can be extremely violent if provoked. There was a virulent anti-LGBT plank in his party’s platform and I think he took that as permission to take action. But he was very sly. Instead of rounding up everyone who was in the LGBT community and putting them in camps, he thought to do something more sinister. He knew he couldn’t kill all the gay people, but he thought that they would just die out if no one was ever born gay. So he came up with Project Kodiak.”

“Was it his idea completely?”

“No, he had his advisers. Actually, it was one of his science advisers. That adviser had been known to speak kindly of Hitler’s Eugenics program. This was Eugenics on steroids.”

They had put a lot of thought into trying to eliminate being gay. They tried to figure out a way make gay people straight. But it didn’t work out. Reparative therapy was ineffective and brutal. Though they didn’t really give a damn about brutality. All reparative therapy did was suppress acting on non-straight impulses. But the feelings never stopped. Hypnosis, drugs, and beatings had no lasting effect. Everyone who was gay stayed gay no matter what. So they had this brilliant idea. Nobody living would get hurt. But every baby born from that time on would never be anything but straight. The current generation was already set. But the next generation could be changed so that being non-straight would never occur again.”

“Is that such a bad thing? Wouldn’t you want to be straight if you had the chance?”

Diane looked at me furiously. And she spoke to me with a forcefulness that even the cancer couldn’t subdue.

“Would you want to be without hands if you had the chance?”

“No, my hands are a part of me, I could not live without them.”

“It is the same with me and every other non-straight person in the world. Being gay is a part of me. I couldn’t imagine what it would be like not to be lesbian.”

I veered away from asking any more questions about her feelings and asked a different question.

“The president eventually was found out and it did bring down the administration. He and those in his administration paid for their crimes. Did you feel vindicated when he was convicted?”

“Hell yes! And good riddance to them. I’m glad the president went to jail.”

“You thought he was a criminal?”

“Of course, he was! It was an attack on every living person in the world! It was outrageous.”

“What about the scientists that carried out his orders? Did they deserve life sentences? They were only doing what they were told. They would have been arrested if they refused.”

“The excuse ‘I was only following orders’ went out with World War Two.” Diane said with some vehemence.

“Still, nobody died as a result of the infection.”

“That’s not true. Some did die because of the virus. So he was a murderer as well. The outward effects of the virus were flu like symptoms. For most people it was very mild. However, younger and older people were affected much more seriously and some did die as a result. You’re a child whose parents were infected with a virus that rewrote their DNA. It eliminated the ‘gay gene’. Don’t you feel deprived knowing that no one of your generation and all those in humanity that follow, will never be able to be the complete fulfillment of humanity?”

“I don’t feel deprived at all. Why should I be?”

“When your parent’s genes intertwined in your mothers womb, an option was taken away from you by a cowardly act of terror. You are a victim of a terrorist attack. Doesn’t that make you angry?”

“Not really. I’m healthy. Not being gay doesn’t really change my health or well-being. I never felt any attraction to people of the same sex so I don’t feel deprived.”

“It was a cowardly act nevertheless. And besides it had unintended consequences that they didn’t find out until much later.”

“No one was ever supposed to know what happened.”

“Yeah, everyone that worked on Project Kodiak, was under a lifetime gag order, but the story leaked anyway. That’s the power of the press for you. Thank God for the New York Times.”

“That was a great paper.”

“It was, yes. They were investigating the worldwide outbreak of this unknown virus that was like a minor flu but otherwise did not affect most people. They called it the Ghost Flu, because it seemed to come out of nowhere. The incredible issue was that everyone was affected to one extent or another. No one was spared. That is what made the CDC and journalists suspicious. There was no natural immunity exhibited by anyone. That is the first salient thing that caused Jack Rosenblum, the journalist, to begin his investigation. That single fact is what led him down the trail. Too bad it got him killed. The administration still might have gotten away with it if they hadn’t assassinated him.”

She struggled to sit up in a more comfortable position.

“What was the tone of society when people found out?”

“The story broke posthumously in Jack Rosenblum’s byline, in the Times, then everyone in the media jumped on it. The journalists shook the trees of their science contacts in the administration to find out more. A lot of them tried stonewalling the journalists, but it didn’t last. Some people started talking. And parts of the story started to leak out. Then the investigations started. And then the whole story came out. And it was a catastrophe for the administration. They were hemmed up in investigations and legal actions for months. The president denied any knowledge of the act. And then when that didn’t work, he blamed rogue elements in his administration and promised a full investigation into it. Of course, he never did. But then just before he was about to be impeached, he admitted that something happened. And then went on TV and said it was no big deal. He said it was an accident and it was just something that got out of control when it was accidentally

released from the lab. He made up some story about a bumbling lab assistant who dropped a vial and release the virus. It was all lies of course. He said that that gene editing was a powerful new technology that could eliminate diseases like diabetes and cancer. Yeah, that didn't work out too well for me though, did it?"

"I've read his speeches and some of the transcripts about the hearings. But I want to know your feelings. What was the mood of the people?"

"My friends in the LGBT community were outraged. We demanded action. I helped organize marches and we held rallies. We wouldn't let the story die. Judy and I even got arrested a couple of times. God! I miss that woman! She was so gentle and sweet. But when she found out, she was even more outraged than I was. She posted everything online and even organized a rally to bring our community together. The best time we had was when we went to Washington. There was a rally on the mall. Thousands came to it. After the rally Judy and I and hundreds of others handcuffed ourselves to the White House fence. It made all the news shows. We made sure that everyone heard our voices and our anger. As a result, we got a plank in the progressive reform party that demanded action and to return the thing stolen from us."

"How did that go?"

"We swept into congress and the White house. But it was an empty victory."

"How so?"

"Even with the assistance of scientists that created the virus, who we gave time off their sentences, there was no way to put it back."

"Why not?"

"This is where Project Kodiak got it wrong. The way the eggheads explained it is that there are some genes that act as switches for other genes. And they turn on other genes under certain circumstances. It's the gene switch or gene regulator that determine how cells are made. They also contribute to other attributes of the human body and brain. They can determine if you have sickle cell anemia or blue eyes. They found a gene that they thought was the "gay gene" but it wasn't the right one. The gene they chose, activated other genes not just the gay gene. But the gene editing virus that was released on us didn't just turned it off, it eliminated it entirely. So yes, it could be put back, but since they really hadn't developed the technology completely at that time, all they could do was put it back in the "on" position. Then it would be turned on for everyone. Then there would have been a very real possibility that everyone in succeeding generations would be attracted to the same sex. The human race would be doomed because eventually no one would ever be straight. The birth rate would drop and humanity would wither away."

"That was when the other discovery was made, wasn't it?"

"Yes, as the investigation into Project Kodiak went on, they found out that it turned on other genes besides just same sex attraction, it was discovered that it also affected the ability to think creatively and intuitively."

"So being gay makes you more creative and intuitive?"

"No, having that gene turned on didn't necessarily make you gay. They found out that being gay is actually a series of genes not just one. But that first gene, the Project Kodiak gene, is the one that allowed the ability of other genes to trigger."

“And those were the ones for intuitive thinking and creativity?”

“Correct. No one in today’s generation is as creative or intuitive as previous generations. And the next generation, *your* children, will be even less so. That’s why everything is breaking down. Everything is in decline. No one can figure out how to fix anything or come up with new ideas for advancing society.”

“I think we do pretty well with our dwindling resources.”

Diane looked at me seriously. “When was the last time you went to an art gallery and saw any new paintings? When was the last time you read a piece of contemporary fiction? Hell, when did you last see a new movie that wasn’t a remake of an old movie? I see you are taking notes by hand. When was the last time you had a pocket phone that worked, or a computer that ran more than an hour before breaking down?”

“You can’t lay that blame on me or my generation. That was all your fault!” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

She looked at me solemnly. “Yes, guilty as charged. Now if you’ll excuse me I need to get on with my dying”, she said as she turned her head away from me.

“Isn’t there anything that can be done for us?” I asked.

“No, not now. Anyone who could think creatively in my generation is already dead or dying. You and your generation can follow recipes and directions well enough, but no one living today can come up with new concepts. And your children will be even less able to.”

“People are hopeful that it will turn around.”

“Yes, ‘hope’. They didn’t delete the ‘hope’ gene, did they?” She laughed. Then the laughter turned into a coughing fit. Looking at her, I realized that she had hit the limit of her endurance. I decided to pack it in. But I longed to hear more of her story. Diane put the oxygen mask back over her face and her coughing subsided. I could see that she was exhausted.

“Those are all the questions I have for today, Diane.” I said. “I have to get back and write up my story. One of the guys at the paper found some cans of mimeograph fluid and we’ll be able to print a few hundred copies of tomorrows paper.”

“Good luck with printing your paper, I hope nothing breaks down.”

That parting statement ‘I hope nothing breaks down’ had become a standard farewell. Much like ‘goodbye’ used to be.

“Thank you, Diane.”

“You’re welcome, John. I’m glad you came.”

“Your story will be told.”

I left the hospice and peddled over to the paper and managed to find some mimeo blanks for my story. I had to wait until another reporter finished her story before I could get a chance at one of the last working manual typewriters we had. I had to strike the keys very hard as the typewriter jammed often and was creaky from age. I had to type quickly as someone was waiting behind me for the typewriter for their story.

Once the editor approved the stories, the reporters and anyone handy would take turns turning the crank for the mimeo machine. The motor for it had been broken for months and we had to crank the paper out by hand.

After my editor checked the story, I received a call from the hospice.

My story had already been approved by my editor, so I wasn't allowed to make any changes. But I couldn't let Diane's last wish go unfulfilled. So, I snuck back to the typewriter and wistfully smiled as I rolled the mimeo stencil of my story back into the machine and typed an addendum.

OBITUARY - DIANE HAMISH-TRENTON 6/10/2008 - 4/17/2085

Diane Hamish-Trenton was best known as an advocate for the LGBT community. In pre-Delane times, she helped to expose Project Kodiak by organizing protests and marches. She was considered to be the last living person who had same sex attraction. She lived a modest life with her partner, Judy Hamish, who preceded her on 09/27/2080.