

Home for the holiday

*Time has a way of putting light on foolish ideas
and softening up the most rigid resolve*

BY ANNDEE HOCHMAN

I used to have a dilemma every time I headed home to Philadelphia for the holidays. Not what to pack, but what to leave behind. The earring in the shape of a women's symbol that I wore in my double-pierced left ear? The photos of me and my lover on a trip to the Yucatan? Copies of this newspaper?

Even after I came out to my parents during a traumatic, tear-streaked May weekend in 1987, I continued to separate pieces of my identity the way some people sort their laundry. Patched blue-jeans, unshaven legs and lesbian consciousness on the west coast. Pantyhose, Jewish holidays and family bonds on the east.

Once, over lunch in a white-tablecloth restaurant in suburban Philadelphia, I told my mother that, if asked to define myself in a series of one-word descriptions, my list would read: "writer/woman/Jewish/daughter/lesbian."

I managed to convince both of us not only that "lesbian" ranked a weak fifth, but that these aspects of my identity were separate, interchangeable, kind of like daisy-wheels on an electric typewriter.

Well, time has a way of putting light on foolish ideas and softening up the most rigid resolve. This last trip, I overpacked because I wanted to bring a little of everything — photocopies of my recent Just Out articles, pictures from the women writers' workshop I attended last summer, fabric for a dress I planned to make. And my journal. To take notes on how it all fit together.

Tuesday, November 21

At dinner tonight, my mother confesses that she was prepared not to like the new haircut I had described to her on the phone. I think she was prepared, as usual, for the worst — a bristly short cut with pink highlights and a braided rat-tail at the nape of the neck. She is relieved, as usual, to find that despite my black high-tops and men's overcoat, I still look like a girl from the neck up.

Wednesday, November 22

I drag my old sewing machine out of the laundry room, oil it and show my grandfather the fabric I brought to make a dress. "New dress. . . got a new boyfriend?" he says, winking. I tell him the truth. Well, part of the truth.

"Nope, this dress is just for me."

Later, I remember one springtime visit home, when I wore almost nothing but a single pair of faded, four-year-old blue jeans. I tucked my parents' house keys into the right rear pocket. They thought I was making a statement. Really, I was asking a question — is this me? — against the bone-deep backdrop of home and family.

These days, my mother and I have reached a bemused truce about my clothes. I don't wear make-up. She no longer suggests that I

do. When I visit Philadelphia, and sometimes even here in Portland, I shave my legs. From the knees down, anyway. "My concession to polite society," I tell my mother. And she laughs weakly.

Thanksgiving Day

Some traditions, thankfully, can be broken. In a deft unilateral move, I strike sweet-potato-and-mini-marshmallow casserole from the menu and offer to make pumpkin strudel, a traditional recipe of Greek Jews, instead. My mother teases me that they don't really know I'm home until they find tofu in the refrigerator. Dutifully, I buy some and set it afloat in a Corningware dish.

At dinner, I talk with my cousins Milt, Laura and Debbie, ages 25, 16 and 10, about what it's like to be Jewish in Oregon. I tell them that I once had to draw "kosher" in a game of Pictionary, and no one even had a clue. Across the room, my relatives pore through old photo albums and laugh hysterically about the gray-haired, smiling man who appears at every party. No one knows his name; they refer to him only as "The Uncle."

Everyone talks at once, teasing, bantering, yelling across the room, telling stupid jokes. Mild chaos is traditional in my family. For 20 people, we have an enormous turkey, five pounds of string beans, several side dishes (everyone likes the pumpkin strudel) and four desserts. Much too much food — also a family tradition.

I look around the room, at the heads of dark hair, the faces that resemble mine. Food and stories bind us to each other, to The Uncle who came to every party, to the others, long dead, in these yellowed albums. Jewish/daughter/lesbian/cousin/woman/writer. I feel absolutely at home.

Saturday, November 25

My parents and I go to a matinee of Lily Tomlin's brilliant one-woman show, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. Playwright Jane Wagner suggests that our hope as people lies in our connectedness, that we're all mixed up together in this wonderful human soup.

I cast sidelong glances at my parents during the show, to see if they squirm at Tomlin's references to labia-shaped candles and turkey-baster babies. They're fine, laughing riotously along with everyone else.

On the way home, I take the liberty of coming out for Lily. "I kind of thought so," my mother says. My father just drives. Lesbian/writer/Philadelphian/Jewish/daughter. In the back seat, I hold my souvenir Lily Tomlin t-shirt and feel giddily triumphant.

Later, my parents go out. I play my dad's records, mostly jazz vocalists like Mel Torme and Diane Schuur, and cook tofu with Indian vegetables for a highschool friend. After I hear the latest update on the man she had an affair with, we talk about French feminist

theory and patriarchal language until after midnight.

Tuesday, November 28

Over drinks, my mother tells me she has been discussing lesbianism with Mario, her hair stylist. Oh? Apparently, Mario says there are two types of lesbians — the ones who know from the time they're very young and the ones who have lousy husbands and leave them to run off with women.

I take some pains to explode this stereotype, and my mother listens. I suggest that Mario is not Philadelphia's most encyclopedic resource on lesbian behavior. But at least she's talking about it, I think. To somebody.

Later in this conversation my mother confides her real fear about my life. "I just don't want you to be alone," she says.

She tells me it makes her sad that she won't get a chance to plan my wedding, a celebration that her friends and family can support and understand. I talk to her about alternative rituals, other ways to bring people together and rejoice in each other's lives.

Then I tell her it makes me sad too, sometimes. And suddenly, we are not on opposite sides of this old issue, but standing together, both of us hurt and angry at a world that squeezes joy into such tiny prescribed slots.

Wednesday, November 29

My last night in Philadelphia. To celebrate that, and my mother's birthday, we go out to a fancy restaurant on the 18th floor of the Bellevue Hotel, where my parents met 30 years ago. A trio plays Broadway show tunes and mellow jazz, and my parents show off their recent ballroom-dancing lessons. I wear the dress I just finished making.

The lighted skyline of Philadelphia spins by on two sides while my grandfather waltzes me counter-clockwise, around and around. My father leads me in his own idiosyncratic brand of foxtrot. When the band plays swing, he sits down and I dance with my mother. We are the only two women in the crowded restaurant who dance together the entire evening.

While we do an energetic jitterbug, I sense chilly stares from other diners. My mother seems not to notice. I tap her on the left hip. She twirls out and back in again. We do a fancy grapevine step the dance teacher taught her just the other day. We hug each other when the dance ends.

When we sit back down, my father and grandfather applaud us. We are more flushed than is fashionable in this place. All four of us grin as if we have just broken a ridiculous rule.

"You know what Emma Goldman said," I tell my family. "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."

Revolutionary/feminist/writer/lesbian/Jewish/daughter/dancer. Whose list is this, anyway? Who said identity was a list? I look at my family sitting at this table, and I begin to think identity is more like soup, all the flavors swimming around together, mixing and mellowing with time.

"Well, I'm with Emma Goldman," my mother says, and everybody laughs.



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