



THE REHEARSAL MAN

Or: How to Turn Your Lesbian Daughter Straight

by Jill Dearman

You love your daughter; you've always done right by her. She mismanaged her money and you called a stern financial advisor who dug her out of debt. When she had her eating disorder, you hired a hip, alternative nutritionist and your girl was healed. But now there's a problem that has you stumped. She's gay.

Allow me to introduce myself: Jill Dearman, Rehearsal Man.

That's right. Give me a lesbian, any lesbian from fashionista to feminist, and I'll turn her straight. My methods are based on the same tried and true principles that make vaccinations effective: Give the patient a bit of the poison and her body will resist future assaults. A romance with me will prep your daughter for the relationship she's meant to have... with your future son-in-law.

Of course you'll want to see my resumé.

Christie
1986 -1990

At 17, I left conservative Queens for a swinging upstate arts college and discovered the love that dared to chirp its name, "Christie." She was a music major, a flutist, and every man, woman and illegal ferret on campus followed her around as if she were the Pied Piper. In our Dramatic Structure class alone, Kimberly, Darcy and some gender-bending Boy George type in the back row were all smitten, but I knew I could woo her and win her.

One day I sat on the plaza in the center of campus listening to The Violent Femmes on my walkman, while several yards away, Christie sat on a brick wall holding a yellow balloon from a blood donor drive. Kimberly lay on one side of her weaving a friendship bracelet, while Darcy played Hackysack in front of her. I waved Christie over. She let the balloon go, left them behind and walked towards me. I could see how fickle she was, but then she smiled mischievously and handed me a Jethro Tull mix.

"Thanks," I gushed. 'Aqualung' is one of my favorite songs." (A total lie.)

We fell passionately in love.

Yet late at night as I held her, I worried: What would my ultra-conventional mother think? She'd had me late in life, yet even with our generation gap, we were intensely close. And when my father died, during high school, I became my mother's constant companion. We went to movies and the theater together; sometimes we just sat quietly in the living room watching "women's pictures" like "Imitation of Life" and "Stella Dallas" on *The Late, Late Show*.

Would my mother somehow blame herself for my queerness? What about Christie? I imagined I could bring her to family dinners as my "friend." It just might work. After all, Christie — a dead ringer for Andie MacDowell — could pass. But by semester's end, before I had a chance to bring her home, Christie dumped me... for the Boy George look-alike, who yes, was most definitely a boy.

I was devastated. Almost as devastated as when I came home one weekend to do my laundry and found my mother in my old room, holding a letter I'd written to Christie.

"This is the worst possible thing you could have done to me," she said.

Mom sent me into therapy. And back into the closet. I dated girls at school, but brought boys home to Queens.

As the youngest child it had been my Passover duty to ask: "Why is this night different from all other nights?" But finally, one post-graduation Passover, I stuck around until the rest of the family had gone, and answered that eternal question like this: "Because I'm officially coming out to Mom!"

Over the next few weeks she slid into a severe depression over my "lifestyle." She retired to Florida; I feared that her grief would cause her to die suddenly, like my father, so I stopped talking about my love life. I'd come out, but nothing had changed.

Luisa
1991-1994

"Lesbian Chic" was a heartbeat away and I was ready for my photo op. But first – since we gay gals always travel in pairs – I'd need the right chick by my side.

I met Luisa at work, at an AIDS organization, shortly after she'd made a stir by getting a Letter to the Editor published in the pioneering gay magazine *Outweek*. The point of Luisa's missive was that femme dykes like her were just as gay as butch dykes. I wasn't into labels but Luisa sure was. I sensed she just might be erratic enough to make me ecstatic for a weekend and miserable for a lifetime.

I had to have her.

And for a few mutually contemptuous years I did, during which time we avoided our families who were less than thrilled about our union. I knew Luisa had been raised as a Navy Brat and had also noted that she tended to adapt her personality to whomever she was with. Yet I was still shocked when my two-year anniversary card from her featured a mannish spinster on the cover and several smudged lines in girlish handwriting about "not being able to imagine two women growing old together."

She moved out and, mercifully, a male friend who was also going through a break-up with his girlfriend needed a place to live. We converted the office into a second bedroom and spent several weeks partying and crying in our beer over the exes who had done us wrong.

When the tears dried and we'd filled about five recycling bags with Brooklyn Lager bottles, Mr. Roommate told me that he'd found his own place and had to move, immediately. A week later a friend informed me that she'd spotted him at a Dave Matthews concert, sitting cozy with... Luisa!

I couldn't believe this was happening again, but I blamed Luisa for being a coward. When her vacation to the exotic Isle of Lesbos was over, she sailed back to the safe Straits of Hetero, and I, feeling duped, considered writing my own self-righteous letter to *Outweek*, but it was too late, the magazine had folded.

Sam
1995-2005

Her name was androgynous and so was her look. Her hair, buzzed, her body, toned, and her heart, pure. Sam was a dancer. I'd gotten used to doing the chasing and so when she came after me I couldn't believe it. Was she really being so nice just because she truly liked me? Surely this was a sign that she was crazy, unstable.

Naturally we started going steady.

And we built a beautiful life together.

Sam was a wild performer onstage and an introvert offstage; I spent my days holed up writing, but outside was an extrovert, a raconteur. We balanced each other out, and were utterly devoted to each other. As couples (gay and straight) broke up when times got tough, we stuck together, and grew even more committed.

Our decline began many years into our relationship, when I expressed a desire for marriage, kids, a country house. Sam waffled; and in truth, I was just as ambivalent. Sure, when my mother occasionally flew in to New York we all had dinner, but I never felt comfortable bringing my lover to Florida for a visit. So how could we plan a wedding?



Judith Hausman

Then Sam abruptly quit dancing to write, and with her career transformation came an unnerving change in appearance. She grew her hair long and started shopping at Anthropologie. I sensed she was becoming attracted to men, and I subtly withdrew from her.

She came home in February 2005, after a month-long stay at a writers colony, and announced she wanted to move out. I instantly knew. I refused to believe this was happening to me again. In our decade together, I'd been no angel, but I did not want us to throw our loving relationship away over what I wanted to believe was a fling.

Then my friend Donna sat me down and said:

"Jilly, you have to decide whether this is an Anne Heche situation or not."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if she's now *into* men there's nothing you can do about it."

And, like those fleeting "it girls," we broke up quickly. Unlike them, we stayed friends. And when our friends asked what went wrong I babbled: "Yadda, yadda... amicable... yadda, yadda... grew apart..." I should've just said "Yadda, yadda, Yaddo" because it was at the famed arts colony that she met the man she is now with.

In fact, Sam just moved in with Yaddo-Man.

She's the third of three lovers who I have set on the heterosexual marriage track. Luisa married Mr. Roommate; Christie recently bought a house with her current boyfriend — in fact, *his* 'gay' sister just announced she is pregnant and marrying the father. That's how strong my mojo is; I don't even have to sleep with a lesbian to turn her straight!

I told you I was good.

But I've grown weary of my work. I'd love to retire at the top of my game and finally fulfill my adolescent dream: to bring the right girl home to Mom, not as my friend, but as my lover, my mate. Instead of retiring, I suspect I need to do just the opposite: go back to school and truly learn how to integrate all the parts of my life. And this time I will pay attention, instead of sleeping through class.

N.B.

In truth, I have fudged a bit on my resume. I never really had the power to turn gay girls straight. I did have the uncanny—or should I say canny—ability to choose girls who were bisexual or straight all along, girls who'd eventually leave me and save me from having to truly confront my mother.

In typical lesbian fashion I already have a new girlfriend, and already it's a lovefest. Don't panic. I am finally awake and see how complicit I was in creating the pattern of my past. So maybe now I can break the cycle. My new lover wants kids, and, get this, she wants to have them with another woman... because she is actually gay!

She's also half-black/half-Sicilian and all-Catholic, but at this point, being in a mixed relationship is the easy part. Besides, to Jews, she looks Jewish. It's the *mazal* of being born

partnership I know my mother truly wants for me, the kind that I am sure I will someday want for my child. And I've come to see that every family has its own version of a mixed-up heritage. None of us get off clean.

And as for me personally, I see now that only by leaving the probably Jewish, intensely merged union I shared with Mom as a child can I at last return home as an adult, the Prodigal Daughter, with a partner of my own, ready to have children of my own, and ready to bring all my loved ones together.

I want to stop rehearsing for my life, and start living it.

As an offering of (I believe) acceptance and even encouragement, Mom keeps telling me stories about people who were involved in nine- or 10-year relationships that stalled and then ended, where both partners went on to find their spouses



"Couple" by Lea Majaro-Mintz

I always chose girls who would eventually leave me, saving me from having to confront my mother.

with beautiful, naturally curly hair. She's excited to meet my mother and I've told Mom all about her. Well, maybe not all. You see, both her parents are gay—which for my money is a blessing—more of a chance she truly possesses the “gay gene.” Maybe that will balance out some of the homophobic genes that have coursed through my own blood, and the blood of those who have come before me, including my father, who was hospitalized all those years ago for reasons that I have come to suspect had a lot to do with his sexuality. But all of that is in the past. I'm ready to create the kind of successful

in the very next relationship. Maybe that will be the case for me. I imagine that the day I bring my girlfriend home will be beautiful, awkward, funny...just like real life.

Jill Dearman, winner of the 2006 First Place Prize for Fiction from the Vera List Center for Art and Politics, has appeared in New York Stories, North Atlantic Review, and other publications. As a journalist, she has been published in the New York Daily News, Time Out New York, and Publishers Weekly. She teaches journalism at New York University.