

PART TWO

Commuters: Houston-Dallas

We never conscientiously saved our letters to one another, but every now and then something turned—turns—up, usually a postcard or a brief note. Jerry had little patience with record-keeping, at least when the records were correspondence and bills, and his desks and files have always been stuffed with unsorted material, left stacked and even bundled for a day when there might be time for such archival undertakings—and, of course, there never was time. He eventually came to make fun of his own sloppiness (and register his contempt for such matters at the same time) by labeling files "Important Papers" and "Mixed Bills."

A letter, either one of mine or one of his, could surface from among old bank statements and water bills, and such a likelihood serves me now as an incentive as I make my way through drawer after drawer of papers, finally sorting and discarding worthless items, a librarian weeding the collection. These discovered letters are messages, I sometimes feel. What they tell me derives both from their content and from the appropriateness of their emergence at a specific time.

One of the memorial concerts given for Jerry in New York included a composition that Jerry had begun planning as a collaboration with Michael Schell, a piece titled *Telephone Calls to the Dead*. When Jerry realized how sick he was, he told me to ask Michael to finish and perform the work. This was done, superbly, but with an interpretation I don't think Jerry envisioned—although I am not entirely sure of that. Using videotaped images of Jerry and his work, along with sequences of mementos and artifacts manipulated by computer, *Telephone Calls* suggested a kind of high-tech seance, an evocation of Jerry's spirit using some of his own tools. I think of this piece sometimes when I run across a letter, attentive to learn both what it says and what it has to tell me now.

And so, a few days ago, I found a letter Jerry wrote to me in Houston, addressed to the house on Delafield that I had rented, located within walking distance of the University of Houston (where I re-enrolled in the fall of 1966)—a house large enough for the two of us, whenever he could join me. After filling me in on his activities, he says:

I wonder about you in Houston. This is not the best of things. But at this point it has become quite natural. I have begun to expect you to be gone...each year. Do not know why you do such things, & always, but that's the trouble. We both have the various demands, 6...one doesn't give them up.

Although, now, I may look back with some regret on those years when my being away at college separated us, I realize, even more clearly from rereading Jerry's letter, that these were good times for us as we met our "various demands". And I am reminded of the sense of security that underlay our relationship then—finally— and that freed us, together, to live apart. There is still, however, the unfortunate aspect of the separation: "This is not the best of things." Every part of that brief letter resounds today.

Jerry was working at the time with Bart Bartelmehs and his trio, playing piano in a variety of venues, including VFW halls.

He was also giving new music concerts in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area, playing prepared piano on a concert in Oak Cliff, doing early performance art at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Ft. Worth (a piece that involved pushing a 3-foot high cigarette urn down the aisle, alarming the already incredulous audience), and performing with clarinetist Houston Higgins and his wife, Jill, a soprano.

It was a period of creativity, of receptivity to new ideas and experiments in the arts in Dallas, thanks primarily to a few members of the SMU faculty. As the conductor of the university symphony orchestra, David Ahlstrom invited Jerry to give the southwestern premiere of Cage's *Atlas Eelipticalis*. And Toni Beck, the head of SMU's dance department, collaborated with Jerry on several innovative works (one of which was

shown on CBS-TV). Jerry also earned money playing dance piano and teaching a series of courses on music after 1950.

His real work, though, was composing, both works for piano (like *Sur Doctor John Dee*, from 1966) and for piano and electronic media. He had begun identifying himself as a composer, as opposed to a pianist or a musician, and the concerts he gave were to consist more and more of his own music.

Because of his association with SMU and, especially, with Toni Beck, Jerry's parents were less apprehensive about his having abandoned a career in traditional music. They were also a little more at ease, Jerry always believed, about his being homosexual and about the problems that might cause him working. In fact, it probably appeared to them in the late '60s that he was succeeding: he was obviously happy doing what he wanted to do, he was staying busy, and he was meeting and impressing influential people.

He was even making enough money to be able to afford a studio, the Green Shack near Inwood and Lovers Lane, splitting the rent with Houston (and a sometime third partner, Phil Hughes). Still officially living at home, Jerry was in fact spending most of his time at the studio, a two-room guest house with kitchen and bath behind a private residence. (The front room was devoted to electronics, and Jerry moved his grand piano to the back room, filling it.)

He did think he might relocate to Houston for a while; that was the plan we made during the summer after I had returned from St. John's. It would have been a mistake, though, we both realized just a few weeks after school had begun. He would have had to start all over in Houston, making contacts and building a reputation, and although the larger city was later to surpass Dallas in its receptivity to new music and art, at that time Dallas was ahead of it. Furthermore, given his inability to promote himself (or, it may have been, his distaste for doing so), it would have been foolish for Jerry to have turned his back on the extraordinary good fortune he had already had.

Nevertheless, it was hard at first for me to accept the fact that he wasn't coming. As I became more absorbed in my studies, I felt less lonely, and I made a few friends on campus to spend some of my free time with. By the middle of the fall semester, it had become clear that I was not going to find an on-campus job to supplement the scholarship and loan money I had, so I reluctantly gave up the Delafield house, with the room over the garage that I used as a study (I'll never forget the ordeal I had shoving the Magnavox stereo cabinets up the narrow stairway—only to have to lug them down a few weeks later).

I had seen a sign in a front yard a few doors up the street advertising a room for rent, and I knocked on the door one day, introducing myself to Ola Coley, a widow with two front rooms available, the rear one equipped as a kitchen. It was all the space I needed, and I moved my things to my new apartment the next weekend, pushing the Magnavox stereo up the center of the street and using a wheelbarrow for books, clothes, and smaller possessions.

Mrs. Coley was a lonely, ill old lady, barely able to keep up her house, and really beyond dealing with a roomer and the worries having a stranger living so close by can bring. All that separated her front room from mine were French doors (that formerly opened into the dining room, where I now lived). A thin, "chromespun" curtain hung on each side of these doors, affording both of us a modicum of privacy.

I would often hear her calling her Christian Science practitioner when she felt particularly bad, asking for counsel and prayer support. Since I could hear every word Mrs. Coley spoke when I was in my own front room, I soon figured out that I would have to do most of my studying at the kitchen table.

From time to time we'd visit; in fact, I believe she sometimes waited for me to come out of the bathroom we shared, having been alerted by the creaky wooden floor of the back hallway. We exchanged pleasantries, I spoke to her canary, and she offered me a

Hydrox cookie from the bag. (I developed the habit of helping myself to these cookies when I knew she'd gone to bed; periodically, I'd replace the bag—and I remember doing this so often that it occurs to me now to wonder whether she might at some point have been able to stop buying them altogether.)

Jerry came down to see me as often as he could, and we'd make love in my front room, where the double bed was. It was a delicate situation. Since Mrs. Coley spent most of her time in her front room, we tried to be careful not to alarm her. It wasn't easy to be quiet. During one especially passionate session, Jerry and I heard her telephone her practitioner, opening the conversation with words to the effect of "Honey, I don't think I can stand much more." We stifled our laughter, somehow; later, we went over for a long visit.

Since St. John's, I had come to love college. My major was English, and I had knowledgeable, stimulating teachers for literary criticism, medieval literature, and Shakespeare. The university required several interdisciplinary electives, and I enjoyed art history and a course in the symphony. The time I spent reading, writing, and listening to music went quickly, and the more I did of it all, the more I wanted to do.

Thanks to St. John's, again, I had had a year of Greek and declared it my minor at UH. Dr. Moore came over from Rice University to teach the language to small groups of students. She was no longer needed when UH hired Sra. Pozzi, a South American native who had studied Greek at Oxford and had come to Houston with her husband, who taught in the philosophy department. With this brilliant, hard-working teacher's guidance and encouragement, I was able to read Attic drama by the time I was graduated. My memories of the two years I spent in Houston are illustrated by images of myself riffling vocabulary cards, memorizing paradigms, and adding syntactical aids, with the sharpest of pencils, to the Greek texts that I carried to every restaurant and on every bus ride.

Sra. Pozzi recommended me to a philosophy major who had come to her in search of a Greek language tutor. Lillian began coming by for weekly lessons, often still in the white uniform she wore on her job in the surgical pathology department of Hermann Hospital. I'd make us a pot of tea, and we'd read Greek, Lillian smoking her Camels and laughing loudly at her mistakes.

We became friends, often finding ourselves straying from the lesson at hand to talk about ourselves. She was 40 years old, divorced, and the mother of a grown son. She was also, as she later confided, a lesbian who had dutifully played a straight role, but who—now that her son was on his own—was gradually asserting her identity, allowing it to shape her life. She told me about the lady she was seeing at the time, who would come over to Lillian's house and sit with her in the swing on the front porch, where they would surreptitiously hold hands. I was fascinated by her, by her stories and by her appetite for learning and for life. And she was the first lesbian I had ever known.

(But not the first I ever knew of. Jerry and I had a math teacher in high school who rode a motorcycle to school and wore a black leather jacket in cold weather. She intrigued us, suggesting I suppose some quality of difference that we identified with. One day we were prowling the dusty aisles of the old Aldredge Bookstore, located in a large house on McKinney Avenue. The store served complimentary wine to browsers on Sunday afternoons and was usually filled with people. Jerry and I suddenly caught a glimpse of this teacher through the book stacks, talking quietly—intimately—with another woman in a similar biker's jacket. To our delight, our suspicions were confirmed.)

Lillian's goal was to teach philosophy, and she went on to receive her PhD in that subject from Tulane University. We corresponded with one another, regularly and voluminously, during the thirteen years we lived in different cities, when I was in graduate school in Austin and she was in New Orleans, then when I taught in Dallas and she did in Auburn, Alabama. Her letters

were the kind to savor, full as they were of humorous anecdotes and thoughtful descriptions, both often illustrated by deft pen-and-ink drawings. She loved gardening, sewing, music, and dogs, and her letters usually touched on all four topics.

Freed from the scrutiny of her family in Houston, Lillian was finally able to have intimate women friends, and she wrote me in detail about the two close relationships she had before she died, at the age of 55, of lung cancer.

When I wasn't reading, I was listening to music—so it had always been; so it is now—but for the first time, with the guidance of a course in the development of the symphony, I was exploring periods and composers in a systematic manner. I had decided, or admitted, that I am a born listener: my early violin- and horn-playing and my later attempts to play the piano were, after all, half-hearted. What I really liked to do was listen, sometimes following a score or an analysis of themes and their development. It had become hopeless to try to share this enthusiasm with Jerry, who by now had completely turned his back on "old, dead European masters." In Houston I was to meet my ideal musical friend.

After studying piano at Centenary College, in Shreveport, Louisiana, Bob (the second Bob in my life) had come to UH to major in English. He was a teaching assistant, working in the French language lab, when he met and married Carol in 1965. They had a daughter the following year. Then, in 1967, I ran into Carol one day on campus—the same ebullient Carol I had known years before. We visited briefly, and she invited me to come to her and Bob's apartment for dinner. That night Bob's and my relationship began, and he remains my closest friend today. He was with me when Jerry died.

Bob and I enjoyed discussing books and ideas. He conveyed his enthusiasm for Steinbeck and Aldous Huxley to me, and we read Milton and Shakespeare aloud together. But it was music that really stimulated us, as we shared discoveries: Nielsen, Mozart's "Linz" Symphony, and the piano pieces that

Bob played on his old upright while I turned the pages.

He and Carol eventually moved into a two-story frame house in West University, and I would come over often to have dinner with them. Bob and I played music, went for long walks through the shady neighborhood, and talked and sometimes argued about ideas. Carol watched TV ("Mission Impossible" and "Family Affair"), smoking, her legs tucked under her and the baby tucked in upstairs. She usually went to bed early, exhausted from school (where she was a political science major), a part-time job, and caring for little Donna.

Jerry came down to get me at the beginning of the Christmas holidays, and he and Bob met. We made a good trio, often gathering at the piano to illustrate ideas or share discoveries. Bob recalls how much Jerry impressed him by his intelligence, wit, and musical talent. Carol had always liked Jerry, and having him with us in Houston was a happy event for all three of us.

Seeing Jerry and me together, relaxed and free in our loving relationship, may have encouraged Bob to confess to me one day during a trip to Galveston Beach that he is homosexual. He had always been attracted to boys, but he had never quite accepted that fact as one that could, or should, influence his behavior.

At the urging of his cousin, and pressured by the fear of being drafted as a single man, he decided to marry and have a family.

He had only begun to realize, during the time we were becoming friends, that he had made a mistake. In any case, the marriage was to last another few years.

The two years I spent in Houston were good ones, filled with intellectual stimulation and aesthetic pleasure. I made frequent trips to the Houston Public Library, then housed in the old Julia Ideson Building, preferring to study there and be downtown, close to restaurants and bookstores and movies. I also subscribed to the Houston Symphony, transported by Sir John Barbirolli's Elgar and Mahler.

Sometimes, before these Monday evening concerts, I would have a meal of fried oysters at Kelley's Oyster Bar. I ran into Ellen Puckett, the elderly lady from the insurance company, having dinner there one night. She had come down for a performance of a violin concerto, even though Francescatti was not the soloist on that occasion. I enjoyed visiting with her, after so many years.

She had since retired, and I gathered that she was pretty much alone in the world, a widow of long-standing and childless. There was a poignancy about her situation that impressed me then and that I often recalled: an old lady bravely pursuing her interests, dining at tables for one, ordering one concert ticket. A decade later I saw her from a distance waiting for a bus in downtown Dallas. I thought, briefly, about approaching her, but she didn't seem to be available, somehow—looking as though any intrusion upon her solitude would be unwelcome. I wish, now, I had said hello, had called her back.

I had one final fling, the only affair I ever had after Jerry and I had become reunited in 1966. Jim was an insurance salesman and a part-time realtor, divorced and separated from his two children in Beaumont, very much a part of the gay scene in Houston's Montrose district. I was briefly allured by that scene, living as I did in an apartment and then in a rooming house right in the middle of the area, with its heavy cruising and its concentration of clubs and pedestrian traffic. I couldn't have had a better, more knowledgeable guide.

Lillian had just left one afternoon, and with the \$5 I had earned tutoring, I went to my favorite hamburger stand and ordered an early dinner. I was sitting at one of the picnic tables outside, eating my sandwich and reading the *Christian Science Monitor* that I subscribed to at that time for news. I noticed a man driving by several times, slowing down, staring at me, and finally parking. He introduced himself and asked if he could give me a ride somewhere.

We saw one another several times a week for

the next couple of months. We went dancing (which I hadn't done since Robert), we ate out together, and we had sex, sometimes in my room, sometimes in the apartment he shared with an ex-lover. Jim was a gentle, thoughtful man, a passionate lover, and a great deal of fun to be with, in public or alone. He wanted a commitment from me; he was ready, he said, to settle down.

As soon as some of the newness, the theatricality of what I was doing, wore off, I realized, or admitted, that I didn't love Jim. We had very little in common, after all, beneath the superficial mutual attraction. Our last time together was a trip that we made to San Antonio. Although the sex was as good as ever, we both knew by then that we wouldn't be seeing one another any more.

Jim was recovering from a bout with hepatitis when I met him—his second, he told me. I soon gathered that he had had numerous sexual partners since his move from Beaumont. As far as we know, AIDS was not yet present in the US, but I have often wondered if Jim ever contracted it, given his way of life then. I don't have the heart to try to find out.

I told Jerry about Jim one night after I'd moved back home to work during the summer, before entering graduate school in Austin that next fall. He had come over for dinner; we'd finished eating, and the two of us were sitting on the dark patio, alone, in the huge metal chairs my parents had had for as long as I could remember. I suppose I felt I had to tell him, that it was a problem we had that had to be resolved.

He was hurt, as hurt as I had ever seen him, or as I was ever to. I remember very clearly—now, over 25 years later—that for a few minutes I was not at all sure he and I could go on. I squatted beside him, putting my head in his lap, and apologized, and promised that it would never happen again.