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THE IDENTITY CRISIS OF A YOUNG MAN

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In May, Alan Montgomery celebrated his 20th birthday. That same month, he arranged for his own cremation.

He's had more than his share to cope with this year, he says. But today he feels good. He's just gotten off work, a temporary office job he's had for two weeks, and he's got a million things on his mind.

Time is running out.

He opens a leather briefcase and begins pulling out files--lists of people he wants to contact, health documents, letters from politicians. He opens the file marked "MATERNAL," a folder that holds the remnants of his relationship with his family. There is a crayon drawing from his little sister, a recipe for chopped beef curry from his step mom, six family photographs and several letters.

A smile travels over the chiseled features of his face as he shares a note from his youngest sister. It reads: "Thank you for the crayons and pens." Alan had sent them to her at his family's home in eastern Washington last Christmas. He'd sent his parents wildflower seeds.

Jan. 12 was the day he got the news. When the counselor told him he was HIV positive, he remembers exactly what he said: "BUT I'M ONLY 19!"

Then he sobbed.

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Ever since his dad kicked him out of the house at 16, Alan has been on his own. There are the occasional letters from his parents, but, for the most part, contact with them has been minimal since they found out he is gay.

"Where he stands with God is in a sinful state," his dad, Michael Montgomery, said during a recent phone conversation.

Alan can't remember exactly how he worded the letter he wrote to his dad about the HIV test results. He recalls saying that he needed to inform him that his AIDS test was positive. He also made a very strong statement that if his dad couldn't learn to deal with him now, he wanted to know. "I won't be able to deal with it when I'm sick."

He enclosed his most recent phone number.

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1-22-91

Dear Son

We received your letter Saturday. While we were deeply distressed by its contents, we were not surprised by it. This is the kind of news that we've been prepared for for sometime now, I when I learned of your decision to join that sub-culture, your mother only more recently. Suddenly, life has a finality attached to it, an ever-approaching, inescapable certainty. Alan, son, just as inescapable is God's love for you and his righteousness in making a provision for your escape from eternal destruction...

We all love you very much.

Dad.

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A letter from his step mom, who has reared him since he was 3, arrived the same day. One sentence stands out. He reads it aloud. "You were a fine son, Alan."

He reads it again and again. "You WERE a fine son? WERE a fine son?"

He leans forward in his chair and pauses for a moment. "They feel I'm already gone," he offers softly. "They believe that by supporting me, they are supporting my 'lifestyle.' They tell me they love me. But when I'm in the hospital, they aren't there.

"I have one goal," he adds. "I'd like my parents to say before I go, 'I love you for whom and what you are.' That's what keeps me going."

It's a wish Michael Montgomery cannot deliver. Unless ... "Alan has to get things right between himself and God," the father says. "He's got to admit what he does is wrong.

"It's a tough line to walk," he adds. "I want to show him that I love him, but I don't want to let the pressure off. I want to see change. I want him to repent."

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Looking back, Michael Montgomery says Alan was always a hard-working, enthusiastic kid who did well in school, read voraciously and played the piano beautifully. Then Alan went through a period of adolescent rebellion. When his son challenged his authority, Michael ordered him to move out of the house.

But the real problem began after his son moved out. That's when Alan met a counselor who "encouraged" his homosexuality, Michael says. "I don't believe he was a homosexual at the time he left home," he continues. "I would say he had some effeminate characteristics.

“I view Alan as a victim of a decadent society.”

Alan views himself as the victim of a different kind of decadence, what he calls “the decadence of stupidity and ignorance.”

He was never like the other kids at school, he says. He knew he was gay from the time he was about 6, though he was light years away from understanding his sexuality. Even then he was called a sissy and often fled home from school in tears.

In grade school, his parents moved the family from the Seattle area to Vancouver to live in a fundamentalist Christian community, a group Alan describes as “an ultraconservative cult, anti-abortion, anti-gay, right wing--fanatically so.”

After about four years, the Montgomery family returned to Seattle and sent Alan to another Christian school. By the time he was in seventh grade, they pulled him out of school completely and taught him at home. He had few friends and lived in constant fear that the kids he knew through church would find out he was gay and tell his parents.

“My parents think being gay is a sin that can be cured, but I never had any interest in the opposite sex,” he says. “I don’t feel that was a choice for me at all. I remember messing around with another boy-- ‘playing doctor.’ The boy ratted. My dad found out and discussed it with the church elders. The second time it happened, he beat me. My parents always thought they could beat it out of me.”

At 15, he took a bottle of Nuprin. He never told his parents why he was so sick.

Jean Willis-Long, who has known him since he was 14, recalls how frightened Alan was when he showed up at her doorstep the night he was kicked out of his house. She and her husband lived near the Montgomerys and frequently hired Alan as a handyman.

“He was so helpless, so sheltered,” she says. “He’s struggled so hard to be who he is and to make it on his own. He has always been so enthusiastic, so bouncy, so eager to see the world, so thoughtful and aware. He’s very, very aware.”

“He cried many, many times.”

Alan lived with friends of Willis-Long’s, got a job bagging groceries, enrolled himself in public high school and later joined the National Guard, scoring in the highest percentile on a battery of tests. He briefly lived with his parents before enrolling in a Bible college. It was there that he first was confronted directly about his sexuality. A pastor asked if he was a homosexual. He said yes. The pastor told his father.

“I was suicidal,” Alan says. “I dropped out of school and checked myself into a psychiatric ward. I was afraid of myself. I knew my parents thought it was shameful, and I had no sex education. I didn’t know what being gay meant.”

Life of change

Since then, Alan has been on the run, changing jobs, changing addresses, changing friends. Sometimes he’s asked his parents for money. They’ve always said no, they would in no way support his lifestyle.

The past two years have been marked by a series of chaotic experiences, he says--two moves to the East Coast, bouts of acute loneliness, returns to Seattle, a devastating rape by an acquaintance.

He’s worked as a sales clerk, a bookkeeper, a computer sales representative. There was a time he worked as a male call boy for an escort service in Seattle, he says. “I really regret it. There were a lot of risks. It was self-destructive. I wasn’t with people you could depend on. I was really depressed, really lonely.”

“I moved to Florida. I wanted to be in a place that was warmer and the people were nicer.”

Instead, he wound up in a shelter for homeless youths where he says he was physically abused. He eventually met a man from Long Beach who talked him into moving to California last Thanksgiving.

“If I hadn’t had friends, I would have killed myself,” he says flatly.

Since his HIV test in January, Alan has had a series of temporary jobs and addresses. But his real work is counseling youths between 15 and 25 who are HIV positive. There are virtually no resources for gay youths, whether they are healthy or sick, he says. It is a fact he finds criminal.

He is classified as having ARC, or “AIDS Related Complex,” a medical no-man’s land which means he has symptoms but hasn’t been diagnosed with a full-blown case of AIDS. That will come later. It could be years. It could be months.

He gets night sweats, a symptom common to AIDS. He recently was hospitalized with nausea and dehydration. His weight has dropped from 170 to 155 pounds since Christmas. He is 6 feet 2 inches tall.

But he doesn’t complain. “The sickness comes and goes,” he says.

Last spring he organized a group called “Positive Youth,” the only support group exclusively for young people who have tested HIV positive in the area. He also lectured at Lakewood and Millikan High Schools about AIDS prevention, and contacted 200 politicians and journalists about the acute need for more AIDS education.

“He has a very powerful message to deliver,” says Sandy French, a Long Beach public schools consultant. “He was able to make students aware of what could happen to them in a very personal way and to have compassion for people with AIDS.”

For him, lecturing is not an occasional volunteer pursuit. Alan Montgomery is on the warpath. He promises he will not let up, not stop his passionate crusade to talk to his peers about safe sex, and to provide comfort to peers who are sick.

Without a car, it can take an entire day to get to a speaking engagement or doctor's appointment. No matter. If he has to miss a day of work, so be it. With an urgency born of anger and frustration and hurt, he says he is absolutely committed to helping others and has every intention of starting a new youth program in Long Beach in September.

"I'm over motivated. I'm determined," he says. "It comes from desperation. If I can help influence the lives of even a few people, I'm happy."

"Look at me. I'm cute. People look at me. That changes their attitudes about AIDS. They listen. I talk to people about homophobia. That's the biggest thing. Something has to be done to change attitudes. I refuse to be silent."

Last month, Alan spent a couple of nights in a motel in between a move from one friend's house to another. He was sick and broke. One morning when he woke up, his sheets were completely soaked. It scared him and he didn't feel well, but he got up and went to work anyway. His current job isn't permanent or full-time. He cannot afford to miss a day of work.

What he'd like most is to volunteer full time and have a place to live and food to eat. He hasn't asked his dad for money in a while. As Michael Montgomery says, "I think he realizes that's not going to happen. We tell him, 'We are not your source of support,'" Michael says. "'We love you, but you need to pay your own way.'"

Alan tries to keep his spirits up. He is a polite, cheerful, even exuberant young man. One moment, he will say, "I see myself as living. I plan on being around when everyone else is gone."

He loves to dance, to write poetry, to raise orchids, to play Bach.

But the next moment, he will reluctantly admit that it takes a tremendous amount of energy to keep a smile plastered on his face. He is scared inside. "It's like I've grown old 20 years before my time," he will say.

He has no idea where he'll go when he gets sick. Finding a place to live this week is the priority. His parents have made it clear that taking care of him is out of the question. "Unfortunately, his lifestyle decision has made it impossible for us take him in," Michael says. "We can't jeopardize other lives for that. It does not make sense. There are too many unknowns. Under the circumstances it isn't possible--and won't be possible."

"It's not over for him yet," he adds. "A lot of people sneak religion in just before the blanket is pulled over their eyes."

Adds Alan's stepmother, Brenda Montgomery: "We have no plans to see him. He needs to get his relationship right with his lord. Where he stays is out of my hands. His daddy says he can't come home, and I respect his authority."

"As a mother, I would probably put my life in jeopardy," she adds. "But I do not have that option."

Alan has a boyfriend who is in college and can't take him in. The boyfriend lives with his parents, who are both doctors. If they found out he is gay, they might not pay their son's tuition.

Though many people have been kind enough to take him in for a while, Alan says most people "don't want to be stuck with someone who could be their son."

He shrugs. He smiles an agreeable smile. He wants to make it clear that he'll work something out. He's been on his own since he was 16, he points out. There is pride in that.

The confidence doesn't hold. "I don't feel wanted," he says, his tone a little empty, his cheerful expression a little forced.

Last Saturday night he was at a dance club and the subject of suicide came up. He and a couple of friends talked about the most painless ways to kill yourself. They reasoned that a good concoction would be to take a pain pill to make you sleep combined with a lethal poison like oleander tea to kill you.

Alan says he tries not to dwell on morbid things. But, he notes almost without expression, "If my life gets much more difficult, I would consider it."

"I don't feel well when I get stressed out like this," he adds. "I'll feel better when I find a place to live."