WIFE OF A LESBIAN

A MEMOIR BY RUTH REID

EDITED WITH ADDITIONAL MATERIAL
BY JACQUELYN MARIE

Kent and Ruth, 1951

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"When I came out in the 1950s, we had to reinvent the wheel. There was no such thing as a lesbian history, we were not dignified with a lesbian history." Lillian Faderman

Ruth Reid, 1981

INTRODUCTION

I met Ruth Reid in 1975 at a University of California Berkeley extension course on women writers taught by Susan Griffin. Seven of us formed a writers group and subsequently published a journal of women's prose and poetry, entitled The Wild Iris Journal.

Ruth read part of her diary at our first meeting and we all encouraged her to write more about her interesting and unconventional life. She then started writing stories which became her "autobiographic novel" (her words), Dark Birth. (She changed names and used a little poetic license but essentially the stories were true.) She finished this "novel" before she died in 1981.

The complete work was never published but excerpts appeared in The Wild Iris, Gay Old Girls, and In The Life.[1]

Before her death, she left this manuscript and other writings of hers such as letters, tapes, stories, her partner Kent's writings, and other materials to the Mazer Lesbian Archives, then in Oakland, California, now in West Hollywood, California.

For many years, I had wanted to see her manuscript published. I acquired a copy from Mazer Archives but felt it needed major editing and I did not wish to tamper with someone's writing in that way. Therefore, I decided to publish excerpts interwoven with information about Ruth's life and times.

1 See bibliography

THE WIFE OF A LESBIAN--RUTH REID

I remember Ruth Reid with a whiskey in one hand, cigarette in the other, holding court in her small Berkeley California studio, books and papers in stacks all around her. "My marriage was a traditional one just like yours," she told me as we discussed our writing in 1975. Ruth was referring to her 29-year "marriage" to Kent Hyde, a woman who "passed" (in the lesbian parlance of the time)[2] as a man. Furthermore, Kent considered herself the only writer in the family.

I was breaking out of my role as a traditional wife and mother with my involvement in the women's movement, reading women's literature, taking classes, starting a CR (consciousness-raising) group and writing for the first time in many years. I too faced a conflict. My husband did not like changes and used passive aggressiveness to combat them. During that first year, I divorced my husband and had my first affair with a woman. Our writers' group and especially Ruth supported me immensely through these life changes.

Ruth read this moving excerpt from her diary at the first meeting of our writing group. We all encouraged her to write more about her interesting and unconventional life.

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2 "The word *passing* is used to represent a Lesbian who looked like a man to the straight world. She wore men's clothes.... Language here is inadequate, however. Neither *passing* nor *transvestism* explains the experience of the passing woman. Only she can." Joan Nestle, Restricted Country.

FRAGMENTS FROM A DIARY

July 4, 1968

Kent died this morning. Her pain has been so very great for so long that I should really feel a sense of relief, even joy, perhaps that the suffering is over. But after twenty-eight years of life with her, how do I feel? Not relief, certainly. Rather a numbing, selfish sense of aloneness.

Since I shall have to move soon, I have filled the hours today sorting papers, looking at old photographs, packing the few books I shall keep. I did not want to see anyone today. Tomorrow, yes, but not today.

Tonight I cannot sleep and I have been looking through old diaries of mine in a desultory fashion. The entries I have read bring back vividly, blindingly, the experiences of the last twenty-eight years -- and of the years before when I was young. The earliest diaries were destroyed but there are still many left. So many things forgotten. For instance:

Santa Cruz Mts.

March 27, 1951

Tomorrow is our fourteenth anniversary. We are going to have a party -- just the two of us after Kent's mother goes to bed -- with hors d'oeuvres and whiskey. The house is freshly cleaned and there are forget-me-nots in the beautiful Chinese bowl -- the one Kent bought me for Christmas in 1945 when the typographical union won the raise with back pay and she had $400. The bowl is one of the three beautiful things we own -- except the books, of course. The other two are the low redwood table which Kent built out of 2' by 12' planks and the huge grey stone with fossils in it which we found on the beach at Capitola.

When I look over the fourteen years it hardly seems possible that we are the same people. We had four years alone before her mother came to live with us. We were no longer young then, in our middle thirties, with the weights of our varied experiences, but we were almost giddy. I remember the night we danced and danced in a bar in El Cerrito when the Beer Barrel Polka was popular. The first night Kent arrived for dinner with newspapers over her head for protection against the downpour. I had set the card table in the living room with candles. When she came in, she leaned against the door and said, in her dramatic fashion, "I have burned my bridges behind me. I have told Jo." I knew then that it was real (she had "forever" engraved inside the ring she gave me). And it has been good. Difficult...but rich and full.

Santa Cruz Mts.

September 10, 1953

I have often thought of writing the autobiography of a "wife" of a Lesbian. It is a situation full of ambiguities, but that is fitting for our age. Although Kent passes as a man in everyday life I have always insisted that in our social contacts the situation be clarified. There have seldom been unpleasant consequences from such an explanation. One of the two nurses from the psychiatric ward at U.C. Medical Center who came to our shop to learn weaving, the younger one, froze and was hostile; the older one was concerned and unbearably "sympathetic." When I told Sara Goldstein (we had met her at Bob Andrew's where there were never explanations, although the whole group, younger artists and poets, mostly, knew), she asked me if it were not an uncomfortable situation for me. I told her that, having been married to a Jew for eight years, I was accustomed to being together with a member of a minority group. That was of course too simple an explanation (and irritated her), but at the time I was very sincere. It interests me that only now, after so many years, I really face the difficulties -- annoying at times -- of my position. It is not always easy to remember whether in a given

situation I am supposed to say "he" or "she" in referring to Kent. But on the whole it has clarified many things. Were Kent actually a man we would probably still be in the Methodist Church. And I believe that our position outside the church, sharpened as it has been daily by our contact through Kent's mother with the Free Methodists (an odious group of people, mostly), has enabled us to find a much more valid spiritual position.

July 4, 1968

And now it is over -- all the delight, the tension, and the difficulties, all of it over. I suppose somehow I will go on, but tonight I am not thinking of that. There is a poem I read once in one of the literary reviews ... Something about: and now that the path goes downward all the way, should I complain.

Ruth was born Ruth Hatch in Salem, Massachusetts in 1903 in a conservative Christian New England family. Her mother died when she was ten. This excerpt from her manuscript, Dark Birth concerns her adolescence around 1917 and prefigures Ruth's interest in women and the stage. Ruth had a husky deep voice with perfect diction when I knew her in her seventies and it was easy to imagine her doing recitations in her early life as she had once mentioned to me.

MY FOURTEENTH BIRTHDAY

I remember my fourteenth birthday for two reasons. Aunt Annie gave me a small gold watch, a wristwatch. I had never had one before.

The other reason I remember that day - a hot June day - was that after my father had lighted the rose-painted gas lamp in the parlor and adjusted the flame, he turned to me and said "Dahdie girl" - that was his pet name for me - "I am going to be married again."

I had taken out a copy of The House of Seven Gables to write an essay on it for next day's English class. I had the book propped against the lamp. As my father spoke I looked at him with what must have been a mixture of horror and terror. It felt as if the horses' hooves, as they rushed past pulling the fire engine, were in my chest. I felt hot and weak.

"Now, Ruth," he said sternly, "Ella" - that was the name of the woman he was to marry - "will be a good mother to you." I didn't tell him I already had a mother even if she were in the cemetery across the street. Without saying anything I went to the kitchen where my aunt was washing the supper dishes. I could tell that she knew about it and that she was angry.

"I'm sorry for you, Ruth," she said. "But you know you can always phone me if it gets too bad. Your father is a fool."

Ella was stout and she had a large mouth with thin lips which reminded me of a fish. When she laughed she put one finger against her upper teeth. They were false and she was afraid they would fall out.

There was, however, one compensation in life with my stepmother which gradually absorbed my entire interest. It was the theatre. Ella liked to go. There was a stock company in Salem and every week they had a new play. Joshua, my father, had never allowed me to go to the theatre, but I had been in some

plays in school and I had heard the other girls talking about moving pictures. They all agreed that Francis X. Bushman was wonderful. I felt shut out not to know what they were talking about.

Now I went every week with my stepmother to the stock company plays. Walking into the theatre and sitting in one of the red plush seats, it was as if the misery of the hours before and after were suspended, waiting, for the moment forgotten. School became vague. I lived somehow from matinee to matinee. Ella told her reproachful husband she went for my sake and I didn't care what she said so long as we went. Ella always bought chocolate covered peppermints in a long, narrow box and while I read the program carefully I tasted the sharp sweetness of the candy.

Sometimes, during the intermission, Ella - whose father had been a Second Adventist minister - murmured her fear that Jesus might come while we were sitting there. I looked cautiously for the blinking red light of the exit sign, and my heart had an uncomfortable rhythm but as soon as the curtain went up again I forgot all about it.

Ann Nowland, the leading lady in the stock company, was Jewish with dark beauty and more than the usual amount of talent for so small a company. I cut pictures of her from the newspapers and pasted them inside the covers of my school books, but it left me vaguely unsatisfied. I wanted more.

Ella was a little deaf so we always sat near the front. I wrote the actress a long letter, telling her of my adoration and my misery, of my intention to be an actress myself. I even enclosed a picture of myself and told her where I would be sitting. Soon after the play began the following Wednesday afternoon - it was Camille - it was as if Ann Nowland's glance reached across the footlights to me and for the rest of the performance through Camille's swooning death, I was numb, almost a part of that group beyond the blazing footlights. But I received no answer to my letter.

Then I decided upon a strategy. If I sent her something, flowers, candy, she might write to thank me.

I thought of Aunt Annie. She still lived in Salem, but she didn't come to our church any more and I was not allowed to visit her. My father said she had been an evil influence on me and Ella said the whole church had been talking about the way Annie had tried to rope Joshua into marrying her. I didn't believe that was true because my aunt didn't want to marry anyone and certainly not my father. But it was one of the few things on which he and Ella were agreed and I knew it would be useless to argue against them both.

One day at recess I went to the phone on the wall of the ice cream parlor across from the school and asked for my aunt's number. The phone had a brown wooden shelf just under it and I held onto it. I was afraid my aunt might not be home, might be out on a case, and my fingers on the shelf did not relax until I heard her slow hello at the other end of the line. I asked if she could meet me at the library after school. I felt a little sneaky as I went toward our meeting place. It was early November and the snow lay in dirty heaps beside the pavement. Then I saw the tall, so familiar figure and before I was even aware of the impulse I was running toward her.

Aunt Annie held me for a moment and then spoke crossly, "Just look how your stockings are sagging, Ruth. A girl your age should pay more attention to her looks." I looked up into her eyes, reddened and damp, and I knew she wasn't really angry. As we walked I told her about my unhappy days, of how I hated living with Ella, and my feeling of utter frustration about Ann Nowland. At that she interrupted me. "Suppose I send a big box of candy to her from you. You ought to get a real letter for that, don't you think?" "That would be grand," I said, my breath tight.

I calculated the time carefully and when I thought the day had come I waited until my father had gone to the office and then

persuaded Ella that my head ached too badly to go to school. The letter came that morning. I slipped it out of the mailbox with furtive fingers and ran up to my room.

"Dear little Ruth," Ann Nowland wrote. "I want to thank you not only for the candy but for the letter and the picture you sent me. Constant rehearsals and performances leave me little time for correspondence but I do appreciate your confidences. May I advise you to put the thought of acting out of your mind? It is a hard, relentless life and if your parents are opposed to it, will cause you and them needless heartaches. Sincerely your friend, Ann Nowland."

I read the words over until I could see them without looking at the paper, but I never thought of taking her advice. Of course I would be an actress. Her letter gave strength to my intent. It would probably be difficult, even bitter sometimes. But it would be full of real and fascinating people, people like Ann Nowland.

We were reading Romeo and Juliet in school and I memorized the scene: "Farewell, God knows when we shall meet again" ending with "Romeo, I come. This do I drink to thee." I dragged a mattress from the storage next to my room and practiced dying. The noise so aroused Ella's curiosity that she looked up from the foot of the stairs just in time to see me swoon realistically and her fright propelled her halfway up the stairs despite her bad knee. The rheumatic twinges increased her anger when she found out what I was doing. I heard her that evening telling my father she was sure there was something queer about me. Her conclusive proof on this point was that I didn't care a thing about boys.

After a few days the letter, far from satisfying me, brought a feverish eagerness actually to talk with the actress. The Red Cross asked at school for some of the older girls to sell stamps on the street. (It was 1917 and the war fever was peaking.) I saw my chance. I volunteered and chose the streets near the theatre. It was a grey day. There were Christmas decorations in the windows but the sidewalks were slushy with trampled

snow. There was a sharp wind from the harbor which cut through my coat and I was cold. I sold my allotted stamps as fast as possible and then when the audience came out of the theatre I hurried into the little side street and stood opposite the stage door. There were some men standing about, blowing on their hands. They looked at me briefly and then looked away. My teeth were bumping each other in cold and excitement. I heard my name and turning saw Sophie, a Jewish girl in my class at school. Sophie told me that she was going backstage and urged me to come too but the idea frightened me. All I had ever heard about backstage life loomed and terrified me, even while it fascinated me. Sophie said she knew Miss Nowland well because her mother sewed for her; at one time Miss Nowland had even come to their house for Shabbas supper. That was on Friday night when they lit candles. Finally Sophie went across to the stage door and entered it. I saw lights, a slanting border of stage trees and then the door closed. It was dark now. I stood on one damp foot, holding the other close to me for warmth. The stage door opened and people came out. But Ann Nowland didn't come.

Finally, cold and hungry and fearing the dark street, I gave up. I had to wait a long time for the streetcar and the ride seemed longer than usual, passing through the familiar streets, over the North Bridge, with its bronze tablet "to the heroic dead" who had died in the Revolutionary War, glinting in the lights from the streetcar.

Home at last, I met my stepmother looking at me strangely as I came in. "Your father is in the den. He wants to see you right away."

I walked into the little den, the gas jet flickering, improperly adjusted. My father was sitting in the rocker, his head in his hands. He looked old and tired. When he heard me he stood up jerkily. "So you've been sneaking around behind my back with actors. I might have known you would turn out this way."

"What do you mean, Papa?" My words sounded faint and far away. "Mean, I mean I've caught up with you. That's what I mean. Some girl named Sophie called a while ago. She said to tell you Miss Nowland was sorry she missed you but they were going to have a party backstage tomorrow and for you to be sure to come. She said to tell you all the actors would be there." There it was, a heavy stone, thudding. My father's voice rose in a sharp crescendo, "So that's where you've been spending your time, you little--"

I was angry but I had no desire to explain. Hunger gone, I went out of the room and toward the stairs, my father following me. "Why," he continued to shout, "you're no better than a common whore." I turned halfway on the stairs, looking at my father. Would I ever be able to bear the sight of him again? Raising my arm with all the drama of Juliet in my favorite scene, I pointed past him. "Please go," I said quietly.

My stepmother had followed us into the hall and I heard her words, "Who would have thought it? The sly puss. And putting on as if she didn't care anything about men." I lay on my bed, not even able to cry.

Ruth later left home and went to live with her 20-year older half-brother and his wife in Greenville, South Carolina. She then attended the University of North Carolina to study literature and met Edgar (Leon in the novel) who was a German Jewish Professor of Philosophy at the university. Ruth married Edgar in her last year of college, 1926 and they moved to Hamburg where Edgar taught at the University of Hamburg. Ruth was pursuing her PhD in LIterature until she could no longer take the endless Heil Hitler salutes before classes.

Edgar left Germany in 1933, when Hitler came into power but Ruth stayed untill 1934 and pursued her affair with Dena, a Jewish doctor. Ruth had had women lovers since her teen age years and continued these affairs in Hamburg. Edgar, according to Ruth, was not interested in sex, only in his philosophy reseach and writings and he never minded her affairs.

In this excerpt, Ruth's affair with Dena was obviously a very significant one. Germany was also very important for Ruth throughout her life. She often mentioned in her correspondence (including letters to Germans during and after World War II) various authors in German literature and philosophy as well as music composers. She also was fluent in the German language.

DENA

In this section of my novel which takes place in Hamburg, Germany in 1934, I have just come from my lawyer where we have arranged the final details for my appearance in court the next day for my divorce from Leon. I was walking along the Alster River thinking about my last eight years in Hamburg, so soon to be ended.

A group of SA men were approaching briskly, breaking harshly into my thoughts. I crossed to the other side of the street to avoid them. There on the ground floor of the Vierjahreszeiten Hotel I could see the flower shop where Dena had bought flowers for me all those weeks when I had lain on the bed or hobbled about with a cast on my leg.

On the 5th of March, 1933, I had slipped on a floor which our cleaning woman had newly waxed that day. While I had been in America during the past summer, I had arranged an affair between Leon and one of the students, Maria, who was a friend of mine and I knew she adored him. The affair had seemingly been quite successful but Leon had expected it to terminate when I returned. That had not been my intention. I explained to him that I was really sexually attracted only to women. That did not disturb him in the least, but it also did not deter him from half-way trying to make love to me. We had been lying together on the couch after lunch that day when the phone rang in the next room.I hurried to answer it, feeling sure it was Maria, but I slipped on the floor between the two rooms. Leon who had been asleep, curled against me, awoke slowly. The phone continued to ring but I found I could not get up. Leon was annoyed. He went to the phone and told Maria I had fallen, then he returned and urged me to get up. When he was finally convinced that I could not, he lifted me, put me on the couch and then called the doctor.

The leg was broken and very painful, so after the doctor had taken me to the hospital and put on the cast, he gave me a very strong sedative. I awoke sometime in the night to the sound of

singing and shouting. I thought it was delirium caused by the sedative. Next morning when our cleaning woman came I realized that it had been a sort of delirium but not within my own head. In the night the Nazis had marched on the city hall and taken over Hamburg in the name of the National Socialist Party. It was particularly frustrating to be tied to the couch with a cast on my leg during the weeks that followed. People came bringing news of what was happening. Leon was still convinced that the situation was not dire.

Dena came often, bringing flowers. They were usually the beautiful Dutch tulips with long stems which, when they were in a vase, twisted and turned in intricate design.

Just beyond the flower shop now, I saw the Klein Fontenay street, the house near the corner where Dena had lived. I could see the window of her bedroom where I had seen her last. In her bedroom , dead, from a death of her own choosing, her sister crouching in the corner, moaning like a beast in pain. Dena, red-haired, so vibrant that when she came into a room it was like an electric charge.

It was in the summer of '32 while I was in America, trying to decide whether to return to Hamburg, that Leon had written me about meeting a fascinating doctor, Dena Goldstein. He said he thought I would like her. He also said his fall lectures would be starting soon and he wanted me to come back for them. I had taken the next ship.

In a way it was Dena, knowing her, loving her, that had been the beginning of what was now the end.

I sat down on the low stone wall along the sidewallk. A great swastika flag hung from one of the windows in the house that had been Dena's, a flaunting symbol of her defeat.

We had talked of going away together, to Holland or to Switzerland. It seemed now like make-believe, a fantasy. She was the Baronin and I the Rosenkavalier. Perhaps that was why it had

not been enough. It was a greater passion, her passion for Germany where her Jewish ancestors had lived for so many generations that, in the end, had put the sleeeping pills in her hand, in her body. She did not want to leave Hamburg where she had lived all her forty-eight years, and yet she could not stay. There was no love, at least no love that I could give her, powerful enough to resolve that conflict. I wondered what she thought as she lay there in the same bed where we had been together, what she thought as she waited for sleep, for death.

There had been parties, wonderful parties, in that house in the Klein Fontanay. It was as though, as the Nazis closed in, the bonds between us all were intensified. We could no longer feel comfortable in restaurants or theatres so we met in our own homes and experienced a closer group feeling than we had had before.

Even that party which started so disastrously. Dena's sister had let us in, saying that Dena had been detained but that she would come as soon as she could. We stood or sat about in little groups in the huge living room, with its flaming paintings from the early German Expressionists, most of them given to Dena by the young artists themselves when they were still poor and she had refused to bill them for her services.

There was a tenseness, a rapidly spreading pall among us that evening. Someone had told the story of a man, known to most of us, who published a small magazine favoring abortion. His wife had found him the evening before unconscious, bloody and broken at the foot of a long flight of stairs in his home. And he was not even Jewish!

Then suddenly Dena was there. She had four men with instrument cases with her. She placed them in the next room and soon we heard the lively music of a Haydn Quartet. She called to her sister to bring more wine. The servants were always sent home before such parties to prevent possible eavesdropping and reports to the Nazis. Dena went from group to group, pat-

ting, kissing, laughing, until we all responded. The gloom disappeared. Dena was there.

I found out later, but not that evening, what had delayed her. Some days before she had hired a receptionist, a young woman she had met in a clinic and who in those days of unemployment had been unable to find a job. That afternoon the young woman's parents had come to the office and taken her away, saying they could not allow their daughter to work for a Jew. The girl had cried and Dena had been shattered. She had gone for a long walk along the Alster, then slipped into the house, put on a yellow dress and there she was.

Looking back at the swastika in what had been one of Dena's windows, I got up wearily from the stone wall and went on to the Alterabenstrasse which for a few more days would be my home.

When Ruth returned to the United States in the mid-thirties, she went to the Moody Bible Institute in North Carolina to become a missionary. She then worked in Cinncinnati as a home missionary to Jewish immigrants. The immigrants wanted no part of Christianity but appreciated her English lessons. She then saw the light and gave up missionary work. She married a blind man, Mr. Reid (Norman Carter in her novel) and moved with him and his sister to California in the late 1930's to take care of them. Ruth spent the rest of her life (except for a short stint in upstate New York with Kent) in Northern California.

In the following excerpt she meets Kent for the first time while she is living with the Reids.

KENT AND RUTH

We were sitting in a booth in a coffee shop at the corner of Telegraph and Bancroft, Kent and I. I had seen her several times since that first evening but there had always been other people. This was the first time we had been alone.

Emily was better now and I was free to go out more so Kent had suggested I come over to the Berkeley campus. I met her at the Life Sciences Building where she worked, feeding and injecting rats. Since it was a Saturday she was through early and we had gone down into the huge circle of old eucalyptus trees and then on up to the coffee shop. I thought the campus was very beautiful and since everything about California had a special charm for Kent most of our conversation was about the various forms of vegetation which were strange to me, a monkey tree for instance. But when we reached the comparative isolation of the booth, our talk became more personal.

Kent told me about a party she and Jo had gone to the night before.

"I think I must have had more than usual to drink," she said ruefully, "because Jo insisted that Bill drive us home. Good old Bill," she added, "he would never overdo anything as mundane as drinking. He leaves that for slobs like me."

Her voice was bitter. I had already realized that Bill was the man Roger and his wife had referred to as having an affair with Jo.

"You aren't very happy, are you?" I said. My words startled me. "I'm sorry," I added hastily, "I shouldn't have said that. It sort of slipped out."

Kent smiled wryly. "That's O.K. I suppose it's fairly obvious. But one can always chalk it up to experience. There's nothing like experience, you know."

"Don't you think perhaps yours comes from being --" I hesitated and then rushed on -- "from being a homosexual? I've known quite a few, especially in Germany, here too, and they usually ended in suicide or compromise."

I didn't say that I, too, had loved women. I am not sure why. Probably because I thought of it as a part of my past that it might be wiser not to tell her. Later when we did talk about it, Kent said she had sensed it that day in the booth.

"I really can't see what that has to do with happiness. Being unhappy is common to most humans." Kent twisted the conversation abruptly. "How are you and the Carters? When I first heard Norman was married, I hoped you were ugly and rich but you aren't either one."

"They need me."

"That's right. Emily told me you were a missionary in Cincinnati."

I made a face. "That's not fair." We both laughed and began to talk of other things.

After lunch Kent walked to the bus with me. As we waited for it I told her I was directing a play at the Baptist Church where Emily and I went. I don't remember who wrote the play but it was -- for that time, 1939, -- startingly modern, something about Jesus returning to earth today and what people's reactions would be. One of the deacons was somewhat horrified by the language in one scene, but the minister -- a Dr. Richmond -- had insisted that we use it as it was. Kent said he, Richmond, sounded like quite a guy and maybe she would go with me to the church sometime. She asked if there were anything she could do to help with the play. "There is," I said, but just then the bus came.

"I'll phone about it."

I had been a little worried about our dwindling funds and the many doctor's bills so I had taken a job reading three nights a week to a blind student at the university. The day I had met Kent on campus was one of the evenings for reading to the student. It was a boring job. He was studying law and I understood very little of what I read to him, but since I had had training, when I was young, in dramatics, I think I managed to make it fairly easy for him to listen. I had gotten the job through the head of the School for the Blind where Norman had gone to learn Braille. This evening it was particularly difficult to keep my mind -- or even part of it -- on the printed page because I kept thinking of Kent. Was it terrible that I had said those things to her? Would she phone?

When the hour was finally over and I was free, I started down the steps. I remember it was a gray shingled house and there was a long flight of stairs on the outside. As I started out the front door I heard an auto horn, but I paid no attention. The honking continued and as I reached the sidewalk I saw Kent parked there.

"Get in," she said. "I phoned this evening and Emily told me where you were."

She got out and opened the door for me. Kent was always punctilious about such things. After the strain of the last hour, this seemed like a very warm, comforting relief. I smiled at her.

"I called to find out more about the play and what I could do to help. Emily told me where you were so I thought I would put the bar off a little longer and come and get you."

"Do you go to bars so often?"

"What else is there to do in an empty evening?"

"But Emily said that you write poetry. She showed me some of it."

"She did?" Kent sounded interested. "What did you think of it?"

I hesitated. Somehow I felt I should be honest with this woman. "I think it had some beautiful lines but that it was on the whole derivative."

Kent almost stopped the car. "What the hell -- oh, excuse me -- what do you mean by that?"

"Well, have you read T.S. Eliot or Pound, or any of the other writers who are turning the language around?"

She looked at me thoughtfully. "When I was in high school," she said at last, "a librarian said to me if you like Robert Service, you might enjoy Kipling. I think you just said the same thing."

I liked her. I liked her honesty, her directness, the way we could communicate.

"About the play," I said finally, "what I really need is someone who can shake tin backstage and make it sound like thunder."

"I'm your man. I can even get the tin. And I am very good at making thunder. You can ask Jo about that."

I found tonight that first scene of us, together, the way Kent remembered it, or the way she chose to write it. I have never been sure whether she decided to make things different from the way they really were because she wanted to hide from the truth or because she thought that was the way she should write. I am almost sure she never finished her novel -- despite the obvious reason of illness -- because she could never really face the exposure of herself as a woman and the fact that she was a homosexual, at least so long as her mother was alive. After her mother's death, she was too ill to write. At any rate, the scene as I remembered it, in the coffee shop, became in her manuscript quite different.

Kent's story:

What do you say to an interesting woman when you have no particular desire that she should be interesting, when the road and the car and October in California and four drinks recently and four more in the offing are all of well-being you ask. You do not say it's a nice day. The gears engage mechanically and call for no observation. If life could become sufficiently like gears there might even be an elimination of all observation. However,

"Do you like California?"

"Very much. Except for the hills, some of the roads resemble a number I've known in Northern Germany. Not the hills, not the sun, but the feeling. Do you like California?"

"It was all I've ever dreamed; and everything I've known of happiness I've found here."

"And you're happy now?"

"You know very well I'm not. I'm in the process of making those adjustments which are called living and growing up. I'm learning that marriage is very like international diplomacy. One compromises until all that one has is gone and then one announces to the press that a satisfactory trade agreement has been arranged. It has taken me two of these Octobers to arrive at the great eminence from which I now view the gutter by only having to raise one shoulder."

"But that's because you are as you are, isn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I've known a number of people like you in Germany and spiritually they always ended more or less that way. I think there are only two horns to that dilemma: compromise or suicide."

"Couldn't you blame that on Germany rather than the individual? Isn't that just as true of many German intellectuals as it is of the people of my sort?"
"Oh, I don't think so."

I think we never argued the question of homosexuality again. Perhaps because by then I was already too much in love with her. Perhaps also because things happened too fast. There were other things about which we did argue in great detail which bordered on the same question -- such as minorities and majorities. This was of course before the question of minorities became a general issue, an open issue as it were. Kent admitted quite frankly that she was a member of a minority. She quoted Tertullian on this point who said minorities should be heard (he was referring, I think, to Christians) even though they were not accepted. She also argued that majorities were made up of groups of minorities joining together. That remained a moot question between us. Our arguments never became acrimonious. I think we both enjoyed them. I had a very high regard for her thoughts and I know she had for mine.

The night for the dress rehearsal for the play came. It was early in March. Easter must have been early that year because the play was to be part of the Easter week celebration.

Kent had come once before to practice the thunder. She was wearing the white slacks and hop-sacking jacket which were common in those days. One of the deacons, the same one who had objected to one of the speeches in the play, raised his eyebrows when I referred to Kent as "she," but there was no other reaction and her thunder off-stage was very convincing.

On the night of the dress rehearsal we suddenly discovered that we needed more black crepe paper to cover the stand at the back of the stage. I said I would get it and Kent, who had her car outside, offered to take me. The shop was only a few blocks away on E. 14th Street and it was always open late so we got a roll of the paper and started back.

I had already opened the door on my side of the car and started to get out when Kent leaned over, caught me, and kissed me. "This is it, isn't it?" she said. I must have looked startled. "I guess it is," I answered and then we went into the church, I clutching the roll of black crepe paper and wondering what had really happened.

In some way I got through the dress rehearsal. Then Kent drove me home. It was only a few blocks and we didn't talk, but as she came around to open the car door for me she said, "You aren't angry with me?"

"No," I smiled, "but where do we go from here?"

"Leave that to me," she said, and I did.

Ruth and Kent lived in Berkeley, Santa Cruz, Fairfax, and Oakland, California and a short time in upstate New York during the years they were together. They had four years alone before Kent's mother moved in for fourteen years. This was a very difficult time for them. They could not be free in their relationship as Kent's mother refused to acknowledge it, as she was a very fundamentalist Free Methodist. She also, according to Ruth, “adored Kent and hated her.”

They were not a part of the gay movement because as Ruth stated in a tape interview in 1981 "Kent did not particularly like gays."[3]

(After Kent died, Ruth became involved with the younger lesbian community and thoroughly enjoyed it.)

Though there was a burgeoning lesbian rights movement in San Francisco with the Daughters of Bilitis begun in 1935 and The Ladder, published from 1956 to 1972, both started by Phyllis Lyons and Del Martin,[4] Kent and Ruth were not involved.

There also were gay/lesbian bars such as Mona's and the Black Cat Cafe on Montgomery Street, in San Francisco in the 1930’s and 1940’s (the Black Cat is now a cafe), Ruth refers only to a bar (probably gay or gay-friendly) in El Cerrito with a bartender named Toni, where they danced the polka.

This excerpt from Dark Birth concerns Ruth and Kent’s time in Berkeley around 1938, at the beginning of their relationship and seemingly shows their specific gender (“butch/femme) roles.

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3 Audio tape interview of Ruth Reid in 1981, by archivists at Mazer Lesbian Archives.

4 A phone conversation with Phyllis Lyons in 2006 confirmed that she did not know either Ruth Reid or Kent Hyde.

FROM DARK BIRTH

When we were back in Berkeley, we found a very inexpensive but pleasant apartment at the corner of Ashby and Eakin. I went by there recently. The building had been torn down and there was a convalescent home on that corner. At the time we lived there it was a comparatively large apartment house - five or six apartments, all small but adequate.

We were after all not young. I was 35, Kent 34 and she worked many hours a day at the lab. The doctor said I should rest, because caring for the Carters had been such a strain, so we had a rather quiet life but I must admit that we were not entirely what at least at that period would have been called discreet.

When I first met Kent while she was living with Josephine, she always changed into slacks as soon as she got home from work and wore them also during weekends, and her hair was cut extremely short for a woman. Jo also wore slacks at home, I think somewhat to offset the effect of Kent's appearance. It was not as usual for women to wear slacks then as it has been in recent years.

After Kent moved into a room just a few blocks from where I was still living with the Carters, I was aware gradually that her clothing was becoming more and more like that of a man. She bought pants instead of slacks, and men's underwear, socks and shoes. To our neighbors, after we were living together, seeing her leave home in a skirt for work in the morning, the situation was evidently quite clear.

I used to go out to the car in the morning to kiss her goodbye. Then as soon as she came home in the afternoon she changed into slacks and we often went out to shop or for dinner while she was wearing men's clothing.

I remember one evening we went over to a bar in one of the suburbs of Berkeley where there was a juke box and a small dance floor. It was the year when the Beer Barrel Polka was

popular. Kent was really not a good dancer but that evening she seemed to move with me and the music. We must have been good, or at least effective, because every time we came back to the bar the bar keeper had free drinks waiting for us.

The next day when I was sitting on the steps of the Life Sciences Building at UC Berkeley, waiting for Kent to come for lunch a tall gray-haired man came down the steps and smiled at me. "You seemed to be having a nice time last night," he said. I did not remember seeing him at the bar but I smiled and said, "Yes."

It was shortly after that Kent and I both received formal letters from a man in the police department, asking us to appear at his office on a certain date. We were surprised but supposed it might be about a check that had bounced, although that was usually handled by the store where we had cashed it.

Next door to our apartment house was a Methodist family who had gatherings of young people from time to time but we had not paid much attention to them.

However, when we arrived at the police department the official in charge said that there had been complaints about us from the people next door. We also learned that we had been under surveillance for some time and that the other people in the apartment house where we lived had been interviewed. The policeman in charge said that they had given very good reports of our conduct but that because of the complaints of the people next door he felt it would be wise for us to move.

There was a moment during the conversation when the policeman turned to say something to me but Kent brushed it aside saying, "Leave her out of this. She is only the woman in the case." After that the policeman ignored me. He explained that he was a graduate of the University of California and thought he had some understanding of our situation but he repeated his suggestion to move.

We found another apartment on Milvia Street on the north side of town. The lower floor was occupied by the owner of the house, an older woman who paid no attention to us.

The next four excerpts, from Ruth's manuscript, Dark Birth, were never published. They cover important aspects of Ruth's life story, so I edited them for this publication. The words in parentheses in the last section are mine.

Ruth had started weaving in Germany in the early thirties and it was an important creative outlet for her. Kent had worked at a University of California, Berkeley lab for years while Ruth remained at home. A weaving business in which they could work together and furthermore would support both of them was the most desirable option for them both. They were able to open a weaving shop in San Francisco on Van Ness Avenue, called Reid-Hyde Handweaving and operate it throughout the fifties.

WEAVING

I decided the time had come to sell my loom. Kent could not help me with the weaving as she had always done and we both knew very well that I was impossible at selling. So on my 60th birthday I made the decision to give up weaving. I posted an ad on the bulletin board of an arts and crafts school in Berkeley and in a few days an eager-eyed young woman came to buy it. I was glad to see it go.

As I watched the loom being carried out to the car I thought of the many years I had woven: of the learning time in Germany just after the Nazis took over and I no longer wanted to go to the University where every lecture began with a Heil Hitler and salute from the professor and during the years in Greenville where Peter, delighted by my interest in weaving had ordered a huge old handmade loom for me from North Carolina. We had set it up together in what had once been the cow shed. Then all the years with Kent, first in upstate New York and the long years after we started the business (in San Francisco, Berkeley, and Santa Cruz) and spent grueling hours at it but -- as we always reminded ourselves -- at least it meant we could be together. Now that part of my life -- thirty years since the beginning in Germany -- was over, and I did not regret having it end.

Kent, in the following piece, seems to state her requirements for Ruth as well as her love in a letter to a friend. “Ruth is a beautiful mixture of intense intellectuality and intense domesticity and everything really works out well.” [5]

Ruth had been writing for much of her life. She wrote about novels as well as writing three of her own. One, she calls “a very jejune imitation of Aldous Huxley in 1922 satirizing the campus life at the University of North Carolina.” The second was her attempt to talk about the novel form and was titled “Bis Rapte” (Twice Raped). It treated two stories of the same theme with a solution suited to the period (the twenties). The third was an autobiography written just after she met Kent. She no longer had a copy in 1951.[6]

The first novel quite possibly was the manuscript titled, Gertrude Stein, a Dialogue. [7] Ruth had been told by an agent that this latter novel might be accepted by a New York publisher if she fleshed it out.

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5 Correspondence from Kent Hyde to friend in Germany in 1951.

6 Correspondence from Ruth Reid to friend in 1951.

7 Found at Mazer Lesbian Archives.

RUTH'S WRITING

I decided the time had come to tell Kent about my novel and what Fanny had said. She looked at me in amazement. "But of course you're not going to do anything about it."

"Why not?"

"Well, first of all, there isn't time. And I'll need your help to finish my book."

I didn't say anything for a long while. The whole idea was so strange. Somehow I had always thought of myself as a writer, always been concerned with some form of it, even if it were the PhD thesis I had been writing in Hamburg to please Leon.

"So?" Kent asked again. "You aren't, are you?"

I did think Kent's writing was better than anything I could ever do, and she did need my help. I looked through the window at the little courtyard outside our apartment. It was early June now and there was still light.

"No, I suppose not." I said. But I had an overwhelming sense of loss. I thought fleetingly that must be the way a woman feels when she agrees to abort a child she had always desired.

A handwritten sheet written after Kent's death and found in Ruth's papers stated, "It is difficult at my age to remember the ecstasies of sex. Yet there were ecstasies. Moments when the body seemed to melt and to become one great cry--was it a cry of pleasure or agony or both? I had known this ecstasy with one man and with women. At the moment of fusion there seemed to be no difference. One had been penetrated, loved, understood, fulfilled."

This story took place just after Kent's mother died in the late fifties. Kent had her first episode of rheumatoid arthritis which paralyzed her in 1951 and she continued to suffer from this disease and other physical problems until her death in 1968.

SEX WITH KENT

Kent was sitting on the couch as I went about getting dinner. Suddenly as I passed she pulled me down on her lap and kissed me. She seemed full of energy.

"Let's not bother with dinner. Let's go to bed and make love."

This was so entirely unexpected that I hardly knew how to respond, except that it had to be negative.

I remembered all the past months. First when she was ill and I had lain close to her, knowing sex was impossible; then when she was better but told me all sex impulses had been killed. One night when she had been sitting down I had even begged on my knees that she would make love to me. And now there was Andy[8] and suddenly Kent wanted to go back -- I had to assume because her mother was dead -- as if everything were as it had been.

I think--no, I know--it was the only time I ever hated Kent. I pulled myself off her lap and slapped her face.

The next morning I felt embarrassed, but Kent seemed to have forgotten the whole episode.

8 her lover, Ruth "Rudy" Babcock

Kent, Ruth and Rudy, 1968

In this last excerpt from Ruth's autobiographical novel, a young lesbian couple, Ruth (Rudy) Babcock and Betty (Biber) Warren[9] come into their life). Ruth and Rudy eventually have an affair which is devastating for Kent when she discovers it.

9 Ruth calls Rudy and Biber Andy and Debbie in her novel.

THE LOVE AFFAIR

I found a note in my diary tonight from August 6, 1956: "There cannot all things to the will be bent," which was a quote from my diary in 1934, when I was falling in love with Wolfgang, but I added, "It is easier when one is 53 than when one was 29." Was it?

There came a very different time than Kent and I had known for years: trips, pictures, conversations--the four of us. Strange how closely our lives became intertwined in that year. Perhaps it was because each of us in her own way had so deep a need. I know now that it was true for me, although I had not been aware of it earlier. I thought fleetingly of Goethe's Die Wahlverwandschaften, but shied away from that thought.

One day when Debbie and Kent were in the garage measuring for shelves, Andy and I were in the kitchen where I was preparing a casserole for dinner. I shut the oven door and stood up. Andy was standing facing me, and she lightly brushed the back of her hand up over my breast.

My breasts had never been a particularly erogenous zone for me before this, and I was stunned by my reaction--partly surprise, partly wonder, but mostly passion, a feeling I had had only toward Kent for over fifteen years, even if in recent years it had not been mutual. I was confused.

(Their affair progresses with trips to Biber and Rudy's house in Marin when Biber is at work.)

In a way I suppose it was surprising that my love for Andy had not in any way altered the very deep affection I had for Kent. Perhaps it was because of the many years and experiences Kent and I had shared. It was almost as if I had two very different existences: one a deep attachment and love for Kent, a sense of her need and my desire to fulfill it; on the other hand the irresistible desire to be with Andy. On that first day on the way to Marin when Andy had pulled me close to her in the car I

had said, "You know this has to be forever?" And she had agreed.

And yet how was it to be? And what is forever? A word, a bulwark we place against what consciously or unconsciously we know is impossible?

(Later Rudy tells Biber about the affair and Biber seems to take it well. However, Rudy and Ruth have been writing a book together and Kent sees the manuscript).

When we arrived home, Kent confronted me. "So Andy stole my manuscript. Did she also steal my wife?" I stared at her.

"What do you mean, 'stole your manuscript'? That was a book Andy wrote. We didn't tell you about it because you couldn't write anymore, and we were afraid it would depress you." Kent raised her face and looked at me. "You didn't answer my question."

"Call her," Kent said. "Tell her to come over here right away and bring Debbie with her."

Debbie's obvious acceptance only seemed to make Kent more angry. She walked up and down the room, stomping her cane. I can't recall anything Andy or I said. The whole scene seemed interminable, but it must not have lasted very long, because when Kent finally turned to me and said, "You will have to leave. You can't stay here anymore," I heard the Campanile chimes sounding one o'clock in the afternoon.

(Ruth goes home to Marin with Biber and Rudy.)

Andy said bitterly. "Kent threw you out. It was the manly thing to do. What I can't understand is why the returned manuscript gave it all away."

"She thinks it was her manuscript and you stole it. She is all mixed up," I tried to explain. "I think she had really known

something was happening for a long time. Somehow she confused me with the manuscript. She had lost us both and unconsciously she knew it. The night Debbie called and I was crying, she asked me if I would ever leave her. Of course I said I wouldn't. And I haven't but what can I do? Andy is right. Her pride is hurt, and she is reacting as an outraged husband should--in the 19th century stereotype."

(Kent calls that afternoon)

"Sorry to bother you." Her tone was curt, but I could hear the quaver underneath.

"I just took my last tranquilizers. I'll have to have the prescription filled tomorrow."

I felt relief. I knew she was reaching out to me but couldn't say it. "I'll be over in the morning to get it filled."

"Oh God," she said and hung up, but somehow I knew contact had been restored. I turned to Andy and Debbie, "It will work out somehow, but I have to go back to Berkeley tomorrow."

(Ruth and Rudy find an apartment together as Kent checks herself into a mental hospital in Saint Helena. When she is released, she comes to live with Ruth and Rudy as she cannot live on her own. This arrangement does not work out and Ruth and Kent move into a place of their own. The affair is over though the friendship continues. Rudy continues to be a loving and supportive friend to Ruth until Ruth's death in Berkeley on October 1, 1981.)

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THIS IS FOR YOU, RUTH

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