

NOTE

1. Although *GAY* boasted the largest circulation of any gay newspaper in the country, several other liberationist publications emerged in New York City, including the GLF newspaper, *Come Out!*, *Gay Times*, and *Gay Flames*. The latter, produced by the Seventeenth Street GLF commune, declared: "Gay flames do not come from the matches of the church, the state, or the capitalistic businessmen. We are burning from within and our flames will light the path to our liberation" (Teal, 1971, p. 162).

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Unless otherwise noted, quoted material is from the personal papers of Jack Nichols, Cocoa Beach, Florida. Some are included in the Sears papers, Special Collections, Duke University.

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Lige Clarke (1942-1975)

Jack Nichols



In twelve days Lige Clarke would have been thirty-three, but he was murdered at a mysterious roadblock, his body riddled with automatic fire. He'd lived in whirlwinds of excitement during his short life, however, becoming the co-editor of *GAY*, America's first gay weekly newspaper and sounding on July 8, 1969, what historians note was the homophile movement's first "Call to Arms" following the Stonewall uprising:

The revolution in Sheridan Square must step beyond its present boundaries. The homosexual revolution is only part of a larger revolution sweeping through all segments of society. We hope that "Gay Power" will not become a call for separation, but for sexual integration, and that the young activists will read, study, and make themselves acquainted with all of the facts that will help them carry the sexual revolt triumphantly into the councils of the U.S. government, into the anti-homosexual churches, into the offices of anti-homosexual psychiatrists, into the city government, and into the state legislatures which make our manner of love-making a crime. It is time to push the homosexual revolution to its logical conclusion. We must crush tyranny wherever it exists and join forces with those who would assist in the utter destruction of the puritanical, repressive, anti-sexual Establishment.

Four years prior to the Stonewall revolt Lige had lettered nine of the ten picket signs carried by gay men and lesbians at the first White House protest held April 17, 1965. The young revolutionary had told me on several occasions that he had no fear of death. He'd seen it too many times in the mountains where he lived as a child. Following his murder I consoled myself

thinking that he'd lived to see many of his dreams come true, traveling across the world—from Rio to Hong Kong, from Cape Town to the northernmost point in Europe.

Starting in 1966 Lige had begun discussing and writing about same-sex relationships, politics, and religious matters, showing an uncommon frankness. In an era when sexual repression and puritanical madness reigned, he hurled unsettling word grenades with unfailing good humor. He often experienced the satisfaction of watching these grenades blow gaping holes in fortresses of bias that had formerly been thought impregnable. Although a fierce warrior struggling to win basic freedoms, he regarded himself as a gentle person, and although he could express himself in memorable tones if angry, he most often opted to transform dull ignorance with his uproarious laughter. His targets were always ideas, however; he seemed little inclined to wax judgmental about individuals. People, he noted, don't remain the same. He maintained hope that they could change for the better.

I was often witness to his kindly treatment of others. He cared pointedly about what they were saying while he remained quietly aware of what their postures, expressions, and voice tones revealed. The inward ease he knew reflected in a posture that made him an unassuming master of entrances and exits. The first time I laid eyes on him he was twenty-two. I was immediately awed—as were many—by the classic symmetry of his face: cheekbones high, jaw strong; eyes hazel; lips full. He was lithe yet muscular, a soldier with a wide smile and top-level security clearances, editing secret messages from the Pentagon office of the Army Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Pentagon intelligence officers did not want to suspect that this smiling Kentucky youth might be involved, as he soon became, with challenging the "one true theory" of masculinity to which they subscribed. Inside the Pentagon he secretly passed out Washington Mattachine leaflets that explained to beleaguered gay soldiers how to handle a federal investigation of their sex lives.

I'd taken him to meet Frank Kameny on our first date, following a movie. It was about 10 p.m. and Kameny was mimeographing a press release, but gladly explained the nature of our Mattachine endeavors. He told Lige that because of his security clearances, he could, if he liked, use a pseudonym to join. "A semisecret society," Lige laughed to me on our way home. "This is really getting interesting." Our relationship developed with an undeniable passion against a backdrop of tunes by the Beatles and the Supremes.

In the spring of 1965 Lige reacted angrily to front-page news that Castro was imprisoning Cuban homosexuals in a concentration camp. Together we plotted what became the first gay movement march at the White House. Lettering the signs, he used slogans upon which he and I had agreed with Frank Kameny. The demonstration took place the Saturday before Easter. I carried

the first sign, protesting federal treatment. Others showed how the governments of Cuba, the United States, and Russia had all persecuted gay men and lesbians.

Lige first marched in September's U.S. State Department protest as a representative of the Mattachine Society of Florida, Inc., which he'd cofounded earlier that same year with Richard Inman and with me. Meeting Inman while on a special Miami mission to persuade him to rename his Atheneum Society—Lige urged he use the Mattachine name in order to link an isolated realm—south Florida—with the homophile movement's groups in Washington, New York, and Philadelphia. It was the first time I'd ever witnessed Lige's diplomatic talents at work. He simply accessed his gentle, irresistible Kentucky manners.

It had been a snowy night, February 22, 1942, when Elijah Hadyn Clarke (Lige) was born in Cave Branch, a Knott County hollow in Kentucky's southeastern mountains, near Hindman (population 700) and twenty miles from Hazard. His earliest years were marked in part by his snow-white hair, later turning blonde, while he showed an earthy awareness that would soon begin to illuminate his concept of a more personal, self-aware approach to gay liberation. While World War II was winding down on another continent, Lige, the youngest of his mother Corinne's children, scampered through the surrounding hills and along the ridges with his sister, Shelbi, and his older brother George. The three Clarke children rode a pony each Sunday to Ivis Bible Church on the main road. When Lige's photo later appeared in a movie fan magazine, however, his Sunday school teacher warned him that he'd have to choose between Ivis Bible Church and Hollywood.

Portraying "Puck" in a Robert Porterfield summer stock production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lige, at seventeen, calmly demonstrated, without speaking a word to his Sunday school teacher, how Hollywood seemed to be winning in the struggle for his soul. Still, emphasizing how he owed much to the people in those steep hills, he often told how he'd seen raw nature's ways close at hand and that he'd learned about people—the wise and the ignorant—from the multifaceted behaviors of his Kentucky kin.

One day, after I'd known Lige eight years, he presented me with *Kinfolk*, a slim volume of poetry written in Appalachian accents by Ann Cobb, a pioneering educator. Inscribing the book for me, he chose a verse characteristic of himself, happy-go-lucky but determined, eschewing common comforts while climbing, climbing:

Far'well bottom-land, with all the garden truck!
Allus tol you hillside's the only place for luck!

Ms. Cobb had settled in Hindman with two other women friends. The three teachers had become a local legend because of their helpfulness, as had Lige's paternal grandfather, George Clarke, another educator honored by a historical marker at the Route 80 intersection. Lige recalled his mother Corinne advising him when he was still a toddler that he must not remain in Hindman after growing into manhood. "You mustn't hold on to your mother's skirt," she'd tell the little boy, "but you must learn to fly up and away from her—far far, away."

Although he wandered far from the hills, Lige never failed to access them in memory, putting hillbilly humor to work whenever city folk got too serious. Having enjoyed a surprising number of heterosexual sex trysts before he'd moved away from Kentucky, it hadn't occurred to him then, as it would later, that people's sex lives are often "chained," as he put it, "to wheels of despair whose spokes are society's conventional codes."

He told me how Sunday evening church revivals in Hindman—unknownst to the minister—had been "good cause for rejoicing." "While adults praised the Lord inside the church," he laughed, "we young'uns, more practical by far, enjoyed automobile orgies in the parking lot out back. There wasn't much else to do up in those hollows," he joked, utilizing Appalachian wordage.

Even so, Lige lamented, the Southern Baptists weren't about to let such good times last forever. By the time local males reached twenty, he noted, "life was almost over" for them. They'd marry. Their wives, following the advice of mothers, cooked to fatten their husbands during the first year afterward so that other women wouldn't lust for these men—much needed meal tickets—and cause them to wander. "Early marriages in Kentucky," he complained, had become "a must." At twenty-four, Lige remained the only member of his high school graduating class who hadn't tied the nuptial knot. "Thank God," he sighed.

Although he considered himself privileged by Kentucky standards, he carried with him a continuing passionate concern about the welfare of his country folk, hating the crushing poverty he'd observed among them during his formative years. When he returned home for visits, he wrote sadly of seeing "deep scars of frustration etched on the faces of boyhood friends." He noted that the sparkling eyes of their early years had vanished. He marveled at how those whose sexual company he had enjoyed on Sundays were now seated *inside* the church while their "young-uns" fiddled with each other in the parking lots outside.

A few locals regarded the handsome hometown visitor with suspicion. "How come you ain't fat? How come you ain't married?" Others said, "There something *quare* about that Clarke boy. Ain't natural for a man not to get married." A couple of old buddies took him aside to ask what they

thought was a real "man-to-man" question: "Hey, Lige, did you ever do it with a colored woman?"

Before he moved away, Lige wrote that he assumed it was only the hills he'd escaped that were out of step.

Little did I know that men and women—people from the middle, upper middle and upper classes were sad victims of the puritan heritage to even greater degrees. In the mountains, at least, we had learned to fuck *wildly*—at an early age, both heterosexually and homosexually. We were in touch with our bodies.

In big cities, Lige discovered, gloomy orthodox codes had "petrified sexual communication." These codes, he wrote, had created "an urban blight: an anally retentive population whose members find no relief." He noted that the

message of sexual liberation falls hard on such ears: the Puritan mentality dies a slow death. It's hard for men and women to admit that their behavior codes are lies; that they have long been "controlling" themselves, "behaving" themselves and frustrating themselves for no good reason.

Lige explained that "jealousy, envy, and a thousand fantasies" people never have the courage to live "converge on them, exploding with an intense and fearful rage that a sexually sane person finds incomprehensible." Life, he observed, "has passed them by and they can't abide another's joy."

It was midsummer 1964 when I met him at a rathskeller, The Hideaway, directly across from FBI headquarters in Washington, DC. He struck me at first as an apparition, slyly seductive as only a smiling rural assurance can allow—earthy, wholesome, his serious side often hard to notice because of his Kentucky-bred *joie de vivre*. As he grew, Lige quickly learned to circumvent people's reactions to his good looks and somehow to touch them more meaningfully, with a few pointed words, a phrase, or perhaps as another biographer put it, "a whisper of poetry."

He was effective at presenting himself as significantly more than a stunning physical presence. He was often regarded as a very wise person, in fact. This was because he continually practiced a nurturing, empathetic awareness. He observed and listened well, and was often able to connect even with total strangers on an emotional level, making them feel somehow embraced or encompassed. Thus, he was beloved by shipmates and foreign nationals from every clime during his travels. He seemed to have embodied Walt Whitman's line, "I think whoever I shall meet I shall like."

He was, for me, my most beloved exemplar. He helped move my focus from abstract thoughts to a more profound physical self-awareness, increasing my enjoyment of living thereby. He taught me, as I noted in my books' dedication to him, which he saw three days before his murder: *a man must learn to bend like the willow*. This was simply hillbilly wisdom that his own mother had taught him. Lige clearly saw advantages to encouraging elasticity in men rather than their long-suffering old-fashioned macho rigidity. He said such elasticity—whether mental or physical—was a component of any hope for human survival.

Moving with me to Manhattan in 1968, Lige began working for the alternative press. The fact of sexual repression had struck with its unbridled force. He saw—as publishers and friends were arrested for “obscenity”—how the establishment refused to abide magazines and newspapers that celebrated sexual passion. “And the man in the street,” wrote Lige, “is hungry, painfully hungry, for a taste of sexual freedom.” Society, he noted, played cruel, heartless tricks on such people. Their alternatives to chaste dates and inhospitable spouses became “hideously painted prostitutes—nightmares in an upside-down carnival!” He believed that the average straight was “surrounded by an army of sex-starved gossips: ‘Mary’s boyfriend, John, is supposed to be true to her but he’s been screwing Joanne on the side.’”

In Lige’s small towns such gossip had seemed barely tolerable. If either the culprit or the victim were married, he knew, the gossip became even juicier. Husbands and wives, he believed, spent useless time worrying about each other’s sexual fidelity. He reflected that society seemed to be forcing both the married and the unmarried to seek the pleasures of sex only under the most bizarre and tawdry circumstances.

Wary of procreation as the only proper excuse for sex, especially in the wake of church assaults on condoms, Lige insisted that “sex for pleasure” must replace sex for baby making as the sanest ideal. He called for an end to the commonplace use of sexual epithets and curses, hoping to see sexual organs and acts portrayed in affirmative terms. In gay terms, Lige Clarke was not, therefore, a cultural assimilationist. He looked instead to a day when humanity might free itself from the ancient taboos that have resulted in “heterosexual” bondage scenes. Petty jealousies, he wrote, butch/fem role-playing, and the concept of sexual ownership (I own your genitals and you may use them only with me) must be stampeded from our consciousness. Heterosexual patterns “must not be copied.”

Lige believed that millions of unhappy slaves to the system were “waiting eagerly for such liberation.” He felt they should be helped to turn away from common compulsive clutching and groping to joys that are informed by a “calm erotic awareness.” Rushing toward some always-particularized goal, he insisted, interrupts the kind of spontaneous sensual flow wherein

more satisfying and sexual experiences thrive best. These messages were part of what he brought to our "Homosexual Citizen" column, published over a period of four and a half years in *Screw*, the original sex tabloid that had become—in late 1968—an immediate sensation offering, for the first time, full frontal nudity. This groundbreaking column provided "Lige and Jack," as the byline read, with a degree of Manhattan minifame.

Lige, who taught Hatha yoga to Kay Tobin Lahusen, took her suggestion that he and I should start a newspaper. *GAY* was therefore born on November 15, 1969, and Kay became the newspaper's first news editor. Soon, in early 1970, *GAY* was turned into a weekly, which kept Lige busy writing letters, talking with columnists, and planning issues. Until he and I resigned in mid-1973 to write and travel, *GAY* faithfully chronicled the birth and growth of Manhattan's most effective activist groups, especially the Gay Activists Alliance. This particular group invented the "zap," providing colorful headlines and photos of surprise appearances of the activists at certain locales where they caused nonviolent distress to antigay zealots.

GAY was host to many writers who had helped found the gay and lesbian movement. It published the first-ever interview with Bette Midler; received the blessing of Allen Ginsberg, who contributed a poem titled "Jimmy Berman Newsboy Gay Lib Rag"; and served as the medium in which Dr. George Weinberg, who coined the term homophobia, first explained his understanding of the phobia itself.

Lige met his newspapering obligations zestfully. He appeared on Gerardo Rivera's first television special. He spoke at the twenty-sixth annual Conference on World Affairs at the University of Colorado. Together we appeared on numerous radio programs. We addressed gay liberation groups. Lige quoted Walt Whitman wherever he went. He was especially fond of the great poet's "Song of the Open Road." Having recited it as often as he did, he became increasingly eager to travel. In the meantime, he initiated and wrote two books with me, *I Have More Fun with You Than Anybody* and *Roommates Can't Always Be Lovers*. The first book was hailed as the first nonfiction memoir by a male couple. *Roommates* was subtitled: *An Intimate Guide to Male/Male Relationships*, and stood out as the first published collection of nonfiction letters from gay men. As the co-editor of *GAY*, Lige had received their queries seeking advice—and had taken meticulous care to reply.

With two more book contracts secured, Lige and I left Manhattan, although we still shared a Greenwich Village apartment there with Kay Tobin Lahusen and Barbara Gittings. I settled, for the winter, into an apartment on Cocoa Beach where I completed *Men's Liberation: A New Definition of Masculinity*. Lige worked aboard the *Vistajord* at this time, a Norwegian cruise ship that took him to the four corners of the earth. He wrote me

passionate letters, asking me to join him, telling of the world's wonder. We met at Port Everglades, Lige leaving the ship for a day. Riding across Miami's freeways, a song of the time, "The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me," was playing. "That's how I feel about you," I told him. Much later, shortly before his unexpected death, he asked me—uncharacteristically—if I still felt as I'd indicated on that day. "More than ever," I replied. In hindsight, I'm prouder of that timely reply than of anything I've ever said.

In the winter of 1974-1975 Lige and I took up residence again in Cocoa Beach, both of us writing, with Lige working to complete a book that would be called *Welcome to Fire Island*. Charlie, a new acquaintance we'd made, lived at the end of our outside corridor. He offered his Pinto as a mode of transportation should Lige wish to take a trip to Mexico. Finally, a two-week getaway was planned. At just that moment an old acquaintance, Juan, unexpectedly arrived and then offered to accompany Lige and Charlie on their jaunt. I felt somewhat assured by the fact that Juan could serve as a translator once they crossed the border.

Juan changed his mind in Houston, however, returning by plane to Washington, DC. Lige and Charlie crossed into Mexico at Brownsville, where they were searched for three hours by customs officials. Lige was carrying the two gay books he and I had written as well as his own worn copies of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, *The Way of Life According to Lao Tzu*, and *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran.

The two journeyers entered the rich state of Vera Cruz, rich in sugar cane, bananas, vanilla, rice, and mahogany. They saw poverty everywhere, however, and laughed at how they had hurried to arrive at such a desolate locale. It was midnight, February 10, 1975, when Lige and Charlie ran into a roadblock on the Tuxpam-Tampico highways as they approached the city of Vera Cruz. According to Charlie's account, he had been asleep in the back seat and Lige had been driving. He'd awakened to bright lights shining on the Pinto and the sound of automatic gunfire. Lige slumped over the wheel and the car lurched across the highway, coming to a stop halfway up a hillside.

Charlie was shot too, a slight wound in his side. He pretended to be dead, he said. He later crawled into a passing bus going into the city and was taken to a hospital where he remained incommunicado for nine days. Mexican authorities were suspicious of him, accusing him of working for the CIA. They refused to let him speak to U.S. embassy authorities and informed him that Lige would be buried in Mexico. The intervention of Carl Perkins, a U.S. Congressman from Kentucky, was finally responsible for Mexican acquiescence in the transport of Lige's body back to his old Kentucky home.

Who killed Lige? I honestly don't know. There are four or five theories, but they are only that. I'm convinced, however, that he was a victim of ma-

chismo's homophobic influences. I attended Lige's funeral in the hills. One of his childhood's mentors, a woman he called Prudy, spoke: "Lige was truly a dreamer," she said,

artistic, sensitive, and a chaser after rainbows. He was ever in search of new adventures and new places. His god was a loving god, one who met his children with a smile. If he were here, I feel he would say, "No sad faces: I am not dead. . . . Smile, for I am just away."

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