Word count: 4845

UNCLE BILL

The restaurant looked like it was shot in black and white. White tablecloth and napkins on the table where Alan sat, a white candle, white carnations in a vase. Black walls and floor, black uniforms on the waiters. What little color there was, the dim lighting drained away. This look was fitting, since the person Alan was waiting for was someone out of the past, from the world of his childhood and before, memorialized in black and white photographs in his family's albums.

Alan went over in his mind some of the things he wanted to find out from Eddie. One question loomed large. "You've got to ask him," Alan told himself. "You'll kick yourself later if you don't."

Alan kept his eye on the entrance. It wasn't enough to look for a man in his sixties since that fit the description of much of the restaurant's clientele. He'd chosen this place on Polk Street because it was near where Eddie lived, but this wasn't a neighborhood he would have come to ordinarily. Polk Street had been the center of San Francisco's gay life in the sixties and early seventies, until Castro Street had elbowed it aside in the last four or five years. For Alan, at twenty-three, Castro Street was the gay present, vibrant, raucous, open, while Polk Street was the

dreary, closeted past, where, after a furtive look around, one slunk into a bar with windows, if any, tinted so dark as to make the people within invisible.

Alan had only one photograph to help him identify Eddie, and that had been taken twenty years ago, at a Thanksgiving dinner. It showed Eddie seated at a table between Alan's mother, who was smiling, and his father, who was not. Eddie was short and slight, what looked like the bulge of a cigarette pack in the front pocket of his shirt. He gazed across the table through black-framed glasses, talking with someone on the other side. He sat forward in his chair and seemed a little taut, exerting himself to be agreeable. Bill had taken the photograph, Alan's mother Fay had explained, saying he wanted a picture of Eddie with the family. Later, Bill must have given the Hanstedts a copy.

A man came through the door who looked like an older version of the one in the photograph. Still short, still thin, still nervous-looking, still wearing glasses that didn't seem so much to help him see the world as make it harder for the world to see him. Clearly, Eddie had never been especially good-looking, but his compensation was to be one of those people whose appearance hadn't changed much over the years.

Alan stood up and raised his hand, catching the man's eye. "Eddie?" he said questioningly as the man approached.

"Yes." Eddie froze in front of Alan, staring at him, like a frightened animal.

"I'm Alan." Alan extended a hand, which Eddie shook after a moment's hesitation. "It's nice to meet you." Eddie said nothing. They both sat down. "You live not too far away, isn't that right?" Alan said.

"Yeah," Eddie said without expanding on this.

"Kay said you were staying in some sort of retirement home." It had been his Aunt Kay he'd asked for Eddie's telephone number. She'd sent Alan a piece of paper with only the name and number, as if to convey, I have nothing to say about your idea of contacting Eddie, and I don't want to know what happens if you do.

Again, "Yeah." Eddie's eyes slid from Alan to his two-toned surroundings.

A waiter came to their table. He was in his late thirties, young enough to strike a chord of desire in the middle-aged patrons, but old enough not to seem impossibly remote from their world. "What can I get you gentlemen to drink?"

"Nothing for me, thanks," Alan said. "Eddie, would you like something?"

"I'll have a gin and tonic."

Good, thought Alan. Maybe that will loosen him up.

In fact, the mere anticipation of the drink's arrival appeared to have this effect. "I live in the Dumbarton," Eddie said, "a residential hotel. I've got a nice big room on the fifth floor. There's a rec room with a piano, an organ, a pool table. We have Happy Hour there on Fridays and bingo on Tuesdays. I'm crazy about bingo. I go to all the different games in the city. You can play bingo somewhere every day if you want. I used to earn all my spending money from bingo. I haven't been so lucky lately."

Once Eddie started talking, it was as if he couldn't stop. "The one thing I don't like is having to pay sixty-five dollars every month for meals, even though I haven't set foot in the dining room for over a year. The food is terrible; they keep it warm for hours on those steam

trays. Someone told me there's a law in front of Congress to stop them making you pay for food in a place like that. They say it should be illegal to try to force people to eat something. Anyway, I usually get take-out food and bring it up to my room. We're not supposed to, but the clerks turn a blind eye."

"Well, I want you to have a really nice meal this evening," Alan said as Eddie's drink arrived. "It's my treat, remember." Normally at his age, he would have expected the older man to pay; but Eddie, with his rumpled clothes and thinning hair, was like some lonely old man he'd found sitting on a park bench and wanted to help in some way.

Eddie took a substantial sip from his glass. "I think I'll have the steak. I haven't had a decent steak in a long time."

A week ago when Alan had telephoned him, Eddie had seemed uneasy, almost suspicious. Alan had introduced himself and said he understood Eddie had known his uncle, Bill Hanstedt. Yes, Eddie said, he'd been a friend of Bill's. "Friend," Alan noted to himself. Alan explained he was taking an interest in his family history and wanted to learn more about Bill, whom he'd never met. "I'm not sure what I can tell you," Eddie said. Alan wondered for a moment if he had the story wrong. But no, that couldn't be, he'd talked to too many people in the family.

After they'd given the waiter their orders, Alan took up the thread. "So you knew my Uncle Bill?"

"I did." At the mention of this name, Eddie became quiet again. Alan tried a more specific question.

"What was Bill like?"

Eddie's gazed into his glass. "The main thing about Bill was that everyone liked him."

Alan imagined Ryan, his father, materializing beside him to add his own views. "Bill could be charming when he wanted," Ryan said, "obnoxious when he wanted."

His mother wouldn't want to be left out of the discussion, Alan was sure. A figmentary Fay looked about her with eyes in which a girlish earnestness had persisted down the years.

"I always had the feeling Bill was keeping his distance," she said. "He was friendly enough, but a little aloof."

"He was a serious person," his father said. "Well, he had reason to be. He had a pretty hard life. Harder than mine, at any rate." Ryan narrowed his shrewd blue eyes. "When we were young, I hated Bill. We fought all the time."

A phantom of his Aunt Kay joined the group, sitting down heavily across from Alan. Kay was ten years older than Ryan, a half-sister of his and Bill's from a previous marriage of their mother's. Kay was short and stout, her braided white hair wound into a crown atop her head. "I remember Al running through the house, just a little guy, shouting, 'I'm going to kill him! I'm going to kill him!' He sounded like he meant it."

"Bill was a couple of years older than your father," Fay said, "and his parents sent him to the same high school. Teachers would ask if he was Bill Hanstedt's brother. 'Bill was such a good student,' they'd say, 'and I hope you will be, too.' Ryan dreaded that."

Photographs scattered themselves across the table. Bill at six or seven standing between two rose bushes, with plump cheeks and a round bell-shaped hat, a little pensive, hands behind

his back. At a rustic cabin in Yosemite, a teenage Bill with shiny dark hair and Ryan, still tow-headed, at opposite ends of the long porch; Kay and their mother sitting in between, as if the two boys needed to be kept apart. Bill in his cap and gown before his high school graduation, arms held stiffly at his side.

Fay spoke. "Mrs. Hanstedt told me that in the year after high school, Bill just sat in his room all day. He even took his meals up there."

"Bill had the top floor of the house all to himself," Kay said. "You could see the ocean from the window on a clear day."

Alan had made a trip out to the Richmond District to see the house on Tenth Avenue. Gazing up at the third floor window, he'd pictured Bill looking out. "What was he doing up there all that time?" Alan questioned.

None of the others could say.

Dora, Kay's oldest daughter, drifted around the table, as if unsure how much she had to contribute to the talk. "After my parents divorced, my mother moved back into the Hanstedt home with me. My mother told me to give Uncle Bill a wide berth. He was in a deep funk, or unwell, I don't know which. He ignored me, and I pretty much ignored him. The family's attitude was, Poor Bill. Then all of a sudden, he started living again."

"How do you mean?" Alan asked. "What happened?" But Dora only made a gesture of uncertainty, continuing her drift.

"I had the impression he didn't like children," Dora went on. "Imagine my surprise when he went to San Francisco State and got a teaching credential."

Kay wiped her eyes with a crumpled tissue; she had some problem that made them water. "Jobs were hard to come by in the Depression, especially teaching positions. The only one Bill could find was at a lumber camp outside of McCloud. He taught the children of all the lumbermen, first grade to ninth."

A pile of letters from Bill appeared on the table, given to Alan by his Aunt Kay. He'd expected these to be a treasure trove – actual letters from his mysterious Uncle Bill. In fact, they were rather pedestrian. Descriptions of the cabin he lived in, accounts of the cold in winter, requests to have more of his clothes mailed to him, thanks for the box of cookies Kay had sent. There didn't even seem to be any lines that Alan could read between. The few interesting details came instead from family members, that Bill had eaten his meals with the lumbermen, that there had been talk of his marrying the woman who was superintendent of schools in the county. "Our mother was against the marriage," Kay said. "Maybe by then she had some idea. . . ."

"Bill was pretty isolated up there," Alan's father said. "He got involved with a ham radio club. To be admitted, he had to join the naval reserves. That meant he was called up as soon as the war started. Later, he applied to become an officer. He got his commission while he was at sea, so the other officers chipped in with pieces of the uniform. I joined the Navy, too." He added with a sour face, "As usual, my brother outranked me."

Another photograph dropped onto the table, Bill in his officer's uniform. Arms folded, confident smile, eyes gazing into the distance. Under his officer's cap, his hair had turned gray in his early thirties, like Ryan's. He also shared with his brother a not very shapely nose, as he did

with Alan. Kay gave the picture an admiring look. "The photographer put a copy of this in his store window as an advertisement for his work. He must have thought people would like it."

"At the end of the war," Ryan said, "when the guy discharging me asked if I was sure I wanted to leave the navy, I hardly gave him time to finish his question before I said, 'Yes!' Bill got out, too, but not without a good long think. He was an officer by then and had a lot of friends in the service."

"Bill was so handsome," Fay said, studying the photograph. "I wondered why some gal didn't snag him."

Ryan raised his eyebrows. "You did your best to set him up with your sister."

"I did no such thing!" Fay turned to Alan. "When your father and I got married, Bill gave us a wedding present, naturally. I had an idea Bill would never get married himself, so when he moved to that apartment on Webster Street, I gave him a pressure cooker as a house-warming present instead."

An old address book of his mother's materialized, open to "H." Several addresses for Bill were crossed out as he moved ever farther from the city center, from the cells of worker-bees encrusting the slopes of Nob Hill to the leafier, less intensely urban outer districts. Alan, who lived near Bush and Powell, where the *tang tang* of the cable car was scattered across his days, wondered if he would follow the same trajectory.

Eddie had been working steadily away at his steak, making little noises of pleasure. Well-done at his request, it looked nearly black in the low light, while Alan's chicken breast was so pale it was almost white. "I was so eager to get out of Montana when I was a kid," he said at

last. "I'd stand outside the vaudeville house in our town and beg the players to take me away to Chicago, New York. But you know, there must still be a little of the Montana boy in me, because I sure do love a good steak."

Kay turned her watering eyes on Eddie. "Bill was living with Eddie by that time."

"Eddie," Ryan said, pursing his mouth. "He was so different from anyone else Bill ran with."

"Bill was good-looking," Dora said, "and had good-looking friends, male and female. Eddie was not good-looking."

"A stock clerk at Roos-Atkins," Kay sniffed.

Fay gazed at Eddie with wide eyes. "Eddie didn't have many friends, as I recall. I had the impression Bill was his main connection to the world."

Dora shrugged. "I suppose Bill's attitude was, Poor Eddie, he needs looking after."

Fay ran a finger thoughtfully over her chin. "'Maybe they're just friends,' I said to myself. 'But maybe they're something else.'" She turned to Ryan. "But I never said anything to you, and you never said anything to me. I didn't want to embarrass you."

"Yes," Eddie murmured through a bite of steak, "everyone liked Bill. I remember when he taught at San Quentin – you know about that, don't you, his teaching there after the war?" Alan nodded. "One prisoner would wait by the window of his cell for Bill to walk past. He called him Mr. Hansty; he never got the name right. He would stand there, waiting, just to say hello, hoping Bill would talk to him for a bit."

Eddie finished first his steak, then a second drink. "Something else about Bill, he was very well-educated. He read all the time. Maybe you're like that, too; you said you work in a library. Bill never put other people down, though. Never used a fifty-cent word and made you feel stupid. Now me, I'm not well-educated. People always told me that was what was holding me back." Eddie gave a shake to his glass, as if hoping to loosen a little more gin and tonic from the ice cubes. "Anyway, Bill was just an all-round great guy. We didn't have a single argument the whole time we knew each other."

Alan buttered a piece of bread, not particularly wanting to eat it, more to have something to do while he ventured, "I hope you don't mind my asking, but – was Bill gay? I am, so I've always been curious."

"Yeah, Bill was gay." Eddie didn't admit that he himself was, Alan noticed. "That prisoner I was telling you about, he was gay, too. But he wouldn't keep a low profile and was always getting into trouble. Bill went to bat for him many times. Of course, the man didn't know Bill was gay. No one at the prison did."

"My brother never told me he was a homosexual," Ryan said, "but then he never told me anything of importance."

"You could see something was troubling Mrs. Hanstedt," Fay said. "There was something no one in the family mentioned, some skeleton in the closet. It's much better nowadays, when people can discuss these things."

"How did you two meet?" Alan asked Eddie.

"Sunbathing in Lafayette Park," he said, "in that flat part at the top." Alan knew the spot. Thirty years on, it was still a place to sunbathe, ringed by trees that provided shelter from the wind, and still a cruisy area. "We lived together for fifteen years, first on Webster Street, then Fulton. After that, we bought the house on Belvedere."

The house on Belvedere; Alan had already heard about this. Belvedere was an almost-island, a wooded ridge out in the Bay linked to the rest of Marin by a causeway. He asked Eddie how they'd found the house. Eddie said they were visiting a friend next door, a gay friend, and the for-sale sign had just gone up.

"'What do you think?' Bill said to me. 'Shall we buy it?' I said yes. The house cost nineteen thousand back then. A friend told me it sold for two hundred and fifty not too long ago. It was on the 'preferred side' as the Islanders say, the one that isn't as windy. The Two Boys in Belvedere, people called us."

Not owning a car, Alan had never bothered to get out to the house, but he had an idea what it looked like from his mother. It had been built to resemble a log cabin, a style that had had a short vogue. A big stone fireplace, a view of the water through the pines.

"I'd get off from my job at Roos-Atkins and take the bus home," Eddie reminisced. "Bill was working at an elementary school in Novato by then, and he got off at three. He was always there at the bottom of the hill to meet me, either on foot or with the car. We'd go places on the weekends. We had a lot of nice friends, high-class people, doctors, lawyers, artists. We went to a lot of nice parties."

"It was brave of you to live together back then," Alan said. He was going through a period of reading books with titles like *Out of the Closets and into the Streets*. He was convinced sweeping social changes were taking place that made the present sharply different from the past and would render the future almost unrecognizable.

Eddie gave a shrug that suggested he didn't see things in quite the same way. "Once someone at the school talked about Bill living with another man, and it looked like trouble was brewing. But then that quieted down. As I said, everyone liked Bill, and he had such a good reputation among his fellow teachers. The thing to do was keep them separate, your private life and your work life. It's like having your salad on one plate and the main course on another."

"What did Bill's family think, though, and your family?"

"My family was way off in Montana and had other things on its mind, like making ends meet. As for Bill's parents, I'm sure it never occurred to them that Bill and I were that way."

"Bill brought Eddie to all the family gatherings," Ryan said, "at Thanksgiving, Christmas."

"My recollection is no one ever said anything about Eddie," Fay mused. "Not a word. They didn't say they liked him or didn't like him, or thought he was this or that. No criticism, no praise. Just nothing." Her eyes shifted to Alan. "I just want to say that I would have married your father even if I'd known about Bill and thought it might be something that ran in the family."

Eddie gave a snorty laugh. “It seemed silly for anyone to make a fuss about what Bill and I did in bed because we hardly did anything. Bill was a great guy, but I think he must have had a low sex drive.”

Alan's mother directed a glance at his father that said, Something else may have run in the family.

“We visited your folks twice,” Eddie said to Alan. “Once we didn’t even go in the house, just picked some fruit off your trees. You had fruit trees, didn’t you?”

Now that the story had reached a point where he himself arrived on the scene, Alan faced conjectural encounters that were either of no interest – if Bill saw him as a baby, that scarcely mattered – or unsatisfactory. Pictures from the family album of Alan playing dress up were added to others on the table. Alan as the Victorian Lady in broad-brimmed hat and carrying a broken umbrella turned parasol; as the Fairy Princess stepping forward demurely in slippers decorated with white pompoms. His parents could dismiss this behavior as “just a phase.” It was harder to imagine Bill doing so. Harder to imagine him not uncomfortable in any meetings he might have had with the budding sissy. Alan couldn't create convincing fantasies about a happy connection between the two black sheep until he was older, possibly a teenager. But five years after Alan appeared in the story, Bill made his exit.

“We’d come home from a party,” Eddie said. “All Bill had to drink was one brandy, but he said he felt terrible and threw up on the floor in his bedroom. I asked if he wanted me to call a doctor. No, he said. Bill was always up before me, but he wasn't the next morning. I called out, 'Bill, how come you're not up yet?' I looked in his bedroom. He wasn't there. I tried to

open the bathroom door, but couldn't, something was blocking it. I finally managed to get it open. Bill was lying there dead. He'd probably been there for a few hours, the doctor told me later. I kept going on about how if only I'd known, I could have gotten him to a hospital, but the doctor said he'd died at once. It was the worst kind of heart attack you can have, the kind where the heart just stops. I forget what they're called. There he was, lying on the floor, one arm over his face, like he was asleep."

Alan listened, looking down at the table, and so did his parents, Aunt Kay, and Dora, hovering behind Kay's chair.

"At the funeral, there were fifty or sixty bouquets," Eddie went on. "Lots of people. Fellow teachers, students, friends, family, navy pals. All the pallbearers were gay. Of course, in those days, you couldn't tell. A full military ceremony. You know how they fold the flag and hand it to the chief mourner? They gave it to me, not one of his relatives. I have an idea the undertaker was gay and arranged that. I still have that flag in a drawer."

A long silence. At last Fay said, "At the funeral, Eddie broke down, like the widow. My sister turned to me and said, 'Well, now we know for sure.'"

"I've never heard anyone carry on like that," Ryan said, faintly disapproving. "He cried and cried and cried, moaned and wailed. He had to have someone on either arm to support him while he walked."

"No one else shed a tear," Fay said, "only Eddie."

Ryan looked toward his half-sister. "Kay certainly didn't. I thought that was strange at the time. Later I found out she knew all about the will. Bill left everything to Eddie. Kay and

Bill had been very close, but the will changed that. She's never said a good thing about him since."

Kay wiped her eyes with the tissue. "Bill was for Bill. Selfish."

"I asked her once if she still kept in touch with Eddie," Fay said. "'No,' she told me. That was all, just 'no.' I didn't either." Fay's gaze shifted toward Eddie, then, without quite reaching him, moved away again. "Sometimes I feel bad about that."

"Bill had a mean expression on his face," Eddie mused. "Like he was saying he didn't want to die. He'd been planning to retire early. He was only fifty." Eddie's eyes were fixed on the black wall behind Alan. "It was two years before I stopped crying every night, thinking about that man. We were such a good balance for each other. He had brains, charm, and I – well, I guess I had more common sense."

The waiter arrived with the check. Alan took charge of it, as promised, and Eddie made no attempt to stop him, as if he didn't even see it. "How long did you stay in the house?" Alan asked.

"Four years," Eddie said. "I tried renting out the other room, but that didn't work. The taxes kept going up. Eventually I sold it."

Amid the small movements that followed, the rising from the table, putting on coats, walking toward the door, the phantom figures disbursed. They had nothing more to say.

Alan and Eddie stepped outside into the cool cloudy night. Eddie asked, "What about you? Are you seeing anyone?"

"No," Alan said. He wanted to experience the automatic superiority of the young, but the fact was, Eddie had had fifteen years with Bill, and Alan's love life so far was full of vanishing tricks, like a magician's act.

"My advice is, don't," Eddie said.

"You got involved with Bill."

"I should have said, Unless you find someone special, like Bill. And I only found one of those."

They headed north along Polk Street. Without having discussed their destination, Alan was walking Eddie to his hotel on O'Farrell. "I have a friend now," Eddie said. "We don't have sex; it's just for the companionship. He's a very nice man. We travel a lot, to Reno, other places. Bill was never much for traveling."

"Just like my dad," Alan remarked.

"Oh look, this antique store has closed. Well, it was more like a junk shop anyway." Eddie peered through the window at the dark, empty interior. The window gave back a dim reflection of their figures standing in the street. Putting a hand to his face, Eddie said, "It's funny. When I look in the mirror, I say, 'Gosh, you look old.' I don't feel old, though. I'm sixty-seven, but I feel just the way I did at thirty-seven."

"You're lucky," Alan said.

"Here we are." Eddie stopped in front of the Dumbarton, a brick building like many others stacked together on the street. "It was nice meeting you. Bill's nephew." Eddie looked at Alan as if truly seeing him for the first time. Alan wondered if he was noticing family

resemblances as he himself had earlier, studying the photographs. Possibly involving a not very distinguished nose.

"I hope we can meet again," Alan said, though aware only a single thread connected them. Eddie held out his hand. Alan took it in his for a moment – it was thin and cold – then let it go.

While Alan walked home, it started to rain. As he reached the bars and restaurants near Union Square, color seeped back into the world through the many neon signs, repeated on the wet sidewalks in softer forms.

END