1996

12/25/96
4:00 PM

Hopefully, this Christmas Day finds all of you in good health and fine spirits. For those retailers not burdened by family and/or personal obligations, it's a blissful pause between slavery to customers making up .their minds and buying and slavery to customers changing their minds and exchanging.

Contrary to all you've seen and heard on CNN, this has not been a great season for all. Greenwich Village has been eeriely quiet all fall. Chelsea,the section just to the north of us, is the new "in" area for shopping, partying, dining out, etc. Even large segments of the gay community have relocated there. Many Village businesses are faring badly.

Uplift is surviving better than most. After all, we have a following built up over the last twenty-two years. Where else can you find the WORLD'S largest selection of original American Art Deco chandaliers? Where else would you find those red-white&blue patriotic pig ornaments? A selection of a dozen different black angels? Rainbow colored decorations including everything from gay caterpillars to shooting stars, from long skinny white santas to fat black ones, all spinning merrily above this year's Kissing /Lesbians Calender?

Times change & so does the staff at the shop. John Heliker, my lampmaker for the past eighteen years, quit. He'd become increasingly unhappy in recent years & his misery had a way of crawling out of the back room and infecting us all. His leaving was both a challenge & probably the best thing to happen to me all year.

Willie's lover, Bob, one of those triple-drug miracle boys who have improved so much in health & stamina that some feel a "CURE" for AIDS has-or is about to arrive, has been coming up for visits & has brought good humored creativity back into my life.

John Heliker - The unhappiness was easy to see

Willie + Bob
Sept. 1989

Good humor!
Great creativity!

1996 had some real downers. But let's save those for later, or, perhaps, for not at all.

There were those activist moments. The gay marriage thing got my gander up & I leafleted & carried a large blow-up of David's & my picture to the mass wed-in at Bryant Park. On top of the photo,I'd simply put in big black letters:"LOVE SPEAKS FOR ITSELF." They used it for a fleeting few seconds on Channel 4's Evening News.

Ever since I've discovered the wonders of color blow-ups at Kinko's & how to cut sections and paste them together to create huge enlargements relatively easily & inexpensively, I've been able to make some eye-catching displays.

At the Mother's March Against Aids, Norma, Marsha's sister carried the big blow-up from our window. Coco carried a blow-up of George Flimlin at her birthday party. And I carried David's picture. It was a special honor to read from my piece about David's death at the annual AIDS Memorial March down Christopher Street in June.

My career as a media whore enjoyed some orgasmic moments this year but nothing like the earthshaking liftoff my dearest old friend (and fellow dinosaur) Jack Nichols has achieved from Cape Canaveral itself. Yes, the real me was one of the talking heads used to introduce the movie "STONEWALL." But while I was flashing across the screen in one of the most unseen movies of the year, Jack was writing his way out of oblivion, turning out in the process a book entitled THE GAY AGENDA, Talking Back To The Christain Right. Nowadays he's burning up the airways all over the country on talk radio. No travel is even necessary. He sits in his condo on the beach within sight of NASA's lift off pad & everything is hooked up electronically. Shucks, he isn't even an atheist, just an anarchist. Just proves that hard work does more for a media whore than playing shop!

Hard work in activism, especially journalistic activism in the 1960's & early 1970's by Jack & myself got good historical coverage in Ed Alwood's superb book entitled STRAIGHT NEWS which documented how gays were portrayed in the mass media & how that was changed by the emergence of those of us who insisted speaking for ourselves for the first time. Jack stuck with writing. I chose to eat better & play shop!

The irony is that "playing shop" is too damn much work & not enough play, sort of a treadmill to oblivion. Now & then you feel something special--when you're featured in an article or when someone enthuses about "this is my favorite shop in the world." But praise isn't universal. In June, I violated my longstanding rule against hiring short folks after interviewing several taller qualified candidates. Gabby, a young woman from Brooklyn, carried the day by returning a few days after her first interview & pleading, "I have these other jobs I can take. But I want to work here, among all these beautiful things, in this beautiful atmosphere."

My decision to hire her was certainly a good one. Cheerful, dependable, prompt & hardworking, she quickly mastered even the mechanical tasks like simple wiring & holder-making. Then tragedy (for me) struck. She decided to return to college in Boston in September. Fortunately, she was able to spend half her semester break helping us through the Xmas rush this past week. Ironically, when she applied at a similar shop in Boston, our reputation had preceded us.

Gabby Mastered Lamp Repair

Jimmy, Gabby, Sylvia + I - AT AN ART Show of Gabby's work.

"You worked at Wicker's Uplift in New York," her potential new employer declared. "That's one of the hardest places in the world to work." Ultimately, her experience working at Uplift & our undeserved wretched reputation landed her in a new job. So much for trying to be "Mr. Nice Guy!"

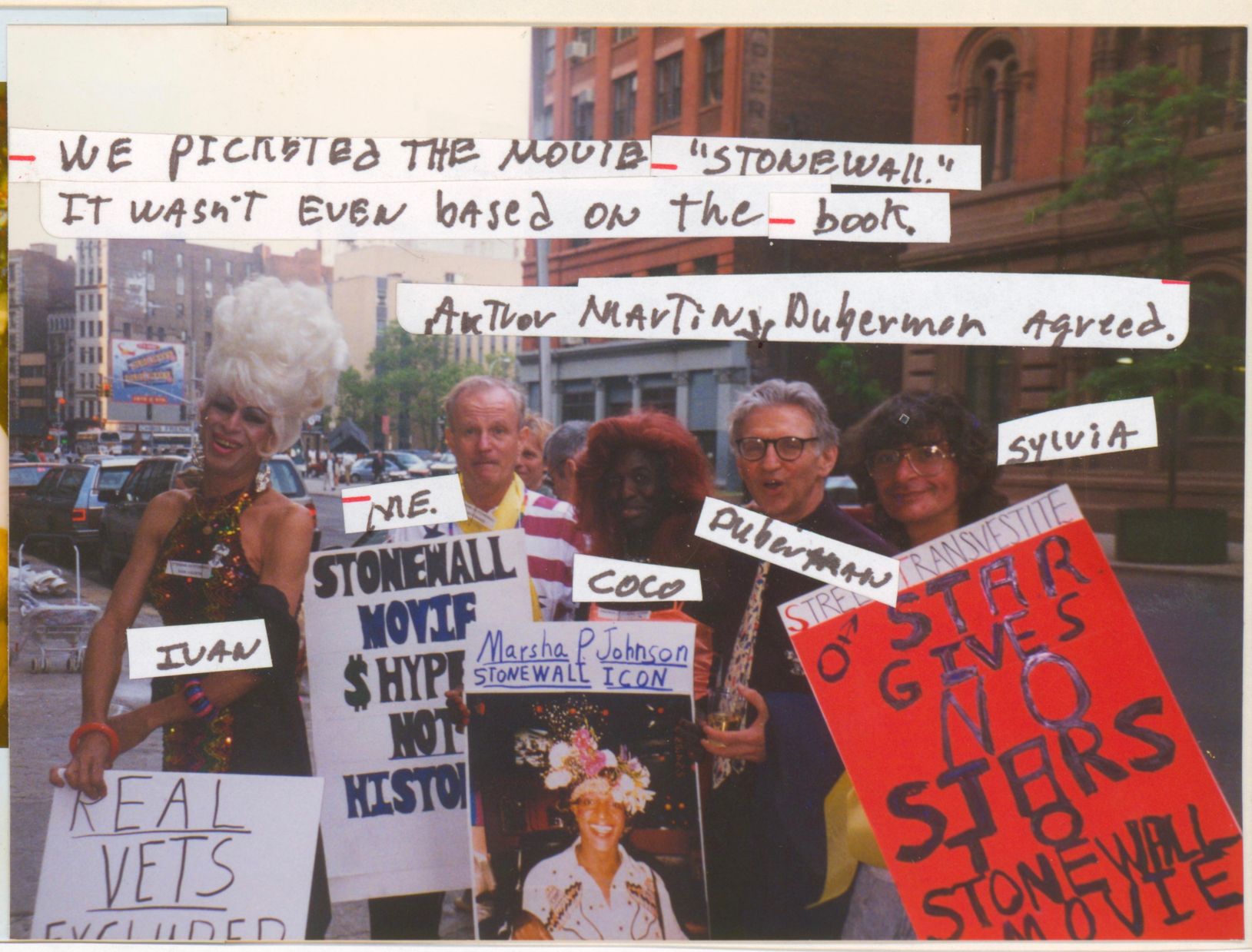
Sometimes I find myself reflecting on the accusation of a now deceased friend (heart attack & death at age 54 from eating too many Big Macs) that I "collected cripples." The only accusation which haunted me even more over the years was Edward Lacey's declaration (movingly recanted 30 years later): "You want to be loved but are not lovable!"

A collection of Edward Lacey's letters to his friends, the Bissels, has been published this past year by a University press in Canada. I turned over copies of his voluminous correspondence with me to the executor of his estate. Hopefully, they too will someday be published. Time & energy permitting, I may send an exceptional page or two wherein Edward describes "going out to meet the water" coming down a dry waterbed into a parched section of Mexico.

Above: Koo-ee got a new coat for XMAS. I take her to the store almost every day.

Left: David's Quilt was part of this fall's display in Washington, D.C.

Koo-ee in her new coat. Frank gets up even in the Middle of The Night TO WALK her.



The sun has set now. Christmas Day is over. With this letter, a year of "typewriter block" has finally been conquered. I don't have the word processor part hooked up yet but at least I've gotten the typewriter part of it operating. This letter may yet prove embarassing, but at least it won't be due to poor hand print & shabby layout (ha).

Last year, I had my first truly "REPUBLICAN" Christmas! As the sun set, several homeless people I'd befriended brought ME leftovers from their feast in the shantytown on the Village waterfront they called "Gay Pier." When the snows came a week later, I took them in.

CoCo had commenced disappearing for a few days at a time. Frank, the disabled vet I'd taken in, had also disappeared after he & CoCo argued. Sylvia Rivera, especially, settled in for the next few months.

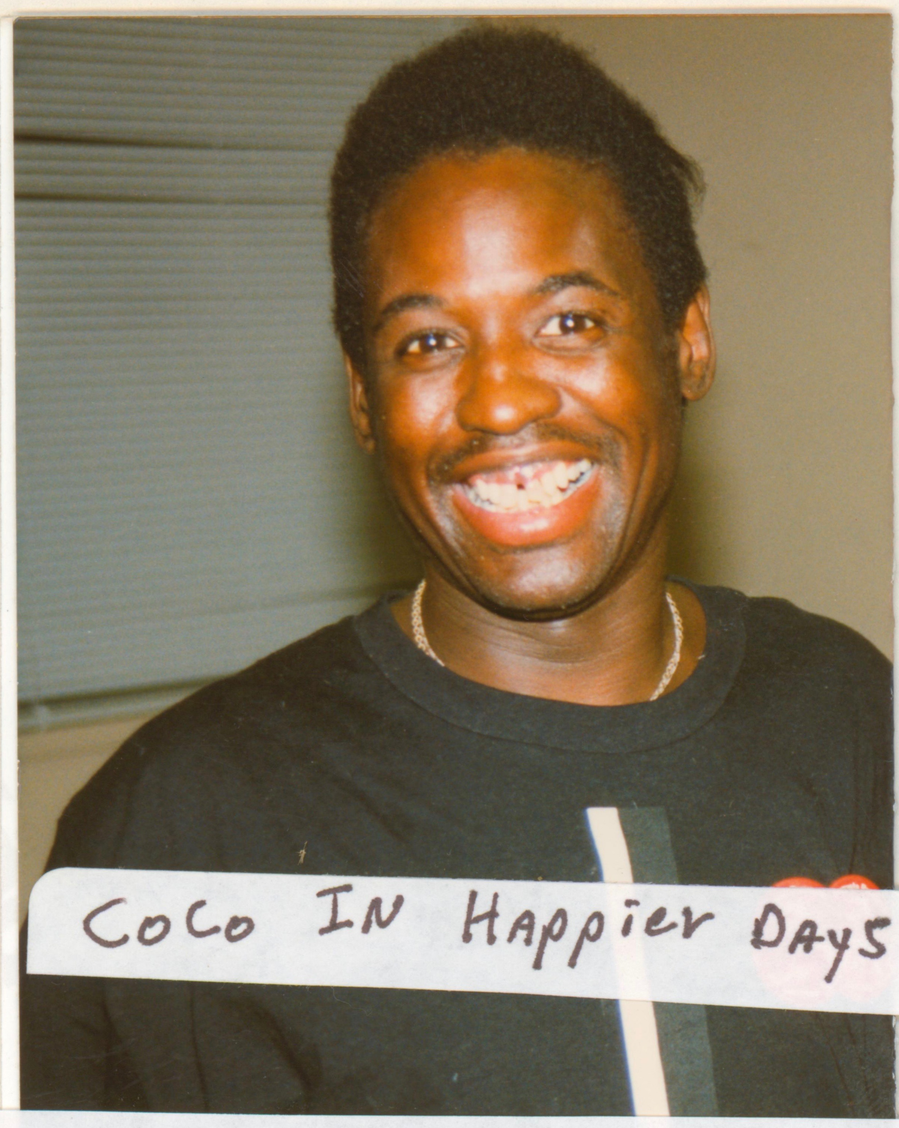
In case you don't already know, hiring alcoholics --even sometimes functional alcoholics--is fraught with difficulties. Only a fool like myself would even try it. But I really liked them. Sylvia, particularly, had a strong work ethic. So long as it was beer, no or few problems. Vodka was the real enemy.

Her friend, one of the most charming & wonderful sober people you ever knew, unfortunately became a blathering pie-eyed drunk at nearly every opportunity. Fortunately, his lover got disability for AIDS & with my cosigning on the lease for the $150 monthly rent not covered by the City, they got quite a nice apartment in a suburban section of Brooklyn.

Sylvia + Gabby Goff Along famously.

Sylvia IN FULL REGALIA with one of the NICEST people you'd ever WANT TO KNOW . . . GAY PRIDE DAY '96

Sylvia worked out reasonably well & went on the books full time last July. Everyone liked her. Then some other friends, former homeless neighbors from "gay Pier" who'd gotten their act together enough to get a large apartment, took her in as a roommate.



CoCo IN Happier DAYS

Koo-ee refused To wear The hat an admirer Made for her.

CoCo had been disappearing more & more frequently. Some married man, a doctor, took her out to his home on Long Island every weekend. I'll spare you the details of how his wife & daughter appeared unexpectedly & had CoCo locked up until the good doctor returned home & went down & bailed her out. Nor will I chill you with a detailed description of the time the same good doctor had a stroke, collapsing on top of CoCo in the middle of a torrid tryst. CoCo thought she was pinned to the bed by a corpse. Whoever said black hookers have an easy life?

The good doctor would return to work on Mondays, bringing our dear little CoCo back with him into Manhattan. Trouble was we wouldn't see CoCo till Wednesday or Thursday. Cash in her pocket & the weather being warm lured her back into life on the streets. She always objected to working for $6 or $8 an hour because she could "make much more than that" panhandling. Passersby would assume CoCo was a young homeless woman & be exceedingly generous.

Unlike the good doctor, I was generally - perhaps, surprisingly- immune to CoCo's bodily charms. But I was the ultimate sucker for her personal charm. She was warm & exceedingly intelligent. We always enjoyed watching "Biography" on A&E & "Booknotes" on C-Span together.

She paid no rent. Had no income. Her room was worse than a mess. It was an embarassing disaster. And by the time she finally came home , she needed $3 every day for chicken wings. CoCo lived on chicken wings. I knew I was being used & abused. But what else could a "collector of cripples" expect?

And I knew why. My father had always said that my mother & I were "so much alike" it was "frightening." And, thankfully, he once told me:" Before I'm cold in the grave, your mother will be out looking for a new husband. NOT because she didn't love me. I know your mother very well. SHE CANNOT STAND TO LIVE ALONE! That's why!"

Well, enough self-serving excuses. On to the ugly truth, the sad details, the outrageous & heartbreaking (but predictable) end.

A couple weeks passed & CoCo failed to reappear. In the past that meant she had been arrested for jumping the turnstyle in the subway, drinking from a brown paper bag in Sheridan Square, or panhandling too close to a subway entrance or in front of a church.

No such luck this time. CoCo was charged with selling a $10 bag of crack to an undercover policewoman at the spot she usually panhandled. It was a "felony"--her third offense--and she faced 3 to 7 years if she pleaded guilty, 9 to 20 years if she demanded a trial. When arrested, CoCo had eight dollars in her pocket. The 'marked' $10 bill used to purchase the crack wasn't there.

A little history. But first, let me tell you that if I were a black person in this country, I think I'd feel like picking up a gun and shooting every honkie (that means 'white person') in sight. A middle class cocaine user would have to have about $5000 in drugs to face the penalties CoCo faces for her alledged (and probable) $10 sale.

First offense: pot (big deal-I've smoked my share too.) smoking or selling in Washington Square Park. Second offense: while panhandling on the Bowery, some guy asks:"where can I buy some drugs around here?" CoCo shares the 'common knowledge' - "Across the street, in the Majectic Hotel, (a welfare hotel) they sell it on every stairway."

A few minutes later, the 95¢ needed to buy a turkey leg finally in hand, CoCo starts to go into a bodega. Whistles blow. Suddenly, undercover cops are running around everywhere. One asks CoCo:"Where do you think you're going?"

"To buy a turkey leg," CoCo replies, only to be informed that she's "going downtown." Ultimately, 95¢ in her pocket, CoCo gets a 5 minute visit with a legal aid lawyer who tells her to "plead guilty" and maybe he can get her "into a program." The "program" under the notorious Rockefeller drug laws turns out to be a few years in jail for the solicted, unpaid act of "steering"!

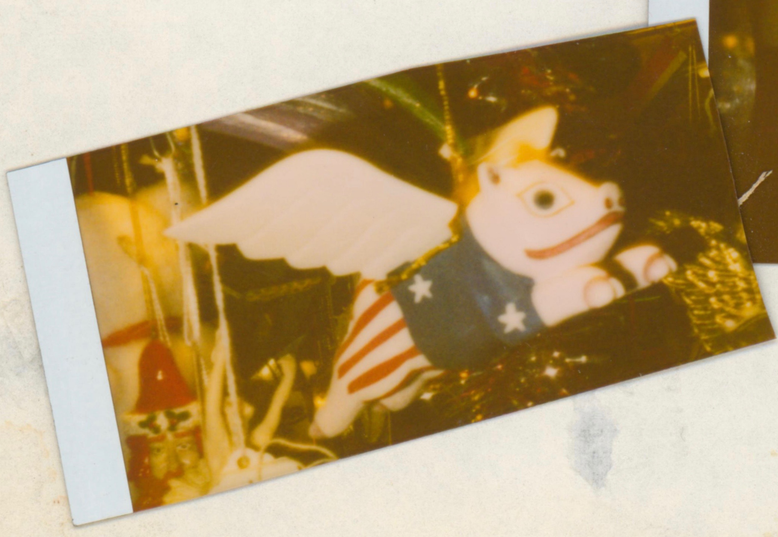
Never in history was $30,000 per year so misspent as in protecting us('society?) from CoCo. Only the good doctor's wife would have approved.

Some might say that CoCo made her own bed (for once!) and now she must lie in it We live in an ugly, racist, unfair, unjust society. Go down to your local court and watch the white folks locking the black folks up! At least then, if some crazed black man blows your brains out as you ride innocently home on the Long Island Railroad, you'll understand that it's all just part & parcel of the system.

Merry Christmas America. Make sure you have that patriotric pig hanging on your sacred, holy, loving Christmas tree.

and to all, a good night!

Randy Wicker
12/25/96
10:00 pm



Randy Wicker's
Uplift Inc.
506 Hudson Street
New York City, NY 10014