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Dear Lady

by James Barr

The following is the actual reply to a letter received recently by James Barr. Learning of it, and feeling that it will be of more than routine interest to «Der Kreis» readers, we asked for permission to reprint it here. After deleting all names, Mr Barr agreed.

Dear lady,

7 May 1954

Your letter of 1 May 1954 at hand; this, my reply.

From several thousand letters commenting on my first two books which treated the subject of homosexuality, yours is the first to threaten my right to live as a free man and my physical well being while doing so. Your letter, long overdue, has been the matter of considerable speculation by several people here. How ironic that you, a mother wishing only to protect her son, should be the first to spring the trap that my lawyers have prepared so carefully and so expertly to protect me from the vicious brutality of the blackmailer. Whatever else you may think of me, dear lady, you must thank me for instructing those lawyers — who are, perhaps, overly anxious to earn both their fee and the newspaper notoriety such a case will give them — to file your letter only, and to take no action against you. Their defense must await other assaults, and I must answer you for much the same reason.

You begin your letter by advising me never to write to your son again on pain of being exposed publicly by you for what I am, a homosexual. You are attempting to intimidate no guttersnipe, Madame, but a man of education, some command of means and a heritage of courage bequeathed by tyranny-hating pioneers who, for two hundred years, have fought in this country's every war to preserve those ideals of fairplay that are too often unknown in that part of Europe from which your starving antecedents more recently fled. I have anticipated your threat of exposure by explaining to my family (who have read and thoughtfully criticized my books) my psychological difficulties. Further, our small community is aware of the pseudonym I use in my writing career and accords me a grudging respect for having accomplished some small position of acclaim no fellow citizen hereabouts has equalled. Still further, the Navy, in which I served faithfully for five years in two wars, saw fit to discharge me under honorable conditions even after learning of my authorship and homosexuality. Last of all, the FBI is undoubtedly aware of my two identities and most of my propensities. To whom then, dear lady, would you expose me for what I am? My church? You would do well to consider carefully before you do so. Unlike yours, it has no rich priesthood as well versed in pressure politics as orthodoxy, in fear and hatred as the other aspects of divinity. In my church it is believed that the soul's salvation is accomplished through progressive contemplation and intelligent reasoning rather than blind faith and mechanical rote.

Any man who can account for his actions, or present his ideas logically has a place in this congregation's esteem. In short, I am a Unitarian.

True, my parents may still be vulnerable in several small ways. Perhaps certain members of your clergy could help you devise some way to use your evidence — a few of my letters which you have seized from the personal effects of your son, now several years past a man's estate — to add to their already considerable anguish. One of my parents has been an arthritic; the other is dying bravely of leukemia. Such delicate flesh would, I am sure, appeal to the taste of at least one of the local representatives of your faith, who, to recount but one of his adventures, was taken into the country only last winter by three men of his parish and beaten severely for molesting the wife of one of these men. In such a man's hands, if reports are true, I am sure my letters could be made to appear far more lurid than in reality they are. And the prizes for clever minority-baiting seem destined to reach an all time peak in this present decade.

Or perhaps you could petition the Post Office Department to prosecute me for some slight obscenity of language or confession of unlawful practice that has been sent via the mail, but I doubt it. The content of any and all of my letters is invariably the content of any group of average men engaged in casual conversation, such content being tantamount to a legal confession of nothing, particularly since in this case, during these three years of correspondence with your son, *I have yet to meet him!*

You say your son does not need the kind of advice I can give. Madame, I am an advisor in no capacity to anyone. I am a writer, dedicated to recording life as I see it, not to the shaping of it for others. Your son wrote to me after he had read my first book. Our friendship developed from a mutual interest and respect, not from any advice sought or given.

You say you are responsible for bringing him into the world, that you will leave no stone unturned (and evidently unhurled) to prevent his living the life of a degenerate. If you are really sincere in what you say, you will persuade him to consult a competent psychiatrist to escape the grip of homosexuality. Fighting for my freedom on this new frontier, I know modern psychiatry is often successful in spite of the scorn heaped upon it by the official body of your church. Your son is no degenerate; nor do I think he will ever be, no matter how far you push him with your past and present tactics. He is a fine man, his love for his family is deep and genuine, his faith in his god is abiding. But when his family and his church adamantly refused to understand his problems, to meet him half way, even if only temporarily until he had repossessed his will to live as society dictates, he sought understanding elsewhere.

Will you then blame me for telling him he must not end his life? For telling him that there are answers to his problems; that others have fought these horrors that inhabit his mind, and have fought them successfully to win the respect and good will of everyone they know? Am I to be condemned for attempting to do what you could not? Would you turn away a starving member of my family who came to you seeking

food? Of course you would not. Your son is a reflection of the gentle courtesy and generous kindness that you have taught him all his life. He is a son you could well be proud of, if you were not so selfishly concerned with what your church and your «decent society» might, in their ignorance, say of him and you. Has he ever committed murder, larceny, molestation of children, or any other crime against the state? No. Does he not earn his living honestly and publically conduct himself honorably as an average, law-abiding citizen wherever he goes? Unquestionably he does. Must you then interfere, without being invited, in the privacy of his sins against his god? Is he not capable of answering for himself for his own actions, which, strictly speaking, concern you neither in the face of his 26 years nor in the face of eternity? Must you systematically liquidate all his friends of whom you disapprove, as you say you are doing now, by intimidating or denouncing them to the police? I can think of no quicker way to embitter him permanently and push him over the edge of commendable behavior into a limbo whose hideousness you cannot imagine! Should you bear with him, however, with understanding and respect for his efforts, you may yet have the kind of son you so fervently desire.

You ask me to listen to the plea of a broken hearted mother. Dear lady, my heart was broken by such a plea from one far nearer and dearer than yourself several years ago. If you think your son does not suffer by acting contrary to your wishes, you do not know an important segment of his personality. He is at present ruled by a compulsion second only to the preservation of life itself. Remember that he did not choose to become homosexual. More likely that choice was inadvertently made for him, by you.

You conclude your letter with, «If you wish to lead this kind of life, that is your business, but may God have mercy on your soul.» In the first place, my kind of life is, unfortunately, *not* my business. In addition to Custom — never a respecter of new knowledge — laws have been enacted to deprive me of my rights to a fair recovery should I stumble or fall in trying to lead a life similar to that of my neighbors. Such laws are not uncommon. Only three hundred years ago in your own state which was then but a colony, more than a dozen people who acted strangely and were not understood by the rest of the community were burned at the stake for witchcraft with the pious approval of the citizenry, the law and the church. Today we know how wrong those laws were. Is it not possible then, that in another three hundred years, or less, people like your son and myself will be understood by their brethren and the laws that now make criminals of us will have been repealed?

As for God having mercy on my soul, dear lady, I do not despair; for you see, the God I believe in did not fashion me in His own image to flatter me, is not guilty of thinking in the poor, petty ways that are the best I know, does not jealously insist that I worship Him above all things for He is all things «good» and «evil» alike, does not inspire me with dread nor fear of Him for He finds my sins far more understandable, far more trivial than I do myself. He does not reveal Himself to me in miracles, for life and every minute of living it, no matter what

that minute brings, is the only miracle of God known to the man who is truly, humbly wise.

To conclude: when you say I must not answer any letters from your son, I must reply that I shall, whether you seize them or not. If he asks me a question I shall answer it with that same consideration for my fellow man and innate love of honesty that have always guided me. If he asks me to remain his friend in our present status, I will be grateful for his companionship. And should you, Madame, find some way of martyring me that I have not yet guessed, I will show you what a «degenerate homosexual» can endure from your «decent society» without flinching.

In all other matters, dear lady, I am, for the sake of your son,

Your devoted servant,

James Barr Fugate'

«Times» 8/8/1953.

Sex Laws in State Are 'Ridiculous,' Lawyer Tells N. Y. U. Police Clinic

New York State's law on sex were termed «ridiculous» and «unenforceable» by a lawyer who told a New York University institute on modern law enforcement methods yesterday that «antiquated» statutes were undermining efforts of authorities to control offenders.

Speaking to fifty law officers and students at the university's Washington Square Center, Robert Veit Sherwin declared that many sex practices recommended in medical texts constituted felonies «in every one of the forty-eight states.» He asserted that «practically speaking, there are no sex laws because the laws that exist cannot be enforced.»

Mr. Sherwin, author of «Sex and the Statutory Law», suggested that under a realistic approach the enforcement of sex laws would be based on three fundamental points. These were that sexual acts constituted a crime only when assault was involved, when they were carried on in public or when children were involved.

Deputy Police Inspector Paul Weston told the group that the city's subway system with its crowded trains and secluded station areas was «a fine place for sex offenders.» He said, however, that the Police Department had made considerable progress in the arrest and conviction of offenders. In the last two years, he said, convictions were obtained in 90 to 92 per cent of the cases.

In the last year, he declared, the Police Department has been compiling a special file on known offenders and policemen have been particularly successful in apprehending molesters of children. Inspector Weston praised the new law under which sex offenders are given indeterminate prison sentences, release being dependent upon the progress of their rehabilitation.

Donal E. J. MacNamara, vice president of the Society for the Advancement of Criminology and chairman of the institute, which ended its