

Interview with X Part 2

Interviewed by Elise Chenier

Transcribed by Jody Konarski

[00;00;00-00;05;14]

Elise: Talking about your family and about Ricky and accepting Ricky and you expecting that your father really didn't...well I guess before I ask you that question, you say that your father really didn't know anything about what could happen between two women. Is your mother not included in that? Or, do you think your mother might have had a sense of....

X: I think my mother knew.....had a sense of it. She read voraciously. At one point she had read a book a day because she happened to be lucky enough to have servants most of her life. A missionary first of all and then a school, in the school she was waited on. And she took that time and put it into reading. And she knew a lot more about life than my father because of that reading. So she would know. She knew about [inaudible], she read all of her that being lesbian. In those days, I think when we first discussed it there was still a question. You know they were still saying they thought she was.

Elise: Oh about Willa Cather? Oh be she might have known for example the big controversy over the Well of Loneliness when Radclyff Hall published it in Britain.

X: She never mentioned that. I don't know whether she ever encountered it.

Elise: But that was certainly a more explicit case that was publicly debated. But you think that your mother had an understanding that your relationship with Ricky was more than intimate-more than just a female friendship.

X: Oh I think she did. And my sisters are well. But I don't think my father did. But certainly my mother did. She was very astute, and later on when she was sort of advising me about careers and marriage, that was the other thing. She said to me, we had a long talk, she said Helen you know, don't think you have to get married, that marriage is absolutely in the books for you. There are lots of people who don't get married and don't need to get married. They have other fish to fry. You have so many interests and I can see you following several different courses in your lifetime, being in several different kinds of

jobs. She said marriage may be one of them but don't feel it has to be. I suppose she saw me struggling to get boyfriends and have a boyfriend and so on because I did, that was normal for me. I didn't know anything about lesbians so I didn't know I was a lesbian. I always felt attracted to a woman in this way. I hadn't labeled myself so it's quite an odd situation really; I think my mother knew more. But she, and that's what she was trying to tell me, that I was different. I think she was trying to tell me not to try too hard to get married.

Elise: Well your mother in some ways regretted their own choices.

X: Yeah.

Elise: So she had a sense of how limiting marriage could be, particularly married to a missionary. But certainly married to almost anyone for a woman it can be incredibly limiting in terms of your choices and options about what you could do with your life. You know, because you more or less have to follow the path your husband takes and more often than not you're going to end up with children. So you can't pursue those things, so it makes sense that your mother would have an understanding about.....

X: Yeah so of course I keep wondering if she understood too that I was a lesbian. I didn't know I was, but perhaps she knew.

Elise: Maybe.

X: If she did she never talked about it with me. Of course, she never talked about sex. She never gave me any sex education. [yeah] And yet in so many other ways she was wonderful in what she shared with us. She knew astrology, the stars, from beginning to end. She'd take us up in the night and teach us and she could botanize...she could take a plant and botanize it and tell you what it was and what family it came from and so on.

Elise: Right.

[00;05;15-00;12;11]

X: She had a lot of skills and knowledge which she shared with us all. But and I don't think from what I can gather from my sisters that she ever took them aside and gave them any advice about marriage and their suitability for it. But um...

Elise: Well um what I was getting to before was...what I was thinking of was you were talking about your father welcomed Ricky into the family and obviously you

had this relationship with Ricky that lasted over many many years, so I guess after a while she would become naturally an extension of you. [right] You know, if one's coming over the other's coming over sort of thing. And um I'm wondering if you felt at the time or if your experience of the community you lived in-your co-workers-that women living together was really quite normal. I'm just talking about two women sharing a home. Did you feel at that time that you were unusual or you had lots of friends that were in the same situation?

X: No, I felt that we were unusual. [you did, yeah.] And I'd never...because I hadn't labeled us lesbian, not knowing the word, I didn't know the groups like us and that just wasn't my knowledge. But I also knew that the women I lived with and shared this apartment-the two of us shared an apartment with two others-that we should try to keep the knowledge from them. [right] Why, I don't know. I supposed we realized that they would be prejudice. I don't think they would have, but now that I know them better....but they knew although they couldn't really understand why we didn't sleep together and that was something we couldn't understand either. We didn't discuss it; occasionally when we had the chance maybe on a holiday, a weekend holiday or something like that, but we always went with people, we always went with friends. But if we happened to get the same room we might shack up together. But then again, we didn't want to be caught. In other words, we didn't want them to openly see us sharing a bed sort of thing and that must be because our prejudices were so ingrained. We hadn't accepted our behavior; we didn't understand it. And I was busy trying to get boyfriends too.

Elise: During that same period?

X: During the same period yes. Because the normal thing was to get married and other people had boyfriends. And it established you as being normal. And certainly at college I really tried, and wasn't terribly successful. But I went to most of the dances and I got to know some nice young men. Um, now one of these...now this is a long story, I won't tell you the whole story, but one young man who was the same age as I was who was at the college at the same time...we had known each other when we were small, between the ages of five and seven I think. We played together and we had a lot of sexual activity in that play. But we had no guilt. I don't remember ever feeling guilty about it. It hadn't built up then not like it has later. And anyway this boy's mother discovered us in their outside toilet one day together and she burst a blood vessel. She was so shocked and mad and she got in touch with my

mother. This was in China. She said she didn't want her son to play with me anymore and I wasn't to come over and so on and so on. So she virtually split us up. She wouldn't let him ever come near me; of course she blamed me for the whole thing. But that young man, he was at college with me and something drew us together again and we dated a bit and we went to quite a few things together. We didn't always go to every dance together though. He was six foot three or six foot four for one thing; it was hard to dance with him [laughter]. So as I say I tried to pursue what I considered the normal life and at college I never thought of myself as different or odd or anything. And when a girl who was a friend, who did become a great friend of mine, she made a real play for me. I remember one day I was resting in my room and came over and flopped on the bed and came over right on top of me and started to kiss me. And I didn't respond because I thought there is something funny about this. This isn't right, and she didn't say anything. She just was trying to arouse me really. But I knew something odd was happening here and I wanted to know more about it. So I went to the Dean of Women and asked can I have a little talk with you after dinner one night, and I put the problem to her. And she said and went and closed the door, and she said I've got to tell you a few things because you are obviously quite innocent. She was a lesbian herself.

Elise: Oh is that right?

[00;12;12-00;16;00]

X: She was telling me about an affair that she had had with another lesbian. They had gone off to...she had been quite successful in girl's work, but taken a year off, two years off-she and her friend-I think her friend had money. And they went to London and they lived it up and went to all the dance halls for lesbians and so on. And then they went to Paris, and that's where they had the most fun. These Paris bars were lesbians and dance halls and she dressed as a man and her partner as a woman and they had a great time the whole winter there in Paris. Then they went back to London and eventually they came back to Canada and I don't know what happened with the woman, she never said, but I never saw her with this woman. I knew her by name, but she was telling me-she said Helen all I can say is that it is one of the most unhappy experiences you can have in terms of the way in which our society looks upon lesbian relationships. But anyway, she opened my eyes to a lot of things. [wow] So I had at least that knowledge before I met Ricky.

Elise: Which wasn't until some years after that...

X: It wasn't no, about ten years after that. I graduated in thirty four and I met Ricky in forty two or forty three, so not quite ten years after. And I hadn't met anybody in the meantime.

Elise: Well what effect did that conversation have on you? That must have just turned your world upside down in a way.

X: Well it didn't because I wasn't involved in any behavior that was under review as it were. It was intriguing to me; I don't know why I didn't go out and do some reading about it. But nobody mentioned The Well of Loneliness at that time to me so I didn't read anything about it.

Elise: Well The Well of Loneliness is depressing anyway so you might be better off that you never read it.

X: I'm still looking for men. I'm still trying to be normal.

Elise: So it wasn't like...some people describe those experiences like while you're having that conversation it's like oh my god that's what I am, but for you that didn't really happen until the eighties right? The nineteen eighties...the last time I was here you were talking about meeting that woman from the US and her bringing you to see Forbidden Love and suddenly, as you told me last time, you sort of realized...well this is me. Am I remembering correctly that it wasn't until then that you really made that connection?

X: Um...it wasn't until then that I kind of identified myself with lesbians. And said these are some of the feelings that I have had. Of course I had matured by this time, I had been almost nine years at CBC and so on. Um...and I had been approached by women.

[00;16;00-00'19;10]

X: And I had never accepted the overtures. Why, I don't know. But I liked my work. It was very challenging, it was very busy, I didn't have much time and um it just wasn't there, this recognition. I was living with Ricky but I still didn't recognize it as being of a different order, until Maria, who was a great teacher. You ask her to explain something and she really gets right into it and I think I told you that when she started coming to Toronto to teach, she would always come early and we would have a session which she would explain lesbianism to me right from a to zee. And that was very helpful to finally get it out in the open and to meet somebody who was proud of it. She isn't quite as ostentatious as she was then. Um...about being a lesbian and I'm proud of it...it's lower key now partly because she's full of personal problems-

her father was an alcoholic and one of these households where it was all acted out in quarrels and fights and everything. She's seen it all and it's just warped the whole family really. The father died about ten years ago and she's been through therapy, years of therapy, which helped her; but it's still all there, her feelings about her family and so on. And um...she's a great...she believes there are a lot of women who are lesbians who are not acknowledging it and this is very hard on them and they should come out and she's encouraging people to do that. She belongs to any organization that is sort of pro lesbian. She and her partner, they put on concerts to raise money for lesbians and gays and they have a lot of activity in that area.

[end of tape]