

In Search of Aimai Cristen

By Phillip Good

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1. The Ad

Young attractive girl, 24, searching for love,
compassion, joy from a man who can provide financial
security. Write Aimai Cristen, Box 3689, Barb Office,
1234 University Ave, Berkeley CA 94709.

2. Dino

My dad and I have had our ups and downs over the years.

When we were younger, he spent a lot of time with my older sisters and not very much with me. He would play catch with them or challenge them to races, but "because Dina couldn't keep up," he wouldn't play those games when I was around or would announce he was "tired" when I came out to play.

This isn't quite true, Dana tells me. Dana says our family also had another game called "Roll the Ball." We'd sit in a circle with Dad at the center, our legs separated so as to make a 'V', and he'd take turns rolling the ball to each of us. Dana's got a photograph of the four of us sitting in a circle on the floor of our family room—the house back in Michigan; my back and Dad's back are to the camera, and Dad, still with his long dark hair, is rolling the ball to Dana, so I guess it must be true.

"And what about 'Sardines,' and 'Puss in the Corner'?" Dana would probably ask. And we did go cross-country skiing in the winter and swimming together as a family in the summer: "Marco Polo." O.K., but I still think Dad spent more time with Dana and Donna.

About two months ago, I came back home to live with my father. I'd dropped out of school for a while. Done some things I wasn't particularly proud of. I got a job when I was only sixteen: telephone soliciting. And I had a job with one of those 900 numbers—"Intimate secrets," my seductive voice promises, "What do girls really think about when they're alone? You can listen for just \$2.35 a minute. Ten-minute minimum." But mostly my friends and I sat around in crummy apartments and talked. Talked all morning and all afternoon. Talked some more and partied in the evenings.

I came back home because I know now what I want to do. Go to college. Get a teaching credential. And work with kids that have problems. Of course, I have a few things to get out of the way first, like getting the high school diploma I never quite got around to completing.

Well, why not? I need just algebra and a semester of Spanish to get the diploma. It has to be done sometime. And like my dad always said, "you're bright enough."

Dana lived a year alone in the house with Dad in her last year of high school. (Never mind they no longer speak.) Now, it is my turn. (She says she came up to him once after a lecture he gave at her college and he looked right through her like she was a total stranger. He says he did try to talk to her, but her politics are so extreme she just won't listen to anybody. They're both partly right.)

Since I came back, Dad and I have been part of a tight domestic scene: Breakfast together in the mornings if I get up on time, dinner together in the evening. Nothing really special for dinner. Dad knows how to make spaghetti—he gets real excited

because he uses fresh cheese and grates it at the table. I'll fix a salad or sometimes he'll have one already made. Dad also fixes roasts. He's very particular about how they are cooked; he steams the vegetables separately and only adds them to the meat at the very end. I know how to make stuffed peppers and almost any kind of dish where you start with rice and then stir in your leftovers. For dessert we both like ice cream.

I'm not sure what else we are supposed to do together, talk maybe?

"How are those math courses coming?" Dad will ask. He reaches up a hand and absent-mindedly scratches his scalp; I wish he wouldn't.

"O.K. I know most of the stuff... Seriously, I got A's in my last three assignments."

"I believe you. Seen this in the paper about the retards on the school board?"

"It's a shame." I reply, wondering why we aren't talking about anything meaningful.

He shakes his head, takes off his reading glasses and looks at me. I meet his gaze. Though his cropped hair is shot through with gray, his eyes are still dark and penetrating. "You've got to read the newspaper more, read books they don't assign you in class."

"O.K." I say to pacify him. And that's our evening's conversation. A wall sits between us, and I can't push through it, yet.

There isn't much to night school: a couple of evenings a week in the classroom with other lowlife dropouts, a couple of mornings doing the assignments and reading. College, I know, will be a lot harder. But right now, I'm left with a lot of time on my hands.

I don't need to work—at a job I mean. Dad says as long as I live at home and am going to school, he'll pay for everything. I'm not going to hang out—no, not for me, not any more, not with a bunch of guys going no place. (Though I might stop back to talk with them later, when I have my teaching credential.) So what do I do when I'm not in school? Stay at home? Go shopping at the mall?

When I moved in with my dad originally, I thought I'd be really domestic. Cook, clean, take care of everything for him. But he's learned a lot in the two years he was apart from Mom. He cleans up now as he goes along. You know, he wipes off counters and puts the dishes away in the dishwasher as soon as the meal is over. So there isn't much mess left for me to clean.

I could do the vacuuming—"I'll do that, Dad."—unless he's already done it himself. Our house is so small. Well, not small, small, but it seems tiny to me sometimes with Dad holed up in his study all day long and me tiptoeing around trying not to disturb him.

I've cleaned my own room a dozen times over. I've thought about putting up pictures but I haven't quite got around to it yet. Maybe, because I don't know who my heroes are, whose photos I want on my wall.

Which leaves me what: A chance to mow the grass (once Dad is through in his study and the noise won't bother him) or clean up the garage.

"It's a mess out here, Dad," I say, though I know he is inside in his study and can't hear me. Cobwebs and a wasp nest have to be cleaned up first. Lots of boxes, the same boxes he's lugged around with us since I was a kid. "Can I throw this out?" Children's clothing in a box marked "Give to Goodwill" years ago by my mom. After a parting squeeze for my last pair of Dr. Denton's, I put the box out on the curb and see that it goes off to Goodwill, finally.

A paper bag full of crumpled envelopes and computer printouts goes into the garbage where it belongs. Here is a second bag, this one filled with white Styrofoam pebbles — "Don't throw that out," Dad hollers, appearing from nowhere.

One box contains all the memos Dad wrote or had sent to him when he worked years ago for a pharmaceutical firm. Its contents include the minutes of the Technical Library Committee: "Janet Henderson has volunteered to look into the possibility of microfiche." I leaf through both the report from Janet Henderson and a caustic memo from my dad criticizing her report. Ah well, let him keep his memos a while longer.

At supper—the entire house smells of the garlic that went into the sauce—I asked him about the garage, "Dad, I've started looking into the boxes. All your old manuscripts and memos. Is it O.K.?"

A broad smile lights up his face, first the left side of his mouth, then the right, the smile extending finally past his dimple to the crinkles in the corners of his eyes. "Sure, it's O.K. I'm flattered. I guess that's maybe why I keep the stuff. In case one or the other of you kids might want to know what I was up to in the old days."

Is this a conversation? Not yet, but I think we are getting closer.

The next afternoon, I put aside the company memos—they are as boring now as they were then—and seek out the older boxes—the ones that are pre Dina, even pre mom. I found one box that is really old; the tape holding the cardboard together has almost rotted away. I sneeze each time I disturb the dust on the outer surface. At the top of the box is a book of course notes from McGill University: Calculus 223 is dedicated in my father's uneven handwriting to a Miss Jan Davenport. Four more course notebooks lie beneath the first, each dedicated to a different girl. And yellowed newspaper clippings: "Street Car Fares to Rise a Dime. Students Protest." Here is a page from the Sunday Book Review Section, 195_ something: "Too Many Penguins" reviewed by Phillip Good, Willingdon School, Age 10. Oh my goodness, little Phillip Good of Willingdon Elementary School, father-to-be of Dina Good, high school student in perpetuum. Little Phillip likes the book and is anxious to read something more by the same author.

I switch to a box of more recent vintage. The outside is water stained and the contents are partially but not completely faded: Letters from Uncle Steven in green ink,

letters from Uncle Pete in an almost undecipherable ballpoint. Uncle Pete had been in the Peace Corps. I didn't know that. A collection of Dear John, oops, Dear Phil letters:

"Dear Phil. I cannot go with you to the concert tonight. I am sorry but..." "Phillip: I like you, but as I told you when we first met, I already have a commitment..." "Dear Mr. Good, my father says that only fast girls will accept..."

And, as if to offset these letters, a note that reads, "Phil. I don't understand why you haven't called. Please. Jan."

The note still holds a faint scent of lilacs and I press my nose against the writing.

But it is the next and largest box that is the real treasure trove. Psychedelic posters—notebook size—advertise concerts at the Fillmore Auditorium: The Grateful Dead, Clear Light, Big Brother and the Holding Company, Yveshenko reading from his own poetry. (Yveshenko sounds Russian: did they have translators?) I put on a pair of glasses with multi-faceted colored lenses, one side yellow, one side pink; through them, everything looks the way it did to Jeff Goldblum in *The Fly*. And then—but will I have time before supper to read them?—a dozen brown manila folders, each containing an ill-assorted mixture of newspaper clippings and manuscripts, letters to the editor, poems, three columns of want ads, parts of a diary. These clippings may have had an order once; perhaps each folder corresponded to a different year or a different six-month period, but now they are all mixed up.

"Has anyone else seen these, Dad?" I ask about the envelopes, meaning has one of my older sisters seen them.

It is spaghetti evening, smelling of garlic again and Parmesan cheese. Dad got out his razor before the meal so the dining room smells a little, too, of shaving soap and Aqua Velva.

"Oh, I've been through them a couple of times." Dad says, "And I tried to get your mother interested. Have you read any of the stuff?" He tries to appear casual in asking, but something, a restless movement of his fingers, gives his need for recognition away.

"Just bits and pieces," I remark, trying to act equally laid back. Actually, I hadn't read any of the manuscripts, yet. I'm still depending on conversation to give me the glimpses of him I need. "Something else I wanted to ask you, Dad: You have this collection of letters that are still in their original envelopes."

"The ones from Uncle Steve and Moo Grandma?"

"No, the letters I'm talking about aren't addressed to you. They're to an Aimai something or other."

He takes off his reading glasses. "Aimai Cristen." His voice is muffled. I wait for him to explain who Aimai Cristen is but he doesn't say anything more, just sits and stares off into the distance.

"O.K., if I look at them, too?" I ask.

He nods, still not speaking. I can't tell from the nod if he means, "sure, the letters would be a good place to start," or "sure, I can't stop you." O.K., Dad, keep your mysteries. I can be cool, too. For a while.

The next afternoon, I am back in the garage early with the contents of two of the boxes spread out around me. I've made a stack of the card-size posters to put up on my wall. My dad was a fan of the Jefferson Airplane and Big Brother and the Holding Company. So am I now, whoever they were.

A manila folder holds clippings from the Berkeley Barb; copies of this same newspaper, neatly folded, line the bottom of the box. I unfold the newspapers and read the articles, one by one. A number of the stories are outlined in red as if Dad were planning to cut them out. Articles by Number Six, the Grass Prophet, Shiva, and Peter Wood.

The folders also contain a number of short stories. The heroes are named Rafe or Peter or Jim, but I think they are really about episodes in my Dad's own life.

Stories, clippings, extracts from his diaries. It's hard to believe, I tell myself each afternoon I sit cross-legged on the floor of the garage reading: All of my father's life is there in the box. Like coming home, all I have to do is reach out and say, "Hi Dad."