Oral History # 040

An Interview With
Dan Cleary

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DAN CLEARY

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: This is Lynn Schwartzenburg interviewing Dan Cleary for The oH Project. The interview is taking place February 22, 2018, in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Mr. Cleary to document his recollections concerning the response to HIV/AIDS in Houston, Texas, and other places that he lived.

Good afternoon, and thank you for doing this.

DAN CLEARY: Thank you. Thank you, Lynn.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Let’s start at the beginning. Tell me, where were you born and when?

DAN CLEARY: I was born in St. Louis in 1957, a Catholic hospital that changed my name.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: Why did they change your name?

DAN CLEARY: Superstition. My name was Daniel Joseph Cleary, and they shortened it to Dan Joseph Cleary so my name wouldn’t be six letters, six letters, and six letters.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: It was the nuns who did that?

DAN CLEARY: I suppose it was, because I was getting my driver’s license before I ever found out I wasn’t Daniel. They changed me from Daniel to Dan. I went through grade school as Daniel.

LYNN SCHWARTZENBURG: That’s funny. Tell me about your family.

DAN CLEARY: I’m from a large family. I’m number seven of nine. I have four brothers and four sisters. Until me, nobody was gay, and now I have a flock of
gay nephews and nieces who see it as just regular life. It’s kind of exciting to
know that my niece married a girl. Life has changed so much that way.

SCHWARTZENBURG: It has.

CLEARY: The prejudices that we faced back then, the way people would be so hateful,
we kind of liberated ourselves that way. It used to be acceptable to go out to beat
up on gay people. I hope it’s not anymore. Way back when, I was part of a gay
patrol. The Sissy Patrol is what we called ourselves, and it was people who didn’t
like to go out to the bars. They’d just hang out at Forest Park and sit on the cars
and talk story all night.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Where was that?

CLEARY: That was in St. Louis, in Forest Park, a place called Confederate Circle. They
have a large cannon that everybody sat on. It was okay at that point to go through
and just beat up people’s cars and all, and we stood our ground. We stopped them
from it.

SCHWARTZENBURG: So you would just kind of hang out there, watch to see who was
coming around, or stop things?

CLEARY: Well, we could see for several blocks away, and it was always the young,
straight kids in their parents’ cars who would come out and harass us, it seems
like. One summer, we took it upon ourselves — I think it was in 1975 — to chase
down the people who were chasing us, and we’d break out their headlights and
taillights, and they’d cry like babies, and we wouldn’t see them again, but it was
standing up for ourselves and forcing them to have to look at themselves and
having their parents will see what they were doing. It seems like it came to pretty
much a stop at that point.
SCHWARTZENBURG: That’s great. When did you come out?

CLEARY: I came out in 1975. I didn’t know I was gay until I really came out, but in looking back, I played with one boy when I was four years old and he was five years old, and we played in his parents’ basement closet, and I just thought that was funny that the first place I played with somebody was in the closet.

SCHWARTZENBURG: In the closet.

CLEARY: Yeah. It didn’t even dawn on me until just a few years ago that that was the first person I’d really played with.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Those memories come back, yeah.

CLEARY: Yeah.

SCHWARTZENBURG: So you were in St. Louis. Seventh grade, is that when you were 12 and Stonewall happened? Tell me about Stonewall.

CLEARY: I might have been in sixth grade at that point. I think the first time that I — let’s see. It might even have been in fifth grade. I was born in October, so I was always a year older than all the kids in school, so I might have been in the fifth grade, or sixth. Probably sixth grade, because of buying cigarettes and all. I started buying cigarettes when I was eight years old. At that point, they were 17 cents a pack or three packs for 50 cents. I quit when they got to a dollar a pack. I couldn’t stand the expense, you know, and no more nickel a piece for those suckers.

At that point, it was amazing the way people were forced to hide because they could get beat up or harassed by the police. Two boys walking together in Central West End could have easily gotten into all kinds of heartache with the police chasing them down or with the straight people just being a problem.
The bar that I remember is the earliest bar I was at was called the Potpourri, and there was one entrance to the Potpourri, and it was the first floor was the boys’ club, and the downstairs was the girls’ club. The guys and the girls would come to it together, and as soon as they’d walk in the door, they’d split up. The girl would go downstairs to the bottom, of the Pot’s, and they’d meet at last call at the door and leave together.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did that bar ever get raided when you were there?

CLEARY: No, it didn’t. In fact, I don’t know of any of the bars that were raided, per se, in St. Louis.

One of my first jobs was working for a gay bar called Herbie’s, which was all the rave because it was chrome and glass and we had picture windows that were 10 feet tall all the way around the place, and it was so wild to have the visibility and the freedom just to not be hiding in the dark. This bar was at a very, very busy corner in the Central West End, and it kind of changed the way that people looked at gay people, or maybe gay people had already changed the look, but it was so neat to be able to be a part of that loving the nightlife and dancing in public and —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Not hiding.

CLEARY: Pardon?

SCHWARTZENBURG: Not hiding.

CLEARY: No, not hiding. In fact, nobody danced at the Potpourri. They just kind of sat in darkened areas, tucked away. At Herbie’s, they had all the chrome and glass and lots of lights.

Adelaide Carp, who is still alive, she was like the Mom of Montrose. It
was in the Central West End in St. Louis, but it would be like a Mom to Montrose, the whole bit. She was our leader. She was the one that we all want to share our existence with because she was so accepting. She was married to Herbie Carp, and he had the restaurant Balaban’s in St. Louis. It’s French cuisine. Herbie and Adelaide were like the leaders, the street leaders of gay Central West End in St. Louis, and everybody knew them and loved them. Adelaide flowed when she walked, and she just carried herself with such dignity and pride and such acceptance for us all.

SCHWARTZENBURG: That’s wonderful. How was your family when you came out? Did you come out to your family?

CLEARY: Not directly, but they very quickly figured it out. My family wasn’t accepting at all. Well, I say “my family.” My dad and mom weren’t. My dad came all the way around full circle. He and I argued all through my early teen years, but by the time I was in my late twenties, he had become my best friend, and my mom resented that still. She died angry with me because I was her only regret, as she called it.

SCHWARTZENBURG: She would say that to you?

CLEARY: Yes, she did. When we were walking away from my freshly-dead dad’s corpse, my brothers and sisters were there, all with their spouses, and I was walking her to the car because I didn’t have a spouse, and as we were getting on the elevator, she said, “I only have one regret,” and I knew it was going to be a doozy. I knew it was going to be something severe.

I kept away from the subject as we walked the 1,500 feet to the car, and finally I said, “So many people live their life with many regrets, and you’re so
blessed to only have one regret. What is it?”

She said, “It’s you.” She just had this venom in her voice that was just absolute hatred. I figured it was that Dad was freshly dead and she was just not herself.

So about a year and a half later, I asked her if she was really serious about me being her regret, and she said, “Yesss,” and that “sss” with it, it sounded like a snake, and I realized at that point that my mom and I weren’t friends. I didn’t know if we had ever been, but I knew we weren’t now.

I think that she resented me a lot because my dad came around to accepting me because, well, his oldest daughter had been a nun who left the convent, and my aunt and uncle had got a divorce, and here my dad was the patriarch to the next generation, and all these people are failing to be good Catholics, and he decided that should he stick with his religious beliefs of what the Church was telling him to do, or should he be a man and stand up for what he saw as truth? He stopped receiving communion, but he’d still go and open the church every day for the priests and turn on all the lights in the mornings and such, but it wasn’t until right before he died that he received communion again and forgave the Catholic Church for them trying to wreck his family.

My aunt who got divorced, oh, she was going to hell. My sister who left the convent after divorce, oh, she was going to hell. And I was going to hell. Somehow he came upon it that we weren’t all going to hell, and that if you wanted to be part of a happy family, he had to put that part of his life aside, and my mom never would accept that, the good Catholic that she was.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did that drive a wedge between them, do you think?
CLEARY: I think it might have. I think it truly might have. My dad was very patient, and my mother became less tolerant as time went on. My dad gathered the tolerance that she had lost.

SCHWARTZENBURG: It kept the relationship in balance, maybe.

CLEARY: Yeah. My mom was bitter for a long, long time, and I’m not sure why. I know that she had issues with my sexuality, but she’d never express them. She expressed them, but she didn’t get bold about it until after Dad had died. When I found out that I was her only regret, yeah, it boggled my mind, because here’s a woman who had brought me into this Earth and had protected me and loved me. She wasn’t that person who had loved me. It was an act. No, it wasn’t an act. It was that she became unyielding. She saw my homosexuality as part of what broke up her family.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Really?

CLEARY: Well, she had the very, very centralized Catholic upbringing where she just had all of her morals down pat, and if anyone swayed from those morals, then they were unforgiven. It’s funny, because she was much more liberal as I was young, and she got stuck in her beliefs. My dad came around full circle to being very loving because he realized that people were human and had foibles, and my mom wouldn’t accept foibles from her family.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What about your siblings? How did they find out or know, and how did they react?

CLEARY: Well, the first person I told was my oldest brother, Tom. He’s a doctor here in Houston. I told him that I thought I was gay, and his answer was, “So?”

“So?” and that was a tremendous, tremendous help. It was that he saw
nothing unusual about it and that he was instantly accepting of it. Though he might not have been externally, he was very supportive.

In fact, in grade school, when I was having the battles with my dad, he and his wife stood up for me, and I lived with them for a year and a half, a year, and he was fully accepting. When I came back to living with my folks again, it was much easier because the pressure had been off of them for a little while.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How old were you when you moved out with your brother, and then how old were you when you came back?

CLEARY: I was still in grade school when I moved out with him, so I was probably in seventh or eighth grade. It wasn’t a fight so much about being gay. It was a fight of just not fitting in with their cookie-cutter choices. In grade school, I didn’t know what gay was and had no idea what gay sex was or any of that. I just was different and very unhappy, and he stood up for me.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Tell me about your grandmother and how she fits into this.

CLEARY: My grandmother on my mother’s side was the one who raised me until I was five years old. My mother, having nine kids and me being number seven of nine kids, my mom wasn’t spending a lot of time with any of the kids, you know, because every three years, there was another child, and so it was like a pass-me-down situation. My grandmother was my caretaker. She and I would take buses together. She was the one who, if there was a need that needed to be sat on, it was hers. When she passed on when I was five, there was nobody there to pick up where she left off, and that’s when I started becoming alone or started becoming lonely and unhappy, because nobody picked up that —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Your loss.
CLEARY: My loss or that emptiness.

In fact, I really didn’t realize how important she was until I was 16 or 17 and went to the graveyard where she was, and I must have cried for two hours just over the loss of her, there by her gravestone, and it was such a release. I had held all that tension for all those years, and it was very freeing to realize that she was such a love for me.

Yeah, I fell into the wayside of not having that unconditional love. Grandma Pound just loved me. She was so accepting. Grandma Cleary, I’ve never really spent a lot of time with my grandparents on that side. My Grandma Pound lived with the family, so she was my caretaker.

SCHWARTZENBURG: When did you become aware of HIV or AIDS? How did that happen?

CLEARY: Before they announced what it was — it was GRIDS before it was AIDS, you know, gay-related infectious disease — I had heard about it. I was dating a callboy in St. Louis when I was introduced to it. It was the winter of 1978. I had that really, really bad fever that people would get. It lasts about 36 to 48 hours, and it was a high fever, and couldn’t hold down water, and then you came out the other side of it and you were skinnier from all the sweat, and it didn’t seem like anything had changed, but that’s when I contacted, in 1978.

I tested in 1984 and found out I was already positive. I somehow thought that if I was negative, that would be perfect. I could live the rest of my life.
without sex, or people hear contact. Yeah, at that time, I was living in Honolulu and —

SCHWARTZENBURG: When you were tested or when you had the fever?

CLEARY: When I tested. There was a health center in Honolulu that I tested at, and I tested. They didn’t require ID to get the test, and so I tested under an assumed name, and I was positive already.

It’s funny, I don’t know if it was a vain suicide attempt, but I swam out with an undertow one day, and I never thought of it as being dangerous, but I swam out probably about half a mile out underwater, and when I came up, all I could see was the top third of the palm trees, and it was a four-and-a-half hour swim back after one lungful of air taking me all the way out. I never realized how lucky I was, because if the undertow hadn’t released at the reef, if it had gone out another quarter mile or what have you, or another tenth of a mile, I would have been out of air and wouldn’t have been able to exhale and come up to the top. But fortunately the reef was there, and when I got past the reef, when it spit me out of a hole in the reef, there was no longer pressure holding me down close to the bottom, and I was able to come up.

When I started aiming upward, it was, “1,001, 1,002, 1,003, 1,004, 1,005,” so I was four and a half seconds in swimming straight up before I got to the surface level, and all those hours to swim back in. I didn’t realize how lucky I was that I was able to swim in like that. I didn’t realize how lucky I was that I still had air going out that way, for many years. When I did come up for air, looked around and came all the way back and swam in, didn’t think of how lucky I was at all, just I was exhilarated.
I came back in to where all my friends were sitting on the beach, and said, “Oh, man, I just swam way out there and back in,” and nobody ever said how lucky I was.

At one point, I was at Mary’s here in Houston, and I told my undertow story, and someone said, “Yeah, you were really lucky, man.” It wasn’t until then that it dawned on me how lucky I had been, and I cried like a baby for 45 minutes to an hour out on a picnic table out in back. Just never realized how lucky I was.

[BRIEF INTERRUPTION]

[END OF AUDIO PART 1]

CLEARY [continuing]: But when I swam out with the undertow, it was right about the time that I had found I was HIV positive, and just looking back upon it, it might have been a veiled suicide attempt. I’ve never thought of suicide, but if ever there was a peaceful way to go, that would have been it.

SCHWARTZENBURG: But it wasn’t.

CLEARY: No, it wasn’t. No, it wasn’t.

SCHWARTZENBURG: It wasn’t your time.

Let’s go back to your boyfriend being the callboy. For the uninformed, what does that mean, exactly?

CLEARY: He was a hooker. He was entertained by gentlemen who would treat him to the finer things in life, I guess, the way he saw it. He loved jewelry, and he loved clothes, and his parents were fairly well off, and they treated him well, but he made sure he was treated a lot better than they were treating him. As in “callboy,” he had worked for a madam back then, and I didn’t even know about callboys and call girls at that point.
SCHWARTZENBURG: So his main clients were TWA flight attendants?

CLEARY: That was among —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Among them?

CLEARY: Yes.

SCHWARTZENBURG: So there could also be like businessmen or —

CLEARY: Yes, they were working people who were in their thirties and forties when he was 16 and I was 18, you know, and he never had a problem finding dates.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You mentioned ground zero or patient zero. Do you think —

CLEARY: I believe that he was the one that gave me the contact to it. I was faithfully his, and we were living on a third floor of a friend of ours. I’m not even sure how that came to be anymore, but we were on their third floor when I had the fever.

He was my first boyfriend, so I wasn’t promiscuous. Well, I was promiscuous, I guess, but at that point, I was very, very faithful to him and didn’t trick out. He and I moved from St. Louis to Kansas City together, and that was my first getting exposed to gonorrhea, and I was faithful, and he said he was, too, but —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Somebody got something somewhere.

CLEARY: Yeah, and I know it wasn’t me. I was absolutely infatuatedly in love with him and didn’t see anything but him, and he told me that it wasn’t him, and it wasn’t him, it wasn’t him. It just doesn’t happen.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How long were you together?

CLEARY: I want to say close to two years. Yeah, probably close to two years, I guess.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did you ever know if he was HIV positive?

CLEARY: Well, he lied a lot when were young. When I asked him about it many years
later, he said he was negative at that point, and I didn’t believe him. It wouldn’t have been easy to prove or disprove. He lied about things when we were kids, and I’m sure he just continued to lie about things as we got older.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did you stay in Kansas City after you broke up?

CLEARY: We drove back to St. Louis to break up.

SCHWARTZENBURG: St. Louis?

CLEARY: I think we were actually broken up when we drove back to St. Louis, already, and we stopped seeing each other there, and then I was back to St. Louis and lived there until I was 19, I guess, and then moved to San Francisco.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Why did you move to San Francisco?

CLEARY: I hated St. Louis. I was a high-school dropout who didn’t have much going for me, and I had people who were very negative about me, saying I was never going to amount to anything. I kind of needed to prove myself, and I moved to San Francisco to avoid who I was before then. I knew that by being so far away from home, it was sink or swim. That’s where I got my first job that lasted for more than a year, being on my own and —

SCHWARTZENBURG: What was San Francisco like then? This is before you knew you were HIV positive, right?

CLEARY: Yes, it is. I was more conservative than I needed to be in San Francisco, for sure.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You missed it.

CLEARY: Yeah, I was there for it, but I didn’t realize what I was there for. San Francisco was one of the five gay meccas in the country at that point. There was San Francisco, Chicago —

CLEARY: — New York, Houston, and Atlanta, it seems like were the five gay meccas back then. If you were going to be gay, those would be the — I don’t know how Houston got into it.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Yeah, that’s interesting.

CLEARY: Houston was wild. I flew here for 43 cents when Southwest Airlines opened up the travel between St. Louis and Houston. We saw it in the paper, and a bunch of friends went with their 43 cents. You had to have something with 43. They were flying for peanuts, so you had to have 43 peanuts, was one of the 43 things that they would sell the first 43 tickets for 43 cents for. A 1943 penny was one of them, just all these different 43’s.

And so when we realized that you could fly that way, we were able to put together like 12 different 43 cent combinations and went to stand in line, and we were sixth through ninth, or sixth through tenth, or sixth through eleventh in the line, and so we knew we were going.

As we were there in line, a couple of my friends were late in getting there. They were involved in a terrible car crash. Caroline survived, but she was really wounded. Paul was — they made it through, but — God, I don’t remember. Caroline Sheebe and Paul Caldwell, they were part of our ensemble to come to Houston for 43 cents. It’s funny how you remember strange things with numbers and people.

We were given rain-trip tickets to come here because we got rained out of the trip after waiting for a day and a half or two days or three days in the airport in line.
SCHWARTZENBURG: Rain here in Houston or there in St. Louis?

CLEARY: Yeah, we were rained out from the trip.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Yeah.

CLEARY: When we did come, we ended up with one of those torrential rainstorms here in Houston that are just incredible. A wall of water coming down Shepherd took our rental car out.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Oh, my gosh.

CLEARY: There at Der Wienerschnitzel under Highway 59.

SCHWARTZENBURG: I remember that.

CLEARY: The water came through it three and a half feet deep, through that intersection, and we were trapped in it, and so we ended up spending a day at Der Wienerschnitzel surrounded by a lake of water. I don’t even know where that Der Wienerschnitzel was, anymore. It might have been on Kirby. I’m pretty sure it was Shepherd.

SCHWARTZENBURG: That’s interesting.

CLEARY: Pardon?

SCHWARTZENBURG: I remember it, but I can’t place it.

CLEARY: It was where the burger — there was the all-night — there in the wedge where Shepherd and Greenbriar separate, there was a Der Wienerschnitzel right there in the separation between the two, and that’s where I spent my first day and a half in Houston, at the Der Wienerschnitzel that was just barely above water, just barely. Der Wienerschnitzels, you couldn’t go inside to eat, so you were trapped underneath their awning. Those were the days.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Back to San Francisco, how long were you there?
CLEARY: I moved there for just over a year and a half and then moved from there to Hilo, Hawaii.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What was happening in San Francisco? Did you live in The Castro? Did you go to The Castro?

CLEARY: I’d like to say I lived there, but I really stayed there. I lived in two different places on Bush Street. I lived on Diamond Street, at 19th and Diamond. I was all the way up the hill, and it was a long walk up the hill, I remember that, and cold and wet and nasty, and stayed there. A friend from St. Louis had introduced me to the place he was, and stayed with him and his landlord.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did you go to any of the bars?

CLEARY: Yeah, I was a pool player, and I was on Deluxe’s pool team. Deluxe was over on Clayton Street at Haight. Haight and Clayton, yeah. Got my leather biker’s jacket that I still have. I bought it used back then. It still fits very well. Lived there for about a year and half, and then —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Were there bathhouses that were active?

CLEARY: Yeah, there were, south of Market Street. I wasn’t really much a bathhouse kind, though. I was more of a bar kind of guy. It seems like I hung out mostly at a place on Haight Street, you know, the Deluxe, which was the pool place that I played for, and the Round Up, south of Market. Hamburger Mary’s was there. Though I didn’t know Jerry Jones, the owner of Mary’s in San Francisco, when I lived there, I ended up becoming his chauffeur in Honolulu.

There were two of us, Spike and I, and we ended up becoming Trixie’s [Jerry Jones] driver and doormen. We’d pick up his guests and show them around Oahu, and we were Trixie’s delights. I was dark-haired and moustache and
swarthy, and Spike was blonde-haired and clean-cut, and we’d basically wear short shorts, cutoff short shorts with our torn-sleeve Hamburger Mary’s T-shirts. We were young and pretty and cute, and Trixie was so good to me and us. When I was in Honolulu a few years ago, Spike’s art was very popular, and he was still hanging out there.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Why did you move to Honolulu?

CLEARY: Well, we moved to Hilo first, because we were moving to Hawaii, and I didn’t realize that it was the rural area that it was. My friend that I was traveling with, we’d been friends for many years, and I didn’t realize that he was putting me into the country so far away that there wouldn’t be any gay people around. That’s where I learned to grow anthuriums. I didn’t know at the time that I was growing these anthuriums that I was actually the guard dog for a pot facility. They were growing marijuana, and I was the guard dog up front growing anthuriums.

SCHWARTZENBURG: I see. The decoy. “There’s nothing going on back here.”

CLEARY: “Ignore what’s going on behind the fence.” I was their decoy, and it never dawned on me that that’s what was really happening. I just thought I was growing anthuriums. We’d send them off to Italy. They’d have to be packaged a particular way, and I had no idea that we were sending out all this pot, too, but we had the agricultural stickers on the flowers, and we’d seal them that way, and we’d send them away. We were sending six to 12 boxes of anthuriums off every
SCHWARTZENBURG: I bet you were.

CLEARY: Off to Italy, off to Italy, and never knew what I was packing there.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How long were you there, and then why did you leave?

CLEARY: We moved to Hilo, because it was moving to Hawaii from San Francisco’s cold nastiness and because it just seemed like something cool to do, and I had no idea that Hilo, Hawaii, was such a sleepy little town, at that point. We were very, very broke there. We had a car that got terrible fuel economy, and everything was a long drive.

I wrote my mother, saying how broke we were there, and said it was costing me $5 a day to eat and I didn’t know how I would cope, and she mailed me $5. She gave me one more day to live. That was my support system at that point. $5, I was so insulted, I ate everything of the $5 as soon as I got it. We were eating at Dairy Queen every day.

SCHWARTZENBURG: That’s a meager existence.

CLEARY: It was very meager.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Somebody was making money on all those anthuriums. It just wasn’t trickling down.

CLEARY: No, it wasn’t trickling down at all. The Italian man who owned the place, he and his Polynesian wife were good natured to me. I mean, I learned how to grade anthuriums. At one point I could hold six dozen anthuriums in one hand. They
taught me how to hold them. I just had no idea I was the guard dog, though. It wasn’t for many years until I found out that that’s what they had been doing the whole time.

We moved to Hilo. I moved there because I thought it would be warm and nice, and he moved there because he could trap me away from all the rest of the people on Earth. We lived in a place called Pacific Palisades, and we were off of the electric grid. There was a generator that we had to start when we got home at night, and we lived on the water catchment. The mosquitoes were absolutely horrendous because everybody was living on a big bucket of water each. It was interesting to live out like that. I hadn’t done it before. I was glad when we did move to town and had electricity. We moved to the pool house of a house overlooking Hilo Bay, and it was on about a 300-foot cliff. It was absolutely gorgeous and breathtaking, and there was no fence at the end of the property. You’d go out to the end, and it was a 300-foot drop down into the rocks and into the water.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You’re on your own.

CLEARY: I was afraid of heights, but boy, it was beautiful. There were a couple of times we were there that it was stormy, and you could feel the waves hitting the bottom of the cliffs that we were on. It was weird to hear and feel, but it was great sleeping. Didn’t need screens at that place, because it was right there where the winds came in. It was absolutely beautiful.

I’ve looked at maps since then. We were one of 15 houses on this little, private cul-de-sac that is still there, but it was just enough land for just a few houses to be down off of the highway. It was absolutely gorgeous. I wish I had
taken pictures when I was there. I wish I had taken pictures of so much, you know, because you can remember it, but you can’t describe the true beauty of it. It’s impossible to really tell somebody how it felt to feel the waves thunder against the bottom of the cliff and to feel that as it would cascade away from Hilo Bay. Great sleeping, though. I mean, the land had a heartbeat, I guess because of the waves, that you could feel through the cliff. You could feel the entire wave hitting, but it felt secure. It didn’t feel like it was going to fall in.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Right, you were still 300 feet up, so that’s a pretty impressive wave to feel it so far up.

CLEARY: It was a cliff, and there was no beach area underneath. It was very close to where they had an earthquake, I think in 1958, where it took a whole grade school off of an island and killed everybody, but I was on top of the cliff. The grade school was down low, and the wave just came in. There was no place for the wave to go other than against the rocks.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Almost like a tsunami caused by —

CLEARY: It was a tsunami. I believe it was 1958 that they had the tsunami there. They used to have a railroad going through Hilo that it knocked out the railroad. It did a lot of devastation. When I was living there in the late 1970s, it was still destroyed from that tidal wave, as much of the sleepy little town of Hilo was. There were blocks and blocks that they had to have had buildings, that were no longer with buildings, and that was 20 years after their tsunami.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Tell me about going to Honolulu. Did you go by yourself, or did you also go with this —

CLEARY: With my traveling partner. I was leaving him any which way, and we moved
to Honolulu in his hope of being able to hang onto me. It lasted for a short while, but he saw me as the boy from the other side of the tracks; that I was the reward. Though I didn’t want him physically, he had decided that I was the only one for him, and it made it less than comfortable.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Was it abusive in a way, would you say?

CLEARY: Yeah, there was some abuse. In fact, when he left Honolulu, I walked into the apartment that he and I had had on Green Street, walked in and every single item in the apartment was gone except for the phone cord. He had given or sold everything. All my clothes, everything was gone.

I knew where his best friend lived, and I went there, and I found my Toyota station wagon that he had forged the signature on the title and given her the car. Somehow it was buried by three cars in the driveway, and there wasn’t enough room to pull it out, but I pulled it out.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Anyway you could.

CLEARY: Yeah, just kind of closed my eyes and backed it out fast, but missed the car and the house when I came out and did — I put donuts in her front yard before I left.

Fortunately for me, he left the tailgate unlocked, but the rest of the car was locked, and as I got in, I didn’t have keys to the car, and I climbed all the way up to the driver’s seat. As I was sitting there trying to figure out what I’d do next, there was a screwdriver in the console, and I stuck the screwdriver into the ignition cylinder and hit it hard enough that it broke the ignition. I was able to start it with the screwdriver, and that’s how I stole my car back.

I restarted life again at that point with my speakers that I’ve had since high
school, that pair [indicating]; and a telescope that I sold in Honolulu; a stained
glass windows that had been gifted to me. It got broken, but it was in the car. So
I restarted life with a telescope, a stained glass window, and that pair speakers,
and nothing else. It was all gone.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Did you still have the apartment?

CLEARY: No. He had stolen the rent on rent day. He had stolen my paycheck on rent
day, and he’d gone to several different Bank of Hawaiis and hit each one for $350
for the ATM machines. When they were first
starting out, he’d realized, he’d figured out that he
could hit several machines very, very quickly, and
they wouldn’t register to each other yet, and he got
six ATM’s for $350 each. They were very close to
each other, on the day he took my $400 paycheck
that was going to cover rent, and he wrote himself
an airplane ticket. He worked for a travel
company. It was a first-class, one-way ticket to
New York City from Honolulu. It was like a $3,000
ticket or something back then, but the owner of the travel company knew that
there was no way that she could hold me to pay for the ticket. When I went to
Bank of Hawaii and found I was cleaned out, I went to the manager to complain
that I was cleaned out, and because it was a joint account —

SCHWARTZENBURG: There was no recourse?

CLEARY: Well, the bank manager threatened prosecution. I was naïve to the point, but
I went ahead and paid it all back, but he told me if I didn’t pay it back, he’d keep
me from ever leaving the island. He’d have me arrested and that I’d never be able to leave the island. So I faithfully paid it off. It took me almost two years to pay off the debt.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Because he took more than what was in the account?

CLEARY: Yeah, he got all these bank machines for $350, and we had $400 in the account, in our joint account, and I think he got us for $2,200 or $2,300, and my car. I was devastated, I mean.

SCHWARTZENBURG: How do you start over after that?

CLEARY: Well, you’re 3,000 miles from the closest other land farm, so I had no choice. He had introduced me to a guy who lived a quarter block away from the house, and that was the only person I knew in Honolulu. I went across the street and told him what had happened, and he let me live with him.

Because of who Elvis Presley was, with Aloha Stadium and the Arizona War Memorial — Clay had been very, very strong with the Navy. And Elvis — do you know the story of Aloha Stadium and Elvis Presley and —

SCHWARTZENBURG: No.

CLEARY: There was no Arizona Memorial in Hawaii when Elvis moved there. All that there was, was the dripping of oil up to the surface from the ship. Elvis was the first performer at Aloha Stadium, and he gave the gate to the Navy to build a memorial for the Arizona. It was Elvis’ first gate at Aloha Stadium that paid for the Arizona Memorial to be built. The military all really loved and respected Elvis, and the Navy especially.

I wasn’t an Elvis fan before then, but after living with Clay for a couple of years — and Clay used to put stacks of Elvis Presley albums on. I think his
turntable held nine records, and he’d play those records over and over, and back to back. Every time I walked in the house, Elvis was playing.

All I know about the whole thing now is, Elvis had such a voice. I’m now a big Elvis fan because of Clay Medler and the Arizona Memorial and Aloha Stadium’s gate to get in.

SCHWARTZENBURG: That’s an incredible story.

CLEARY: I didn’t realize that Elvis was the patriot he was until I lived with Clay.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Were you and Clay friends or lovers?

CLEARY: I think Clay might have been lovers with my ex. I don’t know if they did or not. Clay took me on, and he was living in his little two-room house. There was the living room, the bathroom, and the bedroom. I got the bedroom, and Clay let me live there. I think it was like $120 a month I paid. It was a place that was inalienably mine. My first purchase that was ever something that I bought for myself — you know, it wasn’t a joint purchase or anything — was a clock radio so I could make it to work on time.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Where did you work?

CLEARY: A place called Stone Free Water Bedrooms, at 404 Piikoi, Home of the Sandman. Rick Gray was the owner, and he was “such a nice guy.” I was a waterbed installer there, and I begged him to let me be a salesman. He didn’t see it that way. He gave me a test of some kind; that he said that I wouldn't ever be a salesman. Well, I ended up selling him six trucks at some point later.

SCHWARTZENBURG: When you worked for BMW?

CLEARY: No. That was Aloha Chevrolet.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Oh, okay. Couldn’t sell, right?
CLEARY: Yeah, couldn’t sell, but I sold him six trucks. The commercials were just a riot.

SCHWARTZENBURG: So you were there when the [HIV] test came out. Were you aware of anybody being sick, or were you having any symptoms? What was going on?

[END OF AUDIO PART 2]

CLEARY: I didn’t have any symptoms. The first person that I knew that died of AIDS had a little card-shop stand in Waikiki, and somehow as a community we all came together to buy something, to buy out the shop, buy his inventory out of the shop so that his boyfriend could move on. This is the card that I got [displaying]. I didn’t have very much money, but everybody went and bought just something to buy out their inventory so he could go on. That was the first person I knew who died of AIDS. I’m not sure of his name anymore.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Were you seeing a lot of the disease at that time, or was it still early?

CLEARY: Well, it was early in the disease. Nobody watched television in Hawaii. We listened to records rather than the radio. That was when cassette tapes were the medium. I really didn’t become HIV aware until many years after I had tested for it and came out positive. I wasn’t aware of how devastating it was or how foolish I was to have unprotected sex at that point without telling my partners that I was positive. I just was in complete denial and didn’t understand the disease.

There are way too many people who became positive because I didn’t tell them, and I had years and years of guilt from that. But at the same time, they had to be responsible for themselves, too. I should have been more forthright with it.
I never lied to people, saying I was negative. I just would ignore the idea.

I know people nowadays who say that they don’t know if they’re positive or negative. I know better, because they go to bed with people who are positive. They play the game of, “Oh, I don’t know.”

“Well, shouldn’t you know?”

I didn’t realize how devastating the disease was because I didn’t die from it the way so many did right away back when Kaposi’s sarcoma was first becoming prevalent. Well, it had been prevalent for a while. We all had each other’s backs that if you got KS, I’d help euthanize you, or you’d help euthanize me, and we all had buddy system that if we got KS, yeah, I’d help kill you, or you could help kill me. I guess it wasn’t until the year 2000, when they finally got HIV under control to a degree, you know, so I spent the 1990s with it not under control at all and watching people go.

One weekend in 1992, it was in May, I had had 13 friends that year to date in May, and that particular weekend, I had funerals in three states. I drove to all three of the funerals over that weekend. It forced me to have a nervous breakdown, just that I couldn’t cope. I think I had a couple of nervous breakdowns over the years from just not being able to cope with so much death and just realizing that me being alive was an incredible gift; that so many didn’t make it.

I mean, at one point, I was just doing the math that if you were to put me, with everybody I knew who had perished to the disease, in a stadium, I’d look like the only person there, and the stadium would be full of all those spirits and souls. It was devastating to be so alone.
My dad and I at one point were talking about how when you get old, you expect your friends to die, but you never expect that you and your friends won’t outlive your parents.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Or that you knew more people who have died than they do.

CLEARY: Yeah, and that there’s a certain point in your life when you realize that you’ve known more people, you’ve met more people, you’ve known more people than you’ll ever know in the rest of your life.

SCHWARTZENBURG: When you were having these spoken or unspoken understandings about assisted suicide, what did that look like and how did that feel?

CLEARY: I had a great love, his name’s Carl, and Carl helped to euthanize two or three of his friends. Well, the third person that he euthanized was his best friend Michael somebody-or-other. About two weeks after he euthanized Michael, that’s when they announced that acyclovir would keep you from getting Kaposi’s sarcoma, and Carl had such tremendous guilt from it, and Carl ended up committing suicide himself because of the desperation of killing his best friend.

SCHWARTZENBURG: That can’t feel good.

CLEARY: Carl has always been the only one I’ve ever loved that way. He had the same brown spot in his left eye that I have in my right. We called ourselves bookends. He was my great love, and he committed suicide four years into our relationship, and I’ve never considered anyone else ever since. It wasn’t even a matter of consideration with him. It was just, I met him and I was in love. It just happens. You can’t look for love. It’s just all at once there, and you have no idea how it came to be.
In 1988, I was at a Halloween party, and two radio psychics — the party had gotten to be quite notorious because it was the old groundskeeper house for a 10,000-acre cemetery in St. Louis, Valhalla Cemetery. We went to their Halloween party, and over the years of the Halloween party there, we’d do torches and we’d run through the graveyard at midnight, screaming. There was no fence between us and the graveyard. We were on the inside of the fence, in the graveyard area, and we’d just run through the graveyard. At midnight, you could see us running through the graveyard with torches, and it was spectacular.

Well, the parties had gotten pretty, pretty flamboyant, and the one in 1988, when I got to the party, my friend, the host, Randy, had told me that the radio psychics were there and who they were.

Well, when I walked in the door, the two psychics, who were sitting on opposite sides of a large living room, both made eye contact with me when I walked in. It was like near-instant. A few minutes later, the younger one, the girl — well, they were both girls — the girl came up to me and told me that she and her partner had both had a really strong psychic impression when I walked in the door, and for like $20 they’d tell me my future.

I laughed and I said I, too, was a psychic because I knew they’d be there, and I didn’t bring my wallet.

Over the course of the night, I watched, and they never made eye contact with anybody when they were coming in again, that way.

About 1:15, 1:30, they came up to me, and they were pretty blottoed, and they told me that they’d been very, very successful that night and that they both agreed that they had seen my future much more clearly than they’d seen anyone
else’s in the entire night; that they just knew my future.

I said, “Oh, please, please, tell me, tell me.”

I was living in St. Louis, and they said that though I wasn’t planning it now, in a few years, I’d move to a major Southern city for health reasons, and I’d meet somebody, and I’d fall in love, true love.

I said, “Wow.” I scoffed that that was just so wonderful, and how would I know?

They both quizzically looked at each other. They sat and looked at each other for just a second, and in unison, they said that I’d look him square in the eye and see a sign. That was in 1988.

In January of 1994, I met Carl. We met at the Ripcord, and we had sex all night, and it was great sex, and we opened the blind, and when we looked each other square in the eye, he had my miracle mark. I knew instantly that that prophecy, that forgotten prophecy, was true. I met my Carl beast. He was unhappily living only 175 feet from my home, and I gave him the key that very day. I loved him so, and he loved everything about life but himself. He had taken the life of a friend, and the guilt was overwhelming for him.

He ended up doing himself in because of the tremendous guilt he felt. It devastated my life. It changed my life. We met in 1996, and he did his nasty deed in 2000, and I’ve never recoupled in any way since then because I had my
love and nobody could ever replace my Carl beast. Boy, I was so in love.

You hear about people finishing each other’s sentences.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Yes.

CLEARY: We’d start them.

SCHWARTZENBURG: That’s pretty close.

CLEARY: He was such a good guy, and he had his own health roller-coaster.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Was he positive?

CLEARY: Yeah. The dog that he and I had raised and trained was — I still miss Carl, and I always will, and I just feel so blessed that I actually met somebody who is that love of my life, because so many people go through life without knowing love, and I absolutely knew love and know love, and with no love. I’m so blessed because I knew that love with Carl, and though it was only for a few years and many years ago, it’s impossible to replace. I’m just so blessed that I had that chance.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Do you know, have an idea, of how you survived?

CLEARY: I don’t have any idea what separated me from other people, with surviving. I think that it’s been sharing joy. I’ve done my best to share my joy for life with others, and I’ve tried not to be bitter in any way toward life, and I believe that that’s a huge, huge part of me being here, is that finding the joy that I have and sharing the joy that I have.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Attitude?

CLEARY: It’s funny, it doesn’t feel joyful. Yeah, it’s a matter of attitude. It’s that it didn’t stop me then, and it’s not going to stop me now. I wrote the story of Carl and me when he passed on, and it was very therapeutic. In fact, it’s funny, but I
haven’t written very much in my life. When I lost the writing for two years, I felt
absolutely devastated that I had lost Carl again. I found it just a month or so ago,
after having moved here from the other house. I had lost it for almost three years,
and it turned up. It’s not like having him around, but it’s like being able to keep a
part of him.

Here, I want to show you.

[BRIEF PAUSE]

[END OF AUDIO PART 3]

CLEARY [continuing]: When he committed suicide, I went to the funeral home where
he was, and I didn’t know at that point that he had had one of my love letters in
his hand when he committed suicide. He hung himself in a sitting position, which
I didn’t know you could do, but he did. I found out at that point that it was one of
my love letters, and I had sent him several over the years and didn’t know which
one that it was, but they were all returned to me.

I said, “Carl, how will I know?”

I went through the letters, and when I got to this letter, I felt his hand on
mine. That’s the only time I’ve ever felt something from another —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Dimension?

CLEARY: Dimension, yeah.

It was [reading document], “Oh, my dearest,

“How I miss you. How I long your laugh. I search your smile. I miss
your touch. I love you so. Solely, you’re in every way for me the perfect mate.
What a pleasure you are, a treat, a truly honorable man, one who is worthy.
You’re my love. I see only you. What a mate. Bookends, you and me. Trust
me, Carl, this is the ride of our lives. We need to live together in harmony and peace. Harmony with ourselves, with each other. Harmony with all those around us, living or not. You’re loved, and that’s an absolute. You know I’m a man of my word, and I give you my word I will love you ’til the day I pass. I know that with true love, anything is possible, including you and me, ’til death do us part. It could be either of us. Even then, we’re still a part of each other, but we could go together, hopefully after a long and splendid life. I want fourscore and 10. That gives us 51 years. Let’s spend the next 50 years or so. Let’s live our lives together. Let’s live our lives together now. Can you imagine you and me our parents’ age, celebrating our 44th anniversary together? You and me, bookends ’til death do us be. Happy, healthy, loving, caring, feeling, loving, being whole, wholly in love, sharing all, wisdom and woe, health, wisdom, and happiness. Health to live a long life, wisdom to appreciate it, and happiness because we’ve had a great time. Health, wisdom, and happiness equals prosperity of mind, soul, and spirit. I love you. Please understand we deserve each other. We’ll have a splendid life together and for a long time. I love you. You love me. Oh, how happy we can be. Just let me in. I love you. I’ll never betray you. I may not be perfect, but I’m perfect for you. Our love is without end. Come live life with me. We’ve got the world by the tail. Let’s go. I’m your true love. Honey, do be sweet to me, melon. Love you now and always.

“Your best, Dan.”

So he had this in his hands when he hung himself.

SCHWARTZENBURG: What was the occasion that you wrote that?

CLEARY: He would be halfway at home for a while, and then he needed to be
independent. He had several different rented rooms a few blocks from our home
over our time together, and he’d move out but move back in.

SCHWARTZENBURG: He needed space.

CLEARY: He just needed space, yeah. So that was the occasion I wrote it, but I wrote a
bunch of love letters to him that were —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Those are vows. Those are like marriage vows.

CLEARY: [Crying] I didn’t think that, but I was married to him. I’m still married to
him.

[Reading document] “How can it be? How can it be that a seven-year-old
boy be responsible when he and his older sisters witnessed their father’s
philandering at the local tavern? How can it be this 11-year-old boy be
responsible for showing his mother as she stood just outside her husband’s
mistress’ house, that she, too, could hear? How can it be the fault of a 12-year-
old boy when an unhappy 20-year marriage ends in divorce? How can it be the
fault of the six-year-old to hear his mother’s yelling at her husband that he’d only
used her as a depository to pass his name to the next millennium? Naming the
first daughter Carl her father Carl in ’52, the second, ’54, is a rough pregnancy.
How can it be this beautiful boy Carl, born in ’58, has been so bad? He and his
sisters played audience to an awful, terrible war between their parents, who would
leave both the parents battered, bloody, and then passionate. How can it be the
fault of this beautiful baby driving around being shown as the trophy that his
father had made with no help from anyone, including Joan? How can it be the
fault? How can it be this beautiful eight-year-old whose only escape was a love
for reading and his formal education by the age of 13? How can it be that the
14-and-a-half-year-old runaway joyriding with a friend from D.C. to Florida get caught in a hot car in Georgia and be released by a police officer for sexual favor? How can it be that this 14-year-old get a fake ID that allowed him to work at a gay bar? How can it be the fault of a 15-and-a-half-year-old to return home and be shunned because he was a faggot? How can it be the fault of a 15-and-a-half-year-old to find his father dead at the age of 41 by self-inflicted gunshot in a rented room close to the family home? How can it be the fault of the 16-year-old to be locked up by the state until his 18th birthday? How can it be the fault when a 19-year-old falls in love with a physically abusive cop? How can it be the fault of a 20-year-old boy when his abusive boyfriend hangs himself in jail while awaiting trial for robbery? How can it be that this beautiful boy spend the next 15 years of his life bouncing from one violent relationship to another? How can it be the fault of this brilliant, hardworking, 33-year-old man to be disabled by a torturous disease? How can it be the fault of this 29- and 30-something-year-old boy to help euthanize several friends because of a terrible plague? How can it be the fault of a 41-year-old after an eight-year health roller-coaster ride of failing health to murder himself?"

[Reading document] “I met Carl when he was 37, and having been a discarded child and forced to drop out of high school because my parents wouldn’t cope, I felt I understood. Having tested positive in ’83 and continued to lose hundreds of friends over the last 17 years, I felt I understood. Having my own health roller-coaster for the last decade-plus, I felt I understood. In 1988 I was at a Halloween party that two radio psychics had invited themselves to. I knew that they were to be there and was told who they were before entering. As I
entered, both looked up from their sessions from across the large room and made eye contact. A few minutes later, one of the two approached me and told me that they had shared the same psychic impression when I came in and for only $20 they would tell me my future. I told them that I, too, was psychic because I left my wallet in the car. I watched the psychics for most of the night, and they never seemed to make eye contact with anyone again that way. Toward the end of the party, the pair approached, saying they had made plenty of money and because they had both seen my future so clearly, they felt compelled. They told me that in a few years, I’d move to a major Southern city due to health problems. My oldest brother and his wife were both doctors in Houston, and at that time I was still hiding the fact that I had HIV, and that I would meet somebody and fall in love, true love, absolute love. I said that was magnificent. How would I know? They looked at each other for just a second and in unison answered that I’d look him square in the eye and see a sign. The party had been too dark to see the spot in my right eye. 1994, I moved to Houston, knowing of my failing health and believing that my brother would make sure I was cared for. In January of ’96, I met Carl. It was fabulous. He made me laugh when I hadn’t laughed in a long time. Knowing we were both HIV positive, we went home and spent 17 hours having passionate love and sex, and then I saw his left eye for the first time. I knew instantly that the long-forgotten prophecy was true. I had met my Carl beast. He had my spot. I found he was unhappily living 175 feet from my house. I gave him a key that very day. Over the last four years, I got to know Carl better than anyone had ever cared to. He let me in. I helped him to have his first nonviolent relationship, his first adult relationship. He moved in and out of our
home six times over the course of our years together. He told me that the happiest he had ever been was the four and a half years he had lived in a particular apartment. He told me that if he could live there again, he’d be happy the rest of his life. I bought the house with its apartments. I thought it was a small price to pay for someone’s eternal happiness. Carl stayed with me the seventh and final time for 10 days. I was sicker than I had been, and with Carl’s great fear for losing me, the only true love he had known since his father’s knee, he left yelling and screaming at me. On New Year’s Day, Carl rang once, but enough for the caller ID. I called him right back. We spoke for about an hour and a half. He was saner than I had ever heard him. Although he’d been telling those around him about suicidal thoughts, he never spoke of suicide to me at that point, but had in the past. He was peaceful, loving, and tender. Four hours later, I was so bothered that I went to his apartment. His neighbor and I got the landlord to open the door, found Carl hung in a sitting position by the dog’s leash, the leash that I had bought against his will because he didn’t want his dog restricted. Carl changed his medical records twice in December, the second time 10 days before he died, so that his previous lover to me would get his things, things that I built and helped build, the dog he and I raised and trained together, the tattered fragments contained by a broken life. When I spoke to those thought to be responsible for his estate, they were going to save a grand by letting the county dispose of his ashes. It was fine for their friend Dave. It wasn’t until I made arrangements for cremation that the estate pursued his ashes. Carl and I had argued that I shared and felt his pain. He said that I did not and could not. Carl, I now understand that when you find the person that you love most taken by his
own hand and believing yourself responsible, it absolutely shreds your heart. All the years I blindly said that I shared and felt your pain, I was wrong. Even as I sit, I cannot fathom what it must have done to your 15-and-a-half-year-old life when you found your father. It would have been tough on a boy, especially when you or those around you hold you accountable and then don’t allow you the dignity and honor sharing the grief. I have found more grief in my life over the last few weeks than I’ve ever known, and all I can think is, I still have little idea how bad you hurt. The writhing in pain I saw you do and thought melodramatic, I now duplicate. Carl and I both agreed the reason we were both on this Earth was to find true love. We did. In the end, Carl refused to believe himself capable of being loved because everything about his life fit himself. I looked forward to a lifetime of Carl’s moving in and out. It was fine. Just to be able to share the joys we did certainly outweighed the sorrows. I was wrongly convinced that I could make him happy. No one can make someone else happy. I did help him through his many pains and much of his agony before passing. I only hope that it doesn’t devastate my adult brain the way it did his. He spent his entire lifetime telling himself and allowing his estranged sister and deceased mother to feel the guilt of his father’s self-mutilation. Pain is a price paid only by living. So it is that you are free. I love only you, Carl, and I always have and I always will.

“See you soon, Dan.”

SCHWARTZENBURG: It must have been painful to write.

CLEARY: It was so painful. It was about 12 years after he had done his nasty deed that I was able to find the joy because I didn’t remember his birthday. I didn’t spend the day thinking about his birthday. New Year’s Day is awful hard to not
recognize as an anniversary, but it was 12 years before I missed his birthday, and it was just so joyful to know that I’d not spent a day anguished with his death.

SCHWARTZENBURG: When you have that much grief, sometimes you need that bit of healing. It’s not that you forget.

CLEARY: I don’t know that I’ll ever forget. I don’t think I will. But to just not remember, it was so wonderful to not remember, and it gave me hope that I might live some, but I don’t foresee that. I don’t think I’ll ever live without loving Carl. I just feel so blessed that I did find somebody that I had that true love experience with because so many people go through life and don’t know what true love is and I was able to share it and find it with someone.

SCHWARTZENBURG: In that, you feel lucky.

CLEARY: I was so lucky, so lucky. I’d love to be able to say that I’d give it up. I don’t know. I know I’m lucky to have had it. Would I have been luckier to not have it? No. I wouldn’t be as lonely.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Can’t miss what you never had?

CLEARY: Exactly, exactly. So many gay people go through life with the idea that they’ve known that kind of true love, and then I don’t think that they really know what true love is, quite often. I’m sure that’s true of straight people, too.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You don’t know it until it hits you square in the eye, right?

CLEARY: Literally, yeah. I’m just so blessed that I had that time.

SCHWARTZENBURG: You recently had a health scare. What happened?

CLEARY: I’ve had many health scares. My health is not what it used to be. I’m not even sure which health scare you’re speaking of.

SCHWARTZENBURG: When you were in the ICU and you thought that someone had
maybe —

CLEARY: That I’d been poisoned?

SCHWARTZENBURG: Uh-huh.

CLEARY: Yeah, I spent three and a half weeks in intensive care, and I’m pretty certain that I was poisoned. A bottle of horse tranquilizer that I — a veterinarian had left it here, and I was going to give it back to him, and I got shot up with it. I got shot up with about an eighth of the bottle. In reading about it afterwards, you can’t give it to livestock because they’ll pass it on to whoever eats it, and here I got shot up with it, and I ended up losing my ability to walk, and [use] silverware. When I came out of intensive care, I wasn’t able to lift either of my legs or my right arm. I was able to lift my left arm about four inches off the bed, and that was the full range of my movements. From then, I spent the next four and a half months in rehab, learning how to walk and do silverware again and learning to regain my balance.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Why would somebody give you that medicine? How did that happen?

CLEARY: I think he euthanized his mother, as well, and it’s kind of this complex of he feels he’s helping and that they’re doing the right thing and it’s not going quick enough.

SCHWARTZENBURG: To alleviate suffering?

CLEARY: Yeah, and I had talked about Carl euthanizing friends, and two days later is when this happened to me, and I think he tried to euthanize me. I can’t prove it, but I had the bottle for a little while, and he was the only one who had access to the bottle, and it wasn’t until after I had gotten out of the hospital that we found
the bottle with that bunch out of it, and I was dumbfounded. It’s the only thing that makes sense with what happened to the liquid that was in the bottle.

He took off, and I haven’t spoken with him since. I think he thinks he’s Joan of Arc or something and trying to save people. Not Joan of Arc. What’s the Joan that was the medical Joan? Was it Joan of Arc?

SCHWARTZENBURG: I’m not sure. Florence Nightingale?

CLEARY: Well, yeah, Joan of Arc was the French —

SCHWARTZENBURG: Crusader.

CLEARY: The crusader. I believe he did it to save me. I don’t know.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Would you say during that time that you had a near-death experience?

CLEARY: Oh, I was so close to death, it was ridiculous. I was hallucinating so badly for the three and a half weeks I was in intensive care, I was introducing people to my ancestors. The people who were in the room visiting, I’d introduce them to my Great-Great-Grandfather so-and-so, and I didn’t know their names, but I knew they were there, and people thought I was half crazy because I was introducing them to people.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Not very oriented, right.

CLEARY: Here’s where I got shot, right here [indicating], and it collapsed these veins going down to these two fingers, and I’m still paralyzed mostly in them.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Nerve damage.

CLEARY: Yeah. No, I didn’t ask him to do it, but yeah, I’m still paralyzed in those two fingers. My nails grow funny now. No, I don’t know why he did it. I was in bed when he did it. I was asleep, I guess, when it happened, but when I woke up, I
spent the next two days up in my room with no ability to get out of bed, and calling out to people. Whenever I’d hear voices down here, I’d call out, and finally I was taken to the hospital.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Terrifying.

CLEARY: I have a recording of me recording my last will and testament in that time period between when I was hit and when I ended up in the hospital, and I was a mess. I was barely audible. It makes me cry to just play the tape, just to see it, because I didn’t know. I don’t remember making the tape, but I made it so that somehow somebody would know.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Your wishes.

CLEARY: Yeah. I’ve been lucky, but I haven’t had my wishes. I wish Carl were still here. If we do all meet up again afterwards, then I’m going to find the same 40-year-old Carl that I left, as a much older man. I just know that I’ll be glad to see him, and it will be like old home week again or whatever.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Is there anything else that you’d like to share?

CLEARY: Just I thank God how blessed I’ve been. In the words of Kathy Bates from *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean,* she said, “I’m happy, goddamn it. I’m happy.” I’ve been blessed, and I am happy. I could be happier, I guess. I don’t think I could be more blessed than I’ve been because I’ve known such good people, found such joy and lived so much longer than I ever thought I would. I’ve been HIV positive for 42 years. I don’t know if there are a lot of 42-year survivors.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Not many.

CLEARY: What has allowed me to be here and others not? I have no idea. I only hope
I’m worthy. I don’t know what makes us worthy. I thank you for the opportunity to be able to share my small stories.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Thank you.

CLEARY: It’s been a pleasure and an honor, and I hope that this oral history will be helpful to people who are studying the gay 1970s and 1980s and the AIDS 1980s and 1990s. I don’t know that it will help anybody do anything but maybe bring a tear and a smile, and not necessarily in that order; hopefully more smiles than tears.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Yes.

CLEARY: I do thank you for the opportunity to tell my story. I’m not even sure what story I told. It’s probably confused sounding, but I’m just so lucky to have been able to spend the last 42 years living.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Yes.

CLEARY: Living. So many didn’t. So many haven’t.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Yeah, and you’re telling the story that they weren’t able to.

CLEARY: There are still a few of us out there that have been through it for all these years. It’s my story that way, in telling how I’ve been able to, or how blessed I’ve been, but I think it’s just a story of humanity, of the ups and downs of having to deal with life and being fortunate enough and blessed enough to be able to. I don’t see it as a victory dance; maybe a blessed dance. I’ve been very lucky, Lynn. Thank you.

SCHWARTZENBURG: Thank you.

CLEARY: I appreciate it.

[END OF AUDIO PART 4]
[INTERVIEW CONCLUDED]

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