



Parting Glances NGLTF: What's past is prologue!

by Charles Alexander

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This week's National Gay and Lesbian Task Force 20th Annual Conference takes place in the landmark Renaissance Center. 2000-plus participants from all over the United States are attending (and, one suspects, getting gaily and navigationally lost inside.)

Had someone told me 50 years ago that the City of Detroit (our politically beleaguered Mayor Kilpatrick included) would be warm welcoming an organization like NGLTF, I would have said, Mary, get real. You're living in the twilight zone. No way!

In the late-50s there weren't any nationwide advocacy groups. No newspapers like Between The Lines. No TV programs like "In the Life." Nada. Nothing. Gays and lesbians -- considered a psychologically aberrant, innately suspect, small minority -- lived in the closet at home, at church, at work, and especially in public venues. In fact, the closet as a concept didn't exist.

(Bisexuals, it was said among gays and lesbians, lacked the guts to admit who they honestly were. Crossdressing was forbidden except on Halloween, and Christine Jorgensen made big news for -- whisper, whisper -- "having the, you know, operation.")

Being "out" was being secretive. One shared a same-sex status or attraction only with trusted queer friends. Nicknames were a given. (I was known as Big Al. Big, for tall, by the way.) Survival strategy was passing for straight. Play the game. If need be date. If really need be, get married. (If you can fake it. I couldn't.)

And, for God sake, don't get caught in a raid. Or by entrapment. (Ask me I know about both.) Detroit, as the Arsenal of Democracy, was "the" center for war work, and attracted thousands of World War II workers, soldiers, sailors, WAVEs, and WACs. Gay bars thrived and continued on through succeeding decades. There were several usually crowded clubs in the 1950s, and a couple of notorious restaurants in the city's downtown area where teenagers hung out and learned from gay peers how to cope with a hostile world. It was a viable gay community.

As a native Detroiter -- who was fortunate to acknowledge my queerness in my senior high school year (along with six or seven other Cass Technical High School art students) -- I'm devoting this BTL space to excerpts from previous Parting Glances columns of my teenager recollections. Extending my personal NGLTF welcome to the city, I'll begin with this -- maybe familiar -- summing up: Gay life back then was exciting, varied, nurturing, sophisticated, trashy, unsegregated, segregated, colorful, drab, fulfilling, energetic, dangerous, sheltering, sustaining, fun, wild, crazy, frustrating, boring, exhausting, and damned less expensive. (Beer 50 cents a bottle. Martini, \$1.25. Jail bail, \$25.) Looking back . . .

. . . I was 19 the summer I graduated. Free from studies, living at home, taking time off before job hunting, I was keen to explore the gay scene.

I heard from friends about the infamous Hub Grill, located at Farmer and Bates streets, inconveniently within a short trek (and a lock up) of the 1st Police Precinct Headquarters and Old City Hall. [Actually in walking distance of the Renaissance Center.]

The Hub Grill was a greasy spoon (knife and fork), with large windows, angled on the two street corners. To enter was to be gawked at. Queer! Faggots! Fruits! To stool sit in everybody's sight was thumb-your-nose brazen. "Flamers" -- obvious queens -- never seemed to mind. They thrived on the attention.

"Let's go to the Hub for a bowl of chili and a trick," was our weekend rallying cry. A dollar or two, and our youthful looks, could get us through the night.

Two sisters, Fran and Flo, and a scruffy cook, Uncle Jimmy, held bicarbonate-of-soda court. Fran rarely smiled, and smoked nonstop. Flo, her hair worn in Rosie the Riveter upsweep, was all winks and confidential tease: "Miss Thing, don't you look all Hollywood. You gonna snag husband number five tonight, or is it six?"

I hadn't sat down more than five minutes (far from outside viewing), when a talkative number at my elbow ("she" called "herself" Marshmallow -- decades later transitioning to leather butch) asked, "Are you a Browning King or Queen?" Not knowing what she meant [top or bottom], and wanting to be newcomer polite, I asked, "Is there such a thing as a Browning Prince?" "How about Princess?" she clucked.

A jukebox played six hits for a quarter. My favorite "Secret Love," sung by Doris Day. Each time I heard it I felt myself go romantic: soft in the head and heart for an yet-unidentified shining knight in tight-fitting armor (codpiece optional).

I soon got to know the regulars by face and nickname. (There were a spate of Miss this, Miss that. Names like Little Bobby, Estralita, Taboo, Little Laura Findlove. Butch Bob. Lady Chrysler.) I made friends and, importantly, I realized as a gay teenager I was not alone. My world was much bigger than I thought.

It was custom summer nights to stroll onto the streets to see who paraded in and out of the bars: The 1011, Silver Dollar, Barrel Bar, Palais [dyke hangout], LaRosa's. (I had heard about LaRosa's when I was 15. "It's a queer bar. Fairies go there," confided a buddy one Halloween night when we spotted some men in drag getting into a Checker Cab. If there was one thing I hated as a kid it was being called a fairy.)

I weighed 175 lbs., buff in my penny loafers, was 6' 2", and had a 30-inch Levi's waist. I was told I looked like actor Carleton Carpenter (later gay mystery writer), who starred opposite Debbie Reynolds in a no-brainer B- movie, singing "Abba Dabba Honeymoon."

Standing on the corner during those carefree, adventuresome nights, we underage teenagers flirted and flaunted, hoping to meet someone special -- preferably someone older and reasonably masculine -- when the bars closed. Unfortunately, most nights I had to be home by eleven sharp. Occasionally I would hop into a car cruising the area. Nearsighted in one eye, once I got into the car, if the driver proved to be not my type, I'd say I'd left my wallet behind, take me back, and vanish.

One warm June evening I saw a tall, elegant guy stroll by, wearing Levi's and a white T-shirt like the then, recently mourned, 24-year-old James Dean. "Who's that?" I asked proud, Black-and-bold Miss Bruce, (actually a well-built factory worker) who knew everybody who took to the streets like circling hawks of prey. "That's T.D., 'Tall Dick,'" he said. "He's your kinda man, honey." Miss Bruce made the intros. "T.D., this big bit o'chicken feed likes you," he said and left, leaving me, new kid on the same-sex block, to carry on the small talk. T.D. listened comfortably, smiled alot, and captivated me with his lanky presence. "Got time for coffee?"

Back then if I slept with a guy twice I was "in love," and T.D. soon became my first summer-of-coming-out romance. He was 25, lived in an upper flat with a gay couple, butch Hank and baby-soft Rick, and worked nearby at Highland Park General Hospital as an orderly.

The first night we were together T.D. played "Music For Lovers Only," a monaural LP with Jackie Gleason's easy listening orchestra, and I took on a sentimental glow that kept me lighthearted for days -- only the euphoria soon became flat champagne.

Some time during July, T.D. and I, Hank and Rick went sailing on the Detroit River. There was a soothing breeze, and I sat in the back of the boat, emotionally aglow. I was content as we drifted serenely past Belle Isle and the Seven Sisters factory smokestacks. Screw what the world might think: I was happy to be gay and energetically glad to be alive.

As fall neared T.D. and I saw less of each other. He spent a lot of time with Eleanor, a straight friend his age. They became Ayn Rand Objectivism groupies and planned to move to New York its center. T.D. warned me I shouldn't get 'swoony'. "You're young, Al. Someone will bob along, really worth your time." The usual distancing technique that I, decades later, would use for ending my own misalliances, many because I drank too much.

Our fledgling affair vanished Halloween Night when the streets were cordoned off so that hundreds of "tourists" could watch the parading of drag queens, costumes, glittering show people -- swishing, traipsing, bowing, blowing kisses, to rounds and rounds of straight applause, ooohs and aahs. [In 1968, the year the Tigers won the Baseball World Series, the straights began throwing rocks. The Halloween parade, which had been a decades-long annual event since the late-1940s, was over.]

As I watched from the barricades (trying to pass for straight), T.D. stopped grandly out of the crowd and kissed me neatly on the cheek. I didn't recognize him at first. He was dressed all in feathers and a tapered silk-and-sky-blue sequined gown. Graceful. Lovely to look at. Simply stunning. (I felt totally betrayed. A drag queen! How could he?.)

During Detroit's glory days a half century ago, Washington Boulevard was the setting for exclusive shops and upscale restaurants, stretching sedately from the popular Statler Hotel at Grand Circus Park to the prestigious Sheraton Cadillac on Michigan Avenue.

Both hotel bars catered to a discrete, well-heeled, happy-hour gay, "piss elegant" clientele. Good manners were expected -- no camping it up, no swishy behavior, no untoward touching, no two-shots-and-a-beer buddy-buddying. At the Statler, offenders were handed a succinct note: "Your patronage is not wanted here!"

For those who engaged in the covert pastime of dalliance in the sensual stalls of chance, circumstance, and occasional low-life charity, the nearby Tuller Hotel was notorious, as were the Telenews theater balcony, two Brass Rail Bars (where popular singer Johnny Ray was arrested for soliciting a washroom cop) and Grand Circus Park's busy underground loo. [Renaissance Center restrooms are hidden camera equipped.]

As a teenager all of this was terra incognita, but I learned the lay of the land from word-of-mouth publicity from those who had navigated the watering spots years before me. I did however venture -- daringly -- on my own into the Greyhound Bus Depot to check out noontime comings and goings.

I was cautious. I had been forewarned. "Miss Tillie [vice cops] goes there all the time. Mind your business, child. If you have to pee, just pee. Don't look anybody straight in the eye!" said Miss Bruce. Stories of arrests for merely glancing at a vice officer were many. "It's your word against theirs, Mary. Case closed."

Just behind the Greyhound Bus Depot was another hangout for gay teenagers called Mama's (one diner star rating over the Hub Grill's none). Mama's was owned by the mother of thirty-

something, Butch Jimmy ("BJ"), who had as lovers his share of impressionable teenagers, including, in the early stages of my all-too-willing acquiescence to all things macho, yours truly. Mama -- short, stocky, ruddy, roly-poly faced -- was of ethnic heritage, possibly Hungarian, Latvian, Rumanian. She wore her hair in a tight bun and dressed in basic black (no pearls). She got her sense of humor probably by osmosis from gay kids, greeting regulars with a hearty wave of the hand, yelling "Kud-de-vahs! Kud-de-vahs!" ["Whores! Whores!"]

As a teenager I had no gay-positive role models. I learned how to survive from more-experienced gays and lesbians who on their own learned the ropes by trial and error: encounters with "Miss Tillie," the medical establishment ("Mary, I've got the name of a good gay doctor!"), and queer-hating employers. (The police often reported entrapment gays to their bosses.)

I also came to realize that sensing or knowing a professional, boss, teacher, or professor who was gay could be used to my advantage by letting them know that I too was gay. It was done by looks, hints, "dropping hair pins." Very rarely directly. Gaydar circa 1950s nonetheless.

Unlike today, the general public then knew very little about gays or lesbians. We belonged to what essentially was a secret organization -- the Gay Masons! -- with passwords, special looks, and hand signals. The better gay bars had back entrances. Keep it secret! Survive! Don't get caught! But enjoy yourself!

Yes. It's been a long journey for me. It wasn't always easy. But then again it wasn't that hard either. I've survived, and I like to think I've made something of myself as an artist, a writer, and human being who just happens to be quite gay. Contentedly so. Reasonably happy. Most of the time. That's life. (I gladly do it all over again.)

Come to think of it, life might have been a helluva lot better for me and for others like me if the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force had been around back then to help us out, in both senses of the word.. For today's LGBT teens, NGLTF is a godsend -- in spite of the religious right.