

## My straight friend

*We were by now like family to one another, but Who was a mess the first time we enticed her to a gay bar*

BY LEE LYNCH

I've just moved back to the country again, to a high-ceilinged house heated by wood and recently blessed, on Thanksgiving Day, by a gathering of friends who, like magicians, added the final touches that made the transformation of house to home. Times like these bring my old friend Who to mind.

"Who did this?" I'd ask when there was a mess or a mistake at work.

T H E



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"There you go again," she'd reply, "always blaming me."

In packing for the move, I came across the conch shell and brain coral Who had lugged back from St. Thomas. Who and her husband, that is. She hadn't dared tell him the heavy coral was for me. I was still *persona non grata* to Mr. Who.

This was in the mid-'70s. I was managing convenience markets and was transferred to the store where Who worked, in a small Connecticut city.

"Ruth told me you were queer," confided Who later about my predecessor. "I was scared to death." Then she laughed her hoarse rich laugh. "Until I found out you were a pussycat."

Who, at 35, was a native of that city, which was not any more accustomed to gays than she was. Winning her approval meant everything to the success of the store. She knew everyone and everything in town. She could wring a smile out of the most dour customers, and defuse the nastiest situations with the neighborhood delinquents who, before my arrival, had used the store as base camp.

I'll never know what turned the tide for me. I just ran the store, lived my life and never made a pass at Who.

She was, of course, a civilian, as they used to say on the street. She and Mr. Who had four little whos. Precious, her name for her eldest son, was the apple of her eye. I hired three of the four kids before I was done. As was his habit, Mr. Who came in every morning for his pack of Winstons, and never said a word to me. No smile, no eye contact, just a silent grump. He didn't approve of queers and his fear of us felt menacing to me.

But Who, as the weeks, then months, went by, warmed to our partnership. I think the job came at just the right time in her life. I wasn't the only one Mr. Who grumped at and the kids were marching quickly through adolescence and out of her life. At the store Who was finding a whole world of people and places she'd never dreamed of knowing.

The first breakthrough came with the company Christmas party. Wide-eyed, Who found herself year after year socializing with a predominantly gay crowd. She even came to the company barbecues. Where *none* of us made passes at her.

It didn't hurt that we genuinely liked each other. She taught me how to make a home,

giving me household hints, coaching me on marriage. As much as she learned about gay people, I learned about straights. She was the first woman friend whom I loved without feeling compelled to express myself sexually. She liked my lover and we went to women's softball games together. She thrived around the gay male employees and could out-queen them any day. Beyond that, she was a warm and concerned woman, got involved in our relationship rifts, was all ears for the gay grapevine — and continued to be scared of us lesbians.

I know this because, although we were by now like family to one another, Who was a mess the first time we enticed her to a gay bar.

She had never seen so many of us all at once. She didn't take her coat off that first time, and her smile was almost as hard to unearth as her husband's. She was courageous in her defiance of Mr. Who, of everything she'd been taught about people different from herself, and it worried her to sneak out to a gay bar. But what worried her more immediately was etiquette.

"What do I say if one of them asks me to dance?"

"How about yes? Or no thank you?"

The night reminded me how far I'd come from my first out days when I saw myself as some kind of stomping, lust-breathing monster because that's how lesbians were portrayed. Who, my friend, my mainstay at work, even trusting me with her kids — underneath it all still saw us as monsters.

We went to the bars a time or two after that, but more often settled for my condo. We made banana bread to send to my mother every Christmas. When I was transferred to another store in the same city, and then another, Who transferred with me. I went through the tortures of the damned when I had to leave the job because I knew I'd lose her eventually.

Mr. Who came in my last day and said, "Thanks for all you've done for my family." He even smiled.

Then he accepted a job in southern California, site of his happy-go-lucky Marine days. Though Who loved her home town and had always keep her sanity through her roots, Mr. Who didn't give her a choice. She packed up the kids and followed her man.

They bought a house. She sent pictures of herself, drink in hand, by the pool. The oldest daughter got married and gave Who a grandchild. She came east as often as she could. Each time she showed up on our doorstep unannounced, she'd be more hoarse, more lined, and would drink more, smoke more. When Mr. Who began seeing other women the kids threw him out. There was my beloved straight friend abandoned on the other side of the country far from everything that held meaning for her except her kids. She found a bookkeeping job on the strength of her store experience. She dated.

One night she called, talked about a man she'd gone out with. "And guess where he took me! A gay bar! I can't get away from it," she said with a sad laugh. All her laughter was sad by then.

I moved west too. I'd grown far enough apart from Who that I didn't call her as I passed through California, excited about my new life. A day or two after I reached my own western home the call came from one of the old crowd.

"Who's dead. She killed herself."

This week, I brought my more precious possessions to my new home before the movers came. I placed Who's pink conch shell and the heavy coral, as always, outside my front door, giving thanks for my straight friend. ▼

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