

The key to the gay kingdom

No culture should stand on a liquid base

by Lee Lynch

I was raised in a family which ran the spectrum of attitudes toward alcohol, from a grandma who was probably thrilled by prohibition to people who exhibited varying degrees of addictive behaviors. There's no doubt in my mind that I inherited a proclivity to alcoholism, but I also had role models who might have spared me this suffering. Until my sexuality is factored in.

As a kid I hated to see adults drink. They thought it was fun; I thought their changed behavior was scary and ugly. The worst part was riding in a car with an inebriated driver. I cowered and held on for dear, dear life. I didn't want to act like them and I wouldn't. Never, never, never. Until I was seventeen.

By then I'd spent two years hanging around the capital of gay watering holes. If some curious soul had asked me what lesbians *do* I might have skipped the sex part (I was very shy) and answered, "Drink." Certainly that's what I saw grown lesbians do. And we gay kids aped them. The legal dykes went to the Sea Colony, Googies's, the Swing, or the Music Box, and we, tired of watching them, or cold, or hungry, went to PamPam's ice cream parlor on Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village. There we'd squeeze, unwelcome, into booths, or sit at bar stools and guzzle coffee for lack of chemical fare.

Inside, or fooling around outside, we all worked on how to look gay, posing, getting boisterous and showing off, daring to make out a little and always pretending, self-conscious, to ignore the kids we were trying to impress. Mostly, we knew we were practicing for the real thing, life in the bars.

The first time Suzy and I entertained another lesbian couple we felt obliged to offer them a beer. Oddly brazen, I bought a six-pack when ostensibly shopping for my mother. The adults were away, we had the apartment to ourselves, and I'd just graduated from high school. Adulthood—the real gay world—here I come!

It was an incredibly awkward visit. Of course we knew older dykes got together and socialized, but there was that question again, what did they actually *do*? They drank, right? And with the addition of alcohol to their systems surely the rest came easy. I joined the others when they opened their cans. The evening continued to feel like an audition for gay adulthood. The next time I socialized I didn't stop at one beer. I drank until I felt high. It might not have given me the key to the gay kingdom, but drunk, or passed out, or vomiting in the ladies' room, or making love to someone, anyone—if I was high, who cared?

That's how easy it was for this baby dyke to become a problem drinker. There was more to it, though, on so many levels. For instance the way I felt when I was going to be with gay people. Normally I was in school, my peers apparently straight, my teachers supposedly the same. In the dorm, the cafeteria, at the literary magazine office, everyone but me either was or acted straight. When I got a chance to go "into the city," the excitement would well up in me. I'd be a live wire, tingling with anticipation, a pointing breed, poised toward that moment of arriving in lesbian land: a bar.

The intensity of my anticipation and the exhilaration of arriving in the promised land were



unbearable pleasures to me. Bursting into my real life, I'd feel stripped raw and open to the place, to my own people. I'd feel like I was on fire inside. Fortuitously, I was in exactly the right place to temper that fire and soothe what Radcliffe Hall called "the terrible nerves of the invert."

At the same time, of course, being with strangers in crowded, smokey places totally uncondusive to humanity, yelling to be heard, trying to dance on a tiny floor hidden in a back room—all of this was a letdown. How to make it seem better? Drink more!

Bars were the center of lesbian culture when I was coming out. A strange blessing of capitalism, the gay bar sold bottled dreams to the disenfranchised. My dream was of a place where I could, simply, be me. In the bars, those crowded walk-in closets, I was as near as I could get.

Because I faked them with the help of liquor, I never learned real social skills, still feel like I don't know what social lesbians *do*. When I stopped drinking I found that the only way I could even approach being comfortable in groups was to carry around a glass of ice water, like a password that signaled belonging.

Oh, the velvet city night, with fireworks just over the next rooftop. I loved that time, high on liquor maybe, but also high on being gay, on loving women, on entering The Life. At what point did the alcohol stop enhancing the romance of the gay world and cripple me so that I needed the chemical more than I needed the place to be me?

Probably long before the first beer with my friends. Probably the answer is as deep in my genetic structure as my queerness. It's been over 11 years since I last took a drink, light Jamaican rum having been my final poison of choice. I don't go to bars any more. Drinkers look like the adults I despised as a child, their faces flushed, their eyes unfocused, their personalities turned strident and shallow. Drunkendykes are especially frightening to me because I've been inside the fear that made me drink and because I'm only one drink away from drowning there again.

Like so many of us for whom alcohol is dangerous, I've found a way to get into the gay kingdom without the stuff. No culture should stand on a liquid base. Ours, particularly vulnerable to tidal waves of oppression, least of all. Like my teetotaling grandma at last, I don't let demon rum in my home.

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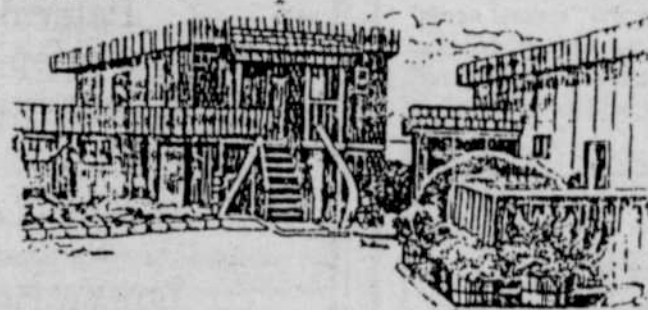


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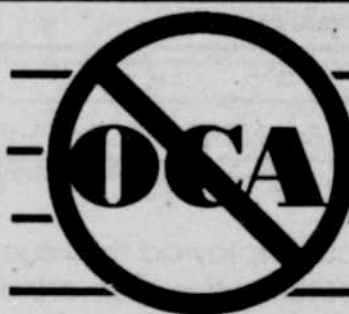
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