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STONEWALL BABY

Looking back

When you're gay and your birthday coincides with a landmark like Stonewall, progress takes on a wider perspective

by Will O'Bryan

June of 1969 holds the seed of my existence. I was born, and at the time, had no idea that I'd inherited a legacy of persecution. On the other side of the Atlantic, simultaneously, people to whom I now owe my social existence were fighting in the streets. The Stonewall riots were leaving their mark on the 20th century and igniting an explosion that has yet to die down.

When my birthdays arrive, along with examining my receding hairline, I examine how my life has unfolded along with the modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement. A time line, with the help of *Long Road to Freedom: The Advocate History of the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, is in order.

• **June 27-29: 1969, the Stonewall Riots.** During this time, I'm born. This we've covered.

I asked my mother if she'd ever heard of the Stonewall Riots. She answered that she gave birth to me in a French hospital where wine with meals was the prescribed order of the day. She doesn't remember much.

• **1970: The family moves to San Diego.**

A West Hollywood cafe, Barney's Beanery, faces protest over a plaque that reads "Faggots Stay Out." Since San Diego is a couple of hours from West Hollywood, and I was hardly old enough to drive, I think the folks at Barney's were being a bit obsessive.

Barney's kept the sign up for more than a decade longer.

• **1971: I've begun eating solid food.**
Oregon repeals its sodomy laws.

• **1972: Perhaps I was potty-trained by this point. Perhaps not.**

Some kids in Seattle were having their own problems. A Seattle judge said their mothers, two lesbians, could retain custody of them, but only if they kept separate residences.

• **1973: Dad's back from Vietnam, and we move to the suburbs of Washington, D.C.**

Seattle makes up for lost ground by passing an anti-discrimination in employment ordinance to protect gay men and lesbians in the workplace.

• **1975: Washington state repeals its sodomy laws.**

Too bad I was living in Virginia. This year marks the time I first saw another boy's...you know.

• **1978: Harvey Milk, openly gay San Francisco city supervisor, hero to us all, is assassinated.**

By this time, I'm in fourth grade. Milk's assassination wasn't something we covered in school. I didn't learn what it was all about until roughly 15 years later, and still not through school.

• **1979: California's governor, Jerry Brown, boosts his state's moral standing by signing an**

executive order that prohibits anti-gay discrimination in state hiring.

I had California on my mind, too. I was engrossed by John Ritter's Southern California-faux-queen character, Jack Ritter, on *Three's Company*. Unfortunately, this was my first exposure to being gay. Very sad.

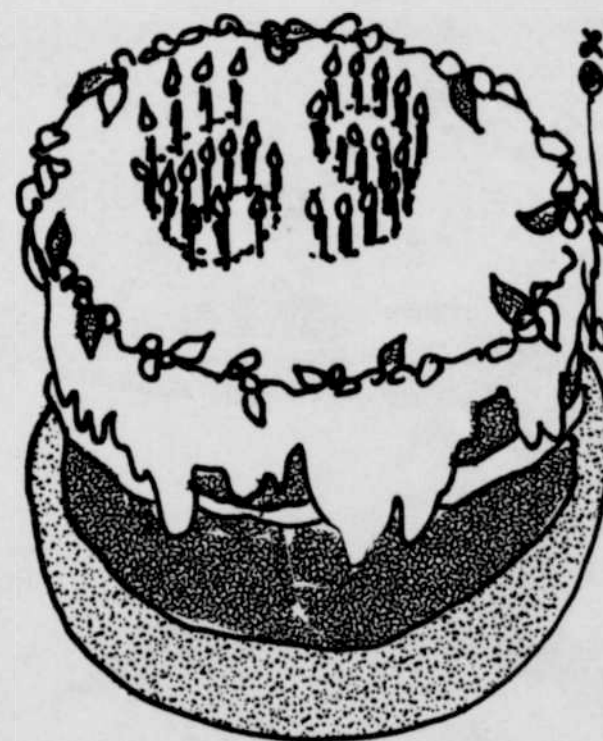
• **1980: Reagan hits the scene in the biggest possible way.**

By sixth grade, I'm beginning to feel a bit queer. I play a lot of Dungeons and Dragons with my little school chums. Oddly, I keep creating all these very androgynous "elf" characters for myself.

• **1981: Worse than Reagan; the dawn of AIDS.**

Till now, I was anxious about growing up. I knew I was different and that I'd find people like me, but I began to wonder whether anyone would be left alive.

• **1993: A lot of time has passed, but now I find myself at the March on Washington.** All my friends are around me. People are indeed alive. In Washington, D.C., during that intoxicating weekend, it feels like I live on a gay planet. Straight tourists stand out in crowds, but I don't. And the future looks bright again.



Looking at even these small snippets of history, I'm reminded of detractors who say gay men and lesbians have a lifestyle, but not a culture. Certainly no one dared teach it to us at school, but it's there.

My coming of age would've been so much richer if, when studying ancient civilizations, some teacher bothered to mention that Alexander the Great was gay.

How bothered I was by a certain high school literature teacher that I regarded highly.

While studying Shakespeare, she told us bright young things that scholarly rumors had surfaced suggesting Will S. might have been gay. She instructed us firmly to regard those rumors as ugly slander. Untrue, maybe. But why ugly?

History class never offered an opportunity to discuss Eleanor Roosevelt's sexuality, whatever it may have been. If anyone had even mentioned it in class, said student would have probably been sent to see the principal—or the school psychologist.

And there's more than history. There's music, symbolism, language—a rich culture. This is what strikes me most, when I take stock of everything since Stonewall during the summer of 1996.

Once you've read this, I'll be 27 and a few hairs balder. But by taking the time to look back on the grand parabola, impending baldness is an insignificant, self-indulgent triviality. Even in our community.

Long Road to Freedom: The Advocate History of the Gay and Lesbian Movement is edited by Mark Thompson, with a forward by Randy Shilts. It was published in 1994 by St. Martin's press.