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STONEWALL BABY

Share the wealth

*History is all around us—in the experiences of the old and
young—all we need to do is reach out of our generation traps*

by Will O'Bryan

It was March of '88 when I first went to a gay youth group. I was 19, a college freshman, and my boyfriend had just dumped me with the excuse that he wanted to try dating girls instead. After the admission of heterosexual tendencies, he added that he was going to meet some friends at the aforementioned group. He even invited me.

Generally I'd have too much pride to accept such an invitation, but at that moment, the idea of sharing some space and time with bonafide queers was very appealing. (When isn't it?) I wanted to wash off this ex-boyfriend's wishy-washy film with a dose of pure homosexuality.

After a quiet drive, we pulled up to a church. Of course, my initial thought upon seeing the cross was that I'd been duped and that he was going to try to convert me too. What lay inside was a different story altogether. This particular Saturday was the group's talent show.

I can remember some androgynous boys lip-synching "Karma Chameleon" as well as a few other talent show mainstays. As with every talent show, there was one shiny standout. I can't remember her name, but I remember enough.

She looked to be about 60 years old and had the sweet, soft-spoken demeanor of a cookie-cutter granny. In the tradition of a magician's assistant, she wore a tuxedo-esque, sequined, black-stockinged costume. As a snotty, socially conservative 19-year-old, I began to have second thoughts about these people after spotting this twinkling senior.

She set her stage by laying a little checkerboard tap-dance mat on the floor. I vaguely remember her picking up a top hat and cane as well. We in the audience sized her up quickly and assumed this woman would do a little dance and that would be that. But once she got the spotlight, there wasn't any music, just her.

Standing in front of us, a crowd of about 25, she stood quite still and told us a story. It was a first-person nonfiction narrative about her own coming of age.

The polite boredom with which we greeted the expected tap dance turned to empathy. We hung on her words as she told us about her first girlfriend. She was a teenager and had met another woman who felt the way she did. In the rural South in the 1950s, she'd felt unique in an unfortunate way. Only after meeting this similar, slightly older woman, did she begin to believe that she might not be a misfit. This woman validated her feelings in a wonderful way.

It didn't end well. Shortly after this desperate affair began, she told us, they were caught. She didn't tell us what happened specifically, but it was enough to know that the other woman was arrested. I believe the charge was corrupting a minor.

The story challenged us to imagine our storyteller as a young woman of 16 or 17, standing on the street below the jail, looking up to the cell that held her deliverance. The woman in the cell could look out to her down on the street, which was all

the contact left for them. They didn't see each other again.

She was very solemn by the end of her story, explaining that as a young lesbian she simply had never had a happy childhood. She was spending the latter part of her life making up for it, cueing the music and tap-dancing her heart out. "It's never too late to have a happy childhood," she shouted merrily.

When all was said and done, I don't think any of us knew what to make of her. Nevertheless, I'm positive that all of us who heard her, carry her story with us still. We didn't talk to her about it, though. All of us would see her dozens of times after the talent show, but no one ever asked her about her history. None of us really knew how.

As a community, we communicate with ferocious efficiency in some realms. We can lobby together, plan actions, employ gaydar, etc. But we could use some improvement in our inter-generational techniques. For myself, the tap-dancer's story represents one of the few times that I've been privy to that kind of inter-generational sharing in the queer community.

Most cultures rely on personal narratives to convey their history through the generations. In our culture we write about what's happened to us, and we read about what's happened to us. Rarely do we see young queers directly receiving

the benefits of their older peers' experience.

There's a cycle that makes us more independent and less prone to rely on others. As we come of age and come out, we're largely left to fly solo. If we make it out alive we're strong, but we've also learned not to rely on others. The experience isn't likely to instill us with a sense of responsibility for those who come after—besides, if we try to help some 16-year-old queer come out, there may be a parent close behind branding us as "recruiters."

When we come out it seems we immediately identify with people in our own age groups—those with the same level of sophistication or naiveté. And that's largely where we stay. The younger ones are perpetually threatening simply because they're younger, and simultaneously obnoxious because "they had it so easy." We're fearful that the older ones are predatory, or boring, or self-righteous. And the stereotypes are easily maintained because little is done to integrate different queer generations.

Perhaps what the region needs is a queer cultural center. Granted, there are places where a lesbian film might be shown, there is a bookstore where one branch of the bisexual movement meets... It would be nice, though, to have a central location to be all things to all queers. One place that could show films, host lectures, act as an archive, house a coffeehouse, operate a visitor's center, among other things.

Maybe a place like this—a place open to all ages—would serve to keep so many gay people from having their first queer communal experience in a bar. And maybe a place like this would be a place where history could be inherited. First-hand.

