

This triumphant memoir chronicles the author's teenage suicide attempt and the real beginning of the Gay Liberation movement, pre-Stonewall, in 1969 San Francisco, where Mr. Whittington was fired for being gay. It's creative non-fiction, written like a novel, with a conservative alter-ego's thoughts inserted to keep it lively. His groundbreaking openly gay philosophy-coming out en masse as a way to enlighten and change the world-leads his comrades to crown him "Gale the Liberator."

BEYOND NORMAL: The Birth of Gay Pride

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"(B)esides holding indisputable claim to the foundation of the old American homophile movement, the West Coast can with some justification date Gay Lib from the creation of its CHF (Committee for Homosexual Freedom), spring 1969, not from the Stonewall riots in June."

—*The GAY MILITANTS* by Donn Teal

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Gale Chester Whittington

BEYOND NORMAL

The Birth of Gay Pride

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Chapter One

The Mixer

I lie in bed thinking about how frightened I am after having been fired for being gay--in San Francisco, of all places. *My life wasn't supposed to turn out like this.* I had such lofty plans—to settle down with a nice lover and live a happy, turmoil-free existence. This gay thing was supposed to make my life better by allowing the *real* me to flourish. All I ever wanted to do was love and be loved. *God, was I naïve!* Back in 1966, I had no idea it would prove to be so hard...I'll never forget the day I decided to act on my inner feelings...such an icy, cold winter day it was—

* * * *

Oh, God, what am I doing?

I pull over, kill the engine, and roll down the window, inhaling the cold night air with the fervor of a sinner searching for God.

It'll be okay. I need to do this...It's just a gay bar. What do I think they're gonna do? Hold me down and bite my head off?...Or molest me?...Hmm...mmm...might not be so bad...at least I'd finally get to have sex with someone besides Righty or Lefty.

I restart the car and drive back onto South Santa Fe Drive toward the bright lights that are the very heart of Denver.

Man, I hope these guys are like me. They can't all be faceless "sick, depraved old men who can't control their desire for innocent pubescent boys—perverts who cannot love," like I saw on that TV documentary.

I shudder and then sigh with relief that I've made up my mind to go through with this exploration.

I need to focus on the beautiful night. It's so Disney-esque! Like Tinkerbelle herself has been waving her magic wand!

Underneath the black January sky, crystalline snowflakes sparkle and twirl through the cavernous city streets. An amber incandescence radiating from a towering street lamp showers each translucent flake with the prismatic colors of the aurora borealis. It's the first snow of the new year, invigoratingly cool and clean. A sense of exhilaration washes over me as I pull into the parking lot.

I lock the new, 1966, flesh-colored Dodge Coronet, borrowed from my fundamentalist Nazarene preacher father, ignore the "Please Pay Machine" sign, and walk across skid row's Curtis Street to a black building. I lift my head and squint to check out the name, "The Mixer," which has been hand-

painted above the entrance with too much lipstick-red enamel, leaving the letters sporting spider-like legs.

Taking another deep breath, I reinforce my decision to enter a gay bar for the first time. I pull the door open and gasp. Smiling and sitting on a stool is a handsome, shockingly normal-appearing blue-eyed young man. My eyes wander to the background of the long, narrow space, where I see a whole array of attractive guys and girls milling around.

Just when I decide I've hit the jackpot, the doorman shakes his head. "Sorry. This is a private affair. We've rented the bar tonight for our senior party."

"Shit!" I mumble, fighting the now-blinding snowstorm back to my car. "No wonder those guys looked 'normal.' They *were*! What do I want with so-called 'normal' people, anyway? I want to meet people like me. Quirky, sensitive, loving, lonely people."

Pulling into the same parking lot a week later, this time in the daylight, I find an attendant who reminds me of Quasimodo. He makes a point of sizing me up from head to toe. "Ya park here, it'll cost ya seventy-five cents," he says, holding out a two-fingered hand. I cross his scarred palm with three quarters and maneuver through piles of mud-covered snow to the sidewalk. A passing car splashes icy brown water on my face and jacket as I cross the street.

Wiping the muddy liquid off my skin with a coat sleeve, I open the Mixer door. An overweight Hispanic with a pockmarked face makes a clicking sound from deep within his cheeks and, from one side of his mouth, mutters, "ID?"

I hand him my license. With a flashlight, he peruses the card. "Looks like yer just eighteen—barely legal." He hands it back and nods for me to enter.

I sit at the first stool and look straight-ahead, too nervous to move. Through the bar mirror, I spot three other people in the place: two Hispanic men and a white woman with blonde hair nearly as big as the Eiffel Tower and almost as crooked. My eyes focus on the pink ribbon nestled smack-dab in the middle of her back-combed bouffant, directly above her bangs. I look closer at the other two and decide all three are probably wearing more make-up than Walgreens stocks in a single store at any one time.

Most of the wall behind the bar is covered with gold-splashed mirror tiles, a popular look that's really quite elegant—but in this place the gold appears to be an extension of the rust-like stains from the surrounding wall. My eyes lock onto a poster of two attractive Speedo-clad men holding hands on a beach with the caption, "San Francisco, The Gay Promised Land."

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I sigh and wish I were there. My eyes wander to the back, where I see a half-dozen empty tables and a stage. Up front, I check out the other side of the narrow bar, which is lined with a string of booths. The three people are sitting in one, talking and laughing, obviously enjoying themselves. One of the men looks almost exactly like Elvis Presley, but for a nose that, although it starts in the middle of his face, comes to its long end at the center of his right cheek. He spots me looking, saunters over, and asks if I'd like to join his group.

"Oh...okay, I guess." I follow him to the table, checking out the intricate, oily "duck-tail" of his Elvis hairstyle, wondering what I'm getting myself into.

The blonde woman smiles as I sit. "What's yer name, sweetie? Mine's Hollywood." She sticks out a hand decorated with long, hot-pink fingernails. I find myself feeling embarrassed for her when I realize the shade doesn't match her ribbon.

I shake her hand, being careful to not crush the pink protuberances nor be victimized by them. "I'm Gale. Pleased to meet you."

"Hi, Gale!" The Hispanic Elvis holds out his hand. "I'm Angel and Miss Thing here is Randy. He's kinda shy."

I shake Angel's hand and nod at Randy, who reminds me of Iona, a bashful, unpopular girl in my fourth grade class. She had dishwater-blonde hair and extra-large nostrils.

"Bull crap!" Randy blurts out. "I'm about as shy as a fly on a pile o' dung!"

I jump slightly in my seat. "Pardon?"

"That's bull!" Randy pounds the table with a fist. "Angel always tells new trade I'm shy. Thinks he's being cute." He glares at Angel, shaking his head several times, and then looks back at me. "Tell me, guy, you butch or fem? Usu'ly I can figure it out, but...you...I dunno...just ain't sure."

I shrug and turn to Hollywood.

She laughs. "Randy's tryin' to find out if you're marriage material, sweetie. He wants to know if you play the man or woman...you know...in *bed!*" Hollywood's laugh grows into a cackle, reminding me of the bad witch in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Heat prickles my face. I float back to second grade—1956—when I picked up a science book from my desk and pushed it into a cubbyhole. Scotch-taped to the rim of the space, on a strip of colored paper, printed in Crayola, the name "Gale Whittington" announced to the world this was my cubicle. I looked at my best friend, who was still sitting.

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“Hurry up, Steve; put your book away. Recess doesn’t last very long,” I told him. He got up, shoved his book into his own cubbyhole, and followed me to the hallway.

“Where ya been for the last two weeks, anyway, man?” Steve asked, as soon as we made it outside.

My face flushed, but I’d been taught to always tell the truth, no matter how embarrassing. “Okay, I’ll tell you.” I looked around and lowered my voice. “But you have to promise not to say anything to anyone else.”

Steve smiled. “Sure. I promise.”

“Okay, well, what happened was...I had an undescended testicle that my doctor just discovered. And I had to have an operation to have it removed, because it was underdeveloped. They said it could turn into cancer.”

“Wow!” The white in Steve’s eyes grew large. “That’s something. You only got one nut! Wow!”

“They said I can still have kids.”

“Wow! Never knew anybody who only had one!” Before I could respond further, Steve ran off and disappeared into a crowd of students watching baseball.

When the bell rang, I walked toward the homeroom. That’s when all the kids started pointing and giggling. Even the girls were in on it. “Mary and I heard the sixth graders say you’re only half a man. Hee, hee!” Some sounded like they were trying to be nice. “Gee, it must feel terrible only having part of your manhood. Is that why your mama gave you a girl’s name?”

I didn’t hear what the rest of them said or learn anything from the teachers in school that day. Or during the whole week, for that matter. I did learn a lot from the students, though. What it was like to feel abnormal, for one thing. It was also the first time I found out people could be cruel. And if that’s what normal people were like, perhaps I didn’t want to be normal.

I made it a point to never acknowledge Steve’s existence after that. Tall, pig-tailed tomboy Jane Catrell took his place as my best friend. We spent the summer together, riding bikes, fishing, and looting drainage ditches for crawdads and salamanders.

When school started up again, come autumn, the other kids started talking again. This time their target was Jane Catrell. “Cowtrail,” the boys called her. “Flat as hell. Built like a two by four,” they said. “Acts too much like a boy,” the girls added.

I caved. I’ll never forget Jane staring down at me with her big brown eyes and asking, “Don’t you like me anymore, Gale?”

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“No, I guess not,” I told her, even though the words felt like they were cutting my tongue. I became a loner after that. It was safer that way. I didn’t have to listen to cruel talk about myself or a friend I no longer had. Yeah, being a loner would be a lot less painful than the guilt I’d suffer if I hurt anyone else like I had Jane. I needed to learn how to be a better human being before allowing myself the luxury of a friend.

“I said he wants to know if you’re the man or the woman.” It’s Hollywood—back in the present world.

My face turns even redder. “I...I wouldn’t know. Or understand why people would want to role-play. Anyway, I’ve never been to bed with a man.”

Angel jumps up from his side of the table and scoots in beside me. “A real live virgin!” He raises a finger in the air and points at Randy. “And you! *You* keep your hands to yourself, Randy.” He looks me in the eyes and wraps an arm around my shoulder. “Don’t worry, little darlin’, your guardian Angel is here to teach you all the ropes!”

Randy and Hollywood break out into more loud, raucous laughter.

I begin to feel uncomfortable. “Excuse me,” I say. As Angel stands, I move out of the booth and look toward the bar. “I—I think I need a drink. Who do ya gotta fuck around here to get a cold beer?”

I turn back around to see three hands in the air and all of my new friends mouthing, “Me! Me! Me!”

Oh, my God, I’m in real trouble now.

A waitress finally appears, her hair trailing down her back all the way to her tiny waist, nary a crimp marring its flow. Quite lovely, her only flaw seems to be two huge ears that stick out with self-importance, like they belong to British Royalty.

“I see ya found the Wholesome Welcome Wagon,” she says. “Beware the gifts of strange fuckers, honey. These three vultures’ll pick ya clean. What kin I bring ya? I’m Vonda and I’m straight.”

The waitress removes a draft beer from her tray and sets it in front of me. “I *knew* what you wanted, honey. A beer! On account, it’s all we serve in this goddamned 3.2 *beer* bar. Duh! For eighteen year-old kiddies like you, I might add. I’m the owner’s fiancée; that’s why I work here, ’cause I know yer wonderin’. That’ll be twenty-five centavos, honey.”

I hand her a quarter, and as an afterthought, a dime. She holds the tip an inch from her right eyeball. “Jeesh! Yer sooooo generous! Maybe now I kin take the kid to Disneyland.” She turns and fades back into the woodwork.

I grab the beer and chug three-quarters of the frothy liquid. Hollywood taps my hand with one of her pink fingernails. “Don’t listen to that bitch, sweetie. She ain’t had a kind word to say about nobody since The Gilded Cage opened down the street, suckin’ off most of their business.”

Randy moans. “Ugh! Do you have to talk so dirty? You’re making me horny. I ain’t had none since the stock show came to town year ’go January.” A smile slowly forms on his face. “Ah! That was the best two weeks o’ my life!”

Hollywood cackles. “Didn’t know you was into cows, Randy!”

He wrinkles his brow and shakes his head. “Hardee har har. You’re soooooo funny. Anyway, I met this bull-rider from Arkansas...we dived into bed for two whole weeks...only came up for air once...and that was just ’cause I had to pee...Ah! Ronnie! That was his name! Was a *real* buckaroo. I screwed him ‘til the cows came home!”

Hollywood slams the table with the palm of her hand. “*Anyways*, before I was so *rudely* interrupted...oh, shit, now I forget what I was talkin’ ’bout...Oh, yeah. The Gilded Cage. I used to work there, ’til management found out I’m real. Now, I do a real classy strip around the corner, at a very nice joint called the Open Legs Bar. You should come see me—Oh, forgot, yer just a kid. Gotta be twenty-one to get into Legs. Oh, well.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Whata you mean, the Gilded Cage found out you were real?”

“It’s all drag there, sweetie. Ya ain’t got a dick to tuck, ya can’t perform. Graaaaand

Illusion, they call it. I call it Grand *Crap*, the worst drag I ever seen.”

“Ah, come on!” Angel jumps into the conversation. “What about Franchesca? She’s one hot cucaracha!”

“Well, maybe they got *one* that looks pretty good, knows her words, at least...Yeah, she’s kinda hot...if ya like Mexicans. But none of ’em comes close to Rhonda! Now, Rhonda was what I call a pro. Did a Peggy Lee impersonation to die for! Even made *me* hot! Should see her do ‘Fever,’ sweetie! Woo wee!”

“Yeah, Rhonda was good.” Angel smiles. “What happened to the bitch, anyway?”

“Went to Vegas, to hit the Big Time, but I heard she just moved back. Guess they didn’t want her. Supposed to be back doin’ the Cage this weekend. Poor kid.”

Sunlight flashes into the bar as the front door opens. We all moan and cover our eyes, as if we’re vampires who can’t stand the light of day.

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I hear stomping footsteps move closer and closer to our vibrating table, until there is silence...eerie silence. My back facing the door, I watch Randy's face grimace. Looking down and to the side, I see the perpetrators of the noise: two black and chrome motorcycle boots. Finally, a man speaks. "Angel, you little alcoholic!" The voice is loud and gruff. "Knew I'd catch you here!"

I slowly lift my eyes and see another Elvis peering down at us, this one dressed in black leather from head to toe, with a pair of shiny handcuffs dangling from the left side of his belt. He'd be Angel's twin, except he's twice as large and his nose is bent in the exact opposite direction.

His glare moves from Angel to me. "And what the hell is *this*? Your latest trick? Guess I'm gonna have to kick some Anglo butt tonight."

My eyebrows jump to my hairline. I turn to Hollywood. "He's not talkin' to me, is he?"

She bunches up her pink mouth. "'Fraid he is, sweetie."

"Well, then, I...I...think I better have another beer, then."

The guy in black leather looks down at me. "I'll be right back."

He returns with a draft, which he sets in front of me. "For you, baby. Anglo butt as cute as yours should never be kicked, only caressed." He extends his hand. "I'm Franco. What's your name?"

"Gale." I offer a nervous smile and gulp down some of the beer.

With eyes focused on me like searchlights, Franco brushes my cheek with a fingertip. A spark of electricity at the point of touch makes us both grin. "Ever been in love, Gale?"

Chapter Five

I Am Alma

My name is Alma Winnemiller, angelic victim extraordinaire. Geraldine Page brought me to life in Tennessee Williams' 1961 celluloid classic, *Summer and Smoke*. But my world changed forever May 15, 1967, the brutal day Gale Whittington committed suicide in apartment number 689 at the Fontaine Bleu Apartments in Denver, Colorado.

I remember it clearly, as if it were yesterday. My movie *and* his suicide. First things first. The suicide.

Gale took his rent money—he was lucid enough to know he wouldn't be needing it any longer—to Queen Soopers at Ninth and Corona, where he bought everything he could to make his last night on earth as pleasant as possible. Didn't cost as much as expected. Was almost ludicrous how little it took. Two cream puffs for a final culinary indulgence. Three blue light bulbs to set a tranquil mood. A Billie Holiday record featuring "But Not For Me," the condensed story of his life. And a box of straight-edged razor blades. He only needed one, but it seems you can't buy them singly. A waste of money, but who cared? You didn't need cash where he was headed.

No, I don't mean Hell! I'm talkin' about Total Oblivion—Peaceful Nothingness. You see, he no longer bought all that Heaven and Hell stuff his evangelistic parents fed him. He quit believing after years of unanswered prayers. Oh, I almost forgot. He also bought an extra large bottle of Sominex so he could die in his sleep, without pain. "Take Sominex tonight and...sleep...sleeeep...sleeeeeeep." The ads made it sound so soothing.

Unfortunately, the sleeping pills slowed his heart and made bleeding to death a difficult chore. He had to hold his wrists in warm water to keep the blood flowing. In order to lie in bed and die in comfort, he tried using pots and pans to contain the liquid. After that proved to be a bust, because the water cooled too quickly, he stumbled to the bathroom sink and then the tub.

This was not meant to be a cry for help. Gale truly wanted to die. He felt he had learned the truth—that love is a lie—and he no longer wanted to live in a cold, ugly world. As a last resort, he cut his wrists deeper and deeper, until the arteries protruded like frayed electrical wires. Nonetheless, instead of flowing, the blood continued to coagulate. Although the pills numbed the pain, each incision grated his spine. Desperate to succeed, he pulled on the

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veins with tweezers and cut them length-wise, just before the pills mercifully knocked him out.

Blood covered much of the apartment—the green shag carpet, the white bed sheets, the beige bathroom tile. Puddles of it mixed with water filled the pots and pans, the sink and tub. His roommate Dennis would later tell every living soul within earshot that Gale was saving his blood, like that little girl in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden*. The joke was on Dennis! Gale hadn't read past the first page, as he found it too depressing. Anyway, the title told the whole story; he was already fully aware the world is a miserable place, i.e. not a rose garden. After all, he had once lived in it.

Although Gale's heart died that night, his body awoke dehydrated, his eyes kaleidoscopic. Tragic that was, especially since the hospital psychiatrist said he didn't understand why a man would want to be loved by another man. "It doesn't make sense...it's not normal...I think you need to grow up." His words threw an already confused Gale deeper into darkness.

So, you can surely see that I, Alma Winnemiller, had no choice but to take over poor Gale's ravaged body. *Something* had to be done. Unlike him, I had somehow survived a lengthy yoke-of-the-world on-the-back-thing via *Summer and Smoke*, and was strong enough to pick him up and push him forward. Although our souls had died, for some unknown and most certainly mad reason, our bodies were coerced to keep going.

Therefore, Gale and I have formed a union, i.e. made a pact. We are now hedonists determined to squeeze out every scrap of pleasure we can find in this old world, our new motto being: If we have to live here, we might as well enjoy the ride.

I'll never forget that dreary May evening when Gale's body was finally released from the hospital *and* police custody. Oh, yeah! Attempted suicide is a crime, don't you know? Never mind the additional trauma the arrest throws on the perpetrator/victim. Can you tell me how, in Heaven's name, do they punish the successful ones?

Anyway, that was the night Tennessee Williams' movie, *Summer and Smoke*, appeared on The Late Movie. Through me, Gale saw his life story laid out in black and white, heart-breaking detail by detail.

Just like mine, Gale's life had been a big disappointment. We have both shouldered the unspeakable burden of being PKs—preachers' kids—who are presumed by every other child to be too goody-goody to hang out with and thus are estranged from the fun-loving, more worldly crowd. Gale and I became good kids gone bad, because of debilitating broken hearts and tragically unanswered prayers. Yes, we had no choice but to abandon our

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innocence once we were so cruelly scorned by those for whom we so deeply yearned.

The dark May night that Gale sat in awe watching my movie was the first time he became aware he was no longer in the real world. I'm talkin' the *ugly*, uncensored, cruel, nobody-said-it-was-fair, stark-naked, eat-or-be-eaten, I-Never-Promised-You-the-damned-Rose-Garden world—the one in which Gale could no longer bear to live.

So, as Alma, I took over and here I'll stay until comes the time Gale is strong enough to venture forth, if indeed, that stage ever arrives.

And *now*, here I sit, in the tiny dank apartment Gale's parents set up for him, the most difficult burden of which is having to gape at these dreadful gray Venetian blinds junking up otherwise perfectly lovely windows. Being impossible to clean, they sorely depress me, as does San Francisco native Rod McKuen's incessant recitation of *Stanyan Street and Other Sorrows*, which Gale plays over and over on our gray splatter-painted 33 1/3-rpm record player. The contraption becomes more hideous-looking every day as it takes up space on that ungodly steel-blue rose-festooned TV tray—just below the window where those dreary gray Venetian blinds gawk back at you. For the life of me, I fail to see what redeeming value he finds in listening to the sorry state of some lonely poet's life.

“Blah blah...words are only necessary
after love has gone...blah blah blah.”

It's an unending, vicious circle. The more he plays it, the emptier I feel. Why I haven't shut it off, I don't know. I guess I'm aware he needs it to come to a crescendo. I know one thing for sure. We have to get out of here, away from these depressingly common and filthy Venetian blinds. Away from Denver. Away from Colorado.

We need to go a better place, perhaps San Francisco in California. They tell me gays are accepted there, that they hold hands openly under the city's glorious California sun. Surely, Gale can find love there.

So, he and I are picking up where *Summer and Smoke* ended, at the place where I offered a traveling salesman a merciful “comfort” pill and proceeded to escort him to the Cantina Casino on the outskirts of town. Because some kind of love, even from a stranger, is better than no love at all. Because being a goody-goody didn't work. Because doing nothing would allow the silent loneliness to drive us both insane.

Gale manages to come to the forefront and tell Mrs. Curtis at the Chatterbox Pet Shop he's taking a two-week vacation, although he and I know full well he won't be coming back to this cow town or his dreadful

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dollar-an-hour job cleaning smelly mouse urine off of merchandise with Pine-Sol.

The two and a half-hour plane ride gives us time to think about our broken lives. Lord knows we wasted too much good affection on unrequited love. I also remember how, after Gale's heart had almost healed, he ran into Dennis again. How that shameful man said he was moving to Denver and needed someone with whom to share the rent. Although Gale's brain said no, his foolish heart said yes.

Gale couldn't afford the awful price at the Fountain Bleu, but Dennis raved and raved about the apartment like a spoiled child until, at last, Gale gave in.

The poor boy had no idea where his portion of the rent would come from, since his job at the pet shop could in no way support such an endeavor. But that dilemma took a back seat after Sally Bailey came to visit. It was obvious she was bitter that Dennis hadn't gone through with their marriage. Dear, sweet Gale imprudently empathized with the portly vixen.

He even confessed to Sally that he thought Dennis might have borderline mental problems, i.e. was a little psychotic.

Of course, Dennis didn't laugh when the conniving Sally betrayed Gale's confidence by repeating his words directly to Dennis.

"I'll show you psychotic!" he screamed, before threatening to dangle Gale over the sixth floor balcony by his ankles.

The incident horrified Gale because it reinforced his fear that people everywhere were basically cruel. Even worse, he realized Dennis had no resemblance to the person Gale thought he loved. Nay, not even close.

Indeed, *love*, the only thing Gale really wanted to believe in, appeared to be an illusion, a figment hatched by the cruel creators of "Once Upon a Time" fairy tales.

At that moment, Gale foresaw his future. Like a long, crooked road, his life lay before him. Instead of adventures, he saw one disappointment after another. Heartache after heartbreak. What was the point? Why endure the pain? I understood how he felt, having been ravaged by affectations of the heart myself.

I must confess I cannot blame the dear boy for being unable to see a way out except for suicide. He's lucky I showed up in time to pick up the pieces. But that's enough thinking about the unfortunate past. We need to move forward!

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Because now, Time has been charitable enough to afford this fresh beginning in a new land of promise—San Francisco. Starting today, we'll pick ourselves up and muster enough courage to throw on a happy face.

I will have to retreat. Now that Gale's sanity is on the verge of making a valiant comeback, he will try to fly again. Make no mistake; as Gale, it's an enormous comfort to know I live inside him, only a heartbeat away, ready to take over, if and when the world grows too intense.

After landing and being told taxi fare would cost some twenty dollars, Gale backs out of the cab, boards a bus, and pays a single dollar for a ride to downtown San Francisco.

And so, as Gale, here I sit on my solitary suitcase trying to figure out what to do next, when a middle-aged man in an open white Monte Carlo convertible pulls up to the curb.

His brown eyes look me over while his big smile seems to wrap itself around my body. "Need a ride?"

"Uh, I don't know...I guess...can you take me to the Y?"

Don't let him take you to a cantina on the outskirts of town, Alma whispers.

"Sure. No problem," the man says, before jumping out of the convertible and lifting my gray Samsonite suitcase (bought with Alpine cigarette coupons) into the back seat. "The Y's just up the street. Name's Marty." He extends a hand.

I offer mine in return. "Alm—I mean, Gale." Gripping my hand, he rubs an unseen middle finger against my palm.

Uh oh, Alma says. Does he have to be so damned obvious?

Once we're in the car, he puts the transmission in drive, but immediately hits the brake, turning his curly brown head toward me. "You've never been to San Francisco before. Right?"

I nod.

"Well, how about I give you the grand tour of our fair city? Would you like that?"

"Uh, God, I don't know." I feel my lips twitch. "Just got here and I really need to get settled in a room."

"Aw, don't worry about that. I'm taking care of a friend's home in Sausalito, just over the Golden Gate Bridge. It has an extra bedroom!" His eyes sparkle as he talks. "Won't cost you a dime!"

Uh oh. Alma tells me there's no such thing as a free ride. *But I am strapped for funds. This guy's not drop-dead gorgeous, but he's no Quasimodo, either.*

Gale Chester Whittington

“Okay, I’m all yours!” *Oh, God. Did I use those words?*

Trying to relax, I look up and notice the sky is bluer than ever. *Is it because the world is prettier from inside a white convertible?* As we approach the bridge, huge billowy clouds of snow-white fog float over and under the huge famous red structure.

Red?

“It’s red!” I exclaim. “Why is the Golden Gate Bridge red?”

“Ha! They say gold paint doesn’t hold up in the humidity. Anyway, it’s just part of the mystique of the City by the Bay. You’ll soon discover that nothing here is as it seems.”

His words cause me to pause, but only for a moment. “Well, it’s still beautiful. Never seen anything remotely like it. Those clouds of fog are so white, it feels like we’re flying over them in a plane.”

“You’re right. It *is* an extraordinarily beautiful day. Absolutely and unequivocally.” He glares at me with obvious intent. A familiar yearning seems to burn from within his eyes. I flinch and turn to observe the surface of the cobalt San Francisco Bay shimmering in the sunlight.

I feel like we’re entering Heaven, with new and exciting adventures on the horizon, as we dive headfirst into the floating fog. But the Alma inside me trembles, fearing we’re about to open a doorway straight to a metaphorical Hell, with our battered souls as the price of admission.

Chapter Fourteen

They Boot Homos, Don't They?

“Sorry to bother you at the radio station, Leo, but I’m freakin’ out.” Dragging the telephone cord with me through the mansion I’ve been renting with two friends, I grab a beer from the kitchen fridge. “The boss saw my picture in the *Barb* and canned me.”

“No!” Leo’s exclamation sounds more like a question. “You’re playing with me. Right?”

“I wish! This is the real world, Leo...be it San Francisco or *not*.” I hoist the bottle of Miller to my mouth and take a big gulp. “Bigots don’t take kindly to an employee’s photo being posted in a sex rag with the word ‘homo’ pasted above his mug, even if it *is* 1969. What the hell am I gonna do?”

“Oh, man...KGO knows I’m gay and as uptight as they are here, nobody comes down on me. I—”

“How could you do this to me, Leo?”

“Now, wait a minute, Gale! I *didn’t* do it. I...uh...Max, the publisher of the *Berkeley Barb*...he’s a friend—The photographer I hired for our shoot works for him—the guy must’ve given copies to Max...Believe me, I had no idea they were going to put your photo next to my Gay Revolution commentary.”

“Surely you told the photographer those pictures were for my *fashion* article in *Vector* magazine...a *much* classier publication...and one that has a *limited* distribution, I might add!” Catching my breath, I pull the telephone receiver away from my face and glare at it for a second, hoping to calm down. “I don’t get it, Leo—if Max is such a good friend, like you say, how could you *not* know he was going to publish that photo in his *so-called* underground newspaper?”

“I...uh...I guess—”

“The *Barb*’s infamous...Damned thing’s on the street corners of every university town in America, which means I’m *notorious*...or soon *will* be! Whatever happened to asking permission?”

“He should’ve—”

“My income’s dropped to a flat zero!” I click my teeth and sigh. “Nobody’s gonna hire me *now*. What am I gonna do?”

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"I don't know...let me think...tell you what. After I get off the clock, you and I could go straight to Berkeley and pay Max a visit...ask *him* what we should do. How about that? You game?"

Right to the source of the problem. Perfect! "Sounds like a good idea, Leo." I finish my drink, untangle the phone's long cord, and meander back to the kitchen. "Gotta do *something*." Clamping the receiver between my ear and shoulder, I open the icebox and pull out another beer. "To tell the truth, man, I'm scared to death. Got this bone-scrapin' feeling I'm gonna starve to death."

"What'd they say to you at the steamship company, anyway? What reason did they lay on you?"

"None *whatsoever*. Mr. Froche, the treasurer, did the dirty dead. Just said my services were no longer needed. When I asked why, he said they were letting me go 'without prejudice.'" I open the beer and take two swigs. "You believe the nerve?"

"Wow...That's like kicking somebody in the teeth and calling it an accident! Damned fascists! I'm sorry, Gale. Don't worry, though, we'll figure something out...Listen, I need to get some work done. I'll come by a little after five-thirty and we'll truck our asses across the Bay."

"I'll be ready."

Lying on my bed, I try to take a nap, without any luck. About four-thirty, I hear the front door open. A few seconds later, the familiar tapping of Brutini loafers on marble hits my ears.

Patrick's home!

He pokes his drop-dead gorgeous, androgynous face and perfectly frosted blond hair into my room. "Hey, Gale! Saw your door open. Home early, huh?"

"Got fired today."

"Really? Why? What happened?"

I reach for the *Barb* and hold up the offending page.

Patrick moves closer and takes the paper. "Oh, man!" He laughs halfheartedly. "*HOMO REVOLT! DON'T HIDE IT!* Wow! How on earth did you manage to get your photo into this fish wrapper?"

"It's a long story, but the *Vector* photographer apparently gave it to the paper, at least that's what I'm told. Guess the *Barb*'s owner thought it was a good fit for Leo Laurence's article calling for a gay revolution."

"Gay revolution?" He holds the paper closer, scanning each line with the aid of a perfectly-manicured finger. "Hmm, he says gay militants are growing in number. I didn't know they were any to *start* with!"

“Well...what he’s trying to say is...a lot of us are active in the antiwar movement and maybe it’s time they...*we* began to work for our *own* civil rights.” I take a deep breath, looking at Patrick sideways. “He’s got a point.”

“Oh, man, what about your future?” Putting his arms around me, he pats my back. “You’ll be labeled a pervert and banned from all decent jobs for the rest of your life!”

“I know, I know, believe me, I know. Like I said, it wasn’t my idea.”

Patrick’s eyes home in on my picture again, then bounce back to me. “It’s really not *that* bad.”

“You don’t have to be nice, Patrick, I know it’s awful.” I clench my teeth. “Not only does it look like I’m being fondled, it’s probably the ugliest picture ever taken of me. Look at my ears, the way they poke through the hair! I’m hideous!”

“Oh, come on, Gale! You positive you got fired?”

“They handed me a check with two weeks’ severance pay.”

“Man, what a bummer!” Patrick sits on the bed and looks around the room. “After we just moved into this fantastic place, too. Damn! How you going to pay the rent?”

“No idea. Leo and I are going to confront Max Scheer, the *Barb*’s publisher, tonight.” Slipping on my suede Hush Puppies, I slug down more beer. “Blaaa! Too warm!” I stick out my tongue and shake my head. “Yucko! Anyway, it’s Max’s fault for printing the photo—without permission from Leo or me. Can’t wait to see what he says.”

“Hey, I just thought of something. Maybe you can collect unemployment!”

“Oh, *yeah!* *Unemployment!* Forgot about that. Prob’ly won’t be enough to pay the rent *and* buy food, though. Wish it were. I love this place.”

During the drive across the Bay Bridge, Leo and I say little.

The tiny, hole-in-the-wall *Berkeley Barb* office is a mother’s nightmare incarnate: like the bedroom of my depressed youth, with manuscripts, leaflets, and photos strewn on desks, chairs, walls, every inch of the tiny room, save the ceiling. A huge paisley shirt topped off by an enormous head of wiry black hair sits in the middle of the clutter. His arms reach out and shuffle the papers so fast I feel like I’m watching an octopus gorging itself on everything in reach.

He looks like a poor man’s Burl Ives. Better watch out; there surely must be river rats hiding out in this office. All newspaper people are a bit eccentric, I guess.

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Leo points to me. “Max, I’d like you to meet Gale, the beautiful young man I told you about.”

I blush.

“Hey!” Mr. Scheer reaches out and shakes my hand. “You’re the guy from the photo.”

“Yeah, that’s me.” I give him a convoluted smile.

“He got canned, Max.” Leo sticks out his lower lip. “By States Steamship Company in the heart of San Francisco’s financial district.”

“Really? I’ll be damned! Hmpft! They shouldn’t be able to do that. In any case, it’s not right.” Max scratches the back of his head, causing clusters of his curly hair to bounce. “Ya got a union?”

My lungs suck in the odd-smelling printers ink air, sweet and sour at the same time. “No.”

“I think ya oughta *fight* it, anyway.” As Max leans back, a stack of antiwar pamphlets falls over, smothering a pile of black and white pictures of half-nude female hippies.

“That’s what I’ve been thinking.” Leo glances at me. “Max and I already discussed the need for a Gay Revolution. This is proof of how urgently we need to get it going.”

“Yep.” Max straightens the stack of fallen brochures and stares at me. “First issue of *Vector* hittin’ the streets same time as the *Barb* was no accident, you know. For some time now, Leo and I’ve been planning to publish articles urging homosexuals to come out!”

“We need to use this shit to our advantage!” Leo begins to pace. “Seize the moment!”

Max nods. “Now you’re talkin’! Hold a press conference! Set up a damned picket line! Take it to the streets! Accuse ’em of the injustice of it all—out and out discrimination! Capitalists *hate* negative publicity.” He smiles like a thief planning a big caper. “Prob’ly hire ya back just to stop all the turmoil. Sometimes ya gotta stir up some shit to get small minds to grow. Sometimes it’s the *only* road to justice.”

“You’re right, Max!” Leo’s eyes divert to me. “We need to take it to the streets!”

“I’m not sure, Leo.” I raise my eyebrows, head cocked. “Not much support out there for homosexual rights, I don’t think. Anyway, the point is you had no right to print my picture like you did.” One of my eyes squints involuntarily.

Max guffaws. “Well, tell me, what was so wrong about that photo?”

I blink, temporarily mute. “I...I guess *nothing*, really. But I’ll bet if a heterosexual had a picture in your paper, he...or she...would be fired too.”

“And would that be right? How does having your photo in an underground newspaper harm the company?”

“Well, you and I know it doesn’t. But the corporate mind...it thinks differently—”

“Xactly! And tell me this. If the *San Francisco Chronicle* said you were a homosexual, do you think for one minute you’d still have a job?”

Leo shakes his head. “Course not. Let’s face it, Gale. The steamship company is embarrassed ’cause you’re honest about who you are.”

“That’s right!” Max eyes open wide and lock on mine. “And it’s a perfect opportunity to spark change. What you do in your personal life is *none* of their damned business. Grab the *opportunity* and bring this kind of naked discrimination to light.”

“I guess I...” Clicking my teeth, I take a deep breath. “...understand what you guys are sayin’, but you’re crazy if you think gays have the public’s sympathy.”

Max stares at me, tilting his head. “But don’t ya think it’s ’bout time they did? As long as you guys stay in the closet and play the hidin’ game, ain’t *nothin’* gonna change. If ya stand up and refuse to go to the back of the bus, you could be the Rosa Parks of a homosexual revolution. Ya gotta make people *aware*. Educatin’ the masses is the first step to social reform. That’s from Lenin. And I don’t mean a bug-eyed Beatle named John.” His horselaugh rocks the office.

Leo’s reciprocal hee-haw nearly equals Max’s. Although my own chuckle grows into the same kind of boisterous laugh, I remain unsure of which is making me bellow—the contagious uproar or the irony of Max Scheer’s words spinning the situation around so he’s no longer the bad guy.

* * * *

Leo opens the door to his flat and smiles. I always expect to see him doing something he never will—wearing a stove-pipe hat to complete his Abraham Lincoln look, what with his similar bone structure, pale white skin, and dark beard. “Welcome to my place, Gale. No mansion, but it’s comfortable.”

My eyes sweep the living room, focus on an ornate antique desk in the corner, and land back on Leo. “It’s cool. Lots of character.”

“Thanks. Come on in.”

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I follow Leo to his rust-colored corduroy davenport. “You sounded urgent on the phone. What’s happening?”

“Just wanted to bring you up to snuff. Get you a beer?”

“God, no!” I shake my head rapidly. “Thanks, but I had *way* too many rum and cokes last night. Got any pop?”

“Pepsi. Might be a 7-Up in the fridge.”

“7-Up sounds good.” I lean back into the fat cushions of his couch. “So, Leo, tell me what’s new.”

He brings the drink and sits on a red leather recliner opposite the sofa. “Called Mike at the War Resister’s League.” Leo scans a notebook. “They’re giving us full use of their copy machine. Even said they’d donate a ream of paper.”

“Right on.” I swig some soda.

Leo nods and hands me a typed document, which starts out, “FOR IMMEDIATE ATTENTION.” He smiles. “And, being in the news business, I know how to write a press release, so that’s what I’ve been working on.”

I scan what he’s written. “Looks good. I was thinkin’, Leo. How’re we gonna put up a picket line, with just you and me? Two people won’t influence anyone. It’d be a big joke.”

“Got it covered.” Leo points to a scribbling on his pad. “In this Friday’s *Barb*, Max’s posting a story about the firing and the planned protest, along with a call for help. Told him to use my home phone number. We’ll start picketing on Monday. Hopefully, by then, we’ll have a bona-fide group put together.”

“What about your job?”

“We’ll do it during the lunch hour. That’s the only time people are on the streets in the financial district, anyway.” His voice drops into low volume as he looks into my eyes. “Been there long enough that I can take a long lunch if I need to. I’ll just tell them I had to help out a good friend.”

I quickly look away and take a sip of my drink. “That’s cool...Hmm, why don’t we meet at my house ’til we find a permanent place? Plenty of room, in case a lot of people show up...So what’re we gonna call our group, assuming we get one? We need a name—a catchy one that says it all...states our purpose.”

“Yeah, I’ve been up half the night thinking about the whole thing.” Leo flips a page. “You know how all the other gay organizations in San Francisco—the Mattachine Society, Daughters of Bilitis, Society for Individual Rights—ever notice how innocuous those names are? I think ours should incorporate the word ‘homosexual’ outright, make it perfectly clear

what we stand for.” He looks up from his notes. “We ought to literally throw it in the public’s face, instead of pussyfooting around. An up-front name’ll also make it clear we aren’t the least bit ashamed.”

“I like the way you think, Leo. Don’t know much about those organizations, but I agree—they sound way too bland, too safe.” Curling my upper lip, I shake my head. “But I think there is *one* group in San Francisco that already has homosexual in the name—”

“You’re right! *And*, of all the organizations, they are the most influential.” Leo studies his pad again. “The Council on Religion and the Homosexual. They work under the protected theological umbrella of Glide Memorial Methodist Church. Their pastor is a most amazing man—Reverend Cecil Williams. Heard of him?”

“No, but I don’t pay attention to anything religious. Too many people use the Bible as an excuse to trash us.”

“Well, *that* church and *that* man are totally different! He’s a black civil rights veteran...Even though he’s straight, he’s the most compassionate preacher in this city.”

“Hmm. Interesting.” I light an Alpine cigarette. “What does this Council do?”

“For one thing, they sued the San Francisco Police Department for the right to assemble, after a big bust at a drag ball in California Hall, and that was way back in 1965. They had a young minister named Ted McIlvenna who organized the Council. He brought heterosexual clergymen and gay leaders together to form the group, mainly as a way to help inner city youth.”

“Really?” I blow smoke into the air and watch it swirl in and out of the narrow rays of sunlight shining through Leo’s bay window. “Like the hustlers and drag queens in the Tenderloin?”

“Exactly! The ball was a fundraiser...the hook being that it was attended by several of San Francisco’s most prominent citizens.” Leo closes his notebook. “The ACLU offered to take the case, but the judge ruled against the police before it even went to trial. Probably the first time in history we had a judge rule in favor of homosexual rights! It was *historical*. The court *finally* recognized our *constitutional* right of assembly.”

“Wow! The police constantly harassed us in Denver.” I frown, rolling my eyes. “They’d come into the bars and check everyone’s ID, young *or* old, then arrest any guy wearing more than one piece of what they considered to be women’s clothing.”

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“Yeah, they used to do that shit here, too. Blatant violation of civil liberties. Winning the right to assemble was a great victory, but the thing is, the Council had *straights* in the front line. Probably necessary back then. But I think gays should *spearhead* their own struggle. Don’t you?”

“Definitely!” I swallow the last of my 7-Up and stifle a burp. “I’ve been listening to Martin Luther King’s speeches and almost everything he said can...should...*does* apply to the rights of gays as much as any other minority. I think it *is* time we stood up and demanded respect. Not gonna be easy, but I’ve decided you and Max have the right idea. I just hope we can convince others. So, any ideas on a name for our group?”

“Oh, yeah. Like I said, I’ve been up half the night—sitting in that little café at Market and Church, drinking coffee, and thinking about what we should do. First, I thought of Homosexual Freedom Committee, but that had the same initials as Household Finance Corporation. Finally, I turned it around and came up with the Committee for Homosexual Freedom. What d’you think?”

“No doubt what *that* means. Goes right to the heart of the matter. *Committee for Homosexual Freedom*. Yes, I *like* how direct it is!”

“Man, Gale! This whole thing...you have any idea what we’re about to get ourselves into?”

I laugh. “Deep and dangerous shit...I know that!”

“You’ve got that right! This is *revolutionary* stuff! *Militant* homosexuals? Up to now, that term would be considered an oxymoron! Don’t know about you, but I’m scared shitless!”

“Well, yeah. Me, too. But we’ve *gotta* do it, *gotta* show America we’re everywhere.” I stand and begin pacing. “That we’re decent human beings—not child molesting monsters.”

Leo nods. “Speaking of *kids*, they’re the whole reason I’m doing this.”

“Wha—?”

“I’m trying to say that...even if John Q. Public doesn’t get it, I want gay teenagers to grow up *without* thinking they’re sick.” Leo holds up a copy of the *Barb*. “If we come out *en masse*, gays everywhere will learn they’re not alone—”

“Yeah! Instead of having their insides eaten away by self-loathing hatred...like I did.”

“Sounds like your childhood was the same as mine—miserable!” Leo clears his throat. “Maybe, once and for all, we can kill the pervert label...stop hiding like social lepers.”

I nod. “And quit marrying poor, unsuspecting females to appear ‘normal.’”

“Oh, man!” Leo puffs out his cheeks. “I had this gay friend who married her high school sweetheart because she couldn’t bear people thinking of her growing into an old maid, so it also works the other way—straight guys get hurt, too. Thousands of marriages are based on fraud—”

“Tell me about it! It’s just not fair to anybody involved.” I grit my teeth and shake my head. “And don’t forget all the gay suicides...*plus* all the *attempted* ones. Hell, I’ve lived *that* nightmare myself.”

“Sad stuff, no question. By the way, I talked to Larry Littlejohn, president of SIR—the Society for Individual Rights...SIR! Get it?”

“I *know* who they are, Leo. That’s where we met...Remember?... I came to the Center to join the staff of *Vector*, right after you took over—”

“Oh, yeah, that’s right. Well, Littlejohn’s the one who asked me to be their editor, so I figured he was progressive like us, but—this morning, I asked him if he could send a support group from SIR to our picket line Monday. He hum-hawed around, mumbled something about a board meeting, and said he didn’t know anyone who wouldn’t lose his job for going public. So I said, ‘How about a *statement* of solidarity?’ Know what his answer was?”

“Gotta check with the lawyers?” I laugh and frown at the same time.

“No, but I’m surprised he didn’t use that one. He said, ‘We shouldn’t be *rocking* the boat. That gays need to continue working *quietly* from the inside or the government’ll come down *hard* on us if we’re not careful.’ You believe it, Gale? I told him, ‘Yeah, and in another thousand years, maybe they’ll stop stoning us in the Middle East...and beating the shit out of us in American high schools.’”

“But didn’t SIR start out more aggressive? Seems like I read that dissidents founded the group after a mutiny...a rebellion against something, but I forget what. You familiar with their history?”

“A little.” Leo goes to the fridge and gets me another 7-Up. “Actually, it’s ironic. A few guys—Bill Beardemphl, Jim Foster, Bill Plath among them—were rebelling against the authoritarianism of an earlier organization. Believe it was called the League for Civil Education. These guys split and formed SIR out of *defiance*—that was in 1964, I think. Main thing was the new group—SIR—had to have a democratic structure.”

“Cool.”

“Even with such a great start, they ended up being more social than anything else...They sponsored parties so guys could dance together... put on

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drag shows...organized bowling leagues, things like that. Those things might be important, but they don't effect political change. The 6th Street SIR Center represented a true milestone when it opened in 1966, since it was the very first non-profit community clubhouse for gays. And you've gotta give them credit; they have over a thousand members now."

"Wow! Bummer they won't help us." Puckering my lips, I rub my index finger over the condensation of my pop can. "What about the Mattachine Society? Weren't they the first to go public? Who's running that outfit?"

"An older guy named Hal Call. Doubt he'll help, though." Leo shrugs. "Right now, all he seems interested in is getting laws against pornography rescinded by the courts. Anyway, Mattachine went through a major reorganization recently—Get *this!*—to purge communists and socialists from the group!"

"Oh, my God!" Chuckling, I light another cigarette. "Hmm. Wonder what happened to all those commies and socialists?"

"So do I! We could use them! Anyway, I don't think Hal would help a radical group like ours...especially since everybody knows we plan to emulate the Black Panthers." Leo chuckles. "The Panthers' Minister of Education was just in the news for passing out *Mao's Little Red Book* to students at Berkeley and San Francisco State" Laughing, Leo shakes his head. "They were trying to draw attention to their cause by freaking people out! You know, for publicity. Did the trick, too! Anyway, Mattachine did a lot for the gay cause when they started, but they've mellowed too much for my taste."

"Too bad!" I get up and stare out the window. "How about the bar organization?"

"The Tavern Guild? Naw. Last thing gay bars want is to piss off the authorities. They're focused on regulation issues and little else. And forget about Guy Strait, with his gay *Citizen's News*, groundbreaking as the paper might be." Holding up one of the issues, Leo waves it in the air. "Mostly tavern news and bathhouse ads. Guy told me he wants to steer clear of controversial—code word for 'radical'—politics. In other words, *us*. A *real* shame. His paper is distributed in nearly *all* the Bay Area's gay businesses. Would've been a fantastic organizing tool."

"Shit! What are these people so afraid of?" I take the *Citizen's News* from Leo and look through its six pages. "Obviously, it's going to take a lot of noise to wake up the people in this city...and this country. In my mind, it's all the same—the mindset that created the Vietnam War is the same

mindset that oppresses homosexuals. Man, this is so frustrating! Can you think of anyone else who might help?"

"I tried to get hold of the city's most famous drag queen, Jose Sarria. He calls himself the Widow Norton, the Nightingale of Montgomery Street."

"Jose Sarria?" Lighting another cigarette, I shake my head. "I'm not familiar—"

"Been around forever. Even had the guts to run for a seat on San Francisco's Board of Supervisors, back in '61. Lost, but got nearly 6,000 votes! Groovy, huh?"

"Yeah!" I flick my ashes into a plaid beanbag ashtray. "Betchya *he'll* help!"

Leo rocks his head sideways, cheeks puffed out. "I thought so, too, but he said he's got his hands full, putting together something he calls 'Imperial Court,' a fund-raising group of female impersonators. He's planning to appoint himself, *herself*, as the Grand—or maybe he said *Royal*—Empress."

* * * *

Sunday night's meeting at my house yields seven diamonds in the rough. The first is Pat Brown, a self-proclaimed Trotskyite hippie, who reminds me of a skinny vegetarian Leo the Lion. After stating, "So this is how the unemployed proletariat lives!" he offers to be the Committee's official grass supplier.

Charles Thorpe, a short, smiley young man with a brown pageboy haircut, shows up with pen and pad in tow, volunteering to be secretary pro tem until official elections can be held.

Stephen Matthews, a tall, afro-haired white guy wearing faded bell-bottoms, rings the doorbell third, offering bed and board in case I'm destitute "because we all have to do what we can, even if our lovers object."

Morgan Pinney, a big-boned, straight-laced-looking man, but for his bushy orange hair, says he's a teacher from San Francisco State College. He's joining because "sometimes you just have to stand up for what you know is right, regardless of the fall-out."

Hibiscus, a devout believer in the insightful power of LSD, floats through the door, looking more like a Jesus disciple of yore than the hippie he tells us he is. His higher consciousness demanded he come.

Sheeza Mann, clearly the progeny of a drag queen crossed with a court jester, enters the house, in a shiny, multi-colored patchwork quilt somehow formed into a body suit. "I'm here because I've suffered more discrimination than one person should experience in ten lifetimes."

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A mustached Chicano youth named Darwin Dias, arrives last, wearing a purple satin shirt, which he proudly introduces as his object d'affection, his fetish. "Since I'm on we'fare 'cause of a so-call mental dis'bilty, got nothin' to lose, so I'm here to help." He offers a toothless but killer smile.

Maybe the picket chant should be: Out of the woodwork and into the streets! God, now I sound prejudiced! These guys are here to openly support me and our civil rights. The suits, except for the teacher, have left us high and dry, by not showing up. The people who came here have guts! And that makes them beautiful.

Once everyone is seated at the long, mahogany dining room table—lighted by two huge antique chandeliers that now seem extremely ostentatious—I stand. "Thanks for coming. I applaud your bravery! Leo and I have talked about this—a lot—and believe what we're about to do is historical. And *hysterical*, according to some people! Ha! But that's okay. It takes strong emotion to fight ignorance. Homosexuals coming out of their closets into the public light of day—in large numbers, like we hope—is something that's never been done before. Leo has convinced me that liberation will come when total honesty is no longer repressed. *Anything less is slavery!* You all need to be aware we are about to scare the devil out of middle America! There may be repercussions, even violence."

Stephen Matthews raises his hand.

"Hey, Stephen, you got a question? Go ahead."

"No question. I just wanted to say I think we're all aware of what we're up against. Otherwise, we wouldn't be here. And I'd sure as hell bet my ass we all agree it's time—*past* time—to stand up for our rights, regardless of the cost. I, for one, am sick and tired of being treated like a second class citizen!"

Responses of, "Right on!" and "Whatever it takes!" make me feel like I'm back in church; their spirit moves me.

"Okay! Let's go for it! Leo—you've got some things to say, don't you?" I take a deep breath and ease into my chair.

Leo stands. For a moment, I flash on the fact that he's taking charge as did the man he resembles so much, Abraham Lincoln. "Sounds like everyone's ready to work!" he says. "First thing, we need to form several small committees—one to make signs, one to distribute leaflets in the bars, another to come up with some chants...."

I lean back, in awe over everyone's enthusiasm. *Wow! I'm so lucky to be part of this ragged, but proud new breed—militant homosexuals—ready to demand their place in the sun! Right on!*

This triumphant memoir chronicles the author's teenage suicide attempt and the real beginning of the Gay Liberation movement, pre-Stonewall, in 1969 San Francisco, where Mr. Whittington was fired for being gay. It's creative non-fiction, written like a novel, with a conservative alter-ego's thoughts inserted to keep it lively. His groundbreaking openly gay philosophy-coming out en masse as a way to enlighten and change the world-leads his comrades to crown him "Gale the Liberator."

BEYOND NORMAL: The Birth of Gay Pride

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