

“Hilarious, exquisite,
empowering stories about
how fabulous we are.”

Inheriting Our Stonewall Legacy

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“Forty? Forty?” Volcanically spewing smoke and ash, Bette Davis bitched about her fate in *All About Eve*: “I’m not twenty-ish. I’m not thirty-ish. Three months ago I was forty years old. Forty. Four O.” In gay years, “Forty” spans two or three queer generations.

One night I met a jaded man sitting on a barstool. Now, this was no ordinary man. (Think George Saunders in *All About Eve* playing “Addison Dewitt” — but on steroids.) And certainly not a typical place. We were in the basement bar of the San Francisco Opera, sipping flutes of champagne between acts of a dreadfully boring piece by Rossini. At least I remember it as boring, because “Addison” told me so. And that’s not all.

“Look, you’re a cute young thing, so let me tell you something,” he said, slightly slurring his consonants. I could tell this wasn’t his first cocktail of the evening. “Don’t ever grow old. You hear?” I compliantly nodded, because anyone standing within a ten-foot radius could hear him perfectly well. With another flourish of his glass he continued. “It’s hell to be forty and gay. Don’t let it happen to you.”

The man adjusted his seat and patted down his graying pate. He intoned his narration so like “Addison” doing his

arch voice-over in the film that I couldn't help but think of La Davis as "Margo Channing" stuck in the snow bemoaning her fate at "the big 4-0." Like her, this man was blasting smoke too. At a little more than half that age, I couldn't imagine how I was going to stop getting there. Still, I listened.

"Age does have its privileges though," he admitted, suddenly shifting tone. "I was at Stonewall, you know. One of the lucky ones. Ever hear of it?"

I replied that, yes, of course, I had heard of the famous riot—the *gay* riot that supposedly set us all free. I'd met so many people who said they were "there" it would take Shea Stadium to hold them all. And yet, with the benefit of the doubt, I politely deferred. Leaning forward to ask him more about those famous June nights, we were both saved by the bell for the final curtain.

Ah, Stonewall at "Forty." 4-0. Stonewall. That magical, mystical place which resides somewhere between Broadway's *Camelot* and *Brigadoon* in our queer consciousness. So near, yet so far ago. What do any of us really know about it?

With verve, a steady hand, and admirable audacity, Jack Fritscher tells us everything we ought to know about those tempestuous times in June 1969. The little girl who sang "Over the Rainbow" had so suddenly just died. Only as quickly to be replaced by a new kind of queen—a queen, as Jack Fritscher writes, with "a bitch slap heard around the world."

Stonewall wasn't the first such action, or rather *reaction* to a police oppression as evil as ever known—just the most famous. It helps when the offices of *The Village Voice* are down the street. That said, why would anyone suddenly care about another gay murder, or suicide, or phony arrest? The river of ruined queer lives was as wide and deep as the Hudson by then. Only this time it made headlines. And just because, Jack Fritscher posits, of one *small* slap in one *big* face. That's all it took. But the faces of the haters always look bigger until they

get figured down to size. In this case, it took a mighty large queen with nothing to lose to do the calculating.

I'll let author Jack Fritscher fill you in on the details of that particular night. But here's a few other things you might want to know. The New York slap that led to a global civil rights insurgence had been practiced elsewhere a few times before. In May 1959, in a shabby Los Angeles coffee shop, queens in Capri pants let the LAPD goons have it for perhaps the first time. Officers from the city's notoriously homophobic police department were harassing the denizens of Cooper's Doughnuts yet once again when tensions snapped.

At first it was the doughnuts that came flying through the air towards the cops. Then paper cups and coffee stirrers and just about everything else that wasn't fastened down by a hair clip. More squad cars were called. Sirens wailed and streets blocked off. A lot of queer folk were arrested and jailed during what was probably the first gay riot in recorded history.

A few years later, in August 1966, it happened again in San Francisco. A bunch of cross-dressed hustlers in Compton's Cafeteria decided that they'd had enough of shakedowned too. Someone threw a cup of coffee in a policeman's face. Yet another slap that resulted in broken windows and a fire. The sissies in the Tenderloin were tired of being picked on and they weren't going to take it anymore.

It was time for a revolution, a riot or two. Perhaps in Barcelona they hurled *empanadas*, in San Paulo each other, in Tokyo maybe just plain old shame. But wherever they were, and whatever they had, the queens flung it hard and fast.

In Greenwich Village, angry protestors marched down the street singing "We are the Stonewall girls. We wear our hair in curls. We wear our dungarees above our nellie knees!" And that was just during the first round of that historic three-night rebellion. Singing defiantly. Right after they had finished ripping the parking meters out of the sidewalk in front of the

rattrap bar forever to be celebrated as the motherlode of a movement.

Comically stirring, Jack Fritscher's pivotal tale of the start of the Stonewall Riot is first of the many worth reading in this *Stonewall* anniversary collection. His nine tales are about gay liberation before and after the June 1969 rebellion. He writes about time and place, and finding one's grace in them. The author is a man of many voices, each exquisitely calibrated to the subject. His "Mrs. Dalloway" may go "that-a-way" picking her flowers at a certain point of time, just as Stonewall had to happen in 1969. But Jack Fritscher gets *us* in every season: we queer men who are under, at, or above that all-defining marker known as "Forty."

I'll take our gay tribe at any age—as sometimes frightful but always fabulous we are. And so does Jack Fritscher, who revels in writing the unvarnished truth. Not only are his stories frequently hilarious, his angle is empowering to know.

This very political year of 2009, driven by the battle for "gay marriage," is no time to shy away from the forty-year-old fight for gay liberation. Life at 4-0 has just begun.

Bette Davis' "Margo Channing" may not have understood the positive side of "Forty." "Addison DeWitt" may not have grown into accepting "Forty." But Jack Fritscher's "Mrs. Dalloway" knows a thing or two about gay survival. As does that other unforgettable doyen of modern letters, "Molly Bloom," whom the author references via James Joyce in "Chasing Danny Boy" in this collection—as well as in his character "Solly Blue" in his memoir-novel *Some Dance to Remember*.

Forty years on, we inheritors of the Stonewall legacy, understand why the nearly-forty "Molly Bloom" has the wisdom to declare that all is good by saying, "And yes I said yes I will say yes."

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