

MEMBERS ONLY

Written by

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*Somewhere in America, a white man (60s)
composes a letter to his son.*

MAN

Dear Son,

You asked a question at dinner the other night that threw me off-balance. I'm not sure why you asked it. Maybe you were just trying to get to know me better. Maybe you're going through something yourself and you were looking for ... I don't know ... guidance. Whatever the reason, your question started me thinking.

At the time I responded that every one is ashamed of something they've done, that's just life, and there's no way to get through it without doing something you wish you hadn't. You pressed me and I couldn't come up with anything specific. I told you that, no, I couldn't think of anything I was ashamed of.

But there is this one thing. I've been arguing with myself whether or not I should share it with you. Can't say I want to. I am truly ashamed. But you asked.

If I don't tell it now, when will I? And if I don't tell it to you ... Well, then no one will ever know or remember what it was like back then. So.

Your mom and I had just divorced. I'd moved to Chicago, for what I thought was going to be a dream job at the brand new Ritz-Carlton in Chicago, managing their mahogany paneled dining room staffed by white gloved waiters. From day one, the job sucked. My boss was a total jerk The pay was terrible and the hours were ridiculous. I wasn't making enough money to pay off my debts from the divorce, and I was determined not to get behind on child-support.

A waiter told me about a way I could make money in my off hours, which meant anytime that wasn't from 8 am to 10 pm He said a new bar had just opened on Rush Street, a few blocks away from the Ritz. Actually, the bar had been there a long time. Alfie's. A cheap watering hole for tourists, salesmen and conventioners from Omaha or Albuquerque or wherever - a sinkhole where they could drink themselves to oblivion and pick up girls, some for hire, so the story goes.

Well, the place was still going to be called Alfie's and nothing about the inside was going to change. Dark. Small. A tiny dance floor in one corner. A mirror ball. Oversize reverberating disco speakers. The kind of place where sunlight is not welcome - a cave off the bustling neon-lit strip that was and is Rush Street.

Overnight Alfie's had morphed from a bar where men met women to a bar where men picked up men.

A gay bar on Rush Street in 1976 was a big deal. Gays were still universally hated and here was this bar in the heart of Chicago's most prominent night strip. Totally in your face.

Well, Alfie's was hiring bartenders, my friend said, and I knew that would be good money. Maybe I could start paying off my debts, while I kept looking for a better job somewhere else.

So, I went to Alfie's after work and applied.

Turns out they weren't hiring bartenders. They had all they needed. But the 'owner', Dan Reilly, (more about him later), offered me a job as bouncer.

Me. A bouncer. I wasn't a little guy back then but I wasn't big either. Six feet, skinny, maybe 150 pounds and about as tough as a feather. I'd never been in a fight in my life. I was hardly the guy to break up anything or stand guard over anything.

But it wasn't like that, Dan said. My job was just to keep the straights out. Guys who had been coming to this bar for years and were coming back and had to be told that they couldn't come in anymore. Or tourists stopping by for the first time. Either way. If they were straight, they weren't welcome.

How do I do that, I asked and Dan said I could sit and watch him do it that night and try it myself, and if I liked it and if I showed a talent for it, then I had the job.

The pay wasn't as good as I had hoped, but it was income and I was desperate for cash and maybe something would open up behind the bar, so I said yes.

That night, Dan showed me what to do.

Oh, yeah, I was going to tell you more about Danny Reilly. It turned out that he wasn't really the owner.

All the gay bars in town had front men who claimed to be the owner, but they weren't. They were owned by the mob. That's how it was. Everyone knew it. Gay bars were cash business, a lot of cash, and only the mob had the connections and the muscle to run them.

Reilly wasn't gay himself, though he pretended to be gay to the patrons. I never could figure out why. He even, for a while, had his 'gay boyfriend' working behind the bar - a good-looking Italian kid named Billy, but Billy wasn't any more gay than Danny Reilly. I figured Billy was connected and was just working there to earn his stripes and maybe keep an eye on Reilly.

Oh, and this: Every Saturday at closing, like clockwork, a south side Chicago Alderman, Clarence something, I can't recall his last name, ... no wait ... Kelly. Cliff Kelly. Not Clarence. Clifford. Cliff Kelly. Anyway, Kelly stopped by for a drink with Dan Reilly every Saturday, just as the bar closed, and Reilly always slid a fat envelope across the table to him. That took care of the city. As for the cops, the same cop stopped by once or twice a week to take his cut. It was the Chicago way.

The ironic thing is that Cliff Kelly, the alderman, was black. He had an Irish name, but he was black. Money is money. Everyone got their cut.

Telling gay people from straight people isn't all that hard when you're the bouncer at a gay bar after midnight and guys are on the prowl. I read an article recently that said that gaydar is a myth. Some institute did a 'scientific study' to test the theory that gay men can identify other gay men through some mysterious sixth sense, and this study proved gaydar does not exist. That study was wrong. I was accurate 99 percent of the time. Sometimes it was the walk, or a gesture or clothes or something they said, but mostly it was the eyes. I'd look into their eyes and they would look into mine and I'd know. I made a few mistakes, but not many; let in a few guys who didn't belong. They figured out pretty quickly they were in the wrong place, and got out of there.

Here's how it worked, what Danny taught me that first night. A straight man or a pack of them would walk up to the door, and I would say, I'm sorry sir, this is a private club now. Members only. That usually did the trick and they moved on. Sometimes they would ask how to get a membership, and I'd say you had to be invited. Then they'd ask how to get invited, and I would say there was no way to seek an invitation. You were either invited or you weren't. And then while they were standing there maybe a gay guy would walk up and I let him in past the straight guys,, and I'd tell the straight guys he was a regular. Regular 'member'. It was bullshit, but it worked.

Here's the thing I was ashamed of.

My first night I let in three or four black guys who came together. They were queer as me, okay? But Danny came over to me and said what was I doing letting them in? He said I couldn't let black guys in (only he didn't call 'em black, you know what I mean?). He said I couldn't let 'em in or the word would get out that blacks were welcome at Alfie's and then the place would fill up with blacks and the 'regular' patrons would stay away.

What am I supposed to do, I asked, and he said tell them you need to see their 'membership card'.

And I said, okay.

I should have told him to go screw himself.

Night after night, those three long summer months I worked the door at Alfie's, I turned black guys away because they didn't have membership cards, and I let white guys in because, well, because they were white.

I've never talked about this with anyone. I needed money, but that's not an excuse. Not a good one anyway.

In the fall I got another job, a good job, so I quit working at the Ritz and at Alfie's. I'd still go back to Alfie's now and then, but it didn't matter whether I went there or some other bar, they were all the same. They were all owned by the mob and none of them admitted blacks. There was always a doorman asking for membership cards.

If I could, I'd look up every one of those guys I turned away and apologize. But I can't. So I'll just apologize to you. I'm sorry I wasn't the man I should have been. I'm sorry I didn't tell Dan Reilly ... what I should have. I'm sorry.

Love,

Pop