THREE STORIES OF GAY LIBERATION

RONALD GOLD

I. PSYCHIATRY

When I was thirteen I told my sister I thought I really liked boys, and it was right after that I saw my first psychiatrist. He shot me full of sodium pentothal, and all I really remember about him are his big, round, thick glasses on his big, white, moon face, very, very close to my face. I was scared out of my wits.

The next one was when I was fifteen. I'd just entered college, and I wanted to move out of my parents' apartment—which they thought required medical attention. This pleasantly rumpled psychiatrist gave me his diagnosis: homosexuality. He told me I should get away from my mother. I was grateful for *that*, and three years later I got him to write a note for me to the draft board.

The draft board psychiatrist asked me, "Where do you cruise?" I told him, but he still didn't seem convinced I wasn't putting on an act, until he saw the book I was carrying. "T. S. Eliot!" he said, and checked off the fag box on his form.

At nineteen I went to school in Berkeley, California and soon I was having a thing with an ex-convict named Frank and Eddie (he told some people his name was Frank and some people his name was Eddie). Anyway, it wasn't going very well, so I

went to the university counseling department and got this psychiatrist who didn't seem much older than I was. He kept his watch on his desk facing *him*, and once I asked him what time it was. He wouldn't tell me. He wanted to know the *real* reason I'd asked the time.

So I quit him, quit Frank and Eddie, quit school, moved to San Francisco, and became a junkie. After I got busted, I moved back to New York, lived with my parents, worked for my father, and spent my entire paycheck every week on junk. Except one week, age twenty-four, I decided to do what my friend Carl Solomon had done: pound on the door of the Psychiatric Institute, demanding instant entry. Except they didn't take junkies. And I had missed my weekly connection and was getting sick. So I gave all my money to somebody I didn't know—who never showed up with the dope—and I *walked* from the Bronx to midtown for a matinee of *Wonderful Town*.

I was really sick by intermission, so my sister took me to a doctor—and *another* psychiatrist, who shipped me off to the Menninger Clinic. So I was in Topeka, Kansas for five years, and I can actually say I got something out of it. I had a nice place to be locked up in for a while (so I couldn't get to the junk); I finished college; went to work; joined the Topeka Civic Theater; learned to play bridge—and learned that there were plenty of people, including psychiatrists, who were just as crazy as I was, and doing more or less okay.

And, when I got back to New York, at age twenty-nine, I found it wasn't true that I hadn't solved my biggest psychological problem. I found a lover; and right away I began to see that *my homosexuality wasn't a problem*. That homosexuality isn't a problem. So ten years later I was ready for Stonewall. And my next encounter with psychiatry, at forty-one, was as the leader of a zap by the Gay Activists Alliance, at the behaviorists convention. You remember the behaviorists: They're the ones who

show you pictures of gorgeous naked men (or women, if you're a lesbian) and then they give you an electric shock.

So we took over one of their sessions and there I met Dr. Robert Spitzer, who turned out to be a member of the American Psychiatric Association committee that could take us off the sick list. Well, I never let go of Dr. Spitzer. He got us a meeting with his committee (news of which I leaked to the *New York Times*), and he got us a major panel discussion at the 1972 APA convention in Hawaii.

There were five psychiatrists on the panel, including Drs. Bieber and Socarides, the preeminent sickness theorists of the day. And me. My speech was called "Stop It, You're Making Me Sick!" I told them that their sickness label provided the biggest rationale for our oppressors, and was the *cause* of our self-hate. I got a standing ovation—from 3,000 psychiatrists.

But that wasn't the best part. The best part was that night. I'd wound up my speech with a plea for the gay psychiatrists present to come out of the closet en masse. But of course they didn't. Instead, something popularly known as "the Gay P.A." was having a bash at a local gay bar (something it seems it did at every convention on the night of the annual ball). I'd got invited, and I invited Dr. Spitzer, since he'd said he didn't know there *were* gay psychiatrists.

I had told him to keep his mouth shut, but when he saw all those heads of prestigious psychiatry departments and the head of the Transactional Analysis Association and the man who gave out all the training money in the United States, he couldn't stop blubbering questions to everyone in sight. The grand dragons of the Gay P.A. were incensed. "Get him out of here," one of them said. And I said "Fuck you, he's here to *help* us, which *you* sure as hell . . . "

Just then an attractive young man in full army uniform walked into the bar, took one look at me, threw himself into my

arms, and wept. He was an army psychiatrist from Georgia who'd been at our panel and, after my speech, had vowed to go to a gay bar for the first time in his life. And now here he was, with me and all those gay psychiatrists. He was awash in tears. And Dr. Spitzer was moved to action. That night, he and I drafted the resolution that, a year later, officially took homosexuality off the sick list. The world was round.

Oh well, I don't want to leave out my most recent psychiatric experience. This was some years ago, when I was sixty-two, and my lover Luis, who died at the end of that year, was seeing a shrink. This *openly gay* psychiatrist wrote me a note to say he wanted to talk to me about Luis. I called and asked if I'd be charged for that, and he said not to worry, we'd talk about that when I saw him. Well, he never brought it up, even when our session went on for two hours. So I thought this is a very nice psychiatrist, and I hoped, as I left, to see him again under better circumstances. He sent me a bill for $200.

II. POLITICS

Early in 1972, before I quit my job at *Variety* to work full-time for nothing as media director of the Gay Activists Alliance, I had a chance to combine the two jobs by accepting an invitation from one of the movie companies to go on a Florida junket. The movie was *The Candidate*, about an aspirant to the presidency, and the junket was to spend a couple of days on a train with the actors, et al., who were simulating a whistle-stop campaign trip, timed to arrive in Miami for the start of the '72 Democratic Convention.

In my GAA persona, Miami was exactly where I wanted to be. So I said yes to United Artists, which seemed to make them ecstatically happy (*Variety* reporters made a point of never

going on junkets or writing the puff pieces they were designed to produce). So I was flown down to Florida on a tiny, luxurious plane with only one other passenger, the candidate himself, Robert Redford.

Seated in our comfy chairs on either side of an elegant polished-wood desk, we got along fine. Redford told me how much his ranch in Montana had stimulated the ecological and environmental concerns that provided his political focus, and I told him about my intention to lobby, at the convention, for the first-ever gay-rights platform plank. As we got off the plane, headed for our separate cars on the train, we applauded each other's political goals and wished each other well.

My train mates—reporters for other trade papers, local dailies, and regional weeklies—were in full party mode when I arrived, sloshing down the free booze and smoking up a storm. I guess I must have interviewed a couple of people and witnessed enough of the whistle-stop bit to write my puff piece when I got back to New York, but all I really remember from the train trip is a pleasantly woozy haze.

In Miami I joined about a dozen others from GAA, all of us crammed into a single hotel room (these were the poverty-stricken days of gay liberation), where we divided up the tasks for the days ahead. Each of us was scheduled to appear before several state caucuses, where we'd tell the delegates why it would be good for the party and the country to extend civil rights protections to millions of gay taxpayers and potential voters.

The reception I got at some of the caucuses was decidedly chilly, with questions ranging from frozen polite to downright offensive. But Louisiana was a highlight, with Governor Edwards, the chairman of the delegation, positively oozing Southern courtesy and charm. He treated me, I thought, the way he might have treated Indira Gandhi, as something a bit

exotic perhaps, but with all the deference due a lady of consequence. Still, I wasn't much encouraged about inclusion of a gay-rights plank.

The others from GAA had similar discouraging reports, but we were counting on a boost from George McGovern, who'd pledged his support and seemed like the likely nominee. So I was especially looking forward to my appearance before the last of my assigned caucuses, McGovern's home state of South Dakota. I got to the caucus room early, but another presentation seemed to be taking place, so I waited outside till that was over and was just about to enter when I was lifted off my feet by two burly middle-aged men, who carried me, as fast as they could, their hands on my shoulders and under my elbows, screaming and kicking through the hotel hallways to the stairwell off the lobby, where they held me, still screeching bloody murder, for what seemed like half an hour.

Maybe because my assailants were wearing convention badges and looked like cops, nobody inquired what was going on as I hurtled through the halls, but even when the three of us were at the bottom of the stairwell and I was making all that noise, nobody stopped for more than a couple of seconds—until one woman looked down, recognized me and said, "What are you doing down there?" It was Shirley MacLaine, whom I'd recently interviewed for *Variety*.

MacLaine, who was emerging as a power at the convention, knew the men for the upper-echelon McGovern lieutenants they were, and she motioned them off as I explained my predicament. Then she pieced the thing together. Just before I was about to make my caucus presentation, McGovern had won something called "The Texas Challenge," which meant that he was a shoo-in as the Democratic presidential candidate, and the press was expected to descend on the South Dakota delegation en masse, to hear the homefolks' reaction. And a gay

activist's presentation was the last thing the McGovern boys wanted to be happening at the time.

Maybe something was still going on. We made a mad dash for the caucus room. Not a soul in sight. I made a fruitless effort to tell my story to the press. Have you heard about people "listening with their eyes crossed?" Now I know what that means. Not a word, as far as I know, ever appeared in print. And soon thereafter, McGovern put out the word to his delegates: Vote against the gay-rights plank.

So, escorted by one movie star, saved by another, that ought to be the end of the story. But, for me, it wasn't. A week later I went to Milwaukee to cover the annual convention of IATSE, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees.

IATSE is the union of blue-collar workers in the film and theater industries: Stagehands, carpenters, grips—even movie-theater projectionists—and its leadership, in 1972, was an ossified bunch not in the least noted for a liberal political stance. So the keynote speaker for the opening session was made to order—Al Barkan, political director of the AFL-CIO. He was there to tell the members that the interests of working stiffs were in defeating George McGovern and reelecting Richard Nixon as president.

"McGovern," Barkan said about halfway through, "cares more about *FAGS* than honest working people." And he was greeted by appreciative hoots and cackles from a good part of his audience. At this point I cast journalistic objectivity to the winds and, seated right up front at the press table, I emitted a series of spontaneous boos and hisses.

Some stares, but generally an amazed silence. And the only public mention of the incident came during a discussion period that afternoon, when a young woman rose to complain (looking straight at me) about Barkan's bigoted remarks, and, not incidentally, to note that even though IATSE's membership

included a significant number of women, not one of them was represented on the union's staff or board. Hoots and guffaws from the same people who'd found Barkan's line about fags so entertaining. It was then that I first realized that the men who spew hatred and violence against gays are the same men who *hate women!* From their faces and voices it was clear to me that, to these men, the brave young woman who spoke was like an escapee from the zoo. The amazing and hilarious thing about her was that she could stand up on her hind legs and talk at all.

That night, fairly early, there was a knock on my hotel-room door. It was a poster boy for blue-collar unionism. A T-shirt and jeans. All muscles and electric glow. Could he come in a minute? Gulp, I said. So he sat down on the edge of the bed and thanked me for booing and hissing. He wished he'd had the nerve, he said. So I told him a bit about GAA. We talked a while. He stayed the night.

The next night, and the next, and every night that week, there were knocks at the door, gorgeous hunks who wanted to thank me for being brave. Some nights there was more than one knock, and as one man entered, another, who'd been chatting, got up to leave. But there wasn't a night where somebody didn't stay until morning. It was one of the happiest weeks of my life.

You know, of course, that Nixon won the election. I'd sworn I wouldn't, but I voted for McGovern.

III. HONORARY LESBIAN

Back in the '70s (a time before recorded history to some of you, I know) I was a prominent gay activist, and my name shows up in lots of gay-history books. I don't look at most of them, but I was interviewed extensively for a book called *Out for Good* which got a good review in the *Times*. So I snuck into St. Mark's

Bookshop, and looked myself up in the index. There I was for pages and pages.

So I read them quite gleefully, sitting on a barstool (I guess St. Mark's can't afford lounge chairs) since, much to my amazement, the facts were straight—excuse the expression—and I wasn't misquoted once. Then I got to the last entry, in a chapter on the relations between gay men and lesbians. And I discovered that my old boss Jean O'Leary had told her interviewer that I, Ronald Gold, was "the most sexist man" she'd ever met.

Wee-ll! While Jean was at the National Gay Task Force, I wrote every word of every article and every word of every letter she signed her name to. Most especially, I wrote *all* the stuff about how lesbianism is a feminist issue, the stuff that gained Jean her reputation as a prominent "feminist theorist."

The only time I refused to be Jean's ghostwriter was when she asked me to write her piece for the first-ever coffee-table–size lesbian sourcebook. Seems the book had a section for articles by "friends" of lesbians and I had volunteered. But no men were allowed! So I was damned if I'd masquerade as Jean O'Leary.

Oh, and recently, *after* the interview where she nailed me for posterity, she went right on with her time-honored practice of calling me from time to time—friendly as a fuzzy bear—for advice and recollections about this and that.

I've never confessed this before, but I was *in love* with Jean O'Leary. And why not? She was fresh-faced and electric: a born leader. Just the type I like. Under the circumstances, I didn't make carnal advances, but I certainly understand how an amazing string of famous and infamous lesbians were sucked into her orbit, so to speak. I even had the honor of providing a shoulder to cry on for a couple of those she dumped (including an aide to Jimmy Carter who Jean used to get a White House meeting, then left out to dry in the political shithouse).

Do you think it's odd that gay old me should confess to passion for a (gasp) *lesbian*? Let me tell you a little story.

I was walking along lower Third Avenue a couple of years back, and in front of me was Ms. Sexy Broad. In jeans and a T-shirt. Long hair down to her waist. And a very nice ass (not one of those big, pear-shaped contraptions most women seem to have; but a nice, tight little ass). And behind me, close to the sidewalk, was Mr. Macho Youth, on a bicycle. Whistling. Smacking his lips, and calling out endearments to Ms. Sexy. Well, Mr. Macho and I arrived at the same moment in line with Ms. Sexy, and both of us were amazed to discover she had a moustache and a beard. (No, not a bearded lady. An actual man.) Well, young Macho sped off in a panic, and I was left to think, *the reason they give men and women different clothes and hair styles is to discourage homosexuality.* So we can all be fruitful and multiply.

But what gets me is that *gay people* use these arbitrary gender assignments to discourage heterosexuality. ("Whoa, there's this adorable boy; whoops, it's a woman.") Why do we do that? Because we're hung up in the homophobic notion that we're gay because we can't help it. After all, who'd be gay if they could help it? Well I would! I choose to be gay because it's a lot better and easier to relate to people based on who I am as an individual, not on the roles assigned to men and women. But I also choose to acknowledge that when I see a woman on the street who gives me that sexual frisson I usually reserve for men, it's not just because I mistook her for a man; there's something about *her* I like. That glow. That electric spark. All that stuff I saw in Jean O'Leary.

Maybe she thought I was sexist because I thought she was sexy. You'll have to ask her. I don't think I'm talking to her. Oh, and I guess I'll show up at this year's Gay Pride March as usual, wearing my "honorary lesbian" button.

EPIPHANIES

BRENT NICHOLSON EARLE

BRENT NICHOLSON EARLE *has been a contributing member of the artistic community in New York City for over thirty-five years, as an actor, writer, stage manager, lecturer, photographer, optical designer, and art gallery administrator. He is better known, however, as an athlete and activist. From his ultramarathons to his many arrests with ACT UP, he has been on the front lines of the battle against AIDS since the early '80s. He was also a charter director for thirteen years, and is now an honorary life member, of the Federation of Gay Games.*

Stonewall thirty-five . . . what a milestone. For me, Stonewall not only represents the birth of the gay liberation movement. It has always been a personal marker for the beginning of my life in New York. I moved to the city in 1969—one week out of high school and two weeks before the Stonewall uprising.

The first gay bar I ever stepped foot in was the Stonewall—Easter break my junior year in 1968. I met my first love there that night, Paul Deibert—trim build, gray eyes, preppy but really cute—leaning against an incongruous wishing well in that grungy rear anteroom. Of course, in '69 I thought preppy was pretty hot. I'd never seen any of the Colt men before or the