

# The Nassau Review



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## The Bar, 1982

*Creative Nonfiction by Nina Golden Seavey*

### I

Herb White was living with a much younger man, not much older than a boy really. That's what probably saved him. Herb owned a bar on P Street in the heart of Washington, DC. He named it after himself: "Herb's." When I arrived on my first day, I looked up at the sign and wondered, "Is it pronounced Herb's with an H? Like his name?" or "Herbs, pronounced without the H? Like a spice?" Finally, I decided it was "Herb's with the H" because of the apostrophe and, as I soon came to learn, Herb had an ego that would definitely encourage the use of his name on a sign that large out front.

I had been bouncing around for a couple of years since college, now finding myself at 2121 P Street in Dupont Circle walking down the short flight of stairs under a sign that I wasn't quite sure how to pronounce. I heard they were hiring a bartender.

Herb was 50-something. Paunchy, stringy gray hair in comb-over, a real New Yorker transplanted to the DC. As an expat New Yorker, Herb's main goal was to bring even just a small slice of the New York glitter of Andy Warhol, Truman Capote, and Cornelia Guest to the southern backwoods of Washington DC. As a way of stating that intention he named the large round table at the center of his restaurant "The Algonquin." Herb's brought artists and writers and musicians together in smokey extravaganzas that lasted well past the District's enforced 1 AM last call. I used to say that every night was a party waiting to happen. It was my job to keep the party going. And what a party it was—with shrieking laughter and shouted conversations over the bar that was frequently three or four deep. It was gay. Really, it was GAY. And that was the point.

Herb's was about a half block from what was known as the P Street Beach. Unlike New York or LA where bath



houses and gay bars hosted hundreds of gay men at any hour of the day or night, Washington, in the early '80's, was still firmly in the closet. It was a place where furtive encounters took place in the dark. Outside. Usually anonymously. Like the ones at the "Beach"—trysts conducted at the base of the hill that sloped down from the 22nd Street Bridge connecting Georgetown to Dupont Circle. On any given night, one might meet a congressman or a high-ranking Cabinet official or a judge who mixed with a steady stream of mostly young men who'd just had a few cocktails on the block—either at Herb's, or at The Frat House across the street, or at The Fireplace down on the corner. They were looking for a "quick one." That's what's they'd always say, "I'm going to the Beach for a quick one."

And then there was me: a twenty-something Jewish woman eager to find a husband—preferably a doctor or a lawyer—definitely a fish out of water. Herb liked me because I had experience, and he said I looked like a "Kelly Girl," very efficient and easy on the eyes. I liked working there because I knew I would never have to worry about being hit on by the clientele when I had to work late into the night. And I needed money, now, fast, a lot of it. I was broke, and the Gay Scene in DC was exploding with Herb's at its epicenter. I parachuted deep into a world that I never knew existed and was welcomed by the mostly male staff in the way you would receive an interesting, but odd, foreigner. For my part, I embraced the opportunity with such a singular, enthusiastic commitment that, at some point in the two years I worked there, I actually came to worry that there were no more straight men living in America.

My co-workers became my best pals: Curtis, Herb's lover, was young, certainly not older than 20, and definitely not old enough to consume alcohol in a bar, which he did in copious amounts. Curtis was tall with long, crazy hair, and he lived in Herb's house in hip, chic Adam's Morgan. He had big plans, none of them he could afford for himself of course.



But he had designs on Herb's money. As Herb's young lover, it was clear Curtis saw the transactional nature of his May-December relationship: He would be Herb's Boy Candy, and Herb would support him, first, in Curtis's calculation, by letting him work in the restaurant and then later as his financier. The former, it turned out, to Curtis's ultimate dismay, was all Herb would ever be willing to concede.

There was Jeffrey, who was rotund and had a great hearty laugh which we heard often. And Mason, who was tall and very good-looking in that planned, GQ kind of way. From what I could tell, Mason hated all women—me, in particular. There was Daniel who was serious in general and definitely serious about the restaurant business. He wanted to be a chef one day. There was Steven who was very young (we never knew how young) and blond and preppy and had sex with anyone who would have him. He broke a personal record by having a “relationship” with Mason that lasted an entire week. He wanted to be a model.

And then there was Russell. Russell wanted to become a woman and was exploring hormone treatments to make the transition. I thought, “Are you crazy? Do you know how much easier men have it than women?” I'd never known anyone who wanted to be a woman before—someone who was literally making the choice to cede his privileged life status. It was interesting to me. I liked Russell, and he asked me a lot of questions about being a woman.

So that was our crew. There were others of course, including the entire Thai kitchen staff who spoke no English. But this small core of the boys and me formed a solid, if somewhat motley, rag-tag family.

## II

As a bartender, I used to have a motto: “Nothing good ever happened after midnight.” It's after midnight when dark, unexpected, inexplicable things have a way of happening. Most of these experiences are the result of fatigue and bad judgment fueled by alcohol and drugs. But it's more than that. There's a

certain aura of the underside of life after midnight. If there was going to be a bar fight where I'd have to call the cops, it always happened after midnight. If someone was going to try to rob the bar, it happened after midnight. If one of the boys was going to go on a bad bender, it always happened after midnight, too. And there was always a bender, every night.

It started like clockwork: sometime around the clock striking 12—one by one, the boys would begin to disappear. They'd ask me for a shot, they'd go into the bathroom, do a popper, and head out to the Beach for a quick one. They'd always turn to me and call over their shoulder, "I'll be right back." Sometimes they'd had an encounter in the men's room, so they were already on a roll. Only the hard-core partiers were still roaming the street; the amateurs had already headed for home. There weren't a lot of words exchanged. It was intense and fast. Fifteen minutes later, they'd be right back on the floor ready to work. Fifteen minutes, tops, each one of them would be gone.

Around 2 AM, we'd lock up and head over to Badlands to dance. They were open until 4 AM on Fridays and Saturdays, and it was always packed. The poppers, the sweat, the acrid scent of tequila, the smoke. I reeked. But I was the only one who didn't reek of sex.

After several months of the this "never say no" merry-go-round, I was standing in the middle of the bar smoking a cigarette, enjoying the lull in the orders. It was just about midnight, and the cycle was just about to begin again. I suddenly had a thought. It wasn't a brilliant thought. In hindsight, it seems like an obvious thought. But at the time, it seemed like a revelation: "Nothing good can come of this," I thought. "It's too much. It's too raw. It's totally out of control." It wasn't just the late nights, the cigarettes, the drugs, and the alcohol; that's the bar business. It was the sex. It was like neon sex. It was everywhere. All the time. It was blinding and agitated and constant sex. "Was I prudish," I thought to myself? I didn't think so. My celibacy was only the result of my worry that were no more straight men left in America, certainly not in



the bubble that I currently inhabited. No, this was different from a question of morality. This was otherworldly, almost nightmarish-like sex. It was frantic, toxic sex. "No, nothing good can ever come of this," I thought to myself.

### III

It was lunchtime when Brian walked in. He'd been a manager at Herb's for a while. I didn't know him well as he worked days and I usually worked nights. But I'd picked up a shift when the door opened, and Brian walked in very slowly, almost as if he'd had an operation from which he was having a hard time recuperating. He sat down on the banquette at a table for two just across from the bar. I looked at him and said in my typically unfiltered Midwestern way, "Brian, you don't look so good, how're you doing?" "Fine" he said, without too much conviction. I waited. I noticed that no one had come to take his order. He didn't need a menu; he worked there and knew everything on it. But still, someone needed to wait on him. That area was known as "Station 1." That afternoon, those were Jeffrey's tables. I shouted, "Jeffrey, table up!" He knew already, but his back was turned. He rotated slowly, tentatively walked over, and standing at an odd distance from the table, took Brian's order.

What happened next really caught my attention. All of the normally chatty waitstaff went quiet, their near-constant barrage of insults and gossip suddenly abandoned. As if following the lead of the waitstaff, the small number of diners modulated their voices until the only thing you could hear was the clanking of the dinnerware and glasses being lowered into the bus buckets. I'd never heard such silence at Herb's. Brian poked at his food shrouded in that silence. The normally quick words exchanged by everyone on the staff when someone who was "in the family" came in to eat never occurred. Brian paid his bill and slowly walked out with the same tortured gait as when he walked in. And then Jeffrey did something that really surprised me. He gathered up the dishes on Brian's table, including the salt and pepper shakers, in a towel, making sure

not to touch any of it with his bare hands. He then quickly dropped the entire package into the trash, making a large CRASH amidst the crowded, silent restaurant. He instructed the bus boy to sanitize the table and banquettes with ammonia. Jeffrey's ever-present jovial demeanor was gone, everyone averted their eyes, and no one made a sound. All I could think was "What the hell . . ."

Brian died two weeks later.

#### IV

The conversations started in whispers that didn't include me. Really, I wasn't part of their "family." Ours was an alliance of proximity and convenience—the kind of relationships that you form when you go to summer camp, or are in a class in college together, or, well, when you drink together regularly in a bar. Once time passes and people's circumstances change, the lack of true connection reveals cracks. Those cracks become chasms, and the next thing you know, you find yourself in ever-rarer communication saying, "Let's do lunch!" without any intention of doing so. The rupture becomes complete.

And so, there were whispers: in the smoking area in the corner in the kitchen, at the far end of the bar where I set up the drinks, at the front door just before midnight before one of the boys was on his way out for a "quick one" at the Beach. I could overhear snippets of those whispers: ". . . cancer. . . cough . . . hospice . . ." and men's names I didn't recognize. Sometimes I would read the newspaper to find out what might be behind those whispers. Despite my elevated status as bartender in one of the hottest bars in town, this didn't feel like my conversation to have. Bartenders are good at figuring out when to walk away from people talking about something they shouldn't or don't want to hear. This seemed like one of those "walk away from" conversations.

Plus, *The Washington Post* didn't really write too much about what sounded like these whispers. But the local gay paper, *The Washington Blade*, did. July 10, 1981. Front page—but below the fold—read the headline, "Rare, Fatal, Pneumonia Hits Gay



Men,” with the kicker, “*May Be Linked to Sexually Transmitted Virus.*” There had been numerous follow-up articles that the gay community read, but not many of us on the outside.

“That’s what this was about,” I realized. It had to do with Brian and others that I knew but hadn’t seen in a while. How many of the boys had had sex with Brian? Probably a lot of them. How many men had Brian had sex with down at the Beach? A lot.

But surely, if people were dying of a disease that was this transmissible, then people everywhere would talk about it. Nope. President Reagan wouldn’t speak the word “AIDS” until September 1985, a full four years into the epidemic. *The New York Times* didn’t cover it on the front page until 1983. But this was the early 80’s, and my bubble was bursting.

## V

Jeffrey disappeared. I heard he’d had a cough, and then he stopped coming to work. Was it his contact that day with Brian as his waiter that had somehow sealed his fate? No way. But it did make you think . . . and I began to worry about me. Obviously, I wasn’t having sex with any of these guys, but I was working with them. We were touching, kissing hello and good-bye, sharing cigarettes, and drinking from the same glass. I stopped doing all that. The boys seemed to understand, or at least they silently acquiesced to my distance. The crack in the earth was beginning. It was made worse when right-wing political activists began proselytizing about the new illness, saying it was the “Gay Scourge Disease.” That rattled me. Did they know something I didn’t? What did I know? Nothing. It seemed like no one knew anything. After all, hadn’t even I thought there was something out of the bounds of sanity in the way we were living? It all started to make me really worried.

But none of that was what bothered me the most. It was Jeffrey’s girlfriend. Yes, his girlfriend. Jeffrey was from a small town in Oklahoma. To maintain his cover with his family and friends back home, he had a girl to whom he was engaged. She would come to DC periodically, and they would sleep



together. She had no idea of Jeffrey's double life. But now his duplicity put her life in jeopardy. I had never even met her. But I was desperately worried because, unbeknownst to her, soon her earth was about to crack as well. It was inevitable. Especially when Jeffrey died.

Slowly, steadily, the waves of illness rolled in. Mason became sick and died. Steven became sick and died. Russell became sick and died. All of them in their 20's and early 30's. Beautiful, sparkling, gorgeous young men. They all died, except for a select few.

Daniel lived because he had been serious about the work and studiously stayed out of trouble. Herb had forbidden Curtis to engage in sexual encounters outside of their relationship, a relic of his previously monogamous relationship with his ex-wife, a union that yielded two daughters before Herb divorced her and turned to Curtis. Curtis, not wanting to risk his plans-in-need-of-financing, stayed the course. It saved them both.

For all of us, the party was over. I moved further and further away from my "P Street Family." I didn't go to their funerals. I had never touched death in any way and had no clue as to how to confront their youthful, tortured demise. The chasm widened. I decided it was time for me to get back to real life, my protected life, away from the virus.

I quit Herb's in 1984. It was easy for me to walk away—too easy. I had never truly been part of that world to begin with, so I just slid back into my own. I had no real ties into what had evolved into a culture of disease and death. What became the era of AIDS was their world; that was their people, not my own. I stuffed my memories into my bag and left—not turning or calling anything over my shoulder as I departed.

I married in 1985 (not to a doctor or a lawyer, but a college professor), and Curtis came to the wedding. He was still wonderful and wild and full of big, unrealizable, unfinanced plans. We promised to keep in touch. I never saw him again.

\* The names in this essay have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals—all except Herb's as his name is on the restaurant's marquee.

