



The Days Of Wine And Gay Bars

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He had me at merlot.

From the minute Dan opened the door, I knew he was different. It was *his* door to *his* apartment with *his* Camry parked in front of the curb. The last car-less bozo who'd asked for my phone number slept a mere fifteen feet from his mom, having opted for six months of home arrest rather than three months at the Grey Bar Hotel.

Given the conga line of losers who comprise my dating past – most notably the Walt Disney employee who, just before Halloween, turned a profit peddling Mickey Mouse costumes to children on a Burbank street corner - I'd had no reason to believe Leslie's San Diego friend, Dan, would rescue me from the cesspool of singles in Los Angeles.

I didn't wear any make-up, pulled on a coffee-stained sweater, slicked my hair into a ponytail, and popped a stick of Fruit Stripe into my mouth. Leslie had offered an Altoid but, personally, I'm against nasal fire. I didn't care about masking the tequila breath I'd earned from draining a pitcher of margaritas that afternoon. I just craved the five juicy flavors that would last for at least six good chews.

Driving toward Long Beach, Leslie reported that Dan, like her and formerly myself, wrote for the *Los Angeles Daily Journal*.

Fabulous – the legal trade publication that stole my soul for two years until I wrestled it back. Unfortunately, my redemption occurred after my friend Jill and I drank a bucket of booze one night and, at 3 a.m., concluded that I should quit. Immediately. My inebriated accomplice further reasoned that since I had some free time due to me, she would call in sick and the two of us should catch the 5 a.m. flight to Las Vegas. Jill packed a bag, inexplicably complete with her bathrobe and bridesmaid dress, and we headed for LAX.

First, though, I stopped at the downtown office to box up my desk and email my editors that I would not be back. I even spelled some names wrong just to underscore how little they meant to me. Jill and I laughed all the way to the airport, until the ticket agent announced that we had booked our flight out of Burbank, not LAX. It was just as well. Jill passed out in the car on the way home.

“Donna, this is my friend, Dan. Dan, Donna,” Leslie's voice snapped my mind back to Dan's front porch where a gorgeous, blue-eyed brunette extended his hand and smiled, exposing snow-white teeth. My cheeks flamed like Rudolph's nose. *Why didn't I do my hair? Why didn't I take that Altoid?*

While none of the folks sipping wine inside his apartment were dressed in top hats or tails, a quick scan confirmed I was the only one wearing a portion of the day's menu. I crossed my arms over my chest as Dan poured Leslie and me a glass of merlot, inviting us to look around his new pad. I felt him watch me clop across his hardwood floors, probably wondering whether the platform heels would scuff the varnish.

“Great shoes,” he said.

Perfect. He's gay.

I nodded in acknowledgement and secretly vowed to patronize Nine West for all future footwear needs if we ended up together. No sooner had he complimented my shoes than he knocked my socks off. Inside his office nook sat the three most beautiful things I'd ever spied in a man's apartment: a bachelor's in English and Philosophy from Berkeley, a master's in journalism from Columbia and an iMac G4. No worries about bringing this guy to an academic cocktail party. No fear that he'd bungle a thought-provoking question by saying, “Let me get my bong.”

As I effused the myriad wonders of Macintosh and trashed the likes of Bill Gates, explaining I won't even use Explorer, Dan laughed in hearty agreement. He said Macintosh is far superior for editing photographs.

Oh my God, he's also a shooter. I just noticed cheese grease on my jeans.

I rubbed a moist finger into the remnants of my chicken taco while Dan explained to the group that he'd moved into this neighborhood two weeks earlier and wanted to check out his local pubs; the ones in walking or stumbling distance. He'd spotted lots of martini marquees and, being Irish and having a sense about these things, believed we'd have one excellent night of over-consumption in front of us.

En route to the first bar, Dan walked alongside me. We talked about all kinds of banal things and learned we had much in common, including a propensity toward Bombay Sapphire Gin on Saturday nights and Bloody Mary's on Sunday mornings. Neither one of us has a cavity. We both grew up only children. We're both from back east. And, when it comes to floors, carpet sucks.

“It's like you're walking through galaxies of someone else's funk,” I said, causing Dan to double over in laughter, palming the side of his red sweater, and wipe tears from his eyes.

Yes! He shares my sense of humor.

By the time he opened the door to The Falcon, I'd forgotten about the coffee stain and the fact that I'd thought, albeit for a moment, that he might be gay. The bartender, on the other hand, was most assuredly gay. It didn't freak me out that the guy serving our drinks had more hair on his chest than clothes. I liked watching the women dancing to Cyndi Lauper. And just when I'd gotten used to the same-sex couples coupling, Dan shot me a look that straightened my spine.

"I'm going to ask for your phone number," he began, as my perspiring feet slid deeper into my slingbacks. "If you give it to me, it'll be the first time I've picked up someone in a gay bar. If you don't, it'll be the first time I've been shot down in a gay bar. Either way it'll be a new experience."

I stared at Dan's smile like a life preserver. He was polite, devilishly handsome, erudite and witty. And even if he'd confessed to impregnating a woman while tripping on acid at an Iron Maiden concert, I'd have gone out on a date with him.

What I wouldn't do, inexplicably, was make it easy for him.

Sitting on a barstool, Dan sipped his martini, waiting for a response. I laughed nervously and twisted a cocktail napkin into dandruff. Had this fabulous man just asked me out or had the jet-engine volume of Duran Duran scrambled my senses? For reasons that continue to elude me, I smiled at him and walked away. I needed a cigarette. I needed perspective. I needed to find Leslie.

"Did you have a lobotomy for dinner? Of course he likes you, tool," she quipped.

Fueled by the confidence of Leslie's comforting words, I joined Dan at the bar. That's when I noticed a cluster of gray hair swirled into his curls. *Devilishly handsome*. He vacuumed another drink dry, cocked his head and reiterated his request for my digits. This time it all made sense. This time I pulled a Bic from my purse and penned my number, suggesting we always begin our evenings with a batch of martinis.

"Great. How about Sunday?" he asked, eyeing the stain on my sweater, his smile widening. "Or we could start with coffee."

Yeah, he's the one.