

The Fag-Stag

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

A few weeks ago I found myself in the most unlikely scenario ~ drinking beer out of a bottle and watching a basketball game in a bar, surrounded by heterosexuals. The bar part was familiar, as was the gaggle of heteros around me, but a basketball game? And beer?! I've always prided myself on being able to butch it up when the situation called for it, but this was a bit too much. Middle-aged women with bad make-up were eyeing me, some jock bartender was trying to exchange sports banter, and I was drinking a beer with a lime in it ~ wasn't this some circle of Dante's Hell? What exactly brought me to such depths? I was waiting for my friend Chris to return from a cigarette break. Watching this basketball game was his idea, some sort of thing that straight men do together, and in the name of research I agreed to go along for the so-far excruciating ride.

After a few \$15 martinis I decided to go with the locals and try the lime-in-a-beer concoction (seeing how drunk I was, it seemed silly to waste premium liquor at that point). Chris tried to explain the finer points of the game of basketball, most of which were lost on me. (I was still trying to get my drunken head around the idea that UConn wasn't "Yukon", and Duke wasn't some S&M nickname.) But the real purpose of the evening was to get a better understanding of the straight guy.

The heterosexual male is an interesting creature, a difficult nut to crack in so many ways, and their behavior has long been shrouded in mystery and secrecy. There is a great straight fraternity, a private brotherhood whose goings-on and rituals have only been superficially witnessed and never fully understood. But with all of the male bonding going on these days, it seems wise to look deeper into the elusive world of the straight man. And what better way to start than with my good friend Chris.

Chris is my fag-stag ~ a straight male friend who is comfortable hanging out in a gay bar and never feels threatened because I am gay. He's like a brother to me, so the thought of anything romantic between us is a grossly incestuous notion, one that neither of us has ever entertained. Our friendship is going on ten years. We've seen each other through hook-ups, break-ups, long-term relationships and quick flings. We've traveled the country together from San Francisco to Miami to Puerto Rico to Rochester, New York.

Chris is a breath of fresh air in my world of homo guys and hetero gals. Most of my good friends are straight women. I have a whole stable of fag-hags ~ gorgeous ladies who adorn my life with beauty, friendship, love, and unabashed joy in finding the perfect pair of shoes. Gay men and straight women tend to enjoy similar pleasures ~ classic fashion, good conversation, and beautiful men. It's easy for us to find topics of common

interest, so I've always found comfort in their company. Yet the same has not held true for my relations with straight men, and many of my gay friends would agree. So many gay men close themselves off to straight male friends – I did it too. In all honesty, I was (and still somewhat am) terrified of straight men. Maybe it was my disciplinarian father who instilled such a fear. Maybe it was the boorish behavior and teasing of some tough-acting school boys. Or maybe it was just that I didn't take the time to get to know any cool straight guys. Whatever the reason, for a long time I ignored and shied away from heterosexual men. It seemed like we had nothing in common.

Over the years I let my guard down. Either I became braver, or simply got over that ingrained fear through my day-to-day interactions with the straight men around me. The guys at work accepted me as another guy, sharing their own stories of insecurity and girl trouble, while utilizing my fashion sense and way with women. Slowly we forged friendships ~ sharing a cigarette over a break-up, going out for drinks after work, and even, on the ultra-rare occasion, tossing a football around in the park. There were other less-stereotypical moments as well ~ late-night honest banter on the steps of my Boston apartment, rating the guys and girls while sitting on a bench in San Juan, Puerto Rico, or horsing around while bar hopping through the streets of New York. These rites of passage for so many straight guys would be missing from my life if I had chosen to limit myself to the girls I felt safe and comfortable around.

I once scoffed at the notion of brotherly love or male bonding, but there really is something that exists between two men – just as there is between two women – and it's not something that can quite be put into words ~ as soon as you name it, it disappears. It's an elusive emotional moment ~ felt for the most part in retrospect, and rarely talked about for any length of time. But it's acknowledged in other ways, a sort of shorthand straight guy code – a quick nod of the head to say Hello, a pat on the back, and an unsaid understanding that makes lengthy emotional discussions unnecessary. There's much less drama in a straight man's world, and that's something every gay man could stand to learn.

All of which leads me to the past weekend. If I thought the opening scene at the sports bar was difficult, picture me in DiCarlo's Strip club, excuse me, DiCarlo's "Food and Entertainment" club, talking to a female stripper for the benefit of my friend Chris. After dragging him to a drag show at Club Phoenix, I agreed to go to the local straight strip club, located oh-so-conveniently on Central Ave. Yet as out-of-my-element as I was and as far removed from what interested me, I still had a great time with Chris. The drag queens and the strippers didn't compare with the time I spent with my good friend. That's something I would have missed if I had never opened myself up to a straight guy.