

Last Night at The Web

DAVID MASELLO

LIKE MOST SPIDER WEBS, the bar called The Web, which existed on East 58th Street for decades until it closed the other month, would snare you unprepared. It was as discreet on its glamorous block of Midtown (between Madison and Park) as a cobweb strung in the corner of a room, whose strands glistened only in certain light.

From the street, The Web appeared to be just a single wooden door that led down a flight of steep stairs. In all likelihood few of the patrons milling on the sidewalk in front of the bar's neighbors—the Tao restaurant and the Four Seasons Hotel—even noticed the entryway; it was that understated. I used to like walking down that block and suddenly, on a whim, entering the bar, disappearing down that narrow stairway, sensing some of those people on the sidewalk above looking down on me as I descended, wondering what was there. The minor intrigue that characterized the act of going to a gay bar was part of the appeal—even if most trips to gay bars proved frustrating and ego-deflating.

A friend and I went to The Web a few months before it closed, which wound up being my last time there. The bar was known for its lithe and beautiful go-go boys, most of whom were Asian, who entertained a clientele that was a mix of middle-aged men of all races and younger Asian men, each group eager to meet the other. The atmosphere was at once bawdy and tame—a tarantula drained of its poison.

My friend had never been to The Web, and I hadn't visited in many years. Our visit coincided with yet another date for the so-called "Rapture," when the world as we know it was scheduled to expire. As we were paying our five dollar cover charge and the insides of our wrists were being stamped, the man rolling the inkpad over my veins said, "Tonight's the end of the world, guys. Make tonight count."

"So, is this the entrance to Hell?" I asked, feeding him the rhetorical question and knowing the corny answer he would provide.

"This is Heaven you've reached."

"But we're going down two flights from the street," I said.

"The Bible had it wrong. Heaven is down."

The Web was neither place; if anything it was a kind of Limbo in that you often spent hours waiting around for something to happen—a conversation, a come-on, a hook-up. But it was the kind of destination that could exist only in New York, given its specialized clientele and social dynamics, and it represented an earlier era of gay life in the city, in which men went out to meet each other and converse in person rather than Grinding or Manhunting on-line. Conversation was required at The Web, and you needed to show more of yourself than just a torso

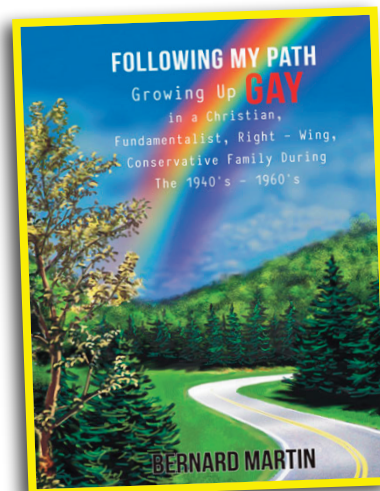
pic and an (exaggerated) accounting of your length and girth.

In some ways, all gay men have been ensnared by a kind of social web that has changed the way many of us interact and meet. There are far fewer gay bars than there once were simply because we can string our own nets and webs from the confines of our home by going on-line—and later consuming what prey we might have captured. *That* web has proven to be of the soundest construction.

While I find a certain irony in the fact that The Web is likely another victim of the worldwide Web, I miss, too, the creative names of gay bars. When I was an undergraduate in Ann Arbor, the students mostly frequented the Rubaiyat, named for Omar Khayyam's ancient verse, though the lyrics we would recite on the dance floor were the more prosaic ones from "Disco Inferno" and "Pull Up to the Bumper." Faculty and townsfolk could be found at the Flame. When I used to rent summer houses with friends in the Hamptons, we would tan ourselves to a rotisserie hue so that we could show off our glow at the Swamp at night, and if our mission there proved unsuccessful

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we would go right from our train at Penn Station on Sunday evening to Cahoots on the Upper West Side or to Boy Bar on St. Mark's Place.

As my friend and I scanned the modest-sized crowd in The Web, I pointed out the lighted, raised boxes along the walls on the open dance floor located yet another level down. I acted like my friend's Virgil, giving him a tour of this underground world that I hadn't entered in years. The great, late gay bar that referenced such allusions was the Ninth Circle on West 10th Street, the apocryphal inspiration for Edward Albee's title, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf" (he reputedly saw the phrase scrawled



on a restroom wall there). Each of the boxes placed in The Web was a simple square of wood fitted with a plastic top illuminated by a colored pulsating light from beneath. The violet light would illuminate the dancer as if a sculpture on a plinth. To tease the crowd, some of the boys scampered, spider-like, out into the bar area in their underwear, jumped on to the boxes—then just as quickly disappeared behind a curtained backdrop. Their flesh appeared in the colored lights as undulating sheets of satin.

When it got late enough, the dancers began to take their places on the boxes, the disco-esque music thumping so loudly that the ice in my glass clinked. I watched as a patron, without hesitation, approached one of the lads gyrating on his platform. The man began to unwrap bills and place them in strategic parts of the boy's body and underwear. As a kind of payback, the boy would graze his face and neck with dry kisses while the patron embraced him. Each boy would be careful not to go too far, often looking out over the man's shoulder as the admirer would nuzzle the dancer's chest.

It was not the most dignified of scenes, but I admired the man's courage in acknowledging his lust and acting on it, even if it meant doing so publicly. But we were all witnessing the indifference of the boy to the attentions of the man. What seemed like affection bestowed to the patron, whose eyes were closed beatifically, his face against the boy's skin, was not that at all. The dancer would adjust his pose so as to make the receiving of the cash easier, stretching out the elastic band of underwear in front and back, opening his fly, flexing his butt cheeks with the efficiency of a Venus fly trap; the man, meanwhile, distributed the bills, smiling at and pecking the boy as he tucked them in place, but the boy was already looking beyond, out over the

man's thick, beefy shoulder, vibrating an invisible web to lure the next and future patron.

And why not? This was their job. This was how they made their money. They were doing nothing wrong or untoward. They had youth, beauty, a seemingly limitless supply of admirers. Their currency was their looks and age, and they were taking advantage of it. It's not likely that they were existentially aware of the ephemeral nature of these attributes but instead imagined that they would last forever.

The handsomest of the dancers would pivot on his lighted box, turn around and look at himself in the mirrored walls, run his hands through his hair and arch his back. He was admiring himself, but the moment I detected that narcissistic pose, the spell he had begun to cast was broken. He was choreographing every move, clapping his hands behind his head and grimacing like the bronze Deco sculptures of Atlas or Prometheus in Rockefeller Center. One of the attributes of a talented go-go-boy dancer is his ability to focus only on the patrons who are admiring him. The moment he admires himself, finds his own visage sexually alluring, he has shunned those who admire him. Even for an exotic dancer—one who unhesitatingly lowers his underpants—modesty is required.

It is unfair, too, to write off these dancers as being purely mercenary in their efforts. Each dancer has his own technique—in the way he performs and in how he responds to a patron who approaches with bills folded over fingers like loosened bandages. One of them was able to bend from his foot-high perch like a giraffe at a zoo bending for the marshmallow, in this case, a five—to kiss his admirer quickly, the treat secured. Another would raise his arms and cup the man's head at his ears, guiding the face into his chest or armpit, dusted with glitter, his patron re-emerging with lips and the tip of his nose sparkling.

And then there was another who, rather than dance, simply circulated like another patron. But unlike the other carefully muscled dancers, their strong calves in boots and high-top designer sneakers, this lad was decidedly nerdy. Oversized hipster black-plastic eyeglasses, pale, skinny body—he even carried a book as a prop for the role he was playing (I think it was a copy of Herman Wouk's *Marjorie Morningstar*). And while he was not the most sought-after one, he did find his admirers in the crowd, each of whom, it seemed, asked him to turn over the book to reveal the title.

I can't say I will miss The Web, but I do miss knowing that such places exist for those patrons who seek out such destinations. So much of homosexual New York is homogenized, with the few remaining bars decidedly mixed with gay and straight clientele. (I know, that's supposed to be a good thing.) The demise of such distinctive gay bars echoes much of the rest of commercial New York, which has also become less distinctive—with dreary 7-11s (the lighting is akin to that of a morgue) opening in place of independent bodegas and delis, and branch banks and Starbucks and chain drug stores repeating monotonously along our avenues like the worst kind of suburban sprawl.

The strands of The Web have been severed, and its demise is a very small, but measurable link to a time in New York and an aspect of gay life that had more character and bite. 