

New Memoir: Solitaire by Lauren Hough (Part I)



Part I of II

My first time at the closest gay bar to Shaw Air Force Base, the bouncer asked me if I had a membership. I wasn't expecting that question. But South Carolina blue laws only allowed private clubs to serve liquor on Sundays. So every bar in South Carolina called itself a private club. I was expecting to have to show my driver's license. It was my twenty-first birthday. And I didn't want anyone to notice, least of all this bouncer with bad skin and frosted tips that made him look like a youth minister.

I told him I was not a member. "Well, you gotta sign up here. Fill this out." The bouncer handed me a card. Name. Address. Driver's License number.

"I can't fill that out," I said. "I'm military. I can't be on a list at a gay bar." My paranoia wasn't unfounded. This was 1997 and Don't Ask, Don't Tell was the law. I'd heard rumors of witch hunts at other bases. Though so far, it seemed no one suspected me.

There's an oft-repeated maxim about women in the military—you're either a whore a dyke. You hear it first from your recruiter, as a warning. You hear it thereafter as an accusation, sometimes it's meant to be a joke. But even so, if there's a useful side-effect to homophobia, it's that most people who find gays abhorrent, find it rude to assume

someone's gay, despite all obvious signs. Which is why any gay person could have told you Ricky Martin was as queer as eight guys fucking nine guys. And yet people were shocked. It's not gaydar. It's the ability to see reality without the constraints of judgment.

Still, I knew I had to be careful. All it took was one person, the wrong person, the wrong grudge, the wrong rumor, and my career was over. The criminal investigation arms of the military would find one gay whose roommate or ex turned him in. They'd use that one person, his emails, phone calls, confession, to root out as many homosexuals as they could. For the most part, they'd just kick the gays out. But some went to prison for violating the UCMJ, the military code of law. I was determined to keep my secret.

My pen hovered above the line. I hated that I couldn't just write my name without thinking of all the ways this could hurt me. Fear is, above all else, exhausting. And the frustration of my indecision made me want to cry. The bouncer leaned toward me. "Honey, I don't care what you write on the card," he said. His voice sounded like he'd smoked a pack of road flares. "You put a name down there, and when you come in next time, that name will be on this list." He held up a clipboard with a list of names and coughed. "You point to what you wrote. And I put a little check mark by it. I don't give a shit if it's the name your mama gave you." He coughed again. Swallowed something large. "Look babe," he said and pointed to the list. "We got Mary Jane, Trent Reznor, Anita Dick, Cherilyn Sarkisian, Sam Iam, and that's just the obvious ones. You sure as shit ain't the first military we got."

I stood there trying to make up my mind. Trying not to ask if Cherilyn was Cher's real name, afraid he'd laugh at me. Part of me wanted to run back to my car, drive back to base, and forget about gay bars. I'd sat in my car listening to the radio for a good ten minutes just trying to build up the courage to walk in the door. I'd been waiting three months,

for my birthday, just to come here.

But even if I gave up now and turned around, it's not like I felt any more at ease on base. On base, at Shaw, I worked in an office building, the headquarters of CENTAF, the part of the Air Force that worries about the Mideast. To say I worked is a lie. I showed up every morning at eight, jiggled the mouse to wake my computer, and read news for an hour or so.

Sometime around ten, Major Coffindaffer would hand me the half-filled-in crossword from the USA Today he bought on the way to work. He'd switch his radio from the John Boy and Billy show to the right wing AM channel.

The guys in my office loved John Boy and Billy. There was this clip they'd play for anyone who hadn't heard it. My supervisor, a big cornfed looking guy called Sergeant Ewing, played the clip for me my first day—some guy from the radio show, their serious news guy, reading what was supposedly a news story about queers and a gerbil. I got grossed out and laughed, asked which desk was mine. But Ewing blocked my path and said, "no, wait this is the best part." I'll spare you the "best part" (there was a fireball). The guys were all looking at me, waiting for a reaction. I smiled and tried to force a laugh. I wasn't angry. I was just sad. It's easy to hate what you don't understand. But I'd never be able to explain how stupid it was to believe gay men played with gerbils, without the inevitable follow-up, "How do you know?" They're like kids, really, guys in the military. They never get tired of gross-out jokes, trying to make the girl gag, and suspecting anyone who doesn't get the joke of being different.

All day long, I'd listen to Rush Limbaugh and friends debate the President's treasonous blow job, and gay scout leaders, and gays in the military. Major Coffindaffer would mutter about how we should just go ahead and hold public hangings like back in the good ol' days. And I'd fill in the crossword. Sometimes I'd read at my desk, what Major Coffindaffer called

“book report books.”

I couldn't see myself spending two years in that office. I'd been there two weeks when I heard this guy who worked in my building complaining one day at the smoke pit. He'd received orders for a four-month stint in Saudi. His wife was pregnant. They didn't have a car. I told him I'd go for him if he could get permission to switch.

He tried to argue with me. I didn't blame him. I can relate to a suspicion of altruism. But I wasn't motivated by altruism. He said, “You can't drink there. Seriously. Not even beer.”

“I'm twenty. If I keep drinking here, I'm gonna get caught. And I don't need an Article 15.”

“There's nothing to do.”

“There's nothing to do here.”

“You'll really do it? I mean, if I go ask my sergeant and then he asks you, you won't

change your mind?”

“I'm totally serious, man. What's your job? I mean, what do you do in Saudi?”

“I'm a one-charlie-three. Same as you.” Meaning we'd both been trained to answer phones and follow checklists in a command post—the nucleus of a military base. As there's only one command post on each base, the rest of the command post techs get assigned to command units like CENTAF, where we were, to fill desks at operation centers—larger command posts. We were basically phone operators with really high security clearances.

He said, “But there, we only do the briefing. You just need the clearance to be in the Op Center. We take the sortie numbers and build the slide for the daily briefing.”

"I can probably figure out a power point slide. I don't have to stand out on the runway and count planes as they take off for sorties do I?"

"Shit. You don't even have to make the slide. We just switch the numbers out every day. And then you hang out in case the numbers change. It's boring as fuck. You'll really go to Saudi?"

"I'll go anywhere that isn't Shaw. I'm bored out of my skull here. Can't be worse." The truth was, I was itching to leave the country. No one joins the Air Force because they're dying to see more of South Carolina. I wanted to travel, even if that meant Saudi Arabia. But more than that, I needed a place like Saudi to keep me out of trouble. My problem wasn't the drinking. Though, had I been caught, the penalty would've ruined my career. I was gay and didn't know what to do about it. I needed time. It's not that I'd put much thought into going to Saudi. But, determined to avoid the problem I couldn't solve, I saw four months in Saudi as the perfect way to buy time.

We shook on it. And I went to Saudi. I left him my car keys while I was gone. I preferred Saudi Arabia to Shaw. I preferred being locked on a base that we only got to leave twice, and only in full-body abayas with the hijab. At least in Saudi, I'd had something to do. And because we were all locked on base, I'd had something of a social life. I'd go to the base bar where they served near-beer and play cards with all the others who had nothing better to do.

When I got back from Saudi, nothing had changed. I was still gay and still in the military. Still stationed in South Carolina. Still sitting next to guys who I was sure, any day, would look at me and recognize what they hated.

This fear never left my mind, but day-to-day, the good thing about the little office where I worked was that the officers

like Coffindaffer mostly ignored me. The NCOs, like Sergeant Ewing, were busy sending out resumes to government contractors where they'd double their pay once their enlistments were up. So that Friday, no one knew or cared that it was my birthday. No one had to know I was going to check out a gay bar.

Now I was standing outside the bar and worse, people were noticing me. I'd told myself *just walk in, don't be obvious, get a drink, look around. Then you can go home.* I wondered if I'd worn the right clothes. I could see inside, just over the bouncer's head. Gays. And all I knew was I was gay and these were supposed to be my people, my community.

Someone came up behind me, and asked what was going on. I turned around. He was about my age. Just a kid. Military haircut, the unmistakable ill-advised mustache that, following military regulation, always rests one shaving mishap away from Hitler-lip. He lived in the same dorms I did. Not my floor or I'd know his name. But I'd seen him in the laundry room. I felt better seeing him, until I realized this meant I might see others from the base. They might see me. I hadn't considered this. I'd driven thirty miles to have a drink where no one would see me. I told him I didn't want to put my name on a list.

"Why? I'm on the list," he said. The bouncer handed him the clipboard. "Right here, Truvy Jones."

"Steel Magnolias," I said. He clapped like I'd learned to roll over. And I realized then he had just as much to lose as I did. But he didn't seem at all scared. I put down Ouiser Boudroux on the card, filled out the address for the local carpet company with the annoying radio jingle, and Papa John's phone number on the line for driver's license.

I sat at the bar waiting for the bartender to finish wrestling with the little airplane bottle of Jack—another oddity of

South Carolina's liquor laws. And I watched the room through the mirror behind the glasses. Truvy was nowhere to be seen. I'd hoped he'd come get a drink. We'd talk about Steel Magnolias. He'd be impressed with my vast knowledge of Dolly Parton trivia. We'd bond and maybe become friends. I wouldn't feel so obvious sitting there alone.

Seemed like everyone at the bar knew everyone else. Everyone was divided into factions. The younger lesbians owned the pool table; the older lesbians occupied the tables outside. As I walked by, they all stared like I'd walked into their private house party and changed the music. A few older gay men took turns on the poker machines. The younger gay boys held the dance floor. I didn't belong here. That I was used to the feeling didn't make it any more comfortable.

I found a payphone in the alcove for the bathroom. I dug my calling card out of my wallet, hoped I had minutes left on it. And I called my brother, Mikey. He answered. "Where are you?" he asked. "Is that Prince?"

"Yeah. I'm in a gay bar. I don't think the lesbians are in charge of the music," I said.

"That's a relief. But still, gross," he said. "Not gross that you're in a gay bar. Obviously."

"Obviously. There's a mirror ball over the dance floor. Your bedroom is bigger than the dance floor."

"Jesus. You spent a year in San Fran."

Right out of basic training, I spent a year in Monterey, two hours south of San Francisco. And I'd had a fake ID. But I was too scared to drive to San Francisco on weekends and hang out in the Castro. Of course, if I'd known I'd be sent to South Carolina, I might've worked a little harder at accelerating my coming out.

"Monterey isn't San Fran," I corrected him.

"Okay. But you're still dumb. What's a gay bar like in South Carolina? Are you counting mullets? Oh, dude, you should find the butchest woman there and bring her home for Thanksgiving," he said. Then added, "Gabe wouldn't let you in the house." I'm sure he was picturing the scene. But even alone, Gabe wouldn't let me into the house if it were burning.

"I don't think I'm coming home," I said. And it occurred to me I wasn't sure when I'd see my brother since I was no longer welcome there. He was nineteen but still living at home. I thought about buying him a ticket to come visit. "Oh, there are three. And that's not counting the almost mullets. I think they want to fight me," I said.

"If you knew karate, you'd probably live," he said. "I was thinking it would be cool to have a gay brother. He'd run off to New York and starve a couple years. But then I'd get to move into his shitty studio and paint. And he'd introduce me to all the rich guys who'd buy my paintings 'cause I'd be the hot brother of a gay guy."

A skinny kid with what I thought was a bad cold because I'd never been around a coke problem came out of the men's room. I flattened myself against the wall so he could pass. But he just stood there across from me and sniffled and stared. You could've fit three of him into his jeans.

"Sorry," I said. "I know this is tough on you." This was not tough on him. I'd officially sealed my brother's role as favorite child by being gay. He'd recently been caught smoking pot. Gabe, the stepfather most likely to call the cops on his stepchildren, laughed about it.

"You should be. I can't hear you though. I'm gonna get off the phone. Gabe's coming home soon." The skinny kid was staring now. Assuming he wanted the phone, I held up a finger to show I'd be done in a minute. But he shook his head and sat down on

the wet tile floor. I turned around.

"Are you not allowed to talk to me?" I asked. "Last time I called to talk to Mom, he just hung up on me."

"No, but he thinks this is something you're doing to him. Like, on purpose to piss him off. It's just weird now. I think they're getting a divorce," he said.

"Well, fingers crossed." I didn't believe my mother would ever leave Gabe.

"Shit. Happy birthday," he said. "I'm gonna send you a book. I'm almost done with it." I wasn't offended he'd forgotten. He forgets his own. But the reminder didn't help my mood.

Maybe it was weird to call my brother from a payphone in my first gay bar. But I'd always had him with me in these situations, when I didn't belong, when everyone else knew each other, knew the rules, and the language, the dress code, knew who and what to avoid.

My brother and I grew up overseas, in one of those cults that sprang up in the late sixties. Ever since we came back to the States, after we left the cult, I'd tried to feel like an American, like I belonged. Funny thing is, I felt more American in the cult than I ever did out of it. Back in the cult, being American was part of my identity. I had what the other kids told me was an American accent. I had an American passport. My grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins lived in America. My parents were American. And so, from the time we landed back in Texas when I was fifteen, desperate for any identity, I tried to be what I thought was American, the way I understood it, which was not at all. I said the pledge of allegiance in school. I listened to country music. I ate junk food and drank more soda and milk than water. I smoked Marlboros. I tried to love football and pretend I found soccer painfully boring. I joined the military and took an oath to defend the constitution. I actually read the constitution. I

hung an American flag on my wall. I considered buying a gun. I was like an inept spy pretending to be American based on movies I'd watched and books I read. None of it worked. I felt nothing. And I couldn't understand what I was supposed to feel.

I walked back to the bar but couldn't get the bartender's attention. So I drove home alone. When I was a kid, I never thought I'd live to be twenty-one. The Antichrist was supposed to show up around the time I turned sixteen. Even if I survived the wars and the persecution of Christians, the world would end soon afterwards. By the time I realized all that was a lie, I didn't have much time to plan a future. The Air Force recruiter was very helpful with that.

There's this day in Air Force basic training where they try to make you feel like you're really in the military. They keep you up most of the night before working in the kitchen. At dawn, you march a few miles carrying your duffle bag, singing jodies to keep cadence. You shoot the M16 for a couple hours. You sit in the dirt and pick through MREs for lunch. Airman Eudy who watched all the right movies tells everyone else to avoid the Lucky Charms—they're bad luck. And because you've never eaten an MRE, you enjoy the plastic food. Then they march you back, into an auditorium.

You file in without speaking because you've been in basic training six weeks now, and no one has to tell you not to speak. The lights go out and there, on the stage, a single spotlight pops on to show a guy, one of the instructors, tied to a chair. The bad guy enters, stage right. You know he's the bad guy because he's wearing a towel on his head. The bad guy slaps the good airman around a little. But the good airman won't give up the mission plan. Just name, rank, serial number—which is really your social security number, but I didn't write his down. The bad guy pulls a gun. Shoots the

airman dead. And the lights go out. Then, I shit you not, you hear Lee Greenwood's "Proud to be an American" kick on.

At that point, I looked around. Everyone was crying, shouting the words. Some of the kids fell back on their evangelical upbringings and waved their hands in the air to the music. I knew I was supposed to feel something. And I did. I felt revulsion. Because I'd been through this before. All of it. The sleep-deprivation, the fun outdoors preparing for war, the play-acting interrogation by the bad guys, and the singing. Always the singing.

When I got back to the base, I sat on the hood of my car facing the highway. Just past the highway stood the fence surrounding the base, and just past that, the runway. The runway lights never went out, but no one was flying tonight. I leaned back against my windshield to see the sky. I'd always searched the sky when I felt alone. I'd look for the constellations my mom taught us when we were little. I don't remember the stories she told about Cassiopeia or Andromeda. I only remember how to find them. But here, in the South Carolina lowlands, there were no stars. The damp air was too thick and glowed a sickly yellow from the lights on the runway and the sodium lights on the highway. I could see the moon, but barely.