

Of Barbary Lane and Lorraine Hall: Notes from a Tour and an Introductory Conversation

By Noach Dzmura

1. The Tour

Oakland's "Barbary Lane," named for the transwoman Mrs Madrigal's collective household from Tales of the City by Armistead Maupin, is a retirement facility near Lake Merritt in Oakland, California. While the person I had come to interview was transgender, odds did not favor the likelihood of the manager of the facility also being transgender. I wondered what Oakland's 'Mrs Madrigal' would look like, and whether or not she would share a joint with me as we toured the facility. The smiling business woman who greeted me was far from any of my Madrigal fantasies.

After introductions, I expressed my sincere appreciation at finding an elder-care facility open to the GLBT community. The gracious and efficient manager was quick to correct my assumption: the facility is open to persons from any category that represents San Francisco's diverse population. "Our embrace of diversity includes," the manager assured me, "but is absolutely not limited to, GLBT persons."

Barbary Lane is housed in the historic Lake Merritt Hotel. The foyer opens on an upholstered, gilded and mirrored sitting room, and then onto the dining facility, a four-star, open-to-the-public restaurant with an unobstructed view of Lake Merritt through three floor-to-ceiling window walls. Liveried waitstaff moved like sentries through rows of silver-bedecked linen tablecloths and conservatively dressed grey-haired patrons. More than one waiter solicitously inquires if the touring party required a glass of mint-laced iced tea. Barbary Lane is a walk back through time into a perhaps imaginary and certainly genteel San Francisco of the late 1940s, and it's a treasure. I plan to stop by for lunch one afternoon when I'm in the neighborhood – the food is quite reasonably priced, and looks luscious. Residents and restaurant patrons eat the same fine fare.

The display model units each have different floor plans; in this old-style but newly renovated building, every apartment is different. All of them are tiny—there are efficiencies and one-bedrooms, and the largest is only about 900 square feet. While they're tiny, they're also Fabulous, and I mean that in the gayest sense of the word. The decorator was obviously Part of the Family, because each model made me feel right at home. 'Well appointed' and 'unique' don't quite do them justice. There was just the right amount of apartment-sized furniture with a chic New York feel. Quaint vestiges of the "grand hotel" remain in each unit: a 'telephone bench' folds into the wall near what used to be a telephone nook. The vestige of a dumbwaiter



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in the kitchen is turned into built-in closets. The kitchens feel bigger than they are – one’s inner-chef need not suffer here. Every unit has internet and concierge service.

There are unique spaces in each apartment. In one model, a built-in china closet of modest depth was used to attractively display a collection of vintage 45s. One could imagine attending a *de rigueur* cocktail party here, looking down onto the view of a bejeweled Lake Merritt on the night of a Civic Light Opera performance, and EVERYONE who is anyone would be there, darling.

We pass through a meeting room in which residents may schedule events, then past some administrative offices, a beauty salon out of my mother’s day, a spa and hot tub that I would gladly take a three hour soak in, a weight room with elder-friendly accoutrement, a covered parking garage, and a van service that takes the patrons on scheduled trips several times a week, and which also drops them off at public transit stops and picks them up again when they return from more distant travels. A range of programs and services—including queer programming—were advertised at key points throughout the facility. There is a family-style game room with a quite modern wall-mounted flat screen television and a pool table. Built-in library shelving houses only a few magazines and paperbacks at present, like a beach house that hasn’t yet experienced too many rainy seasons. The reason for the sparseness is that currently there are only two residents in the 44 unit building, and one of them is the woman I am set to interview.

I conducted an initial interview with Lorraine Hall, without a tape recorder or a notebook, simply to say hello and to see if together we could come up with a narrative for use in the LGBT Resource Library that focused on the intersection between Lorraine’s Jewish and transgender selves. The rest of this essay is the result of our conversation.

2. The Conversation

Lorraine, a conservatively yet casually dressed woman with silver-hair, in her eighth decade of life, extends a hand and says, “You must be Noach. Pardon me for being tardy. It takes me a while to put on my makeup.”

“No problem at all, Lorraine, I am certain I was several minutes early.” We shook hands with a smile and sat on comfortable couches in the cheerful “family room.” Even though she completed surgical transition many years ago, she has only been free to live as “Lorraine” full time since moving in to Barbary Lane a little less than a year ago out of respect for her wife (now deceased). At Barbary Lane she has found a home where she may rest, truly, in herself, for the first time ever. At times even today (due to ill health, family obligations, or an appointment in the world where she is known as male) she appears in male clothing, but even



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so, she is Lorraine to the staff and her fellow residents. There is no awkwardness in her presentation, there is only the feeling of warm caring and gracious welcome.

During our conversation, it was somewhat difficult for Lorraine to think of her Jewish life and her trans life as having any overlap: her Jewishness didn't directly or specifically inform her transness and her transness really didn't affect her proud and secular Jewishness.

We eventually agreed that there is a case to be made for the effect of her Jewish values on her decisions about transition—for instance, she did not “come out” to her wife for almost the entire length of their marriage. Although she didn't use the words, *shalom ha bayit*, it seems to me that “peace in the home” was her intention in making such a huge sacrifice for so many years. As a convert to Judaism, my expectations were unrealistic; it is typical for converts to think overtly about the links between radical life transitions and Jewishness. For people who are born Jewish, in whom Jewishness sits more easily on the shoulders, perhaps, the intent to consciously link Jewishness with other aspects of life isn't quite so intentional.

To sketch her life briefly, using the pronouns that correspond to her gender presentation at the time, Lorraine was born male in California. He served in the navy during the Great War and met a young Jewish girl in New York while his ship was in port there, under repairs for battle damage. They continued to correspond after he returned home and he brought her back to California in 1949 where they married and settled in his home town of Alameda. Always active in local community affairs, he eventually ran for, and was elected to the Alameda City Council. Through local Jewish friendships he became an active fundraiser when it became necessary for local Temple Israel to build a new Synagogue. Soon after, due to his fundraising efforts, he was invited to join the Temple. Though not observant, he found his wife wanted to be a member, and bowing to her wishes, the couple joined. Shortly afterward, becoming very active in the congregation, he was asked to accept the Temple presidency. Once again, bowing to his wife's wishes, he accepted, and served for three years during which time she lived a closeted life as a crossdresser.

During the time that she was a synagogue President, she suspects there were rumors about her “other life (as a crossdresser),” but people kept those rumors from her ears, for the most part.

Lorraine always felt inclined to dress, but was seldom able to act on the desire, and never at all in public, at least until the 1980's in San Francisco. At that time, she joined a private club for cross-dressers and transsexual women that met at a local gay bar. She befriended some of the women, who served as role models for her own journey. But the bar scene was not for her.

When Lorraine did come out to her wife (in the last ten years of her wife's life) she kept her dressing separate from their life together, so it would not offend her wife. In the very last couple of years of her wife's life, her wife consented to allow the two women to be seen in



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public together, yet she remained chagrined whenever a restaurant's wait-staff would refer to the two of them as "ladies."

Eventually, one of Lorraine's friends from the "tranny group at the bar", (who had already had surgery and as a business venture helped other transwomen with the frightening process of going to Thailand for surgery), had an extra ticket when an individual "chickened out," and asked Lorraine if she wanted to accompany her to Thailand.

"You wouldn't have to do anything," Lorraine's friend said (meaning surgery). Lorraine wanted to go, just to see the lay of the land for that time in the future when she would decide to have surgery. She consulted her wife, who said, "Sure, you can go. But don't do anything."

From Thailand, she called her wife and said she was "doing something."

Lorraine spent some time in the Jewish community as an 'out' transwoman, when "trans" was not much more than "the T on the end of GLB" in the minds of our communities. She cared for children as a volunteer at the Jewish Children's and Family Services in San Francisco. She suspects people "knew" about her, and kept their comments to themselves. She also spent some time on speakers bureaus, talking at synagogues and JCCs about being transgender. She always enjoys the opportunity to talk, and to finally be visible and recognized in company as the woman she is and always was.

Our conversation did not encompass Lorraine's professional career. Lorraine's beloved wife passed away a little more than a year ago. Lorraine misses her terribly. She has children and grandchildren, some of whom accept her as Lorraine, and others who are only allowed to know their "grandfather." Like grandparents everywhere, to keep in touch with these beloved children, Lorraine will make any sacrifice necessary.

The tolerance offered by Barbary Lane staff was evident. Toward the end of our first interview, Lorraine went upstairs to her apartment to retrieve a photograph and a calling card. During the break, the manager walked up and asked how things were going. "Has she told you about shipboard life yet?" I said no, and said that we were just getting acquainted in this first interview. Then she said, "You know, even when she has to dress as –well, not in her usual attire—the staff and residents of Barbary Lane understand and accept that. We embrace all of who she is."

[Author's Note: Sadly, the facility at Lake Merritt formerly known as Barbary Lane, which attempted to attract a diverse residential clientele, is under new management. The name of the Residence has been changed from Barbary Lane to Age Song at Lake Merritt; the facility no longer actively celebrates diversity. This article commemorates a brief moment in time that has,



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unfortunately, passed. But Lorraine is well and still happily ensconced at the residence. July 28, 2009.]



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