

If a murder mystery were to be set in Wetside the murder would have to take place under the bare red bulb in the well at the entrance to Barney's. On a rainy night. Picture a black body as two-dimensional as a paper doll face down in black black water, the blood like an oil slick as bright as neon.

Inside are plush leather booths and an antique redwood bar salvaged from a nineteenth century saloon in San Francisco and hauled north on a flatbed trailer. Behind the bar hangs a huge, ornately framed mirror, pitted and distorted. A profusion of flower pots hangs from heavy wooden beams above the bar, doubled by the mirror. Music comes from a 1950s-style jukebox loaded with 45-rpm singles from that era—rockabilly from the old Sun studios, Carl Perkins, Elvis, Jerry Lee—plus lots of Broadway show tunes and a smattering of Fats Domino and Little Richard, and the undisputable local favorite, “Louie Louie” by the Kingsmen. Lounging against the back wall are cardboard figures of Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, Elvis in a gold lamé suit, Rock Hudson and Doris Day. There are no beer ads or commercial messages of any kind, but on the night when Jim Bright showed up there was a single political poster featuring a pop art portrait of Barack Obama. It hung over the booth where Alex was seated.

Calling Barney's a gay bar is something of a stretch, even if they do have drag shows once a week. It would be more accurate to call it a bohemian bar, a hangout for artsy types. Alex Martin was not a lesbian and never had been, unless you count a bit of experimenting back in college and that one summer when she and Mary Elizabeth Lucious shared a cabin at Camp Butterfly, which if you asked Mary Elizabeth about, she'd deny on a stack of bibles. Sometimes Alex wished she was a lesbian. Or black, or Native; anything but white. She liked her self: her looks and her mind, but she was not proud of being a member of the privileged and exploitive class. She frequented

Barney's because that's where the most interesting people hung out. Wednesday night is drag night. It's the lowest of lowbrow camp and really raunchy. Fridays is cabaret night. Singers, mostly jazz and folk. One of her favorites was a sultry jazz singer named Amanda Bright. Alex realized that the singer's last name being the same as Jim's was pure coincidence, but seeing Jim at the bar was what made her think about her. She hadn't seen her in a while. To Alex it seemed like just a few months ago, but she realized it must have been years.

It was a week before the 2008 presidential election when she first spotted Jim Bright in Barney's...