

1969: The Stonewall Inn

by DC Diamondopolous

In the industrial ruin near the New York docks, rats clawed through garbage left by vagrants. Inside the jammed truck that hauled meat during the day, Jackie, along with dozens of boys and young men indulged in an orgy. The stink of beef, sweat, and cum had nowhere to escape. The only sounds were moaning and grunts. In the dark, Jackie clutched the waist of someone in front of him.

Somebody pounded on the truck. “Lilly Law! Lilly Law!”

The back doors swung open.

Two cop cars screeched to a stop.

Jackie and the others jumped onto the landing platform. They charged in different directions.

On this sweltering summer night, Jackie darted through the freight yard. In his worn hightop sneakers, the soles smacked against gravel and pavement.

He bolted onto Greenwich Avenue under a big white moon. His tight, frayed, bellbottom jeans pulled against his crotch. The sweaty orange tie-dyed T-shirt stuck to his chest. His heart thumped. The pigs weren’t going to catch him, not this time. He ran as if his life mattered.

If only his eighteen-year-old legs could outrun life on the streets. In late-night movie houses, lonely old men found his blond hair, slight build, and effeminate nature irresistible. Jackie scored, sometimes going home with them for food and a shower. Chicken hawks cruising sub-

way toilets paid to blow him. To survive, he'd do anything.

Jackie raced past Mama's Chick and Rib Restaurant.

Turning onto Christopher Street, he glanced back—no cops.

He walked down the one-way street toward the Stonewall. It was there that he had made friends with other twilight boys and drag queens. And it was the only bar in the Village that allowed slow dancing between men. For the first time, someone put their arms around him—not for sex or to hurt him. When they danced to Stevie Wonder's "My Cherie Amour," they stepped on each other's toes. It didn't matter. They laughed. The tenderness blew his mind.

As he neared the Stonewall, there was a crowd and a paddy wagon. It was a raid, but on a Friday night? Just the past Tuesday the fuzz raided the place. Had the Mafia not paid off the pigs to keep the bar open?

Walking closer, Jackie heard grumbling and sensed the bad vibe.

Bar regulars watched cops haul out handcuffed customers, then throw them into the paddy wagon.

"What the fuck's happening?" Jackie asked the guy beside him.

Just then a pig punched a tough-looking lesbian. She kicked him.

The angry crowd inched forward.

Jackie seethed.

"She didn't do nothing," a Puerto Rican kid shouted.

"We'll shut you damn perverts down for good," another cop bellowed. He clubbed the woman,

then pushed her into the truck.

“Leave us alone,” Jackie yelled.

A brick shattered the windshield of a police car.

Whoops rang out.

Drag queens taunted Johnny Law with cries of “Betty Badge!” “Patti Pig!”

More gay men arrived from Christopher Park across the street, from Waverly Place, and 7th Avenue. They brought with them years of persecution and joined the rebellion.

A drag queen threw pennies at the pigs. “You’re nothing but copper.”

Jackie hurled coins. “Here’s your payoff.”

Shouts of “*Let us be,*” thundered through the pandemonium.

In front of the bar’s plywood window, a nightstick pressed into Jackie’s back. His wiry body whirled around. He punched the cop in the face. Jackie saw first shock, then fear in the man’s eyes. Fear. Jackie lived with it every day.

All six pigs looked astonished as the enraged nellie queens and limp-wristed fags hit, kneed, and threw bottles and tin cans at them.

Sweat flew off Jackie’s long curly hair as he jabbed, slugged, and kicked the cops with the viciousness of having nothing to lose.

A drag queen in a sequined dress jumped onto a cop car. She took off her stiletto heels and waved them high in the air with one hand while blowing kisses with the other. Everyone cheered.

The crowd mushroomed to hundreds.

Jackie pumped his fists and joined the chant of “*NO MORE*” until his voice rasped.

The terrified pigs turned tail and fled into the Stonewall.

“Let’s get ‘em!” Jackie yelled. He rammed his shoulder against the two wooden doors. They didn’t budge.

He joined three guys who rocked a cop car.

A young man in a Jewfro and handlebar mustache lit a mesh garbage can, and threw the burning container at the bar’s doors.

Screams and shouts split the night.

Bricks crashed against the wall.

A sewer grate slammed into the plywood.

Firebombs smashed against the doors. The smell of lighter fluid saturated the air. A bottle crashed through a window above the Stonewall. Shards of glass rained on the sidewalk. Blood trickled from Jackie’s head. He wiped it away with his arm.

Cries of “*gay power*” turned the scorching night into a blazing furnace of pent-up rage.

Jackie and his friends, Mary Queen of the Scotch and Miss Congo Woman, pulled on a parking meter. Two burly guys pitched in and tore it from its base. The five of them hoisted it and used it as a battering-ram against the doors.

With each thrust, Jackie’s adrenaline surged—against the pigs who clubbed and raped him—*boom*—for his stepfather who threw him down the stairs for swishing like a queer—*boom*—for the bullies at school who cornered and beat him—*boom*—for every asshole who called him fag-

got—*boom*. He heaved the meter like a gladiator against a world that hated him—*BOOM!* The Stonewall, with its watered-down drinks, no running water, and clogged toilets, was a shithole. But it was Jackie's home, his block, a place where he felt human. Safe.

A small gap appeared between the doors. He knew if they busted through he'd kill a cop.

Sirens howled.

Gay men packed the sidewalks and streets.

Against the flow of traffic, five buses drove down Christopher. They parked between 7th Avenue and the Stonewall.

Cops in dark uniforms, black helmets, and big plastic shields filed out of the vehicles. They formed a V wedge, gripped their clubs, and advanced toward the crowd.

Jackie, along with scores of street kids, faced the oncoming tyrants.

The pigs inside the bar opened the doors and scampered to the paddy wagon.

"C'mon girls," a drag queen yelled.

The drag queens locked arms, formed a kick-line, and sang:

We are the Village girls—*kick*

We wear our hair in curls—*kick*

We wear our dungarees—*kick*

Above our nellie knees—*kick*

The squad froze and glanced at one another. They edged forward, their batons raised.

Jackie was confronting an invincible force, but he and his gay brothers were winning just by standing up to them. It was a momentous feeling of liberation.

When they were less than ten feet away, Jackie and the throng turned and ran, racing around the short blocks that crisscrossed the Stonewall, Washington Place, Waverly, and 7th Avenue. They outsmarted and confused the cops by coming up behind, pushing them forward. From Howard Johnson's to Mama's Chick and Rib, it was Jackie's and the street kids' turf. The uptown pigs were clueless.

At first, Jackie thought it fun outwitting the cops, but after an hour of playing cat and mouse, his legs became heavy. He and the kids scattered. The pigs dispersed.

Jackie headed up Christopher, wanting to see what they'd done to the Stonewall.

As he walked, he noticed his bloodied knuckles, blood-caked arm, his torn T-shirt.

When he opened the door, the smell of liquor smacked him. Bottles and mirrors were smashed to pieces, along with cigarette machines and the jukebox. Tables and chairs lay shattered.

"Don't worry," the bartender said, brushing glass from the counter. "Mario will have the bar opened by tonight."

"It was worth it," Jackie said, feeling tired but exhilarated, and strode outside.

Too exhausted to walk further, he sat on a stoop with two other kids.

"Man, I can't believe what happened," said a boy on the top step.

"Now we're really in for it," added the other guy.

Over his shoulder Jackie said, "If I have to, I'll come back and fight tonight."

He turned to the war zone.

“Me too.”

“So will I.”

In the predawn, lampposts picked up glitter of broken glass strewn across sidewalks and streets. Like diamonds, they glistened. A light breeze ruffled torn pieces of cloth. Interwoven like a giant quilt lay crushed cans, a high heel, bricks, left-overs in food cartons, a wig, orange peels, Styro-foam cups.

Jackie and his gay brothers had fought like men. The fear he saw in the cops eyes would live with him forever. For the first time, hope entered his life.

This was America. People had rights. He'd be willing to fight, even die for them.

Pride overwhelmed him as he scanned the hallowed battlefield. It was so beautiful, their reward.