

## Marching home

*I was marching alongside a lot of other tomboys, blocks and blocks of tomboys and sissies and butches and drag queens*

B Y L E E L Y N C H

I hadn't been to a gay pride march in six years — which I now know is a mistake — and I hadn't been able to attend the March on Washington in the fall of 1987. I was determined to do what I could to swell the ranks of some march somewhere in 1988.

About the same time that I made this decision I also was coming to realize that after four years of living in Oregon, and eighteen before that of living in Connecticut, I still thought of New York City as my home. I had no intention of living there again, and this year I would not even set foot there closer than an airport. Wasn't

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it about time that I settle, in both senses of the word, on a place of my own?

I could not bring myself to adopt southern Oregon as home. It's too hard to be queer here — impossible to be openly queer. On the other hand, I am not about to move away from Girlfriend, nor am I willing to abandon some of the loveliest territory in the universe to fundamentalist Christians, conservative survivalists and macho methamphetamine manufacturers.

I was scheduled to attend San Francisco's Living Sober gathering again this year. It is, like their gay pride parade, one of the largest in the country, and my experiences at both had been gratifying, if a bit overwhelming. It struck me, though, that this running to the major events in the major cities where the major celebrities spoke was not going to help me take root. Maybe I should consider making my statements where I live.

The first time I visited Portland I was not, to say the least, impressed. It was little (population 366,383), it was inland, it was for the most part flat and had no Castro, no Stonewall, no Mardi Gras, no cobblestones or gay literary history. It did have one tall building. Big fat hairy deal, as Garfield would say.

Yet Portland's *Just Out*, highly regarded by the gay press industry, has loyally run this column for more than three years. And Portland's A Woman's Place Bookstore is one of the oldest in the country.

What's more, the state is filled with maverick women and men whom I admire enormously. Billy Russo of Roseburg quit his secure federal job, cashed in his retirement and created Ruby House, an AIDS hospice in a rural redneck town of 16,000. The state is famous for its women's land groups: Owl Farm in Days Creek, Womanshare in Grants Pass, Rainbow's End in Roseburg, to name a few. The radical faeries meet annually on Creekland, five miles north of where I live. *Womanspirit* magazine lived its potent life here, and this was the birthplace of *RFD*, the magazine for rural gay men.

Southern Oregon is also one of the few temperate places in America where I can make enough of a living on a part-time job that I can write. This nesting process, I came to realize, had to do with accepting who I was, what I needed and what my life had become.



So I made my decision. I would march as close to home as possible — in Portland. And I would celebrate my sobriety at Soberfaire, a weekend of meetings and workshops in Portland. I would settle for Oregon to see if I could settle in Oregon.

Soberfaire was just what I needed. It was held in a neighborhood full of graceful older apartment buildings, trees, and a commercial strip where the gay and lesbian film festival was blatantly advertised on a marquee. There were between 200 and 250 people at Soberfaire. I remember that most of the workshops I attended at Living Sober in San Francisco had been so large there had been a charismatic quality to them. A leader or a well-spoken participant would move the room to emotional heights, and I felt as if each session had been highly cathartic, revelatory, life-changing. It was what I'd needed then.

In Portland, the groups were small. Not only did I, Mizz Bashful '88, feel a responsibility to contribute by opening my mouth and sharing, but I felt comfortable enough to do so. No one walked around hugging teddy bears (although I'd brought Easy Bear in case). I didn't feel as if I needed to. Soberfaire for me was not so much about moving to new places in sobriety as recognizing where I am.

One realization for me that came out of Soberfaire was about anger. I'd spent a lot of time fuming about the people who were organizing against gays in my small town. I'd gotten a little obsessive about it and was beginning to feel consumed by my anger. When I talked about this at Soberfaire, one group leader, also an alcoholism counselor, told a story about how she realized that she could not live in the small town where she had grown up. She loved it, but like mine, it was bigoted and ignorant. Her message, clearly, was that I had choices. I could move.

Well, I was there because I'd decided *not* to move. So I got angry at the group leader — which I knew was silly. Maybe my problem was not the bigots, but the anger itself. Maybe the anger didn't have a whole lot to do with the bigots. Maybe if I could separate my anger from that issue, then the actions I was taking because of it, to use up the angry energy, would finally be able to do just that.

The next weekend I traveled to Portland again for the Lesbian and Gay Pride March. It was one of the actions I'd planned to take to turn my anger to good. I'd seen the anti-gay demonstrators back in my town during the week and had been infuriated even further. They'd set up a fortress outside the post office: a round table with a beach umbrella to shade them from the searing Oregon sun. I was ready to march.

I kept remembering what I'd realized the week before, though, and had spent some time identifying the source of my anger, which went

way back to New York, my beloved home town. I'd drawn a picture of part of that anger, of a thirteen-year-old tomboy striding past the city playground, and of the teenagers on the other side of the chain-link fence yelling "Hey, butch!" at this kid who didn't even know what the word meant. "Is it a boy?" they sang every time I went by, "or is it a girl?" I wanted to run, I wanted to kill, I wanted to hide somewhere and never come out again.

I marched by them, helplessly swallowing my anger. Who could I tell? It was true, I didn't

look like the other girls. My mother complained about it all the time. What could I do? I was a gay child in a hostile straight world full of boys shouting insults.

I marched by the teenagers again in Portland, but I was marching alongside a lot of other tomboys, blocks and blocks of tomboys and sissies and butches and drag queens. The anger was there, but it had finished its job for now: it had driven me home and it was tempered with relief and with joy.



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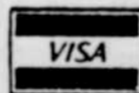


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