

Bright lavender neon

The great butch loner hits the Vegas strip

B Y L E E L Y N C H

Although I wanted to be at the Lambda Literary Awards in Las Vegas and had business at the American Booksellers Association Convention afterwards, I might not have been able to face the 18 hour drive each way to attend if I hadn't longed to see all that *neon*.

THE AMAZON TRAIL

One of my most pleasant childhood nostalgias is of New York City nights. I can remember being just tall enough to look out a window. Was it a red neon sign that I saw across the street? Yellow? Did it depict a blinking cocktail glass or a watchmaker's symbol? Whatever, to this day neon means glamour, excitement, romantic lonesomeness. Neon beckons me out and on into the world, to pursue my destiny, to find my particular glory. I had to see Las Vegas.

My style of travel, when Lover can't be with me, is to assume the identity of the Great Butch Loner. You know the image: stalking cities in search of idiosyncratic crones, exploring odd picturesque corners—always observing life from the sidelines. If I wore a cape, I'd probably do melodramatic furling movements with it, hiding half my face as I push through mysterious doors into exotic buildings. If I had super powers I'd be taken for Bat butch.

Alas, I'm only Little Lee all grown up, a woman alone on city streets. My first night in Vegas, not knowing the temper of the town, I didn't even dare to walk the famous strip to get to the LAMMYS. The next night, inebriated men accosted, commanded, insulted me as I walked near my hotel.

Yet the city has its power. It haunts me. One thing I can't forget is The Mirage Hotel and its block-long artificial volcano. Every half hour at dark, fire roars 54 feet high, cascades down waterfalls and crosses toward the throngs that wait for it. Las Vegas' more garish displays, though obscene money wasters, toy like movie epics with our lust for grandeur.

The LAMMYS were held at Caesar's Palace. I had spent the night before in Tonopah, Nevada, a small, old fashioned western mountain town. It would have fit inside Caesar's Palace. It must have taken me 15 minutes to travel from the parking lot to the hall through the casinos. Though Jane Rule's *Desert of the Heart* was set in Reno, a smaller and more benign gambling town, I felt as if I'd entered the novel as I searched for Ann in her

change girl uniform, and for laughing, bold Silver.

There were rows and rows of slot machines, barely clothed waitresses serving trays of free drinks, people who'd staked out machines, playing three at a time. The fever of gambling was in the air. Sombre women and men dealt cards, spun roulette wheels, pulled in chips. But how would I ever find the LAMMYS?

I spotted a tall, good-looking young man in a tuxedo. His posture was excellent. He moved with grace and assurance.

"Are you here for the LAMMYS?" I dared.

He smiled down at me and said he was. "But first, I'm showing my friends—" there were two casually dressed men behind us—"the statue of David. I can point you in the right direction, though."

Off I went, only to doubt my success when I still wandered a labyrinth of gaming tables several minutes later. Solution: *two* men in tuxedos this time. At the door where all the lost gays converged, I met the owner of Bright Pink Literature, the local gay bookstore. Great name, I thought, picturing a huge bright pink neon sign. Despite my social ineptitude (a truly great butch loner couldn't possibly mingle comfortably), I felt at home.

I also felt like a lovingly wrapped pancake. My call for help in a recent column—I couldn't figure out appropriate attire for this event—elicited wonderful response. Lover sewed sparkling metallic thread along the royal blue, black, turquoise and dark rose stripes of the Guatemalan vest I'd purchased for the occasion. Georgia, my lesbian octogenarian friend, advised me to wear black corduroy jeans. (Her first pair of slacks, daring garb fifty years ago, were boys' cords purchased by her lover for a fictitious male relative.) A physician-poet passed on the tux shirt, lavender cummerbund and bow tie she'd worn to her residency graduation. I turned down a friend who offered me the lavender-tipped button-on ruffles she's worn to her bonding ceremony. And of course, I wore my patent leather dancing shoes.

To tell the truth, just about the time I chickened out of walking two miles along The Strip in these gladrags, I also decided to ditch the cummerbund and the patent leathers. Great Butch Loners don't make spectacles of themselves.

At the very last minute, as I was about to walk out the door, Lover called unexpectedly.

"I've decided," I announced and told her about my terminal gaudiness phobia.

"I'm sure you'll look great whatever you wear," she said supportively, but I heard the sigh in her tone.

Well, Great Butch Loner couldn't bear to disappoint the Femme Who Loves Her. I dressed in full colors. And went out into the romance of the sparkling desert night, through the rowdy crowds and the jingling coins at Caesar's Palace, glowing like a piece of gay neon.

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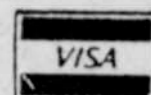


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