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Speak to Your Brothers is a program of Cascade AIDS Project

STONEWALL BABY

The right to party

Young or old, everyone needs a place and a time to feel immortal and reckless

by Will O'Bryan

There was a time when I marked the days of the week by which club or bar I'd be spending the evening at. But that was a long time ago, relative to my 26 years. Those were the hedonistic college days spent in balmy Tampa and traditional, pent-up, a-queen-in-every-closet Richmond, Va.

Portland finds me in a new domestic dynamic. My boyfriend—whom I'll call Mr. X for the sake of his very precious privacy—and I moved here slightly more than a year ago. We mark the days of our week by whose turn it is to walk the dog or do the dishes. The bulk of happy buzzes I've enjoyed in Portland have been spent in front of my fireplace drinking Weinhard's from Safeway. The memories of strangers' ceilings, mind-blowing inhalants and after-hours clubs are hazy and distant.

Despite my attempts to fill Martha Stewart's noble house slippers, Mr. X and I ventured out to a gay bar recently.

Much of my initiation into the gay world I call home took place in clubs. I'll never forget the names and memories of these places, which acted as a sort of nursery during my "gay birth." I have good

memories of sewing my oats, developing gay defensive social skills, learning the difference between sex and love, etc., in gay clubs. But I've learned the basics, and it's time to move on. Nevertheless, it's nice to return occasionally to visit the old alma mater.

I wondered if Portland clubs would be much different from the ones I'd left behind. Or if perhaps times had changed since the last time I'd been out and I wouldn't be hip to some new secret handshake or code word. Maybe that whole color-coded hankie thing that died out once my generation hit the scene had been resurrected.

The entrance looked just like a million other club entrances: gay man at the door to stamp my hand with fluorescent ink; large, bored, amiable security guy; a few steps further in and everything takes on that eerie, clubland, black-light glow.

Once inside, still nothing out of the ordinary. The people weren't stunning or troll-like. Some cute, some not so cute. The music was familiar; no monumental strides in remastered club dance-mixes had passed me by.

Long ago, though after the loss of my innocence, I would go to a club and often become glued to the TV above the bar. All I would need to see is some hokey digital pattern, something akin to a screen saver, and I would get completely sucked in—like a deer caught in headlights. Concentrating on the screen helped cushion the boredom, because even flirting gets boring after a while.

That's exactly what I ended up doing on this particular outing. The TV above the bar was showing me snippets from Jeff Bridges' Disney classic *Tron*, and I was engrossed. I was so

consumed, that after several hours I was completely unaware that Mr. X had reached the limit of his consumption. Of all the things he learned in Boy Scouts, moderation was not one of them. It would've made a nice badge, though.

He wasn't nearly ready to leave yet, so I entertained the idea of a dance. I don't remember what the song was, but if I've had anything to drink (I can't dance while stone sober, I fall over) and I hear one of those driving, soul-pounding, slave-to-the-rhythm beats of, oh, say a rehashed 12-inch Bananarama house mix, I've got to go be part of it. Only the best for me, you know.

The dancing inevitably increased my circulation, and blood began flowing into my brain,

raising my awareness. I knew we would have to leave whether Mr. X was ready or not. I managed to get us outside to the sidewalk. But we were still not out of the woods. I was forced to get on my knees (literally, I'm not making this up) on the gritty, dirty pavement and beg Mr. X—who was rapidly becoming Mr. C' mon-just-15-minutes-more—to call it a night. Finally he acquiesced, but he was not happy about it.

That's how I remember my return to the gay club scene following my yearlong

hiatus. I don't think I missed much. The end of the evening was quasi-traumatic—but it was worth it.

The club I went to in Portland may not be first club I was picked up in, the bar where I turned 21, or a place where I would recognize any old faces, but there was still a sameness, a comforting continuity. People younger than me (though not by much, I swear) were still dancing and feeling immortal and reckless. People who could've been me three or four years ago were there casting their coy glances at each other, discovering that after years of loneliness, they were not alone.

Straight people grow up, play house, date in high school, enjoy the tradition of the prom in the same way that they'll probably enjoy the tradition of their wedding receptions some day. As gay people, we have to learn our social skills on our own for much of our lives. My father, for example, often warned me about the dangers of getting a girl pregnant. He never warned me that insertion may be a bit painful at first.

It stands to reason that for lots of us, gay clubs and bars compensate for where the Sadie Hawkins dance fell short. We may seem a bit hedonistic in our young adult lives, but we've earned it. Not to advocate self-destruction, but the fact that we like to go out and have a good time once we're away from the trappings of our adolescent lives is not surprising. It's a sort of victory party to celebrate having made it out alive.

Sooner or later, though, the party ends, and it's time to get on with some little thing like a career. But for me—someone who is in a place where the party has ended but the adventure continues—it's nice to see that people are still celebrating their victories.



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