

Strangers in the Night

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"I can't go to bars because I'm allergic to smoke," he says, "but I've got needs to fulfill just like anybody else."

According to Corey, sex with a stranger in a park is not only exciting, it's expedient. "This is just gymnastics," he says.

Despite a moon so bright we can see our shadows, once we set foot on the secluded paths, we can't make out the faces of men just two feet away. In this moment, I understand perfectly why cruising parks is definitely a guy thing. I can't imagine any sensible woman would go looking for sex in a park on a dark pathway unless she could kickbox.

Certainly I don't feel safe, and even the regulars disperse the moment we hear a group of carousing teens. The thought of grown men being afraid of children makes me sad.

Corey and I go sit on the steps. I ask him why he doesn't go to the more protected environment of a bathhouse or a sex club.

"They're not anonymous enough," he says. "I want to be in a relationship someday, and I don't want everyone in town to know how much I screw around."

Corey also tells me most of the men he meets in the parks lead otherwise heterosexual lives.

"I've met so many closeted fundamentalist Christians here," he says, "that I'm getting them all together for a potluck at my house."

Things are quiet tonight. Corey tells me he's seen as many as 100 men at a time roaming Washington Park's so-called Fruit Loop, but he won't go there anymore. At 36, he faces more and more rejection from

younger men and tells me he is on "the verge of retirement."

But not tonight. Next port of call is an adult video arcade where I actually run into someone I know. So much for anonymity.

Being a Chatty Cathy, I much prefer this environment to the silence of the park. The guys I meet agree with me.

"The arcades are much less pretentious, less competitive than the bars," one says. "It's less in-your-face."

Another adds: "Actually, it's more on-your-face, really." We laugh and squeeze each other's biceps.

If what Corey says is true and most of the men having sex in public places are straight-identified, I realize, then my lesbian friend's question really shouldn't be "Why do gay men have sex in the bushes?" but rather "Why do men have gay sex in the bushes?" And while I'm thinking about it, are heterosexuals cruising for public sex, too? What about lesbians?

Although they might have had a quickie in the alleyway or on the beach or in an airplane, all of the straight men and women I've spoken to admit there's no heterosexual correlative for, say, Squirt.com: "Your Neighborhood Guide to Getting Off."

As for the lesbians, New York's Fire Island is home to the long-standing myth that, while men have the Meat Rack for cruising, women have the Doughnut Rack. But by all accounts that's just a joke the gay boys made up. Historically, the only women likely to be found in a cruising area would be those practicing the world's oldest profession.

TEA TIME

One of the world's oldest pastimes, on the other hand, might be male-to-male cruising.

In 1587, a Portuguese official wrote that the natives of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, were "addicted to sodomy and do not consider it a shame.... In the bush some offer themselves to all who want them." Likewise, a French official wrote in 1724:

1706, one Thomas Vaughn of London attempted to blackmail Edward Barker, an apothecary he met in the piazza of Covent Garden, after Barker allegedly presented Vaughn with the crown jewels by way of a glory hole in a public toilet nearby.

At the dawn of the 20th century, public sex was a common activity for working-class men in U.S. urban centers. Crowded tenements and boardinghouses simply afforded no privacy, so

Administration construction of public restrooms in our nation's parks meant men in smaller towns also could meet other men for sex.

Many of the men who came of age between the 1930s and the 1950s speak with gratitude for the experiences they had in these tearooms and parks. "If we are going to start apologizing for our history of public sex," said one septuagenarian interviewed in John Loughery's *The Other Side of Silence*, "someone is going to have to tell me how and where I would have met anyone and learned anything when I was a kid. I didn't make the rules."

With few gay outlets at their disposal, most men were forced to get creative. In *Gay New York*, George Chauncey writes, "The joke in the 1940s about the standing room section of the Metropolitan Opera was that it was harder to know which was the louder sound when the lights went up, the applause of the audience or the noise of zippers being yanked back in place." (Apparently, one patron regularly wore his pants backward for his own personal Ride of the Valkyries.)

And in 1912, long before the Village People knew it was fun to stay there, 68 men, including prominent lawyers and Chamber of Commerce officials, were arrested in a YMCA sex ring scandal right here in Portland.

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

The gay sexual liberation of the 1970s, with its proliferation of bars and bathhouses, did nothing to diminish the practice of anonymous public sex.

Indeed, public sex became all the more, well, public. What had begun as a symbol of oppression—the need to have anonymous sex in the bushes—became a symbol of liberation—the right to have anonymous sex in the bushes.

"If you tell people for 2,000 years that they can't touch," writer David Ehrmestein says, "and then, all of a sudden, someone says they can, you're going to see lots of action."

Today, the men who partake in acts of public sex seem to fall into two categories: what I call "the Hiders" and "the Seekers."

The Hiders include those men living otherwise heterosexual lives who cannot afford to be seen in a gay bar or even a sex club but for whom the excuse "Oh, I just stopped in the bathroom

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to take a leak" provides an instant alibi. Other Hiders include gay men looking for a clandestine break from their nominally monogamous relationships, giving them a chance to act out their own personal "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Darrell, who enjoys public sex for the "straight trade," told me a story about hooking up with a guy who kept saying, "Oh, don't tell my boyfriend, don't tell my boyfriend."

"What he didn't know," Darrell says, "was that I had already done his boyfriend."

If the Hiders are a continuation of the closeted, pre-Stonewall tradition, the Seekers represent the unapologetic hedonism of post-

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"It's a horrible scandal that a large number of libertine men swim in the nude in Paris in sight of so many people." He went on to add that these libertines "commit abominations with those of their own sex."

And it seems that ever since the invention of indoor plumbing, restrooms have been used for sexual encounters. Men in 18th century Amsterdam favored cruising the public toilets built under the city's many bridges because the sound of wooden clogs clomping down the stairs gave them time to button up their breeches. And in

low-wage laborers took to relatively secluded dark corners of city parks and stockyards.

By the 1920s, so many men were cruising New York's Central Park that the open lawn came to be called the Fruited Plain, while other sections were referred to as Vaseline Alley and Bitches Walk. And when subway and train stations opened "toilet rooms"—"t-rooms" for short—urban gay men soon began doing what came naturally in what they rechristened "tearooms." (So much more elegant, don't you think?) In the 1930s, the Works Progress