

Bright Lights, Big City

A Kentucky boy arrives in Portland—what next?

I had forgotten what it was like.

The talking—nervous, fast and loud—like at the junior high lunch table. The tight smile and forced laughter with a group of mostly older men, all strangers. Heavy pregame drinking to curb the butterflies.

They're some of the telling signs of a newly out gay guy on the scene. Being openly gay for going on 15 years now myself, I'd forgotten about them. That is, until Logan popped into my life. Via MySpace, naturally.

His first message to me was on a Tuesday, 9:49 p.m.: "hey im new to portland and saw your pic and thought i would tell you that your HOT!!!"

Well how cute is that I thought, and clicked through to his profile, where I was greeted with a blast of pop music and a swirl of smiling photos. OK, so he's not a spam-bot and doesn't seem ill-intentioned, I thought, and responded in kind: "Hi Logan, thanks for your sweet message...aww shucks, well, I consider myself to be a pretty average dude, but thanks for the vote of confidence! :) How are you enjoying PDX so far? How long have you been in town?"

This back-and-forth messaging went on for some time, until I finally convinced Logan to ring me. (It took some convincing.)

Through lightly Southern-accented English, Logan told me it was his very first night in Portland—that, indeed, he'd arrived late the night before and was living with his sister in inner Northeast. I consulted his MySpace page, cell phone to one ear, for confirmation. It was all right there, the beautifully stark prose of his personal biography. He had typed this: "i live in oregon now. portland to be exact. i was once from henderson ky, but there was nothing there for me. ready to find a job, get back in school, and make tons of friends:"

Rural Kentucky... "nothing there" ...move to the big city... get it together...start anew. I recognized those feelings, however distant they were from me now. I invited Logan out that night with friends

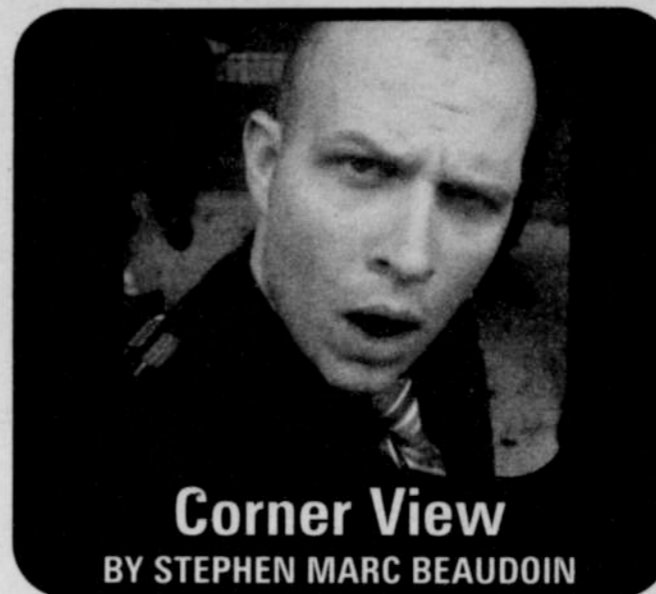
for a happy hour excursion. Because Logan was too green in town to yet navigate TriMet, my friend Chad and I picked him up where he was staying.

It would be fruitless to recount the entire evening with this newly minted Stumptown queer. Suffice it to say we hit up the requisite 10 o'clock happy hour at Jake's and sauntered (Logan, well-fueled, rather stumbled) over to Boxxes for karaoke. Along the way, Chad and I tried to impart some local queer history to him: Here's the street corner from a famous scene in Gus Van Sant's *Drugstore Cowboy*, there's the shell of a building that was once the home of a long-standing bathhouse. "This used to be called Vaseline Alley," Chad explained with maybe some sadness in his voice. "But now everything's moving downtown and over to the east side."

Logan didn't offer much in the way of reaction ("Oh wow! Cool!"). Or maybe his wide-eyed innocence was reaction enough. When he wasn't busy throwing down Long Island iced teas or messaging friends from home on his iPhone, he was gabbing at warp speed and staring at Portlanders for far too long. In one instance, another young guy a few feet away returned his hungry glance, and Logan barked out, in his best Kentucky-ese: "What're you starin' at? You got a problem?" I asked him to chill out.

I don't mean to be dismissive of Logan, or of his background. That night, he simply seemed overwhelmed by the world. When he confided during the waning minutes of the night that he was not openly gay in Kentucky (except to one dear female friend), that he'd never before stepped inside a gay bar and that he'd never kissed another man, his behaviors began to make sense.

The night was winding down, and many of my friends had expressed a sort of distaste for this new entrant in our circle. ("He's



Corner View
BY STEPHEN MARC BEAUDOIN

just a mess!" one of them said to me later.) Maybe thrown off by a new energy in the group, we decided to wrap things up on the early side.

Then, standing at a cocktail table in the glow of the karaoke screen, nursing an ice-bottomed empty drink, Logan looked at me with welling eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I just don't know about any of this. I just don't know how to play

this game."

At that moment, Logan couldn't have articulated himself more clearly. He's right—how do gays learn to "play this game"? From whom can young gays learn how to navigate the rocky gay social and cultural terrain? For gays moving from suburban or rural areas especially, is there any way to ease the shock of the big city? Outside of the bars, where are the natural places for gays to come together? How best to battle this severe sense of isolation?

I see this as a central failing of the queer community. I recalled a conversation just last month with Q Center's Kendall Clawson, where she identified one of the center's top priorities: battling gay isolation. But I found myself struggling to cope with the gravity of Logan's most primal question: How do I find myself as a gay man, and others like me, in a brash and busy new world?

I didn't know what to say to him. Do you? **jo**

Staff Writer STEPHEN MARC BEAUDOIN writes about Portland arts and queer culture at fromeverycorner.blogspot.com. He welcomes feedback at stephen@justout.com.

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