

Burning Down The Candy Shop

Summertime, finally! Karen and I recline lazily against our inner tubes, the Clackamas River full of drunken young people and radios blasting Top 40 radio. Over the din of the fellow river-floaters, we talk about an all-too-familiar story: Her childhood friend moved from their repressed hometown to the Rose City, and has proceeded to go as wild as could be expected.

"Hearing his stories," she says, running her fingers through the cold water, "it sounds like when gay people move to cities, they're moving into a candy shop."

"Oh my gosh, yes," I reply, wiping my sunglasses on my bathing suit. "Absolutely. I can't think of any queer person for whom this hasn't been the case."

"But why? I mean, straight people don't really have a real equivalent. Why does this happen for gay people?"

"Well, lack and repression, of course. However, you feel justified to do it because, unlike most straight people, most gay people start out their lives in the gay community believing on some level that other gay people are their friends. You assume that because you have a shared experience and a shared interest, you also have a shared allegiance to one another, and a shared sense of ethics."

"Um, yeah," Karen smirks. "Because that's totally how societies form their sense of ethics—



remember to breathe

BY NICK MATTOS

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on everyone agreeing that they're into Robyn."

"I'm impressed by your awareness of the gay zeitgeist, sweetie," I reply. "Anyway, I'm not saying it's a reasonable thing to believe—but when you first see a real gay community, it's hard to believe that such a thing exists, too. I remember having my mind just *blown* by the city having more than one gay bar. Or logging into Manhunt and seeing that there were over 300 guys online!"

"Overshare."

"I'm just getting started. The city seems like a candy shop, if only because you're used to the gum-and-Snickers aisle at your small-town 7-Eleven. In comparison, if you're anything like me, you think the community's big enough that you can do whatever and whom-ever you want—and proceed to do so. Myself, I slept around and partied up a storm and in general behaved like I was a college freshman. I also behaved terribly and hurt a lot of people,

many of them in ways that I'm only starting to understand and without realizing at the time that I was doing anything wrong. I was simply so naïve that I expected everyone to lovingly support me, even when I was doing very little to lovingly support anyone else..."

"...And whatever mythology you have about gay community shatters," Karen observes.

"Exactly. The really sad part of this is how quickly this sense of community and promise goes away—how rapidly and thoroughly most gay people become jaded, stop trusting each other, project their self-loathing onto the community around them. I reached a point where I had pretty much scorched myself. If I was going to be any place where there'd be other gay people, I'd be overwhelmed with anxiety and barely talk to anyone because I'd be so paranoid that I'd run into someone I had burnt."

"Do you wish you hadn't done what you did?" Karen asks over the splash of boys flying off rope swings into the river. "Is it better if gay people never move into the candy shop at all?"

"Well, here's the thing: I definitely did things I shouldn't have done. However, I rather doubt that in general this is an effect that is stoppable—it seems like human nature to be

excited and idealistic. Past that, I don't really think idealism, or being batted around by the world for it, is a bad thing!"

"You think freshman gays should suffer for their naiveté?"

"Well, not exactly." I pause. "Think of it this way: You aren't given a permanent place in a community without earning it, and earning it often involves a degree of sacrifice and hardship. I mean, most any society you enter has a trial, an ordeal—a hazing, even, if you're not lucky. Why shouldn't gay society?"

"It's an initiation. You move into your own personal candy shop, and then go so crazy inside it that you unintentionally burn it down. The good thing about it, though, is that with the candy shop gone you have to make yourself a home in the city, amongst everyone else. You perhaps need to make some amends to the people you screwed over, of course, but you get to start figuring out who you are beyond the confines of the candy shop. At that point, you're really part of the community."

In the heat of the sun, I marvel at everything that conspired to get me here on the river, at how strange and wonderfully the world works itself out. "May your friend enjoy the candy shop fully," I tell Karen, smiling, "and, when he's ready, burn it down completely." ☐

NICK MATTOS *pretty much lives for Portland summers. Send invitations to float down rivers to nickmattos@justout.com.*

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