

Lady About Leather: A Folsom Retrospective

Trips out of town aren't appealing only because they afford chances to escape monotony and routine, although anonymity is rather alluring—as is the opportunity to fire up Grindr outside Portland. I love travel because of the possibility of the spectacular (even if it doesn't always happen). Say, for example, you plan a trip to New York City with your best friend at the tail end of your four-year relationship's abrupt disintegration. While there, you meet a boy from West Hollywood and—cue fireworks—you find temporary bliss. Your trip ends, you stay in touch, said boy visits Portland. That things eventually fizzle doesn't matter much—sometimes the adventure is more important than the ending.

In all of my travels (I say that like I've rounded the world a dozen times), I've never really picked a destination because of some big must-see event. I've yet to see, say, Halloween in New York or Pride in West Hollywood. Up until now, I've been perfectly content with events close to home—and those to our slightly bitchier north. (Hello, Seattle.) That changed last month when I went to Folsom Street Fair in San Francisco, the notorious leather and bondage festival that regularly caps the city's annual Leather Pride Week—an event that boasts hundreds of thousands of visitors.

Be it on public transit, the city's streets or at



lady about town

BY DANIEL BORGAN

the airport, San Francisco was teeming with gays of virtually every shape and size, into every fetish. Oh, what those hapless TSA agents must have seen while tending to their X-ray machines—eyes wide, permanently scarred. And I had no idea until Folsom weekend that manufacturers made luggage with giant leather “Nasty Pig” tags. “Guess what’s in that faggot’s suitcase?” was one of the more amusing games my traveling companions and I played.

The street fair itself falls on Sunday—like Pride here—so everyone is, obviously, (not) fresh-faced and rested after weekend-long parties. My cohorts assembled relatively early that morning—once everyone found their way back home—and after going face down in brunch, we made our way to Folsom Street. In my many gay years on this planet, I have seen some things. I have watched some adult films. Having been briefed by many an experienced traveler about this particular event, I felt prepared to see some new things. That said: Conceptualizing fetishes and watching them live are very different things.

Admittedly part of the sightseeing-only contingent, the most scandal we achieved was

my plunging V-neck T-shirt. From the moment we passed the gate, I felt like a habit-donned nun from a convent in the Midwest. Live sex acts, impressive (and clearly difficult) feats of bondage and famous (naked) porn stars on every sidewalk were just the beginning. I was shocked by how many porn stars my friends, ever the supporters of the arts, knew by name. I've never been that committed.

We saw testicles stretched to their limits with saline, rivaling cantaloupes in size. Leather masks of every shape, size and animal-likening, paired with whips—festival participants were eager to show off their vast skill sets to passers-by. (Lucky friends back home received play-by-plays; I was dedicated to documentary filmmaking with my camera phone.) Sadly, days of studying hanky code beforehand didn't bear the fruit we expected.

Then, in the midst of the snapping of whips and the loudest, welt-inducing of spankings, surrounded by all that newness, I barreled right into my past. I came face to face with the old lover I met in New York, new boyfriend on his arm. All I had on mine was my friend Ryan and his brightly colored pants. Awkward

hellos morphed into obligatory offers to catch up, overtures which were quickly dismissed. As my old flames are usually wont to do, he hurried away, fleeing at top speed. Later on, thanks to Grindr's homing beacon, I ran into John—best friend to my former partner of four years. That one-two punch reminded me that no matter our physical locations, we're just a random occurrence away from revisiting and reliving emotions we thought we'd safely shelved and stored away.

Upon my return home, a married straight male friend opined that homophobes aren't actually disgusted by homosexuality; they are, rather, turned off by the fact that our lives seem more intriguing than theirs. While meant in jest, there's certainly some truth there. Being queer forces us to write our own handbook, make our own rules—for living, loving, fucking, all of it. I loved Folsom not just for its shock value; I loved that, to all those thousands of people, things were perfectly normal—the result of years of redefining identity. And while we're rewriting all the old rules (and enjoying it), there's little time or need for the futility of regret. ☐

I truly regret any shocking images I inadvertently sent my nana that Sunday afternoon. Email daniel@justout.com.

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