

Out, Part 3: Grinding to a Halt

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A pointless history lesson...an audience with the Sister and another exercise in poor taste...the gum that tastes like rubber...getting intimate with someone's groinatological area...Neve's hair...the only reason I envy Republicans...

The drag queens were pissed off. They were pissed off at the repression, the brutal treatment by the police, by the refusal of the more "mainstream" gay community—whatever that was—to recognize them as deserving of civil rights every bit as much as those who wanted to assimilate seamlessly into straight society.

The straw which many believe broke the proverbial camel's back was the death of gay uber-icon Judy Garland. The rioting which followed her death almost certainly would have come along sooner or later, as gay black poet Langston Hughes' musings about the fate of deferred dreams suggests. However, to use the standard and very cliched (particularly in this case) fire metaphor, Judy's death was the spark which really got the fire started. Even the most self-loathing, closeted, wannabe-straight dittohead Republican Christian queer has to admit that the Stonewall Riots were the birth of the modern gay movement, and that the drag queens were on the front lines. Even Harvey Milk, who would become the template for all gay leaders (well, politicians anyway) to follow, recognized their potential and made sure they were on his side. Lesbians not so much, but that's the sad truth about societal change: men are usually first in line. Being progressive doesn't necessarily mean you aren't sexist. It certainly makes the queens' achievement a lovely irony.

These were thoughts crossing my mind as we abandoned our post at about 11:45pm and headed for Pasqua's, a coffee place kitty-corner from Harvey's and

across from the Lady Di tribute. Though I hadn't been aware of it while she was alive, Diana was very much the gay icon, probably on par with Judy. On first glance, it seems obvious: she was a goddamned *princess*, for Christ's sake, and one with allegedly impeccable fashion sense. (I personally never cared for her style all that much, but my tastes are different than most. To put it mildly.) More importantly, though, among her charitable work—but less widely reported than, say, that landmine stuff—was much involving the gay and AIDS community. She was involved with AIDS from very early on, while it was still treated as simply a "gay disease" and before it became a fashionable celebrity cause. With Diana gone, Susan Sarandon is among one of the only celebrities for whom the cause is more important than any impact it has on her star status. (For those who haven't guessed by now, I worship Susan.)

Still, I wondered, was this progress? How would La Miranda, the fiery queen who essentially led Stonewall—and whose characterization in the film *Stonewall* was, in my opinion, extremely flawed—have felt about this? Certainly we didn't get any trouble from the police (most of whom were turbodykes), but we weren't out just to be fabulous, either, which was arguably La Miranda & Co.'s primary intention. We were out to try and slow the transmission of a disease which never should have been allowed to spread to such an extent in the first place. The blame for this can be laid almost entirely at the feet of the Reagan Administration, but the gay community itself was tragically if understandably reluctant to face the facts about the epidemic. Check out Randy Shilts' brilliant book *And The Band Played On* for a remarkably in-depth look at the early days of AIDS and just how many people screwed up on how many levels. His equally brilliant *Mayor of Castro Street* has some fascinating insights into La Miranda. Now, on with the fucking story, already.

The plan was to take a 20 minute coffee break, go into Harvey's and The Midnight Sun to distribute condoms, then call it a night. The Midnight Sun is one of the maybe half-dozen bars in the Castro, and like most it has no windows and

an ID check at the door. I go into very few bars since I don't cruise and I seldom drink, so I'd never seen the inside.

We'd been sitting in Pasqua's for a while when a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence came in. I can't speak for anyone else, but I'm rather in awe of the Sisters. I mean, they're IT, y'know? The queens to end all queens in both attitude and political action—they held the first AIDS fundraiser back in '82 (give or take a year) and haven't slowed down since. And they wear Catholic nun habits, which pleases my long-abandoned Catholicism no end.

After making her presence known, she came over to our table. I felt certain that she was going to take one look at me and say, "Honey, you *so* don't belong here. Who are you trying to kid?" If anyone was going to recognize me for the poseur I am, it's a Sister.

Instead, it was a cheery "Hello, girls! How are we this evening?"

"A picture!" Jimbo practically shrieked. "I've got to have a picture!" He handed off his camera to me, and I promptly gave it to Pepper, who snapped a couple of them. I considered asking to have a picture taken with the Sister as well, but that was right about where my courage expired. Besides, I sensed she had other things on her mind.

I was right. "Do you want to hear the first Lady Di joke?" the Sister asked. I stayed up all last night thinking of it." Mind you, Di had been killed less than a week before. The Sisters move fast.

It went something like this: An reporter asks Nancy Reagan what she thinks about the Lady Di tragedy. "Oh, it's awful. I'm so jealous!" Understandably confused, the reporter says, "Jealous? Why are you jealous?" "Because she'll be first to wear the fall Versace line!"

Is it any wonder I look up to the Sisters so much? She then proceeded to request (nay, demand) the room's attention, and after making sure we were all aware of how hard the employees work, she carried around the tip jar. I'm telling you, Catholics and their damn collection plates. All I had to offer were condoms and 'lubes, which I decided to hang onto.

From Pasqua's we went back to Harvey's. Condom distribution is just what it sounds like: you distribute condoms. If I have a problem with getting peoples' attention, then I loathe the concept of handing out something unsolicited, particularly inside a business. Harvey's obviously had no problem with it and everybody knew who we were (even if we hadn't been standing outside for a couple hours), but still it made me uncomfortable. I would've been uncomfortable regardless of how I was dressed.

My pitch was a paraphrase of the old graffiti classic: "Condoms! The gum that tastes like rubber!" Overall, some reacted well; some were indifferent; some gave me looks which dared me to try, which probably resembled the looks I give people trying to talk to me on the street.

One fellow happily accepted my offer, the only problem being he was standing with a beer in each hand. I couldn't exactly expect him to put the glasses down on my account, so I did the only logical thing: I put the condom in his front pocket. I'd like to think that La Miranda would have approved of that, if nothing else.

While Harvey's at least has a certain drag connection, hence we weren't too out of place, I didn't feel at all welcome in The Midnight Sun. Nobody said anything (I know, hon, they wouldn't), but it was packed wall to wall with clones who I sensed were just barely tolerant of queens. Pepper and Jimbo made a full circle, but Number One and I only lasted a few minutes.

Long enough, though, to catch a segment of Saturday Night Live featuring Neve Campbell on their large screen. It surprised me a bit; not so much that the bar would have such a huge projection screen—the main gay bar in my hometown of Fresno, the Express, has one as well—but that they'd be showing SNL. It was a spoof of the movie *Scream*, which I hadn't yet seen, but what mattered was that it gave me an opportunity to marvel at how beautiful Neve is...and, oh, that hair, I *love* her hair. Based on that segment, which was followed by one anonymous techno video or another, she's an incredible dancer, too.

It was midnight, time to call it quits. We made the trek back to SA's headquarters, and to my surprise, The Ex and Louise were waiting patiently in front. I'm not certain why I was surprised, but I was.

Pepper and Number One proceeded to remove their makeup and get back into their regular clothes; in spite of the degraded state of my own makeup, I decided to keep it on for the drive home, though I did take off the dress and put back on the skirt and t-shirt I'd arrived in. Dressing down, if you will, and I still figured that there was no reason to shy away from the more causal drag.

Now, here in the big city we have something that you more rural bumpkins might not be familiar with, a concept called "desensitization." It's what allows us to walk down the street and utterly ignore the people starving at our feet. Being the commie pinko leftist that I am, I feel a certain amount of what our more conservative brethren snickeringly refer to as "liberal guilt," but I manage. (It beats conservative guilt, in which case I wouldn't be able to do any of this at all because I'd be too worried about the laws of nature or God's will or my own useless male ego.) I'm know there's a system at work which is much larger than myself, and certainly not one I created. Do I exploit it? Yes, I've used it as much as I can to get where I am today—which isn't far, and I've never made over 10K a year—but I can't recall the last time I fired someone, took away their home or ended social programs, either.

It's a different ball of wax when you're dressed up, though. It's impossible to ignore the class disparity. I'm frustrated that the damn nylons keep rolling down, and they have to scrounge for their next meal. Granted, it's not the same as zooming by in my Range Rover while yakking it up on my cell phone (again, the dress was \$15, not exactly high-class), but my conscience is still troubled. Even though what I was doing was for a good cause, like that makes any difference.

We just had to make it back to the car. (That's the cure for middle-class paranoia in an urban setting—if we just make it back to the car, honey, we'll be all right.) The Ex had parked a couple blocks away out of sheer necessity, and it could have been a lot farther away. But, alas, a couple guys had set up shop right next to where we were parked.

You know the drill—walk quickly, looking either straight forward or focusing on something else, no direct eye contact. Usually during the day I'll be wearing my walkman for that extra level of isolation. (It won't always be on because I want to be aware of my surroundings, but the headphones will be on to discourage people from trying to talk to me. Works on the same principle as The Club, in a really sick way.)

Ha. No such luck. One of them insisted on holding the door for me as I got in. I wasn't worried, exactly—I might have been in makeup and a skirt, but I'm still 6'2" and more beefy than I care to admit, and he was neither of those things. I assured him that it wasn't necessary, I could get in just fine on my own, and his response slayed me:

"I don't want you to mess up your dress. Besides, you're parked in my living room."

And that's my story.



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