People Like Them: Sign o’ the Pines

Does how we play tell us how we live?

October 1, 1994 By Bruce Bibby

“You see, darling, I’m about a nine.” My companion and I were walking along the beach at Fire Island Pines, that gay New York bastion of sex, drugs and jock ’n’ troll. I asked my friend, a celebrated West Coast artist with sun-dried tomatoes for nipples, exactly what he meant.

"There’s an upper stratosphere here and I’m *just* below it, so I can’t be quite as picky as I’d like."

I looked at my acquaintance’s wrinkled knees, his slightly convex belly, his gray hair, not to mention the fact that he still spoke daily with his “mummy,” his best friend. He’d be lucky to score a drunk at the Meat Rack (a cruise swamp), I thought, as I said, “Darling, I know.”

“I think I’ll just go home and take another pill,” he said forlornly. “You see, I’m drinking less and cutting down on the drugs. A Valium helps a lot.”

“Darling,” I said, even more sympathetically, "I *know*."

God, how I know. When I spent my last summer on Fire Island in 1987, my brain was pickled in Absolut and my tits were starting to sag at 26. Which must explain why I married a famous playwright I had little in common with (but later came to love) and starting summering in Izod-infested Connecticut. My new husband hated the beach, so we guzzled iced booze as we entertained Broadway stars, both faded and glittering, by the pool. I never returned to the Pines.

Until I got divorced. I also got sober. And since I replaced the liquor counter with the boob-and-butt machines, my breasts had become Fabio-ized. So you’d think with my new pecs and my firm-but-supple ass, I’d feel right at home again.

I did at first. Then I saw that the Pines had become one big B-movie and it was called *Invasion of the Ordinary Body Snatchers*. Slowly over the past seven years, Jeff Stryker pods had replaced virtually every male specimen on the island. Even old and skinny guys suddenly had biceps where they used to have moles and body hair. Talk about scary monsters.

But a bigger scare, perhaps, was when I realized that a large percentage of the population had lost itself in muscle mania because it was running from the biggest fright of them all, AIDS. Pull it,

press it, push it but don't talk about IT.

Our bodies have become our barriers. Mine, too. I've been panting at the gym for more than a year, I now realize, not just because I wanted built-in shoulder pads but because I wanted to be a bad ass to more bad news. I don't want to know about any more friends getting sick. I'll just rep out while I check out, thank you. I understand the escape. But that escape has a price, one which is reflected in some signs I've noticed this time around. Take smiles, for example. They seem to have been replaced with cold *Stepford Wives* non-expressions. There used to be a certain *joie de vivre* on guys' faces. Now everybody sex-rays each other. *Fuck me with your steely baby-blues, baby*.

Sex, like smiles, has also gotten more economical. Admittedly, the Pines has never been known for its let's-get-to-know-each-other atmosphere, but now even staying the night after a good lay seems right up there with Day-Glo thongs. With some exceptions, the encounters I've had this summer have been quite thrilling but with very little emotion. Few words. Perfect bodies. Hot. Fast. Forgettable.

Drag. A couple of weeks ago I threw on a wig and alligator pumps -- which I've done before in the Pines to great applause -- and ran to greet some friends. "How tacky!" is what nearly expression at the dock said. "I'd be running, too, if I had that hair," said some brittle old thing. It was really ridiculous, especially considering the fact that most everybody, with their shaved bodies, ballooned breasts and flowered bikinis (square-cut, of course) looked like girls anyway. Get over it.

Then there are "celebrities." Elegant gals like Claudette Colbert, who used to be a regular guest of my neighbor's, have been replaced by the likes of NYC cable TV's industrial porn peddler Robin Byrd, who, like the omnipresent deer, has a habit of eating her breakfast off the berry bushes outside my house.

And, of course, there are the drugs. I'd like to say that they're more rampant than before, but, in reality, they're probably the *only* thing that has remained steadfast in the Pines. Despite people who are fighting HIV-related everything, poppers are everywhere and alcohol is the guest of honor at virtually every party.

But who am I kidding? Not only is it the beach, it's one of the most breathtaking shores in the world; and there's no place I'd rather be. Fuck constraints. Life will always be unfettered in the Pines, as it should be. And New York City and its gay-bashing scum are two islands and several large bays away.

So I'm a 12-steppin' Betty Ford in a sea of pill-poppin' Nancy Reagans. You say Adolfo, I say drag. So what? We all get face-lifts in the end.

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