Days of 2005: Settling-In, Studio 13, Snogging

April 29, 2015 By Jay Vithalani

It was easy enough to furnish my one-bedroom apartment that third week of August. My needs, as well my budget, were modest. Iowa City is a student town after all, and in the final weeks before the Fall Semester there is a network in place to help with the large number of arrivals and departures. Yard sales on every corner, practically. Flyers everywhere advertising delivery service by pickup truck. (Pickup trucks *everywhere*, casually muscled men in their teens and twenties with farmer tans, ditto.) And, of course, an insanely busy Target.

I had done my research in June and July--bus routes, faculty, course listings, popular restaurants, banks, cellphone services. Information on the queer "scene" was more difficult to come by or at least more difficult to evaluate; not everything can be foretasted online (more's the pity).

I had no desire (at least not yet) to be a part of the undergraduate gay group. The sparse (and seriously outdated) notes on cruising spots all had a sad and desperately optimistic ring to them. The situational homosexuality of frat culture certainly intrigued me; and I was to learn almost too much about Greek life in the years to come. For now, though, where did this morass of vague impressions and uncertain information leave me? A quiet year, a long journey; a solitary week of bustle and jet-lag and settling-in. A visit to Studio 13 seemed to be in order.

(O Studio 13, thou know'st that many hourglasses of mirth and melancholy were spent upon thy ambivalent bosom! 'Tis true this, the discharge of promis'd duty was much doubtful, rais'd as a firing cannon tho' I often was.)

A full description of the place, Iowa City's only gay bar, and its small but significant role in my life, would take too long and lead me into further digressions. So, for now, for this narrative, just a few salient thoughts and facts.

I was intensely curious: just what would a gay bar and nightclub in the Midwest be like? Unsure of any sartorial subtleties required, I was determined to play it "neutral"--could one really go wrong with faded jeans and a white t-shirt? And, almost certain they would not be needed, I had on my person a condom and a sachet of lube.

Carded, at the age of 32. Hurray! 1980s New Wave music playing at the time I got there, 11ish: hurray again, I could actually dance to this. And the drinks, served by impossibly cherubic bartenders, absurdly cheap. Three cheers, right there. Crowded, and pleasantly so, but not packed to the gills. Pretty smoky; but also the heady, and wonderfully familiar, almost-olfactory sense of testosterone and pheromones: in an entirely new space. To the dance floor.

An hour of sweat later, and with the fortification of two more G&Ts, I surveyed the landscape. I seemed to be neither too young nor too old, I felt Goldilocks-ish. There were plenty of zygotes (all of legal age, no doubt) with those neon glow-stick thingies, and stoic solitary men in their 50s and 60s with beer and resignation. I'm genuinely a terrible dancer--sometimes I just jump and down to a thumping song--but I liked the accidental (or occasionally tactical?) bumps and brushes with other dancers. Speaking of brushes... one guy I had been next to on the floor, and had (perhaps?) exchanged smiles with, was now standing near the bar area as well. More smiles. Was he (a) dopily smiling-in-general or (b) in hot pursuit of someone else? I was old enough to know that this kind of pre-flirtation could be (a) entirely in one's mind, or (b) real enough but snuffed easily because of endless doubting and indecision and tedium. I put my hand out and shouted one syllable: "Hi!"

Matt turned out be a graduating senior on his way *out* of IC--perfect. Not quite Norman Rockwell; but perhaps that was just a matter of the trendy haircut and cigarette. Tall and rangy, very (summer-sunshine) blonde, confident in his looks, with more than a dollop of what gay men, in certain contexts, call "attitude." But he seemed genuinely curious about Bombay, so I shamelessly played up the exotic Big City angle--"20,000 people? Try 20 million!" Or something along those lines. The loud music obviously made conversation difficult, though it brought our faces very close to each other; and conversation was not a high priority for me at this point.

Back on the dance floor: the snogging began. Glorious summer weather: making out outside the club, pausing only to share a cigarette. Of course, the grinding of denim-covered erections. Handsy, then handsier... but wait, best not to go for the superlative just yet. So, a tipsy walk to Matt's apartment--*mirabile dictu*, he didn't have roommates!--laughing about nothing in particular, singing songs, and snogging.

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