

Where Have All The Gay Folk Gone?

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

For a long time, the center of gay life has been the city ~ New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Boston, Miami, etc. ~ and we have sought and found comfort in those cutting-edge hubs of cultural activity. Gay men and women have congregated in the metropolis ~ a polished, sophisticated, fast-paced world where we feel at home being outsiders. Lately, however, we seem to be moving out of the “gay ghettos” to the suburbs for our own slice of American life. Are we losing some sense of gayness in our migration into mainstream America?

While sitting at the Newscafe on Ocean Drive in South Beach last month, I overheard a couple at the next table discussing the sorry state of gay affairs in Miami. Where used to reign plentiful gay bars and clubs now held hum-drum restaurants and decidedly heterosexual fare. (Fat Tuesdays anyone?) Once home to Gianni Versace and a gay scene of fabulous proportions, South Beach was decidedly less gay today than it was a mere ten years ago. Lamenting the arrival of a mainstream scene, my compatriots were pointing out a trend that has taken leaps over the past few years ~ the movement of gay men and women from centralized gay areas (San Francisco’s Castro, Boston’s South End, New York’s Chelsea, Miami’s South Beach) to lesser-known spots ~ the suburbs, the small towns, Brooklyn, etc.

Is this an alarming trend, or a welcome integration into society? Look at the Castro – what was once the mecca of gay existence is now a Disney version of gay life complete with a rainbow motif and friendly leathermen smiling kindly upon tourists and pointing out the local landmarks. The same seems to be happening in Boston’s South End – I recently visited after being away for a few months and in that time the atmosphere has decidedly shifted. How long before we fight off the arrival of Pottery Barn and the Gap? Even the recent Winter Party in South Beach seemed less edgy, less exciting than it once did. These affairs are now big-budget extravaganzas, carried off with military precision and planning and devoid of all in-the-moment passion and flare. I’m not saying they’re dull or meaningless, and surely one’s first circuit party is an unforgettable barrage of sights, sounds, and pleasures ~ but have we come so far that such parties, which used to

be underground, subversive, dangerously and wonderfully heady scenes, are now commonplace and lacking in inspiration and ingenuity?

One of the joys of being gay, at least for me, was the sense that my difference ~ once a source of isolation and fear ~ was also what put me on the cutting edge, the forefront of what was trendy and cool. Granted, it was a frivolous feeling, but it made up somewhat for the terror that often accompanied being gay. Take away that edge and what are we left with? The difference that I once rejected and fought, when taken away, is something I actually miss.

Yet it is, in the words of a convicted felon, a good thing. The next gay revolution will take place in the suburbs, in the heartland, in the backyards of America ~ what began in the cities will move deeper into our country. And I quite enjoy living in the suburb of a smaller city. The only times I've ever been harassed as a gay man have been in big cities like Chicago or Boston. In my home in upstate NY I feel safe. Surrounded by good neighbors and people who have welcomed and respected my partner and me, I feel at ease. This is my American dream, and while it never really is what it seems, it's still pretty good.