

FIRE ISLAND IS NOT SO exclusive these days, or so I'm told by friends who have invited me, a longtime San Franciscan, out for the weekend. So many men who once came summer after summer have died or are too ill to make the trip, and with their absence, it's easier to find a room for the night, or the week, or for a summer share.

A veteran of urban gay life, I find myself poorly prepared for Fire Island. Its distance from the mainland, for example—once you're there, you're *stuck*, which gives its social life that alluring combination of escape and claustrophobia peculiar to island towns. So many of its vacationers return weekend after weekend that small-town ethics enforce themselves. Born and raised in the country, I find it funny to watch city boys learning that in such closed communities, manners are a matter of survival as much as form.

At the disco, drugs are back, fueling a mighty laboring to retrieve an innocence that's not there to be found. In the age of AIDS, we all know more than we want to know, and drugs can erase that knowledge only briefly, if at all.

But the music is great, and whether what it inspires is forgetfulness or denial, it's good to come by, if only for a night. Somewhere around 5 a.m., I team up with a young man with a clarinetist's lip, named deWayne ("small D, big W") who has just arrived in Manhattan from Texas. He got himself out to Fire Island only to miss the last ferry back (that story will do). He works part-time at a music store, plays "every" musical instrument, is studying to be a dancer. I could tell his sweet, familiar story to him before he tells it to me, a knowledge that gives me a small case of the willies, which I manage to avoid until he shyly confesses his age: 20. Overcome by the spirit of camaraderie, I blurt out, "I'm 38." I'm that guileless, dumboid kind of guy.

A look of consternation crosses deWayne's face. For long seconds he's rendered speechless—he's unable to imagine 38; he hadn't thought it possible that someone so hoary could hoof it up. I can see him reevaluating his hormones, which have betrayed him into flirting with a man he never thought might be almost twice his age until I flat-out said as much. He makes a quick exit.

L A S T P A G E

INVITATION TO THE DANCE

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I allow deWayne his getaway and then follow, to emerge into the grayness of a rural dawn after a danced-away night—surely one of the more otherworldly of experiences. The quiet is deafening, the bird song indescribably sweet. I follow the boardwalks to the beach.

In the time-honored tradition of gay men and lesbians, deWayne and I

have helped each other a little down the path of wisdom. I have taught him that age is not so simple a conundrum as Madison Avenue would have him believe. In his innocent shock, he has awakened a wolf I had tucked away for a comfortable nap: I am no ancient mariner, but I am old enough to be his father, old enough to know love before and during AIDS, old enough to be on intimate terms with death.

When we speak of "nursing our wounds," we're usually speaking of healing, but we might as well be speaking of caretaking those wounds. Grief is like any wound—there is some terrible pleasure in it. Grief grows out of remembering, and in remembering there is life. How may we be absolutely certain that those we have loved live on, except in our memories?

All of us survivors (which is no more than to say: all of us) face this question: How much to remember, how much to forget? Knowledge of death may be knowledge we'd prefer to have acquired later in life, but this might be said of most knowledge, and in any case we have no choice—live long enough and it's thrust upon us.

I walk the beach thinking of deWayne. For his sake and mine, I'm glad that the party is resuming, but I hope that those of us still alive can learn and pass on lessons, and I don't mean only about safer sex. The lessons I'm thinking of have to do with the importance of remembering in an impersonal, technological age, a time when we had better find some means for preserving our humanity close to home or we will certainly lose it afield, to some bureaucrat or computer. It's the importance of every single one of our stories—chips in the ongoing, ever-evolving mosaic of life.

When we mourn the dead, we mourn finally and necessarily for ourselves: for our shared fate, our inescapable invitation to the dance. Waiting for sunrise at the Atlantic's heave and fall (so different from my vast and rugged Pacific!), I think on this, and shout into the calm gray swell the names of all of my dead, friends and relatives who taught me how to live.—FENTON JOHNSON

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