

Rest Stop

by Chris Tebbetts

Seven cars wait in the rest stop lot, five with Vermont plates, one New Hampshire and one Massachusetts. Two have rainbow flag stickers on the bumpers; most have a lone male passenger in the driver's seat. No one turns a head to take notice of my arrival.

Rest stop sex is an invisible phenomenon to most of our society. Outreach at these so-called Public Sex Environments (PSEs) is part of my contract with the Department of Health, as one component of the Vermont CARES Men's Health Project HIV prevention program for men who have sex with men (MSM). I've been doing it for a year now, and haven't had any bad experiences or particularly nasty run-ins. And yet, I wonder if I ought to just cruise right through, in the entrance and out the other end. I recognize the timidity behind my urge to leave, so I park the car.

The rest stop has a long narrow parking lot which runs along the bottom of a small hill. From where I sit, a blacktop path leads up to a small meadow. It doubles back on the hill to parallel the lot and then slopes down at the other end. Dense woods border one side of the scene, with highway on the other.

I have done my homework and made enough of these outreach trips to know that I am in the "waiting area," that the path and meadow are cruising spots, and that the woods are mostly reserved for playing.

I always knew that men have sex with each other at rest stops. The experience, however, has evaded me. Now that I make part of my living at this, rest stop sex seems to be everywhere I look. Like 3-D movie images that require special glasses, the patterns of lone men in cars and bathrooms and picnic areas on the highway pop out at me with an obviousness I can't believe I missed before.

For a moment, I take myself back two years and try to imagine telling my 1994 self that in 1996 I'll be going to rest stops, handing out condoms, and talking to men about safer sex. And now, here I am, taking in the scene and going through a ritual of courage-gathering.

My fanny pack is stuffed with condoms and individual packets of lubricant, which I know are more in demand here than the pre-printed brochures I bring. Lubricant and condoms offer immediacy: here, take these, go have fun. A brochure can be cumbersome or didactic, or even incriminating for the closeted or married man who brings it home.

I get out of my car. Mr. Massachusetts has driven away, maybe just stopping here for some quick fun on the way to Montreal. Three of the original group have ambled up the hill. None of them talks to the other. They have all staked out their spots, and the woods are quiet. I suppose no one likes what he sees so far.

Despite assumptions and stereotypes, a large number of the men who come here are out gay men, comfortable with their sexuality and turned on by anonymous, sometimes quick, sometimes nasty, and sometimes very ordinary sex. Others fit the stereotype: married men whose rings give them away; closeted men who feel relegated to these areas by fear, homophobia, or convenience; and truckers, whose appearances say anything but "queer."

I first approach the smoker, a fifty-ish man who looks like a professor with his trim white beard and glasses. He shows no sign of interest in me and I force back my temptation to keep walking.

"Hi," I say. "Would you like any condoms or lube today?"

"No thank you," he says, cold but polite, never taking his eyes off the passing traffic.

I'm accustomed to eye contact, maybe some conversation, or even friendly disbelief at my offers, so this non-reaction throws me a bit. I wonder if I've made a mistake, but then realize that my instincts as an outreach worker are just fine. This gentleman is not here for the view. I move on, my route clearly mapped out by the string of men along the path.

My next contact is younger, preppy and good-looking in his denim jacket and new sneakers. He

is standing by the edge of the path with his hands in his pockets, occasionally glancing left and right. There is a purposefulness to him, as if he's under an imaginary lamp post, waiting for an imaginary taxi. He sees me coming and smiles non-committally.

This time I try small talk: "It's kind of busy here today," I say.

We both know what I mean. "Yeah," he says, waiting for more, and I go on.

"I work with Vermont CARES...in Burlington?" He nods. "One of the things we do is come out to the rest stops, talk to guys about safer sex, and give out condoms and lube. Would you like any?"

The young man is non-plussed and accepts three condoms and a lube packet. Encouraged, I ask if he has any questions about HIV or safer sex. He doesn't, and I leave it at that.

Anyone who has been watching can see by now that I'm not here for sex and that I present no threat. My other encounters run smoothly and fairly par for the course: two flat, unaggressive refusals and one long conversation with a recently divorced man who mostly just wants to know where else he can meet other guys.

This is typical. I spend as much time at the rest stop talking about the constraints of small town life and trying to be gay in Vermont as I spend talking about HIV. The isolation of rural gay men, an issue we spend so much time talking about in staff meetings, comes alive here. A lot of my contacts seem happy just to talk with another gay man and be themselves, which is something I take for granted in my own life.

I end the encounter with more condoms and an offer to add him to my newsletter mailing list, which he accepts.

It's now 6:45, and the sun is going down. As I drive away, I wonder for the millionth time if what I'm doing is making a difference. And is it enough for me, just having the possibility of success here, without ever knowing for sure? Yes, I tell myself. It is. ▼

"Our Town Meeting" Plans Underway

by Shelley Smith

The 4th annual "Our Town Meeting" (formerly "Queer Town Meeting"), complete with fashion, politics, raffles, workshops and art shows will present: "Politics as (Un)Usual" in Brattleboro, with date and times to be announced. We are planning our usual array of workshops as well as events for the night before the meeting so that everyone can join the adventure in Brattleboro.

The conference committee is chaired by Carey Johnson (258.2826). Gabriel Q (257.4871) is definitely in charge of aesthetics. Pajj Wadley-Bailey (454.1135) is seeking teachers and parents interested in coordinating Children's Programming (ages 1 1/2 to 14). Judith Beckett (439.6453) will be calling for volunteers, or please call her if you'd like to help out. Shelley V. Smith (454.1347) is organizing workshops, so do call if you'd like to facilitate.

Please contact any of us with your ideas, requests, or availability to help out. ▼

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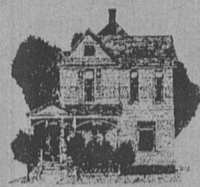
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