

A Beach Party In Erie Kurt Arehart - 2019

Sleeping in the reclined vinyl seat of a '72 Chevy Vega makes for a long night. But in 1977, when age 22 and broke and moving to a new town, it was a logical choice. Information about affordable apartments with a decent location was scarce, and the best way to figure it out was to make the cross-state drive, get a few hours sleep, buy a local paper in the morning, and start looking around.

I had hired on with General Electric, then an unassailable corporate titan, right out of Penn State, and had just completed two weeks of penniless downtime lodged in my parent's basement in Philadelphia. The highlight of this time was pick-up tennis with some thirty-something housewives, and while my antennae were tuned for any cougar-like signals, none were received. Now I had nursed my decrepit Vega north and west across Pennsylvania to Erie. Stretching out my spine and groping for an optimistic mindset, I crossed the tree-lined street and met with my future landlord, settling on a little one-bedroom furnished place, first floor rear. The burglary problem created by windows four feet off the ground would be months presenting itself.

The first week at the behemoth GE manufacturing plant followed, the bathroom was found, and the rudiments of office life were gathered. A shiny future promised, but the now was grim enough. Spreadsheets were made of paper. Calculators with paper tape took up some serious desk real estate. A thirteen column pad and .05mm pentel mechanical pencil completed the kit. Any interaction with a mainframe computer involved a stack of punch-cards. Green eyeshades and sleeve garters had gone out of fashion, but only recently.

Saturday came up sunny and I was very ready for an exploratory bike ride. The city of Erie, Pennsylvania is situated on Lake Erie, a very large, heavily industrialized body of water, more an inland sea than a lake. Over the northern horizon lay Canada, sending moisture laden winds, known as the 'lake effect', which brought plenty of cloud cover, rain and snow. Fine sunny days were rare, seemingly rarer still on weekends. But I had yet to appreciate this.

My more experienced co-workers, settled and wise in the ways of Erie, had told me of Presque Isle, a hook-shaped peninsula that joins the mainland a bit west of town and curves back east to protect the city center from the direct fury of lake storms. The peninsula is entirely a state park, offering relatively safe cycling and beach access. The lake had been badly polluted but had since been cleaned up to the point where beaches and bathing were again attractive.

And so I was off on my low-end Bottecchia road bike, west-bound on 6th Street for the peninsula entry point, upbeat and ready for what the day might bring.

I did not have long to wait. Approaching on a side street were two women on bikes. I calculated that I would come through the intersection a little ahead of them and got a good look

as they approached. Both attractive, one full-on stunning. They swung in behind me west-bound on 6th Street and I slowed just a little so they would come up on me. Sandy, the stunner, pulled alongside and we chatted easily. Yes, she and Wendy were also heading for Presque Isle. To a beach party, as it happens. And would I like to join them?

Well, yes. That would be lovely. Erie is not so grim, maybe.

Sandy became the tour guide, leading us down off the mainland and onto the quieter Peninsula Drive. She swept around the perimeter road for several miles and back west to the beaches and the destination party.

There I was introduced to another 15 attractive people, women and men both, almost all open, friendly, outgoing. Beers offered. Maybe a little reefer. Phone numbers exchanged. Dinner invitations gratefully accepted. At the start of the day I did not have a social calendar, and now mine was filling up, bright with promise.

At least five of the women caught my eye, but all were eclipsed by Sandy and her positive energy. Maybe aged 28, she was an olive-skinned Mediterranean beauty with large, dark liquid eyes, a uniquely chiseled little nose and a classic baby-bow mouth, all framed by flowing and wavy brown hair. Add a toned and athletic body and you get the picture. She showed nothing beyond friendship, but I was transfixed.

Also prominent were Sharon and Renee. Sharon was a gregarious 35 and an art instructor at a private college south of town. Renee was after the Farrah Fawcett look, hair-wise at least, and rented a room in Sharon's home. They'd love to prepare a home cooked meal for me. When can I come?

Finally there was Bill, maybe 25, an Erie native, scion of the local Mazda dealership, and eager to befriend me, ride bikes, play volleyball, and introduce me around.

So. New town loneliness struck down in one stroke. Promising love interest and friendships all around, with boundless further possibilities. A good day.

In the following days I lost no time seeking to draw nearer to Sandy. But there was Alan.

Alan looked to be late thirties, short and a little thick, with wirey hair and not particularly handsome. But this fellow was clearly well to do. And maybe a little connected. He kept our dear Sandy, an elementary school teacher, in a tony urban townhouse a few blocks from me, and threw in a late model Mercedes 450SL. Yeah, the two seater convertible roadster. A white one. She looked really good in it. Sandy was well cared for.

Being a very bright fellow, I promptly backed away in view of Alan's probable connectedness and likely penchant for violent solutions.

Absolutely not. When I thought about her I vibrated with sexual energy and could not possibly do anything other than recklessly fly directly into her flame. Happily, she was far more experienced and savvy than I, and she gracefully kept me at arms length, turning me aside without bruising my ego too badly. On to Sharon and/or Renee.

Sharon taught art at Edinboro University and lived nearby, maybe 15 miles south of Erie. She owned a nicely decorated little ranch house on several acres outside of town. I answered the summons and enjoyed some seriously excellent Italian cooking generously washed down with Chianti. I was particularly attracted to Sharon's creative energy and 35 years of cultivated life experience. Here was a lovely, generous and welcoming soul. And she too artfully kept me at bay, deflecting my doe-eyed devotion, keeping me in the fond friendship box. A lovely box to be in, but at age 22 I could not appreciate this.

Bill the Mazda Scion checked in often. We played some tennis, rode bikes together, and he brought me to a favorite night club several times.

My twenty-two in 1977 was maybe a bit naive. Yet even I began to get an odd sense that Bill was wanting a special friendship. And the club he repeatedly brought me to started to seem a bit different. One evening there, maybe our third visit, it suddenly clicked into place that this club was likely run by and for the LGBTQ community. And so I was viewed as Bill's latest find.

It was late, we were both a bit over-served and we walked the few blocks back to my little downtown apartment. Bill declared that he was too far gone to attempt driving home, might he stay the night? So much safer.

My memory of this moment is unclear, but I believe I actually considered letting him into my bed just this once. Good old Bill. Really a very pleasant chap. Maybe I should just let him have a little of what he wants from me. Does he want to pitch or catch? Who knows?

Aside from some vague interest in thumbing my nose at convention, in coloring outside the lines and exploring just a little, I had no desire to lay with Bill. It was Sandy who sent me on long, lovely and extravagant imaginings. Sex with Bill had no pull. And besides, forever after my pencil would hover uncomfortably over that blood donor intake question: "Have you ever had sex with a man, even once?"

Now it was my turn to be sage and gentle in my refusal. I broke the news that I wanted his friendship and nothing more and directed him to the couch. He was sad but not entirely surprised and revealed some disappointment, but no anger. He was actually pretty good about it. Nice fellow.

With Bill and his thundering hangover packed off in the morning I sipped some coffee and began to reflect. Rear-facing clarity arrived, maybe two months late.

That beach party I had rolled up to? A convocation of Erie's LGBTQ community.

My beloved Sandy? Most likely bisexual. Maybe Alan tolerated Sandy's occasional tryst with a woman, or more likely was blind to it. But seeing other men would have been for her crossing a dangerous line.

My warm and wonderful Sharon? In a long term relationship with Renee.

It turns out Bill was yearning for me much the way I was yearning for Sandy: desperately, and with little hope. Broken dreams for Kurt and Bill both.

I had to wince a bit at my innocence and naivete, but all in all, I had been treated really well while I slowly figured it all out. Kindness and tolerance and patience throughout. After all, they had no idea whether I was gay and cautiously slow in a new town or straight and a bit blind to the truth before me. These were really lovely, smart people, full of creativity and a joy for living. And in 1977, justifiably wary in a world that was not at all ready to let them live openly as their true selves.

I kept up with these friends, but a little less zealously. I understood my proper role now: the straight guy who had been a little slow on the uptake but is a good sort all the same, accepting of the many natural states of human sexuality. And Bill gave me a great deal on a new Mazda 626.