

THE PARADISE OF PROVINCETOWN

BY ALAN BENNETT ILAGAN

There is a paradisiacal place on this earth where the sun both rises and sets over the ocean, where sexuality is irrelevant, and where a pizza party begins at 1AM every morning. It's a place where one can lay on the beach, bask in the sun, drink in the sights (and the cocktails), and dance the day away on the beachfront. The sky is more blue than anywhere else, the light enchants artists and lovers of beauty, and the atmosphere is one of easy acceptance, warmth, and love. The place is Provincetown ~ that magical point at the very tip of Cape Cod ~ where the ocean surrounds, protects, buffers and belts the sandy shores of a world unlike any other.

My first trip to Provincetown was at the end of the summer of 1995. Dragging our August feet a few weeks before college began again, Suzie and I took an impromptu drive along the curved arm of the Cape Cod peninsula, winding our way into town in the middle of a gray drizzle. The whole trip was hazy that way ~ clouds overhead, but still bright, windy but emanating warmth ~ it lives in my memory dimly yet implacably. I don't remember much about that first trip ~ a photo of one perfect sunflower is framed somewhere, taken behind our guesthouse looking over the bay. Suzie and I mostly did what we do best ~ a lot of nothing. We read books on the beach, browsed lazily through the boutiques, and feasted on lobster salad and fried clams. At night I strolled alone down Commercial Street, passing a long line of leering men ~ terrifying and exciting all at once ~ a thrilling, unsettling glimpse into my own future. I thought I was such hot shit in my linen pants and tight black T-shirt, holding off insecurity with aloofness, putting myself above everyone so as to be hurt or rejected by no one.

We departed Provincetown unscathed and untouched. The next five years do not prove so fortuitous, and when I return to the Cape in July of 2000, I am battle-weary and worn from a few serious relationships and subsequent break-ups, and a dizzying series of one-night-stands.

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My friend Kristen and I board the ferry at Boston harbor. The wind is strong, the sun is stronger – it is the perfect July day. The jaunt to Provincetown is a rocky one, quick to be sure (at 90 minutes), but bumpy – people are getting sick right and left.

Thank God for the foresight to have taken Dramamine. We arrive at our guesthouse and unpack. It is a slow, peaceful, relaxing entry, with the good spirits of Kristen buoying me and the tranquil pull of the ocean guiding our journey. That night we head out to the Gifford house, where there is a group sing-along to 'Delta Dawn'.

It's so easy to get laid in Provincetown. Sex is in the air, on the beach, in the dunes, at the bars ~ it's everywhere. But it no longer interests me. Of course, once that is the case one instantly becomes a hot commodity. In the past I would have jumped into bed with the first suitor who glanced my way, but things are different now. I'd rather play double solitaire with Kristen and have a real conversation with someone at the bar instead of going home with some beautiful but anonymous stranger.

Still, beauty casts an intoxicating spell, and a few days later I succumb to a gorgeous guy whose name is Chris. He will be my only one-night-stand for the whole week. Back in my room, there is moonlight streaming in through the window. The light is gray, our bodies just dim outlines in the hushed night. As we undress, he compliments me on my white briefs. I laugh a little and kiss him.

When it's over I ask him his last name. I don't remember it now, but back then it was important. It is the perfect Provincetown one-night-stand ~ sweetly poignant, ferociously sexy, and a little bit sad. I see him on the street the next day. He gives me a smile and a handshake and that is the end of it. A slightly apathetic ache is all that remains. I don't really care, but still, it might have been nice...

Suzie arrives a day or so later – we head out at night and a super-hot, and super-cool, lesbian drags us along as she crashes a friend's party. Provincetown casts a seductive spell on most of her visitors ~ a spell of summer, of sand, of ocean and perfect sky. She embraces all outcasts and for a few days everyone lives this enchanting utopian vision. You find yourself swept away, doing things you never thought you would do.

In spite of this harmony, it is still possible to feel alone. Walking out along the pier with the moon hovering over the ocean, I stand in the night wind. Surrounded by the cries of seagulls, remembering the love of my life, I mourn. And then it is done. I return to the shore, to the lights, to the music and the drinking and the dancing. I do not know then that in a few weeks I will meet Andy. But for that moment, I am alone, and it's okay.

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By the end of the week the bartenders simply set a Tanqueray and tonic in front of me without waiting for my order. I have become a small part of P-town's transient family, and it feels good to belong. At the daily Boatslip tea dance I find the nerve to introduce myself to the Most Beautiful Man in the World, also known as David, who, I later discover, works for Gucci. He invites us to their new store opening in Boston the next week. I shake his hand and we say good-bye.

On our last morning in Provincetown, I arise early and walk down Commercial Street alone. I have a quick breakfast at a diner and buy a box of saltwater taffy for my parents. It's early ~ there aren't many people out yet. And even though I am alone, I find comfort in the overwhelming sense of acceptance I feel around me ~ not worrying about being ridiculed, or yelled at or taunted, or beaten or killed. It is a healthy feeling.

The town is like that ~ a place of refuge for some, a place of enchantment for others, and a temporary home for all. There's no place like Provincetown.