

BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

LGBT Postcards from the Edge

TOUR WEEK TWENTY-SEVEN, (CANBERRA)
CAUSE FOR CELEBRATIONS: TRIVIA NIGHT IPHONE INTEGRITY,
OCCASIONAL TEACHERS AND MISTAKEN FOR STRAIGHT

"PS - I don't think it's nerdy at all to go to the Tally Room!..."

I'd come out to one of my contacts for Canberra and confessed that I was looking forward to going to the National Tally Room on Saturday 21st August. Originally due to arrive on Sunday 22nd August, I decided that attending the National Tally Room won over a Saturday night in Bathurst. I figured that I was unlikely to be in my nation's capital for Election Night ever again.

There was perhaps no-one better to go with than my friend "Jaiden". I'd met Jaiden at a national leadership gathering, the 6th National Johnson & Johnson New Leaders Forum, on the outskirts of Sydney in 1998. One hundred "young leaders" from across Australia came together for four days. I spent most of the time hiding in the corner, given that most of the people there were sickingly successful small business owners (in IT) or young executives from companies like BHP or IBM. As a volunteer with a gay and lesbian youth group and a severe introvert, I wondered how I snuck in.



Amongst the one hundred were Jules Lund, class clown and youngest attendee who would go on to be a Getaway reporter, and James Moody, the most ingenuine and flirtatious networker I'd met who would go on to be a judge on ABC's Inventors.

I took the approach, much as I do now, of only speaking when I was spoken to. If asked I would explain to people my support of a group of gay and lesbian young people in my hometown of Geelong and my hope to improve their everyday lives in local schools. I was honest that I didn't know how it would happen.

One year later I was standing before a classroom of Year 9 boys in an all-boys Catholic school about to commence what would become the first Pride & Prejudice program. Two things at this leadership gathering would prove pivotal in getting me into that classroom.





The first was a “leadership questionnaire” which, once completed, highlighted that my “mission” was to be challenging homophobia in local schools that helped me set out the steps required to do just that.

The second was on the final day in the final session. “Young leaders” were invited to stand and reflect on their four days, what they learnt and what they intended to do. Loathing public speaking because it drew attention to myself, I sat listening to young leader after young leader stand and share. I was clear that I was not going to stand.

It didn’t help that I was feeling emotional after an exhausting program of presentations, discussions and self-reflection.

Then he stood. “John”, one of the oldest of the young leaders rose and started to speak. I looked forward to what he had to say after a discussion two days before. Between sessions I was sitting on the floor by a window soaking up the warmth of the afternoon sun. Alone. Happily.

John would come and sit on the floor with me. Slightly annoyed that my solitude was broken, I relaxed and began talking about my work in Geelong. John sat and listened, yet an unexpected thing happened. Slowly people sat down and listened in on our discussion. Before long a significant group of young leaders were sitting listening to me as I talked about my hopes to work in Geelong schools and why.

Now in the final session John began. He said how much he appreciated the opportunity to attend the leadership gathering and thanked everyone who had shared their reflections.

“But I’m interested in hearing from someone who hasn’t shared yet...I talked to this young man the other day and since then I haven’t been able to stop thinking about what he said...I think he is going to do great things and I’m interested in what he has to say...”

I watched John and, like everyone else, was wondering who he was talking about. After all, everyone else had stood and talked about themselves.



“And that person is [turning to look at me and hence focusing 99 young leaders’ attention on me] Daniel...”

Damn you.

For the record I stood and spoke, yet I couldn’t tell you what I said. Whether it was good or bad I’ll never know. I suspect it would have been somewhere in between. I remember sitting a little stunned and receiving a round of applause.

Before getting on the bus for the long drive back to Sydney airport John approached me and gave me a handwritten note. Paraphrased it went something like this:

“Dear Daniel, I believe that you are doing a very special thing. One day you will be a leader of 100s of people. [John]...”

I never saw or heard from John again, yet I’ve never forgotten his belief in me as an intensely shy, awkward and self-doubting young man.

Another person who showed faith in me at that leadership gathering was Jaiden. Jaiden was a breath of fresh air because of his powerhouse intellect and self-depreciating humour. I liked how he talked about if institutions were not working that they should be destroyed and rebuilt, as well as how he regularly referred to “evil” people. I laughed a lot in his company.

Involved in student politics during many stints at university, Jaiden, a serial collector of degrees, became

involved with the Australian Labor Party after the demise of the Australian Democrats, for whom he was asked to represent as a senate candidate for Western Australia.



Whilst I headed off to the gym and looked for sausage sizzles at local primary schools, although I had completed a postal vote earlier, Jaiden handed out ‘How To Vote’ cards in the bell wether seat of



Eden-Monaro. Instead of attending the victory party of the candidate he helped retain his seat, I convinced Jaiden to queue for one hour and five minutes on a Canberra winter night.



Once inside I decided quickly that this was where I would want to meet the man of my dreams, such was the disproportionate number of attractive men who gave the impression of great intellect (posted on my Facebook status update as “hot nerd burgers”). One of Jaiden’s friends, a Tally Room regular, explained that the National Tally Room lacked the atmosphere of 2007. I got the impression that everyone was looking through their fingers at the results, wanting to know yet not wanting to know. I spoke with JOY FM for their Federal Election broadcast, yet I’m not sure I really contributed much (and to be honest I’m not sure any scoops are possible on the Tally Room floor).

Days later Jaiden would take me to see various Canberra sights and lunch to celebrate my birthday, the day before. On my actual birthday I tried my best to have a rare “day off”, taking myself out to lunch care of “Damien”, my host in Alice Springs (see Alice Springs blog). I’d received an e-mail and was given little choice.

“Hi Daniel, I would really really love to shout you lunch for your Birthday if that is Ok. Can you email me your bank details so I can put some money in your account. Don’t say no either MR W...”

The amount transferred would normally keep me going for a week. For the record I enjoyed three lunches and a breakfast.

Yet the celebrations would continue when I arrived home on my birthday night. My hosts for the week were a couple I’d been in touch



with thanks to “Jodie” on the Gold Coast (see Gold Coast blog). When I explained that my onward journey included a week in Canberra, Jodie confirmed that I had nowhere, as yet, to stay and organised for me to stay with her sister and her brother-in-law.

That I mentioned to Jodie in passing that I would be in Canberra for the Federal Election and my birthday was seemingly forgotten until my birthday night. Not one to make a fuss, I didn't mention my birthday to my hosts. A delightfully entertaining, progressive and welcoming couple, I'd decided that all I wanted to do was sit with them and have an everyday meal, and that their company would be the perfect way to spend my birthday evening.



After dinner Jodie's sister would appear with a small cake.

“We weren't sure if it was today...Happy birthday!...”

How lucky am I?

Yet Canberra was not all about Federal Elections and birthdays, I was also there to talk to the locals about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) life.

In Canberra the locals talk about Tilley's Café as a gathering hot spot, particularly for LGBT locals, and it was here that I met with “Gayle”.

[“Gayle” has since asked for her story to be edited. Her story will be included in post-tour reports. Similarly “Aaron” made a similar request. Their stories are no longer part of this blog.]

In any interactions with teachers and health professionals I always stress one of the less quoted research findings from the Writing Themselves In Again: those young people who reframed homophobia as being the problem of others and not themselves (i.e. they did not take it personally) fared better than their peers who didn't. This focus on the environment and not LGBT young people led to my development of Pride & Prejudice rather than focusing on out-of-school support of harassed and abused LGBT students week in, week out.

“Evan” from local LGBT glossy magazine, FUSE, noticed a difference

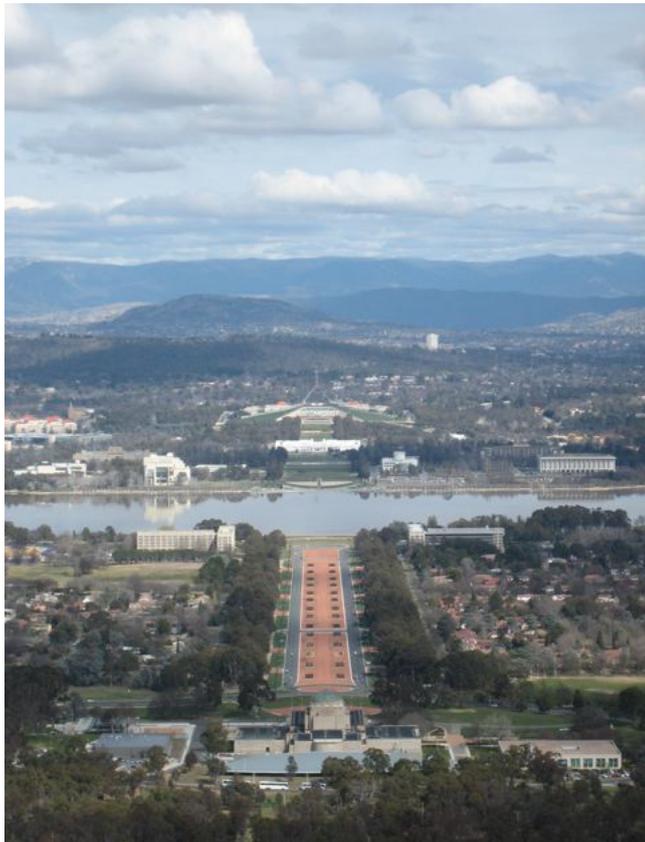


between Canberra and larger cities.

“My first 6 months in Canberra seemed very different to Sydney to me...There’s no Oxford Street, there’s no gay community...It seemed very loose to me...”

An ex-navy officer from regional New South Wales, Evan decided FUSE might be a way to “fuse” this “loose” group together. In time his opinion on Canberra changed.

“It’s actually not different to Sydney, it’s just a lot smaller...I think that most people are out in the suburbs, having homes and doing lawns and that kind of thing...Whereas in Sydney it just seems that Oxford



Street is where everyone is...Plus there’s a real public service mentality here...Sydney is very edgy because you can lose your job at any moment so you have to be the best and that shows...In Canberra, because it’s a public service mentality you just have to turn up to work and you won’t lose your job, which translates to life...I don’t wanna trash Canberra, but...It makes for a very serene city, but you only have to be a little bit edgy to be the next best thing...”

This might translate to a non-gym culture.

“Canberra’s very different in that it doesn’t have that gym culture... There is a general amount of fatter men in Canberra, they just seem not to care...”

Again, Evan is more describing, less judging, given that he feels he has benefited from an environment where aesthetics are not all important. Not that FUSE readers want it in their publications.

“People don’t read it, they just want to see cute boys on the cover...”

[for the record in the few back issues saw they achieved just that with their covers]



When I asked Evan what he thought was the big issue for LGBT people in Canberra, he chose mental health.

“The biggest issue for gays and lesbians throughout Australia, the pandemic is depression...’How many friends do you have that are on anti-depressants?’...It’s obviously a pandemic for our country but whenever you have something that is not in the norm [like being LGBT] there is going to be a problem with it...”

Homophobia is the key for Evan, and he names it as three things.

“One, is people feeling that their own ideology is being threatened... Two is a complete misunderstanding of a culture...My mum and dad thought I was gonna be a woman, wear hotpants in a parade or catch AIDS...So there’s a fear...Three, you’re gonna get your straight out idiots, you’re always going to have a percentage of that in society... So in the end it’s an expression of hate...”

Part of this percentage is what Evan terms “monkeys”. I ask him about monkeys.

“We go to the gym and we call these young guys ‘monkeys’...They’re not self-questioning...They drag their arms, wanting to lift the biggest weights...But all they are is like monkeys throwing poo at each other... [laughs]...”

I saw a bunch of these monkeys and met someone who supports a group of people who experiences their hate just before I left Canberra. As I left this meeting a group of “monkeys” would stare, hit one another and point. I wouldn’t guess what they said.



“Andrea” is new to the Canberra Transgender Network (CTN). Angela explains (new) CTN.

“It’s primarily a social group but also a support network...You have a get together once a month, a sort of 4-5 hour get together, very informal...About two weeks after that we’ll have a café night...It’s inclusive rather than exclusive...It’s about acceptance and support (and includes their friends and families)...It’s not very political... [Canberra based A Gender Agenda (AGA)] is more that side of things...AGA is about trying to change the world, New CTN is about providing a space for people to be themselves...”

Andrea and I got to talking about taking political action when there is not a consensus in what that action should be.

“I think the trans community is more fragmented than the gay community...I’ve had had gay and lesbian friends all my life and it seems that the issues they have is less complex than transgender issues...I’ve met 20 transgender people and come up with 21 different stories...Of the gay people I’ve met there seems to be a similarity between the stories of gay people and the experiences...And it’s for that reason that it’s so hard to get political and social acceptance and recognition [for transgender people]...”

Not that Andrea is shying away from this.

“That’s part of the reason I’ve become involved politically with AGA, to try and give a voice to those who can’t speak for themselves...The incidence of transgender people losing friends and family is higher than with gay people in my experience...The general community knows what it is to be gay but they don’t know what it is to be transgender or gender diverse...I mean we can’t even decide on the terms!...”

Even Andrea’s e-mail signature demonstrates her commitment to this idea:

When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed.

But when we are silent, we are still afraid.

So it is better to speak.

~ Audre Lorde ~

Andrea and I sat for some time and discussed what I thought might be helpful in challenging transphobia based on what I’d learnt through challenging homophobia. Amongst other ideas I shared that knowing common myths and stereotypes for transgender people and subsequent ways to challenge them quickly could be a useful part of any challenging transphobia toolkit. I suggested it might have been done before, but it could be useful to have something that (new) CTN members could feed into and develop.



Then, when Andrea said, “We could get the best marketing person in Australia to market us better” for ways to promote transgender visibility, I joked that The Gruen Transfer might take on a social justice theme for one of their shows and come up with something. Stay tuned folks.

The issue for Andrea is clear.

*“It comes down to a lack of acceptance of anyone who is perceived to be different in the community...In order to be different in this world you have to be extremely confident, because if you’re not confident, you get picked on...Many people are just not confident enough to go out and be who they want to be...Until someone is visible and stands up, we remain stigmatised and marginalised...Is it too much to ask for acceptance and diversity?...Sh*t, what are we human beings or not?...”*

When I asked Andrea what might help (new) CTN members in the next 6 months, as a way to get practical and less utopian, Andrea was initially stumped.

“What most of our members want is acceptance of friends, family and society and that’s not gonna happen in 6 months...”

Yet talking some more Andrea would identify better funding for mental health services and more transgender-friendly workplaces to battle high levels of unemployment as two ideas.

Andrea and I decided to post this question of “in the next 3-6 months” to the (new) CTN e-mail list and beyond. The first (heartening) response is here.

“Well, I am accepted at work without condition. I am accepted by my friends without condition. Most of my family accept me without condition. I cannot say at any point in my transition - apart from my doctor who I viewed as a challenge - have I experienced transphobia. Maybe I am blind to it or just have had a better reception than I expected myself. I count myself lucky in this respect.

What needs to happen and what I want to happen, is to not be so caught up in the endless loop that I have created between examining myself and questioning myself. It is a bad habit that has been developed from a life time of self doubt, denial and covering up.

It’s not about what I want or who I am any more, it’s about just finally accepting me for who I am and getting on with day to day tasks and not distracting myself by getting all introspective. It is a bad habit and one which is hard to break.

So, the thing which will make the biggest difference in my life in the next 3 to 6 months is to just get on with life and achieve all those



things that I know I can and to stop hiding from reality and making excuses.”

Andrea acknowledges that community groups like (new) CTN benefit from assistance from others. One of the organisations providing space and support for (new) CTN is the AIDS Action Council (AAC) of ACT.

On a cold morning in Canberra I sat for a hot chocolate with “Grant” to discuss his work with AAC. Grant is understandably proud of working at AAC given his background.



“I’ve gone from being a participant of youth group to running a youth group to being a guest speaker...”

A few years back Grant had been a part of a fledgling network called the Youth Sexual and Gender Diversity Network. The then-CEO of Twenty10 (see Sydney blog) was invited to come to the network’s strategic planning day and guide it through it’s first steps. That CEO had been involved with WA’s Freedom Centre and this national tour’s predecessor, Outlink (see Geelong blog).

After that planning day Grant was asked to become involved in the Q&A Leadership Program for LGBT young people, formerly Sydney-based but in recent years a branch has sprouted in Melbourne (stay tuned for a Melbourne blog). Although he had to travel back and forth to Sydney, it’s clear that Grant blossomed.

Now heading out to LGBT youth groups to do talks on things like sexual health, Grant admits that groups can change over time, and for white, middle class, private school attending LGBT young people, this can be a shock to the system.

“For some young people, going to Bit Bent can be a bit confronting... Some young people [attending] are open about living with violence, being former sex workers, not all of them, but it’s much more



confronting...That's one of the limitations of the group these days... The youth centres are not like the one's on Home & Away where kids just go to hang out..."

A theme through my discussion with Grant was "engagement" of the Canberra LGBT population.

"Based on stats we have 12,000 LGBT people in the ACT...On the ACT mailing list we have 2000 people...Twenty young people access each of the Bit Bent [LGBT youth groups]...There are 600 people who go to [Canberra's gay nightclub, Cube] on any one night...My question is, where are the rest of these people?...I found the idea that you wouldn't want to get involved with all [the LGBT events, venues and activities] quite strange...But most guys don't..."

One of the groups that Grant thinks is not being engaged is the young professional set.

"Like a group for young professionals for guys in their 20s who would never access a youth centre..."

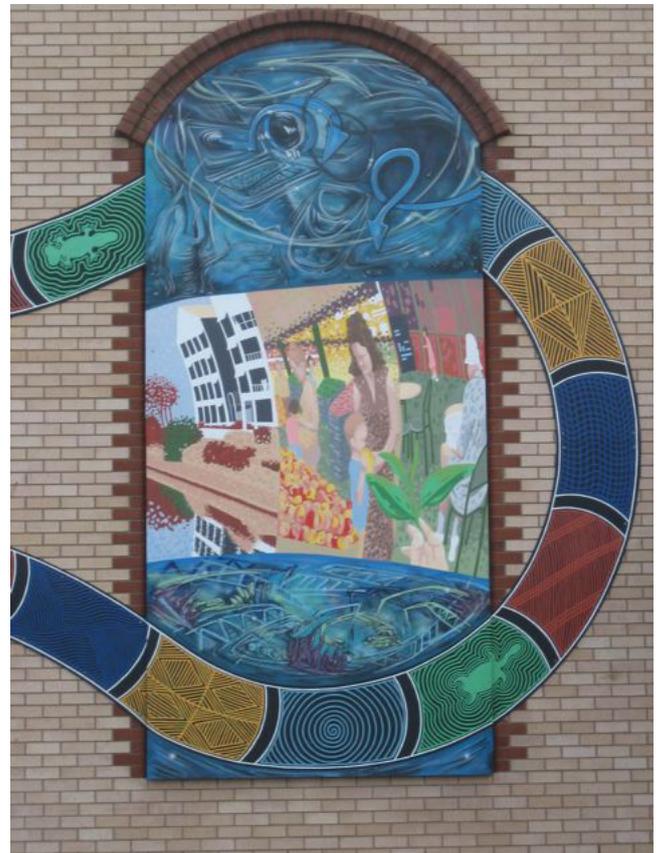
One area where AAC is making headway is with schools. Workshops with teachers and workers with young people have happened in the past.

"We do deal with issues of 'faggot' and 'that's so gay'...We've found that teachers and youth

workers tend to throw their hands in the air saying, 'It's too hard. What can we do about it? It's too difficult'...Some say, 'How can we do anything about it when they are out and proud and they are saying it?'...Well my issue is the little guy in the corner whose identity is being used and he's not OK with it..."

And it seems in Canberra it might be better to live up to stereotypes.

"There do actually tend to be the guys that fit the stereotypes...They do theatre, they're not afraid to be fashionable, they do dance, they're in classrooms where it is more conducive to being themselves... Whereas the boofy rugby player or the weedy little guy in the Chem class I think tend to have bigger problems with it all..."



I must admit that my conversation with Grant covered all manner of issues including gay marriage, sexual health education and “getting messy”, mainstream gay mens’ current obsession with “straight-acting” and more. Again this was a time when I could have thrown the pen and paper away and chatted for hours. However I had another interview to get to and Grant had a AIDS Fundraiser Trivia Night to organise.

Before he did leave, Grant talked about his hopes.

“I hope the community doesn’t stop seeing a need for having community, even though it’s arbitrary...I think acknowledge the differences and come together when it’s important...I’d hope that Canberra would stop complaining that there is no community to engage with...That Canberra starts to be more proud of the community that does exist...”

Interestingly - follow me because I’m getting to a point :-)) - Grant had spied me during a Body Attack and Body Pump double class before our hot chocolate. Explaining that in the absence of consistent gym attendance and routine I was using such classes to maintain what little I had, Grant told me that our instructor for that class was the daughter of the man who is responsible for bringing those classes to Australia from New Zealand. The gym that I was going to this week was the first gym to have those classes in Australia.

Excited enough by this, I was then invited by “the daughter” to come to the Body Attack launch for instructors. I’d always heard of these events because you get aerobics instructors from all over in the one place. I figured that could not be a bad thing, but also wanted to see how I compared to their fitness levels. Arriving early to stretch out, I was walking through the gym and saw Matt. Last week’s (Bathurst) blog mentioned a launch speech for Outlink. Matt was the subject of that very speech by Rodney Croome.

“But beyond all this the project aims to allow young lesbian, gay and bisexual people and the communities in which they live to benefit from and enjoy that sense of integrity, of place and of belonging which my friend Matt so misses, and which ultimately is so important for our happiness.”

Matt, now living in Melbourne, was in Canberra and had already done what I wanted to: his boyfriend was an instructor and was attending the launch. One down, many thankfully to go. For the record I fell in love three times during that class and kept up. I did go out to lunch after the launch, but as is my life story, it was with two instructors who were spoken for and Matt.

The very next morning I found myself in another aerobics class. I’m always interested in seeing who turns up to exercise on a Sunday



morning, particularly in winter. It's safe to say that I notice the men in the room first and occasionally my female peers.

Late in the class I looked sideways in the mirror to check out my technique during some lunges when I thought I saw someone familiar. Quite quickly I realised that I was watching the head of Lifeline doing an impressive set of lunges. I met her when I had traveled to Canberra in 2008 when I was working in the violence against women sector as the Victorian White Ribbon Coordinator. That visit I also got to shake Kevin Rudd's hand and talk about my work. For the record he looked like he needed to catch up and sleep and get some sun. He did compliment me on my Berlin t-shirt which was pulled over a shirt to signal my distaste for formalities.

As I walked out of the class I decided to say hi.

Me: "This might seem straight, but you work for Lifeline, right?..."

"Yes...I thought I recognised your face..."

Me: "Yes we met through White Ribbon..."

"That's it!...Well actually, oh have you heard the news?..."

I shook my head.

"Oh I guess I can say because they announced it two weeks ago...I'm leaving Lifeline and will be the CEO of beyondblue..."

Wow.

Me: "Congratulations..."

"You're in Canberra now?..."

Me: "No actually, I'm based in Melbourne...I'm here [Daniel quickly explains his tour]..."

"How interesting...Well I start January 4th so..."

And that is how a cuppa was planned to talk about what I've observed in



regional and rural Australia about LGBT young people's experiences. Given the recent rumblings about beyondblue, I felt quite optimistic. I knew I dragged my sorry self out of bed on a Sunday morning for some reason.

It was another case of thinking I'd seen somewhere familiar as I sat with Jaiden and awaited the start of the AIDS Fundraiser Trivia Night the night before. Once seated and realising we were fashionably early, considerably, I spied a man.

"Hmmm, he has that Berlin look I like...He almost looks familiar..."

Jaiden wondered what or who I was talking about.

"That guy over there in the purple Adidas jacket with the 70s porn star mo...It's almost as if I've seen him around in Berlin...I have this thing where I go to Berlin and think I see people from Melbourne and I'm here and I see people from Berlin..."



Jaiden and I had talked about this before and he remained staunchly unimpressed.

"It's just your mind and wishful thinking..."

Needing to powder my nose, I realised I had to walk past Berlin look's table. I had been looking his way and I expected a night of slightly uncomfortable looks and nothing more. As I walked past, he jumped up and had cornered me. I've certainly had worse things happen to me.



“Daniel I’m [Aaron’s] housemate and I know all about your work...”

“Leroy” went on to explain that he was studying his Graduate Diploma in Education and wondered if I had time before I left to meet.

‘Great’, I thought. Wary of mixing business with pleasure I watched as Leroy became strictly professional. Exchanging numbers to coordinate our schedules he checked my surname.

“It’s Wittenhaus right?...”

“Almost, it’s Witthaus...”

“[German: Do you speak German?]....”

“[German: Naturally, I lived in Berlin for 7 years]...”

Later an sms was exchanged as I told him I felt like I’d seen him before. Then it came.

“I used to work in the Heile Welt...”

The Heile Welt was one of my favourite bars when I lived in Berlin in 2006-7 and 2009. A quick perusal of my diary from last year and it was confirmed: he’d served me a number of times at the Heile Welt and I’d announced to my then-flatmate that he was my future husband.



Yet before I could meet my ex-future husband for a cuppa there was a trivia night. As Leroy’s team was penalised heavily for using their



iPhones to Google answers, my team would leap to a late finish in second place. One point separated 1st and 2nd.

I mused on how you could ensure iPhone Trivia Night Integrity in a room full of gay men with iPhones, given that most of them were actually paying more attention to Grindr (an application which allows you to find other gay men in your vicinity using GPS) than they were the trivia questions or Google. It was this iPhone focus that led to my leaving gay nightclub, Cube, soon after my second drink. Well that and an approach by a straight girl.

"I want you to come and dance..."

Me: "No that's OK, I'm happy standing here..."

"I've been watching you, rally, come and dance..."

Me: "I'm finishing my drink, I might come in a song or two..."

Not.

Finally I headed out, more curious about why I was singled out. I'd find out and within one song I'd be off the dance floor. Nervously she danced and looked at me.

"You're straight, aren't you?...I've been watching you..."



I stopped dancing and looked at her. Seriously? Here? Months on the road and one of my few chances to be thrown to the homosexuals and I'm mistaken as straight.



“No, I’m very gay...”

In response I got an open mouth and some hand gestures that said, ‘That is gay?’

“Are you sure you’re gay?...”

Me: “Yes, very sure I’m very gay...”

“Well you’re hot...Why aren’t you picking up?...”

Obviously she hasn’t been reading my blogs. I wish that she could tell me the answer to that question.

Me: “It just doesn’t happen like that...And I’m going home soon anyways...”

I thanked her and walked out of the nightclub through a sea of men looking at their iPhones.

The next day Leroy would end a few hours of cuppas and talking about our work, our lives and our love affair with Berlin. Leroy let me know that during those few hours he’d been focused on something very different to mobile technology.

“I haven’t been able to stop staring at that bottom lip of yours...”

