

sfnowthen

Some stories about what San Francisco was like then, in the mid-1970s and the 1980s and some observations about what San Francisco is like now, in the post-Y2K era.

Saturday, November 9, 2013

invitation



With the wisdom of hindsight the year 1981 was pivotal. Ronald Reagan took office as 40th President of the United States and 52 American hostages were released after 15 months of captivity in Iran. In New York the Mudd Club closed and the Saint disco opened. And little noted at time, the June 5 issue of the CDC's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* included in a brief article entitled "*Pneumocystis* Pneumonia—Los Angeles" which described five cases of previously healthy men about age 30 found to have biopsy-confirmed infection with this rare microbe.

The Centers for Disease Control's *MMWR* publishes data on notifiable diseases from national surveillance programs as well as observations of special interest to its readers, public health workers, those that see the big picture. Doctors deal with individual cases and only when enough are reported to the CDC does it warrant a mention in the *MMWR*. A short editorial addendum to that article explained that the "fact that these patients were all homosexuals suggests an association between some aspect of a homosexual lifestyle or disease acquired through sexual contact."

While this was the first public recognition of the syndrome people in the gay communities of LA, New York and San Francisco had already begun noticing something weird going on.

Three weeks after the article appeared San Francisco hosted the largest gathering of gays in the world at that year's International Lesbian & Gay Freedom Day Parade.

They sat cross-legged on the oriental carpet, four young men in Ricco's living room in Chelsea

all intently watching Larry lean over the mirror holding a rolled hundred dollar bill to his nose. His head swept along one of the lines of white powder on the glass, the line disappeared, Larry raised up, inhaled deeply and passed the mirror along.



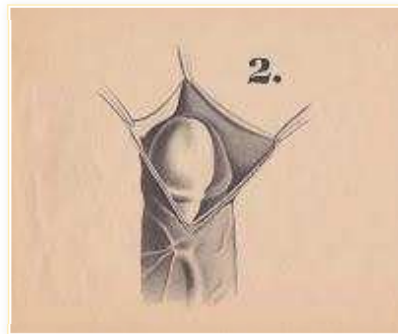
Joey, waiting his turn, idly picked up a small booklet from the coffee table with a medical illustration of an uncircumcised penis on the outside. A forcep pulled at the shaft opening. The packet unfolded like a map, the next page had a similar drawing but with the foreskin pulled open and held by three foreceps.

He continued and now had the paper lain out on the rug and ignored his turn as the mirror came by. Drawings on the third and fourth pages continued the theme. Joey looked up, "What is this?" Watching from the couch Ricco said, "Find that interesting do you?"

Joey unfolded again to where the skin covering the shaft was sewn back in place and he shook his head, mesmerized, "But what *is it*?" he said.

"Keep going, you'll see."

Joey turned the final fold so that the complete series lay flat on the carpet and the last square showed that it was an invitation.



Joey looked up, "Another one of those overpriced places for the disco queens, prissy little guys with glitter and feather boas, right?"

Ricco leaned back into the cushions and closed his eyes, "Maybe if you didn't spend all your time at the trucks or out on a pier and socialized a little more you'd know about these things."

The Saint was the most expensive disco in history, New York intensity melded with Hollywood special effects. In 1980 there was no reason to think this human tsunami of gay freedom would ever retreat, a cavernous domed room with an enormous high-tech planetarium projector dominating the center like some alien spacecraft just landed, a sound system with

over 500 hundred speakers. Total immersion, the place could pack in 4000 men dancing together on a busy night with no reference to time or location anywhere in the universe except this space. This was the future. The future was now.

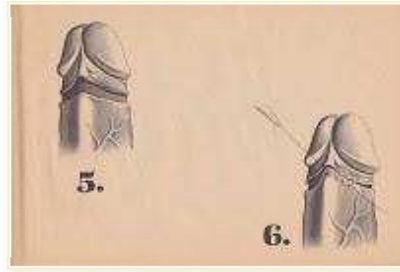


A private club that targeted the young and hot, males only, Pans only, those that could afford it, those that understood how the sex and the drugs and the music were so tightly intertwined. Theme parties, especially at the solstices and equinoxes, the Age of Aquarius had dawned, sympathy and trust abounding. Dancing shirtless for hours with only enough room to sweat between you and the shirtless men on all sides, thousands of men moving as one, as a flock, handing an amyl to the hunk who just appeared across from you, eyes locked, smiles, crushing one for yourself, feeling the thin glass shell shatter into the gauze mesh, holding it to your nose, a vapor chill, the sudden crisp clarification as a bracing Winter breath fills the lungs, then the soaring rush as a heart-pounding Spring drives vitality into the bloodstream, into the brain. And down into the crotch.



The music never, never stops, not once in however many hours you've been out on the floor, under this light show of a universe, you and that hunk now wrapped around one another, both shirtless, moving, heading for the stairs, knowing without words, up to the balcony. Here everyone else has the same idea, you try to find an empty space among the moans.

Twenty minutes later you're back down on the floor again jammed in with all the others, dancing furiously and reaching into your shirt pocket.



Opening night at the September equinox, lines of men around the block and then packed inside this futuristic dome, waiting, the anticipation, could this possibly live up to the hype. The house music stopped, the lights flared briefly and then the room went completely dark. After some seconds the minor triad that opens a Chopin prelude sounded as the full planetarium display illuminated and filled the space with stars, a night sky as the ancients must have seen it: wondrous and alive. Someone there that night told how a unison gasp came from three thousand men who then stared in awed silence until the voice of Donna Summers began a breathy, sexy moan "Oh baby . . ." which became an imploring "I want you to come . . . come, Come, *COME!*"

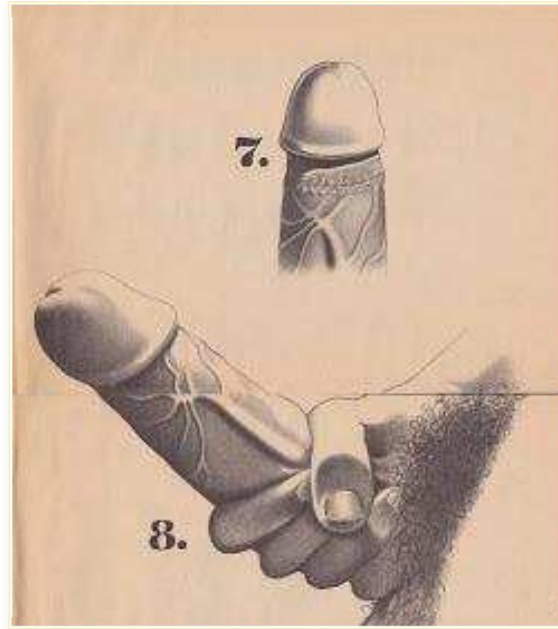
Is this real or could this be magic?

When the drums kicked in it seemed that the brief prelude music had been the funeral march for the pre-Stonewall world, their heroic struggle was ended and a dawning, a celebration had begun. The volume level exploded and the thousands of young men there broke into a long, sustained cheer because of what they were witnessing, what they were a part of, this new world they were making.

Six months later, at the March 1981 equinox, the whole known universe spans the enormous dome, a billion stars, constellations, galaxies, the great wheeling zodiac turns to Spring, locks in place, the fiery ram roars into the cosmos from his winter cage, horns gouge the firmament, unleashed now he cannot be returned, the fish, wet cold winter, is banished forever. The stars have aligned, there will be no return. Those thousands dancing looked up to the heavens, to a bright promise in the explosion of stars but their fate was marked in the darkness of their blood by a tiny strand of nucleic acid. In a far corner Prince Prospero whispered a line from Psalms, "the pestilence that walketh in darkness, . . ." which went unheard. It was time to party, it was innocent fun, it was already too late. The ceremony of innocence is drowned.

The future seemed so bright, how could it not be, it was written on the stars.

Joey is still staring at the invitation spread out before him on the rug as Ricco explains, "There's to be a ritual circumcision, an altar in the middle of the floor, an Aztec sacrifice, you know, one of those pagan things."



"I want to go to this," Joey says, "This looks like my kind of place."

Less than two years after The Saint opened those expensive invitation packets began to be returned, stamped "No Forwarding Address." Initially they couldn't understand why someone would spend so much money on membership fees and then not leave a forwarding address. And as more and more of the invites began being returned they saw a parallel with the increasing numbers cited in the newspaper stories and they began to understand why.

Each October the Centers for Disease Control publishes an Annual Summary of "Significant Public Health Events" compiled from data and reports for the previous year. The 1982 issue began, "For 1981, one of the most significant public health events in the United was not an epidemic or the appearance of a new disease, but the marked decrease in the occurrence of a well-known illness. The reported cases of measles for 1981 reached their lowest level since 1925, the year that communicable disease reporting on a weekly basis was instituted in the United States."



The future is written.

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