

After the Party
by Liz Stokes
Highly Commended

No-one saw it coming.

Which was a real surprise, considering our baptism by fire, drought and flooding rains. Obviously there was a bit of cognitive dissonance going on too. Imagine gathering for World Pride in Sydney, Emerald Jewel of the island continent, barely three years after the 2020 pandemic. Had we learned nothing? But I was desperate for close contact, for skin to sweaty skin, crinkled brows and hot throbbing dancefloors. It would be like the Olympics, without the shame of a cleaned up city and celebrated competitive sport that I didn't really understand. I didn't want to hide or keep a safe distance. And even the bushwalkers, twitchers and classical musicians yearned to commune. Perhaps they had a more circumspect sensibility. The choreography of an Austen drawing room, with prophylactic gestures of public health.

And so, too busy hooking up, smiling coyly, making friends, lovemaking in the parks, on the beaches, serious festive business. Sneaking drinks in the street parade, pinned and sunburnt in the great fleshy carpet at Bondi, bugged out at Luna Park, Fair Day, Elizabeth Bay House. Even on the return, here by the water's edge, it seemed to take as much time as it took the Europeans to fly back, recover from jetlag, to come down from savouring that salty queer bubble. #allthefeels on the tongue, that worn out collective muscle.

So we returned to our offices, our stations, our desks and cabs. Our part time jobs, and late night shifts, our office drag, community organisations, nonprofits. IT departments, brunch cafes and bakeries. Hospitals, childcare, universities, public service. Byron bae influencers and 96th floor C-suites. My ears still ringing as I dragged dolorous brogues into the lift and across dimly lit open plan desk tranches. My Library was empty, except for the rainbow lanyard in outreach and the grand dame in circulation. This was only very slightly unusual. We were still getting used to fronting up full time. My email went quiet, even the intranet. I assumed it was a slow news day, then week. I actually finished a report.

Queers in science took it upon themselves to analyse the data. Every citizen librarian armed themselves to the teeth with fieldwork equipment and set out on grim civic observation rounds. Pooled our data in open source repositories, plotted graphs, laughed in shock, and disbelief.

The virus was helpful, in a way. It was swift, thorough and fatal. Once it took hold, you were gone. An apathetic malaise was the first symptom. People simply stopped turning up to work. Their skin turned a peculiar shade of sparkly beige, and their speech slurred, then ceased. Like a reverse coming out, and an ineluctable compulsion to congregate at public sites notable for their commitment to compulsory heterosexuality. Churches, mosques, some bridal shops, baby stores. Neatly folding themselves into desiccated stacks, like pressed flowers. A slow fizzing of a life's essence. Cathedrals piled high with dry, withering husks. Places of worship became morgues overnight.

It was kind of embarrassing. The virus was only fatal for straight adults. All that talk about diversity, equity and inclusion and now we were the only ones left. Some radical feminists emerged from hermitage, so Deep Lez they'd never heard of TERFs, sniffed the air and turned up their noses at the corporate gays assuming power. Not good enough, and melted into the hills again.

The whole economy turned inside out. The bottom fell out of the market as we scrambled to fulfil essential services, and prevent environmental disasters. Urban cultures took a crash course in logistics infrastructure, decommissioning livestock humanely. Kids from poor schools moved into universities. We changed our priorities to helping all kids live enriching, full lives. It wouldn't be easy for them. A world built for two hundred and fifty times as many people left alive. So many of our cities lay mouldering. Fuck we were lucky to have IT geeks and programmers. Nomi's girls, we called them.

It isn't all anodyne cupcakes and buttercream harmony. There were some from the BDSM community who thought they'd be a better police force than the ones left. Disenfranchised and traumatised teenagers tapped out, went rogue. Whole languages have been lost, in a matter of years. So tragic, to finally see this collective turn towards custodianship of the Earth, by the remaining few in it, who have such a gargantuan task ahead. And yet, how lucky we are, to see one more glorious sunset, as the Earth turns from the Sun.