

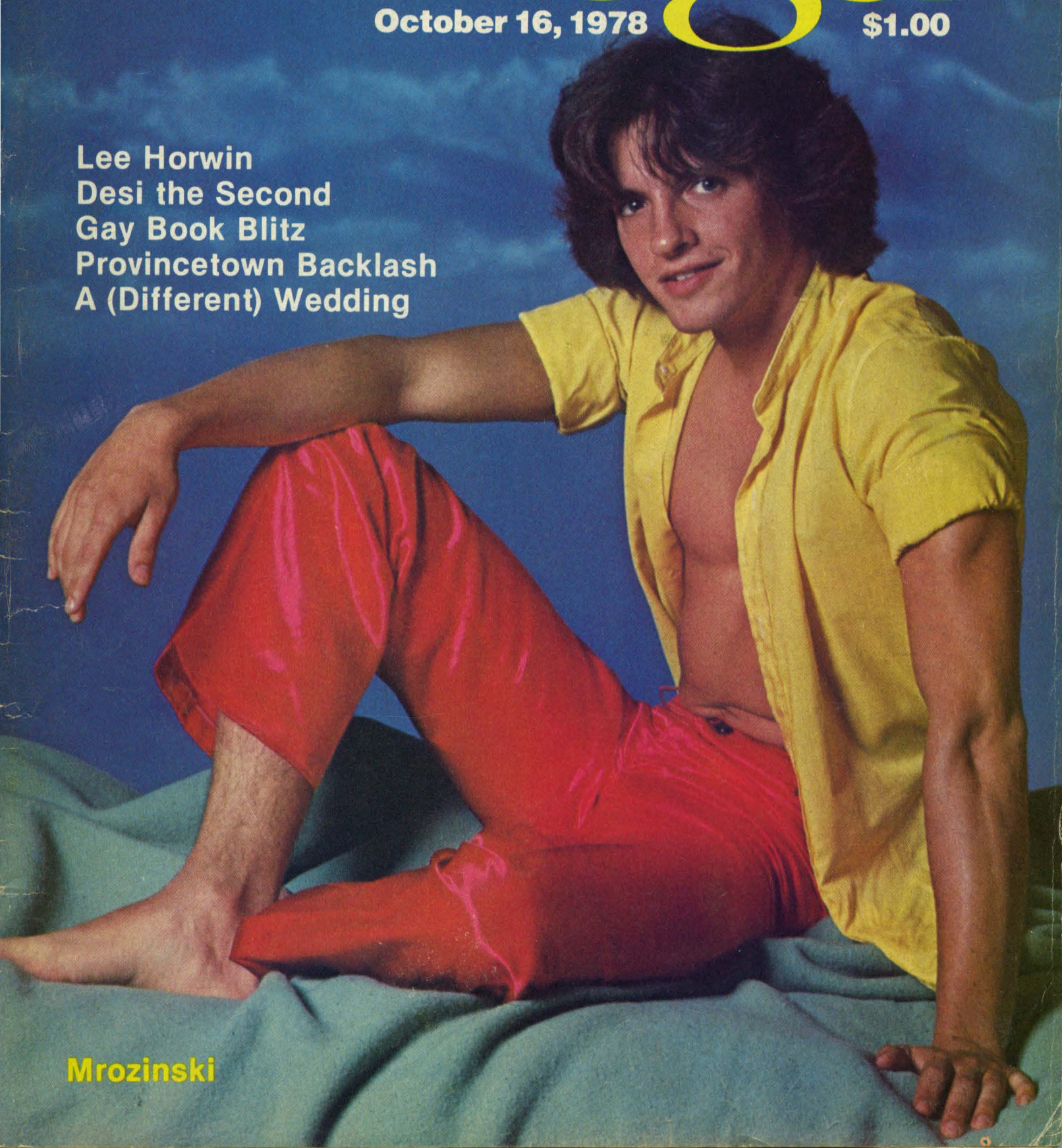
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Paradise Lost: Trouble in Provincetown

By Jeff Weinstein

I. THE VACATION

I was thrilled when my lover and I were offered the use of a house in Provincetown for the month of July. We dog-sat for two weeks there last winter, running ourselves and a golden lab over the frozen dunes and deserted beaches. I loved it, and though I knew the town would be crowded and expensive in the summer, a Provincetown vacation seemed ideal. There would be other gay people there. We could hold hands. We could eat lobsters and scallops and get tanned and go dancing. Conformist pleasures, but there is good reason to conform to these if the occasion or money arises.

But it was not like this. The main felicities of Provincetown—the weather, the food, the opportunity for resort-town euphoria, and most of all for me, the beauty of this hook of land surrounded by water and washed in brilliant rarefied light—these were all overshadowed by a climate of homophobic bigotry and violence which was impossible to avoid or forget.

This is surprising because Provincetown has a reputation as a gay resort. I first knew this ten years ago, when an out-of-the-closet college friend (rare in those days) sent me a postcard of the inescapably phallic Provincetown Pilgrim

Monument ("the tallest all-granite structure in the U.S.") and startled me with his message: "This is the biggest whorehouse I ever slept in!" Promiscuous P-town.

"The temptations of Provincetown are legion. You want to be up early to take advantage of the sea and sun...yet you want to stay up late to visit a cabaret, dance at a discotheque, enjoy a night club, or have a quiet drink in an atmospheric bar with a mate, lover, or friend...Places to dance...to see and be seen...to take a friend or meet a new one. There are straight, mixed, or gay spots. Quiet, nostalgic, or swinging spots. Poetry readings, lectures, musicals. Whatever your persuasion you'll find an evening of fun, usually within an easy walk."

A Guide to Provincetown,
published by the Provincetown
Chamber of Commerce

Even the Chamber of Commerce acknowledges a gay presence, as it must, because according to their figures 80 percent of town income is tourism-generated, and many of these tourists, probably most, are gay men and lesbians. However, there are also families, vacationing non-gay couples, overnighters and day-trippers off the boat from Boston, motorcycle gangs, gay and straight French Canadians (so many that the town is almost bilingual in the summer), and a handful of artists and writers, of whom much is

made. There are almost no blacks, in spite of an inducement photo in the Chamber of Commerce Guide: a black father and daughter viewing a stuffed white polar bear. Supposedly all the vacationers and 4,500 year-round townspeople just love tolerating each other, for that's how Provincetown is sold:

"And the people. At least two of everything. Tall. Short. Fat. Slim. Dressy. Simple. Gay. Straight. Families. Singles. Old. Young. The cosmopolitan mix is part of the fascination of the town...part of the reason that even in remote corners of the world one has only to say 'Provincetown' and people know what and where it is."

The First Resort

Provincetown is the tip of Cape Cod, the knuckle at the end of that musclemans arm. Native Americans would visit the area in the summer to hunt and fish—they are blamed by white historians for beginning the deforestation—and return to their permanent Cape settlements in the fall. Vikings landed in 1004, and Pilgrims in 1620, where they rested for a while, assumed they couldn't work together as equals and drew up the Mayflower Compact, then left for Plymouth Rock. History sits well on this bare stage.

Provincetown economy was based on fishing and whaling in the nineteenth cen-

tury; this bowed to tourism in the twentieth, though there is still a fresh-fish catch and active wharf. The reason I sound like a museum wall-card is that although economic and cultural underpinnings are important anywhere, they may help explain things in P-town that are otherwise unexplainable: the dependence on selling "identity" to outsiders and the resulting puritan shame, or the general mood of ecological fragility—the fear that some delicate balance of the town's water table, the town's "morals", or the town's existence, will be swamped and lost.

But little facts and museum curiosities may be interesting in themselves. Like the photo of Eugene O'Neill's beach house perched high on a sand dune at a 60° angle and sliding—slowly or quickly, I couldn't tell—into the surf. A schoolchild's crayon drawing of this now-mythic Provincetown event. A pair of nineteenth century shoes made from masticated paper money. Many old decorative things made from other things: painstaking, ingenious, spare, all apparently necessary qualities in a young isolated fishing town.

The Promenade

We arrived late in June, in perfect weather, and got our gay bearings. Herring Cove was the mixed gay beach; there were more gay men and lesbians in the cheaper west end of town than in the "fashionable" (according to the ads) East End; the afternoon "tea-dance" at the hotel/restaurant called the Boatslip is the event of the day, a ubiquitous bar scene cast with the people you thought you left in N.Y. but now discover by daylight in a beautiful indoor/outdoor waterside setting (healthy!). Actually I only went to the tea-dance twice, I don't know why. My friend and I did various things—visited other parts of the Cape, rented bikes and saw nature, etc.—but we quickly fell into a routine which now seems almost unavoidable: eat breakfast out, drive to the beach and collect pebbles or stares, eat dinner out, and take a walk.

We were staying, accidentally I'm sure, on the fashionable East End, and our evening walk started there. The geography of P-town determined that there would be two long main streets called Bradford and Commercial. Commercial Street is aptly named; you can buy antiques, notions, real and ersatz jewelry, real and ersatz food, have your portrait painted, your taffy pulled, go fly a kite ("the largest selection in the world"). The merchandise is more sleazy in the busier center of town. As I was photographing some t-shirts ("I Have a ♡-On for Provincetown"), someone yelled, "Whaddaya taking pictures

of that Jew-stuff for?" There was a Provincetown Fire Department sticker on his car.

The walk through town, the Promenade, is a structural part of most resorts, a ritual originating in Renaissance town-habits of conspicuous display. Not a "ramble," but more a parade of costume and/or partner, back and forth or in a circle or square. The process is the goal, to "see and be seen," to have the leisure and money to do it. Store windows and people are summer entertainment, and consumerism involving both can become obsessive.

The one sidewalk on most of Commercial Street was narrow, just enough for two, and we would begin our stroll in the quiet, darker part of town, with our arms around each other, or holding hands. This was a gay resort, and for a little while at least we could be unselfconsciously affectionate. If a person or people came toward us we would, out of consideration and fairness, split one behind the other so no one would be forced into the street. This "language" was easily understood by female couples and by paired gay men. But a heterosexual couple would almost always assume we would make room for them without compromise, the woman usually following the man's lead in this arrogance. A few times we were forced into the street, thinking little of it. But when I finally allowed myself to see this behavior I decided not to budge, forcing my partner to stand firm. One confrontation took almost a minute before it occurred to our impediments that we were a "couple" too, and we slithered around each other as quickly as we could. After a few days of this, holding hands became an assertive act, leaving tenderness far behind.

On one of these walks—we weren't even holding hands—a passing car sprayed water at us.

Three guys on motorcycles approached as we were walking on Bradford Street during the day, talking. One swerved into me on purpose, almost knocking me down. They yelled "queers, queers," as they drove on. I was scared, looking around to see where we could run for protection if we had to. "How did they know we were gay? Were we standing too close together?" For the rest of the day I fantasized about buying a gun, throwing a stick between the spokes of their wheels, anything to alleviate my helplessness. These were people who looked like stock leather-porn fantasies. I had just found out about the summer beatings in Central Park, and I shook with rage all night.

Walking down the crowded part of Commercial Street at night, happy with

the day, someone leaned over as I passed, and whispered, almost imperceptibly, "faggot." He was standing there, obviously looking for a fight. I didn't respond. But I thought of nothing else. There were other gay men milling around, sitting ducks.

Almost every night some expensive beach buggy or van manned by young pre-alcoholics would cruise down Commercial Street, the occupants yelling "faggot" as loud as they could. There were fights reported in every issue of the weekly *Provincetown Advocate*, but nothing about gay harassment was mentioned. In Wellfleet, a few towns south, the police argued that they couldn't violate the civil rights of the town's gangs: "as long as they aren't drinking in front of us, we can't touch 'em."

In the Provincetown square, a cop so young he hadn't started shaving pinched a woman in the ass as she walked by, and grinned as she turned around, angry.

A male/female tourist couple were "spotting" gay men; he pointed out groups of "queers." She: "I didn't know they looked like that, why they look nice..." He: "Oh, they just play with each other all the time." It was the end of my stay and I felt brave: "Oh, those heterosexuals just play with each other all the time!" But I felt bad about my childishness and her embarrassment.

When we left I knew something was rotten in Provincetown, but it was unclear what. I was not able to admit that my hard-earned vacation was soured and embittered by these "isolated" events. Even though I should have known better, I wondered if I wasn't exaggerating. After all, I had a beautiful tan.

II. "IT ISN'T HAPPENING"

The details aren't interesting, but my lover and I had another inexpensive opportunity to visit Provincetown in early September, and this time I went with my eyes open. In N.Y.C. a few gay men and lesbians told me tales of rapes and beatings and said that they would never go back. And *Gaysweek* reported that more than 50 gay townspeople and tourists "crammed" a meeting of the P-town Board of Selectmen to complain that the police don't protect them from harassment and assaults on the streets. A sigh of relief. Verification. Something *was* wrong, and others perceived it. With all my gay experience I still had tried to deny the bigotry in front of me, believing I could have a "vacation," a rest.

The women's and gay liberation movements have shown how difficult it can be to acknowledge your own oppression when that oppression itself keeps you

isolated from others who experience the same thing. The oppressors and bigots and nearly everyone else will of course deny their guilt, deny that any trouble exists.

In Provincetown again I questioned a few non-gay people I knew, regular summer visitors, about gay harassment. I was treated to an almost unbroken chorus of "the liberal response" (or "those paranoid queens"): "It's like that for everybody now—just rowdy kids—it used to be really bad, with police taking people [people? gay men?] to the edge of town without their baggage or money and saying if they ever saw their asses in town again they'd kill 'em. But now it's better." Or "Everyone gets crazy around Labor Day. Why even I get hassled, and I'm not gay [*do* tell]. I just don't walk into town anymore. Those creepy kids, etc." The town paper had a letter a week saying the same sorts of things. One plaintive missive chided tourists for complaining about mosquitoes: "They expect their vacation to be without any natural annoyances." God forbid. One innocent responded to my questions with an airtight example of "counter-harassment"—a friend had told her that you can't get a job as a waiter in this town if you're not gay.

Denial was the order of the day in sunny P-town. The *Provincetown Advocate* announced that police chief James Meads was "enraged" by reports of violence, that (he said) there is no crime wave in the streets of P-town and his department has violence completely under control. "It's no crime to make fun of someone," he informed us. "There were no assaults... when I hear all this talk it sounds like people are getting beat up all over town. It's just not true. It isn't happening."

"A Little Bit Crazy"

When the person behind the desk in the office of the Chamber of Commerce heard me introduce myself as a reporter she said "uh-oh," looked intensely angry for a second, and then smiled a brave professional smile. I would do a nice story. I wanted to know if the town's tourist income had decreased. It had, down 20% this year and she was worried it would continue. How did she account for this? Three reasons—tight money, publicity about gasoline contamination of the water supply last winter, and "other things." What other things?

"These reports of gay harassment. The stories of town police beating up on gays [I hadn't heard about *that* before] are exaggerated." She went on to berate the *Provincetown Advocate* and Boston papers for driving business away with their stories. I asked her what the reasons for these "exaggerated" reports could be?

Everybody goes a little bit crazy over

Labor Day."

We then discussed the recent formation of a gay chamber of commerce, the Provincetown Business Guild, which intends to promote P-town in gay publications. "You know," she told me, "80% of the guest houses here want only gay business, and the rest want just straights, which is discrimination on both sides. The gay businesses want special treatment, which is unfair. We'll lose families." And she ended up with the amazing theory I heard many times that week: that gay people are notoriously fickle and may take their business away anyway, so we shouldn't depend on them. "But," she tacked on abruptly, "we are the first community which accepted gay people. All the others are new in this."

I asked her, quite seriously, how Provincetown could be an exception to the rotten way most of the world treats gay people. She looked puzzled. "We're almost an island. There's no place to go. No sides to take."

Walking out into the sun, I saw a woman with a t-shirt: "I Don't Get Mad, I Get Even."

The hostility from the representative from the Chamber of Commerce toward the new Provincetown Business Guild led me to call Paul Cristo, the chairperson of this "association of gay businessmen" (as he called it). He was friendly, but defensive, because the purpose of the Guild was to build gay tourism, and the press, he thought, has so far been "sensationalistic."

"Provincetown is no longer the mecca of meccas." Cristo admitted. "People can jet to any other gay resort—Key West, Fire Island—and we need ads, ads on a more national basis." I asked him if there was any way of knowing what percentage of Provincetown tourism-related income was gay. He answered, but from a point of view more to his interest: "Better than 50% of prime income-producing property is owned by gay people." I remembered that the Chamber of Commerce person told me that property was being bought up "by gays and New Yorkers."

"So what does the Guild intend to do about the harassment and violence? No ads will overcome that."

He hesitated. He wanted to deny there was any, but I had just told him that I spent some time in P-town and had run into a few problems myself.

"Well, these incidents are caused by a very small percentage of the population. It will happen in any gay resort where straight kids can ride in and out, and in proportion there is no more harassment here than in any other gay resort area."

That's comforting. "But does the Guild intend to do anything about it?"

"We are staying out of politics."

Cristo did add that some people in the Guild are active in town government; he himself is the chairman of the Provincetown Finance Committee. But from the way he spoke, I realized this influence probably wouldn't be used to control harassment or begin an anti-bigotry campaign: "You know," he said, "it's not insurmountable. There's a certain amount of harassment that one puts up with. I don't think what we'll see next year will be as tough as this year."

"Why not?"

"This gay backlash will let up by itself." He didn't seem to know about the anti-gay Briggs Amendment in California, which is likely to pass, or the frequency with which even the few legislated gay rights we have are being revoked by popular referenda. It will all get better if we just keep quiet.

I asked Cristo if he had anything else to add, and he did: "Provincetown is still a good place to come to. Diversity is the key to success here—cuisine, dining, prices are reasonable, even more than in any other resort area." And he told me that the president of the P-town Chamber of Commerce is sure that the two business groups could work together very well.

It was still possible for me to believe these denials. A big fuss over nothing. The talk I had with Jay Critchley, program coordinator of the Provincetown Drop-In Center (a legal/medical aid service center funded by federal, state and local sources) did not take me much further. He did admit there was an increase in gay harassment this summer, and had some mild but sensible reasons for it: "People come into the Center with one problem, but it turns out they've been in a fight or hassled...Not all the harassment, though, is life threatening. Some is psychological...And there are people who are hassled and won't go to the police [I wonder why]...It's happening because gay people are more up-front, more vulnerable. Anita Bryant has made it more acceptable to ridicule gay people...It's mostly people from out of town, drinking, doing it...But it isn't just gay people who are hassled. Rapes are on the increase...It's important for townspeople not to yell at each other though, because it's a bigger problem than Provincetown."

He told me the Drop-In Center has, and needs "good relationships with the police," but a low budget makes them hire untrained kids as summer cops. He thinks the real issues are "environmental"—i.e., "outside forces are shaping what this town is."

Critchley gave me the impression of walking some sort of tightrope. Outside forces. What I remember most about the



Drop-In Center is the face of an absolutely miserable looking gay man in the waiting room reading a pamphlet: "What to Do If You're Arrested".

Alice Foley, lesbian and shopowner, came to P-town from teaching college nursing because she was tired of living a double life. There is no question for her about the anti-gay harassment and violence in Provincetown. She described a lesbian bartender punched and knocked out by a straight man in a lesbian bar, yet the man was back in this straight-owned and run bar the next day. Foley blames much of it on the ineffectual and harassing police: the bigotry of the older ones and the macho childishness and homophobia of the pre-ookies. She substantiated this with familiar stories: of gay beach harassment and arrests, selective enforcement of loitering and sex laws ("if the cops saw a straight couple making out on the beach they might stop and stare for awhile, but they wouldn't do a thing"), and the biased laws themselves. Gays can get twenty years for a sodomy conviction in Massachusetts while a heterosexual couple can get only three years and three months, which is bad enough. One gay man was recently deported, intimidated by trumped-up charges. Police Chief Meads recently tried to press charges on a sodomy case: "He's a bullheaded man," Foley said, "who will never admit he's wrong."

Even though both her taxes and gay harassment are increasing at intolerable rates, Alice Foley won't leave Provincetown because she thinks solutions are possible: gay education, gay police on the force, and the newly formed gay Business Guild. "Gay people are the bread and butter of Provincetown, like it or not."

After talking to Alice I knew the Chamber of Commerce "exaggeration" stuff was a pack of lies. Talking to the gay Provincetown Business Guild wasn't much better. I wasn't convinced until I spoke to an independent gay person. I remembered being impressed by a lesbian clerk in a clothing store telling off a male co-worker

when he referred to a woman as a chick, so I asked her if she knew about any gay harassment.

"Harassment?" She pulled a woman friend over roughly and showed me her broken tooth. "Four straight guys (if you know what I mean) beat up on us, three women. One of them smashed our friend in the head with a coke can. They guys were caught, but they said we started it. It was difficult, but we're pressing charges." Whew. "And just two days ago..." She proceeded to tell me about five guys who set upon one gay male, Mike, an amputee with one arm, and beat him so badly he had to have a testicle removed. This happened in town, at 7:15 p.m., while it was still light.

"Where were the police?"

"The police stay in the center of town but don't patrol the ends."

"Do you think all this happened because you are gay?"

"Definitely. No question."

Soon I discovered that if I walked up to a lesbian or a gay man the chances were good that she or he would have some story of anti-gay harassment or violence. I believed them. I stopped taking notes. "Why did I come here?" one man said. "If I wanted to be hassled I could've stayed at home." My lover was understandably afraid to walk around at night, as was I, and we were glad to leave. There is no question why tourism in Provincetown is decreasing. Susan, the woman whose tooth was broken, told me simply, "I've been coming here for three years, but I'm not coming back."

An article like this may rightly dissuade people from visiting Provincetown. But in some ways that would be a shame, to lose the promise of a place which, even in an artificial way, hints at possibilities of peaceful sexual coexistence. P-town is a beautiful place, and it is unfair that gay men and women should be forced out. But since there is no vacation from homophobia and bigotry, means must be found to fight them. Accused of being fickle, we may have to prove it, and take whatever money we have elsewhere. If a

gay and lesbian boycott were to exert economic pressure on business, business might then exert pressure on government and police—for better police protection (if that's a possible concept) and legal reform. But ultimately our fight is more radical than this, and our solutions, I suspect, must not be just immediate but far-reaching.

EPILOGUE: LAND'S END

I walked, when the tide would let me, to the tip of Provincetown called Long Point, a jut and turn of sand which narrows and rounds almost to a point. The Coast Guard may consider Long Point part of a continuum, just one more shade or gradation on their nautical maps where a plus elevation becomes a minus. But this is nonsense. Long Point is a Land's End, the farthest extremity, almost an idea, where even primitive societal tracks must narrow down to one, and vanish. The idea of Land's End is appealing: no bigotry, no business, no inter-influence, no Other. This is Provincetown's oldest self-concept, that of the outpost, heroic. But its newer selling-mythology—Provincetown as utopia—which originated in the Puritan Jerusalem-on-the-hill and the needs of the Chamber of Commerce, doesn't jive, either with the impossible frontier outpost or with any present reality. Provincetown may be "unique"—what place isn't?—but not because it stands alone, uninfluenced, and happy. No place does.

In twenty minutes I would have to return to town or the tide would cut me off and leave me stranded overnight. But if that happened I suppose a boat would pick me up. I'm glad I read about the tides. I was hungry. I hoped I wouldn't be bothered by anybody on my way back.

