

In Providence: Here We Go Again



If you were downtown this Saturday night, you may have noticed that the roaring post-pandemic times we were promised seem to have arrived in Providence.

Correction.

We are not post-pandemic. We may never be post-pandemic. But with the weather reaching summer highs and restrictions falling by the wayside, this weekend seemed to invite everyone to come into the Capitol City — some for the first time in a long time.

Someone accurately asserted on Twitter this week that summer is actually horrible, but because it's the time of year children associate with "no school" we are forever told that it is the *best* season (Autumn is the best. No questions at this time). I am one of those people who experience seasonal depression in the warmer months. Winter allows me to stay in and do nothing and not feel bad about it at all. We are all exiting an extended winter. I'm glad it's wrapping up, but I won't lie and say I'll miss having a reason to keep my social calendar unfilled.

After texting several people Saturday night, I considered staying in. I wasn't sure I was ready for the full, unhindered social experience of a Saturday night. I trust the vaccine. I trust science. But, truthfully, I just never liked crowded bars all that much anyway. Yelling so the person next to you can hear what you're saying gets tiring. And as I approach my 37th birthday, I've convinced myself that a

Jack the Ripper miniseries on a streaming service has the potential to make any weekend worthwhile if you pair it with the right cheese plate.

I know, I know.

Over a year of isolation and fantasies of going out, and now we can go out, and I'm complaining about going out. What gives, Broccoli? You can finally write your "Man About Town" column again. No more stories of people trapped at home. No more dour profiles of anxiety-ridden people trying to make the best of things. Life is back. Write about life.

But in much the same way we all promised to create a better world to return to once the pandemic was over only to discover that, *Wow, y'all, that shit is a LOT of work. Like, who knew? I didn't. Maybe we can just ... bring back the Old World? Or something slightly worse, but still cool, because it's not the pandemic world?* It's possible there was some reflection necessary about how we socialize and what we gain from it that didn't get a chance to occur.

FOMO, for example.

I did not miss FOMO.

After 14 months of telling myself I would go to every concert once there were concerts again and eat at every restaurant and hug every sailor as they arrived at the pier, I discovered that all those things still cost ... money? And, uh, there's also the issue of time? And just, you know ... energy?

Despite all the repressed urges I had over this past year to do ... anything, it turns out that Old Kevin — who was just fine engaging in interpersonal recreation once every other week — did not magically evolve into a social butterfly ready to emerge from his cocoon. That, combined with, you know, the collective trauma of living through a once-in-a-lifetime worldwide crisis, has not created a person who can simply stroll into a filled-to-the-brim bar and embrace everyone in sight — be they sailors or anyone else.

And I feel bad about that.

This is a new kind of FOMO. Fear of a kind of ingratitude that I'm finally being given the opportunity to have the kind of life I kept saying I wanted only to find that, oooh, maybe I didn't want it *exactly* the way I thought, and yes, things about the world and my life did need to change, but maybe not *everything* needed to change, and maybe too many of us defined ourselves by where we go when we go out and how much we travel and how many times we can make it to the beach in a given summer, and now I don't just *fear* that I'm missing out, I don't understand why. Why? Why am I allowing myself to miss out?

So I got in the car.

I got in the car and I drove downtown. Once I was down there, I had no idea what to do, but luckily for me, the city was as busy as I've ever seen it. It made even the most bustling of WateFire nights look tame in comparison. That roaring '20s vibe was in the air, and the roar was deafening.

I parked on Weybosset Street and made my way to the mall and back. Along the way, I found myself behind various groups of people. One trio of inebriated friends was arguing about whether Texas or

Oklahoma is the most boring state in America. (I guess none of them have ever visited the distant land of Connecticut.) Four guys in a pizza place I stopped into were debating where the best place to get a tattoo is. (Come on, guys, behind the knee.) In the lobby of the Hotel Providence (my favorite public restroom in the city, just immaculate) a couple was wondering out loud how long they could stall before they had to go back up to their room and admit that the night was over for them. They both looked exhausted and part of me wanted to hang back and find out what it was about the night that had made them surrender to it.

Instead, I just kept moving.

When I first started driving, I used to park my car in the State House parking lot and walk to the mall or to one of the local theaters or to meet up with my friends at a restaurant or bar. I always wanted to walk through as much of the city as I could, every time, because I wanted to see if something would happen.

I didn't know what that something was, but I knew that if you lingered around the edges of the lives of strangers, then you were never far from either fortune or disaster. In this way, I got myself into quite a few disasters, but the one or two fortunes made it all worth it.

If you've spent any time in Providence the weekend before Memorial Day, you know that the promise of summer can sometimes feel like a threat. The heat begs you to hop in your car and head for South County. The population changes drastically as the colleges empty out, tourists arrive on fleeting day trips, and you begin to ask yourself if you're at the beginning of something or the end of it.

Back at my car, I took stock of what I'd done with the night. Lots of eavesdropping. A quick check-in with a friend working bar at a dive on the outskirts of downtown. A six pack of chocolate chunk from Insomnia Cookies. Some notes on my phone about how to write an article on Providence reopening. Words like "trepidation" and "overwhelmed" and "jubilant" and "Texas" and "pepperoni" and "parking" and "tattoo" and at some point, I must have heard somebody say "the night is young" because I wrote it down, but I can't remember who said it.

But the night did feel young.

It felt young even when I didn't.

Not to say that I felt old, but I felt changed, which I think can sometimes feel like feeling older. I felt like it wasn't going to be as simple as diving right back into the night, which should have been obvious a long time ago.

Nothing's ever been simple and nothing's going to be simple.

It's not fatalism talking — quite the opposite.

While sitting in my car, on my fourth cookie, I watched as a man dressed as Batman went by on a scooter singing War's "Why Can't We Be Friends" to nobody at all.

Nothing simple about that.

But can you think of a better way to end a night?

I can't.

Not in Providence anyway.