

# BIG NIGHT OUT

**Theresa Byrnes**

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I monitor a big night out by 1, if I fall out of my wheelchair tanked with chilly margaritas, face planting the downtown sidewalks. It happened twice. Those two particular big nights ended at 5 or 6am, the first, in bed with Michael and Javier, the second, having a very early breakfast at ‘Odessa’ (a 24-hour diner on Avenue A) with Nigel and Bill while holding an icy-pole on my swelling cheekbone.

The good thing about projecting from your wheelchair drunk is that you relax into the flight. Before you know it, you’ve splattered safely. I spend the next few minutes calming down the lads, letting them know I’m okay. Sprawled on the cement, trying to look as glamorous as possible, I instruct how best to heave me back into the chair. Grabbed under the armpits and alley oop! I give the silent prayer of thanks that I didn’t wear a G-string and a mini.

2. monitor – how many people, if any, have to assist me to take a piss. Even though most clubs in New York City have handicapped facilities, it is of enormous help on a big night out if my chosen ally pulls my knickers down at the strategic moment when I stand and grab the rail. I swivel and land on the toilet seat in one fell swoop (usually ensuing in a toilet seat breakage). Inebriation is great, in that I don’t have a skerrick of embarrassment or shyness. I kind of enjoy the opportunity to show off my powdery ass. No shame, baby!

3. monitor – taking the dance floor by storm, oozing joy, sexuality and having a man either straddling me for a seated groove or abandoning the wheelchair altogether, tossing my arms and legs around partner’s neck and waist for vertical groove. The second option usually results in my girlfriends running around my empty wheelchair on the dance floor wondering where the fuck I am.

4. monitor – 6 or 7 a.m., searching the streets for an open bar with an entourage of wonderful freaks who have become new best friends. They say New York never sleeps; well, for that crucial hour before the new day begins, I have found that it goes into a brief coma. Worst of all regarding monitor 4 is that the pizza places are closed – Rosario’s, Ray’s, Sal’s, Three Boots (really Two Boots) – shut, shut, shut. No cheesy oil to anoint my party clothes. I would invite the rage crew back to my apartment but it’s full of wet paintings, and damage control forbids entry. Time to take my ass home, raid the fridge and hopefully make it into bed without falling.

5. monitor – purposely or accidentally ‘exposing myself’. Wearing a boob tube dress, rocking out to ambient trash at ‘Parkside’ on Houston St with Jill.

Numerous tequila shots with wheat beer chasers later, we move to the back room where I thrash my head in punk fashion to corny, synthesised harmonics, Jill leans over, informing me to readjust my stash shoved down my top, it being more prominent than my tits. As I pull it out, a boob pops out – time to go. A week or two later, I go to Rockefeller Centre with my friend Jessica to pick up some champagne truffles from Teuscher Chocolates. After purchase, we roll up Fifth Avenue where a young man runs up to me and asks, ‘Didn’t I see you the other week at a Downtown club?’ I think for a moment and then remember. My face reddens in recognition. He chuckles, ‘It looked as though you and your friend were having a great time – I wanted to join your party.’ He gives me his email address. Three months in New York and already my reputation precedes me.

6. monitor – ending up at ‘La nouvelle Justine’, a love and hatred club in the East Village. I hung out there with gorgeous transvestite and Bette Midler impersonator, Anneda Cocktail. We picked each other up at ‘Lucky Chengs’ (a world infamous drag club) earlier that evening and totally clicked. Margarita artier Margi, a Polaroid together with a cobra, a joint I the dunny where I stripped down to my leather bra, free cocktails until closing, a queue of kisses, and a gift of a leather paddle with a ‘La Nouvelle Justine’ inscribed on it. I was the toast of the leather set.

So I am good at the big night out. Oh, the thrill of risk, the joy of the shocking and the abundant possibilities in destruction. The uptight walls crumble and there seems to be no limit to my all-encompassing exuberance. It’s taking control of my own mortality, sacrificing brain cells to booze and bringing on cancer by sucking down cigarettes. There is something enlightening defiant about celebrating, letting loose, rejoicing by poisoning myself, not giving a shit. ‘Contradiction in terms?’ Life is so full of contradictions, opposites giving each other meaning. My idea of balance is back-to-back extremes: creative hyper productivity, contemplation and isolation to full on, out there, party mode. It seems that unity and truth reside in colliding forces and nothing is right or wrong in that moment of exalted obliteration.

I live outside the loop – no husband, children, mortgage or automobiles. I own nothing but my presence, my wheelchair and my art materials. I am one of the underground privileged. Not chained to the system – grateful to it, but also critical of it. I live freedom in the delirious joy of living my dreams, a self-sufficient artist based in New York, travelling the world exhibiting my work. It was the dream of my ancestors, being answerable only to one: ‘I am the boss of me.’ From a lineage of adventurers running from war, from arranged marriages, from strict family, from poverty. I have arrived certainly without a silver spoon, but with millennia of love and knowledge that I can do anything, wherever I hang my hat. And now the bloody civilisation comes tumbling down.

My entire adult life, as an artist, writer and vehement freethinker, has been about seeking truth – the way to live in ultimate freedom, on the firm path of destiny. I had always felt on the outside of the community or so deep within it I was avoided like a mutant. I don't want what most work for all their lives: financial security. I want only to understand life and to ride the adventure of it with no fear, facing all opposition as a means to bringing me closer to truth. Rebellious? I just want to cut the civilised crap.

I treasure my unstable life. I follow my bliss and my will to be a conscious global citizen. Added to my mix is a fatal, genetic disorder – Frederick's ataxia – causing deterioration of my coordination. My nervous system is failing and clumsiness is increasing. Now wheelchair mobile, I speed down the path of freedom deconstructing. Wind in my hair, I know deeply that freedom is not about mobility and control of the body or about unabashed consumer choice. I miss the ball, but not the plot.

I live in the East Village, downtown New York, about fifteen minutes from the World Trade Centre. One afternoon I was doing a little martial arts workout with my then lover and friend Cameron, when a smoky stench flooded in, directed by the wind, that was to fill the air for months. We embraced and sobbed in each other's arms because we recognised that smell instantly – the smell of death, incinerated bodies, asbestos and CFC's.

It seemed that any light relief or joy was fleeting between trauma, as thousands of spirits let go of New York City, realising their death. And we too were realising death, not just the deaths of the victims but also the death of the world, as we had known it. Once again I would have to examine the meaning of freedom.

Sirens reined in the hood. In the weeks after 'the crash' you could barely count to sixty without a screaming emergency vehicle ripping through your heart. Locals wore dust masks, NYPD on every corner, roadblocks, and an anthrax scare at 'Key Food' (my grocery store on the block). The military were in the East River, and in the sky. The City on high alert; lockdown.

I slunk with ease into depression. There were days I could barely raise my sobbing head off my chest. The following Friday evening, after crying for most of the afternoon, my best friend and neighbour Irene (originally from Perth) invited me to go and see Archie Roach and Ruby Hunter perform at the BAM café (Brooklyn Academy of Music). It was part of the Next Wave Festival. I crashed the opening party and ended up dancing with Robert Archibald (Manager Cultural Relations, Australian Consulate in New York) and Teresa Keleher (Cultural Ambassador, Australian Embassy in Washington DC), while sculling good Australian wine on the BAM stage.

Irene and I used to party at the same clubs in 1980s Sydney, The Trade Union Club, Manzil Room, Kardoma café. I was fourteen and she was thirty-one. After tracking similar paths and dancin' in each other's shadows, we finally met when I moved into the building a little over a year ago. We have become like sisters, joined by the spirit of good live music, a past of wild men, a ragingly independent tenacity and a sublime love for New York City.

Irene and I had a conversation shortly after September 11 about how we both felt we'd been in training for 'the fall' all our lives. Some of my friends had just moved from New York while others, like Jess Adams (author and astrologer), arrived from London the night before. If New York were an artist, her subject would be freedom. And maybe we are her scribes and her expression. The word on the street is that we feel selected by this place and although freaking out, couldn't bear to be anywhere else.

I am used to the whole death sentence thing. We all have a fatal condition called life. But now more than ever, it feels like any day could be the end. I look at the Manhattan skyline and I can't help but see it collapse before my eyes. I listen to politicians of Western world saying, 'Buy, buy, buy!' as friends lose their jobs and the ass falls out of the market.

Archie and Ruby's first song was 'Took the Children Away', about the stolen generation. I burst into tears. Irene put her arm around me and held my hand. I had come full circle to realise that we are all stolen children: all born to the earth and swiftly indoctrinated into religious, moral, economic and political orders. Division is created, beliefs instilled – capitalism is mistaken for freedom: it enslaves, impoverishes and commodifies human rights. Desire delivered, consumer need expands – exploitation creates stability. I cried because I felt a renewed unity with the earth and a profound spiritual solidarity with my indigenous brothers and sisters, the entire humanity.

September 11 has had a sobering effect on the neighbourhood. In the past few years the East Village has fallen victim to a 'creeping fabulousness', the once notorious Alphabet City now gentrified. The young hip and financially mobile come to get sloshed, on a crawl form on shi-shi bar to another. On Friday and Saturday nights I hear raucous, drunken Americans blunder by my storefront into the morning hours. I expected there to be an upsurge of public drunkenness after September 11, but no. In the weeks and months afterward, bars were empty. My sleeps were undisturbed. A strange peace fell over the hood. People were not escaping, or maybe they knew there was none.

Now my 'Big Night Out' is rare and changed. The children who dyed in Afghanistan and now in Iraq make it hard to groove. I feel there little souls. We are

all connected. Victory needs to be mourned. And celebration of life has taken on a less destructive edge.

I had a vision when I was twelve: Dad was driving our yellow Valiant over the Harbour Bridge. I hung my head out of the window at the sunny, Sydney day. Suddenly the buildings vanished, the bridge collapsed. Indigenous people were fishing with spears. The car had become a time machine. But was it going forward or back? Now I'm grateful every day to open my eyes and live again. I'm blown out by the beauty of life and the fragility of this technological society. From that day on, whatever followed was a bonus.

At BAM the twelve-year-olds son of one of the filmmakers pushed me around the party like Queen VIP. Gliding from food table to bar, I was introduced to brilliant Aussie actors staring in Cloudstreet and also its director. I caught up with many dignitaries, like Michael Baume, the former Consulate General who had come to my very first exhibition in New York and had now retired.

I danced with Robert Archibald, Teresa Keleher and sweet Irene. I spun my wheels and thrashed my hair. I had not had a drink for ages and the wine was going straight to my head. I was missing the beat but I didn't care. I didn't care because I was letting myself become numb. I was feeling joy again for more than a moment. I had crashed the party and ending up being a big wheel.



**Theresa Byrnes** is an Australian artist and writer who moved to New York in 2000. She has exhibited annually since 1985 in Sydney, Melbourne, Rome, New York, Detroit, Washington DC. She published her autobiography, *The Divine Mistake*, in 1999. Currently she is working on her next book (about moving to NYC) and is painting her latest series.

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