

Tearoom!

A Conversation with a New York Aficionado

by David Thorstad

[Don Perry writes for *Black Leather in Color*. The following conversation took place in New York City on December 9, 1994.]

David Thorstad: You're thirty-two years old, but when I met you, you were nineteen. When did you start cruising tearooms?

Don Perry: I was seventeen.

How did you even know there was such a scene?

It was probably that Laud Humphreys book [*Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places*]. I figured out that all the big transportation places had some large bathroom. So I found Penn Station. I noticed that people weren't just pissing. They were looking at each other at the urinal. Other people were looking at me and said, "Come to the back, come to the back." That scared me, but I wanted to find out what was going on back there. All the stalls were either broken or the door was loose. People were playing peekaboo with the doors. In some cases, the partitions had been knocked down so you had three toilets in a row, and people were standing there doing things like jerking off—and no cop was showing up.

So Penn Station was your first stop?

And Grand Central.

What attracted you to those stations?

The high volume. They were major transportation centers. At Grand Central, they used to have a row of at least twelve of those old-style urinals, the type that start from the floor and come

up to about the waist. You couldn't hide yourself at all in those—unless you pushed yourself up really close into the urinal. You could look right down the row and see twelve different dicks.

Most men who use public toilets push themselves up so close that they're practically touching the porcelain as if to protect themselves from having anyone else look at them.

Some of those guys just don't want you to see them first; they want to see what you have. If they're interested, they relax a little bit and pull back. They want to see if you're bigger than they are, or if you're smaller.

You started cruising the tearooms around 1980. Have you seen any changes during the past fourteen years?

Overall, it's been pretty bad. A lot of the subway bathrooms are shut. Even at seventeen, I had missed a few. I heard that Canal Street was pretty hot. I think that was because of its design. You had to walk into a corridor and up some steps to get into the bathroom. The same was true with Continental Avenue in Queens: there was a long hallway, then a few steps, and you made a right-hand turn, so there was plenty of time to hear somebody coming.

With the current Giuliani administration, there's been a crackdown. At Eighth Avenue and 42nd Street, for example, they walk in pretty frequently, and they have a lot of plainclothes guys hanging around outside watching. After a while, they come in and survey. They look a little nervous.

They're trying to survey everything, and first of all to make sure they won't get shot. They go to the back and look around underneath the stalls, at feet. People who are cruising do that too, but they're not nervous about it.

So the main change is that there are fewer people cruising?

Fewer people and fewer places to cruise, either because they've been closed down or because they're more heavily patrolled.

What are the hottest tearooms in the New York City subway system?

Main Street Flushing, because of the international crowd. You have a lot of South American people. You also have Indians from India, and Pakistanis. You have an Asian crowd, and a few white guys and a few Blacks. The bathroom is basically open twenty-four hours a day.

I stopped going to Shea Stadium because right now it's too cold. That station can be interesting, but it's right across from a token booth, and the railroad clerks are watching everything. They're tattletales, so the cops come in every once in a while.

Then there's Jay Street/Borough Hall in Brooklyn. There's the PATH station at the World Trade Center. There's Seventh Avenue and 14th Street, which was closed for a while and then reopened a few years ago. The same thing happened with Jay Street—that was closed for two years, and then it reopened. 71st Street and Continental Avenue is kind of strange. It's open sometimes, and not really packed. There's always Penn Station.

In some of the porno stores you used to be able to jerk off and screw. But all of them have been cracking down lately. There was one place inside what used to be an entranceway to the Eighth Avenue subway for the E and the A lines on 42nd Street. You could go in there in the gay side and play around in one of the booths and nobody would ever come by to watch you. In fact, more people would come in and join in if they could. Now the management walks around and checks. If they see more than one pair of feet, they stop you. They actually come up with a baseball bat or something like that and bang on the door.

There's an interesting stop in East New York that nobody ever goes to, at the stop on the A and C line.

It must be all blacks and Puerto Ricans.

Yeah, there was one latino guy and two black guys and

myself. That was fun because it was right across from a police precinct. And no cops walked in, although the door was propped open.

What scenario unfolds in a typical tearoom encounter?

Let's take 14th Street and Seventh Avenue. When I walk in, people think I'm a cop, for some reason. So people usually freeze.

How could you appear to be a cop with all those earrings?

Well, these plainclothes guys wear the same thing. I just don't have that air about me where people think I'm there to cruise. They usually freeze up or walk out right away. So I look around, and if I feel comfortable about the people I will put my hand in my pocket and play with my dick. And if that's not enough for them—because remember, I haven't pulled my dick out yet—then I'll take a chance and pull it out and see what happens.

You've got how many people in there?

If it's 14th Street and Seventh Avenue it might be about eight, just standing around doing nothing with their hands in their pockets.

They're not standing at the urinals?

One guy might be. It's like a safe place because the cops will have a hard time trying to bust you for standing at the urinal. Although remember, I got arrested once for standing at a urinal.

When was that?

It was '86 or '87.

Where did this happen?

At Penn Station. But not the big bathroom. There was a small one for the Long Island Railroad, on that level.

You were arrested for doing what?

For jerking off. I was looking in the reflection of the tiles. I saw the cop walk in, so I stopped. Everybody else did too. They started to leave, I started to leave, but the cop grabbed me. He claimed he saw me jerking off.

Were you standing by yourself?

Oh, no, there was a whole row of people, about eight people at the urinals jerking off. The cop said that he saw me standing there jerking off for five minutes in front of him. He lost in court because the judge asked, "Was his back turned toward you?" and the cop said yes. "Well, how

could you see him masturbating if his back was turned toward you?" she asked. She dismissed the case.

So you've got about eight people in there, one at the urinal and the rest standing around with their hands in their pockets. Where do you go from here?

I usually head for the urinal. The other guy usually is nervous and will stand real close to the urinal as if to say, "Don't look at me." So I'll play aggressive and look down, I'll look at his face, I'll pull back from the urinal a little bit. And because they're interested they slowly take a look. I'll pull back a little more, and they'll look again. But I won't jerk off. I'll just stand there with it hard. If they're interested, they usually start jerking off. I figure if they're jerking off, then it's safe. I'll look around to make sure no cop or anybody weird has walked in and let the others see what's going on too. I'll start jerking off in front of them.

They're not jerking each other off, they're jerking themselves off?

Or they come toward you and want to jerk you off. Or, the people who were in there doing something earlier will resume what they were doing once they find out that you're not a cop, that you're not there to kick their butts.

What's the longest that you've been in a single spot doing this without leaving?

Oh, that's embarrassing! It could easily be three hours, or more.

Would that be unusual?

No. That happens a lot in Washington Square Park.

But there are police all the time in that park.

But not in the bathroom. They don't walk in that often. The cops are there mostly to watch for drugs.

I've used that toilet many times—just to pee, never for anything else. I've even run into you in there. It's a filthy, smelly, stinkhole, yet I've found people lined up at all the urinals along both walls, standing there not peeing, yet refusing to move.

Because a good scene was going on. They were waiting for you to leave because you interrupted it.

So if I had prolonged my visit by maybe five minutes I might have found a lot of action going on?

Oh, in twenty more seconds. Some of those tough guys

may be tough, but they're there to jerk off too. Like some of those Rastas. They're real fast about going to the bathroom. We're talking about 'batty' boys—basically faggots, people who are fucking each other. They usually have crap to say about 'batty' boys, blah, blah, blah, blah. Sometimes I smartmouth back, and the rest of the guys crack up. They come in and one, two, three, piss and leave right away—unless they're drug dealers; then they go in the back and fool around some more.

There's one place in the subway—the Court Street station in Brooklyn, for the R, the N, and the M trains—that doesn't have a tearoom in the station anymore. At the end where the elevator is, we used to fool around on the emergency stairway, but you can too easily get busted there because a cop can come in from the top and another cop from the bottom and they'll just trap you in the middle. That place used to be fun.

There was also the Fourth Avenue stop on the F line, and for the N and R, but that was closed years ago. Fourth Avenue had a bathroom on a terrace level. Part of the station comes up out of the ground, and the other part is elevated on a bridge. The bathroom was on the upper level. It overlooked the other part of the station, the enclosed part—before you went outside for the F. That was kind of fun because you'd hear the cop walking down the terrace before he came into the bathroom. But that's gone.

New York City being such a hodgepodge, is it possible to characterize the kinds of people who are into the tearoom scene?

There are all types. There's this one guy who claims to be a millionaire. He's there in his three-piece. There are lawyers—all different types. Some really poor people. There are bums who go in there—[laughing] I don't know if I should say this, but I'm reminded of a conversation I had with two good friends. We talked about times where—[laughing harder] you're going to kill me—we have gone to these bathrooms or Central Park and the lights were dim and you're sucking on what you think is the best dick you've ever had—[laughing uncontrollably] and later on you find out it was some bum who had just washed off his dick and the dick was clean but the rest of him wasn't. You see him in a park light later on scratching away.

There's this one guy I saw at 34th Street on the N and R line—the D and the F go there too, and the B train and the Q and whatever. When the station was renovated,

nobody went. But I went. It was a well-kept secret for a while—and then it caught on. They immediately put up a sign saying “This bathroom is monitored.” This bum there had a really great-looking dick but he looked gross—the head was kind of greenish-looking. He was black but fair—[hysterical laughter] don’t look at me that way! Some people get, like, purple dicks. Some black guys get that too if they’re real fair—a purplish or darkish green color. But it had a great-looking big flared head on it and it dripped a lot of pre-cum—and had a big foreskin. I was thinking, “I’ve gotta have this!” but at the same time, “This is a bum!” He had a big knot on his head, he was kind of stinky-looking, his hair was a little dirty and dandruff and crap was in it, but I thought, “I’ll put my hand on it; at least my hand won’t catch anything.” He kept pushing my head down. I put my tongue out and said, “No, I can’t deal with any more of this,” and I left. That’s the same guy I did at Jay Street/Borough Hall. He’d only put a cap on and got some new used clothes for the day. He didn’t smell—wait, I bet he did smell, but because I’m so used to going to the bathroom and smelling all these usual smells, I thought it was part of the bathroom. He didn’t give himself away until he started to scratch his head and the cap fell off and there was that same big knot on his head again! I’m, like, “Oh, no! Here I am sucking bum dick again. This is so gross!”

Are there subcultures within the tearoom scene, such as S/M, fetishism, or pederasty?

Oh, yeah, all that stuff is there. Some people go to these bathrooms looking for a certain type. But me, if it looks good, I grab it. If there’s some S/M guy, fine. But they usually walk in with this tough attitude like “I’m Mr. S/M and I have this big dick and blah blah blah.” If I looked just for people who had piercings in their dick I’d never get anything. Every once in a while you see someone with a Prince Albert, and that’s a turn-on because there aren’t too many of those around.

I have seen kids in there who look under seventeen. But there have been setups. There was a problem with that at Chambers Street, on the IRT line. There was this really cute little black kid, and he had a huge dick. He was maybe fourteen or fifteen. There have been cases where people have gone into a booth with this kid, and I’ve run out and I’ve seen cops running right in, and I thought, “I knew it. I had a feeling.” So this had to be a setup.

Do you run into people with interesting fetishes, or practices, or styles?

Some people only want to suck. Some people only want to play with balls. Some people only want you to fuck them and not touch the rest of their body, or just to hold their body and fuck them. A lot of the straight guys just want to be jerked off. Once they’ve cum, that’s it. Some guys like doing it underneath the stall. They don’t want to see your face. It’s like a gloryhole-type thing, but there’s no hole in the wall, so they kneel on the floor and put their body underneath the wall of the stall. Some people only want to see a dick come through a hole. They wait until you stick your dick through and then jerk you off. That scares me because the hole doesn’t fit my size so I end up getting scraped a little if I’m not careful.

In October 1980, the National Organization for Women adopted a resolution condemning pornography, pederasty, public sex, and sadomasochism.

Fun topics.

Several of those categories are relevant to your own personal experience. The gay movement too looks down on the tearoom scene. Public sex and tearoom sex do not cost money, and middle-class gay and lesbian groups seem mainly interested in the commercializable aspects of homosexuality. What is your reaction to this prudishness?

People are shunning the very thing they like. They’re worried about respectability, trying to look good in front of the rest of the world. They think people will treat them better if they know that they don’t go cruising in parks—or at least they’re trying to control this type of thing. This thing about control I just can’t stand.

Well, if Newt Gingrich reads about your exploits he’s going to be horrified. The public perception of this perfectly innocent behavior is probably one of outrage. Yet the behavior is actually very discreet. It’s the kind of activity you have to virtually look for in order to be bothered by it.

True. Because usually we don’t do it out in the open so people can see. You don’t want a million people seeing.

‘Public sex’ seems almost a misnomer for this type of activity.

Personally, I don’t mind if other people join in and look. I have an exhibitionistic side about me. I like it sometimes if people just stand around and play pocket pool and watch.

Do you think you’ll ever give it up?

Never. I got hooked.

Do people of all ages do this, including people who may not be considered desirable in the gay subculture?

Oh, yes. You'll find older men in there, men in their seventies. There's this one older guy in his sixties. He saw me screw somebody in the bathroom and wanted me to do it to him. I refused—not because of his age, he just wasn't my type. He was dying to do it, and he let some guy screw him. He was like, "Ohhhhh, ohhhhhh." And he came, too—without touching himself. If he went to a bar, that's not going to happen. A few walls are broken down—at least in some of these tearooms. Some of them are very competitive. Some want only one race—either all white, or all latino, or all black. Even at Main Street Flushing, there are times when you see mostly latino guys and they don't want to deal with black guys. The PATH station is mostly black. The same with East New York.

If the PATH station is mostly black and you were a white guy interested in blacks, would you go there?

Yup. Because there would be some black guy—like me—who likes you. Of course, the other black guys will look at me as if to say, "Well, what's with him?" But I don't care.

Have you ever seen Hasidic Jews in the tearooms doing things?

Oooh, yeah—in Jay Street/Borough Hall. They'll jerk off. Some could be rabbis. The older ones, with the big beards and all grey and everything—oooh, it's so cool. There's this one guy who was only a year or two older than me, though he looked older. I thought he was cute—big stomach—he looked like a teddy bear type—big brown beard and everything. And those curls!

Wearing the black hat and the whole garb?

The works. He was standing at the urinal, and he was looking at me and he was playing around with his dick. I jerked him off and I jerked off. I gave him my number—I couldn't take his because he had a family. We hooked up later on. It ended when one day I got into his car and we went by his job. He was running a sweatshop—one of those real grungy things over in Bushwick. I saw all these laborers making handbags and stuff, and that pissed me off because they were all black and latina—all females. I thought, "This is what he's running? And probably paying them really poor wages. And now he wants to play around with me?" I decided, "Well, OK, I can still jerk off with him, but that's about it." So we played around. He came to my apartment in Clinton Hill. He came over another time, and wanted me to bring a video because he

doesn't see videos at his house—there's no way. Of all the things I had to pick—I think it was called *Oreo Boys*—it had black guys and white guys, and it was the wrong tape to pick because I hadn't previewed it: all the black guys were getting fucked by the white guys! He wanted to fuck me. I said, "I don't think so." It was too symbolic: my attitude was, "these people working for him in the sweatshop are getting fucked over by him, and now he's going to fuck me over literally?" I just pushed him out of the apartment.

The tearoom has been parallel to other sexual friendships you've had going on at the same time. But it's really a separate part of your life, isn't it?

It's like a supermarket. It's not always stable stuff, but it's new stuff, something on the side you get to see; it's temporary. And it's fun. Then you go back to your stable side, if you have one.

What's the deal with the Staten Island Ferry?

Oh, you have to be careful cruising on the ferry. If you're on the big ferry, there's a big bathroom downstairs. The small one has a little bathroom on the middle level, and that's a dangerous one because the crew knows about that and they have a garbage can holding the door open so people can see what's going on. If the crew finds out, they announce it. Now, if you go toward Staten Island, you have to get off the boat and pay to get back on again. One time I didn't get off. They kept saying over and over, "Everybody must leave the boat—including you in the bathroom with his feet up on the toilet!" I was so embarrassed!

One night when I was coming back from Staten Island, there was this guy with his work clothes on and he's looking at me and staring. So finally I got up and looked at him and went down the stairs and kept staring at him the whole way. I went to the bathroom and stood there—and he came in. He went to the corner. So I figure, "He's got to be with this." I pulled out my dick and started jerking off. He pulled out his dick too. Boy, what a big piece he had! As soon as he realized we were docked in Manhattan, he came real fast, and packed up and ran.

Sometimes part of the fun is not touching somebody—or maybe touching them only once. Because they don't usually get touched by a guy, but they want to see what it feels like.

Here's one more really wild story. There was this straight guy I met at Broadway/Lafayette in the train station on

the platform for the F line. He was this Italian Bensonhurst type—someone to die for. He was starting to bald in front, and his hair was thinned out in the middle, and he had that Bensonhurst accent and a nice three-piece suit. He was playing this cat-and-mouse game around the stairway. He'd look at me, and every once in a while he'd rub his crotch, and then back off. So I rubbed my crotch in front of him, and he's standing there with his mouth open. I motioned for him to come to the back. So he came back, and says, "Oh, wow, man, I always thought there were faggots hanging out back here, but I wasn't sure." I said, "Well, how did you know, since you're obviously not gay?" I'm feeding him these lines, because he was a straight type.

"Well, every day I pass by here in the train and I see all these men hanging out back here and I figure it must be a whole bunch of faggots back here."

I said, "Yeah, so what about them?"

"Well, I always wanted to play around with one but I didn't know how to do it."

"OK," I said, "let's do it."

"Oh, but I can't do it," he says.

"Well, I'll do it," I said, and pulled my dick out.

"Oh, wow, man, that's big. That's a real big dick."

"Well, let's see yours."

"Oh, no, no, I can't do this. Somebody might see me."

I'm cracking up. "Well, can I touch you?" I asked.

"I don't know."

He'd never been touched before—at least he claimed that, and he behaved like it. When I first went for him, he jumped.

I said, "Come on, let me see what it's like. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm not going to do anything."

"But I might get something."

I said, "You're not. You have your clothes on. Give me a break."

So I touched him. It wasn't very big, but you could tell it was one of those types that has a very big head. And it was getting hard real fast. He put his gloves on. "Why the gloves?" I asked.

"I might get AIDS this way."

"You don't get AIDS by touching somebody. Give me a break."

Eventually he did take the gloves off. He touched me, and says, "Oh, wow, I never touched a guy before!" He put his hand on it, but didn't move it at all. This was getting me off. Eventually, I got him to move it, but he barely moved his hand on it.

We got on the D train and went to Brooklyn, and got off at Atlantic Avenue. We hid behind some columns. "No, no," he goes, "hide behind this column over here. I don't want people to see me. Oh, damn! Here comes the train! Hide! Hide over here!"

I figured I'd play along with the game, so I hid. He goes, "No, no, make sure you hide, I don't want people to know I'm with you!" So we got on the D train, going back toward Manhattan ...

This is a lot of running around!

Yes, but remember, this is a straight guy. They don't know any better in these situations. They're so paranoid about being found out. That's how you know if they're really straight. So, we got back on the D train going the other way. Now, during p.m. rush hour, there's nobody on the Manhattan-bound side. I sat there and just jerked off, though not to completion. He was just rubbing his pants, and he came in his pants. I start seeing a wet spot. I'm thinking, "I don't believe this. This got him off!"

"I never played around with any faggot before."

Most gay people would hear 'faggot' and they'd be thinking, "Oh god, he's going to beat up on me." But I was getting off on this.

Then he says, "Oh, but I cheated on my wife. What's going to happen?"

"She won't know."

"But, but I cheated—"

"Don't tell her."

"I'm going to feel real guilty."

"Look, it's too late. You've already done it. I'm not going home with you, so don't worry about it." We had a long talk about guilt, and religion, and sex, and gays.

"What about my pants?" he asked.

"Take them to the dry cleaner's and tell them it's got to be done fast. If you're really worried, put a little bit of water on it. If worse comes to worst, you have to throw them out, that's all. Don't tell her."

I like playing around with these straight guys. They're more interesting than a lot of gay guys. If you go to 42nd Street, you go to a booth where there are some presumably straight guys watching a video. These booths are made for gay people, but straight people don't know it. It doesn't occur to them that there might be some gay guy watching through the crack. They're sitting there jerking off and you can see their dick and everything and cum flying out—that is so funny! And they never know. If you go to the gay videos, there's always some guy watching to see who's looking through the crack. Hiding their dick. No fun.

David is a former president of New York's Gay Activist's Alliance (1975-76), a founding member of the Coalition for Lesbian & Gay Rights (1977) and the North American Man/Boy Love Association (1978), and co-author of The Early Homosexual Rights Movement (1864-1935). 