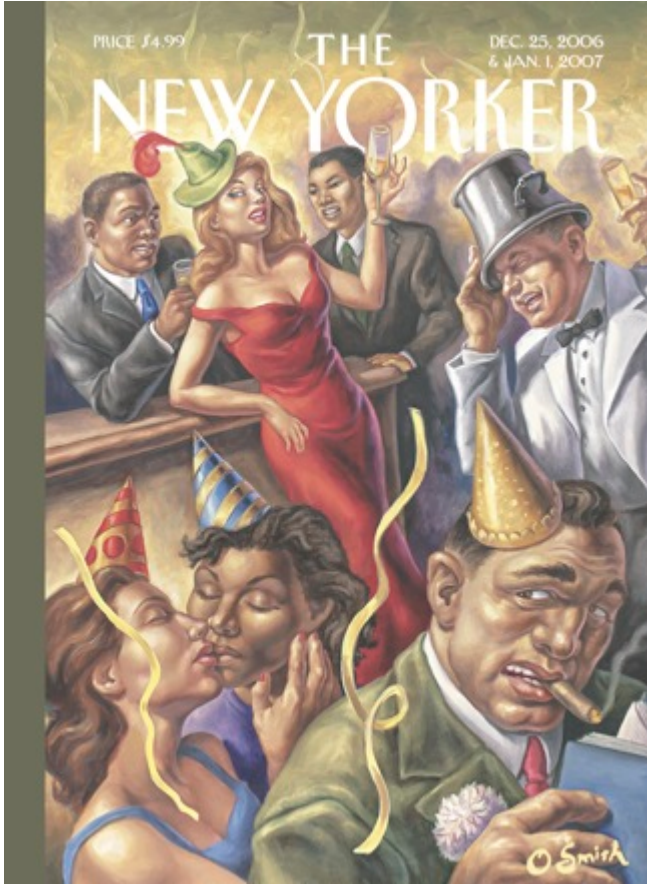


THE NEW YORKER

SIGN ME UP DEPT.

JOINER

by Ben Mcgrath
DECEMBER 25, 2006



In 1998, a local man, aged forty, requested a legal name change for reasons that he no longer cares to explain. Out with the old (“and you’re not going to find out what it was,” he said recently), and in with—say it slowly—Leftonred Atanycorner. The new name suits his politics (he goes by Lefty) and hints at his rebellious streak. Other names he considered include Fail2yield Atalltimes and X. Sesivspeed.

Lefty is a freelance computer consultant and a world-class networker and social joiner. He belongs to more than four hundred clubs, and has supervised or organized twenty-six of them, including one whose theme was administrating more clubs. “I was the organizer of the organizers’ group,” he says. For a while, he kept a blog, *Where’s Lefty*, “a ‘Where’s Waldo’ for the modern socialista,” in which he chronicled his schmoozy travels. (Sample entry: “Eric was a great host and offered us free Jello Shots before the movie and pizza during the movie. Way to go Eric!”) Then he concluded that he was too busy meeting and greeting to record his impressions in a timely fashion, and he gave up.

Most of Lefty’s group activities are coordinated through the Web site Meetup.com, where, for instance, origami aficionados or “Twin Peaks” fans or atheists (Lefty is all three) can find like-minded souls and arrange to convene. There are about ten New Yorkers—the Meetup Mafia, they call themselves—whose convening enthusiasm transcends subject matter. They are “high-volume attendees,” as Lefty says, and Lefty is their don.

The other day, during a coffee break at a graphic-design seminar on lower Broadway, Lefty, who was wearing a pin-striped suit and an orange shirt, half unbuttoned, reached into his right jacket pocket and produced a stack of cards. “That’s my business card,” he said, presenting one for inspection. It read, “Middle Earth Media: We’ll bury your problems,” and featured an image of a hobbit with a shovel. (Lefty, a Tolkien fanatic, is by no means tall.) “Here’s a *sake* card.” It promised “an exciting and unpretentious atmosphere” and listed the Web site for the New York Sake Meetup Group. “And this one’s a personal card.” It featured a head shot and cited his blog. His left jacket pocket contained fifteen more cards: bounty from the morning’s small-business owners’ breakfast.

His next stop was N.Y.U.’s Hayden Hall, for a monthly vegan dinner, where he ran into his old friends Gary, Doug, and Andrea. An Indian man, spotting the middle-aged cluster among the mostly college-aged crowd, approached them cautiously. “Is this Meetup?” he asked.

“If you see Lefty, it’s a Meetup,” Gary said.

Andrea critiqued the food—“The Kiev is excellent, and the stuffed shell sucks.” Then she added, “I’m going to a mystery Meetup after this.”

Lefty, for his part, wanted to drop by a *sake* tasting on Astor Place (“If there’s a *sake* tasting in the New York area, Lefty’s got to be there”), before heading to a meeting of the Personal Computer Users Group, of which he is the president.

The computing event ran long—a sales representative was showing off new digital cameras—and a weary traveler, shadowing Lefty for a day, began to dream of the next item on the itinerary: Beer Meetup. But it was three hours past the scheduled start of Beer Meetup before they arrived at the specified bar. Lefty approached each table and asked, “Are you with the Beer Meetup?” The other patrons were confused. Lefty ordered a beer anyway, and, spotting a consumer-feedback questionnaire, promptly filled it out, adding his e-mail to the bar’s distribution list. Then he handed the bartender a *sake* card.

“The board-game people will definitely still be there,” Lefty said, referring to the next—and last—event of the evening. It was ten-thirty. As he waited for an uptown bus, he reflected on some of the more memorable Meetups he’d attended. “The Bowling Meetup is really strange—they encourage you not to bowl well,” he said. “I like the wine Meetups, especially if you want to meet women.”

Women were in scant evidence among the gamers, but David Greene, another Meetup mafioso, was there, playing San Juan, a fantasy card game, and eating Pringles. David and Lefty are co-organizers of the Leftonred and Greene Meetup, which they founded on a whim when, two years ago, they met a hermaphrodite at a vegetarian dinner, were interested, and needed an excuse to see her again. “She asked us what the group was for,” Lefty explained. “We said we do female-body finger painting. We’ve got about thirty regulars now.”