

Pride

by Anthony Abate

“From Stonewall to Laramie, and now Orlando, we’ve seen too many examples of how the struggle to live freely, openly, and without fear has been met by violence. We have to stand together, be proud together.” These are words spoken by presidential nominee Hillary Clinton in a speech following the Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando, which is now one of the deadliest mass shooting in American history, claiming 49 lives. The news of this attack against the LGBTQ community brought me sleepless nights accompanied by whirlwind emotions and an aching void in my chest. Having identified as gay from a very young age and still struggling with self-acceptance, I felt an overwhelming need to be with the community that I had yet to embrace as my own. Not being out to my family and also never having had any gay friends has kept me from any indulgence in gay nightlife or socialization. I have chosen a path focused on my career and my faith that has also doubled as a wall to keep me at a safe distance from the lifestyle that I have always seen as a cross to bear. However, I have always aspired to be one of the people who live openly and free in their truth. Knowing that the victims that night had achieved that self peace and acceptance only to fall victim to hatred sparked something within me. I just didn’t know exactly what. I immediately made an out-of-character decision to attend an event honoring the Orlando victims that was taking place at a local gay nightclub in hopes of finding some form of peace or resolve.

As I enter the bar I can feel my heart pounding and my breath shorten with every step. I immediately make my way to the bar, which is blindingly dressed in neon-glowing palm trees to complement the nightclub’s name, Toucans. I find it fascinating that an island-themed bar is placed in one of the hottest deserts in California. On the bar top sits a tiki statue grinning down on me and everyone else to reassure us that we are on a temporary vacation from the outside world.

“What are you having babe?” I hear as I almost forget that I am in line for something. I order a michelada, and as I take a sip of my drink, I notice that the bite was a little more than I’m used to as my forehead gets moist and my mouth becomes a conflagration. It’s obvious to me that this drink is not something the bartender makes that often, almost as obvious as it is to him that I am a fish out of water in the gay nightlife. “Enjoy your night, you’re safe here” Caught off guard by his choice of words, I smile the same way I smile at my father when he asks me if there are any women in my life, completely oblivious to my truth. “You’re safe here” I replay in my head as I run my fingers through the course straw-lining of the bar. It was never my safety I was concerned about tonight. Regardless, I took the reassurance.

I make my way through a grass-lined door and onto a smoking patio, where I find a seat under a cabana. I light my cigarette as the desert's heat and humidity trick my skin into believing I am in a tropical paradise. I watch the crowd outside through the bamboo fence like Steve Irwin used to watch crocodiles through the shrubbery surrounding a marsh. There is not one sign of cattiness, drama, or the over flamboyance I had expected. Instead, I see individuals greeting one another with hugs, smiles, and kisses on the cheek. I even see strangers embrace one another instead of greeting with the stern handshake I was taught to exchange when meeting. Each person, regardless of who they are as an individual, seems to be able to relate to one another about what life has blessed or cursed them with.

I realize that we have all faced adversity on our road to self-discovery and self-acceptance. We have all had to mask our bruised and broken hearts with a smile to carry on with our lives. The only difference is that tonight we are all here carrying the same burden and the same pain from the same dagger that pierced all of our hearts forty-nine times on June 12, 2016.

A burly older gentleman enters the patio and directs everyone to join him in the front of the bar to honor Orlando Pulse with a candle-lit march down the street. Immediately the chatter and laughter stops and the music fades out as everyone begins their silent walk through the tiki bar and out the exit of our temporary vacation to share a much bigger real-life moment. As I brush shoulders with others heading towards the exit, I realize that one-third of the people in this bar is equal to the amount of lives lost on that night. I can't help but replay in my head what I imagined happened that night. I find my thoughts dead end in the same confusion, fear, and hurt I felt watching the news that morning, wondering how I or anyone else in the community would ever be able to navigate beyond these feelings.

I am one in a silent sea of no more than 150 people standing in a parking lot. I see towards the front of the rows a man begin to light his candle and then move on to light the next persons in a sort of domino cadance. I stop myself from reaching in my pocket and pulling out my lighter as I realize that this cadence serves as a message, that we are all in this together as a community and we need each other more than ever now. The person to my left leans in to finally provide my candle with the gift of flame, and I leaning to my right pass on the reassurance through flame to the next stranger. The candle light grows and it dances in my eyes, captivating me through the strength and difference of one flame growing into so many.

With the first step I take, I hear over a portable speaker "Amanda Alvear, 25" Immediately I feel my heart in my throat as I cough to try to hide my emotions. I feel an arm gently wrap around my shoulders. I look at the man who it belongs to next to me as he offers a somber smile of support. It is then I realize I am exactly where I need to be. His eyes are kind and warm, and in a way I feel like he was one of my best friends, and I don't even know his name. I wrap my arm around this stranger's waist in reciprocation. He has now in this moment become my support

and I his as the names and ages of lives lost continue to be announced. Without blinking I feel a tear escape my eye and make its way down my cheek, leading the way for the rest of my salty sorrow to pour out. I look down only to realize that the dixie cup my candle sits in is not serving its purpose and I have a clay like mold of wax around my knuckles. I am so distracted in the moment and outside myself that my mind can't be bothered with letting my brain know that I have hot wax burning my skin. With each step and name, my obligation to be more involved in the gay community grows. Purpose outweighs comfort to me at this point, and I make a decision that it's time to start getting uncomfortable.

As the flames are blown out, so is any bit of separation between myself and the people, who only an hour prior I had considered strangers. As the sulfur in the air pinches my nose, I realize that these people are not only my brothers and my sisters, but they are also the only people in the world who understand this road less traveled. Suddenly I realize that the bar is more than just a bar. It's a safe place, a holy ground of sorts, a paradise. We escape to it, knowing that in this place we will not be judged, nor will we face adversity or hatred for being who we were born to be. You see, what happened in Orlando hits people in the LGBTQ community to such a great extent because unfortunately this is our reality.

For the first time in my life I feel fortunate to be apart of such a strong group of people. For the first time I don't feel so alone battling the demons that come with this lifestyle. For the first time I feel unconditional acceptance thanks to the people and the realizations I have had in this paradise. For the first time in my life as a gay man, I have experienced pride.