

Mike Alvarez

I <3 NY

So it's decided," said Gertrude, her grin wide as an orange slice. "We're going to a gay bar."

I'd never been to a gay bar, and the thought of going to one in New York filled me with so much excitement. Meeting boys. Dancing the night away. Falling in love. Oh, the possibilities!

"What are we bitches going to wear?" asked Tammie.

"Not those pajamas," I said with a smirk on my face.

Tammie raised an eyebrow and threw me a look. "Cum rag," she said vehemently.

"Slop bucket," I snapped back.

"Gaping gloryhole!"

The three of us erupted into laughter. My next-door neighbor, exasperated by our late night, "no sleep" sleep-overs, banged on the wall. "It's 4 a.m., you assholes! Shut the fuck up or I'll call the RA."

The girls and I had only been friends for two months, but it felt like we'd been friends for much longer. Our closeness was a direct outcome of the circumstance of our meeting: we were admitted to a mental hospital on the same week (Tammie and I on the same day) after each of us attempted suicide. Speaking of coincidences, we were all juniors in college, we were all persons of color, and we were sent to the hospital by the same psychiatrist, who we joked must have been working on commission.

We stayed by each other's side throughout our brief yet emotionally harrowing confinement. We dined together, solved crossword puzzles together, attended group therapy, and shared many laughs and tears. Or rather, as the crybaby in the group, I did most of the crying while they did most of the consoling, wrapping their arms around me despite the unit's ALA (arm's length away) rule.

Oddly, I was the first to be discharged. Unwilling to let our friendship end, we exchanged numbers and promised to meet “on the other side.” The inpatient unit had two payphones, and I called one or the other every day until both girls were discharged. After our release, my dorm room became our collective safe haven, a place to concoct ideas for recreating ourselves anew and inserting ourselves back into a world we’d nearly forsaken, a world that had almost forsaken us. A fun night out in the city while finding me a boyfriend/getting me laid (the two were not mutually exclusive) was part of that plan.

The girls arrived a few minutes after sundown, hauling shopping bags filled with party dresses. One by one, we entered my phone booth-sized closet, trying on different clothes and different selves.

Tammie decided on white Capri pants and a turquoise halter top, with matching stilettos and purse. She was already a tall woman, and the shoes further emphasized the height differential between us. Plastic pins held her coarse black hair up in a neat bun.

Gertrude opted for a more conservative getup: a red flocked coat over a white chiffon dress. With red shoes and her coarse hair parted into pigtails, she looked like a modern-day Dorothy – feisty and naïve rolled into one.

“Thomas is coming, by the way,” Gertrude said as she put on lipstick. “I’m not sure you remember him. He was discharged the day you were admitted.”

“The pastor’s son? Why would a pastor’s straight son want to go to a gay bar?” I asked, rummaging through my clothes. “Could he be hiding something?”

Gertrude chuckled. She switched on the overhead lights and puckered her lips in front of the mirror. “He’s got nothing better to do, that’s all.”

I settled on a short-sleeved, metallic blue shirt, black pants with white pinstripes, black steel-toe boots, and a black trench coat. I made a mental note to myself to reintroduce color to my wardrobe. Black and blue had become too close a friend to my dark moods.

Standing in front of the mirror, I saw the dozens of cuts I’d inflicted on my left arm. It had been a long time since I saw my arm and face on

the same reflective surface. The cuts were no longer as tender as freshly sliced strawberries, but they were still all too visible.

“Maybe I should put on something warmer, like a sweater,” I said.

“You look fine. And we’re gonna be in Tammie’s car.”

“But what will guys think if they see these? They’ll think I’m damaged goods and peace out.”

Tammie held my hands in hers. In a voice almost as low as a whisper, she said, “Listen. We’re going to have the time of our lives. You will get on that dance floor and shake that booty until every man’s looking your way.”

“Damn right!” blurted Gertrude. “Your pocket’s gonna bulge with more numbers than your wallet can handle.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, especially at the mention of bulge. I’d never heard reassurances phrased in such a way.

We knew it was time to go when Thomas knocked on the door. He was dressed even more sharply than us.

We followed MapQuest to the tee as we made our way from New Brunswick to the Holland Tunnel. Tammie, a transplant from California, was amazed that we were actually under water. It was a big leap from freeways to subterranean tunnels.

Gertrude and I belted out lyrics to songs we recognized on the radio. Thomas hummed along while Tammie concentrated on the road, occasionally making snide remarks at our off-tune singing. Before long, we were on the other side of the Hudson, looking back at New Jersey. Skyscrapers and luxury apartments shot up into the sky, filling it with dazzling lights that spilled onto the river like paint runoff. It’s true what everyone says; the best view of New Jersey is from New York, and vice versa.

Engrossed with all the sights and sounds and the excitement of plunging back into the world, none of us realized that we were driving the wrong way down a one-way street.

A yellow streak, followed by a crash. “Mommy!” shrieked Tammie as a cab slammed into the passenger side of the car at a perpendicular angle. Thomas’s head collided with the window, producing an awkward thunk, and I felt a sharp pain shoot up my elbow as it jabbed into the armrest.

The cab stayed on its course for what seemed like an interminable period of time, reducing Manhattan to a dizzying swirl of colors. Eventually, the screeching of tires ceased. I could hear Tammie sobbing. I worried that she'd been badly hurt, but luckily she was just shaken up. "Holy shit. My parents are gonna kill me. My parents are gonna kill me!"

Gertrude was thankfully unscathed. She put a hand on Tammie's shoulder and gave her a tight squeeze. "You're gonna be okay. Everything is gonna be okay."

We got out of the car as fast as we could. Thomas walked funny, as if he didn't know left from right. He slumped to the ground in front of a deli and leaned against its corrugated shutters. He closed his eyes and rubbed his temples in a circular motion. He looked as if he was trying to make a frantically spinning world stand still, but there was not enough magic in his fingers.

The cab driver approached the two girls. I couldn't make out his words from where I was standing, but the flaring nostrils and mortar-and-pestle hand movements looked accusatory. This was far from the evening we were expecting.

Before long, a cruiser arrived. One cop stayed inside, while his partner, a dark-haired man in his twenties, checked up on me and Thomas. "How are you feeling?" he asked, smiling, trying to make light of the situation. His smile impressed dimples in his cheeks.

He must be the good cop, I thought, as I compared his face to the absence of expression on his partner's. "I'm fine, thank you. But I'm more worried about my friend."

"An ambulance is on the way. We'll have him taken to St. Vincent's. It's not far from here."

The cab driver left the scene with busted headlights. There was broken glass everywhere, glinting under the streetlights. My friends and I sat on the pavement, huddling together. Underdressed, we felt the night grow noticeably colder, as if synchronized with the abrupt turn of events.

"What a night," said Gertrude.

"Tell me about it," said Tammie. She'd calmed down a bit, but her eyes were still pink. "How do I tell my parents that my...that their car is totaled?"

“Totaled,” I repeated to myself, the way a child repeats words that have just been added to its vocabulary. It sounded severe, as if the car had exploded. “What matters is that you’re alive,” I responded.

Thomas mumbled incoherently on the gurney. Gertrude asked him for his father’s phone number, but the number he gave was off, way off.

“We’re going to have to keep him under observation,” said the doctor. “At least for a couple of hours.” The doctor suspected he had a concussion and offered to have us examined as well. The three of us declined. We didn’t want to be in the hospital any longer than we needed to. Our memories of confinement were still fresh.

Going by the clock in the lobby, it was already 2 a.m. The small sounds made by candy wrappers, rustling clothes, and footsteps pacing back and forth were magnified by the eerie silence of the hour. I wasn’t sleepy, but I was tired. I wanted to lie down, but the locked armrests saw to it that I remained upright.

Outside, it was misty. Raindrops splattered off the concrete pavement and the roofs of parked cars. “What would our doctors think if they found out about tonight’s accident?” I mused out loud.

“Suicide pact!” exclaimed Tammie, imitating her doctor’s thick accent.

The three of us laughed, clutching our bellies. We shouldn’t be laughing; other people wouldn’t find it funny. But we did and that was all that mattered. Laughter was our way of coping with the absurdities of the world.

“You’d think fate would cut us some slack, give us a reprieve,” grumbled Gertrude. It was indeed bizarre. Not a month after we were discharged from the mental hospital, we found ourselves in another hospital, this time for trying to live rather than die. The irony was nothing short of laughable.

“Mommy!” I shrieked in falsetto, poorly imitating Tammie at the moment of the crash.

More laughs and giggles. Nobody would believe we were ever suicidal.

The laughter stopped when a woman with messy blonde hair walked into the lobby. She was wearing a pink T-shirt, denim jacket, and torn jeans. Her make-up was all over the place. She looked like the Misfits from *Jem and the Holograms*, minus the glamour. She must be cold, I thought, but she appeared too preoccupied to be cold. She was rattled, her eyes sweeping her surroundings in wild arcs.

“Could any of you spare me a dollar?” the woman asked. “I need cab fare to Bellevue.” Bellevue, as in Bellevue Hospital. The renowned mental hospital.

The girls and I looked at each other. We understood the urgency of the woman’s plea. This was not a scam for drug or booze money. She was somebody like us – afraid for reasons only she could comprehend, saddened by things unknown even to herself.

We reached into our thin wallets, not because we thought the hospital would do her any good, but because it had become an inevitable part of her life, as it had ours. I worried that confinement would make her realize the poverty of her existence; the mental hospital was cold and dreary, and the staff we encountered were hardly empathetic. At the same time, I knew that it was the last chance she saw at life. To deny her that would be to sentence her to death.

At 4 a.m. the doctor deemed Thomas fit to go home. He likened Thomas’s injury to that of a cartoon character seeing stars after running into a brick wall. His attempt at humor struck me as insensitive. Still, we were glad that there was no concussion, and glad that we could finally be out of the hospital.

We made our way to Port Authority on foot; there was no way we were getting into a cab, not after our close encounter with one. From there, we would take the first Coach bus back to campus, but with time to kill we decided to do some exploring.

The morning air was brutal. I could feel it seeping into my bones. We walked into the first gift shop that was open and bought ourselves matching “I <3 NY” hoodies. Nothing screamed “tourist” louder than an “I <3 NY” hoodie, and on an ordinary day, I’d have been too embarrassed to make such a purchase.

The four of us lost ourselves in the billboards and lights. We ran like children when we saw the huge, glowing Toys “R” Us sign. The lights inside the building were off, but we could still see the Ferris Wheel, the meters-high LEGO sets, and the life-size T-Rex from Jurassic Park.

“Where does the ball drop on New Year’s Eve?” Tammie asked excitedly. “I wanna see it. I have to see it.”

“Over there,” said Gertrude. “You can’t miss it.”

I wondered if I’d think anything special of this city that never sleeps, of blinding lights under the dome of the night sky, had I never been admitted to a mental hospital. I would not think that colors, even if artificially created, could evoke so many memories and feelings had I not attempted to end my life.

We huddled together down 42nd Street, past the Regal Cinema and AMC Empire 25, past the two-story McDonald’s and Madame Tussaud’s, until we reached our destination.

Our bodies collapsed the moment we took our seats on the bus. Because we were the only passengers, we each claimed a row to ourselves. One by one, we started to drift to sleep. I looked out the window as the first rays of sunlight penetrated overcast skies, the thin slivers of yellow and white breaking through to the cityscape below.

Tammie gently tapped my shoulder. “Are you alright?”

I smiled at her, nodded. “Don’t worry about me. Get some rest.”

For the first time in a very long time, I realized that I was happy to be alive, and that being normal was not nearly as important as *being*. I began the day hoping to find love on the dance floor, hoping to find someone who would accept me despite my scars, despite my fractured mind, despite my bouts of madness. But I didn’t need to look. It was there all along, on my friends’ sleeping faces.