

It Wasn't the World Ending

by Camille Butera

I am bisexual. It's a fact I've known since I was 13, and stumbled across the term online. But I never came "out" as it were. My friend group in high school was a mix of people who didn't fall into the categories of straight or cisgender, and it was an unspoken, but oft joked about knowledge between us. I never formally came out to my parents either, just dropped idle hints into conversation knowing they would understand. And I was lucky in that regard I suppose. My home, my space, was comfortable, a liberal public high school in the suburbs of Atlanta. While it wasn't free from the occasional slur or fight or issue of internal bureaucracy when it came to sexual orientation or gender identity, it was still a place where I could exist and would not have to face the barrage of fear provided by other schools.

And yet I felt a tenuous connection to this identity I knew with certainty, never quite wanting to vocally identify myself with it, yet being utterly assured of the truth of it. There was a sort of fear there, a feeling that I had not suffered as others had, that I was not allowed access to the full history that the label entailed, a community that my sheltered existence meant I

should not have access to. While I had a community, I lacked the broader community.

But the summer before my senior year, I ended up at a program for "smart" kids, run by the state of Georgia, bringing in students from across the state. I was there for Communicative Arts. Now, I don't know if you've ever noticed, but writers tend to not fit into neat social categories, and my peers were not the exception to this trend. And in their midst, I felt more than ever how detached I was from the LGBT community and the circumstances that necessitated its existence. And in feeling detached, unable to voice my need for the companionship of those who understood, I felt bitter, withdrawn, my words turning to ash on my tongue in the classroom.

But back to the camp. We were in Valdosta, Georgia, for the months of June and July. Now, Valdosta is close to the Florida state line and the climate reflects it. We all swum in the early morning air, and sought refuge inside when possible at all times. And while I tried to avoid them, the mosquitoes seemed like they reached the size of birds.

And this weather meant I spent most of my (minimal) free time indoors, in the company of my peers, and I ended up finding myself in an slam poetry class, where a good majority of my classmates were the LGBT kids in the program, or they were those who felt they had feelings roiling inside them, desperate to get

out. And when we weren't in class we hung out together, a small band of poets, sweltering under trees, throwing out idle pronouncements and scraps of prose. It was with this group, in a spare classroom, which froze just as much as the outside sweltered that I faced a moment of identification, a moment of reconciliation with myself. In my slam class I avoided poems about my sexuality and identity, while my peers flocked to them, and instead I wrote of death, and education, topics I could keep both away from myself while still being invested. But I digress. In this classroom, in this moment, we were joking around, brandishing tubes of glitter as we made silly prizes for our slam competition, when my friend, a kind boy who had told me of his own inability to come out to his family turned to me, as part of a broader conversation and said "Camille's not straight, aren't you?"

And I mumbled back "Yeah, I'm bi". It wasn't the world ending, my family gathered hushed into a room. It wasn't even the end of me struggling to feel as if I belonged to my own identity. But it was the beginning of me building a community, of feeling that I had people I could turn to in case of something more.

It was the act of me rendering into words something that I had not formally outed myself as a in long time. In retrospect, yes, I wish I had written a poem about my sexuality, attempting to capture and place the confusion into, well not a poetic meter,

but a poetic voice, calling upon the chaos and discovery of identity. Instead I talked of death and education, two other great constants in my life. But to be in a place where I had formally identified myself to my peers, to have voiced something into truth in myself was a weight off of me for that moment. And the camp only served to help, exposing me to the experiences of others, and how they were hurting and sought community from that. It made me understand why the LGBT community was even there, that I need to be there to support as well as be supported. I was more rendered aware of those whom I was missing and how they mattered to me.

To know the pain of others is jarring, and poetry is a sweet way of hearing the bitter. The camp lasted only for four weeks, but it reshaped my own understanding of my sexual identity, in the act of confirming it and legitimizing it, which was more than three years in a comfortable space had. While I still struggle with voicing identity sometimes, and this was only the first step in a longer internal issue, it gave me a moment of comfort and validation that I turn to even now.