

THE QUARRY

True Colours

Bohdi Byles

Disclaimer — this personal essay contains potentially triggering content relating to hate crimes, self-harm, and suicide.

March 3rd, 2012. I've never seen anything so vibrant, so spectacular, or so expressive before. It is the night after I've come out, and Mardi Gras felt like a symbolic way to embrace my new, authentic life. There's every colour of the rainbow in all different shades, from azure to cerulean, indigo to violet, lemon to lime; colours in the hair, on the naked bodies, on the clothing, the floats of the parade. There was something about the rainbow that was transcending the physical — it was like there was a rainbow flowing through each person and connecting them, bringing together a community to celebrate who we are. How is it, though, that a rainbow had come to hold such symbolism for people?

Scientifically speaking, a rainbow is a blend of colours typically in the order of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. They occur when light is refracted through the water droplets floating around in the air and are commonly associated with storms and the sun emerging from behind the clouds. Personally, I find that explanation boring. For me, whenever I see a rainbow in the clouds, it is like the universe is nudging me a little more forward on my path, or reminding me that I'm not stuck, I'm just pausing to take a breath.

A rainbow flag was an image adopted by the LGBTQ+ community in 1978, originally designed by the late Gilbert Baker. Prior to the rainbow flag, a pink triangle defined the gay community during the Gay Liberation Movement. However, the triangle was a symbolic reminder of how Nazis identified homosexuals in World War II, and so with the triangle came the emotions connected to what it had been. For Baker, the rainbow flag was a way to deconstruct the solemnity attached to the gay community. When openly gay politician, Harvey Milk, was assassinated in November 1978, the flag became a symbol of the gay community. Since its genesis, the rainbow flag has become a constant image of resilience and strength.

I want to take you back to May 2010, when I didn't know about strength or resilience or pride. I am sixteen-years-old, sitting in a theatre, waiting for the lights to dim and the movie to start. My friend and I are chatting as my phone buzzes. I open it up to Facebook. One unread message. I see the name of the person sending it to me, and inhale before opening it.

'use all should be shot in the head and burned you queer cunt.'

My fingers tap wildly on the screen as I respond.

'When the fuck are you going to understand. . . I. AM. NOT. GAY.'

I silence my phone before shoving it back in my pocket. My heart is thumping in my chest and my stomach churns. It's hard to draw in air. The lights dim, and the movie begins as I start getting tunnel vision. I smile at my friend, but all I can think is how I have school tomorrow, and the next day, and the next month, and the next year. I want nothing more than to curl up under the seat in the darkness and stop existing. I'm not going to make it.

It's effortless for me to recall this experience and many others, like the Facebook page made about me saying I had sex with another male student in one of the high school blocks, only for people to shout it at me for weeks during quiet classes. Or being harassed in the change rooms for looking at the boys when I was standing as far away as possible, staring at a corner and changing as fast as humanly possible. I was still in the closet, still hiding who I knew I was. For me, to be out in high school would've meant more than just being vulnerable and authentic. It'd be like bleeding in a lake full of piranhas. They would've smelt me out, and they would've come in full force to tear me apart even more than the chunks they'd already stolen.

Bullying is bullshit. It's deeper than just a mean remark or a nasty comment. It's a way to police people's behaviours and try to force them to conform to an ideal person. In my case, that ideal was to be straight. It's not an uncommon story either, and it often has tragic endings.

Seared into my mind is the story of 9-year-old Jamel Myles who came out as gay, full of pride and joy, only to endure four days of constant bullying, to which resulted in him committing suicide. Four days is all it took for people to take this boy's pride and irreparably shatter it along with his life. The other names tattooed on my soul went the same way – Tyler Clementi (18), Jamey Rodemeyer (14), Phillip Parker (15), Jadin Bell (15). All young, all beautifully queer, all gone. These names never fail to bring tears to my eyes because they are like a mirror to me of what could've been.

While I was walking on a tightrope for 4 years, I nearly fell off. Along with that list of names could've been Bohdi Byles (18). My name has had a total of four opportunities to join that list, three of them in 2012, each attempt etched into my brain along with their unforgettable sensations. The pills washing down my throat and being forced back up. The sharp sting of a razor blade slicing over flesh. The belt tightening around my neck. My lungs burning with my head underwater. The shame. The prickly shame of failing yet again.

The day I came out, I was terrified. I was scared that those closest to me would abandon me. I was suffocating. It's like my body was ready to emerge from the cocoon but the cocoon wouldn't break, so it was just getting more and more claustrophobic. However, the fear and anxiety were not good enough reasons to carry around a 50-ton burden anymore. I was going to come out and the chips could fall wherever they damn well pleased.

Gratefully, I had an easy coming out experience, albeit a little anti-climactic. While I thought everyone would be shocked and have their perceptions of me absolutely blown apart, for the most part, the opposite happened.

'It's about time, now go clean your room,' Mum said to me. The fear I had wasn't real anymore, and frankly, no one cared.

Except for Grandma.

Grandma didn't want one bar of it. Even now, six years later, she still is optimistic that I will one day realise I am straight and want a girlfriend, regardless of how insistent I am and how much I externalise my queerness. She's grown though, from the woman who cried and told me I was going to get AIDS and die.

AIDS has always carried stigma with it. In the late 1980s, during the AIDS crisis, it was linked entirely to gay men. That stigma, while it has shifted over time, has never fully been left behind, as proven by my grandmother's fears. It was her fear that drove her reaction, not her disapproval. Her love has never been in question, only her acceptance.

When my uncle was 13, he was placed in a boy's home for stealing a car. While there, a gay security guard sexually assaulted him, and from that, my uncle contracted HIV, which later developed into AIDS. He passed away when I was two, so I have no recollection or memory of him. I only have photos, but to me, they might as well be photos of a stranger. I never had the opportunity to know him.

I spoke with my grandmother recently to try and scope how that experience was, particularly because it was happening during the AIDS crisis and just afterwards. I wanted to know, partially out of my own curiosity as a Gender Studies major, what it was like, what the beliefs were, and how they were enacted. Through her tears, she told me about how all her friends abandoned her when they found out because they were terrified they would catch AIDS. She wept and spoke about the deep shame she carried.

'How could I tell anyone?' she asked, her voice croaky as she wiped a tissue over her eyes. 'How could I possibly tell anyone?'

I understand why she feels the way she does. Through that understanding and empathy I have is a driving force for me to own my authenticity and my identity with pride. I am proud of who I am, and I want to make it known to people that there is pride to be had as a LGBTQ+ individual. With that pride comes a community, a chosen family who accepts one another.

In June 2016, a shooting at Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, went down in history as one of the worst shootings to ever happen in modern U.S. history. 49 people in a gay club were killed, another 53 injured. I was in a house alone, watching the constant stream of news through Twitter unfold.

I was shell-shocked for weeks. I was numb and felt so completely powerless. I lit candles, I cried, I even gave an impromptu speech at a vigil (even more powerful given how I detest public speaking). I cried some more, and I was just a cloud of confusion and fear. What helped me walk down that cloudy, scary path though was the rainbow I was walking with, the people I looked to for inspiration.

For the months that followed, the rainbow flag was not just a symbol of pride, but one of remembrance and grieving, connection and compassion, not just in Florida, or in the United States, but worldwide. People mourned as a community where their brothers and sisters, their chosen family, had been attacked. These were my people. My community. My family.

The words from my high school bully rang through my head after the shooting, and still do. *'use should all be shot in the head.'* Bad grammar and spelling aside, if this person had

their way, I would've been one of those injured or killed. Yet, reflecting back on those experiences of the many others who came before, like Harvey Milk or the victims of Pulse nightclub, I think that there is solidarity in our struggles, and there is power in our stories.

In 1939, in *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland (a much beloved gay icon) sang the lyrics, 'Somewhere over the rainbow / Skies are blue / And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true.' Beloved popstar of the 70s and 80s, Cyndi Lauper, sang in her powerful anthem, *True Colours*, for her friend lost to AIDS, Gregory, 'I see your true colours / And that's why I love you [...] True colours are beautiful / Like a rainbow.' During her life, the late Maya Angelou would often sing a 19th century African-American song: 'When it looks like the sun will not shine anymore, God put a rainbow in the clouds.'

I wonder if perhaps there isn't something waiting over the rainbow, but maybe the rainbow itself is the dream that really does come true. Maybe it isn't so much about the rainbow, but about who is within that rainbow that you find.

What I know for sure is that coming out as gay was so much more than liberating. It was a golden ticket to life, permission to not just survive but thrive. Pride wasn't a sudden response, but a gradual and internalised feeling that reached the deepest, most unloved parts of me and brought them to the surface to shine.

Endnotes

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