

Grieving on the Dance Floor

Robert Kingett

My body is gyrating to the music blaring from the giant speakers in the packed house in Rodgers Park. My moves don't quite match the music, but I keep on dancing because I am incredibly lonely, and I am here to satisfy some desire I can't get rid of, let alone identify.

The mix of pop, rock, and country music takes my mind off friends who've lied about how much they care about me. People who said they cared about me and considered me a good friend hid the fact they didn't want to have me touch them or be in the same room as them, just because I am gay. It hurt more than expected when they shouted the truth to me over the phone when I wanted comfort and company because I missed Jeffery Robinson. I missed Antonio Davon Brown, too, but maybe someone here would make me remember other things. The rhythm pumps self-confidence into me. It reminds me that I am more than a guy's sexual pleasure. Each song is like a reassurance to counter the many number of dates I have been on with guys who just wanted to get me into bed and then never speak to me again. The happy couples dancing remind me that the Pulse night club shooting a week before, where two friends died saving strangers, has not affected everybody. People are still alive in my world. The people dancing beside me are way better at it than I am, and possibly carry less baggage than I do, but I am a man who does metaphorical things because I read a lot.

When the dancing stops, I make my way through the party to meet and greet various people of various statuses. There's a guy who's in a relationship, but he's here because his sex life is dull, and besides, his husband will never know. Not to mention, they have an open relationship, because of course they do. There's a lesbian who thinks I am straight and asks me what on earth I'm doing at a gay party.

Even as I watch all the blurry bodies bounce and wiggle to the tunes I wonder why this party even exists. I think it exists for the same reason why I am here. being gay automatically places me, and others like me, into this weird alien class where the majority can have the freedom to hate us for no reason. I am chided for my terrible sin of sleeping with a man who captures my heart, when my heart deserves better than worrying about what happens after it stops existing.

This party is a celebration. We're telling each other we are here and we are out. We're proud of it. We're proud to live.

It's weird how I came to be here. at first, I said no to Phoenix's invitation. I wanted to look back at old texts because I wanted to wallow in the memories I had of Jeffery. Even though we didn't add each other on Facebook, we connected in a myriad of other ways after he met me in a Tampa, Florida outlet mall years ago before I moved to Chicago. I had tripped on the air with a lot of grace and skill, which sent my cane flying out of my hand, where it landed just before his feet, causing him to trip. After helping each other up, we bonded by walking around the mall and getting to know each other. Even years later, we conversed about our lives. I told him all the different ways I made a fool of myself by putting on mismatched socks and he, in turn, would share about his loving family and how proud he was of his cousin holding down a job at a bookstore.

I didn't grieve as hard for Antonio though because we didn't know each other that well, but still, the loss of a great pen pal, bordering on a long-distance friendship, was hard to take for me, especially since I accidentally deleted his emails the day before.

I didn't want to come here to this party but I changed my mind though and, now, I am happy I am in Mat's house. I don't know why Mat calls himself Phoenix, but I also don't know why he holds parties like this, either.

I am here at this party because there must be someone who will not let me down. Strangers and Friends have let me down so often in the past week that I figure going to bed with a total stranger might solve all my problems.

As I make my way into the kitchen, I spot a very tall guy in a yellow shirt playing with his phone at a table. I sit across from him, wishing I had a mobile phone to play with. His ebony finger massages the screen with such speed, I assume he's playing a modified version of Flappy Bird.

"I figured you'd sit down eventually," he says. "I've never seen anyone dance so much in my life."

"I was dancing because, basically, I've had a bad couple of weeks and I just needed to let go of a few things in my life." He puts down his phone and folds his buff arms on the table.

“I hear you, dude. I came here because the same thing happened to me. My whole family was killed a few days ago, and so I figured the best thing to do would be to do the dumbest thing possible and go to a party where nobody knows me and I can be whoever I want to be.”

“Are you serious? Like, shouldn’t you be in mourning right now?”

“That’s the thing. What if I don’t want to grieve right now? What if I want to be somewhere where nobody can see me even though I am standing in the same room as them?”

“You’re weird,” I say, and he laughs. I don’t know why I feel the urge to treat him like any other person, why I’m not saying I am sorry for his loss, but I get the sense that isn’t what he wants or even needs right now. Mark introduces himself, and soon we are connected by sorrowful chemistry. Losing his mother, father, two brothers, and 8-year-old sister in a sudden shooting on Chicago’s South Side is so much worse than people letting me down, so we figure what better thing to do than make the worst jokes possible. We joke about the nice things people say but never mean at funerals. We joke about religion — he’s an atheist too — and the afterlife, but we do not joke about the dead. With so many dead police officers and fellow members of the LGBT community, somehow this seems like the best kind of medicine we can give each other. I feel like a spoiled child complaining about a lost toy after listening to him tell me about his dead family. As we talk, we continue to connect.

I wonder who killed his family and I also wonder what the reason for the shooting was. Given that the most tragic event to our being happened last week, I am guessing that the shooter wanted this gay boy dead but missed. I usually don't like to assume things but straight people assume we are different than them all the time, so it's fair game.

I reach across and take his hand. It feels strong and warm. he's still here and he's still queer. I'm glad he's here. It proves we matter.

The one topic we don’t talk about a lot is his family. That's not what he wants or needs. It's a subject we don't want to dwell on, so after asking me why I am here, Mark asks me why I am single, and I tell him I have no idea.

“Why do people always say you will find the one you need if you just do your own thing and never look?” I blurt out. “Sounds like a poor excuse. Maybe there really is nobody out there.”

“I disagree,” Mark says, fixing me with his intense brown eyes. “There’s someone out there for everyone. You just have to try a little more. You know?”

“But if I try, I’m not doing my own thing, right? I’m searching. Isn’t that what people always say we shouldn’t do?”

“Some people, yes, but you have to understand that there’s a personality type for everybody. You just have to be aware of that and keep your eyes or, in your case, ears open.”

“Do I have fat ears?” I ask suddenly. He comes over to me, holding me close as he studies my ears with mock intensity.

“Nope. Your ears are cute!” Then a slow song starts, and we look at each other.

“Since we bonded by making fun of funerals, do you want to do something normal, like slow dance?” he asks.

“Sure!” I say. He guides me into the living room. There are non-dead couples dancing beside us, swaying to the song that’s playing. It’s about some guy who ran over some woman’s dog, but she still loves him. We dance, Mark’s arms wrapped tightly around me. I came to this party seeking a shoulder to cry on but now I feel as if I am medicine Mark needs. I feel as if I am his life support tonight. The longer the song plays, the tighter he holds on to me. Just as the song is about to end, I feel something wet hit the top of my head. I think it’s rain at first, so I don’t react, until I lean my face up to kiss Mark. When I see the streak of tears on his face, I take him into my arms and wipe away his tears as another song fills the room. He doesn’t need to say thank you. His embrace is enough.