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Untamed

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JOANNA GREENBERG

Untamed

After Orlando, the flags flew at half-mast for a week. Grieving as I was, I wanted them to stay that way forever. Certainly, our country is full of enough tragedy these days to warrant keeping the flag down a few notches indefinitely.

It's easy to think that now that gay marriage is legal, the fight for equality is over. I'm guilty of it myself. Then I hear about another transgender or gay teenager committing suicide. It feels like a knife going in every time. Then I wake up to the news that forty-nine people have been shot dead, dancing their hearts out at a gay club, finding that feeling of giddiness and acceptance on the dance floor that can be so elusive in the world at large. Feeling as if they were in a safe space, among their own, and now they're gone.

When I was in high school, my friends and I would go to a local LGBT nonprofit's teen drop-in night. They played hip-hop and hung a disco ball up in a room with linoleum floors. There would be fifty or so of us burgeoning queers, shaking our hips and writhing our bodies up against one another in that room. I've never been able to dance well, but it didn't matter there or in any of the gay dance clubs I frequented as I grew up. The dance floor was a place of freedom, a place where no one called you dyke or fag. My generation came out with the shadow of Matthew Shephard hanging on that fence, but it didn't make us scared. It made us angry, defiant, made being an activist part and parcel of our coming-out process. It's easy to imagine myself amongst the dancers in Orlando, smiling and laughing before the horror took hold. It's easy to go back in time, to inhabit my teenage self on her dance floors, learning to live her truth, surrounded by love.

I don't know why I was so mad at Jimmy for giving Frank a blowjob in the back of the van that night our sophomore year in high school. For a radical lesbian activist, I was sort of a prude. I was still a virgin that first year after I came out of the closet, and I was embarrassed about it, feeling that I had yet to complete the full scope of initiation rites required to fully claim my membership in the gay community. My first girlfriend, Cristina, and I hadn't gotten any further than making out once or twice over the course of our six-month relationship. It was hard to find privacy in her strict mother's house, and my house was out of the question. I never knew if my mother would be sober or not, if the sight of an outsider would inspire her to good behavior or embolden her to throw insults and accusations my way, thrilled to have an audience.

Our friends got around privacy in cars and playgrounds late at night, but we were so shy, both of us barely out of the closet. I didn't know any other lesbians besides my older friend Simone, whom I idolized, and was too embarrassed to ask for sex tips. When Cristina broke up with me to date another girl, I was heartbroken but also relieved. The whole thing had felt a little over my head. I was content to be surrounded by other gay kids figuring it all out, content to head up the Gay-Straight Alliance and walk around the halls of our school with my messenger bag covered in pins proclaiming, "Yeah, I'm Gay, So What?" and "Dip Me in Honey and Throw Me to the Lesbians," which I now see as somewhat ironic considering my total lack of sexual experience.

Jimmy and I were the first to come out, and while that should have made us thick as thieves, instead it created competition between us. I was livid when he encroached on my anti-Iraq-War crowd. He was angry with me for commandeering the meetings of the Gay-Straight Alliance, appointing myself president without a vote (okay, it was less than democratic, but we both knew I would have won anyway). Despite our differences, when I discovered the Long Island Gay and Lesbian Youth Center, I let him in on it.

The Long Island Gay and Lesbian Youth Center, or LIGALY, was run out of a few rooms on the second floor above a pizza parlor in Bay Shore. I had found their website on one of my internet research missions, typing the words "Gay and Lesbian Long Island" and "How to meet other gay people Northport, NY" into the AOL search bar. The Internet was still relatively new; my family had only had it for a few years, and every time my mother picked up the phone I would be kicked off the dial-up line. The Internet was my gateway to the LGBT community. On it, I found message boards full of other kids questioning their sexuality. I remember staring at a photo a girl had posted of herself, testing myself: do I want to be her, or do I want to kiss her? (The answer was, and is, both. I'm the first to admit that one of the truly great parts of being a lesbian is the 24/7 slumber party with sex dynamic. That my

wife and I aren't the same size and cannot trade clothes is one of the great disappointments of our marriage.)

When I discovered the LIGALY website, and saw that they hosted a Friday night Drop-In, I knew I had to go. Long Island is a big place, and to make themselves more accessible, the organization provided vans that drove across the Island, picking kids up and delivering them to the center on Friday nights. I screwed up my courage, dialed the number on their website, and gave my friend Lisa's address to the friendly woman who answered the phone. "We'll call you on Friday morning with your pick up time—it's usually between 4:00 and 5:00 p.m."

Lisa wasn't gay, but she was one of the many allies that made up the Gay-Straight Alliance, and her musician father was sort of a hero among our group of friends for so happily encouraging us as we tried on our new identities. He would have driven us to Bay Shore himself had he not had a standing gig on Friday nights. LIGALY welcomed everyone ages fourteen to twenty-two who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or as a straight ally. The first night I went, I brought along Lisa, Jimmy, and our friends Caitlin and Nicole, also allies.

The Friday night drop-in was a revelation. The small space was bursting with people, and it was impossible to turn around without making a new friend. One room had been converted into an approximation of a dance club, and we spent the night alternating between dancing under the disco lights and having conversations about what it meant to be out and proud with the other kids and the twentysomething volunteers. I worshipped the volunteers and the staff, all seeming so sure of themselves, all so welcoming and encouraging to us kids.

It was on that first night that I met Frank. He marched right up to me, a giant smile on his face, and told me I was cute. "You're just so cute, look at you in your little tank top!"

I've always been like a puppy when it comes to admiration: I just lap it up. "Oh my gosh, thank you! You're cute too!" Frank was adorable, dressed in the flare jeans that were popular in the early 2000s, a tight blue T-shirt, and a studded punk-rock-style belt. His hair was gelled up, and he wore a class ring on his left hand. I complimented him on it.

"It's my engagement ring! My boyfriend Anthony and I are getting married. You'll come to the wedding!"

It didn't seem odd to me for high school students to be engaged. I was in love with the idea of love, which at that age was even better than the real thing. I thought it was amazing that he had someone who loved him like that and felt a pang of jealousy about my own unadorned ring finger. I met Anthony later that evening, but he didn't make an impression, and by the next time I saw Frank, the engagement had been called off. Frank didn't seem

too sad about it; he was already crushing on Brandon, the hunky Argentinian exchange student who also was a part of the Friday night crew.

I started going to LIGALY religiously on Friday nights. Most weeks Jimmy came too, and a rotating cast of our friends joined us. The van ride was almost better than the night at the center itself. The driver wasn't supposed to play music, wasn't supposed to let us make out, and most definitely wasn't allowed to make any stops. Luckily for us, our driver, Jay, didn't give a shit about the rules, and let us blast our mix-CDs. He kept his eyes on the road ahead ignoring whatever shenanigans we were up to and could be persuaded to stop at 7-Eleven so we could get Slurpees on the way home. The van was a fifteen-seater, and we would crisscross Suffolk County, picking people up around the corner from their houses so their parents wouldn't see us in all of our rainbow T-shirted glory.

The night that Jimmy gave Frank the instantly infamous blowjob, I was in a terrible mood. I had been single for longer than I had been in my relationship, and I was certain I would never find love again. My desperation must have been obvious, because all of the cute pixie-cut girls I clumsily attempted to flirt with at the center rebuffed my advances. That night, I had shared a promising dance with a girl in a yellow tube top. The song we were dancing to instructed us to take our shirts off and twist them around our heads like a helicopter; the volunteers had banned us from doing so after we had all ended up topless the week before, so we lifted them up a little instead. She had a star shaped belly button ring that I couldn't keep my eyes off. After our dance, I truthfully told her I was pretty sure she had appeared in a dream I had the night before; after that, there were no more dances.

I was in such a shitty mood that I don't even think I was aware of the action happening in the back of the van that night. It was only after we dropped off Frank on some corner in Huntington Station that Brandon burst into giggles and announced, "Jimmy and Frank just got down and dirty! Jimmy, how'd he taste?"

I was a huge drama queen and refused to speak to Jimmy for a good week, all while gleefully dishing the dirt on his sexcapades to anyone who would listen. When I did speak to him, I gave him a giant morality lecture.

"Jimmy, I'm just disappointed in you," I said. "I thought you had standards. Not that I don't love Frank, but really, in the back of a van? Gross. Don't you want to be in love with the first person you have sex with?"

"I don't know. It was just fun, okay?"

"Are you two going to date now?"

"Um, I'm pretty sure not. It's different for boys. You dykes take everything so seriously."

At that, I couldn't help but laugh, and just like that our fight and my terrible jealous condemnation of Jimmy's sex life evaporated. It was around this

time that the term *sex-positive* entered my vocabulary, and I began to fight not just for the right for my friends and me to be able to love anyone we wanted, but to be able to fuck them however we wanted too.

That spring, the staff at LIGALY announced they were throwing a gay prom for us. Gay proms were beginning to be held all across the country so that LGBT teens could have a prom experience where they would feel welcome bringing a same-sex date, which most high schools wouldn't allow. We were all over the moon about it. I had told my parents that I attended a club for future leaders on Friday nights, and explained that we were having a formal dance to celebrate the end of the school year. My mother, on a rare sober afternoon, took me to Bloomingdale's and bought me a halter-top dress with a black and white floral pattern that I thought looked like something Audrey Hepburn would wear. I still didn't have a girlfriend, but I thought perhaps I might meet one at the prom, and I was happy to go with my friends. I was crowned prom queen; there were seven of us kings and queens in total, each of us representing one color in the rainbow court. I received a yellow sash and a tiara, and was delighted to learn that we royalty would be riding on a float at the Long Island Pride Parade in June. The float turned out to be the back of a pickup truck, and I sat perched on the edge, blowing kisses to the crowd.

Frank is missing from my memory of that prom, of that parade. One minute he is there, I think, in a grey suit and a purple shirt, dancing right next to me, and then the next he flickers out. This uncertainty haunts me now. My heart wants to put him in every snapshot of those years; my brain just won't cooperate.

The truth is, I lost track of Frank as the years went on. Like so many of my friends from LIGALY, his family had disowned him when they figured out he was gay, and he had spent most of high school bouncing around between different homes, living with an aunt, then a friend, and then, I was horrified to learn, on the streets. "What do you mean, homeless?" I asked Caitlin when she told me. They were still close.

"He stays at a shelter some nights or sleeps in a car if he can find one unlocked. I told him he could stay with me, but it's hard for him to get a ride."

I was wrapped up in my own life, and I'm ashamed to say I didn't think too much about it. I had finally, in my junior year, found another girlfriend and wasn't so shy this time around. I lost my virginity and stopped going to LIGALY every week, preferring to spend my weekends holed up at my girlfriend's house, taking advantage of her parents' belief that we were just good friends enjoying standard teenage girl sleepovers. (Many years later, her

parents confessed that they had known we were more than friends, but were too uncomfortable to confront us about it.)

My girlfriend was a year older than me, and when she left for college, we did the long-distance thing. Between our hours-long phone conversations and my overachiever load of all AP classes, my senior year flew by in a blur. I got an early acceptance to NYU, and I couldn't wait to move to the city and be an activist and march in the New York City Pride Parade every year. One night, Jimmy, Caitlin, and I were walking down Main Street, on our way to the brand new Starbucks (I fancied myself a female Ernest Hemingway, scribbling my poems in Long Island's version of a Parisian café), when we ran into Frank.

"You look radiant!" he told me, and I beamed back a smile. He looked a little beat up: his jeans were too big for him, the cuffs frayed at the bottom, and he had dark circles under his eyes, but his infectious enthusiasm remained as I remembered.

"I'm starving," he announced. "Let's go to the Golden Dolphin."

"That's my favorite diner!" I said, and the two of us linked arms and skipped down the street, Caitlin and Jimmy following in formation behind us. We stopped in front of the diner so that Frank could smoke a cigarette, and he bent down and plucked a pansy from the planter out front.

"For you, my lady," he said, bowing, and I tucked the purple flower behind my ear. What a perfect night, I thought. Nothing will ever possibly be as perfect as it is right now.

At the diner, I ordered a grilled cheese and wolfed it down as Frank caught us up on his life. He was living with his aunt again, he said, but he might move in with a friend. He wasn't in school, but he was hoping to get his GED soon. He thought he wanted to go to law school one day; he was already practicing by drafting legal documents, like his last will and testament, which he took out of his wallet to show us. He handed it to me and I looked it over and laughed. Frank was funny and weird. He had willed everything to his boyfriend. I didn't think anything of it. I was happy to know so many interesting people.

People made fun of Jimmy for what he did in the hallway. How callous, I thought, when I heard them later. Yes, Jimmy had made a scene, that afternoon, running towards me crying in the English wing, shouting at me, "Frank's dead! Frank's dead!" Yes, he dropped all of his books along the way, and I did too when I saw him coming, dropped them right there on the ground. I don't remember picking them up, and I don't remember Jimmy telling me the details, though he must have because they're burned into my mind. How Frank had left a note in which he said he just couldn't cry any-

more. How his tears were like an ocean, and he wanted to float away on the waves. How Frank had taken a plastic bag, placed it over his head, and fastened it around his neck with a rubber band. Suffocated. How someone had killed themselves the same way on the show *Nip/Tuck* last week, and how Frank loved that show.

I remember frantically looking for Caitlin, knowing that the word would spread, knowing that our friendship would never survive me telling her, but that I had to do it anyway. I remember how she crumpled over. I remember she didn't say a word to anyone the rest of the day, how she sat in my car crying as I drove her home, and how her mother's hand flew to her mouth when I had to tell her, too. I remember going to work the next day, telling my coworker, a volunteer EMT, a not-so-sensitive guy who told me "That's a horrible way to go. It's like drowning, lungs on fire."

The funeral was the first non-Jewish one I'd attended, the first open casket, the first dead body I'd ever seen. It both did and did not look like Frank, and I remember how I almost vomited and stood in the back for the rest of the wake, listening to Frank's mother, the one who disowned him, go on and on about how much she loved her son. Still, I took two of his bracelets from the box of jewelry she offered to his friends and wore them on my arm for years, until the rubber stretched and broke.

I carried the prayer card from Frank's funeral with me when I traveled to Europe in college. We had both loved the idea of Europe, had talked about how we would go there one day. I carried the card from London to Athens to Venice to Paris. I carried it to the top of the Eiffel Tower one night, and as I stood looking out at the sparkling Paris skyline, I pretended he could hear me. "You would love this," I said to him. "I wish you were here. I wish it had been me, and not you." Because I was sad then, sad for no good reason. Not homeless, not alone, in my fancy study abroad program, crying myself to sleep at night, thinking about ways to go that wouldn't feel like a fire. Painless ways to go. The Internet had gotten better, but still, if you googled "easy ways to kill yourself" all you got was the number for the Samaritans, a list entitled "Life Is Worth Living." It soothed me to imagine Frank telling me reasons to live. "Live for dancing and friends and sex," I imagined him saying. "Live for both of us. Here, take this flower. Everything's better with a flower in your hair."

It took some time, but I found my reasons to live. I dropped out of NYU and spent a year holed up in my apartment in the throes of clinical depression, too scared to go outside. When it came time to pick up the pieces, it was my teenage years that I looked back on for a blueprint. In high school, rubber

bracelets with WWJD emblazoned on them were popular with the religious kids, a reminder to ask themselves, in times of uncertainty, “What would Jesus do?” My friends bought me one and joked, “What would Joanna do?”

“What would Joanna do?” Specifically, “What would teenage Joanna do?” This became the question I asked myself as I tried to reenter the world of the living. Teenage Joanna was going places. Teenage Joanna didn’t have all the answers, but she had hope; she had pride, and she had love. Not only was she loved; but also she loved everyone and everything around her. She was unafraid.

There are still a lot of things I’m afraid of. I was afraid to fail, so afraid that I refused to allow myself to even try. Teenage Joanna wouldn’t have wanted that for herself, so I have spent the better part of a decade trying to face the fears that run so rampant in me. Always clumsy and embarrassed by my body, I took up running. Always struck down by periods of deep depression, I saw a doctor and began taking medications to keep me stable. And the hardest of all: full of regret and disappointment at myself for not finishing college, at the age of thirty, I am finally completing my undergraduate degree. My apartment is full of books and papers, and I sit at a desk every day, plucking words out and onto the page. I’m no Hemingway, but I have my stories, and I intend to tell them.

Besides the words, there is the love. In a pleasant twist of fate, this year I celebrated my sixth wedding anniversary with Cristina, that first, shy love of mine from high school. This time around, we weren’t so shy. We reconnected at a point when I was the most mired by my fears, but she saw the old me in me and held my hand as I found my way back to myself. At my most depressed, I did a very good job of pushing away my friends, but a persistent few held on, Jimmy among them. As I sat in my apartment, sobbing over the news of Orlando, I received a text message from him. Three words: “I love you.”

I went to the vigil for the victims of Orlando in Greenwich Village, outside the Stonewall Inn, the birthplace of the gay rights movement, looking for comfort, looking to make some sense of what had happened. There were thousands of us there, brushing up against one another, many in tears. A chant made its way through the crowd: “We’re here! We’re queer! We’re fabulous! Don’t fuck with us!” I couldn’t help but laugh.

As a community, we stood, candles in the air, as each name of the dead was called out. My candle flickered out; immediately, a man to my right handed me an LED candle that could withstand the wind. We were all in this together. We weren’t afraid. We refused to be silenced.

For years I have skipped the New York City Pride Parade, moaning about the crowds, the heat, arguing that since I live my life out and proud every day, there’s really no need to attend. This year, though, I’m going, and I’m

bringing all my friends. We'll dance our way down Fifth Avenue in the bright June sunlight, and I'll pin a flower to my hair, blow kisses to the spectators on the sidewalks.

In the wake of unspeakable tragedy, it's easy to give in to the fear and sadness. Now, as I sit comforting myself with my memories of my friends and that linoleum dance floor, I think that the only answer to loss, to inconceivable grief, is love. Love, bursting one from heart to another, refusing to be tamed.