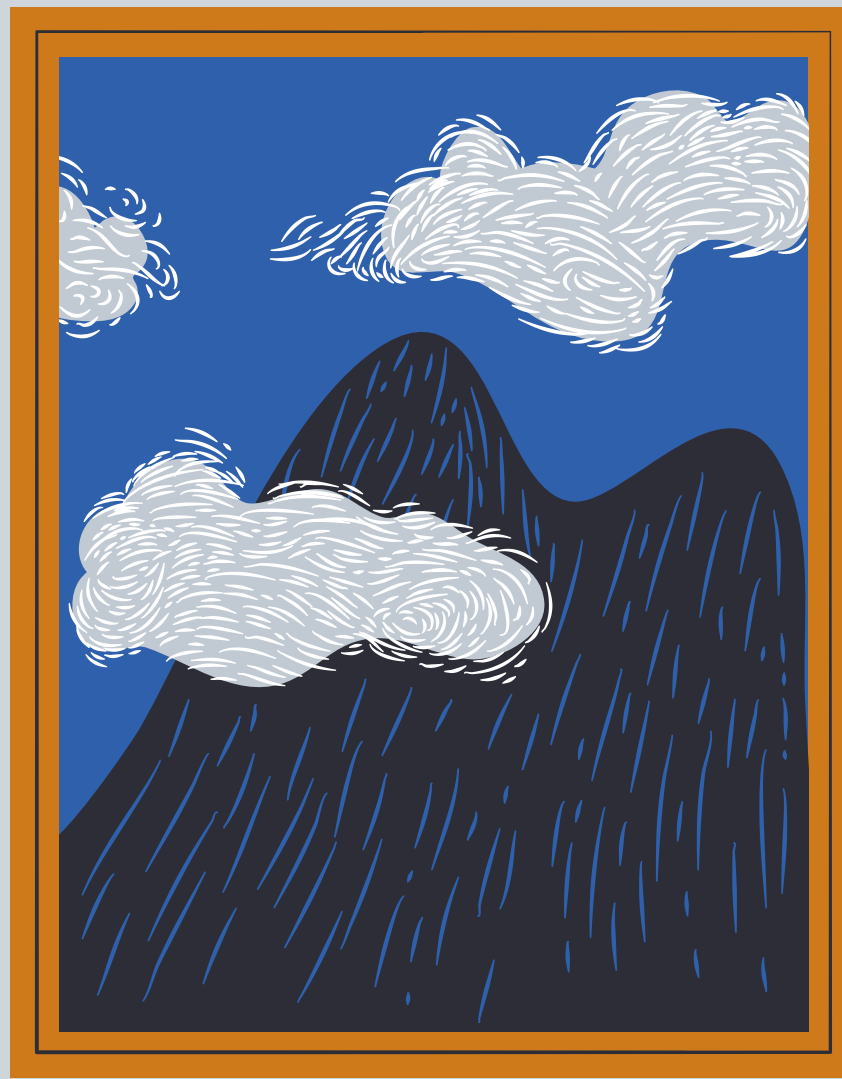


Proud to Create



Art and Creative Writing Competition

A collection of writings based around the theme of Pride.



Proud To Create – Submissions

Fall into Sin -

Sitting on the pews,
At the back of the alter,
I kissed your sweet lips,
I didn't even falter.

Our Father almighty,
So gracious,
So holy,
Looked down upon us, and said it was blasphemy.
To me you were; the one and only.

I have no need for this sanctum,
No need for your scripture,
Your words can't guide me,
If they won't let me kiss her.

There was no matrimony,
No sacrament of anything holy,
Just your lips on mine,
As the world faded slowly.

My hand in your hair,
Your hands holding me close,
I think if the priest saw he'd be as white as a ghost.

I love you so deep, and so dearly,
I want nothing more than to spend my life with you, truly,
But the world, it threatens us with the Lord's divine cruelty.

For indulging in sin
We are to be stoned,
But I know if I'm with you,
Even Hell would be home.

By S.C.K.

Ersatz -

These eyes they peer through the walls,
We're stuck under the scrutiny of a town that doesn't even know our names,
Still they insist we abide by the rules of their games.

My hand holds yours,
Gentle and close,
But I'll soon let go,
Feeling intimidated by ghosts.

Voices whisper in my ear,
Opinions galore,
Telling me words I wish to ignore.

Stay with me,
Please don't let go,
I'm scared that when I look,
You won't be here anymore.

By S.C.K.

Adding a little colour to hell

June 8th , 2115. Another colourless year. But that was about to change.

The small, Irish village of Dún Réidh was a very grey village. All the buildings were dull and grey. Everything looked lifeless, personality-less. The small grocery store, post office, police station, even all three of the pubs, where people would often flock to at the weekends due to their being nothing else to do, all lacked personality. God bless the single café in the village, which at least has some window flower boxes on both windows. A bit of colour.

When it began to get dark though, the church atop the hill with its looming tower did light up. The patriotic colours of green, white and orange lit that tall tower up, luminating the village. Regardless of where you were in the village, that bright, glowing tower could be seen. As nice of a sight as it is, however, it also provides a stark reminder of who is really in charge.

Erin Kennedy had the perfect view of that tower from her small, two-bedroom flat. Her bedroom faced the direction of the tall and proud tower, and Erin would often just lay in her bed, staring at the colourful structure. When she was younger, she stared at those bright lights in awe. Now at the (Very old in her one-year younger partners opinion) age of twenty-five, she stared at it with disdain. It was still pretty, but what those colours represented now was far from pretty.

Post World War three Ireland was far from a good place to live. In its aftermath, Ireland saw the rise of The Catholic Voice political party. They formed at a time of disorientation and division for the nation, and the result was people putting their faith in this party. Which led to religion once more being the dominant force in how Ireland was run. This has had a profound effect on Irish society, including Ireland falling behind in technological advancements. But the regression in development, particularly in the rights of LGBTQ+ people, was the worst outcome of all of this. At least for Erin, who now had to pretend her girlfriend was her roommate and nothing more. Streets were heavily monitored; cameras watched each citizens every move. At least they lived together though. Those cameras had full surveillance of every street, but they could not see behind Erin's curtains.

Clodagh Lynch, Erin's secret girlfriend for close to seven years now, came from a highly religious family. While they liked Erin, they also had no idea she was anything more than Clodagh's friend. Erin suspected, especially from how secretive Clodagh preferred to keep their relationship, that if they did find out, their opinion of Erin would be the complete opposite. Erin suspected her own parents would share those views.

Exactly one hundred years ago, the people of Ireland voted in favour of same-sex marriage. Now most of the population disapproves of the concept of same-sex marriage. It had been thirty-eight years since same-sex marriage was once more banned. Gender affirming care for transgender people was also met with a complete ban in Ireland. There had even been talks about homosexuality being criminalised once more. And conversion camps were created and heavily promoted. Modern day Ireland was hell. Despite everything though, there was still some fight in the LGBTQ+ community.

Erin lay on her bed; fixated on her social media feed. While Ireland was falling behind technologically, she was pleased that they still had access to the biomechanical brain implant created by the technological organization Transcendence Nexus. Everyone had it! It allows those with the implant to access an augmented reality in the form of a holographic interface that only the user can see. This interface allows access to messages, social media, emails, and cute cat pictures. All the important things, all accessed by the user's mind at anytime and anywhere. Apparently, people once had to carry a physical device that gave them access to those same things, which sounded like such a crazy concept to Erin. And they had to use their hands to type back messages, rather than their mind. She was glad Ireland wasn't so stuck in the past that she'd be stuck carrying this handheld device around with her like some sort of primitive cavewoman.

This implant allowed her access to a life outside of the village she was stuck in. Videos and images of neon-lit streets, with walls coated in led screen advertisements and shops that projected holographic figures to attempt to persuade passerby's to come on in. Streets where robots were as common of a sight as actual people, and cars travelled above the crowded population on the streets below. Where it was common to see people with a variety of alterations made to their bodies. A soldier had returned from military service several years ago and the community of Dún Réidh mostly came together in disgust at the fact that, after being caught in the crossfire of an explosion, they had to get a robotic replacement for their arm. It functioned just like an arm made of flesh and bones would,

but that didn't stop people from making up rumours that this soldier had died and was replaced by a robot with ill intent.

Some doomscrolling later, Clodagh's voice yelled out announcing "I'm home"

"In here" Erin replied.

Clodagh, who was currently stuck in what she described as a dead-end job at that aforementioned café, and also the mastermind behind those flower boxes on the cafe's windowsill, entered the room with a yawn before throwing herself on top of Erin. Erin reached up to gently run her hand through her girlfriend's black hair as Clodagh's head rested on her chest.

"Fun day at work?"

"Nope. Did you?"

"Nope. But at least the grocery store hours are a lot more reasonable than the cafe. And the grocery store gang wars are a thing of the past"

"Thank God. That was a rough few months"

"Soooooo..." Erin began.

"No" Clodagh quickly interrupted her.

"You don't even know what I was going to say!"

Clodagh pushed herself up so her big, icy blue eyes were staring into Erin's, a soft smile on her thin lips "I feel confident in saying I do"

"But I've been watching more videos on it. Those who have gotten the cat ear modification say they are so sensitive! They can feel them! And they can wiggle them! I've seen the clips. They twitch and it's so damn adorable!"

"Let's keep the cat ears to our future pet cat"

"You don't think I'd be cute with cat ears?"

"I think you're cute enough as you are" Clodagh leaned up and briefly planted a brief kiss on Erin's lips.

Erin pressed her own lips into a pout "That's not answering the question"

"It was a silly question"

Erin was about to go on a rant about how silly questions matter too, but a small ping informing her of a notification caused her to lose her train of thought. She quickly opened the feed, glancing at the discussion.

Clodagh sat up, noticing Erin was preoccupied "What is it?"

"Um, do you remember that LGBTQ+ group I was telling you about?"

Clodagh let out a sigh "Yes"

"Well, they are planning something. Big. And I want to be part of it"

Clodagh's jaw tightened, eyebrows furrowed, and her eyes narrowed, continuing to remain locked onto Erin's. She was silent, but Erin could tell she wasn't happy. A common reaction whenever she mentioned the rebellion group "Rainbow Phoenix Association". The Rainbow Phoenix Association was a secret LGBTQ+ rebel group who provided refuge, care, medication, support, advice, and assistance in emigrating out of the country. The current state of the country was pushing members of the LGBTQ+ community out of the country, with Manchester being the most popular safe haven for them.

Erin, seeing her girlfriend's lips were now curled downward, opted to attempt to put her in a good mood again "BTW, you're hella cute"

That didn't cause any movements on those lips though. It did result in her girlfriend climbing off her and repositioning herself on the bed, so she was sitting, crossed-legged, beside Erin. "Define 'big'"

Erin nodded slowly "Well, according to them June used to be pride month, where the LGBTQ+ community came together to celebrate how far we had come in society, and all those who fought and sacrificed their lives so we could live in a society that allows us to be who we really are...for a while, anyway. Oh, and sometimes they'd get drunk! It all looked quite fun from the clips they posted"

"I've seen similar clips before. Of the parades, not of people getting drunk. It's...crazy to learn how much they took from us"

"Yeah... But they are planning on claiming June back. They are tired of hiding. They plan to fight back, and it starts with reclaiming pride month. They are going to light the entirety of Ireland up in rainbow colours later this month!"

"Well, I wish them all the best luck with that" Clodagh said, her voice clearly tired. She was tired a lot these days. It was evident by the bags under her eyes, and her general lethargy. Erin assumed it was due to her long workdays at first, but she was starting to suspect the constant worrying over her secret relationship with Erin was taking a toll on her.

"I want to help them"

That caused Clodagh to rise abruptly, standing up beside the bed and throwing her hands up before clenching them into fists "We have a plan! I've taken on more hours so we could someday move to Manchester"

"I know! I know! But, why should we have to flee our country?" Erin rose to her feet too, attempting to reach out to take Clodagh's hands but she pulled away.

"For our safety, that's why! We are in danger here, and now you want to increase that level of danger"

"The Rainbow Phoenix Association wants to make a change! I want us to be part of that change. We can make Ireland a place where people don't have to date in secret again"

"No. You're being ridiculous" Clodagh raised her hand, a single finger raised when she saw Erin open her mouth to reply "I'm tired and not in the mood for this conversation"

"You're never in the mood for these types of conversations anymore! We belong here, Clodagh. I want us to be free to be together. I..." She sighed as Clodagh stormed out of her room, into her own, slamming the door behind her.

Erin sunk back down onto her bed, glaring out the window at the glimmering tower in the distance. Her and Clodagh don't argue often, but the nights they do argue are the only nights that Clodagh sleeps in her own bed. Erin got up to get something to eat sometime later and noticed darkness under Clodagh's bedroom door. She was asleep. Erin sighed, knowing that meant they were not going to make up tonight and she'd be sleeping in her bed without the warmth of her girlfriend.

They had been living together for two years now, so things had gotten quite predictable on those rare occasions they do argue. Aside from sleeping in their own bedrooms and not talking to each other for the rest of the night, they also both apologize first thing in the morning.

Today was no exception. Erin woke up to the sweet aroma of pancakes and freshly brewed coffee. Clodagh was always an early riser. Erin was not. So, Clodagh usually had breakfast made for her when she did stumble into the kitchen. And today Erin was greeted with that same sight. Clodagh was quick to apologize for getting snappy with Erin last night. Erin apologized for not being more considerate toward Clodagh when considering partaking in the Rainbow Phoenix Associations plan. They both spent several minutes insisting they were the one who should be apologizing to the point they were nearly arguing over which one of them was more responsible for the brief argument. That predictableness came into play once again though, because the result of their morning-after-an-argument apology session was the two of them embracing, promising to not have silly arguments again and enjoying breakfast together.

Today was the one day of the week where neither of them had to work. It was Erin's favourite day of the week. She got to spend the entire day wrecking her girlfriend's head! There wasn't much to do in Dún Réidh. Clodagh refused to go and get a coffee together because there is only one café in the village, and she works there. She would rather use her day off to get a day off from him. In her own words: He talks too much. And about himself. And his collection of vintage video games. These video games come in the form of discs, and, as Clodagh has unwillingly learned from her boss, the disc is inserted into what was called a video game console, which booted the game up. The game was then played via a controller. This was a lot different than modern video games, where a headset transported users into the virtual worlds of these games. Either way, Clodagh's boss had absolutely no understanding of when he was talking too much and his conversation partners were disinterested. Clodagh often described herself to Erin as too nice when these conversations occur, unable to bring herself to tell him to stop talking.

They agreed to get some fresh air and go for a walk in the park. Well, somewhat fresh air. While Dún Réidh did not have advertisements plastered on every single wall, there were a few billboards, including one offering to sell people fresh air. Literally. The billboard claimed climate change really did a number on fresh air and was offering to install an air-filtration system into houses to provide homeowners with fresh air. And that it was a subscription service.

The impending warning from the billboard beside the park entrance did not stop Clodagh and Erin from going for a walk and breathing in that not-quite fresh air. The park was rather small, but it did provide a break from all the grey. Here, they were surrounded by green. Green fields, the rustling of green leaves on the various trees scattered about. The green stopped there though, as both the benches all over the park, and the small kids' playground were devoid of colour.

Erin really wanted to just hold Clodagh's hand as they walked through the park together, like in the movies they'd watch together while cuddled up on the couch in the evenings. Erin still admired her girlfriend as they walked along though. She was shorter than Erin by one inch. Both were average height though. Since she was slightly shorter than Erin, Clodagh insisted that she was the lap sitter in this relationship. On occasion, she did let Erin sit on her lap though. Clodagh was quite thin. Erin's grandmother, on the rare days they visit her, practically forces Clodagh to eat biscuit after biscuit so she won't blow away in the wind. Her round face was adorable. Big round eyes, a cute button nose, even dimples when she smiled. Something Erin felt she was seeing less of nowadays. On top of that, her coal black hair felt like a nice contrast to Erin's bright, blonde hair. The colours complemented each other! In Erin's opinion, at least.

"If you want to challenge me to a staring contest, you'll have to use words to make that challenge" Clodagh spoke up with a grin. And them dimples!

Erin returned that grin "Nah, if I wanted a staring contest, I'd at least want a challenge. Anyway, sorry. I just can't help but stare sometimes. It's...just weird. That I got so lucky that I can call you my girlfriend" "Shhh"

"We're alone right now, Clodagh. I don't think they can hear us"

"They can see us. So, they can probably hear us too. Besides, he's here" Clodagh nodded in the direction they were walking.

On the path, coming towards them, were two figures. On the left was a brute of a man. He had to be close to the height range of being classified as an official giant. Every single part of him was big. His arms and legs both featured defined muscles, and his hands were bigger than Erin's head. He had short brown hair, a rugged face and faint stubble. His eyes were cold. Unfriendly. Erin didn't meet the man too often, but he was one of the local guards for here and some of the surrounding villages. He had a reputation for being rough. Which has caused a decrease in anti-social behaviour at least. But he also scared Erin. The thought of what he might do if he found out about her and Clodagh made her shiver. She had heard plenty of stories about members of the LGBTQ+ community being mistreated and dehumanised by police.

Beside the brute of a man known as Jack McDonagh, was the local parish priest, Michael MacBrennan. He was a shorter man, but still tall when compared to Erin and Clodagh. He was a thin, frail looking man. His hairline was in a losing battle, and his grey hair matched the primary colour of this village. His youth was long behind him, as evident by his wrinkled skin. As the two women got closer to them though, his warm blue eyes locked onto Erin's, and a soft, welcoming smile grew on his face.

“Good morning, ladies. Lovely day today, isn’t it?”

Erin forced herself to smile back. She really didn’t want to smile at Michael. People in this village looked up to him and the other priests as if they were unofficial mayors of Dún Réidh. He was the reason this village was so dead. He was the reason school banned any discussions of anything LGBTQ+ related all those years ago when the teachers turned to the local priests for advice on how to tackle those subjects and LGBTQ+ history. He was the reason Erin couldn’t hold Clodagh’s hand right now! Well, she knew deep down it was the political party to blame for that, but none of them lived here. Anywhere near here. So, she had to put that blame on some face, and Michael was viewed as the face with the most power here. So, he was to blame!

“Good morning” Clodagh said amidst an equally as forced smile.

Erin joined them in saying those same words. Jack did not. He just continued to stare at the two women with his cold glare.

“I hope to see you both at mass this week” Michael added, before stepping to the side of the path so they could both advance forward. Jack stepped a little closer to the grass at the edge of the path too. The park had a single path which trailed the entire outskirts of the park. Erin and Clodagh both opted to cut their walk short as to avoid bumping into Michael and Jack once more.

A few days later, Erin once again joined a Rainbow Phoenix Association chat thread, under the name Erin_Go_Bragh. She didn’t reveal her actual name to this group, so she couldn’t express how proud she is of the name she came up with. Without knowing her name, no one would get her username. She was flat out on the bed, eyeing that holographic interface.

The-OG-Bear: Yo. We still doing this thing my bitchez? We need numbers. How many of you is down for lighting Ireland up?

RainbowQueen99: Yesssss! Me! Us! Count us in!

XX_Dat420Guy_XX: Ditto.

The-OG-Bear: Duly noted. We needs answers asap. Keep em coming.

Miss-Take: No way in hell am I missing out on being part of this. I adore the idea.

PinkAddict96: It’s cute and all, but I personally think my previous idea of us just all taking over and having the biggest (And gayest) orgy ever in phoenix park is a better idea.

Miss-Take: Cringe AF.

ShadowWarrior69: Always happy to help, brother. Heard they raided one of the bars down there again. Hope ye are all doing good.

The-OG-Bear: It was a stark reminder of why we need to do this. That crap can’t keep continuing. Thanks for checking in though.

GaymerGirl97: NGL, doing this scares the heck outta me. But I’m in. Stupid FOMO

Erin’s breath fluctuated as she eyed up her typed message. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and sent the message.

Erin-Go-Bragh: Dún Réidh is onboard. Let’s make Ireland gay again!

Erin-Go-Bragh: And, uh, all the other letters too. Let’s make Ireland all of them again too!

Her messages got lost in a rapidly flowing sea of messages. But not even a minute later, one of the mods sent her a private message, asking for her address and similar details. She took a moment, thirteen minutes to be exact, to pace up and down her room before responding with the required details.

It took another few days before a package arrived at Erin's apartment from the Rainbow Phoenix Association. Unfortunately, Erin got the news it arrived from Clodagh, who tossed a small, square device onto her lap the second she got home from work.

"Care to explain?" Clodagh said, hands on her hips and raised voice both offering prime indicators that she was not happy.

Erin picked up the device, examining it. There wasn't much to examine. It was a small, box-shaped item. It was used for hacking, so it was designed to lack anything worth examining so it wouldn't stand out.

Clodagh didn't give her time to respond though "I know what this is! We've seen similar things in movies. You're up to something, and I can probably guess who it involves"

Erin quickly stood up with a huff, tucking the device into her pocket "You had no business opening my package!"

"We have a plan, Erin! What the...fuck is wrong with you! Why do you insist on putting our lives at risk"

Clodagh was on the verge of tears. And she did a really good job of maintaining a tough girl persona since they met. She never cried. And Erin knew that it was a sort of competition for her to keep it that way now. So, she quickly turned, and ran right to the door, and out of the apartment.

Erin could hear the patter of rain on the window. So, instead of following Clodagh straight out, she searched for her shoes in her messy bedroom, which took slightly longer than she hoped due to...the mess. She gave up on her search for a coat and quickly ran outside. She couldn't see Clodagh, but she knew where she was. The same place she used to hide when she was in a bad mood.

The park was lit up by lamps spread out along the walking path. The centre area was pitch black. Like a black hole swallowing anything that would leave the path. Clodagh was on a bench further into the park, her face buried in her hands, sobbing. And soaking wet.

Erin was also soaking wet as she approached her "Clodagh, please listen. I just... I fucking love you"

Clodagh didn't look up, but she did manage to get out a quiet "Then why do you want to put us in danger?"

"I want the opposite. But we can't get to that without..."

Clodagh interrupted her, now rising to her feet so she was face to face with Erin "Manchester. It's safe there. We've been working to save up for Manchester for years now!"

Erin took the risk of reaching out and placing her hands on Clodagh's shoulders. It was a success "That's not facing our problems. That's running from them. That's never having to face your parents' reaction"

"I just want to be happy... with you. If something happened..."

"Clodagh! We can do this together. For those future teens that find themselves in our boots. We can make this place better for them. But we can't if, like so many others, we flee Ireland"

Clodagh sighed heavily, shaking her head. She said nothing for a moment, before finally "Fine. I'll help. For the future generations"

"And the present ones" Erin smiled. Clodagh didn't return that smile, but she did lean in and to give Erin lengthy kiss.

It took some time to mop up the puddles they left all over the house the previous night. There was a knock on the door shortly after they finished the chore. Clodagh went to answer it, while Erin checked for something to watch for dinner today. Moments later, Michael MacBrennan was in their kitchen.

"I hope now is a good time because I really need to talk to you" His voice was soft and soothing, but a visit from him never happened. This was bad.

They offered him tea, which he declined, and then he proceeded to show them a holographic projection from his watch, which was their kiss in the rain last night. Erin's jaw dropped. She kept looking back and forth to the door, just in case Jack was about to barge in.

"You know behaviour like this is heavily frowned upon, yes?" They both shot each other glances, wondering who was going to reply. Erin really didn't know what to say so she was thankful Clodagh took that role "Duh. But...it shouldn't be. We can't help who we love. It's..."

"I agree. It shouldn't be" They both stared at Michael, Erin once again finding herself speechless. She was just about to join the conversation too!

"You...what?" Clodagh asked.

Michael let out a sigh "The heart of religion is love. Or at least it should be. I don't agree with the direction everything has gone. You two...shouldn't have to hide your relationship. This is all wrong, but I don't know what to tell you two other than please be more careful. You're lucky I saw this first"

"We shouldn't have to be careful though!" Erin finally spoke up "We love each other. We're harming no one. Things need to change!"

"Yes, but there's nothing we can do"

Erin pulled out the hacking box "Not alone. But together, as a community, there is. And we could really use your help..."

The day finally came. All across Ireland, members and allies of the LGBTQ+ community all got to work. They needed to have the hacker attached to the largest energy supplier before 10 p.m. This is where Michael came in handy.

He was very involved with everyone within the village, and as such was awarded a key to the village. He had access to all public buildings, for potential emergencies. He drove them to the local substation, unlocking the gates and control house. He pointed them toward the control panel. Erin took a moment to look at Clodagh, who gave her a soft and brief smile, before attaching the hacking device underneath one of these panels. The three quickly hurried off, praying this works.

Later that night, Erin lay cuddled up with Clodagh in her bed. The tower began to light up with its usual colours. Meanwhile, a mod of the Rainbow Phoenix Association had a livestream of a screen with surveillance footage across the country, which they had opened on Erin's projection screen. Her heart was pounding when the clock struck 10 p.m. Why wasn't it happening? She tightly gripped Clodagh's hand as a minute passed.

The streetlights flickered, before the white light quickly changed, leaving those roaming the streets bewildered. Instead, that white was replaced with the one of the colours of the rainbow, leaving rainbow-coated streets below them. Then those Irish colours flickered. Both women sat up, and soon both women let out an excited squeal when the towers colours were replaced. The rainbow colours took over the tower, shimmering brightly above the village of Dún Réidh. Erin couldn't contain her excitement that it worked and gave her girlfriend a kiss. Clodagh, on the other hand, couldn't stop smiling. It felt like it's been a while since Erin thought her girlfriend looked happy. The livestream showcased similar occurrences in other places. From the spire to the neon-lit streets of cities to smaller, less colourful villages, to even lighthouses. The rainbow glowed brightly across hundreds of urban areas in Ireland.

"It looks beautiful" Clodagh remarked.

"Why thank you!" Clodagh playfully nudged her side

"The lights! But you are too" Clodagh bit her lip "You're right. We need to be part of this change. We need to be part of this battle"

Erin nodded "We do. Fleeing is letting them win"

"You know the upcoming summer festival? We should go. And we should climb up on the stage and kiss. In front of everyone!"

“I’m never against an idea that involves kissing you. But, Clodagh, your parents will be there...”

“I’ve always been better at showing rather than telling. We need to follow up tonight though, Erin!”

“We do. This was just step one. That’s a great step two though”

They both lay back down on the bed, limbs entangled. Erin knew the rainbow-lit tower won’t last long, but the memory of this moment will stick with her forever.

By Pen name: Camellia Star

Journey to Pride

When I think about how I got here and the direction my life has taken, I can think back to certain points, a key one being letting go of my voiceless self and slowly but surely living authentically and true to myself. This is a story of letting go, refusing to continue in a harmful cycle, and learning to love yourself.

It seemed so long ago now, but there was a time when being false came naturally & not knowing what was missing. A time I vividly remember being both figuratively and literally voiceless was at a funeral, and the period leading up to it. You see, a notion of death was all I had. Mam and Dad did discuss such matters but it wasn't really understood until I was pelted in the face with it.

Roughly speaking, I saw it at the time as something to curse at, to shout & scream. None of these options presented themselves however, when I experienced this for the first time I could not accept the reality of death. So I did something at the time I now realise that wasn't healthy, which was to retreat internally as a coping mechanism. This resulted in my inability to speak due to shock & not wanting to take up space. I would only later realise, through differing experiences, that this too was a form of harm. Grief is absolute and can take on many forms.

Through this experience, I found strength through music and began to discover, or rediscover in some cases, the joys of having eclectic tastes. From Moonlight Sonata to Spice up your life and various other creatives, I found there can be many aspects to voice, not all of which involve speech or language. It can also be through art, song, movement and expression.

Channeling the grief through writing helped my expression as a beginning. Having Paddy & Maragret for parents helped too. If Maragret was the warm beacon with an occasionally quirky turn of phrase, then Paddy absolutely was someone who nurtured anything I wished to do, despite being away with the fairies at times. It was probably a way of cultivating a sense of fun or daftness in me and my siblings, Stephen and Brian.

Brian would yell "Barry" at me to get a reaction, amongst many tricks used to get a reaction, which I usually fell for. Stephen would just laugh in the background & let the eejits play like cats and dogs. Ah sure, I was amazed the same trolliness I'd expect from these two would also inform how I would learn to live proudly and openly without shame.

It's very telling that despite the voice through music I found, I was not musically inclined in the slightest. Think of the acts they put on reality tv shows that are clearly there for the laugh not talent & they would be Madonna next to me. But sure, I didn't care one iota as it was more about expression and fun for me.

There's plenty of Lady Gaga's and Adam Lambert's so I felt ah sure start with loving the craft first & talent can come later. I of course used my "talent" to troll my brothers right back. That's where I learned what patience looked like as Paddy and Maragret encouraged this, despite my sounds akin to if mangled cats & dying squirrels decided to make music, at least in the beginning.

A great friend, Violet, decided to gently steer me to writing lyrics and poems instead. Banter was common between the two of us and mercilessly took the piss out of each other. Honestly, it was a good safe as I found this outlet helped more in finding what was missing. When writing began, a few themes always seemed to come out through this, which included the need to escape, being stuck in a void & unable to find light and other such topics. Naturally at first I figured this is just the type of writing I seem to do. It was later that I realised that maybe more lies beneath the surface.

To be fair, it's a tricky process to discover all of these facets of oneself as it takes time. I always knew I was different somehow but couldn't quite figure it out for a long time. So a favourite of mine is to bounce ideas off others, although I felt burdensome at times when I didn't understand that the ones that truly care will lend an ear. That's what Brian was for me.

Despite Arguing a fair bit & sibling stuff and everything, I was quick to turn to him as the kind of brother Brian was that we would take the piss out of one another. Brian also is the kind who would gladly stand up for me to the point that I would worry for anyone on the receiving end. To be fair, it was only when I would be shamed, bullied, isolated or picked on. Suffice to say it slowly gave me the space to develop a thick skin. It would especially come in handy once I knew something that I was not ready to handle.

For I feared not, the coming out so much as the silence was slowly eating away at me, but the rejection from my family would have destroyed me. This was when gay rights were not openly discussed & it was harder to find your people. It was through my writing and music that I was able to contextualise what made me different but also beautiful. It also helped inform how I would tell my loved ones.

So telling Brian came in an unexpected way, but not for the reasons you'd think. I began that conversation and all the while, I could hear music internally screaming, begging like two sides for different things.

"Why must you say it, things are grand how they are

If that was so, then I would be close not far

So tell me this I must know, what will you do

I don't know but keeping this in is killing me

So I will not suffer in silence anymore

For anything is better than this".

"Oh don't be so harsh, it's not so bad

Saying silent means no change & we know how you are about it,

But then coming out means you can never go back

So what, anything is better than this

I cannot go back, for I could never forgive myself for living a lie".

During the conversation, I only just about managed to croak out about a tiny bit of what I was going to say before Brian chipped in saying learning the Riverdance steps for Pride was a dead giveaway. I was so taken aback that I couldn't remember the rest other than saying he knows where to go for camp lessons now, in a loving manner.

Well that was unexpected, I was thinking to myself, when he pointed out that there was more light from me, like a burden had slowly been lifted. For the first time in a long while, I cried, but not from sadness. It was more a deluge of relief, joy and laughter all at once. Of course, it led to more confusion from Brian but before he could say "Barry" like usual, I pointed out it was not from despair that I wept but rather happiness.

It's quite telling that after that experience, a while later I would take an upskilling course where I would find Violet grinning upon seeing me. "So how's my favourite rainbow" she remarked and I just had a little chuckle. I never had to come out as she always knew so it was an unspoken bond that way. Ah sure ya know how it is. This led to some new experiences within the course, including trying to pass off food poisoning as hungover, a singing unicorn we couldn't code right, to the annoyances of our classmates & learning the story of the travelling hat via a campy ghost romp & a drunk American, amongst other stories.

All of this I wouldn't change, for without Violet I wouldn't have experienced half the stuff as I was slightly on the shy side. So she encouraged me to try doing some dating apps if only to boost my confidence & I also decided to try music again as it had been a few years at that point. The dating aspect did help to take my mind off the course as it was stressful, even if I had mixed experiences on Grindr, Tinder & the like.

So among the dateastrophes, or dating horror stories, included someone who was never off their phone, someone who wanted to stream our date, a guy who would not stop talking like a baby & I wasn't forewarned, and someone who couldn't be honest about not wanting to be there. That isn't to say that all of them were bad. I learned a bit about anime, a guy danced to impress me, and even got a quick city break that I won't forget anytime soon. Sadly nothing long lasting but Violet knew it's what I needed, even if I couldn't see it initially.

Part of the fun was discovering myself and what I would accept and not put up with. It did give me the push to begin living more authentically even if it meant confronting some hard truths. Mostly making sure I didn't fall into the void again was key & having a date approach me in a manner that had major red flags, only for the eyes giving away their intentions did I manage to escape but suffice to say it screwed me up for a long while.

This is where both my siblings did a rare tag team I only learned later. Stephen made sure that I was ok and to not blame myself as anything could happen, whereas Brian found out I was not the first the date did this to, so I was lucky. Brian tracked down the guy & anonymously reported the person both to the authorities & also to other groups to warn them so something bad doesn't happen to anyone else.

Once again, I dived into music as a means to process except it was more cathartic this time around & slowly it helped to contextualise to me that I'm ok as I am, warts and all. Even my inner monologue slowly came around.

"What has happened, I do not see. For you have robbed me

I was once broken but now I won't believe

in the silence for I will break free

And I will not be angry, nor sad

For that gives you power, and I'd rather be happy and glad.

Those who use their power for ill intentions are cowards

As it only serves to draw back and cause me to flower.

So I will not give into fear, I won't accept hate

For that is more than you deserve, I will live my best life.

As time spent wasted on regret can be used to act instead".

I must have sung some of that aloud as Paddy and Maragret pretty much explicitly told me, I must tell my story as it will help people. Even through the sound of music will I slowly find my path in life. I even sounded not too bad for the first time in a long time, possibly ever.

This was their way of saying "Being gay is A-OK". At least that's how I read it. I believe that at the time, it was their best way of being an ally, even if I cringed a bit. It was nice though, being that music brought me closer to my loved ones, even if it's the unexpected way I used to come out sometimes, as a way to reduce my nervousness around it.

In conjunction with the confidence of music, I also learned to slowly not care about when people judged me as I figured if they had an opinion about my life, they can live it. That kept a lot of people quiet as I was sick of being called different names just for being myself, not different, not a freak, just myself. I decided why should I try to fit in when certain people will always find something to judge me for.

With this new me, I now had more banter my way from Stephen and Brian as they started calling me the gay Sam Smith, not once realising the irony of that statement, but it was funny to watch them learn from people at Pride when they accompanied me one year as allies to my fabulous campy self.

They would always be learning about LGBT culture & music, which made a welcome change for me. I would learn that it was another way to bond with Violet over as she liked to do short stories & poetry but also was into her music & was happy to be a sponge learning LGBT culture together.

There were no words to describe finding my voice in the community as I initially felt like an outsider looking in. This was probably my shyness taking over, but going to Pride awoke this sense of warmth and depth and community for whom I was grateful. Even when running into "the God Squad", I was surrounded by people who drowned that out with a message of love & we're better together than apart, affirming messages like that. It was needed given how much work I put in to bring myself to a place of stability and serenity.

It was at Pride I will never forget that someone told me, no matter who I am, there will always be someone who will love you for who you are, and you will love someone for who they are. They weren't talking about romantic love or platonic love, but something deeper. I saw it as not to give up on yourself and you will be seen by those most needed & also to be a beacon so you can help someone down the line. With that meant I gained a sort of armour and shield, for which I could use to bring hope to others and show them they're not alone.

" I gather slowly, but surely, the joy is within me

For you won't be left here, I bring you on this journey

Through the sadness I will be here to unburden to,
If you fall to pieces, I will be there to help you heal.
There is always a place for you here where you can soar
Without the need to cower in the shadows and fear
With this it is true to say you are beautiful my dear
I hope you hear this, for I wish nothing but happiness".

Given that it takes bravery to live authentically, I made it my mission to be an example to others once I could love myself as a certain icon in the LGBT scene would say. For this, I found a few ways to ensure that there would be less nervousness. For one, I learned that a certain amount of metaphorically killing with kindness is something that worked for me. I was told once "gays can't do anything" and I responded "Does that mean no one is happy, because I must be the only gay one so". Another way is to be able to defend yourself as a means of confidence building but also so you find your voice. The most important one of all though is to use your voice, whatever method works, as there's people who cannot stand up for themselves so we use our voice to stand with those that can't.

As a result I decided to take up a form of self defence that uses dance as well called Capoeira as this Barry loves anything creative or expressive but also realised that sometimes being proactive is necessary along with trying something new. For this was one of my confidence building tools so I could take some power back. In my own way, I was answering back the bigot with "well this gay can defend himself, so you know". Stephen must have come to this differently as I figured he heard about it & only got the dance part & thought he'd be learning how to move like the Vengaboys. He was in for a rude awakening as I had trained for a while by the time he decided to do this.

I encouraged it but Stephen wasn't exactly what I'd call the most confrontational person so I couldn't laugh for once as he was trying in earnest to learn Capoeira. I felt after the hell I went through a while back, it was my turn to support him as best I could as thanks. It was appreciated and gave it a fair shake. After a well deserved effort, he had enough as it was not for him but Stephen turning up even if it wasn't initially to support me meant a lot and it became a way he was proud of me in a prideful way, though he didn't realise this for a long time.

After sometime slowly building myself up again, I felt I wanted to attempt music & specifically singing again. The idea was twofold, looking back on it. The first part was to put into practice that it is important to use your voice in whatever way you can. This was so that even if physically it's impossible to be there for someone, my hope was to at least have some words that would bring tranquility to whoever listened. The other reason was to say to those who needed to hear it that they are seen, they are loved, and they bring light by existing. I know, amongst other things, music literally saved my life so I wished to be that for others.

"When you feel nothing but the darkness and it feels like you have nowhere to turn,
There is always a way out, even if right now the void is all you know
If you are in sorrow, then I reach out for you,
For I will be your shining light so you can see your own brightness.
I will not abandon you for you too are precious
and I say to those that would want you gone,
you are not welcome, for everyone deserves happiness and joy
not only a select few, for else if this is true, we begin anew.

I will see you through your darkest days,

And if you wish to cry then I'll still be here when you find your smile again".

Given the new perspective I now carried, I believe it was around then that Violet decided that she too could share some of her creative pursuits, such as the poetry, raps and short stories as she was instrumental in getting me to a place that could feel like speaking out would benefit not just myself. She mentioned at one point to me about ripples in a pond when saying you don't know what can happen by taking this step. I thought this was a beautiful way to emphasise a journey undertaken, & I realised then this was her way of getting through to me at my lowest.

It was now my turn to do the same as best I could even if it would be complicated. While I was thinking of how to accomplish this, she approached me with an intriguing idea. It was proposed that we team up on creative pursuits separate from what we got up to in our course. This took me aback slightly as I had no idea that singing was something that was a passion of hers. I knew music was important to Violet, but it was more eclectic tastes that were instrumental parts, or so I thought. After a bit of back and fourth, we decided together that we can attempt to form a duo for music.

It was comical really, forming a duo with my close friend as I never would have expected it but I suppose its one of these things whereby nothing ventured nothing gained really does apply. It was also a way to honour the younger Barry when I could not speak due to grief & other factors at the time. So it was a case of honing our craft and figuring out what styles suit what we can do. Various different types of musical facets were tried, from classical to dance to rock & through this process, we laughed ourselves silly.

We did eventually land on a style that suited both of us & the dynamics of a song. At this point, I must have forgotten that I had said to my family or maybe Violet told them, but all of our family heard us while we were practicing & it must have been my confidence building or the encouragement or maybe taking the drag performer words to heart but I didn't feel shame upon them hearing me.

Merely seeing the different emotions around me spoke volumes as to the progress I have made over time. There were even some family members who were crying the type of crying I did when coming out to Brian, and I maybe have seen some of these people cry only a handful of times.

At this point, it became clear that even if it doesn't become something we become professionals at, we could still have some fun with it as you only live once and all that. So Brian found us an open mic night where we would get to try for ourselves in front of an audience our musical styles.

Rather cheekily, Brian left out a particular important bit which was both hilarious and heartwarming while simultaneously being what the hell. For you see, it wasn't just any old mic night, but a costume LGBT themed which I only learned the day of the mic night.

So you can imagine that I was in a panic as I didn't even think about any of that but it meant that I would be surrounded by my community at least & Brian knew I'd back out had I known beforehand so, in his own way, he was helping. In the end, me & Violet went with a country music goth mesh up that didn't betray the type of song we were going to do.

Now before you get on stage, some performers get nervous & others overthink it. We were definitely a puddle of nerves but then, some of our families and friends had banners to cheer us on. I dunno if it helped or not but we would be on now or never as it was too late to back out at this point.

"I look out at this crowd and I can say I found my people,
This is for the love ye have shown us,
So I give it back in spades, and now can say im not afraid
And the lives we live, I thank everyone for those before,
And those that will come after, for we draw strength from you
So to those that would be unsure or not ready
We say to welcome you through those open doors whenever you're ready
For that is a promise well kept and don't ever feel ashamed
As everyone is on this journey, so know to reach out & say I'm OK".

Regardless of how I started on this journey of being unsure & staying in shadows, I never would have imagined in my wildest dreams that I would be proudly singing publicly & proudly as a member of the LGBT community, never mind creating different narratives through writing, singing and expressing it without any hint of shame. It was as much for the scared child who was me who needed a hug & be told it would be OK as much as it was for my community.

With all of this on my mind, I don't really remember much of the reception me & Violet received as I was so overcome with euphoria, heart bubbling warmth, tears & pride and many other feelings. Brian & Violet eventually snapped me back to reality to join in the celebrations of completing one of my first public singing nights as a proud gay man.

Rather than panic or overthink about what was to come, I just decided it was OK to live in the moment at least for now. The future could wait & all of us would walk forward together. This was a journey undertaken. I didn't know if this journey would end at the bar, or if it was just the beginning.

By JJ Russ

Othered by Myself: A Personal Essay

It's funny how things can make perfect sense one day that would have been unthinkable before: the way that you can realise and integrate a piece of information into your worldview, and your view of yourself, in a way that explains a lot of things you might never have tried to have explained, but that is also something that, for a long time, you had never let yourself think about.

This is a bit of a roundabout way for me to say that it took a while for me to realise I was bisexual (or pansexual: I don't mind which of these words gets used to label my sexuality, honestly), but that, when it did happen, it happened suddenly, without me being presented with any new information about myself. I was just putting together what had already been there: what had always been there.

One of the main blocks to me figuring out something about myself that, quite frankly, is pretty obvious to me in hindsight was the way that I had been conditioned (by society, family, peers, and so on) to 'other' queer people. I'm speaking as a guy born in the 2000s when I say this, for context. Even in that era of liberal values, and tolerance, and acceptance (relative to what many, many previous generations had to go through), I'd contest that queerness wasn't considered as something part of the norm. It was something exceptionalised, something that had to be explained to people, and not something that was expected to be understood organically by the average person (whoever "the average person" is meant to be). Particularly when it comes to media, the cultural landscape of films and books and, well, everything else is generally concerned with 'normal' stories about heterosexual cisgender endosex people and the lives they lead without focusing on anything outside of that limited framework, and in those cases whenever a story with a scope that is a bit wider presents itself, what tends to happen is that it is only seen through the lens of being an LGBT story, without an acknowledgement that stories like that are just as normal and relevant as every other.

I understand that both the recognition and platforming of stories about queer experiences specifically are important, given that the industries which produce media and which decide which forms of artwork are valid have long excluded minorities and works relating to their experiences, and that you can't immediately go from a situation of systemic discrimination to one where everyone is at full parity given the ways our society is structured, and I support efforts to highlight marginalised creators and their art, and I also understand that I'm currently taking part in a competition that is specifically about doing this, but

I still think that the way stories about queer people are generally framed does lead to a certain othering of them and their experiences.

Is it really that surprising that, for some people, this context would lead to them refusing to face any facts that would lead them to acknowledge that they are a part of that 'other,' as a result of having internalised society's general framework for viewing minorities?

I can say that this is what happened to me, and that this mindset did leave me feeling a consistent expectation that it just wouldn't be right for me to see myself as belonging to what I was taught to view as an outgroup.

Looking back, one of the things that I think would have been most important for me to expand beyond that outlook would have been to find a community that would give its queer members a voice in how they wanted to talk about and define themselves in ways that wider society generally doesn't let them do. Due to living in a small enough town in the West of Ireland during my childhood, I wouldn't get much of a chance for this to happen until I became an adult, and due to the fact that I was born in 2002 it just so happened that my adulthood began in pretty unfortunate circumstances: I turned eighteen in the same year that the country as a whole became locked down due to the coronavirus pandemic.

There went my chances at finding an in-person community that would be able to change the mindset I was conditioned into having.

However, as so many people did during that year, I was able to get some kind of substitute for community through the internet.

Through a highly specific series of shifts between various online communities, I eventually managed to stumble into a vocally queer-accepting lefty internet space, without even being on the lookout for one in the first place. It was rather significant for me because it was the first place where I regularly saw members of the LGBTQIA+

community express themselves naturally and without any filter rather than having to see them through the lens imposed by mainstream media.

That by itself didn't prove to be enough for me to overcome any internalised bigotry I may have had with regards to myself, but I do really want to give my thanks to people who spend their time working to create accepting communities, whether those are online or in person; I can say from personal experience that you change lives.

I also found that the media I engaged with (especially the books I read) were crucial in my own personal journey to figuring myself out. In particular, I want to describe my experiences with one specific book: *I'm Sorry You Feel That Way*, written by Rebecca Wait.

My first encounter with this book was through a book club that, at the time (late 2023), I had only recently joined at my local library, and I picked the book up with no particular idea of what to expect. It turned out, however, that I would end up relating to the main character of this book more than I ever had to any character I'd ever previously seen portrayed in any story. Not to go into too much detail on either the book's plot or my own life, but the narrative is primarily about Alice who, as both a teenager and an adult, has to find her own path in life in the United Kingdom in the 2010s and 2020s while navigating the relationships she holds with each member of her family. While, naturally, her life isn't an exact reflection of mine (she is a fictional character, after all), I related to many aspects of her character due to the similarity of her personality to mine and the ways that many of her family members bore some resemblance to my own.

However, one important, if understated, part of the book is its queerness, even if it is approached in an unusual way: the main character of the book, Alice, is attracted to other women, but this is only made clear to the reader (and to Alice herself) right at the end of the book, right before the book's epilogue. While there's certainly some foreshadowing, it's supposed to come as a surprise both to the reader and to the characters of the book.

I came away from that meeting of the book club mainly feeling happy that I'd found a book that I'd resonated with. Alice's story, including how it ended, did, however, stick with me.

I think it was important to me that I found a character who I related to very strongly and who ended up being queer, and possibly even bisexual. However, that also was not enough for me to end up figuring out the truth about myself.

In addition to experiencing art created by others, one potent way of realising and revealing things about yourself is to engage in creating your own art. Not every artist will always fully understand their own motivations for creating their work, and analysis of your reactions to your own art can deepen your understanding of yourself at times. One of my absolute favourite films, *Never Look Away* (which is very loosely based on the life of German artist Gerhard Richter) deals with the unknowability of an artist's own work even to the artist, and how the main character of that film was not consciously aware of what was really inspiring his creations, without in any way lessening how personal his art was for him.

My own instance of this sort of "oh, so that's why I did it that way" experience is hardly as grandiose or dramatic as that depicted in *Never Look Away*; rather, it's an internet shitpost fan edit of a videogame character with a romantic song by the band Muse playing in the background. However, despite its unassuming nature I do think that that time was a meaningful moment in my life, and I want to lay out a bit of context for it.

There's this videogame called *Immortality* that released in 2022. The basic premise of the videogame is that you are playing as someone who is watching three films, with the story being presented in the form of clips, presented in random order, from various stages of the behind-the-scenes process behind those films, from table reads to dress rehearsals to 'actual' takes. It's all filmed with real actors on sets using cameras, unlike most videogames, which tend to use computer-generated graphics. Quite frankly, there's a ridiculous amount of effort put into the creation of this game: the developers could have actually produced three different films with the amount of footage they had to shoot, but instead they chose to release a single videogame about watching three different films. In case that sounds like a bizarre idea for a videogame, it's because it is, although that medium is used as a vehicle for a bunch of even weirder ideas sometimes.

Anyway, when I was playing *Immortality*, the gameplay would mainly consist of finding a new scene from one of the films, trying to figure out how it plays out in the context of the plot, and then rewatching scenes that I'd identify as taking place before and after it to see if my theories made any sense. Over the course of a single playthrough, I ended up watching each scene from the films multiple times and in various different orders. Repeated viewings got

me to pay attention to the smaller details in each clip as well as the broader details of the plot: the actors' mannerisms, their intonation as they spoke each line, the ways that their performance might change over the course of the (fictional) process of filming a scene. There was one character in particular, the male co-lead in one of the films, who particularly caught my eye. In every scene he was in, I would remember aspects of his performance and anticipate them in advance, like: "this is the rooftop scene, which means he's about to do that stupid thing where he opens his mouth into an 'o' . . . THERE IT IS, HE DID THAT STUPID THING WHERE HE OPENS HIS MOUTH INTO AN 'O'". Something about watching this particular character made me feel happy, especially when the game would present me with footage of this character that I hadn't seen before.

What had happened, of course, was that I had developed a crush on him. Not that I knew it at the time, as a result of my internalised attitudes with regards to my sexuality.

I was so smitten by this man that I decided to perform the classic internet ritual for broadcasting to the world as a whole that I liked this character: I cut together a little video of clips of the character that I particularly enjoyed set to unrelated music (in what I thought at the time was a completely heterosexual way, of course). In a choice that happens to be dripping with irony when looked back on in hindsight, the song I used was 'Undisclosed Desires' by Muse.

By this point, I've described the fact that I joined accepting communities, the ways that I had engaged with queer art that felt relevant to my life, and how I also happened to create art with very heavy homoerotic undertones. Surely, that's the end of the essay, right? I put the pieces together and figured everything out about myself and stopped my habit of othering LGBTQIA+ identities as something that would not be applicable to me personally?

Well, not quite.

There was one more ingredient necessary, one that is rather easy to name but very hard to describe or quantify.

It was *time*.

I find that, when it comes to some of the major realisations I've had in my life, they didn't usually come after I'd been presented with a conclusive data point that shifted the balance of probabilities to a position that was different from what I held before. I don't think that my brain reacts to the world using rationality and logic only, and I'm very doubtful of people who claim that theirs do. I'm subject to a wide range of biases that distort the way I process my experiences and surroundings, and it does take time to work through a lot of them.

One of my favourite books is a novel called Nevada. This book was the debut novel of author Imogen Binnie, and it also remains her only published book to date. The second half of the book's story centres around a character who is revealed to be trans to the reader, but by the time the story wraps up the character still hasn't accepted and internalised that fact. In the book's afterword, the author specifies that one of the messages she wanted to have come across in the book was that "It takes as long as it takes to figure out what you need to figure out—and to figure out what you need to do about it". I also happened to read this book and that quote while I was still in denial about my sexuality, but I was able to recognise, even at the time, that a lot of the story's themes hit me hard.

And when the time eventually came for me to figure out what I needed to figure out, it didn't seem like it was a special occasion. From what I remember, I reached my breakthrough at about 6.55am on the 22nd of November 2023, while on my way to the train station to go to work as part of my morning commute. I think, actually, that I might have just been passing the local post office then. I don't know why it happened at that moment, other than the fact that it must have been the right moment for me, for whatever reason. Regardless of why that moment came about, I do think it was important for me, in that moment, to be able to remember the effect the ending of I'm Sorry You Feel That Way had on me and to reflect on the fact that I had made a romantic fan edit of a male videogame character as some sort of 'confirmation' that my newfound realisation was correct.

Despite the fact I've read quite a few real and fictional accounts of people coming out to themselves, the most I've ever identified with any story of self-realisation has nothing to do with any sort of queer identity. It comes in C.S. Lewis's autobiographical book *Surprised by Joy*, which describes the author's journey to becoming a Christian:

I was going up Headington Hill on the top of a bus. Without words and (I think) almost without images, a fact about myself was somehow presented to me. I became aware that I was holding something at bay, or shutting something out. Or, if you like, that I was wearing some stiff clothing, like corsets, or even a suit of armour, as if I were a lobster. I

felt myself being, there and then, given a free choice. I could open the door or keep it shut; I could unbuckle the armour or keep it on. Neither choice was presented as a duty; no threat or promise was attached to either, though I knew that to open the door or to take off the corslet meant the incalculable. The choice appeared to be momentous but it was also strangely unemotional. I was moved by no desires or fears. In a sense I was not moved by anything. I chose to open, to unbuckle, to loosen the rein. I say 'I chose,' yet it did not really seem possible to do the opposite. On the other hand, I was aware of no motives. You could argue that I was not a free agent, but I am inclined to think that this came nearer to being a perfectly free act than most that I have ever done. Necessity may not be the opposite of freedom, and perhaps a man is most free when, instead of producing motives, he could only say, 'I am what I do.'

While the exact realisation that he had in this moment is deliberately kept vague in the book, I find that I relate to a lot of the specifics that he describes: the mundanity of the occasion, the sense of location, and the mystery of the choice of moment. When all the pieces are waiting to fall into place and the only thing preventing that from happening is that it's not the right time, there's no way to tell when or why the right time will come.

Ultimately, the factors that led me to getting a greater understanding of myself can hardly be said to be straightforward, predictable or logical. The key events that were involved seemed to be rather arbitrary, and sometimes I look back and wonder what my life would look like today if any of them had managed to pass me by. However, this was the path that my personal journey took, and I can say that I am proud both of it and of who I am today.

By Daniel Thistlethwaite