

I am a drag queen, not to be confused with transgender. A drag queen is a person, usually male, who uses drag clothing and makeup to imitate and often exaggerate female gender signifiers and gender roles for entertainment purposes. Historically, drag queens have usually been gay men, and have been a part of gay culture. My life is like everyone else's, and I don't understand why I'm so villainized... by random people passing by... by my family... by my own community. You'll hear a lot about how gays are judged by society, and indeed they are.

However, we hear very little about how the gay community treats its own. I kept wondering what it means to be a drag queen, I am just a gay boy with a normal life. I am not a performer. Being a drag queen is not always comfortable either. I've undergone cosmetic procedures to feminize my face since makeup and contour weren't good enough for me and made me always still see myself as a man in a wig. At my shows I've gotten into the habit of talking about how drag isn't something evil or something to be hated on. We are simply people and I hate that I am seen differently. Also in my shows, I like to talk about the fascinating use of a common household items, explaining that drag queens use duct tape to achieve many things, including cleavage and tucking, which if you know, you know...

After my shows I like to stick around for a bit and enjoy the crowd of other performers and Queers enjoying their time. This is a place for us to feel safe. It is our other home where we are around people like us and know we're safe in each other's company.

This was my safe place until an intimidating male walked in one night with his hood up and his hands in his pockets. Obviously, it caught my attention and sent worry into my mind as I intensely watched the others glide around the dance floor, waving in between the Queer people jumping around and dancing with each other. I watched the stranger's eyebrows narrow as he started to shove in between the others to space them apart, by this point I had started to follow slightly along, stalking the other and his moves as he started to make his way to the back of the stage. I wondered if he was a performer in a bad mood, so I backed off a little to let them perform until I heard a scream.

The one thing I was dreading hearing. The screaming only multiplied from one to the rest of the cast who were now running out of the backroom and into the crowd, which was also trying to flee the building. More men came in with bats, and knives, blocking the doors. Some people ran out the fire exit, while some smashed windows and leapt out them. Seeing the glass, and blood, and bodies on the floor was traumatic. We just wanted to feel safe, but someone had let our safe place slip in public and of course, with our luck, some of the most homophobic men had overheard and followed them here and waited for the perfect moment. A moment where people were tipsy, and disorientated. They used that moment to attack because they knew that they couldn't fight back.

I was in shock watching the others run, and scream, and try to fight back only to be received with a harsh swing of the bat and a quick slice of a knife. I locked eyes with one of the masked men and he started to make his way towards me, and I was frozen, I couldn't move. Luckily, one of the patrons had grabbed me by the arm and started running dragging me beside them which

made me snap out of it. I began running in my 9-inch hot pink heels and we ran to the backroom. We froze, three of our queens had been stabbed and bruised by the man earlier and I felt my stomach sink knowing this was my fault. I should have spoken up or stopped the man who was obviously not here for safety, or community. He was here for the opposite: he wanted to tear down our queer community, he wanted us to all go back to 'normal' and stop doing drag and fit the gender stereotypes.

I gulped as we both silently cried but once we heard the heavy booted man approaching, I grabbed the patron's hand and ran towards our closet. We hid in our little bunker we had in the floor, where we usually went for a smoke, but this time we had to hide in there. It was a little trap door in the floor that led to a small room no bigger than a closet so the two of us fit fine, we slapped our hands over our mouths keeping our breathing quiet as silent tears fell as we listened out to the footsteps above us...

We heard them laugh and beat the already deceased queens for about half an hour for some sick and twisted reason, the smell of blood was so putrid, but we had to deal with the smell since they were seeping into the wooded floorboards, when we were just about to give ourselves up, we heard the sirens, those blessed sirens. It made the men run to the front of the building to have a fight with the police I'd guess, but the patron and I didn't even blink before we opened the hatch climbing out and running to the fire exit in the backroom running to the alleyway the quickest my 9-inch heels could go and the quickest this 5'6 males short legs could carry him.

We ran behind a dumpster and collapsed to our knees as reality hit us... we just escaped a mass murder and a mass hate crime. We sat there sobbing until we heard a loud explosion and the sudden heat of a fire, and the smell of smoke hit our noses. We instantly knew what happened. Our safe space was no longer safe or ours, it was gone, our home away from home was gone as well as our second family is gone the bodies were still in there... I got up and ran to the police and the ambulance that had arrived and told them about the bodies in there which they didn't do anything about since they were "already passed away". They apparently didn't need to retrieve them, nor did the police care for the LGBTQ+ community, and actively didn't care for our wellbeing. The reality of this happening isn't shocking to society, we are just outcasts that's why we must fight to make our presence known! My heart was shattered but not my spirit, not my identity, not my drag persona, not my attraction to the same sex. I am still just a gay boy. **I am still a human.**

(This is inspired by the Upstairs Lounge arson attack, Stonewall riots and the basic violence that queers and drag queens get.)