

The Great Gay Abyss
By Danielle Ariano

One drunken night during my senior year of college in the bathroom of some stranger's dorm room, I admitted to myself that I was gay. It wasn't crazy or dramatic. I didn't curse or smash my head on the mirror or pound my fists. I just stood there staring as I let the information settle over me. It was a little like pulling money out of a pair of pants that I hadn't worn in a while—a surprise and not a surprise all at once

People in line outside banged on the door and told me to hurry it up, but I just stood looking at myself in the mirror trying to make sense of how drunk I felt but how sober I appeared. “You're gay.” I told the reflection. “*You are gay.*”

Part of me couldn't believe it and yet, at the same time it felt like if I turned to look back at my history I would see a trail of breadcrumbs leading right up to this moment—the super close friendships with a string of girls in grade school and high school that had mirrored relationships right down to the dramatic breakup, the crush I had on one of the girls on my rec soccer team, the dream I'd had about kissing one of my college dorm neighbors that caused me to act shy and nervous around her.

Okay, I can handle this, I thought, *I can handle this.* But immediately following that thought came another, *I will never tell this to anyone, I will live with this secret until I die.* Later that night at a bar, I found a boy from the Naval Academy and made out with him on the dance floor.

I was determined to be the straightest gay person anyone had ever met. *Nobody needs to know* became my mantra and I continued to tell myself this for the next few months, even as I developed my first real girl crush, and even as that crush quickly became the only person I wanted to spend time with. I convinced myself that none of it had anything to do with my being gay and even if it did, *nobody needed to know*.

When I started to blow off some of my roommates' invitations to go out to the bars, opting instead to go over to my new crush's room to watch *Dawson's Creek*, I reasoned that I just really, *really* loved that show. And when my crush and I started watching T.V. while cuddled up on her bed, I figured that it was *such* a tiny college dorm room, that the bed was the only place to sit other than that uncomfortable desk chair. As for the cuddling, well, it was cold in there.

My roommates noticed my mounting absence.

"Are you okay?" they asked. "We feel like we never see you."

"Oh yeah, fine, fine, just crazy with schoolwork."

I didn't even consider telling them the truth. My roommates were basketball players and over the years we'd had countless conversations speculating about the sexuality of their coach. Was she or wasn't she? We'd made bets, analyzed bits of conversation we'd overheard, dissected her clothes, her shoes, her haircut and her walk. We weren't mean-spirited about the issue, but I remembered, quite clearly, the way that many of the girls wrinkled their noses in disgust at the prospect. Besides that, it wasn't like I was acting on my newly discovered sexuality, so really there was nothing to tell. End of story.

When I graduated from college a few months later and moved to the city, it felt like I'd finally broken through the surface after being held under water for a long period. I hadn't realized how suffocated I felt on my small conservative campus until I was living in a much more open environment. The more I met people out in the big bad city, the more I realized that my pact with myself was not only absurdly ridiculous, but impossible to continue. Most of this realization was fueled by an overwhelming schoolgirl crush I developed on the manager at the restaurant where I was waiting tables. Though she was technically straight, she didn't mind flirting with me—telling me that I looked pretty, pushing my hair out of my eyes, complimenting a tank top I was wearing while running her finger along its scoop neck.

One drunken night after the bars closed she put her hand on my knee and said, “You want to kiss me, don't you?” in a way that was much less of a question than a statement of the obvious. I held my breath and nodded my head just barely. I wasn't sure what was going to happen next. She was cruel enough that she could've started laughing and gotten up from the couch, but instead she leaned in and kissed me. Any doubts that I might have had about whether I would like kissing a woman disappeared in that moment.

After that I knew there could be no turning back, so I told myself that it wouldn't hurt to see the sights a bit, in secret, of course. So slowly, I began to navigate the ins and outs of the Baltimore gay scene, checking out bars, going on my first girl date and meeting a few lesbian friends with whom I began playing touch football with every Sunday. I was so busy exploring my new sexuality, while simultaneously remaining closeted that I rarely saw any of my old college friends, which only further intensified the fissure in our friendships. When they called to get together, I was “busy” and on the rare

occasions we did hang out, I felt like everything out of my mouth was a lie. Simple questions caused me great angst.

Them: How are you?

Me: Fine. *If by fine I meant that I was as excitable as a teenage boy.*

Them: What's new?

Me: Oh, nothing. *If, by nothing, I meant that I had lost my virginity—the very thing to which I had clung all throughout college—and that I'd lost it to a girl.*

Them: Are you seeing anyone?

Me: Oh no, no one. *No one in particular, only Ryn then Heather then Brigid*

Given the distance that had developed amongst us, I was surprised when I got an email from one of the girls, inviting me to go in on a house for the summer in Dewey Beach, Delaware. I didn't know much about Dewey other than the fact that it was only about a mile away from the gay mecca of Rehoboth, but that was enough for me. Without thinking about how I would handle this potentially awkward situation, I replied that hell yes I wanted a spot in the house.

This snap decision landed me in a mixed gendered house full of straight, white, fairly conservative people who were primarily interested in going out, getting hammered and hooking up with members of the opposite sex. To be fair, I wholly shared those interests, with only one exception, but as it turned out, that difference was a big deal.

Somewhere between college graduation and the following summer, the straight world had lost all its appeal. When my housemates came down on Friday nights and invited me to “Taco Toss” I politely declined, all the while thinking that I might toss my tacos if I had to stand around getting drunk at a bar full of straighties. From the

perspective of my old roommates who lived in the house, it probably seemed that I'd become even more of an elusive, evasive, weirdo who never wanted to hang out with them and who dodged any questions that came her way about where she was going or where she'd been.

One night early in the summer, after ditching my roommates yet again, I left the Dewey party house and stood on the corner waiting for the free red bus, better known as the "Jolly Trolley", that ran between the two small beach towns. Early in the evening, families packed into the trolley on their way to Rehoboth's Funland, but as the night wore on it filled with drunks who loved to scream out the window or start sing-alongs as they made their way home from a night out.

When I got to Rehoboth, I steeled my nerves and walked into one of the lesbian bars. I took a stool a few seats down from a threesome of older women, ordered a Miller Light and sat huddled over the top of it, picking at the bottle's label. The place was pretty empty. Later in the summer I'd learn the ebb and flow of the lesbian bar scene: The Beach House, where I currently sat, only got busy after ten on the weekends. Most evenings kicked off at The Frogg Pond, unless of course, there was a Ladies Tea going on at The Renegade, which took precedence over all other lesbian events.

"Are you new around here?" The voice came from one of the older women. I looked up to see that I had peeled the entire label off of my beer.

"Uh, yeah," I said. All at once I was simultaneously relieved to have someone to talk to and full of anxiety that this woman might be hitting on me. She had a helmet of dark brown hair, a pretty face and a nice smile.

"I could tell. Where are you from?"

We chatted for a while and when she gathered that I was a freshly minted lesbian, her demeanor shifted more toward the motherly advice giver.

“Have you been to Gordon’s Pond?”

“No? Is that a bar?” I asked naively.

She rolled her eyes, grabbed a free tourist map of Rehoboth from a nearby stack and asked the bartender for a pen.

“It’s a beach,” she said as her pen began moving across the page. “All women.” I looked at the sheet where she was drawing a map. “You go all the way down First Street, follow it over the little bridge, keep going.”

When the pen stopped moving there was a perfect sketch of the route I was to take.

“All women?” I asked incredulously.

“All women. You really should go. It’d be good for you.”

I’d never imagined an all woman beach. Earlier that year I’d thought I’d died and gone to heaven when I attended my first Ladies Tea in Baltimore. It was not, as I’d envisioned, a bunch of women in funny hats sitting around sipping tea with their pinkies sticking out, it was simply a dance party for lesbians that usually started in the late afternoon or early evening. Hundreds of ladies came out for these parties and it was a revelation for me to see so many beautiful gay women in one place. My head had swiveled around and around all night long like I’d been possessed by an evil spirit.

The next day, I blew my roommates off once again and ventured over to Gordon’s Pond, which was in a State Park. I paid the entrance fee and drove into the parking lot,

grabbed my backpack and began walking over the large dune. What I saw when I got to the other side sent shivers down my spine. There were women everywhere.

There were young women with red solo cups dancing on the sand; there were black women, white women, old, fat women with mullets; there were beautiful women and women who wore sports bras in lieu of a bikini tops, there were women strolling down the beach hand in hand and women kissing in the ocean. There were tattooed, pierced women and plain-Jane women, women with families, women playing paddleball and even a group of athletic looking women in the middle of a serious game of tackle football. There were women with their shorts hiked up too high, women with rainbow umbrellas, manly women, feminine women, women in cowboy hats and baseball caps, women with shaved heads and women with long, flowing hair.

Holy shit, I thought, *I've found the promised land*. I was stunned that these women were *all* gay. And on that half-mile stretch of sand, there was nothing to hide, nothing to feel ashamed about. Being gay was normal. *Normal*. The idea was astounding. I still thought that the word lesbian sounded more like a disease than a term that ought to be used to describe a person's sexuality—but as I stood there, looking out at all of those women, I saw the promise of a possibility that one day I might be okay with who I was. When I walked out into the crowd that day and laid my towel down, part of me felt like I was home.

Once I'd discovered Gordon's Pond, I stopped spending even days with my Dewey Beach housemates. I went to the house to shower, change and sleep, but in the mornings I'd be gone before they were up and at night I'd do my best to stay out until after they'd all passed out. When we parted ways at the end of that summer, we walked

out of one another's lives, they to their, normal, straight world and me into the great gay
abyss.