

Disco Death Camps

by Gary Paul Kroening

October 21, 2000 — Anniversary of my mother's death

I know why I go out. I've known for a while now, and tonight — on the anniversary of my mother's death — I'm finally going to say it out loud.

I go out to the clubs already drunk, and then I drink more once I get there. The loud music, the blinking lights, the magnificent confusion of it all. I go because the clubs are the last place I remember seeing them — my friends, the ones AIDS took. The ones I outlived when I had no business doing so.

The clubs are my Auschwitz. They are where I lost everyone. Where their ghosts still live. I walk back into them, night after night, like a man returning to the scene of something he cannot name.

I drink because I believe — I have actually believed this — that if I drink enough, they will return. That if I stay long enough, lean into the noise long enough, push far enough into the blur, I will catch a glimpse of one of them in a hallway. That they will tap me on the shoulder and say *hello, Gary*. That somewhere inside the bottle is the feeling of when they were still alive.

But they won't come back. Not through a drink, not through a line of coke, not through any amount of noise or disorientation I can manufacture. They are gone — all of them — and I am the one left standing in the wreckage of their absence, trying to drink my way back to a world that no longer exists.

They are not going to call. Not going to write. Not going to visit.

I miss their smiles. Their cockiness. The specific way each of them moved through a room. Their messages on my answering machine — voices I would give anything to hear again. Their hugs, their kisses, their particular brand of courage. I miss drinking with them. I miss getting sober with them and falling back off the wagon with them and getting back up with them. I miss their lives. I miss being known by them.

I had believed that if I could reproduce the conditions — the same clubs, the same music, the same chemicals in the same combinations — that they might show up. That memory, pushed hard enough, becomes presence.

It doesn't. What I've been carrying instead is something heavier: a grief that looks, from the outside, like a good time. It is a down quilt soaked through with isolation and remorse. It is burdensome, and it is mine.

Here is the discovery, arriving late on a Saturday night with my mother dead one year and my friends dead longer:

I do not drink to forget them. I drink to remember them. The hangover is the only ritual I have left. It is my broken, self-destroying way of saying I was here, we were here, this mattered.

But they are history now. They died of AIDS, and I miss them, and the drinking is killing me in a different and slower way — and I cannot keep doing this. I cannot keep returning to the scene. I cannot keep trying to raise the dead with liquor and loud music and the desperate hope that grief, if felt hard enough, becomes reunion.

I was interrupted just now by the sound of footsteps upstairs.

My five-year-old nephew Zak has arrived — all energy and noise and complete indifference to my sorrow, the way only a child can be. He came in like weather. He is so alive. So unguarded. So entirely unconcerned with loss in the way that only someone who hasn't lost yet can be.

Looking at him, I understand something I couldn't reach on my own tonight.

He is what my friends were, once — before the world got to them. Before AIDS got to them. In him I can see what I've been mourning, and also what I've been missing: the fact that life did not stop. It kept making new people, new mornings, new chances to be present for something.

My friends are gone. That is the truth I've been drinking against, and it will still be true tomorrow. But Zak is here — bright and growing and completely unaware that he just walked into the middle of someone's reckoning.

I cannot bring them back. I can, however, stay alive long enough to be someone worth knowing. Someone who shows up sober. Someone who carries their memory not as a wound to reopen every weekend, but as evidence of a life fully lived in the company of people who loved without reservation, right up until they couldn't anymore.

That is the only tribute left to give them now.

That, and choosing to live.

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