

Stripping Down by Devin Dufour

TW/CW: Sexual Assault

Freshman orientation was hot, horrible, and exhausting. Even if I remembered nothing else, I will never forget taking turns with my roommate laying in front of the crappy oscillating fan we'd gotten from target on move-in day, sweat rolling off our bodies and slicking the torn-up wooden floor. When our heads were finally cool enough to form sentences, we complained about the droning lectures and awkward icebreakers that we'd sat through with the other hordes of excited-turned-jaded first-years. As the week trudged on, we started sharing our fan sessions with our other fellowees across the hall, and our complaining quickly shifted to gossip about the other first years and sharing stories about old high school loves, crushes, and hook ups. She was an open book, and I was notoriously loose-lipped in a way that didn't actually give anything away.

If I only remembered two things from orientation week, the second would be attending and hating the sexual assault assembly. Before going, we were reminded that if at any point during the assembly we felt uncomfortable and needed to gather space, we were more than welcome to leave. Something inside me let out a bitter laugh at those words; even if I needed to leave during the talk, there was no way to do so anonymously, and the eleven students who I'd known for less than a week would know far more about me than most of my closest friends.

In my fellow group, I was the only openly trans person and one of two out queer students; this wasn't abnormal or unexpected, but I already felt like an outsider in the space I so desperately wanted to call home. The week had been full of well-meaning but awkward and invasive questions about my gender, body, and sex life: at times I wondered if my new friends were trying to get to know me or just viewed me as a curiosity. The other queer students I'd met through online groups before move-in all seemed like theater gays or were committed to creating other kinds of drama, and I wasn't sure that I'd ever meet anyone that I could fully trust.

I'll admit that I entered orientation week guarded and distrusting, fearful that allowing myself to be fully open with these people would just lead to me getting hurt. There were a lot of things I was beyond excited for, but I leaned into the boredom I felt at speaker events and info sessions instead.

Here's the thing: this was not my first orientation. Two years prior, I'd been admitted to a residential magnet school and lived three hours from home for my junior and senior years of high school. The orientation had been similar, if a little shorter and peppered with a few more meaningless icebreakers. So when I came to Vassar, I was sure that I knew exactly what to expect from orientation. The problem, I've since figured out, was that my

first orientation conditioned me to understand this first week of college and kind, interested hallmates as threats.

I was sexually assaulted shortly after my high school orientation by one of my hallmates. There are a lot of things I could say about this, but I think the most important is that I have never said that to anyone who wasn't a trusted friend of mine.

Being a survivor affects your ability to form relationships of any kind, not just the kinds that involve sex. It's hard to trust strangers, mentors, friends, even family because you're terrified that accepting any kind of offering might result in a demand for return that you can't offer. You can't open up to anyone because your body and soul are already engulfed in shame and can't bear the risk of having that directed at you from another person, too. You become scared to ask for help when you need it because any display of vulnerability could be used against you. The only way you think you can possibly be safe is to be alone, and that's no way to live.

If I were to only remember three things from orientation, the third would be the campus activities fair. There weren't many orientation events that I was actually excited about, but I'd been looking forward to seeing all the orgs all week. But by Saturday afternoon, my fellow group had been beaten into a sweaty, brain-dead pulp, and they were too tired to brave the full force of the midday August sun. Scared to go alone, I trekked to Noyes circle with a friend's fellow group.

It was the activities fair that first pulled me from the hermit crab shell that I'd crawled into two years ago. Despite the biting heat and lingering anxieties, the org fair offered me a slough of pride pins and newfound hope in the form of Mads Ouellete. After accompanying my musically-inclined friend to the cursed aca-booths and dance org tables, I was gently steered in the direction of the TBD table. I couldn't make out the signs at their tables from afar but recognized the baby pinks and blues of the trans pride flag. Shy and nervous, I attempted to stealthily add my name to the email list and run without having to introduce myself, but Mads ensnared me in a conversation about gender, orientation, and Vassar life almost immediately.

For the first time that week, I had a conversation with someone that didn't feel like a dissection of my body and self. For the first time in months, opening up to someone new didn't feel like navigating a minefield.

"Do you like to perform?" They asked, and I shook my head, responding that while I have always loved watching theater, dance, and other kinds of performance art, I have major stage fright and am terrified of public speaking.

This didn't deter them in the slightest; instead their face broke into a conspiratorial grin as they ushered me to the other side of their tabling station. Instead of pride pins,

condoms, zines, and other queer merch, this side was adorned with lacy lingerie and artful posters.

“You should interview for Burlesque,” they said, launching into a detailed explanation of the orgs inner workings.

“But I’ve never done anything like this before. I don’t know how to dance or strip or anything! I barely even know what Burlesque is,” I responded, still skeptical but growing more intrigued by the minute.

Gently reassuring, they explained that almost none of the troupe members have any kind of experience when they join and that those who do are always more than happy to help wherever they can. They described the heavy focus on creating a sex-positive, body-positive space that allows members to reclaim autonomy through intimate connection rather than just being an alternative performance troupe.

If there was anything I needed at that point in time, it was a returned sense of body autonomy. Even the parts of me that were most in denial about needing help and healing knew this.

Hesitation gone, I signed up for the email list and wrote the time and date of the interest meeting on my forearm, committed to going in part because Rocky was one of the few buildings I knew I’d be able to find on my own.

When I finally left the Burlesque/TBD table, I realized that my friend had disappeared minutes before, but I couldn’t bring myself to be concerned. I knew there were spaces and people ready to welcome and support me, so long as I was willing to let them.

It’s been almost four years since I first approached the Burlesque table at the org fair, and it remains one of the best decisions I’ve made while at Vassar. Every Saturday that I’ve been on campus, Burlesque gathers, shares stories, holds performance workshops, and grows closer. I’ve laughed, cried, and bared my soul to the troupe countless times, and have learned more about myself in that space than nearly anywhere else. Burlesque is where I learned to be vulnerable again.

The first time I told someone that I was a survivor was when I signed up for a survivors-only affinity Burlesque routine. Nobody asked me to share anything; I had shared enough with the group just by acknowledging what had brought me into the space. It was here that I first really understood how non-linear healing can be. It was here that I learned just how much sharing a burden can lighten the heavy load of anguish.

I’ve performed in over two dozen different routines in over ten shows since first joining Burlesque. Sometimes, it feels like I’ve done it all: I’ve gone full nude, I’ve poured fruit juice all over my body, I’ve painted myself gold, I’ve gotten fake stomped on, and once I even pretended to be a priest who had a communion wafer strapped to his dick. But there’s no routine that’ll ever hold as dear a place in my heart as the survivor’s routine. That group

of five entirely changed the way I started to engage in burlesque spaces, and was the major catalyst that allowed me to finally tell my closest friend what had happened to me in junior year of high school. When I read a book about a particularly violent sexual assault for a class that ended up sending me into a depressive spiral later that spring, I was actually able to reach out to her and my routine members for support.

If you'd told college freshman me that this was the story I chose to share in a public exhibit my last spring at Vassar, they would've laughed in your face and then denied it all. Burlesque has made me unrecognizable to my former self. The relationships I have with people have dramatically changed, and my friends feel like they actually know me for once. I still hide behind walls of secrets and silence when I get scared, but now I let myself deconstruct them once I feel safe again. I still get nervous in dorm rooms and I still hate asking for help when I need it, but I know that I've improved.

Burlesque isn't the only community that's allowed me to grow and heal; time, friends, and lots of therapy have been just as life-changing. But Burlesque is the place where I find my healing to be most intricately bound up in the healing of the whole community. This year, I'm running the org with my co-president, and I've never been as invested in a leadership position like this. Together, we've pulled the org through the covid slump and have put on the first campus shows since Spring 2020. I've gotten to watch all of the members pour their hearts into the org and bring their visions to life in ways that feel like a perfect continuation of years past.

Things aren't perfect by any means; organizing the first fall showcase was a frenzied shit-show that barely came together in time, and there have been entire weeks where I've felt like a failure who's running the org into the ground. But even in our worst moments, the love and care that the troupe has for each other, for the intimacy of the spaces we create, and for the visions that we make reality have kept us afloat. Burlesque is nothing if not a giant support system of dedicated, talented, and capable people. Even the smallest, shyest first years are capable of growing into the formidable, loving, and empowering leader that Mads was to me, and that I hope I have been for them. But more importantly, I know that the org isn't what it is just because of the strong, supportive presidents that lead us, but rather because the relationships we form with one another uplift and bind together the entire community in mutual empowerment.