

4884 Words

Pride Charade

by Jada Thomas

A year ago, Nicole decided to come out as bisexual on National Coming Out Day. She wrote a long, poetic post on Facebook about coming to terms with her sexuality that got a measly 21 likes and a single comment from her mother that read: “So proud of you!” Pictures of her cat got more recognition. When she called her father to see if he had heard the news he said, “Baby, you do you, but I don’t wanna hear about your sex life. Focus on law school.” It felt anticlimactic. It could have gone badly. Everyone could have turned on her like she had feared. But no one cared, and somehow that felt worse. What she needed was a community of people who understood her.

Naturally, she joined Vanderbilt University’s Queer Coalition and went to every club meeting and mixer. They were in desperate need of a treasurer, or they risked losing official club status, and Nicole was more than happy to help. Her duties consisted of ordering pizza and collecting club dues. Since hardly anyone paid their dues she paid for the pizza out of pocket, and that was a big deal for her considering the state of her bank account. It only took her a couple weeks to remember most of the club members’ names, but there was one she didn’t catch. One guy would occasionally pop in to grab some pizza and leave without saying a word. He came to the Friday mixer and immediately stacked his plate with three slices of supreme pizza. He headed for the exit and Nicole intercepted him at the door.

“I know the meetings are kinda boring, but could you at least wait five minutes before running off with all our food?” Nicole asked with her arms crossed. She looked him up and down. He was shorter than her, with a dirty blonde buzz cut and green eyes.

“You must be new here.” He gently placed his hand on her back and ushered her out the door.

“Yeah, but—”

“I don’t know if you’ve noticed yet, but this club is like 90% straight allies. It’s only good for the free food,” he said matter-of-factly. The young man kept walking down the hall and Nicole followed.

“That food’s not free! I paid for it myself, you know. But if this is the ally club, where do the gays go?” Maybe there was a secret club for gays only. Who knew?

He laughed so hard he almost dropped his pizza. “Girl, are you even gay?”

“I’m bi.”

“Like *bi-bi*? Or *bi-curious*?” He slowed his pace a bit in anticipation of her answer.

“I’m actually bi! Are *you* even gay?” She couldn’t hide the exasperation in her voice.

“Yes, I was just asking...”

Nicole sucked her teeth and gave him the side-eye.

“Anyway, you’ll find queer people at queer parties. Thanks for the pizza, though.” He turned the corner and disappeared.

###

It wasn’t difficult for Nicole to find one of those queer parties. She thought it was some underground event you’d need a passcode to get in, but really all you needed to do was RSVP on Facebook and bring a six pack. She took an Uber to a small house on the fringes of Midtown. It

was nothing like the frat house mini mansions from her undergrad days. When she walked up to the house, she couldn't hear loud music from outside. The front door had a handwritten sign that read: *Come inside!* Nicole took a deep breath in and slowly opened the door. She saw about a dozen people in the living room. Some of them were huddled around the TV playing *Mario Kart*, but most of them were just chatting. She exhaled.

“Hey, you can set that on the counter in the kitchen.” One of the *Mario Kart* spectators noticed the six pack Nicole was carrying.

“Got it!” She made her way to the kitchen and set the case down with the others. A bottle of wine stood untouched on the edge of the counter. She twisted the cap off and poured herself a generous glass in a red solo cup. She heard music playing in another room, so she followed the 808 beats to its source. This side of the house had a totally different vibe from the rest of the party. A huge crowd gathered around a kiddie pool. Two fully nude women covered in slime wrestled each other inside the pool. The crowd cheered as one pinned the other down.

“Three. Two. One. We have a winner!”

Nicole didn't know what to make of what she was seeing.

“You really made it!” a voice shouted from behind her. She turned to see the pizza guy from the Queer Coalition.

“I don't know what's happening right now, but I like it.” Nicole barely looked at the guy. She was transfixed by the slimy chicks. The ladies struggled to get out of the pool without slipping.

“It's lube wrestling.”

“What?”

“Some lube company sponsored the party. The host didn’t know what to do with all that lube, so he used it for this.”

“Wow. That looks kinda fun.”

“You should go next!” The guy egged her on.

“No way! I’m not drunk enough to get naked in front of all these people.” Nicole took a huge swig from her cup.

“I never got your name. I’m Mike, by the way.”

“I’m Nicole.”

“You go by Nicki?”

“Nope. Just Nicole.” She watched as two well-chiseled men approached the pool.

“That one’s cute.” Mike raised his cup towards the pool.

“Who, the one with the tattoos?”

“I meant the redhead, but he’s hot too.”

###

Nicole didn’t expect her and Mike to start hanging out after the party. She thought he’d want nothing to do with her since she drank just a little too much wine and had to be escorted to the toilet. But he didn’t mind. He was just glad she wore her hair in a bun because he didn’t have to hold her hair back while she heaved. In just a few months, Mike’s role changed from designated driver to study buddy, to body double. Nicole could get stuff done faster when she had someone to keep her company, and Mike was always there to help. He visited Nicole’s apartment so often, her roommate only half-jokingly suggested he start paying rent.

“Almost done with your paper?” Mike asked. He sat across from Nicole at the dining room table.

“No. Not even close. But I’ll come back to it later.” She closed her laptop and pushed it away from her as if it were radioactive. “Tell me some good news.”

“I’m getting a dog!”

“Oh my god! Really?” Nicole’s eyes lit up.

“No.” Mike started laughing. Nicole threw a pencil at him, and he dodged it.

“Man, you really got my hopes up for a second.” She pouted.

Mike fidgeted with his phone in his hand. “I guess I do have something good to share... My brother’s getting married.”

Nicole’s eyes narrowed. “Stop playing!”

“No, really!”

###

It had been years since Nicole last went to a wedding, and no one in her family was up next. Her cousin on her dad’s side didn’t want to get married because it’s a patriarchal tradition. Her two other cousins on her mom’s side had been single for as long as she could remember. But the one wedding she went to was magical. Nicole didn’t consider herself to be the sentimental type but something about hearing a church organ echo and the old ladies beside her snuffle made her heart flutter. Watching the bride float down the aisle, radiating pure joy, moved her. She wanted to feel that warmth again and she couldn’t resist an open bar. So, when Mike asked *her* out of all his friends to go to his brother’s wedding she had to say yes.

“Thank God you’re coming with me. I love my parents, but I can’t be stuck with them alone in a cabin for three days. They’ll drive me crazy!” Mike rolled his eyes and sunk into the couch.

“Yeah, I got you. Wouldn’t want you to get cabin fever, right?” Nicole giggled. Mike smiled politely at her bad joke.

“And since you’ll be with me you won’t have to pay for the room, flight, or anything. My parents got it covered.”

“Oh, no. I can pay for my room and flight myself.” Nicole could use all the help she could get, but she was the type to feel guilty when people bought her \$5 shots at the club. An all-expenses paid trip to Gatlinburg would be a bit much.

Mike scoffed. “Girl, don’t worry about it. You’re doing me a solid. My mom would kill me if I let you pay, anyway.”

“I dunno…” Nicole took a sip of her Frappuccino.

“But what you need to be worried about is holding your liquor. No vomiting in front of my grandma at the reception, ok?”

Nicole laughed. “Alright. I’ll save it for the after party.”

###

It was the night before Nicole’s flight and her bedroom was a complete mess. All the drawers in the dresser were open with socks and jeans spilling out. She couldn’t walk in her closet without stepping on clothes that had fallen off the hangers. She reached for her short navy dress and held it up to the light.

This is conservative, right?

Nicole headed towards her bed, tiptoeing around the shoes and papers scattered across the floor. She gently laid the dress on the bed next to three brighter outfits. Then her phone rang. It was a video call from Mike.

“Nicole! You ready for tomorrow?” Mike asked. He already knew the answer to that question.

“I’m almost done packing,” Nicole said quietly. Truthfully, she had just started.

“Girl, what? Your flight leaves at seven. Do you know what time it is?”

“I know, I know. I just need to figure out what I’m wearing.”

Mike sighed. “Let me see.”

Nicole reluctantly switched the camera view to show the ensembles on her bed. Mike said nothing.

“Are they really that bad?”

“No, no, no, not bad... It’s giving *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.”

“I just don’t wanna offend your family with my exposed knees or whatever.”

“You’ll be fine! Just hurry up and get packed. Don’t stay up ‘till 2 AM, ok?”

Nicole sighed. “Yeah, yeah. I promise! See you tomorrow!”

Technically Nicole kept her promise. She stayed up until 3 AM instead. All the excitement she had about attending the wedding morphed into anxiety. She wanted to be a good friend and show up for moral support, but she was getting second thoughts. Mike didn’t talk much about his family but the little he did say worried her. There was no way they’d like her. She grew up non-religious, but his folks were devout Christians. She was a quarter black and his mom’s profile picture had a Blue Lives Matter badge on it. Most importantly, she was bisexual. If they couldn’t accept their own son for being gay, how could they accept her? What if they’d think she was a poor influence on him?

###

Nicole tried to get some sleep on the plane, but her mind wouldn't stop racing. She thought she could take a nap in the car since Gatlinburg was an hour drive from the airport. But as soon as she got in the car Mike started blasting Kim Petras and she couldn't help but sing along. Her worries started to fade as she danced in the passenger seat. Soon they were in the city, only fifteen minutes from the cabin.

You took the wrong turn/Took the wrong turn at the wrong time

"Sing bitch!" Nicole belted. Then she fell silent. A silver pickup truck raced by with dozens of red flags in the bed. They all read *TRUMP 2024*.

"What the hell?" Nicole yelled.

"We're in Gatlinburg, alright. Wait 'till we pass the Trump gift shops."

"The what? There's more than one?!"

"You know everyone in my family loves Trump, right?" Mike looked at Nicole.

"Oh, God."

Mike looked away. He zipped around the curves of the mountain so fast Nicole almost thought they would fly off the edge. She started to feel dizzy.

"This is it." Mike pulled in front of a rustic log cabin with a wrap-around porch.

"Man, if it took a second longer to get here, I would have puked."

They got out of the car and headed to the door. Mike knocked and they heard a voice yell,

"They're here!"

A short curvy brunette opened the door. "Michael, you look exhausted!" She hugged him and stepped aside so the tall stocky man beside her could hug him too.

"Mom, Dad, this is Nicole," Mike said with his hands in his pockets.

"Oh, she's beautiful. Isn't she gorgeous, honey?" Mike's mother smiled at her husband.

“Nice to meet you, beautiful. I mean, Nicole.” Mike’s father shook Nicole’s hand. “I’m Ben and this is my favorite person, Wendy.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both. Thank you for letting me stay with you.” Nicole tried to make eye contact, but her gaze wandered to the ground.

“Well, why don’t you come get settled while Mike and Ben unload the car?” Wendy suggested.

Nicole was eager to escape the brisk wind. She sat in the loveseat closest to the fireplace.

“Want some coffee? I just brewed a fresh pot.” Wendy started pouring a second cup before Nicole could answer.

“That would be incredible. I didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“Poor you! Cream and sugar?”

“Yes, please.”

Mike and Ben finished unloading the car, poured themselves some coffee, too, and joined the ladies around the fireplace.

“Mike, did you know y’all missed the dress rehearsal this evening?” Wendy asked.

“Oh, that’s a shame. Wish we could have been there.” Mike didn’t even try to sound genuine.

“We’re just glad you’re here now. Tomorrow’s gonna be a busy day!”

“Sure will.” Mike didn’t look up from his phone.

“So, Nicole, Mike tells me you interned with the California Department of Justice this summer.” Ben said, leaning forward in his seat.

“Yes, I was so grateful for the opportunity.”

“It’s important work. Keeping those criminals off the street.” Ben and Wendy both nodded in agreement.

“My cases were more about hostile work environments and discrimination. Everyone deserves to have a safe workplace.”

“Exactly! You know so many folks out there are just *lazy*. They don’t wanna work ‘cause the government keeps giving them handouts!”

“That’s right!” Wendy chimed in.

Mike kept scrolling and pretended he wasn’t listening.

“But I don’t wanna talk your ear off with politics. I’m sure you two just want to get some rest.”

“Yes, we’re very tired, Dad.” Suddenly, Mike was paying attention.

“Alright, you’ve got the whole downstairs to yourselves. We’ll leave you to it.” Ben stood up and retreated to his room.

“Goodnight, y’all. Get some rest. Or don’t!” Wendy winked and followed Ben.

Nicole and Mike went downstairs into the game room. Nicole opened the door to a bedroom and tilted her head. She didn’t walk in.

“Um, Mike... why’s there only one bed here?”

“What do you mean?” Mike walked inside and immediately kicked off his shoes.

“I mean where am I supposed to sleep?”

“Uhh, on the bed.”

“But where are *you* supposed to sleep?”

“Well, there’s room for both of us. It’s a king-sized bed.”

“No thanks. I’ll take the sofa in the game room.” Nicole turned around and plopped down on the sofa with her arms crossed.

“Come on now. What’s the issue?” Mike sat next to her.

“Your parents kinda...” her voice lowered, “weirded me out.”

“If it bothers you that much, I’ll sleep out here and you can sleep on the bed.”

Nicole felt guilty for making him sleep on the sofa. She knew on the surface there was nothing weird about sharing a bed with a friend, but something about it just didn’t feel right. The next morning, she woke up to someone knocking on the bedroom door.

“Come in!” She groaned.

Mike cracked the door open.

“Mom made breakfast. Hurry and get up. I’m starving!” He quickly shut the door.

Nicole rolled out of bed and shuffled her way to the bathroom. She splashed water on her face and brushed her teeth. She didn’t bother changing out of her pajamas. When she walked into the game room Mike was sitting on the sofa, checking his phone. He was still in his night clothes, too. She was glad to not be the only lazy one in the cabin.

“Took you long enough. Let’s go up and eat.”

“You know you didn’t have to wait for me if you’re that hungry.”

The two went upstairs and were greeted by the smell of bacon.

“Good morning!” Wendy sang. “How’d you two sleep? Was the bed comfortable enough?” She nudged Ben and giggled.

“Morning.” Mike didn’t sound nearly as cheery as his mom. “Yeah, the bed’s *very* comfortable.” He smirked.

Wendy gave Ben a look and he waved her off.

“Good morning. Oh, that smells so good!” Nicole made her way to the table.

“I hope you like your eggs scrambled ‘cause that’s the only way I fix ‘em.” Wendy brought the skillet to the table and spooned some eggs onto everyone’s plates. Then she brought the bacon and toast over.

“Need salt? Pepper?” Ben stood up and grabbed seasonings from the cabinet.

“I’d like some ketchup,” Nicole said shyly.

“Ketchup? Don’t tell me you put ketchup on your eggs, honey.” Wendy shook her head and chuckled.

“I’ll give that a pass.” Ben opened the fridge and grabbed the ketchup. “But only because Mike likes you so much.” He slid the bottle over to Nicole.

“Don’t worry. We’re just joshing you. We like you too, Nicole.” Wendy smiled sweetly.

“T-thanks.” Nicole lost her appetite, but she forced herself to eat. At least the eggs were cooked well. They were fluffy and not overdone, just how she liked them. She finished eating as fast as possible so she could slink away to the bedroom and get ready for the ceremony.

###

Nicole marveled at the view of the Smokies from the wedding venue. It was overcast and still dawn, giving everything a pastel hue. For miles and miles ahead, she saw lush green hills. The jagged, gray peaks of the mountains crashed into the delicate, white clouds above. She felt like a single brushstroke in a Monet landscape. She wanted this moment of peace to last forever, but there’s no such thing.

“Nicole! The photographer said it’s time for us to take photos with the groom and bride.” Mike shouted from the top of the staircase. Nicole hurried towards him.

“Wait, are you sure I’m supposed to be in the family photos with you?”

“That’s what they said.”

“I don’t think—”

“We don’t have time. Just come down.”

Mike led the way, and she reluctantly followed him down the steps. Across the plaza she saw both families on either side of the bride and groom posing. The photographer took a few shots while her assistant shouted instructions.

“You guys are done,” the photographer’s assistant said. A few relatives left the group and went back upstairs. “Now I need Mike, Nicole, Anna, and Chris.” Mike and Nicole joined the groom’s side while the other two joined the bride’s side.

“Smile. Smile. Good. You’re done.” Nicole went back upstairs to gaze at the mountains again, but the morning mist had cleared, and the magic left with it.

More people started to trickle in. The servers brought out a hot chocolate bar and charcuterie boards for the guests to enjoy as they mingled. Nicole tried to stay as far away from everyone, especially Mike. An older woman noticed her standing alone in the corner. She gave her a pitiful look.

“And how do you know the bride and groom?” She asked.

“I don’t.” Nicole replied. The woman looked puzzled and walked away without any further questions.

“Everyone, it’s time to be seated! The ceremony will begin shortly.” A voice called. The guests filled the rows of chairs and whispered among themselves.

“There you are!” Ben found Nicole in her corner. “I saved a seat for you.”

They walked to their chairs together and were some of the last people to be seated. Shortly after, the groom and Wendy walked down the aisle together. Ben already had his handkerchief out. Nicole watched Mike take his place at the altar with the rest of the wedding

party. He was sweating more than his brother. The young ring bearer brought the rings to the groom. He was wearing a three-piece suit that probably cost more than anything in Nicole's closet. The flower girl trotted after him carrying a basket of flower petals nearly as big as her. The wind started to pick up and blew most of her petals away, but she kept miming the motion of scattering petals until she reached the altar.

Finally, the bride made her way down the aisle with her father by her side, tears glistening through her veil. Her train was nearly as long as the aisle. She met her love at the altar and held his hands. As the couple said their vows Nicole fought back tears. She didn't know them, but she could feel how much they truly loved each other. The clouds couldn't hold back. Just as the couple kissed it began to rain, and they scurried down the aisle into the reception hall. The guests rushed inside after them, eager to get to shelter.

Wendy caught up with Nicole and put her hand on her shoulder. "Ben and I are sitting together, but you're sitting with Mike and the wedding party." She pointed to a long table at the front of the hall. Nicole slowly made her way to the table and sat next to Mike.

"You did a good job walking down that aisle, Mike." Nicole smiled and patted Mike on the back.

"Thanks, I've been waiting for this day my whole life." He smiled back.

"Oh, yeah?" One of the groomsmen put his arm around Mike. "And when's your day coming? You don't wanna keep your lady waiting for long, right?" He looked at Nicole and gave her a nod.

"Um, I think we can get food now." Nicole grabbed her plate. The groomsman rushed ahead.

The others had already started filling their plates at the serving line. Mike and Nicole got in the back of the line, sampling every dish they saw. They returned to their seats and dug right in, ignoring the idle chatter of the bridesmaids and groomsmen beside them. When Nicole couldn't eat any more, she started for the bar across the hall.

“Four shots for the bridesmaids, please.” She carried two shots in each hand and hurried back to her seat.

“You want one?” She tried to hand a shot to Mike but he shook his head. She shrugged her shoulders and downed all four shots herself.

“Woah, slow down!” Mike leaned in towards Nicole and whispered, “Didn't we talk about this? You're cut off for the night.” Nicole didn't mind being cut off. She had all she needed to survive the rest of evening.

“Can I get everyone's attention?” The DJ's voice echoed across the reception hall and all the buzz came to a halt. “Today we witnessed the union of a very special couple. They showed us what marriage is really about. It's about love. It's about commitment. It's about *a man and a woman* devoting their shared lives to God.” A few guests shouted and clapped.

“I want us to celebrate not only their Godly union, but the unions of some other very special people here with us. Can the grandparents of the bride stand up? Please stand up.” They stood at the far end of the hall.

“This year they're celebrating 43 years of marriage. Absolutely phenomenal. Can we give them a round of applause?” The guests roared and cheered for the elderly couple. They sat down.

“Now will the parents of the groom please stand?” Wendy and Ben stood. “This year they celebrate 32—” Wendy held up one finger and mouthed “one.”

“31 years of marriage! Amazing! Let’s show them some love!” The crowd started to holler. Wendy’s face turned bright red, and she sat down before the applause was over. Ben followed suit.

“Now will the bride and groom please come to the floor for the first dance?”

The couple took their place at the center of the hall. They embraced and stared deeply into each other’s eyes. The DJ put on a country ballad and they slow-danced slightly off-beat. It was still a beautiful sight, Nicole thought.

“Now all the married couples, all the married couples, please come to the dance floor!” All the tables cleared out and each couple found a spot on the floor. Nicole and Mike were the only people still sitting down. There wasn’t a single maiden or widow in sight to share the shame with them. Each happy, married couple spun around without a care in the world while the heathens sat alone. Mike pulled his phone out and tuned out the music. Nicole had never felt more mortified and singled out in her life. She turned to Mike.

“Fuck it. Let’s go dance,” she whispered.

“I’ll pass.” Mike kept scrolling.

“What? Isn’t this what you want?” Nicole raised her voice. “Isn’t this what your whole fucking family wants?” She stood up and almost lost her balance. “Come on! Let’s give them a show!”

One of the dancing couples nearly tripped over themselves trying to get a better look at the commotion behind them. It’s hard to eavesdrop while doing the Wobble. The music drowned out Nicole’s shrill voice.

“What the hell are you talking about? Sit down and stop yelling.” Mike tugged on her blazer, but she wouldn’t budge. “You’re acting like a drunken idiot in front of my family!” Now he was yelling, too.

Nicole stormed out of the reception hall and started sobbing. It was 40-degrees out, but her face felt like it was on fire. She started to lose her balance, and she steadied herself with her hands on her knees. What was she gonna do now? She thought of calling an Uber home but where would she go? Back to the cabin without a key? To some shitty motel? She didn’t even fully understand why she was so angry.

“Girl, what in God’s name are you doing out here?” Mike shouted and walked behind Nicole.

“Don’t talk to me.”

He didn’t listen. “I’m sorry for what I said in there, ok?”

Nicole turned around to face him.

“You’re not sorry! You just don’t want me to make a scene.”

“No one’s out here but us. I’m sorry, I really am.”

“Sorry for what? For making your parents believe we’re dating? For lying to everyone?”

“I can’t apologize for that. You wouldn’t understand.” Mike looked away.

“No, no, tell me. How do you justify being a two-faced coward?” Nicole put her hands on her hips and waited for his explanation. Mike laughed.

“Nicole, what happened when you came out to your parents?” She didn’t answer. “Tell me what happened!”

“Nothing.” She said sheepishly.

“Nothing! And guess what happened when I came out?”

Silence again.

“My parents threatened to stop paying my tuition if I kept living this *ungodly* lifestyle. That’s what happened.” Mike got closer to Nicole. “Your family loves and supports you just as you are! I don’t have what you have. You don’t know how easy you’ve got it.”

Nicole scoffed.

“Don’t give me that shit. Rich white guy gets his tuition paid by mommy and daddy and all he has to do to keep the cash flowing is use his friends and lie. I’ve got it easy? You may not be aware, but no amount of love and support pays my bills. I don’t have what you have, either, Mike!”

“Your struggle isn’t the same as mine.” He threw his hands up.

“I get that. But you don’t have to use me to get by.”

“You don’t get it. I’m not using you. I didn’t think bringing you here would be so bad, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Yeah, you were wrong. You could have just told me the full story from the beginning. I understand hiding from your parents, but why’d you keep *me* in the dark?”

“Because clearly I can’t trust you to not fuck it up.” Mike walked back inside with balled fists. He noticed his mother and relaxed his posture.

“Honey, where have you been? I want to introduce Nicole to your great aunt Sophie. Could you find her for me?” She scanned the room and saw no sight of Nicole.

“The wedding’s got her all emotional. She said she needed to touch up her makeup in the restroom.”

“Aw, what a sweet girl. You know your father and I really like her. When you find a good woman, you can’t let her go. Don’t forget that, honey.”

“I know, mom.” Mike gazed at the doors. “I won’t.” He stood still, waiting.