



THE CLOSET TRIP

A trip to middle America for a family reunion leads this couple back to the closet door, old fears, and worry about the others out there.

My partner and I took a trip to South Dakota this past summer to celebrate my grandfather's 100th birthday. Before the trip began, we talked about how my extended family on my mother's side had always been very accepting of me (and my gayness) in theory, but that I had never taken a man "home" and been around all of them while in relationship to test it out. Somewhere in me I knew that everything would be fine with all of them, just as it has been with my immediate family for years, so I didn't think much more of it.

Almost immediately upon our plane landing in Rapid City, it was clear that we were not in Portland anymore. The woman at the rental car place made some snide comment about how only I could drive the car unless we were "married or domestic partners" which then made her laugh out loud. Imagine – two men married to each other? Ha!



By the time we arrived at the hotel we were exhausted and it was late. We chatted with my parents for a bit and then went to sleep. The next morning we woke up early and traveled to the Badlands, where we spent most of the day. The land was magical and our interaction with people was sparse. We hung out, took photos, and tried not to touch the very cute prairie dogs (which carry plague, come to find out).

We spent the weekend hanging out with all the people who have ever loved me in the world. It was really great for me to get to share them with the man I love, and him with them. My family all celebrated our relationship and welcomed him into the fold without batting an eyelash. It was extraordinary.

Family aside, I could tell some of the hotel staff and patrons were either afraid of my floral bike cap or the anal sex it implied, but no one bothered us and I didn't feel unsafe. At one point we decided to go to Mt.

Rushmore, which was boring and hideous, but most of the people there were from other parts of the world visiting that particular landmark so, once again, the experience of our otherness was masked with at least the appearance of diversity.

As the family reunion love fest was drawing to a close, we decided that we would go exploring deep in the Black Hills and eat biscuits and gravy at this country diner that everyone had been telling us was so delicious, way out in the middle of nowhere. As we drove through the canyon the land was stunning, but we both lost reception on our phones. I shrugged it off and we just kept going. (I was really excited for gravy, OK?!)

When we arrived at the diner and were being seated I noticed that every other table in the restaurant had their eyes on us. They were all staring. Every one of them ... and neither of us had any way to call for help. I'm sure we weren't actually in grave danger as it felt, but I started playing the theme song from *Deliverance* in my head and couldn't help but flash back to my own violent experience growing up gay in a rural farm town.

We ate quickly and booked it out of there, back to the safety of cellular reception - but something disturbing happened to us both there that day which has lingered. It's almost like we brought ghosts of that palpable bigotry back to Portland with us or something. We've chatted about it since and keep circling around the conclusion that at least some parts of us were forced back in the closet on the trip for self-protection, and those recently re-closeted parts are having to be intentionally coerced back out, even now that we are home in the safety of our affirming surroundings.

It's striking to me that as professionally and publicly out as we both are, depending on where we find ourselves in the world, homophobia can still reach us, still change us - even if just for a moment. Suppose you are lucky enough to be surrounded by familial love and acceptance (as we were), chances are still pretty good that the townspeople want to tie you and your partner to a fence and leave you both for dead.

So, we peel back the sad layers of fear, which have attached themselves to our love and life while traveling through middle America together, and we move on – but I can't help feeling worried about our brothers and sisters living in that part of the country who we've left behind. What will become of them? Is the only option for an LGBT person to be free in the United States to live somewhere coastal? What responsibility do we have as queer people in progressive communities to reach out to those living in non-affirming communities? I'm not sure what the answer is, but I look forward to a day where we can be our openly queer selves safely no matter where we are in the country. §

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