ABSTRACT

RYAN GREENE: Oppression in Paradise: Homosexuality and Homophobia in Jamaica
(Under the direction of Dr. Richard Cole)

Widely seen as a laidback island paradise, Jamaica bears the distinction of being perhaps the most homophobic nation in the western hemisphere. In three articles, this master’s thesis examines various aspects of Jamaican attitudes toward homosexuality. The first article discusses Jamaican homophobia in broad terms and examines the work of the country’s lone gay-rights group. The second article is a snapshot of some Jamaicans’ responses about homosexuality. The third article explores the underground gay party scene in Jamaica through the context of one such party. The thesis aims to explore this topic of Jamaican homophobia from new angles and to illuminate some of the challenges gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people face on the island nation.
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Introduction

Jamaica: a dream come true or a living nightmare? Paradise or perdition?

Renowned for its white-sand beaches, posh resorts and laidback reggae sensibilities, Jamaica is typically depicted as a carefree tourist destination in the fun-loving Caribbean. But beyond the gated beachside getaways, the island nation harbors a darker truth. Racked with poverty and one of the world’s highest murder rates, Jamaica is also considered one of the most homophobic countries in the world.

In Jamaica, being gay can be lethal. Gay men fall prey to mob violence. Lesbian women are raped. Popular musicians glorify the murder of homosexuals. Politicians and clergymen denounce the sin of homosexuality. The country’s lone gay-rights group cannot reveal the location of its headquarters for fear of attacks.

On the other hand, many Jamaicans insist the situation is not dire. Antigay lyrics by local singers, some say, are rare and should not be taken literally. Gays and lesbians draw anger only if they flaunt their sexuality in public, they say, and most violence against gay people can be chalked up to crimes of passion between lovers. The only real problem, some say, is that foreign countries insist on imposing their moral values onto Jamaican society.

Surveying available literature and taking advantage of first-hand research, this paper attempts to portray Jamaican homosexuality and homophobia fairly. Based on newspaper and magazine articles, scholarly research and reference books, and eyewitness
reporting, this paper delves into a complex and, at times, troubling issue. It begins with a brief history of Jamaica and then delves into different facets of the society, including tourism, music, religion and activism. What emerges is a portrait of one of the most homophobic countries in the world.
Literature Review

A Brief History of Jamaica

As is true for most Caribbean islands, Jamaica is steeped in the turmoil and violence of colonization and slavery. That legacy has powerful repercussions on the country’s treatment of gay rights today.

In 1494, on his second voyage to the West Indies, Christopher Columbus landed on Jamaica. Peopled by Arawak Indians, the island was named Xaymaca and was fabled to be rich in gold. The gold was a myth, and the Arawaks died out as the Spanish settled the island as a base for conquering the Americas. In 1655, the British captured the settlement, which by that point was of little significance to the Spanish. The slave trade that would define Jamaica’s future began shortly thereafter (Mordecai, 2001, pp. 6-7).

The British soldiers who captured the island from the Spanish “were turned into settlers by land grants and the ever-present threat of starvation” (Mordecai, 2001, p. 8). But they could not work the land themselves, and labor could not be brought in from England in sufficient numbers. The land was rich, but the problem was labor. As Mordecai writes, the solution to the problems lay all around them: sugar and slavery, both already entrenched in the Caribbean by the 1660s (Mordecai, 2001, pp. 8-9).

English slave traders dominated the Jamaican market and flooded the island with slaves, primarily from West Africa (Bayer, 1993, p. 11). Within 20 years of capturing Jamaica, English whites were a numerical minority. At the beginning of the 18th century,
more than 40,000 slaves were on the island. By the middle of the century, 130,000. By 1800, twice that many. (Mordecai, 2001, p. 10).

The British Empire abolished the slave trade in 1807, when about 350,000 slaves toiled on Jamaica. Roughly 35 percent of them were African-born (Mordecai, 2001, p. 13). Unrest was an almost constant threat to the vastly outnumbered white settlers. From the beginning, Jamaica had a strong tradition of slave rebellion, stronger than any other Caribbean island. The Spanish had set the stage for such a rebellious tradition by releasing most of their slaves when the British invaded (Mason, 2000, p. 18). Those freed slaves, bolstered by refugees who had escaped British masters over the decades, founded free inland communities and came to be known as Maroons. Those Maroons formed the backbone of resistance to slavery, waging guerrilla warfare against the British for centuries (Campbell, 2007, p. 20).

The first major recorded slave uprising was in 1678. The first substantial rebellion came in 1690. As slaves escaped into the interior of the island, one escaped slave, Cudjoe, led the Maroons against the British. This First Maroon War spread across the island from 1690 until 1739, when the British persuaded Cudjoe to make peace (Bayer, 1993, p. 12). Relative peace reigned for 50 years, “but this did not stop the regular uprisings” (Campbell, 2007, p. 26). Amid countless smaller uprisings, a runaway slave named Tacky led a major rebellion in 1760, and a Second Maroon War erupted in 1795 (Bayer, 1993, p. 13).

Jamaica’s legacy of slave revolt culminated in Sam Sharpe’s rebellion in 1831. A native Baptist lay preacher, Sharpe led 20,000 slaves against the British. Sharpe was executed in Montego Bay, northern Jamaica’s largest town, in 1832. But his rebellion

Ending slavery did not end Jamaica’s tradition of violent resistance. While the island’s more than 300,000 black inhabitants were free legally, they could not vote or hold elective office (Bayer, 1993, p. 16). In 1840, Campbell (2007) writes, only about 23,000 former slaves owned parcels of land larger than two acres. The vast majority struggled as workers or small farmers, and they formed the embryo of the Jamaican working class (p. 33). Tensions came to a head with the Morant Bay Rebellion in 1865 when Paul Bogle raised the call for self-determination. “Cleave to the black” was Bogle’s rallying cry. Though the rebellion lasted less than a month before Bogle was executed, “1865 has become a focal point in the class and racial struggles in Jamaica” ever since (pp. 35-38).

Over the decades, Jamaicans began taking greater pride in their heritage. Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, the rise of Rastafarianism, an Afro-centric religion, and a major uprising by poor Jamaicans in 1938 illustrate the growing “black consciousness” of the island’s people (Campbell, 2007, p. 81) The granting of universal adult suffrage in 1944 marked the beginning of the end of British rule. (Mordecai, 2001, p. 26) On August 6, 1962, Jamaica became an independent nation.

Present Day

According to the Central Intelligence Agency World Factbook (2009), Jamaica today has a population of 2.9 million — about 90 percent of African descent — across its
4,400 square miles. Kingston, on the southeastern coast, is the island’s capital. Montego Bay, a tourist haven on the northwestern coast, is the nation’s second-largest city.

More than a million tourists flock to Jamaica’s natural beauty and world-class resorts each year, and the country has successfully branded itself as a sunny paradise. But for years, Jamaica has had one of the highest murder rates in the world. Police cite 1,660 homicides on the island in 2009 (Melia, 2010), a rate of 57 murders per 100,000 people. By comparison, the U.S. homicide rate in 2008 was 4.7 murders per 100,000 people (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008). Due largely to gangs and the drug trade, much of the violence in Jamaica is concentrated in the densely populated ghettos of major urban centers such as Kingston.

**Homophobia**

Amid the violent reality of life in Jamaica, the country has earned, as Padgett (2006) writes in *Time*, “another ugly distinction: the most homophobic place on earth.” The country’s gay-rights group – Jamaica’s Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, or J-FLAG – “notes that between 2006 and 2008 more than 150 homophobic assaults and murders were reported to the agency” (Amber, 2009, p. 119). The available literature, mainly newspaper and magazine articles, makes it clear that homophobia is a serious, even dangerous, issue in Jamaica.

Although most articles offer only brief anecdotes, sometimes no more than one or two lines, examples of violence against gays and lesbians abound. In January 2008, a mob broke into a Mandeville home and attacked the four men inside, sending two to the hospital. One of the men could not be found and was thought dead. The men had been
eating dinner (Daniel & Charles, 2008). In February 2008, a gay police officer fled to Canada because of death threats he received after coming out as gay (Richardson, 2008). In June 2004, the mutilated body of Brian Williamson, a founder of the island’s only gay-rights group, was discovered in his Kingston home. He had been stabbed 77 times (Amber, 2009, p. 121). The list goes on.

The most thorough article on the issue was published in *Essence* magazine in March 2009. It presents the story of Gareth Henry, a gay Jamaican man who witnessed and experienced antigay mob violence. “Henry says he personally knew at least 13 people who were murdered because they were gay” (Amber, 2009, p. 121). Henry fell victim to a mob himself on February 14, 2007 — Valentine’s Day — when more than 200 people gathered outside a pharmacy, demanding that Henry and three other young men they thought were gay come out to face them. Henry says he was attacked by police who tried to force him out of the store and into the crowd. For whatever reason, “the police suddenly changed course” and dispersed the mob (Amber, 2009, p. 156). About a year later, Henry moved to Toronto, Canada, after receiving death threats. “To be gay in Jamaica is to live with a bull’s-eye on your back,” Amber (2009) writes (p. 121).


*Official Antigay Sentiment*

The complex forces behind Jamaica’s homophobia start at the top. Richardson (2008) sets the scene in the *New York Daily News:*
Any doubts about how deeply homophobia is ingrained in Jamaica, West Indies, culture were put to rest in May [2008] when Prime Minister Bruce Golding told the British Broadcasting Channel that there were no homosexuals in his cabinet and none would be allowed to serve.

As recently as October 2009, Golding railed against legalizing same-sex marriage or same-sex unions. “I will not accept it that homosexuality must be accepted as a legitimate form of behavior or the equivalent of marriage,” he told the Jamaican parliament (AFP, 2009). Clearly, Jamaica’s culture of homophobia is established at the top of its government.

Gay sexual expression is outlawed. Williams (2000) writes that Section 76 of Jamaica’s Offences Against the Person Act “prohibits the ‘abominable crime of buggery’ [anal intercourse], even where it occurs between consenting adult males. The offence of gross indecency prevents activities of sexual intimacy between males” (p. 110). The former is punishable with up to 10 years of hard labor. The latter earns up to two years (The Economist, 2009). Though the law is rarely enforced, “the effect is that all homosexual activity is tainted and the whole gay and lesbian community is marked with deviance and perversity” (Williams, 2000, p. 110)

And the police can be part of the problem. Amber (2009) writes that Gareth Henry filed a complaint with the professional standards branch of the Kingston Police Department in 2007 after officers tried to hand him over to an angry mob. “Henry says that when the police arrived, they, too, jeered at the men, admonishing them for inciting the riot. … The complaint describes how four policemen tried to pry him loose, one striking him in the abdomen with his rifle” (p. 156). The literature is peppered with
similar anecdotes in which “gay men accuse Jamaican police of being their tormentors” (Richardson, 2008).

Harvey Lewin, commissioner of the Jamaica Constabulary Force at the time of Amber’s article, grants that police officers are products of their environment. “Jamaica, by and large, is a homophobic society; that’s a fact,” Lewin says. “And there is no question that in our past there have been attacks on gays, and the police response might not have been what one would expect from a police service.” Lewin, however, adds that gay rights activists overlook examples of police officers’ “actually rescuing alleged homosexuals from hostile crowds” (Amber, 2009, p. 156).

Other examples of official homophobia can be cited. In 2008, Jamaica’s Ministry of Education drew fire when it seemingly endorsed a home economics textbook that promoted same-sex unions and homosexuality. “We want to make it absolutely clear,” Education Minister Andrew Holness said, “that the Ministry of Education does not endorse or support the teaching of homosexual relationships as the accepted standard of family. We don’t teach it and we don’t recommend it” (Daniel & Charles, 2008). And Earl Witter, the country’s public defender, has “reinforced the common view that if only gays would be less flamboyant, there would be less violence against them” (Lacey, 2008). Witter reportedly even told a meeting of the Mandeville Rotary Club that “‘tolerance has its limits,’ and gays and lesbians should be sensitive to the ‘repulsion that others feel’” (Amber, 2009, p. 120).
Religious Intolerance

Much of the available literature links Jamaica’s homophobia at least partially with its religious conservatism. According to the Guinness Book of Records, Jamaica has more churches per square mile than any other country in the world. “Its values and mores are rooted in traditional biblical teachings, making it a socially conservative society,” James-Johnson (2007) writes.

According to Chevannes (1995), 17 named denominations exist in the country, plus a large, undetermined number of smaller ones. Jamaica is primarily a Christian nation, with more than two-thirds of citizens identifying themselves as Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal and so on. Much of the other third identify with Jamaican or African religions, including Revivalism and Rastafarianism (p. 2). “We were brought up that way, where people in Jamaica go to church every Sunday,” explains the Rev. Dennis Grant, a Jamaican pastor who has preached against gay and lesbian lifestyles in his church. “Nothing else was done on a Sunday but church. … We could not even play on a Sunday” (James-Johnson, 2007).

No matter the religion, the consensus is that homosexuality is an affront to the island’s deep religious roots. “The thinking goes that Jamaicans have taken their pastors’ admonishment of homosexuality to violent extremes,” Amber (2009) writes (p. 121). The Rev. Grant Lynn Ford, pastor of a Florida church that also offers church services to gays and lesbians in Jamaica, agrees. “I think it’s because Jamaican churches have largely taught … a gospel of fear, which creates anger. … And I think that comes from the pulpit, and it filters then down to the people.” (James-Johnson, 2007).
Throughout the literature, Jamaicans point out that open displays of gayness upset people. Popular opinion, Williams writes, is that “it was best if gays kept their business to themselves and not thrust it upon the rest of society” (Williams, 2000, p. 109). Gays and lesbians, even among tourists, “are told not to hold hands in hotel restaurants or outside resorts for fear of attacks” (Beard, 1993). This fits with Jamaicans’ emphasis on the greater social good, which Chevannes (1995) describes as one of the island’s central religious tenets. “For instance, it values individualism and respects achieved status, but only if communal values are upheld. People who achieve but by their actions and attitudes reject their community are sanctioned” (p. 25). Being openly gay is considered an enormous affront to Jamaican values, and so gays and lesbians “earn” their retribution (Chevannes, 1995, p. 26).

‘Murder Music’

Long considered emblematic of Jamaica’s easygoing spirit, reggae music, a blend of blues, rock and calypso music, is another locus of antigay sentiment on the island. The face of reggae (and Jamaica) for much of the world, Bob Marley was known for singing about peace and love. But times have changed. “These days some of reggae’s biggest acts are just as likely to be advocating the killing of homosexuals in their music,” Thompson (2007) writes.

The reigning “sound” in Jamaica is known as dancehall (Mordecai, 2001, 150). Described as a type of reggae infused with hip-hop influences (Jacobs, 2004), dancehall specializes in sexually explicit and violent lyrics combined with lewd stage antics, such as daggering, a type of dance that mimics having sex (Mordecai, 2001, p. 151). Some of
the most reviled songs celebrate attacking or killing gays and lesbians, known as “battymen” in the Jamaican patois. While different examples appear throughout the literature, Tatchell (2003) presents this list:

- Beenie Man’s track “Damn” boasts: “I’m dreaming of a new Jamaica, come to execute all the gays.”
- Elephant Man’s “A Nuh Fi Wi Fault” declares: “Battyman fi dead!/ Please mark we word/ Gimme tha tech-nine [gun]/ Shoot dem like bird.”
- Bounty Killer’s hit “Another Level” exhorts: “Bun [burn] a fire pon a kuh mister fagoty/ Poop man fi drown.”

Far from the reggae of Marley’s era, those songs and others glorify shooting, raping and burning gays and lesbians. “So violent are these lyrics that in countries such as Canada and Britain this strain of dancehall has been dubbed ‘Murder Music,’” Amber (2009) writes (p. 155).

Proponents of dancehall argue that performers are a product of their environment. For example, Beenie Man, a Grammy-winning reggae and dancehall artist, told the Associated Press as much in 2002: “Jamaicans come right out and say, ‘We don’t deal with homosexuals.’ … That’s why the music is homophobic? I don’t understand.” (Jacobs, 2004). Some also say that critics interpret lyrics too literally, thereby failing to “grasp the metaphoric richness of Jamaican patois” (Chin, 1997, p. 127). One defender of dancehall suggests that the lyrical gun used to kill battymen in one particular song “should be understood primarily as a ‘symbolic penis’ and, therefore, ‘[i]n the final analysis, the song can be seen as a symbolic celebration of the vaunted potency of heterosexual men’” (Chin, 1997, p. 128).
The song in question was “Boom Bye Bye,” Buju Banton’s 1992 hit. The lyrics, taken literally, decree that gays “haffi dead,” meaning “have to die” (Padgett, 2006). When gay-rights groups protested a Miami appearance by Banton in September 2009, Banton’s South Florida promoter reportedly said the song “was forgotten about,” a distant memory. Banton had signed the Reggae Compassionate Act in 2007, “in which he pledged to stop singing songs preaching hate against gays.” But Rothaus (2009) writes that Banton has denied signing the act, and that a YouTube video shows him singing “Boom Bye Bye” at a Miami concert in 2006. Banton, who was arrested in December 2009 on drug charges (Charles & Weaver, 2009), was accused in 2004 of viciously attacking a group of gay men in a house near his Kingston recording studio. His case was thrown out in 2006 for lack of evidence (Padgett, 2006).

“Boom Bye Bye” remains popular among reggae DJs (Charles & Weaver, 2009). Amber (2009) writes that it “has become a theme song for mob attacks” (p. 155). In her article, Gareth Henry says that the mob that attacked him and three other gay men in 2007 chanted “Boom bye bye” and “Battyman fi dead” (p. 156).

Tourism

As Jamaica’s largest source of foreign currency, tourism is big business (Faul, 1999). And in 2004, gays and lesbians accounted for more than 10 percent of the $88 billion Americans spent abroad (Padgett, 2005). The Caribbean, however, is not the most welcoming destination for gay and lesbian travelers. Two gay men were beaten in St. Maarten in 2006, for example, and a cruise ship that caters to gay families was met by 100 protesters when it stopped in the Bahamas in 2004 (Halden & Kiesnoski, 2007). But
the literature suggests that “economic realities … have begun making inroads into the climate of intolerance.” Many of the islands “are recognizing the economic potential of this market and are now proactively putting things in place to attract same-sex couples,” a St. Lucia hotelier explains (Williams, 2005).

But Jamaica remains “the Caribbean’s no-go zone” (Kiesnowski, 2007). The literature agrees that most gay travelers avoid Jamaica. “I cannot say anything positive about travel to Jamaica for LGBT clients,” one American travel agent says (Kiesnowski, 2007). Different groups, including the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association, advise boycotting Jamaica (Padgett, 2005). Those who choose to travel to Jamaica anyway are warned to be careful. “Gay tourists are told not to hold hands in hotel restaurants or outside resorts for fear of attacks” (Beard, 1993). Indeed, travel agents tell gay tourists to “stay in gated, all-inclusive resort complexes and simply don’t mix with the locals” (Kiesnowski, 2007).

Based on the literature, only one hotel on the island makes itself known as being gay-owned: the Hotel Mocking Bird Hill in western Jamaica. And even its owners, a lesbian couple, don’t market to gay tourists. “We just couldn’t fight the general [negative] perception of [Jamaica]” (Kiesnowski, 2007).

**Spirit of Resistance**

Based on the review of available literature, the common thread that ties together Jamaica’s homophobic politics, culture and mob violence is a resistance to outside influence. Put simply, Jamaicans resist outsiders. The island nation “is credited with one of the highest rates of slave revolts and conspiracies in the history of any slave society”
Religion, particularly the Baptist faith, was a symbol of resistance in a time when the Anglican Church “was the only church allowed by law to function in the island” (Chevannes, 1995, p. 47). Rastafarianism, a religion based in part on embracing one’s proud African roots, was born in the crucible of slave revolts and promised Jamaicans “the confidence and strength of the lion” (Campbell, 2007, p. 99).

Today Jamaicans view homosexuality as an outside force. Chin (1997) writes that Jamaican society values heterosexuality and masculinity as the “‘native’ sexuality” of its “‘indigenous’ culture” (p. 131). Writing from personal experience, Glave (2000) says that homosexuality is considered a “nasty foreign business,” something imported from other islands or North America (p. 123). The common view is that homosexuality “is an acquired behavior that can be dropped if only one prays more and pays more attention to the opposite sex” (Lacey, 2008).

International pressure for Jamaica to change only makes things worse. “Those who would otherwise not give a hoot as to whether someone was homosexual start feeling as if there is a need to defend turf,” Gareth Henry explains (Amber, 2009, p. 155). For example, a Toronto-based coalition of gay-rights groups called off a tourism boycott in May 2008 “amid reports of increased violence against gays on the island” (Amber, 2009, p. 155). And Jamaican Prime Minister Bruce Golding defended the nation’s laws in March 2009. “We are not going to yield to the pressure,” he said, “whether that pressure comes from individual organizations, individuals, whether that pressure comes from foreign governments or groups of countries, to liberalize the laws as it relates to buggery” (Luton, 2009).
So Jamaica goes on resisting the foreign menace of homosexuality. And remarkably, gays and lesbians resist the homophobia where and when they can.

“Jamaica’s gays socialize at underground nightclubs and worship at secret church services that move around the island,” Lacey (2008) writes. Funded by anonymous donors and international human rights groups, J-FLAG provides assistance to gays and lesbians and supports HIV clinics on the island (Amber, 2009, p. 119). But some pay a heavy price. Gay men such as Gareth Henry (Amber, 2009), a former member of J-FLAG, and Michael Hayden (Richardson, 2008), a former police officer, are forced to flee their country. And others, such as J-FLAG founder Brian Williamson, are murdered for their beliefs (Amber, 2009, p. 121).
Methodology

This thesis is a professional project geared toward writing three in-depth feature articles. Personal interviews and personal observation were the main sources of information. Before each interview, thorough research was conducted on the topic and the interviewee. Using this information, a list of questions was written as a guideline for each interview. Each person was told he or she was speaking to a journalism student and that it was possible that the story would be published.

Most interviews were conducted in person during a two-week trip in Feb. 2010 to Kingston, Jamaica. Every possible effort was made to make interviewees feel as comfortable as possible. Subjects had a choice of place and time that suited their schedule. The interviews entailed asking open-ended questions and encouraging sources to talk in detail. When possible and when permitted by interviewees, conversations were recorded using a video camera.

Funds from the Roy H. Park Fellowship paid for the flight, accommodations and ancillary expenses for the trip to Jamaica.

The articles focus mainly on GLBT people in Kingston. James McFarlane, program director of Jamaica’s Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, or J-FLAG, and Timothy, his assistant, helped arrange interviews with numerous sources. Those included Yvonne, Tiana and Pierce, all of whom were interviewed at J-FLAG’s headquarters. To protect identities, sources did not provide last names. McFarlane is a pseudonym.
In the interest of balance, other voices and opinions were sought. Norbert Stephens, regional deputy general secretary of the Northeast Regional Mission Council of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands, and Carolyn Cooper, professor of literary and cultural studies at the University of the West Indies at Mona, in Kingston, agreed to speak on the record in a professional capacity. Because homosexuality is such a touchy subject, other sources declined, while some others, such as a police officer in New Kingston, spoke only off the record. Encounters with Kingston residents also yielded interviews and anecdotes. Other sources of information, such as newspaper and magazine articles and Web sites, provided facts and anecdotes about homophobia in Jamaica.

Sources were interviewed for anecdotes, quotes and descriptions. No reasonable effort was spared in presenting each source in a full, fair and accurate manner. When needed and possible, sources were contacted for follow-up and clarification.
Limitations

The chief limitation was finding sources willing to discuss the issue. Homosexuality and homophobia in Jamaica are touchy, sometimes volatile, topics. Even broaching the subject often brought blank stares, confusion, reticence and even hostility. While the sources cited in this thesis provide a robust and satisfying set of accounts and opinions, the information other sources might have provided could have proved useful as well.

The other major limitation was safety. Because some Jamaicans react violently to homosexuality, sources face a real danger when speaking with reporters. James McFarlane of J-FLAG insisted on presenting a confidentiality agreement to any source contacted with J-FLAG’s help. The agreement stated that the finished articles would not endanger sources by revealing last names (or, in McFarlane’s case, his real name) or certain locations, such as the location of J-FLAG’s headquarters. Likewise, many sources refused to provide a last name or age, and providing anything beyond the most basic physical descriptions could have endangered sources. Every effort was taken to prevent identification.
Article Summaries

The thesis consists of three articles and three sidebars exploring different aspects of homosexuality and homophobia in Jamaica. Any or all pieces could be published in a magazine such as The Advocate or in any major national publication, including The New York Times. Major newspapers in Florida, such as the Miami Herald or St. Petersburg Times, have shown past interest in homosexuality in Jamaica and might also publish these articles.

• The first article is a 2,700-word feature covering homophobia in Jamaica and J-FLAG’s work in the country. Covering some of the history of the issue, the article also discusses the gay-rights group’s daily efforts to help GLBT people in need. A 300-word sidebar discusses Timothy, McFarlane’s assistant and the only other employee at J-FLAG.

• The second article is a 1,300-word feature recounting a trip to downtown Kingston looking for opinions on homosexuality. It is essentially a person-on-the-street piece in which random people were asked what they think of gay people, but with a twist: one of them turns out to be a troubled gay man.

• The third article is a 4,700-word feature about the underground gay party scene in Kingston. The story discusses Jamaican gay life and culture in general and party planning in particular, framed by a first-person account of a Valentine’s Day party in uptown Kingston. A 230-word sidebar explains why party security prohibits electronic recording devices. A 175-word sidebar looks at the impact of social media on gay life in Jamaica.
Chapter 1

Wonders in a Wasteland:
Despite Dangers, Some Gay Jamaicans Reach Out

Imagine your father beating you with a shovel because you went on a date, or a neighbor slashing you with a knife because he heard that you like someone. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Jamaica face those scenarios every day.

“A mob with torches and pitchforks is a sad but realistic possibility,” says Pierce, a bisexual man in Kingston, Jamaica. “It’s rare, but it happens.”

Antigay sentiment is the norm on the island nation, which is usually known for its lovely beaches and laidback sensibilities. While the daily reality is less dire than violence or murder, those are the extreme but real possibilities that gays in Jamaica face.

Given such dire consequences, Jamaicans who dedicate their lives to helping other gays and to improving the situation are few and far between. Jamaica’s Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, or J-FLAG, is the only gay-rights group in the country. J-FLAG’s director works under a pseudonym for his protection, and the location of the group’s Kingston headquarters is a closely guarded secret.

But Brian Williamson, who co-founded J-FLAG in 1998, chose not to hide. By all accounts, he proudly advocated tolerance without using fake names or protections. In June 2004, authorities discovered Williamson’s mutilated body in his Kingston home. He had been stabbed 77 times.
“Brian Williamson was the last public face of J-FLAG,” James McFarlane (pseudonym), current program director, says in an interview at the group’s office. “When you put all of those things together, you ask, why are we still here?”

Why is Jamaica Considered so Homophobic?

In 2006, Human Rights Watch, a New York-based organization that monitors international human rights issues, dubbed Jamaica the most homophobic place on earth. Is it?

“Well, I wouldn’t want to live in Iran or one of those countries,” McFarlane says. “But in the Western world, yes. While homophobia does exist in other spaces, the need to act on it doesn’t seem to be as strong as in Jamaica.”

Antigay sentiment is apparent throughout Jamaican society. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have published reports detailing armed mobs assaulting people accused of being gay.

At J-FLAG, McFarlane hears such stories regularly. He knows two different lesbian couples who reported being raped last summer. Some Jamaicans, he said, think lesbians are just bisexual and need “some good heterosexual sex to straighten them out.” It’s called corrective rape.

One of the women reported being raped again a few months later, McFarlane added.

He knows a young man whose mother told him to leave home and not come back, for fear that neighbors might burn down her house.

“She’d rather protect her worldly possessions than her son,” McFarlane said.
Gay sexual expression is outlawed. Section 76 of Jamaica’s Offences Against the Person Act prohibits the “abominable crime of buggery,” or anal intercourse, even between consenting adult males. The offense of gross indecency prevents activities of sexual intimacy between males. The former is punishable with up to 10 years of hard labor. The latter brings up to two years. Though the law is rarely enforced, some Jamaicans see it as a license to discriminate, or worse.

“A lot of people use the buggery law to say you’re not allowed to be gay,” McFarlane says.

Law enforcement can be of little help. Police officers don’t always receive reports of antigay violence willingly, McFarlane says. Some officers have been parts of attacks on gays in the past. But J-FLAG has established some rapport with the Jamaica Constabulary Force. One assistant police commissioner, whom McFarlane will not name, and some officers have proved sympathetic to their cause.

“This unfortunately has been only with those officers who have come from Scotland Yard [London’s Metropolitan Police],” he says, “the non-Jamaican officers.

“Part of the stigma is being guilted by association,” he adds. “If you seem in support of something that puts a question mark next to your sexuality? Persons aren’t willing to take that step because it would challenge their livelihood.”

In October 2009, Prime Minister Bruce Golding railed against legalizing same-sex marriage or same-sex unions. “I will not accept it that homosexuality must be accepted as a legitimate form of behavior or the equivalent of marriage,” he told the Jamaican Parliament.
“I was embarrassed as a Jamaican to have my leader make that kind of statement,” McFarlane says. Golding did, however, say J-FLAG has a right to exist and help Jamaicans.

“I really believe he has a conflict in his mind between what he thinks is right and what he knows he can do,” McFarlane says. “He has the power to change, but he’s unwilling to do so. He’s toeing the line. He’s taking his cues from the public.”

The Origins of Homophobia

Antigay sentiment in Jamaica has complicated roots. Explanations range from Christian influence to music lyrics. Some people even blame Western civilization.

Perhaps the most-cited source of discrimination in Jamaica is the church. According to the Guinness Book of Records, Jamaica has more churches per square mile than any other country in the world. While more than 365 denominations exist on the island, most citizens identify as Christian. According to Barry Chevannes’ *Rastafari and Other African-Caribbean Worldviews*, more than two-thirds of citizens see themselves as Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal and so on. Many of the other third identify with Jamaica or African religions, including Revivalism and Rastafarianism.

“Suffice to say, you don’t have to look hard to find a church in Jamaica,” Norbert Stephens says. Stephens, 45, is regional deputy general secretary of the Northeast Regional Mission Council of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. The United Church claims more than 10,000 members in more than 200 congregations in Jamaica.
Some preachers condemn homosexuality frequently, Stephens says, and their followers listen. Many more preachers, far from celebrating tolerance, try to ignore homosexuality altogether.

“We haven’t done enough as a church,” he says. “I think we’ve skirted the issue a little. We’re uncomfortable talking about homosexuality.

“It is not a view that everyone holds,” Stephens adds, referring to antigay sentiment, “but it is a prevalent view in Jamaica.”

For some, the explanation is simple.

“It comes from the Old Testament,” says Carolyn Cooper, professor of literary and cultural studies at the University of the West Indies at Mona, in Kingston. “It comes from Leviticus.”

Often cited by religious groups the world over, the King James version of Leviticus 18:22 reads: “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind. It is abomination.” Leviticus 20:13 reads: “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.”

Music also plays an important part in Jamaican antigay sentiment. The reigning “sound” in Jamaica is known as dancehall. A type of reggae infused with hip-hop influences, dancehall specializes in sexually explicit and violent lyrics combined with lewd stage antics. Some of the genre’s most popular songs, including Buju Banton’s 1992 hit “Boom Bye Bye,” celebrate attacking or killing gays, known as “battymen” in the Jamaican patois. Though international pressure has pushed dancehall musicians away from such themes to an extent, Jamaican radio stations still play such songs often.
“Even if you’re not thinking about it,” J-FLAG’s McFarlane says of hearing antigay music on the radio, “you’re singing the lyrics until they’re ingrained.”

“I think a lot of Jamaicans share a lot of opinions articulated by some of the DJs,” Professor Cooper says.

Meanwhile, many Jamaicans blame Western society for homosexuality. Particularly during a long history of slave revolts and anti-colonial unrest, Jamaica earned its reputation for resisting foreign influences. Some Jamaicans believe Americans and Europeans import homosexuality, and so it should be resisted.

“It’s thought to be non-African, non-Jamaican,” McFarlane says. “It’s brought from post-colonial whites.”

The everyday reality of life in Jamaica exacerbates the issue. More than a million tourists flock to Jamaica’s natural beauty and world-class resorts each year, and the country has successfully branded itself as a sunny paradise. But Jamaica is racked with poverty and one of the world’s highest murder rates. Police cite 1,660 homicides on the island in 2009, a rate of 57 murders per 100,000 people. By comparison, according to the FBI, the U.S. homicide rate in 2008 was 4.7 murders per 100,000 people. Due largely to gangs and the drug trade, much of the violence in Jamaica is concentrated in the densely populated ghettos of major urban centers such as Kingston.

_J-FLAG’s Work_

In Kingston, James McFarlane sits at his desk, typing a file on his laptop. J-FLAG’s program director is preparing for a brief meeting later with the United Nations special rapporteur on torture, who happens to be in Jamaica. At one of the two other
The third desk, reserved for Maria, a part-time volunteer assistant, is empty.

McFarlane and Timothy, 26, who won’t reveal his last name, are the only employees of the country’s only gay-rights group. Its headquarters is a single room.

Even getting to the room is a delicate process. Homosexuality in Jamaica attracts interested researchers and reporters from around the world every month. If their cause seems worthy, Timothy vets most outsiders and usually tries to meet them at a public place. Promises to keep identities and locations confidential are mandatory, preferably in writing.

“We’ve had good run-ins and bad run-ins,” Timothy explains. Even researchers who promise confidentiality sometimes reveal too much accidentally.

Only after that, if McFarlane allows it, will Timothy share the address to J-FLAG’s headquarters. They’re careful about revealing its location even to people seeking their help.

“We have received threats via the phone,” McFarlane says. “And some e-mail threats.” Several years ago, armed men showed up with ideas of “vigilante justice” in mind before police arrived to avert a confrontation.

J-FLAG’s office is in a house. No signs. Most visitors get past the front desk only by appointment. At the far end of the kitchen in the rear of the house, a white door bears a small printed sign instructing visitors to knock and wait.

Behind the door is J-FLAG’s cluttered, cramped headquarters. Three hefty old desks, half a dozen filing cabinets, a thin table and a glass-fronted bookcase crowd a room that can’t be larger than 150 square feet. A partial wall splits the office almost in
half. An oscillating stand fan whirls valiantly to combat the stifling Jamaican heat on this February afternoon.

Pamphlets with such slogans as “FAQs about HIV/AIDS” and “Stigma Hurts … Stop It!” fill an information rack in front of Timothy’s desk. Gay-oriented magazines, most outdated by years, cover filing cabinets by the door. The bookcase brims with dozen of books ranging from “Does Your Mama Know?” to “The Ultimate Guide to Anal Sex for Men.” A collage of postcards and notes from well-wishers covers the door to a broom closet.

From here, McFarlane, Timothy and a handful of volunteers change lives – and try to change their nation. J-FLAG spends much of its limited resources, gained from individual donations and grants from international aid groups, helping struggling gays and lesbians find new homes. If a young man’s parents kick him out of the house for being gay, he can call J-FLAG for help.

Yvonne, 48, handles most of the relocation calls, because it’s easier for a woman to help. Bringing a man along would invite assumptions that he’s gay, too, she says, which would make matters worse. Sometimes J-FLAG receives one such call a month, and sometimes 10.

Yvonne does everything from helping find an apartment to moving someone’s things out of his parents’ home in the middle of the night. If the individual needs help financially, as is often the case, J-FLAG will pay the rent for a month or two (if funds allow).
The group also runs a small shelter next door to its office for young men waiting to relocate. Eight young men, aged 18 to 28, currently live at the shelter after being forced out of their homes by parents or neighbors.

“Mothers do that to their kids,” Yvonne says. One of the men is 19 years old. “His father beat him with a shovel because he heard that he was gay.”

J-FLAG also helps people seek asylum in other countries, find legal assistance and obtain medical services. Yvonne and others sometimes accompany attack victims to the hospital. Recently someone stabbed a young man in drag, and Yvonne went to make sure a doctor stitched him up properly.

“When they find out you’re gay, sometimes they don’t want to help,” Timothy says.

McFarlane says J-FLAG handled 33 cases of people “being attacked and hurt in varying degrees,” and many more nonviolent cases, in 2009. The problem is that he hears of many more incidents that victims never report.

“That’s part of the challenge, to get a handle on the real numbers,” he says. It’s difficult to push for lasting change when many victims are afraid or unwilling to come forward, particularly in poor areas such as downtown Kingston, where violence is more vicious and more common than in wealthier areas.

“Middle-class people can get into their tinted vehicles and drive into their gated communities,” McFarlane says.

“Say you’re a closeted corporate executive,” Timothy says. “You go home to your apartment or to a hotel and you fuck your brains out. And the next day, who knows? No one knows. It’s like it never happened.
“But if you live in close quarters in the ghetto,” he says, “and someone catches you in the act? That’s when they cut you or shoot you.”

Even so, McFarlane says, that so-called class protection goes only so far. For example, a group of middle-class men were forced out of a restaurant recently. The owner and some customers assumed the men were gay, McFarlane says, and thought they had caught one of them checking out another man.

“You’re never certain of where and when,” McFarlane says. “You just have to be in the right place at the wrong time.”

The Future

McFarlane, who spends much of his time with J-FLAG quietly lobbying government officials and members of law enforcement, believes change will come.

“I hope for realistically in 10, 20 years, there may be new legislation,” he says. What form might that take? “The charter of rights is up for discussion. Or I would like to see the nondiscrimination clause widened to sexual orientation, or say no one can be discriminated against.

“This is a democracy,” McFarlane says. “We have a right to exist.”

Some hint of change is in the air. At the least, McFarlane says, troubles in Jamaica and international discussion of gay marriage have drawn wide media attention to gay rights. That, in turn, encourages the beginning of a dialogue in Jamaica. But just the beginning.

“I believe that we need to have a conversation in a wide way,” says Stephens, of the United Church in Jamaica. “As a nation, we need to have a more open conversation
about how – theologically, ethically, logistically – we deal with an issue that has been
around since the Bible was shaped."

But with lasting change a distant possibility, J-FLAG members have trouble
seeing the upside.

“You aren’t sure if you are making any headway,” Timothy says. “That really is
the biggest challenge. There’s more to it than just stories in the media. These are people’s
lives.”

On that front, at least, J-FLAG makes an impact daily.

“Yes, I am making a big difference,” Yvonne says. “Because now people have
someone to call. I do this because I love my fellow brothers and sisters.”

But for McFarlane and his colleagues, time is limited. In 2005, the year after a
mob murdered Williamson, the co-founder of J-FLAG, an armed gunman abducted and
killed group member Steve Harvey for being gay. Gareth Henry, from whom McFarlane
took over J-FLAG, fled to Canada in 2008 after death threats and at least one attack.

“I have been wondering at what point I will be going through that,” McFarlane
says. “It is a real challenge just to exist and have a life.”

McFarlane, who attended college and worked for years in New York City, laughs
at the question of why he is still in Jamaica.

“My desire to see a change in the community,” he says. “Someone has to do the
work. I’ll be here for as long as I can mentally manage the process.”
Sidebar

Q&A with Timothy

Meet Timothy. The 26-year-old Kingston man works for Jamaica’s Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, or J-FLAG, the country’s one gay-rights group. As program director James McFarlane’s assistant, Timothy is the second of J-FLAG’s two employees. He earned an undergraduate degree at St. John’s University in St. Joseph, Minn., and worked in New Jersey and New York City before returning to his home country. Here he discusses challenges he has faced as a gay man living in notoriously homophobic Jamaica.

*Talk about coming out as a gay Jamaican while in school in the U.S.*

In college, some friends took me to my first gay bar. There were strippers! And the binge drinking. I’m from Jamaica, where if you say ‘gay’ too loud, they’ll bash your head in. It was just sensory overload.

*Why did you return to Jamaica, given the antigay atmosphere?*

It’s my home. We all can’t be afraid. For me, it’s not as hard. I’m a middle-class Jamaican gay man. And I went to school in the States. So I know there’s a world outside of Jamaica. I have friends and resources outside the country. So if things got really bad, I know I could leave.
How do you handle homophobia in Jamaica after the relative acceptance of the U.S.?

Once you’ve had that experience, you can’t really get it out of you. And you tend to be more assertive about your sexuality. I try not to let too much get to me anymore. I just try to live and love and grow in love. And I think it’s worked for me.

Do you see yourself remaining in Jamaica for good?

I know I’ll have to leave eventually. I want to find love. It’s hard to find in Jamaica. Boys are so afraid to be themselves or to love. I don’t want to have to leave. This is my home. But it’s a question of when, not if.
This flier is one of the only items bearing the J-FLAG name in the group’s one-room headquarters. Even among friends, secrecy is paramount.

A homeless man sleeping on the sidewalk is a common sight even in the business district of New Kingston, Jamaica, a far wealthier area than the slums of downtown Kingston.
Chapter 2

Fear and Loathing in Jamaica: Kingston Residents on Homosexuality

With discrimination against gays and lesbians a daily fact of life and antigay violence a real threat, Jamaica has been called the most homophobic place on earth. But is it true?

“There are a number of persons who are very opposed to that lifestyle,” says Norbert Stephens, regional deputy general secretary of the Northeast Regional Mission Council of the United Church in Jamaica and the Cayman Islands. The United Church claims more than 10,000 members in more than 200 congregations in Jamaica.

Speaking with a handful of Kingston residents is enough to illuminate Stephens’ point. Assuming you can persuade people to talk about homosexuality at all.

“Uh, uh, uh, uh,” one woman responds.

“No, man,” a shopkeeper says.

Looking for input from a variety of Jamaicans, I recruit a cab driver named Colin to take me to a craft market in downtown Kingston. On the way, I ask Colin, 54, what he thinks of homosexuality and its place in Jamaican society.

“From the standpoint of life itself,” he says, “I don’t think it is the right thing to do, to be. Homosexuals are born of heterosexuals. Every homosexual on the planet, they came here of heterosexual beings. If it was philosophically correct [to be gay], it would bring an end to all life.
“But, a big but,” Colin adds, “every human being on the planet, bar none, is free to be who and do what they want to be. You can eat at the next table to me. You can share with me laughter. Just don’t impose yourself on me.”

The craft market on Ocean Boulevard, half a block from the Caribbean waters of Kingston’s port, consists of two long cinderblock buildings set on an otherwise barren lot. The buildings house a series of souvenir shops, most of them closed today. A handful of feral dogs snarl at each other in the street.

Two shops remain open this Sunday afternoon. The owner of the first speaks in a heavily accented patois, which sounds like mush to my untrained ear. But I understand his body language well enough when I ask him his views on homosexuality. He shakes his head vigorously before turning his back and walking into his store.

The owner of the next shop, Riley, 65, proves more willing to talk.

“I don’t think it’s the right thing to do,” he says. “It’s ungodly. Other than that, I have nothing against them. They behave quite nicely. They are peaceful, they don’t bother anybody. They come in and buy from me all the time.”

The next vendor I meet gives me much the same reply. Around the corner from the craft market, Colin parks the taxi at a snack cart near the water. It looks like a popular neighborhood hangout. A group of men sit in plastic chairs chatting. Drivers in cars that look far too expensive for this area pull up regularly to buy something to eat or drink from the woman who runs the cart. The 20 or 30 children in bathing suits or underwear playing in and around the nearby harbor fill the air with splashing and shouting.
“I don’t have a problem with them,” Sandra, 45, tells me. “If them buy from me, I sell to them, and them gone. I never have any problem. You just can’t tell a man how to live a life.”

A scrum of boys, who look about 12 to 16, all shouting their opinions about gay people, forms around me. Amid the yelling and the patois, I understand perhaps one word in 10. But the words I do catch – gunshot, fire, kill – convey their point.

After the ring of shouting children breaks up and heads for the water, three of the older boys step up. Their seeming leader, who calls himself Prince, invites me to “walk and talk.”

“The Jamaica style, we don’t deal with that,” Prince says. “No deal with battymen. They come from New Kingston. We do not want battymen in our country.”

What happens if they meet a gay person?


“Fire for them,” one of his friends chimes in.

Colin calls me over to speak with an older man who just rode up on his bike. The man is a true Rastafarian, Colin says, with evident pride. His dreadlocks in a shapeless, red, yellow and green knit cap and his eyes so bloodshot it almost makes mine water, the man looks the part. He refuses to give his name.

“Anything that wrong, one don’t support,” he says. “We no support them. We no support murdering.” Standing beside me, Colin beams and bumps fists with the man. I think he’s pleased to have found me such tolerant people to talk to.

“They all about the place,” the Rasta man continues. “You have to be careful – the homosexuals will rob and murder you.”
Colin looks horrified. I ask the man what he thinks causes homosexuality.

“Too much freedom,” he says. “If you have too much freedom, you’ll have a lot more wrongdoers. Find wrongdoers. You must kill them.”

“Okay, well, obviously we don’t exactly feel the same way,” Colin says. Then he leads me away from the Rastafarian and back toward the taxi.

Just before we leave, a young man in a green American Eagle T-shirt and plaid shorts gets up from his chair near the snack cart and steps toward me.

“So what do you think about gay people?” I ask.

“I think we should be nice to them,” he says. “Everybody deserves a chance in life.” Then the young man leans in closer and drops his voice to a whisper: “Because I am one.”

His name is Shawn, he tells me. The 20-year-old attends college and lives in a building just a block from the snack cart. He twirls his dingy plastic lawn chair nervously and tells me than none of the people hanging out here knows about him. Then he shows me a five-inch scar on his right forearm and a four-inch scar on his left bicep.

“They either kill you or chop you,” Shawn says.

Lonely and scared, he plans to seek asylum in the U.S. next month. But he knows it isn’t easy.

“I need friends overseas, but I don’t have any contacts,” he says. Then he stops staring at the dusty ground and looks me in the eye for the first time. “Do you have any contacts?”

It hurts me, but I tell him I don’t. I’m just a student. Afraid to say the name out loud – one of the men sitting nearby seems to have noticed my keen interest in Shawn’s
opinion – I write “J-FLAG can help” in my notebook and show it to Shawn. But he just shrugs and looks down at the ground again. His shoulders sag as he twirls his chair.

Not wanting to speak to Shawn suspiciously long, I thank everyone for speaking with me and join Colin as he walks back to his taxi. On the return trip to my hotel, Colin seems determined to make up for the Rastafarian’s betrayal.

“Some Jamaicans are more violent than others,” he says. “But it’s not a question of everybody in Jamaica. In fact, I don’t think the majority of Jamaicans are against homosexuals. It’s a very mixed-up situation.”

Halfheartedly agreeing with Colin’s assessment, I can’t get Shawn’s last words to me out of my head.

“I’m scared,” he said. “I really need some friends.”
A burly man searches me for weapons. He pats down my chest and back. He squeezes the empty pockets of my jeans. He runs his hands down my legs. He tugs at my belt buckle with both hands.

I have never been frisked at a party before. But I have never attended an underground gay party in deeply homophobic Jamaica. The gay party scene is a microcosm of being gay in Jamaica: a dangerous secret.

The man stops frisking me and steps back. He’s a few inches shorter than I am, probably around 5-foot-8, but he has more muscle in one arm than I have in my entire body. Bald, tattooed and clad entirely in black -- muscle tee, pants and boots -- the man would intimidate in broad daylight. And we’re not in broad daylight.

A few minutes past 11 p.m. on Saturday, Feb. 13, I have just arrived at a nondescript house in uptown New Kingston. Almost all the houses in this area hide behind fences or walls, often topped by barbed wire. My destination is no exception. The taxi driver tried to find the correct gate several times. When we arrived, Timothy, a lanky, 26-year-old Jamaican and my sort-of guide for the evening, had to ask a guard if we had found the party.

Three minutes and one frisking later, I wonder what I’ve gotten myself into. That will be the theme of the evening.
Satisfied that I’m unarmed, the burly man turns his attention to my companion. Timothy’s cell phone raises a red flag, but he can keep it because it has no camera.

While the guard searches Timothy, I hazard a glance around. The taxi left us at an unmarked metal gate in a nondescript wall about eight feet tall. Ushered past the gate, which is draped in white and red cloth, we stand in the dark at the end of a gravel driveway. Eight or nine young Jamaican men mill around a small car parked across the driveway. Almost like a barricade.

All the men wear black. They talk quietly in the Jamaican patois that sounds like so much gibberish to the uninitiated. They peck away at their BlackBerrys. The burly man was the only one to pay us any mind, but I get the feeling that all these men are hired security.

My attention snaps back to the burly man. He steps closer to Timothy and me.

“You have the money?” he asks. I hand him three crisp Jamaican $1,000 bills – about $35 U.S. – for the cover charges. And then the burly man comes another step closer. Is he trying to seem as ominous as possible?

Then I notice the guard just behind him. And the club hanging from the guard’s belt. Thicker than my forearm, the nightstick is about two-thirds the length of a baseball bat.

The burly man who frisked me speaks up.

“If there’s any commotion at all,” he tells us, “we’ll get rid of you.”

And with that, he steps out of our way so we can go enjoy the party.
Antigay Jamaica

To many Americans, Jamaica seems like a paradise. An idyllic playground of sunny beaches. An island of Rastafarians preaching one love.

But reality is radically different. Classified by the International Monetary Fund as a developing country, Jamaica is racked with poverty. The minimum wage is about $1.15 per hour, and areas such as downtown Kingston are riddled with ghettos and shantytowns. Gang- and drug-related violence runs rampant, particularly in urban areas. For years Jamaica has seen some of the highest homicide rates in the world. Police cite 1,660 homicides on the island in 2009, a rate of 57 murders per 100,000 people. By comparison, the U.S. homicide rate in 2008 was 4.7 murders per 100,000 people. And according to the World Health Organization, the 1.5 percent HIV infection rate in this island nation of 2.7 million is among the highest outside of sub-Saharan Africa.

Jamaica holds another distinction. In 2006, Time magazine called Jamaica the most homophobic place on earth. Discrimination against gays and lesbians is a daily fact of life, and antigay violence is fairly commonplace. The country’s lone gay-rights group, Jamaica’s Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, or J-FLAG, has said that it received more than 150 reports of attacks in 2006-08. James McFarlane, program director of J-FLAG, said in a February interview that the group handled more than 33 cases “of persons being attacked and hurt in varying degrees” in 2009.

McFarlane is a pseudonym the director uses for protection. J-FLAG cannot reveal the location of its Kingston headquarters publically for fear of harassment or attacks. Timothy, who also works at J-FLAG, says that Jamaicans don’t really use the term “out of the closet.”
“From the American standpoint, no one is out in Jamaica,” Timothy says. “No one does the Ellen Degeneres, on the cover of magazines, ‘I’m out’ thing. The only person who did that is dead.”

That was Brian Williamson, co-founder of J-FLAG. Williamson’s mutilated body was found in his home in June 2004. Police reported he had been stabbed 77 times.

Antigay sentiment in Jamaica appears to have roots in everything from widely held Evangelical Christian beliefs to violent lyrics by some of the nation’s most popular musicians. But a solid, even vibrant gay subculture lives on throughout the country. For example, Timothy says that popular “cruising” spots are scattered throughout relatively affluent uptown Kingston, mainly at public parks and restrooms. And groups of male prostitutes reportedly make decent money on side streets only a few blocks from Knutsford Boulevard, the main street in the business district of New Kingston.

“If there weren’t a subculture,” Timothy says, “how do they keep getting work?”

Where the gay subculture seems to thrive is the party scene. Kingston boasts a handful of promoters who regularly organize parties for gays and lesbians. In a good month, people in the know can find at least one party every weekend and sometimes a few each week.

Promoters throw most parties at private or rented houses. Security is a must. While relatively rare, antigay attacks have been an issue. Timothy says people have tried to talk their way into parties with knives, guns and even acid. When I ask why acid, he gives me a quizzical look.

“To throw in someone’s face, obviously,” he says.
Recording devices, including cameras and modern cell phones, also are verboten. No one wants his picture at a gay party plastered on Facebook or in the tabloids.

“In Jamaica, we always have to be vigilant,” Timothy says. “We’re very aware of our surroundings. So even when we’re relaxing, we’re not.”

Not Your Average Party

Tonight is a Valentine’s Day party. Streamers hang in the doorway to the dance floor. Large pink streamers extend from a ceiling light fixture to each corner of the room. The light fixture, which looks like an upside-down tulip, shines with a purple light bulb. The light in the next room has a red one.

The party takes up most of the empty house, which looks to cover about a thousand square feet. A bar serves soda, Red Stripe beer, bottled water and mixed drinks (vodka with cranberry juice appears to be the drink of choice). Just beyond the foyer is the dance floor. A DJ plays loud, hip-hop-sounding music using a Mac laptop and a hefty sound system. A projector splashes music videos that don’t match the music onto a wall.

Other walls are bare, mostly unpainted. Furniture is totally absent. Yards of black cloth cover the wall-to-wall windows in the front of the house. The double front doors, only one of which remains on it hinges, open onto a concrete wall, making a small side door the only entrance. A port-a-potty stands out back. One of the party’s organizers, dressed all in white, confirms that the house is often rented for parties.

Timothy and I arrive at about 11 p.m. The place is empty. Most parties in Kingston, Timothy tells me, don’t get hopping until 1 or 2 a.m. So we stand under a tree
in the large yard and wait. Guests, almost all men, start showing up in earnest at around 1 a.m. It’s still early, so most of them buy drinks and stand around chatting in small groups.

By now, I’ve begun to relax. The knot of misgiving in my stomach has eased. Except for the guards stationed at the front gate and the door into the house, the party is not unlike your average house party in the U.S.

Timothy stops talking mid-sentence and stares to his left. Noticing that he is suddenly rigid, I follow his gaze to a wooden gate in the wall about 10 yards away. I remember having passed it in our search for the main gate earlier. Then I notice the tops of two or three heads just beyond the gate and hear raised voices. As a man’s hand reaches up and pulls at the gate, a guard jogs over to that corner of the yard. He’s not sprinting, but he’s not taking his time, either. After some conversation, the guard appears to direct the men to the main entrance. He heads back toward the party.

“They were just looking for directions,” Timothy says, eyes still on the gate. The relief in his voice is palpable. “That’s the sort of thing that can go wrong. They might not have wanted directions. They might have been here to cause trouble. “I was ready to find a way out of here.”

That’s the only reminder I need that this isn’t your average house party. Looking for an escape route at a party is new for me. What I don’t know is that Timothy and I will be forced to use that escape route soon.

*Gay Party Planning*

“I’m going to be one of those people where you think Jamaica isn’t so bad.”
Meet Pierce. Born in Canada, where his two Jamaican-born parents relocated to have children, Pierce moved to Jamaica when he was 8 years old. A college student living in Kingston, Pierce is bisexual.

“For the most part, I got lucky with a supportive family unit,” he says. “When I came out, my mom said, ‘So we can stop pretending you’re not?’”

The head of Fierce and Co., his party-planning business, Pierce is one of the few people who plan gay parties in Jamaica. He started because his mother wasn’t comfortable with his going to parties, some of which are rowdy, or worse. So Pierce decided to throw his own.

“It was about wanting to provide something to gays that wasn’t there,” he says.

Now Pierce reckons about eight serious promoters specialize in parties targeted at GLBT people. The gay party scene, like gay life in general in Jamaica, is stratified roughly along socioeconomic lines. Different promoters run in different circles. Some throw “downtown” parties, characterized by a rougher, more working-class crowd. The security is less elaborate, the cover charge is lower and the frills are fewer. Those parties, whether actually held in downtown Kingston or not, can be dangerous, Timothy says.

Parties in Jamaica often end after dawn, and after copious drinking. End-of-party drama occasionally gets violent, which is one reason for all the security.

Uptown parties are classier affairs. The cover charge is higher, but Pierce says you get what you pay for. Venues are nicer, security is tighter. Sometimes the party has a theme and decorations, and once in a while the entry price includes drinks.

By all accounts, Pierce throws uptown parties.

“Really top-notch, closet-case-type people go to his parties,” Timothy says.
Pierce tries to phrase it more politely. He doesn’t like pinning differences on one’s social rank.

“I like to say there’s a different caliber of people,” he says about his parties. “There are outstanding members of society. We’ve had politicians, radio and TV personalities, doctors, lawyers. Prominent businessmen, hoteliers.”

Few of them support GLBT issues publicly.

“For the most part,” Pierce says, “it’s sad that a lot of the prominent people who do come are the ones who speak out against homosexuality.”

Those qualms aside, Pierce enjoys the niche he occupies in gay Jamaica. And a lucrative niche it is. Promoters pull in anywhere from $10,000 to $1 million Jamaican in profit per party. (That’s about $110 to $11,000 U.S.) That’s nothing to sneeze at, considering a decent venue can cost as much as $3,000 U.S., and promoters often throw one or more parties each month.

Little wonder that competition among the small group of dedicated party planners can get tough.

“There’s friendly competition,” Pierce says, “and we all tend to support each other’s events.” A group of promoters, for instance, is trying to plan a calendar of events in Kingston to coincide with worldwide gay-pride events in June.

And sometimes the competition is less friendly. New Year’s weekend featured a full slate of gay parties, and someone named Brandon tried to squeeze Pierce’s party out of its prime Friday night slot. Brandon’s party occupied an empty house in the hills, required patrons to pay for drinks, lacked any food and had to be lit by candles because the house had no electricity. Pierce’s shindig, a luau-themed party dubbed “Taste the
Rainbow,” included a “premium location,” all-inclusive food and drink, “prime decorations” and fireworks. All for the same price as Brandon’s party.

“I served drinks and socialized personally,” Pierce says. He adds that promoters sometimes don’t even bother attending their own events. “I literally came out with a silver platter.”

“So were you in your Playboy bunny outfit?” asks Michael, a friend of Pierce and Timothy.

“No, I was beautifully dressed,” Pierce says.

Party Foul

I don’t know about beautifully dressed, but Pierce has arrived at the Valentine’s Day party, which is finally lively. Just as Timothy predicted, and almost as if on cue, people started arriving in droves just before 2 a.m. Now gay Jamaicans are all over the place: cozied up to the bar, packed into the house, talking in groups outside or strolling in pairs across the lawn. They’re everywhere but the dancefloor. It reminds me of an eighth-grade dance where all the children circle the dancefloor expectantly, hoping others will go first so they don’t look foolish.

Pierce blames the DJ. The music is too hard, too hip-hop, too “straight.” Some good American pop music would get people dancing, he says.

“Give us our Britney,” he says to no one in particular. When the DJ continues with another thumping hip-hop selection, we head outside for air. The night is warm, and the packed house is stifling.
On our way out, three transvestites brush past us and park near the dancefloor. In
the lead is a crossdresser who must be six and a half feet tall (partly because of the
enormous heels he wears) and built like an Olympian. They wear tight shirts and
impossibly short mini-skirts. Their blond-highlighted hair (or wigs, I suppose) look as
hard as plastic. Ostentatious jewelry is everywhere: gold necklaces, huge hoop earrings
and gawdy, clunky rings. The tallest, in a green shirt with a dragon design on the back
and a white mini-skirt, wears a white, patent leather belt shinier than a new car.

“Just think if the police had stopped her on the way here,” Pierce says. “They
think they’re pulling over a woman. Then she gets out, and immediately they know.
That’s how things go bad.”

Timothy turns, disgusted. “Sweepstakes girls,” he calls them. Often a rowdy sort,
sweepstakes girls are flashy, nouveau-riche transvestites. Pierce admits they do a lot for
gay visibility in Kingston, since they’re not afraid to walk down the street, but they can
be trouble once the party really gets going. The sweepstakes girls are a sign that tonight’s
party is even more “downtown” than Timothy thought.

Outside someone set up a round card table with a red tablecloth. Small plastic
masks in different colors ring the edge of the table, and a pile of beaded Mardis Gras
necklaces sits in the center. Evidently tonight is supposed to be a masquerade. But the
man at the table apologizes when Timothy tries to take a necklace and a mask, saying it’s
one or the other. The snowy weather in North America delayed the rest of the order,
leaving the party short on cheesy costume pieces.

A handful of sex toys covers the rest of the table. They include edible handcuffs
and the “slap and tickle” set (featuring a pink plastic hand on a stick and a long-handled
feather duster, presumably for slapping and tickling, respectively). Selling them at gay parties is common, Timothy says, since finding them elsewhere can be a challenge. It’s hard to imagine these items showing up at many Jamaican stores.

Timothy, Pierce and I have spent most of the party with Pierce’s “cousin” (slang in Jamaica for good friend) Wilton. Willowy, extremely thin and effeminate, Wilton strikes me as someone who would have a hard time passing for straight. Timothy is amazed that Wilton attends the same public school that he used to, but Wilton says he gets by with relatively little harassment. As usual for gay Jamaicans, money helps. Wilton says his mother used to be a pop musician.

“Existing can be difficult,” Pierce says, especially in school. “But it is a myth. You can exist in Jamaica and be gay.”

Perhaps more surprising to me is the fact that Wilton is only 15, but here he stands at a gay dance party in uptown Jamaica, sipping a vodka and cranberry, having a fine time. Wilton is much more at ease than I am, at any rate.

And so we sit, the house and my rib cage vibrating with the thumping bass. Timothy is bored. Pierce is indignant. From a professional perspective, the party is a sloppy job. $1,500 Jamaican to get in, but a cash bar, not enough masks to go around (not that anyone wears one) and terrible music.

“Ninety percent of our music is about [sex], isn’t it?” Pierce asks. “That’s gross, actually.”

Music is often cited as a root of Jamaica’s antigay atmosphere. Dancehall music, sort of a reggae-infused hip-hop, is wildly popular on the island. But it is also wildly
sexualized and sometimes antigay. Some of the genre’s most popular hits, such as Buju Banton’s “Boom Bye-Bye,” glorify burning, shooting and murdering gays and lesbians.

Daggering often accompanies dancehall music at Jamaican clubs and parties. It is a dance by a man and a woman (generally) that has been described as having sex with one’s clothes on. At events such as Passa Passa, a massive street party held in downtown Kingston each Wednesday night, the ubiquitous daggering can be graphic.

Tonight’s Valentine’s party, meanwhile, is sedate by comparison. Pierce again blames the music, and I have to agree. More people seem to tolerate the party than enjoy it.

Until about 3:15 a.m. Toward the end of yet another thumping hip-hop-y song, the DJ mixes in the first few seconds of the Lady Gaga song “Bad Romance.” The distinctive “oh-oh-oh-oh-ohh” acts like a gay cattle call, and everyone outside stampedes inside.

“Come on, we have to get close to the dance floor,” says Pierce, who takes off like a shot. I jog after him into the throng of people pushing their way inside. It takes a minute or two because guards have to wand everyone with handheld metal detectors. They’ve done that all night whenever someone enters the house – I’ve been wanded four times already.

Inside the house, I’m suddenly at a new party. Nearly everyone is dancing, and time flies as the DJ runs through a string of Lady Gaga songs. Then he moves on to Miley Cyrus’s “Party in the USA” and assorted other pop songs I don’t recognize.

The energy is palpable. But with dozens of dancing Jamaicans packed into such a small space without air-conditioning (almost all the windows are covered with black cloth), the room soon feels unbearable. Or it does to me. No one else seems bothered. Nor
does anyone else appear troubled by the cloying reek of marijuana, or ganja, hanging thick in the air. In each shadowy corner of the house, I see the red flash of someone lighting up a few times every minute.

At 3:55 a.m., just before I ask Timothy if we can leave lest I asphyxiate, the DJ cuts in with a long-awaited announcement:

“Get ready! The stripper is about to begin!”

Pierce grabs my arm and pushes his way to the edge of the crowd ringing the dancefloor.

“We’ve got to get you a good view,” he says. That’s the last thing I want, but Pierce pushes me in front of him. Now one row from the show, I see a white plastic lawn chair. I rack my brain for a polite way to tell Pierce I don’t want to see a Jamaican man take his clothes off for the crowd. My mind is blank. I blame the heat and fumes. The crowd cheers in anticipation.

Suddenly a hand grabs my right arm and pulls me back into the crowd. Timothy hauls me toward the door. Wilton, Pierce and Pierce’s boyfriend, Stewart, charge ahead of us. I don’t understand.

Not until we clear the crowd and near the door do I get it. A bright light shines in from outside. A man in a helmet and vest stands beside the doorway. In large, white letters, his vest reads POLICE.

“We have to get out of here now,” Timothy says.

Risky Business

Attending a gay party in Jamaica can be dangerous.
Almost all such events occur on private property or in a secluded location. Most include hired security to keep the peace inside and to keep troublemakers out. Promoters almost never advertise. They rely on word of mouth or private Facebook groups. Gay parties need to maintain a low profile. They don’t attract unwanted attention.

“A mob with torches and pitchforks is a sad but realistic possibility,” Pierce says.

In January 2008, for example, a mob broke into a Mandeville home and attacked the four men inside, sending two to the hospital. One man could not be found and was thought dead. The men had been eating dinner.

Trouble with the police is another issue. While “the abominable act of buggery,” or anal intercourse, remains illegal in Jamaica, authorities rarely enforce the law. Instead, under the island’s Noise Abatement Act, police can be called in to break up loud parties after 2 a.m. That can be a problem when most people don’t show up to parties until 1 a.m. Sometimes the police shut down the party. Other times they allow it to continue if the DJ turns the volume down. Instances of antigay police brutality, while widely publicized, are rare, Pierce says.

The real danger lies in the crowd, not with the police. Particularly at a “downtown” party, where partygoers are often rowdier (and sometimes drunker), the situation can deteriorate if police show up. People who only just showed up want their money’s worth. Sometimes they refuse to stop the party. Sometimes they party harder to spite the police. Sometimes they get confrontational.

“The crowd tends to disperse immediately out of fear,” Pierce says. “Sometimes they don’t. And that’s when bad things can happen.”
Despite the danger, the demand for gay-focused parties can far exceeds the supply.

“The public doesn’t know,” Pierce says (or they don’t want to know, he suggests). “But we’re actually a very large segment of society. We have had parties with hundreds, if not thousands, in attendance.”

But why? Why explore Jamaica’s underground gay party scene if it’s so risky?

“The natural desire for human interaction is still there,” Timothy says. “We all can’t be afraid.”

Time To Go

For a moment, I’m more shocked than afraid. The crowd behind me still cheers for the stripper. They have no idea about the police.

I look at the plastic mask in my left hand. Baby blue with feathers sticking out of the top, it’s nicer than most other cheap masks at the party. Pierce asked me to hang onto it while he danced because he wanted to bring it home. But I wonder if walking outside holding the mask would make me seem too gay for the police to tolerate. I toss the mask onto the bar and hurry for the door.

The bright light flooding the entrance to the house comes from a police car’s headlights. The car sits in the yard 10 feet from the door. The light blinds me, but I make out two more officers standing near the car, speaking into walkie talkies. I turn and jog after Timothy. Pierce and Wilton all but run for Pierce’s car. Pierce’s boyfriend, Stewart, heads for another car a few spaces away.
“It was very nice meeting you,” one of Pierce’s friends calls to me as he hurries to Stewart’s car.

About 20 seconds later, Pierce pulls out of the front gate and speeds toward the business district of New Kingston. Timothy is quiet. Wilton seems unfazed. Pierce is outraged that the police, probably called by a neighbor angry at the noise, got into the party at all.

“At my parties, security does not let the police in,” he says, fuming. “They call me, and I deal with them personally. This is outrageous.”

When I ask what they would do at the party, Pierce says probably nothing. Mostly, police just end a party and tell everyone to leave. But the folks at a “downtown” party are liable to resist in some way, and that’s bad news all around.

Everyone is silent. The car tears through the night. Then Pierce sighs.

“Welcome to Jamaica,” he says, “where a good time can change in an instant.”
Sidebar

Electronic Hate at Gay Parties

Gay parties in Jamaica require serious security. But guards don’t just target aggressive troublemakers. Electronic recording devices of any type – from video cameras to cell phones with cameras – are prohibited.

Timothy, an employee of Jamaica’s lone gay-rights group, says antigay sentiment in Jamaica is so prevalent that “it causes an environment where gay men turn on each other. They think in terms of ‘every man for himself, and I’m not going be the one.’ So you have a situation where one gay man will out another because it won’t be them.”

As such, it’s not uncommon for someone to try to take photos or video at a gay party or from Facebook and leak them onto the Internet or to newspapers.

“There have been many and horrible instances of viral attacks on people,” says Pierce, a volunteer with J-FLAG.

In 2004, for example, rumors swirled that someone recorded videos at a particular gay party. Many guests dreaded the possibility of being outed.

“All of their livelihoods were jeopardized for fear of these videos being released,” Pierce said.

He knows that someone has posted a video of himself at a party, though he tries not to worry about it.
“So far mine has been pretty quiet,” he said. “If not, I might have to get on a plane and go. God, this country sucks.”
Sidebar

Social Media and Gay Culture

Technology plays an important part in many gay Jamaicans’ lives, making it easier for them to communicate, to express themselves, and to meet other gay men and women.

Social networks: With numerous options for private friend lists and group pages, Facebook is a godsend in Jamaica. Party planners advertise events. J-FLAG organizes workshops. Men and women communicate openly and share pictures without fear. Gays and lesbians often maintain separate public and private profiles, so social media mean a lot.

Dating sites: The popularity of Adam4adam.com and other sites means meeting other gay men is easier than before. Though often used specifically for finding sexual partners, sites such as these include profile-making, e-mail and instant-messaging options in an explicitly gay-friendly space.

Cruising: Even finding sex on the go is more doable now. The iPhone and iPod Touch app Grindr has gained some traction in Jamaica. Grindr uses the phone or iPod’s built-in GPS and WiFi technology to pinpoint the user’s location and notify him of nearby users.
Reflection

“Him a batty boy.”

Only once did I hear the phrase “batty boy,” derogatory slang for a gay man, directed at me. Only once over the course of two weeks in Kingston, Jamaica. A pack of teenagers jeered as I photographed an outdoor festival. One of them said it, once.

Once was enough.

In Jamaica, being gay – or being perceived as gay – can be uncomfortable at best, and dangerous at worst. Discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people is a daily fact of life. Antigay violence is a real possibility.

And yet a gay subculture persists throughout the island. Gay parties regularly attract hundreds of partygoers. A few hotels advertise themselves as gay-friendly, and one or two boast openly gay owners. The country’s lone gay-rights group, Jamaica’s Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays, or J-FLAG, works from an undisclosed location to advocate change.

Preparing to spend two weeks in Kingston reporting on gay life, I didn’t know what to expect. All I knew was that it must be complicated to survive in Jamaica if you’re not straight.

I’m lucky I had a tour guide of sorts. Timothy, 26, works for J-FLAG. Born and raised in Jamaica, he earned his undergraduate degree in the U.S. During my time in
Kingston, Timothy introduced me to friends and colleagues. He showed me a piece of 
gay life in Jamaica.

Many gay Jamaicans live in fear, Timothy told me. Fear of being revealed as gay. 
And that fear has had a surprising effect on gay Jamaicans, one I didn’t see coming. 
Instead of fostering a sense of community, the fear instills in many Jamaicans a dog-eat-
dog mentality.

“It causes an environment where gay men turn on each other,” Timothy said. 
“They think in terms of every man for himself. So you have a situation where one gay 
man will out another because it won’t be them.”

At first I was amazed. One gay man outing another to draw suspicion away from 
himself? Such a concept seemed foreign to me.

But over the course of two weeks in Kingston, I began to understand. I’m 
ashamed to say I felt it, too.

Granted, I had planned my trip cautiously. I was heading to a foreign country, 
alone, and poking my nose into a sensitive topic in what is widely considered the most 
dangerous city in the Caribbean. I had packed my baggiest jeans and had opted for blue 
and grey shirts over purple and pink.

Even so, my research and planning did not prepare me for the paranoia I felt in 
Kingston. Was I dressed “straight” enough? Was I acting straight enough?

Whenever Timothy and I met, we drew stares. The cashier at a takeout place 
smirked at us. The concierge at the front desk of my hotel gave Timothy a hard time 
whenever he came looking for me. Timothy said that if two young men eat a meal
together, some people will assume they’re gay. He has had to leave restaurants before because other diners would snicker or a waiter would refuse to serve him and his friend.

The paranoia worsened. I worried that the hotel staff would think it strange that I invited Timothy up to my room. I worried about telling Timothy and his friend Pierce that I’m gay. Even sitting at an open window in J-FLAG’s headquarters bothered me.

I remember sitting in Burger King one afternoon while Timothy told me about being gay in Jamaica’s public school system. I could feel my getting red. I missed half of what he said because I was busy sneaking glances at other customers to see if they could hear what we were talking about.

Only through Timothy and his friends’ example did I began to relax. They were able to walk down the street and hang out and go to a party. And for the most part they didn’t care. Or at least they didn’t let it get to them. After all, gay Jamaicans often suffer hazards much greater than unfriendly customer service.

On my last night in Jamaica, Timothy explained some of the looks we had been getting. He suggested that because I’m a white man, and he is, by certain standards, an effeminate Jamaican man, some people would jump to the conclusion that I was a sex tourist and he was a prostitute plying his trade. At least Timothy didn’t tell me that right off the bat.

I’ve returned now to America with a fuller, more secure sense of myself. In most of the U.S., a look is just a look. An insult is just an insult. In Jamaica, homophobia can mean something much worse.

“I’m from Jamaica,” Timothy said, “where if you say ‘gay’ too loud, they’ll bash your head in.”
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