

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

My first impression of the place was that we had left the city entirely. As if somehow by walking the distance of a few blocks through some odd back alleys, we were taken at least as far away as a suburb nestled half an hour away from the city via commuter train. We definitely weren't in Oslo anymore, or at least the same city I had come to know over the last year. Vivi tried to explain the place to me using terminology I could relate to: a “bridge and tunnel” bar. In New York “bridge and tunnel” is a general term that refers to all of the people who come into the city every weekend from Long Island, New Jersey, and beyond. Literally they come in cars and trains through bridges and tunnels, so there you go.

“See that guy over there?”, she said, nodding her head in the general direction of the door. “Yea, the normal looking guy in the corner?” “Yes, him. I used to see him everyday on the bus when I was younger and lived out in the suburbs. I used to wonder what he did on the weekends and actually... I think he comes here a lot.”

“Cool.” I wasn't sure how to respond. This place was strange but soon enough I became adjusted to my new surroundings. I didn't know anyone there, of course, but then again most of the people I knew were from the art world and the crowd here was very, very different. In fact, I couldn't imagine anyone I knew here aside from the people I was already with. Which was a shame, because the first thing I noticed was that everyone looked so *happy*.

It's Saturday night and half past one. The bar is more narrow than wide and has very few distinguishing features. The most striking of which is that the bar is actually a storefront, so the entire right hand side when you walk in is a large plate glass window. From the outside the window provides passersby on the street with a clear, albeit backside view of a small karaoke stage with a DJ and sometimes a singer atop. One side of the stage runs into a wall and two other sides face small tables with patrons and a group of people dancing out of their seats. There is also a handy flatscreen facing the street displaying lyrics in real time as the singer inside belts them out over the sound system. We were sitting by the bar, as far away from the stage as possible, which actually wasn't that far since the bar was pretty small.

A middle aged woman on the stage is singing a very sad Norwegian song I have never heard before, but everyone else in the room seems to know it. The video screen behind her shows images of the moon and romantic landscapes at dusk. Her voice isn't beautiful by any stretch of the imagination, but she seems very into it. There is emotion in her voice and she means every word she sings; they are hers and she is both happy and sad at the same time. Meanwhile, Vivi is hungrily flipping through the song books: flip, flip, flip, “ooh”, flip, flip, flip. Right across the table from her is Espen, looking completely terrified. I'm somewhere in the middle, equal parts excitement and terror, because I know I will sing but I also want to get a feel for the atmosphere. And it feels good. The all around mood is very safe, very open, and very drunk. Half full beer glasses litter our table from people who left before we arrived.

The bar's routine is both comforting and loud. After the woman is finished singing, a round of applause circulates among the patrons for a few seconds before the DJ starts to blast reggaeton. A minute after that, dancers have materialized and fill the space directly in front of the stage until it is time for another song. When that time comes, the DJ calls out a person's first name, cues up his equipment, and the cycle is repeated. Some singers were very good, almost showing off. Others were more like the first woman, endearing almost to the point of embarrassment. Almost, but not entirely—like catching a glimpse of a friend naked for the first time—that warm mixture of curiosity and embarrassment that you have breached some boundary, usually unintentionally. The feeling that arises seeing another person stripped of all their defenses but not their power, the murky feelings of kinship and alienation intertwined, inseparable from one another.

The definitive highlight of the night was when an guy wearing a red baseball hat and holding a glass of beer took the stage. He yelled more than he sang into the microphone, but his rendition of the old folk song “2525” set to the unofficial cyber-punk video on the screen behind him gave everyone the chills. It was beautiful.



All is equal in love and war