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ONOMATOPOEIA: SOUNDS LIKE NEW YORK
Episode: We're queer, I'm new here

MUSIC: "When I Grow Up" by the Pussycat Dolls

LUCY GRINDON: I'm trying to get across the dance floor. This girl in trapezoid-shaped white sunglasses notices me. She starts jumping from side to side right in front of me, blocking my way like she's some kind of basketball guard. I freeze. Do I copy the basketball-guard move? Do I make a joke out of pushing past her? Do I try to flirt?

I want to play this game, but I don't know how. She can tell, and she quickly loses interest. She turns away and goes over to talk to one of the DJs.

How does a person find love in a place like this?

THEME MUSIC

LG: I'm Lucy Grindon, and this is Onomatopoeia, a podcast about the people and places of New York City. In this episode, we're queer, and I... am new here.

Let's back up. It's Friday night, and this is my first time at Henrietta Hudson, the oldest lesbian bar in the city. Actually, this is my first time alone at *any* lesbian bar.

I want to meet someone. A new friend would be great, but what I *really* want is to give someone my number or ask someone on a date. I've never done that before, not in person.

Before I left my apartment, I wrote a note on a piece of paper so I could hand it to someone, in case I was too scared to use my voice.

Here's what the note says:

MUSIC: "Vernouillet" by Blue Dot Sessions

LG: "Hi! I came out as gay about a year ago, in the middle of the pandemic, and I just moved to New York in August. I'm 24, but still a baby gay, alas! Anyway, I wrote this out in case I didn't have the guts to ask someone out, out loud. And decided to give it to you! Text me! Or be bolder than I was and call!"

LG: I included my phone number, and I signed my first name. I tucked the note into the back pocket of my jeans, determined to give it to someone, and I got on the Downtown 2/3.

SUBWAY ANNOUNCER: This is Houston Street.

LG: My heart is pounding as I walk through the front door. I take a seat at the bar.

BARTENDER: What can I get started for ya?

LG: Uh, do you have Blue Moon?

BARTENDER: No.

LG: Nine other women are sitting there. Two beanies. One baseball cap. Facing forwards, not backwards. One of the beanie women locks eyes with me. She gives a small nod, and a little smile. I wave. Am I supposed to wave? I think... probably not.

As it turns out, I'm not the only newbie at Henrietta Hudson. I talk to two women sitting at a table nearby. One is about my age. The other is 48. This is her first time at a lesbian bar, too. It's also her first time out in public as a woman.

She buys me a beer. The dancing is supposed to start soon, and she's trying to convince me and her younger friend to get out there with her.

Soon, the lights are off. The crowd grows quickly, and suddenly it's warm. And loud. I see two girls dancing together to "Bad Romance" by Lady Gaga. They hold each other's faces and scream-sing the lyrics to each other:

MUSIC: "Bad Romance" by Lady Gaga: "I don't wanna be friends..."

LG: I'm searching the room for someone to talk to, but I feel lost. Who's here with a date, and who's here with a friend? I'm overwhelmed.

I kind of love being in a space where *everyone* is new. Like journalism school, for example. But here, I feel almost exactly the way I used to feel at seventh grade dances. I was the new kid. At a Catholic middle school in Pasadena, California. I used to float from one circle of sweaty, soda-filled 12-year-olds to another. I could never figure out where I was supposed to fit. Honestly, in that environment, I don't think I was meant to.

But here, I *am* supposed to fit in. I feel it in my bones. So why can't I just ask someone to dance with me?

MUSIC: "Slumber Party" feat. Princess Nokia by Ashnikko

LG: I reach to feel the folded note in my back pocket. I look around. Is there anyone I can give it to? Everyone is beautiful. Everyone seems friendly. No one feels reachable. I just don't know. It's too much for me. I slip out the back door.

I try to remember, as I walk back to the subway, that this is hard.

Even in a place where you belong, maybe it takes time to feel at home.

THEME MUSIC

This episode of Onomatopoeia was created by me, Lucy Grindon. Onomatopoeia is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. Joanne Faryon is our executive producer and professor. Original theme music by Lee Feldman. Other music by Blue Dot Sessions. Special thanks to Columbia Digital Librarian Michelle Wilson.