# On growing through chaos

Writer, filmmaker and artist Angeline Gragasin traces her own loss of innocence through three stories, each of which helped her learn to be resilient in the face of chaos and uncertainty.

March 26, 2020 -

As told to , 3077 words.

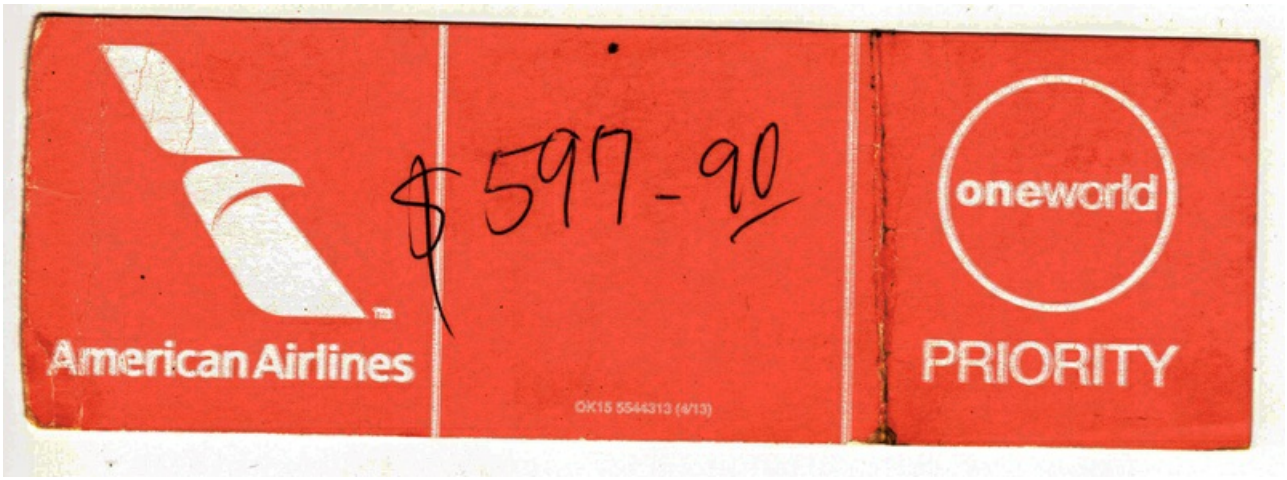
*We are now living in a time of unprecedented chaos and uncertainty. It's tempting to feel discouraged or debilitated by forces beyond our control — to succumb to the chaos, and to feel like giving up. Despite this, I find that meditating on my past experiences growing through chaos can relieve stress, and empower me to embrace uncertainty and fear as an inherent part of the creative process, and of life itself.*

*Below are three stories that mark turning points in my relationship to this mysterious and dramatic force. These personal anecdotes describe the chaos of escaping an abusive relationship, the chaos of sharing close quarters with strangers, and the chaos of an overwhelming, unexpected crowd. I wrote them months before the emergence of coronavirus. Looking back on these memories today, I now understand they mark important milestones in tracing my own loss of innocence, and my coming to terms with the responsibilities of adulthood. While they now feel detached from today's global crisis, they still remind me that I am a resilient, creative person with the power to change my behavior, my perspective, and ultimately, my reality. This is a reminder I think we could all use right now.*

*I hope that by sharing my stories, it might encourage you to reflect on your own experiences learning and growing through chaos. While these past "crises" now seem a bit trivial compared to the massive chaos of today, they did teach me important lessons on coping with events outside of my control. My greatest wish right now is for all of us to work together to transform today's chaos into an opportunity for creativity, community, and growth.*

## MY SKULL

I was 28 years old. I left Oakland with nothing but the clothes on my back and a one-way red-eye flight to New York City. I bought my ticket that night, at the airport, in cash. I'd finally snapped. A voice inside my head whispered: Get out. Get out now. I'd tried to end it before — every year for five years — but somehow he'd weasel his way back into my life, and the voice inside my head would retreat into silence. He wanted to buy a house and have a baby. We were neither married nor engaged, but he'd suddenly begun referring to me as his wife. When his computer broke, he snatched mine away and wouldn't give it back. He said coding was more important than editing a film nobody would see.




My one-way standby ticket from Oakland to NYC, purchased with cash at the ticketing booth.

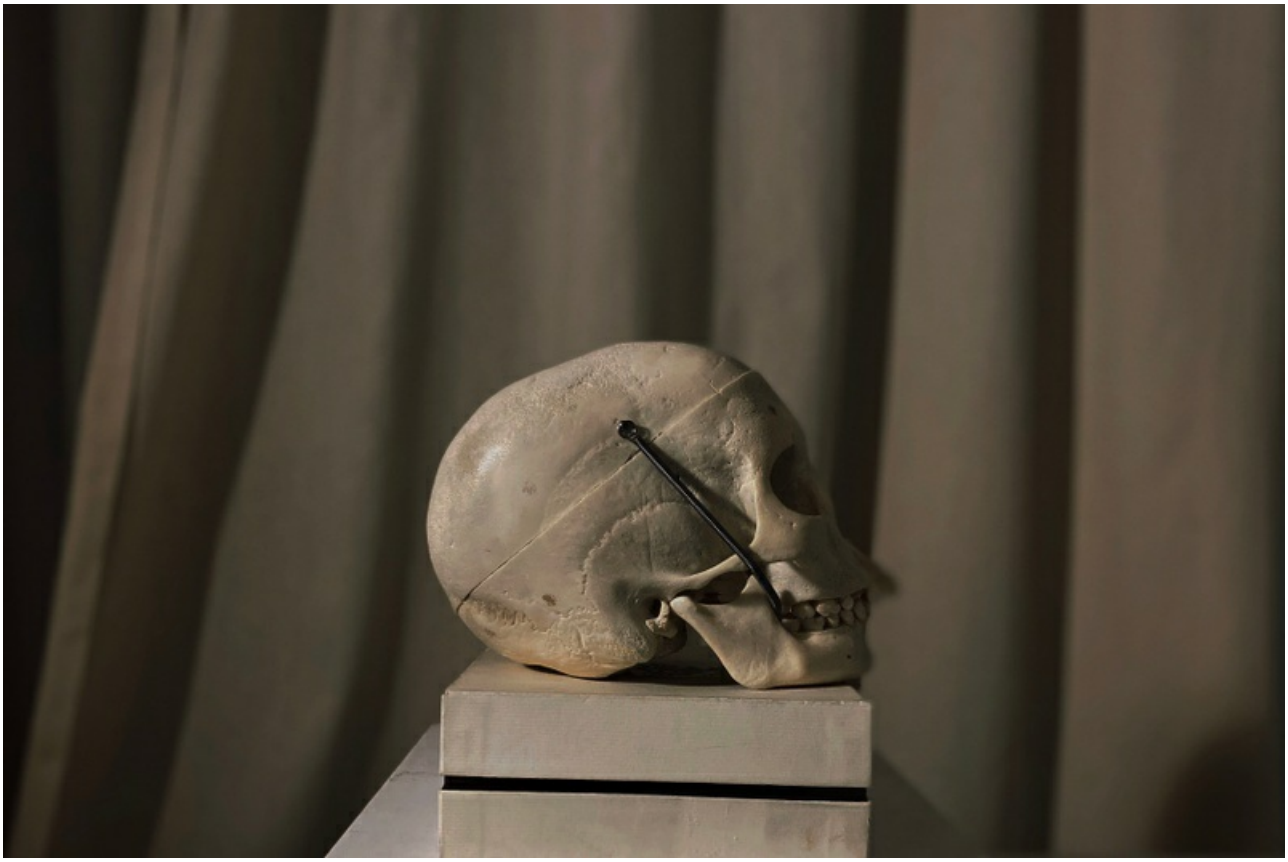
He thought I should drop filmmaking and get a real job. I thought he should drop dead. I remembered all the times he'd lost money, lost his temper, broke things, threatened me. One time he was arrested for stealing a car — his own mother's. I was so ashamed. I knew I had to leave then, or else I might never. I left as quickly and as quietly as I could. I didn't say when or where I was going. I walked out the door and vanished. I landed in Brooklyn on July 5, 2013. It was too hot for clothes, too hot to think. Too hot to be scared. I didn't have a plan for how to survive. But an old friend had moved into a new apartment before her last lease was up, so I had a free room for the month. Friends fed and watered me like a new plant, clothed me with their hand-me-downs. Hired me, found me work — assisting and directing low-budget commercial shoots. I asked to be paid upfront and in full so I could buy groceries and pay rent. I ate sardines and bread. I wandered around the city like a lost child. I was broke and disoriented, but I was finally free.

The first photo I took with my phone after landing in NYC. July 5, 2013.

Two months later, he came after me in the car with our dog, Coco. I'd left her behind, thinking he'd want to keep her. Instead, he'd taken her hostage. He begged me to meet him and threatened to cut her loose if I didn't. He got as far as Philly, where he stopped to crash with friends — who called me and monitored his behavior. He hacked my website, took it down. Bombarded me with hundreds of hateful texts. Then he stopped feeding Coco. I finally filed a harassment report. An NYPD detective called him and threatened to arrest if he crossed state lines. He finally got the message. His friends forced him on a one-way train back to Oakland, and I took the bus to Philly to pick up Coco and the car.

While he was out on his blustering cross-country chase, my Oakland landlord had let my friends into my old house to pack up my books, my clothes, my hard drives, my paella pan, my skull — the actual human skull my mom was given to study in med school in the '70s. Three weeks later, their hastily packed cardboard boxes arrived in Brooklyn crushed and in tatters. I was amazed to find the naked skull intact at the bottom of the box, underneath

a heavy file cabinet. I took this as a good omen.

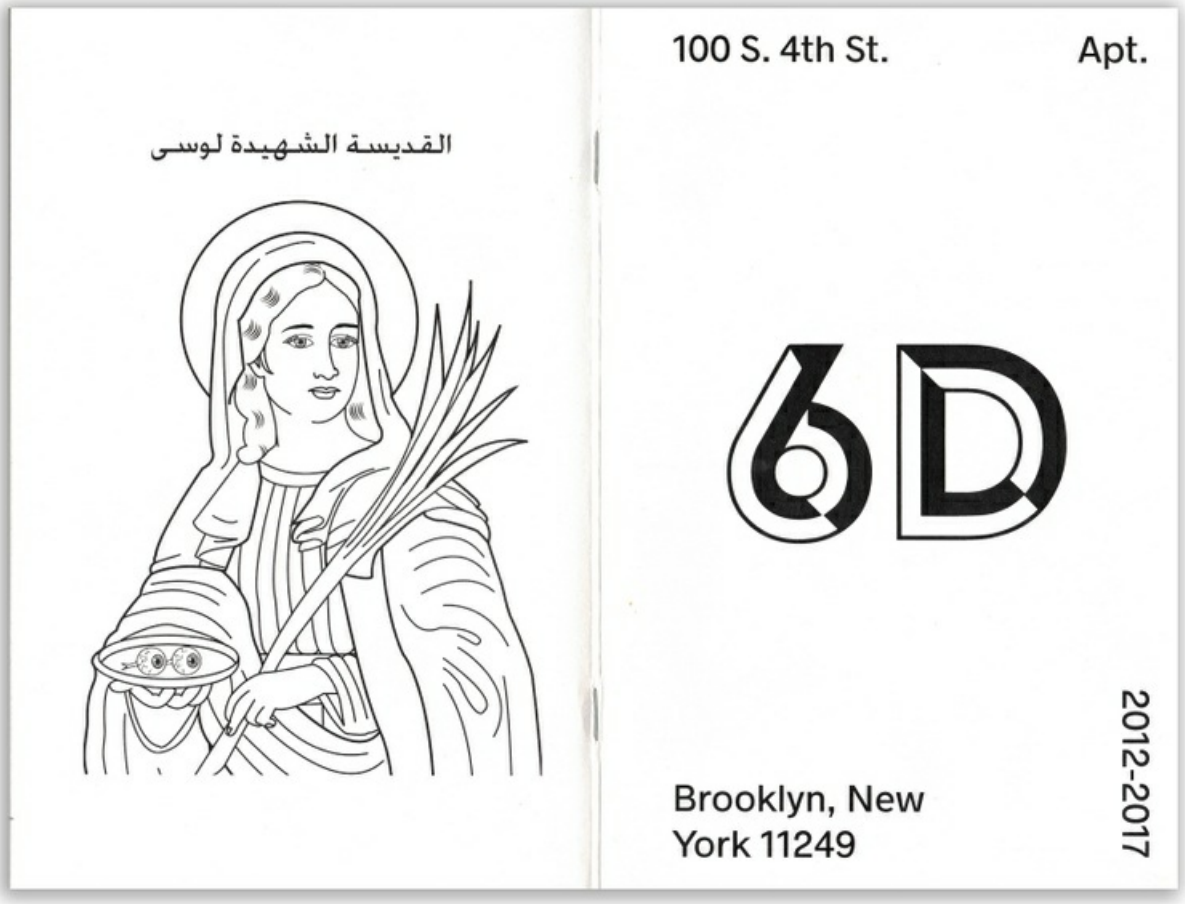


My skull (still intact), sitting on a box at home. March 23, 2020.

# SIX ROOMMATES, ONE BATHROOM

I turned the page and explained, “As you can see: in 2014, our landlord was murdered…” Everyone opened their books to follow along. It was the first time we were all in the same room at the same time — four generations of past roommates together in the old 6th floor loft we all shared, six at a time, over the course of five years.

It was the first time I myself had returned since I’d moved out three months before, and in with Spencer — my then-boyfriend and future husband. As the longest resident in the loft’s history, my four-and-a-half-year tenure gave me a unique perspective. I’d lived at (apartment) 6D through four successions of roommates, each of which had its own memories, traditions, and recipes; its own conflicts, triumphs, and turning points. I’d collected as much as I could into THE YEARBOOK, a 54-page zine to commemorate our shared experience — murders and all. And so on May 6, 2018, we gathered ourselves together to celebrate our collective “book launch” and reunion with tacos and wine.




Front and back cover of the 6D Yearbook. Published May 5, 2018.

Spencer and I arrived late. I had come directly from a screening in which my film "Yanvalou" (2017) played alongside works by Ja'Tovia Gary, Naima Ramos-Chapman, Charlotte Wells, Jessica Beshir, and Christine Turner, who had also curated the evening's program. The screening was a sold-out success, and I was stunned by both the sheer number of bodies in the audience, and their astonishing response to my film. Until then, I had attended only one other live screening of "Yanvalou" — at a faraway film festival in which it was relegated to the painfully obscure and under-attended "dance shorts" program. The festival-goers had chuckled politely, nothing to write home about. But that night, I was startled by the tremendous turnout, intimidated by my distinguished peers, and overwhelmed by the delicious sound of uninhibited laughter that accompanied my film. I arrived to the party shocked and bewildered by the unexpected success of what I thought would be just another sleepy screening.

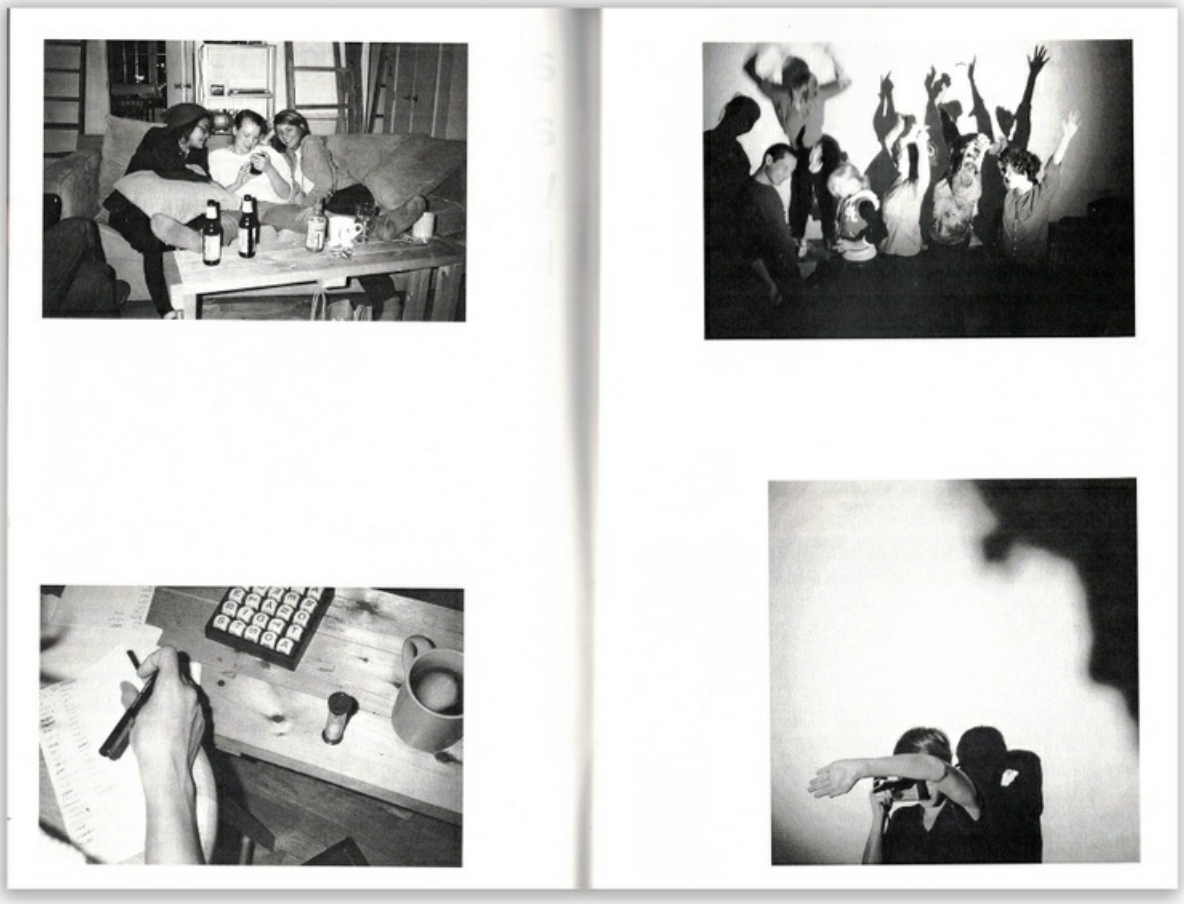
Parts of "Yanvalou" had also been shot at 6D. It had been nearly five years since I'd moved to NYC, most of which I'd spent living in that same south-facing Williamsburg loft. What began as a cursory response to a Craigslist ad ended years later as an unbelievable collection of cherished memories with lifelong friends.

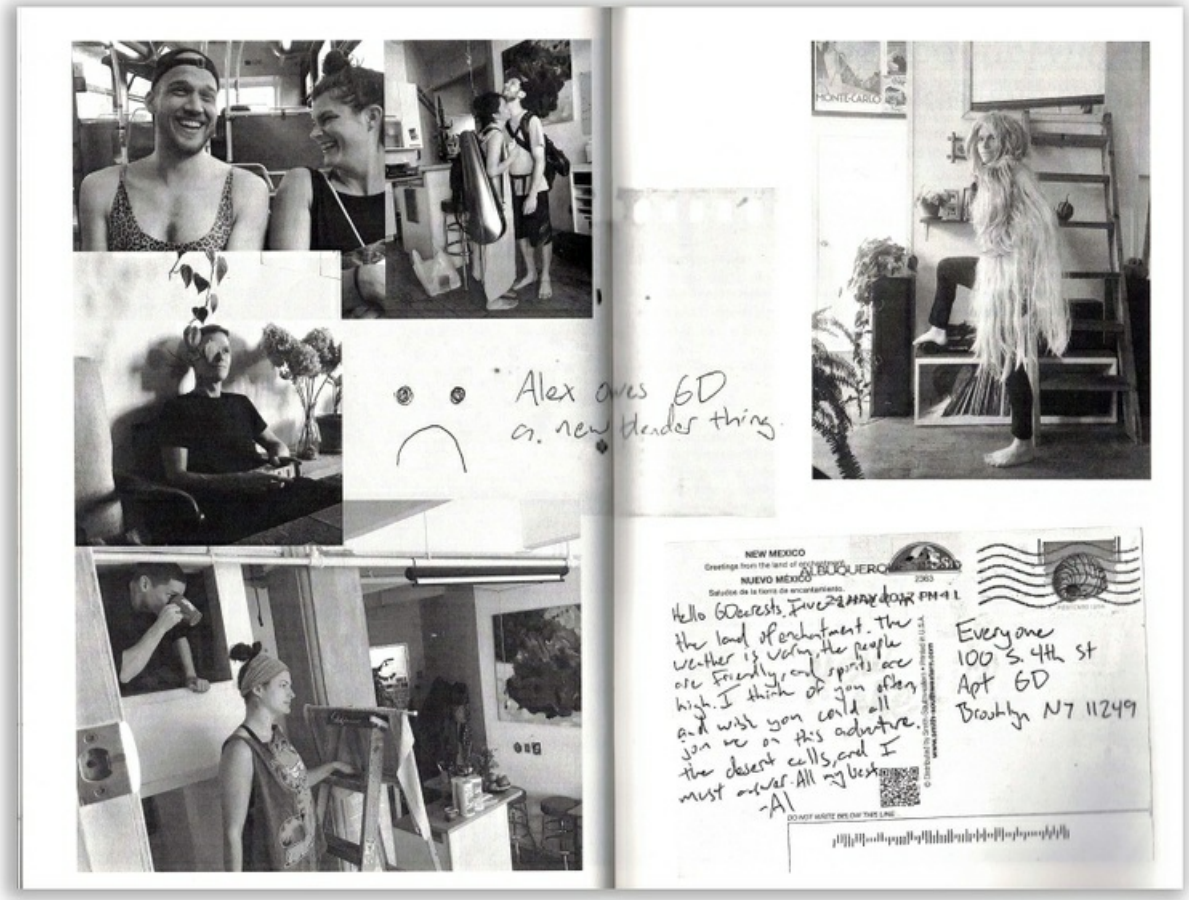
As the only child of an overprotective single mother with neither immediate nor extended family in the US, I had never known the dynamics of siblinghood; of hand-me-downs; of family gatherings; of sharing time and space as intimately and infinitely as when one shares a 1200 sq ft loft with the same five individuals for a full 24 months.

When I had first moved into 6D, I thought it would only be temporary — a few months at most. I thought I was way too old to be living with roommates period, much less five of them. I thought I'd be in and out and that was that. Thankfully, I was wrong. When I began living at 6D, it was still in a primordial state: the floor was rarely

swept, the bathtub usually clogged, the kitchen understocked, the rent split inequitably. Rents varied by as much as $350 even though all rooms shared the same qualities — a 100 sq footprint, unobstructed view of the East River, and total lack of audio privacy.

We lived in what visitors would claim were “treehouses.” 6D’s founding resident had cleverly re-designed the open plan layout to accommodate six by bisecting the three ground floor bedrooms laterally, and installing a second set of doors above, accessible by ladder. We lived stacked on top of one another, each with our own enclosed plywood pod that allowed each roommate a modicum of privacy. This would have been intolerable were it not for the price of rent, which averaged out to around $700 per roommate — a steal for prime waterfront Williamsburg real estate. We who opted into this arrangement were willing to sacrifice privacy for price.






After an entire year of living at 6D, I gained the confidence and authority to identify problems, propose solutions, and spearhead some significant improvements to our collective quality of life. These included reorganizing shared spaces to maximize storage capacity and optimize traffic flow, instituting seasonal all-hands-on-deck deep cleaning days, redistributing the rent split equitably (which, in turn, incentivized individuals to take equal responsibility for the overall maintenance of the apartment), and clarifying all expectations explicitly in the form of a written agreement. These small reforms helped transform a group of six strangers into a relatively harmonious community, from which an unlikely and unique culture of generosity and mutual respect was born.

These people were the closest thing to family I'd ever experienced in my entire life, and I learned more about leadership and cooperation living in this ad hoc community than in all my years of professional experience combined. If there was anything I knew how to do after nearly five years at 6D, it was how to create order from chaos. The night of our reunion, those of us who moved out and lived elsewhere remarked how odd it felt to return to such a familiar place that now seemed so different. Odd to see what were probably incremental changes now suddenly magnified in a single, cumulative image: this plant has grown! That one has died. That once-new thing — alas, now broken. Odd to see the cycle continue without us. To witness evidence of an ongoing transformation in which we had all once played an integral part. For some, that evening served as a bittersweet reminder of what once was and would never be again. For others, it was the first they'd learned the origin and history of the loft in which they lived. For me, it marked the end of an era.


# MAKE IT RAIN

“Close the fucking doooooooooors!” I threw my entire body weight into it, pressing with my shoulder against the wet glass. The hot summer rain spilled down the door in thick, clear rivulets. I pushed and shoved like a linebacker. But the flow of bodies was more than I could control. It was a stampede.

I barked for help. Two security guards muscled their way through the throng and came to my aid. The doors gave way and finally began to close onto the crowd outside. Hipsters, scenesters, and queens came skittering in, dripping wet, their outfits and hairstyles ruined. The line ran out the door and two blocks down. God knows how long they’d waited to get in. And now here I was, closing the doors on good paying customers. But none of that mattered once it started raining. Some scattered back toward the train, a few flew for cover at the bar down the street, but most made a run for it — bypassing the box office and dashing into the venue like a swarm of salmon swimming upstream. It was mayhem.

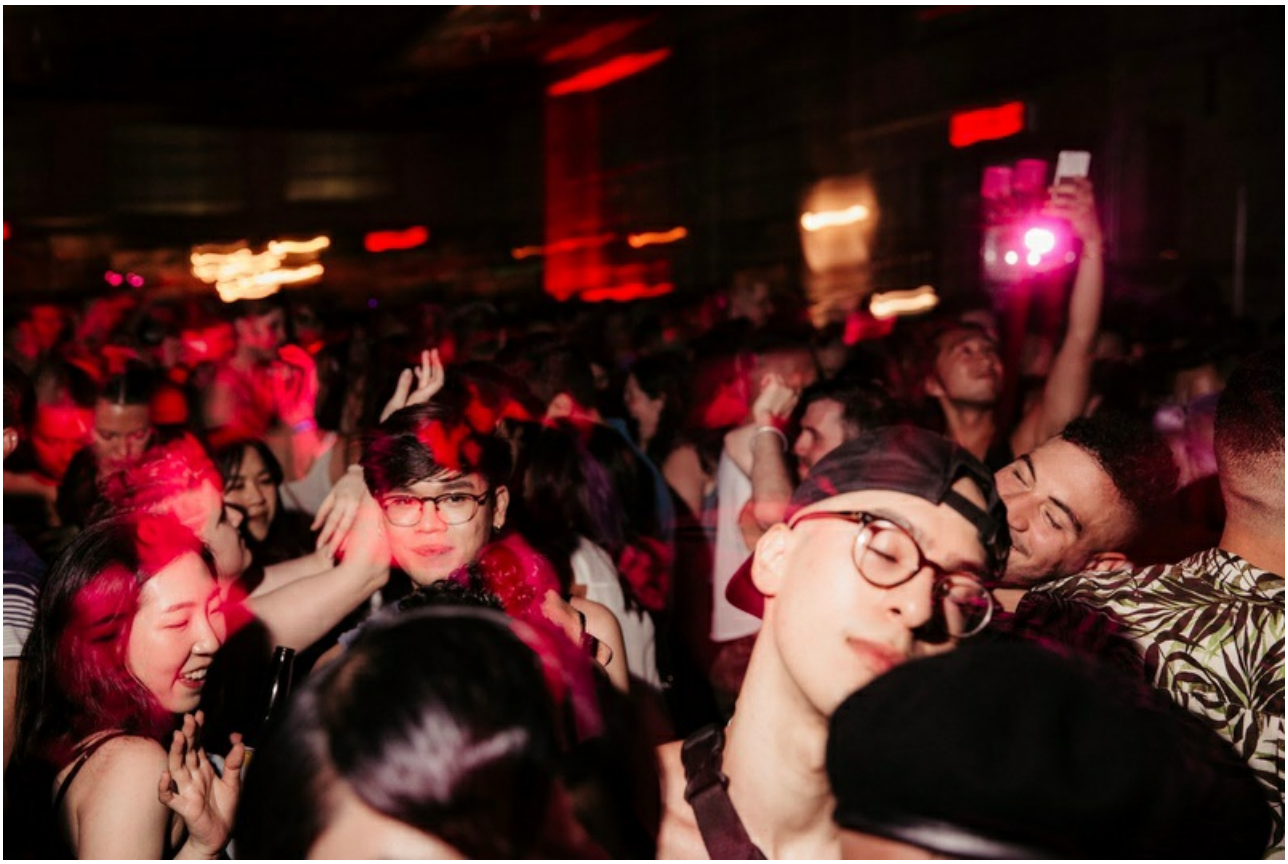
I was seized with a sudden vision of guests tripping over wet concrete and the word “LAWSUIT” flashing over their cracked skulls. That’s when I lost my shit and started shouting.

Now, I don’t like to shout. I always try to maintain my calm and composure, especially in public. Even more so in a professional environment, such as a film set, a meeting, or in this case: a massive all-day-and-night festival that I’d helped create. The very first Happy Family Night Market was underway, and at 13 hours into the event, I was starting to unravel.

It was coming up on midnight when the hot July sky unleashed her sudden wrath. Our event producer hadn’t planned for rain, and she definitely hadn’t planned for a stampede in the middle of our afterparty, right at the height of ticket sales.

So I shouted, I shoved, and I shut the damn door. I looked up to see our box office staffers hovering nearby — soaked and stunned, but still in good spirits. They’d grabbed the iPads, the Square readers, the guest list, the cash box, and run inside with the rest of the crowd. They now stood patiently waiting for direction. We were in the dark, literally — sunset was three hours ago and what little mood lighting we’d installed was so far from the venue’s entrance that we could barely see each others’ faces, much less conduct transactions and count change.

Scores of eager attendees huddled around our impromptu indoor box office, dripping rainwater into puddles at their feet. Our hearts pounded along to the thumping rhythm of drum and bass that came drifting through the PA system. My cortisol levels soared. I felt my sanity fly into oblivion like a lost balloon.



The afterparty at the first annual Happy Family Night Market. July 14, 2018.

CLICK!

The bright light of a bare bulb cut across the surface of the table. Someone had managed to find a clamp lamp so we could again see what we were doing. The music was now so irresistibly loud, guests began dancing even as they waited to buy their tickets. The iPads had run out of battery so we could only take cash. The ATM had run out of bills, and strangers were Venmo-ing each other so that those without cash could still get in.

Finally, my collaborator Phoebe arrived.

I was beyond frazzled. The steel cash drawer had caught on itself and wouldn't roll out all the way. I was stuck in a useless cycle of yanking harder and harder to force it open. BANG! BANG! BANG! The metal drawer slammed repeatedly against its frame. Phoebe witnessed my many violent attempts, then took the drawer from me, and calmly squeezed her hand into the small opening to feel around for the offending object. She carefully loosened it and the drawer slid open.

"You need to calm down. Take a deep breath." She said this quietly, under the din of the chaos that surrounded us. It dawned on me that one didn't have to shout to be heard in the midst of a cacophony. I did as she instructed and lowered my voice: "OK. Let's do this."

Howling applause erupted and echoed throughout the space; the first of Bubble T's long lineup of Drag Queens had just taken the stage. We were already exhausted, but we both knew the party was just getting started and we couldn't quit now. We stood side-by-side taking cash and making change as quickly as we could. People lingered around waiting for a wristband or stamp, but we just waved them away and onto the dancefloor.

Bubble T's Queen Bichon performs at the afterparty for Happy Family Night Market. July 14, 2018.

Another couple hours went by; it felt like an eternity. By 3AM, ticket sales ground to a halt. I watched as Phoebe gazed longingly onto the dance floor, wanting to participate in what looked like one hell of a good time.

"Do you want to take a break?" I said. She nodded. We agreed to close the box office for the night. Phoebe took to the dance floor and I retreated to the green room, where both of our boyfriends had camped out for most of the night. They had worked the event on and off all day and were now holed up behind the scenes, waiting for the storm to pass. I arrived to find them in good spirits, making jokes and eating snacks.

"You did it!" They congratulated. "People are having a great time!" I heard the words but was too tired to celebrate. I sank into the couch and closed my eyes. I knew the event was a huge success, but the time and energy it took to pull it off was more than I had imagined. I was completely drained — mentally, physically, and emotionally. I knew Phoebe was too. But it was true: we HAD done it, together. And I found great satisfaction in that.

We'd made so many mistakes over the course of the evening, overlooked so many important details, and yet we and our 2000 guests had not only survived, but managed to have a positive and meaningful experience. Today I wonder whether the rain had come to teach me a lesson about chaos and control. I've since grown to appreciate this experience as some kind of sadistic gift from the gods.

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Vocation
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