

The New Normal: Short Stories About Being Transgender in the Modern Day

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This anthology is dedicated to my Grandfather, Stanley Benjamin Grey 1921-2019, and  
my sister, Genevieve “Jenny” Silverstein 2002-2019.

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## Foreword

My senior project started out as a very different story to what it is today. A few years ago, around the end of 2018, I had a vague outline of what I wanted to try fiddling around with - almost an extension of an idea I'd had back in high school, I was originally working towards a piece that revolved around a transgender musician navigating the music scene and public eye after he comes out. I wanted to insert little experiences I'd gone through, like social transition and name change processes, and write a fictional piece that I could envision myself picking off a shelf at age fifteen. There had been a few attempts over the years at writing little snippets of the story, pieces I used just to bring the protagonist to life a little. I even tried to dig up an old short story I wrote in high school involving time travel, but these slivers all failed at delivering whatever message I was trying to put out.

It was supposed to be structured in a way similar to a Chuck Palahniuk novel - not chronologically, so in small snippets each depicting a certain time frame. It is a style I quite adore, I feel it offers an uncertainty to readers and can provide backstory when needed. While writing pieces individually was quite nice, I didn't feel a story coming out of it. There wasn't an overarching tale I was achieving, and I couldn't decide where I wanted to direct my work. I was preemptively writing so as to create the narrative that wasn't working.

The first plan was to take my sweet time plotting and building the piece over my second last Spring semester, and then start writing during my final Summer at Purchase College, but things took a turn for the worst.

In January 2019, my grandfather passed away. He had been my home for almost four years. I had been living with him since I moved from Australia to the states and had an extremely close relationship with him since I was young. His health had been getting worse over time, but even so, his death was so sudden that I felt I was unable to properly say goodbye, and I never was able to tell him I was trans. The loss of my Grandpa crushed me, and to make it even worse, I suddenly had no fallback in the country. Growing up in Australia and moving in with Grandpa at eighteen meant that when I looked to my future, there was no longer the option of staying in Manhattan with ease. I could no longer stay in Grandpa's spare bedroom while saving money and trying to find my own place like I'd hoped to do.

Because so much of my life was in his apartment, most of the Spring semester of 2019 involved me putting my life into a storage facility and searching for Summer housing in a panic. My focus shifted and I stopped thinking too much about my final project, telling myself I could come back to planning it out when I got to the Summer break.

Then, in April, I lost my sister.

During the second night of Purchase College's annual music and arts festival, Culture Shock, my Mom called me from Australia in tears. My little sister was barely conscious, fading away as I was on the phone. I begged and pleaded, yelling that I

could catch a flight and make it back to Australia in time to hold my sister while she slipped away. But this was unrealistic. Her last breath was broadcast across the world to me on FaceTime.

The loss of her cut deeper than anything before. The depression from losing my Grandpa deepened with the loss of Jenny. Everything felt pointless and draining. I almost failed my classes, could barely push myself to attend them at all. I couldn't pick up a pen, a pencil, or even a musical instrument anymore. To this day, I have still struggled to play my guitars. I owed my sister so much and I'd failed to be with her when she died. She'd saved me from death and I hadn't been there for her. The guilt ate away at my entire being, and by the time Summer Break rolled around, I was desperate for distraction.

Over the break I put all my focus into my job so that I didn't have to think about losses, about expectations, about anything other than keeping high-ropes climbers safe. For the most part it worked. I put myself into high gear - opening early, staying late, getting overtime, and filling my free time with sleep or cooking. However, this also meant I didn't write a single thing during Summer.

Once the Fall 2019 semester started up, I was assigned an adjunct professor to oversee my Final Project progress. He gave me ultimatums, pushed me to try writing perspectives that weren't traditional, and guided me to write short stories instead of one conjoined piece. I sat down at my laptop and punched out a somewhat fictionalized story about being trans and having to visit the doctor (sprouting from frustrations I encountered at the doctors offices around the same time) all written in second person

perspective. I exaggerated some of the reactions, but tried to make it relatable for transgender readers.

After positive feedback from multiple readers, many of whom were trans friends who had similar experiences themselves, I decided that this was the essence of what I wanted to capture in my writing. I figured that I wanted stories focusing on transgender experiences that may not be too common. Everyone knows the coming out tales - they are most often publicized, but this isn't what I wanted to draw upon. In my anthology, I want to address unexpected acceptance from family members, like grandparents, mistreatment from doctors, and paranoia about identifying outside the cisgender realm when applying for things like housing or jobs.

Over the past eight months or so, my stories have expanded and bloomed from small granules of ideas. There are six pieces I love dearly and feel need to be included. The first is a short about being trans at a medical appointment. The focus is on a transgender man and deals with the medicalization of trans folk, along with the issue of deadnames and legal genders.

There are two different stories about grandparents accepting transgender grandchildren. Both based on my own grandparents, one is dedicated to my Grandpa and based on our interactions, the second about my Buba and Zaida, but twisted to fit a transgender girl.

My longest story is split in two, seeing through the eyes of a trans man while he and his trans-feminine friend deal with abuse during a search for affordable housing in the modern day.

A late addition to my lineup is a story about a non-binary person, which I felt really needed to be included if I truly wanted to represent the broad spectrum of trans lives and identities.

Lastly, I wrote a piece dedicated to my little sister. It is written in a very odd point of view format, about two children feeling like they're the odd ones out in the family - one because he is trans and the other because she is adopted.

In the future, I would like to extend the current stories and add more shorts, eventually culminating in a larger anthology that I can publish.

The formatting of my senior project was inspired by David Levithan, an author I admired as a teen. He is a queer author mainly known for his book-turned-film, *Every Day*. An earlier work of his was an anthology of short pieces written by those in the queer community, and it became very important to me in helping me find my space in the queer world. My intention is to produce a work that would speak to people who feel alone like I once did.



## Two Little Boxes

There are two options on the page waiting for you. Two little boxes that will dictate how the doctor decides to treat you. You wish there were other options.

Do you check off the first box - male - and stride through the door as if you're confident in your non-biological gender? You'd like to try it sometime, maybe if you passed better.

Or do you check off female, that damn box always listed after male because of the patriarchal way your society functions, and adhere to what's listed on your insurance?

Technically, you know that somewhere in the fine print of your insurance you need to say female, because that's your 'legal' gender and you can be refused help if you seem to be posing as someone you're not. But you also know that listing yourself as female will not only make you feel unsafe, but could possibly put you in physical danger. Drawing attention to yourself might draw in extremists who think 'freaks' like you need to be eradicated.

You have scruff, and maybe it's not much but you comb it and trim it and keep it tailored so that you at least look like an 18-year-old who cares about his image. You have sideburns and the slight shadow of a moustache. Your voice has changed since you started testosterone almost a year ago, but it still sounds nasal-y in your head and you know you stress your 's's in the most stereotypical gay-man way. And while your

face has hardened and gotten more angular, you still know that your eyes have a softness that won't leave, your lashes are still longer and thicker than the typical man's, and your adams apple isn't prominent unless your head is cranked backwards while you down a glass of water.

You look through the page again - name, address, symptoms, medical history, insurance.

And Gender.

That, and your still unchanged birthname, are the two worst parts of the page.

Why do you need that when you're only going to get some stupid, flu-like symptoms addressed?

You check off female and head to the front desk.

The woman sitting there looks short even when she's not standing up. Her limbs are tiny and her purple-tinted hair is cut in a shoulder length bob that makes her neck seem two inches long. Only one penciled eyebrow lifts when you lean on the desk and clear your throat.

"I'm finished," you say.

She sticks out her hand. Her palm is dry like a desert and her nails are small, blood red talons. She plucks the clipboard from your grip and looks over your information. At your birthname alone, she purses her lips further into a pucker than they already were.

*It's a girl's name, so why don't you look like a girl?*

You can see when she gets to what you marked as your gender, because her eyes flutter a bit and then she blinks at you a few times. She swings her gaze between you and the paper a few times before she finally says, “And if I put this through the system, it’ll all process correctly?”

She sounds as if someone is speaking through a kazoo stuck in their nose, and you know that she thinks you’re using someone else’s insurance. You nod profusely and pull a pained smile onto your face. You just *have* to convince her you’re you.

“ID please,” she says, talons out again and that one damn eyebrow high as ever.

It’s on the desk faster than anything, and the desk lady scrapes it into her other palm, holding it up high to compare that old photo with your current face. When she sees that most of your features match the crappy post office snap from two years back, she shakes her head just a little and waves you away mumbling, “I’ll take it from here.”

You beam a thank you and head back to your seat. Once sitting, you realize you haven’t taken a breath since you went up to give back the clipboard. Your chest deflates and you can hear your pulse start to slow down a bit. You’re behind a little wall in the waiting room, so you don’t feel the glares the desk lady might shoot your way. A little bit of freedom.

Sitting across from you and a bit to the left is a man you could only describe as forgettable. He’s in khaki pants and a navy button-up shirt, his mouse-brown hair cut all sharp and proper. He’s got wide shoulders and, as he slowly leafs through a men’s outdoor magazine, he peeks over the pages to glance at you. Your cheeks are already

red from handling the desk lady, and you'd rather not have to deal with this office Bro tossing up your Gender in his head.

Your phone buzzes - your boyfriend - he asks how the appointment is going. You smile at the device and respond "fine," so as not to worry him. When you look back up, the office Bro is staring once again, and this time, you lock with his bland, brown eyes. You flash a quick smile and look back down at your phone, opening any app in an attempt to not seem rude.

"Hey, excuse me," you hear from the other side of the room. You look up and office Bro has placed the magazine on the chair next to him, and he's now leaning toward you, "Where'd you get your shoes?"

You lean forward to get a look at your shoes, not very sure what you threw on when running out the door this morning. They're off-brand checkered converse with a dark green band across the top, orange laces woven in a train-track pattern and tied around your ankle.

"Oh," you let slip, "I'm not too sure. I've had them a while now." You look back at him and he's listening carefully, almost like he isn't simply humoring you. "I think... maybe DSW?"

"Damn," he says, "my girlfriend goes in there, but I never followed her y'know?" He smiles a bit sideways at you. For a moment, you fear that maybe DSW is too girly, or that shopping is too girly, and you've ratted yourself out.

"Yeah, totally," you say as a defense, even though you don't really know the feeling.

“Girls, man. They really like all the shoes and stuff. I got, like, two pairs and one I’m wearing right now, but my girl is always telling me to get something nice so I have options. I don’t get it but I’ll do it for her.”

He stares off into the distance for a second, a warm smile on his face, and you don’t know why but you find this is a common theme. Cisgender men *love* to talk about themselves for no reason. Give them any prompt and they’ll start a’talkin’.

“Your girl ever do that? Ask you to up your game?”

The question catches you off guard. This dude, this office Bro of a young man, has zeroed his focus in on you, but not to question your genitals or what you ‘were like as a girl.’ Instead, he’s genuinely wondering whether your non-existent girlfriend ever expects more from you. He thinks you’re a cisgender man like him.

While flattered, you realize it places you in another predicament of what path to choose. Do you tell him you’re gay, or do you play his game and tell him what your imaginary girlfriend has said in the past?

Your phone buzzes on your lap, you know it’s your boyfriend again, and in that moment you recognize you’d rather be proud of your queer status and cut off from random conversation in a doctors room than play a stupid game.

“I’m gay,” you say in a small voice, and wait for office Bro’s face to turn sour.

“Oh, my bad,” he responds, “Your man ever do stuff like that then?”

The edges of your mouth turn up into a stupid grin. This kind of thing only happens in movies, your head says, but then, it’s also happening right now.

“Yeah, he’s much more organized than me,” you say with a laugh.

“Bro I feel that,” office Bro says and leans back into his chair a bit. “If my girl wasn’t on top of her calendar and everything, I would’ve forgotten I was supposed to be here today.”

“Same here man,” you say with ease, and for once in this damn waiting room, you’re not lying.

A nurse appears from around the wall of the waiting room and looks between you and the office Bro, a little confused that no woman is sitting here too. “Denham?” he asks, and you shoot up out of your seat before he can utter any part of your first name.

“Me, that’s me,” you spit out.

He smiles and says, “Follow me.” As you’re being led down a few hallways he asks you how you’ve been feeling, and you tell him not too well, hence the appointment. He’s nice and he smiles at that, and then leads you into a small room. He gets you to sit in a chair in the corner and gives you the paperwork you filled out ten minutes beforehand with your ID and insurance and everything, then tells you Doctor Good will be in soon.

You partially wish that you could just see him instead of someone else, because he’s so nice and warm, and he also didn’t say a word about your name or legally-listed Gender.

Soon, Doctor Good appears. She’s a slender woman, probably about your height, with cropped black hair that shines under the cold hospital lights. She’s got slim, purple framed-glasses on her long nose, and has a purple lanyard around her neck.

You can see her hospital ID photo scowling at you the same way she's doing from the doorway.

She waits a beat, taking in your appearance, before she calls your deadname. When you nod, she seems to take a deep breath of preparation, then she heads to the computer on the other side of the room. Your jaw clenches.

"What seems to be the problem today?" She asks, not addressing you, but typing at the computer.

"My throat and...um, my nose is a mess," you say, at a loss for why you have to tell her again when it's listed on paper in your lap, and most probably on her computer screen too. "My head hurts and I think I had a fever earlier, but I don't want to have the flu."

"Can't help it if you get it, though," she interrupts. "Did you get your flu shot for the season?"

Only then does she stop typing and look at you, ready to judge in case you say no.

"Yes, in September."

"Hmm," she muses, "let's see what's the problem then. Go sit up there please." She motions to a hospital bed with a paper sheet on it and picks a stethoscope off the wall, putting it in her ears and, once you're seated, places the head over your heart.

"Can you lift your shirt please?" She asks, after moving the stethoscope a bit.

You nod and start apologizing about wearing a binder. When you lift your shirt, she looks at the material compressing your chest a bit quizzically before saying, “Just to confirm, that’s not a type of corset, correct?”

You try not to chuckle. “No.”

She mumbles good and starts placing the stethoscope around your chest, still looking a little unsure of what and why you’re wearing your binder.

“I can still breathe, it’s not doing anything bad,” you say quickly.

She nods. “Big breath for me now.” You breathe. “And cough.” So you do. And then she moves to listen to your back.

Once done, she takes the buds out of her ears and lets the stethoscope sit around her neck with the lanyard. Without a word, she retrieves that band for the vital signs monitor and wraps it around your left arm. What once used to be a pump for blood pressure now tracks everything. She presses a button and it begins to inflate, and in the meantime she clips a little device to your right forefinger. It feels like you’re being studied as an experiment, with the way she breathes sharply and makes sure to keep a fair distance from you.

You watch the numbers climb and fluctuate on the machine as the pump starts and stops, and once it deflates completely she removes the band and shoves a thermometer under your tongue. All the time she’s humming at every number that pops up on her computer. You don’t know what a single one means. You wonder if she’s reading your climbing anxiety on the machine.



She shines a light in your eyes and ears and throat, almost making you gag with a popsicle stick. Her face remains unchanged. She prods the glands in your neck and behind your ears, then hooks her hands under your armpits like she's going to lift you up. She nods like all is good, then asks you to go stand on a scale.

Finally, she tells you you can sit back down in the chair. In the corner of your vision, you can see her strip single use gloves off her bony fingers and drop them in the trash as if they're infectious waste. As if you're something diseased.

"It looks like a flare up of a cold or something similar. Not the flu, but you'll be congested a bit," she says, now back to typing and not looking at you.

"And the fever and that, it's part of a cold too?" You ask.

"Probably overheated from the change in weather. Nothing seems to be that bad in your vitals, it's probably just very uncomfortable pressure."

"Is there anything I can take for it?" You finally ask, getting a bit more desperate with her nonchalant diagnosis.

It's silent while she scrolls through the computer system. After a bit she exhales sharply through her nose and leans back, still not looking away from the screen.

"The system doesn't list what women can take if they're on testosterone."

You feel like the binder is suddenly tighter than before, like maybe it does have laces similar to a corset and Doctor Good has yanked them tighter. Slimy saliva pools in your mouth but you can't swallow it because you're getting choked up.

"It can't be that different," you almost whisper.

“Men can take certain things because testosterone affects how they absorb chemicals,” she snaps, “Women don’t commonly take testosterone, so I’m not sure what certain medications could do to your system.”

She crosses her arms and for the first time in a few minutes looks directly at you, like she’s waiting for a response.

“I’m transgender,” is all you can manage to give up.

“Have you had surgery?” She asks.

“No,” you say, not sure what surgery she’s asking about, or why.

“I can’t make an educated decision on what to give you then. It’s not safe to tell you to get any medicine you want if there’s a chance it’ll endanger you.” She says it like she’s telling you off for being on testosterone.

“There’s nothing you can prescribe me? I can’t take, what, Ibuprofen Cold and Sinus?” You’re almost begging, basically in tears now, because you can see from how closed off she is that she’s not changing her mind.

“I cannot prescribe you that. I don’t know what it could do to a woman like you. Testosterone weakens your immune system anyway, and whoever put you on it should’ve let you know in the first place.”

With that, she turns back to her computer and starts scrolling through her system again, but you know she’s not double checking anything for you.

“So there’s nothing I can do about being sick?” You ask.

“Have soup, drink tea, stay in bed, get some rest. Legally, there’s nothing I can give you.”

That's what you were waiting to hear.

*Legally.*

She's not prescribing or advising any medications because she wants to save her own ass in case things go wrong and you sue. *Legally.*

"Have a good day now, ma'am," she says.

You're sure she's fully aware of how that might hurt you, but at this point, you know Doctor Good doesn't care about people like you. About transgender people.

You get up from the seat and gather your things. You can't speak because tears will fall if you so much as open your mouth, even for a breath. Whatever sliver of a headache you had when you entered the practice is now pounding your temples and your ears are on fire from embarrassment. As you fly past the front desk you can see office Bro is still sitting in the same place, now flipping through a magazine again. The penciled up and puckered desk lady watches you rush through with wet eyes, and sucks her cheeks in a bit, a face that says you've gotten what you deserve.

Finally, you make it outside and you let yourself burst. Crying has become such a rare occurrence on testosterone that when you start, you really feel the sadness beat its way up and out of you. You try to breathe a bit and rub your temples, struggle to ignore the ache in your chest from being called woman, woman, woman, so many times. You take big, shaky gulps of air, whatever the binder allows you to take, and slowly start to calm yourself.

Disappointment bounces through your head, that this isn't the first time this sort of thing has happened. This was an attempt to find a new doctor's office that maybe

didn't completely ignore your trans identity. This was an attempt to be treated like the human being you are when asking for medical assistance.

Hands trembling, you take your phone out of your pocket and check your alerts. Your darling partner has messaged you, calling you his boyfriend over and over, and you know he means it. Sitting on the steps of the Doctor's Practice, red in the face from crying, it starts to feel a little better, knowing that someone sees you as the man you are.

Apostasis  
or  
Hiding In Plain Sight

Apostasis: (*ə 'pɒstəʊsɪs*) describes the survival of individual prey through process of changing its appearance which allows it to be ignored by its predators.

Ashley had given me her prospective landlord's number in case the lady decided to take Ash's application seriously and call her sources. When "Ashley's Landlord" popped up on my screen, I felt a slight panic.

Do *not* say "Ashley." Do *not* call her a girl. Do *not* use female pronouns.

"Hello?" I said when the call connected.

"Hello," an older woman's voice responded, "Is this Antoine's roommate?"

"Yes," I replied, with a fiery tenseness instantly across my chest.

"Oh good," she said with relief, "Hello dear. My name is Julie, would you mind if I asked you a few questions about living with Antoine?"

It was a ten minute chat; how had I met *Antoine*, what did I think of living with *him*, was there anything I particularly enjoyed or didn't enjoy about being *his* roommate? For the most part, it was easy. I never had much to complain about when it came to the person in question: Ashely. She'd been my roommate all of college - from when we

were randomly placed in a unisex dorm in our first year, to us living with a select bunch of our trans friends on campus three years later. She was clean in the bathroom, kept her things on her side of the room, had a relaxed approach to how we decorated. She and I clicked, and she was my best friend.

The only hiccup; she was trans. And she wasn't publicly out.

She was studying in New York, but originally hailed from Pennsylvania. Her parents were the kind of conservatives who were deathly transphobic, to the point where Ash knew she couldn't come out until she was self-sufficient and could handle being cut off completely. At the end of our final year, she was moving out of our dorm and closer to Manhattan - the first step towards a freer life. Not being totally financially stable yet, she was getting some help from her parents, hence why she couldn't apply for housing under any pseudonym, request a preferred name, or pronouns.

And this is why Julie was asking about *Antoine*.

Sitting in the school's cafe, I had my headphones in both ears and tried not to yell. Julie kept asking question after question and eventually, I stumbled.

"Is there anything you'd like to let me know about that I may not have asked?"

"Well," I said, trying to think as honestly as I could without speaking badly of my friend, "Ash can sometimes have a strange sleep schedule-"

"Ash?" Julie interrupted.

"Sorry?" I asked, but I knew I'd messed up. My cheeks went red.

"You said Ash?"

“Oh,” I croaked, “Sorry, my fault, I’m, uh, sitting in a cafe and my friend Ash just waved at me, I meant Antoine though, Antoine, *he* can have a weird sleep schedule because he works at the mall late sometimes but it’s not always the same shifts.”

I vomited out the words, throwing in anything I could to cover my slip up. It’d been so good. I’d used the right name and pronouns for so long.

“That’s fine, thank you for the honesty,” Julie said.

Within the next few minutes the call was over and I was left cursing myself, hoping with all my might that I hadn’t just fucked up Ashley’s chance to get the room she so desperately needed.

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I found a place to rent very late in the game - two days out from the semester ending in fact. I agreed to meet with the landlord and see the place, and if all went well, sign the lease and move in before I had to pay a late exit fee to my school. Ash insisted on joining me for safety.

The little cottage was two stories tall and looked a little flimsy, with some obvious cracks in the wood and some planks on the porch warping up to greet the sky. It was all dull grays which may have once been a light blue, and muddy maroon shingles for the roof. There was a small garden and lots of shrubbery, enough to cover the front windows for privacy. And for the rent of only \$900 a month, it seemed like a pretty secure place.

A dark grey, hatchback-type car was parked in the driveway - the landlord I assumed - so Ash parked us right behind. I was nervous. I'd only spoken to this man online. There had been one photo of the front porch and shrubbery, alongside the street address. He'd said there were a few other occupants, all students, and that the place was a bargain. I could only pray this was the truth.

I knocked on the rickety front door and held my breath. Ash was holding hers too. A muffled woman's voice inside said, "Oh, it's him!" a few seconds before the door swung open to reveal this sweet looking older lady. She seemed at least fifty years old, so maybe an older student? Not fazed at all by there being two people instead of just me, she asked, "One of you is Lucas, yes?"

"That's me," I said, feeling Ash deflate a little beside me.

"Come in!" Said the older lady, "I'm John's wife, Sylvia, partial landowner of this fine abode."

She led us into a cramped and chintzy living room where all furniture was seemingly secondhand and dumped onto a carpet that may or may not have been made entirely of dust and lint. The couch was dipping in towards the middle of the worn out cushions, the television seemed like it was plucked from the 90's. The walls were draped in kitschy, psychedelic, and otherwise downright ugly prints, with way too many christmas lights around the trim of the room.

I hoped the rest of the house didn't look like this.

"The kids here, they're all artists, so wild with their decorating," Sylvia said with a laugh.



She said we'd see the kitchen later, then took us upstairs to see my 'grand bedroom.'

"A lovely room, if I do say so myself, quite a bargain for this area, what with it being so easily accessible by car or bus or bike even. Close to the city, good food nearby, and if you're the camping type you can disappear into the woods down the road for some fun, eh?"

Ash was smiling at the ground while I nodded along to Sylvia. She never stopped speaking highly of her own rental.

With my lack of experience, I didn't know if \$900 was unreasonable for the size of the room. It was a little bit more than living in a closet, with its own closet inside. It was a bedframe under a window, a set of drawers, and some hanging space. The closet door almost hit the bed. But the bathroom was something I could work with, and the place also included a kitchen and laundry. As long as I worked consistently, I could handle rent.

"So what do you think?" Sylvia asked back at the landing.

"I like it, I think I'd like it here," I said.

"Fantastic! John is just in the kitchen making sure the lease is all up to scratch, we can go sign it now."

Downstairs, John, a very large man with a puffy, square face, reminiscent of Harvey Weinstein, had a pair of teeny-weeny glasses perched on his nose while he scrutinized an exceedingly large piece of paper like a caricature. Sylvia burst into the room, flourishing her hands, and began. "Our new resident -" but John cut her short.

“Two of them?” He howled, “What’s going on Sylvia? Damnnit we said only one, who the fuck is this other one?”

Sylvia’s hands dropped, suddenly clasped in front of her like she was pleading. “Lucas is the only one renting,” she said softly.

John singled in on me, his squinty eyes hiding under angry brows. “Lucas, eh? That you? Had to bring along someone else to back you up, is that it?” His gaze flicked to Ashley and he looked her up and down, his face morphing from anger to borderline disgust. “So, what, is this your boyfriend or something?” But then he paused. A smirk twitched at the edge of his mouth, like he was holding it back.

“Or is it one of those tranny things?”

“John!” Sylvia cried, “You need to understand, transvestite lives aren’t normal to us,” she said to Ashley and I.

“Sorry,” John said, with absolutely no empathy, “I’m just cautious about what sexual promiscuity goes on under my roof.”

“Care to go over the lease?” Sylvia asked, truly panicked.

I felt like I couldn’t move. I was afraid to take a single step closer to John, now reclined against the kitchen wall and his chin tucked to his chest, the condescending sneer on his face like he was proud he’d thrown slurs at his prospective renter. Something inside me said if I moved closer, he’d put one of his oversized hands on me and not let go, lock me in that tiny closet of a room upstairs and leave me to rot. Even if these two lunatics didn’t live on the premises, I was still terrified that being in a building they owned was unsafe for people like me and Ashley.

After a few seconds, Ash realized I was frozen, and she nudged me forward with a smile. I shuffled to the table and sat, picking up the pen in front of John, and started reading through the lease which was clearly downloaded and printed directly from the internet.

“John and I are going to be in the living room if you have any questions while signing ok? Let us know when you’ve gone through it!” And Sylvia guided her husband out.

Ashley took John’s seat and put her hand on mine. “Is this a good idea, Luke?” She asked.

“I can’t pay the late fee at school, Ash. And this is one of the most affordable places I could get.”

She heard the heavy desperation in my voice. Instead of saying we should look for better housing, or that we could try me couch surfing ‘til I found a better place, or trying to offer an alternative like she usually would, she just hung her head and apologized. This was something I had to take.

~ ~ ~

The text read, “Need 2 check house, want to chek ur rooms. R u an the other s in home 2moro.” It was John’s old man way of texting, like he was still using a Nokia flip phone.

“Sorry John, Zander & I both have work ‘til 6, Arin & Esme are in Connecticut until next week. When they’re back we will update you on a time you can stop in and see the rooms. Is that ok?”

Ten minutes later, John replied. “Fine. We c u nxt week.”

But he lied.

My shift at the cinema was from 11am to 6pm, but when I turned up that day, the foyer was almost completely empty. I’d never seen it so empty, and there were eleven of us scheduled.

“I don’t know why management put so many of you guys on today,” said my supervisor, “Don’t they know Thursdays are dead till like, 6?”

She turned to a few of us whose shifts ended at 6, apologized, and sent us home. I was disappointed but not too fussed. I needed a nap, so I went on automatic and took the bus back to the house. I’d been there for a month and a week, and had finally gotten used to the route I needed to take to work. Once at home, I flopped into my bed, happy to just smush my face in the pillow and listen to the birds chirp and leaves blow outside my window. Without the three other very social housemates, it was so beautifully silent - something I almost never experienced.

That silence was short lived.

Not fifteen minutes later, a sputtering of exhaust came clattering through my window, cutting through the euphoric atmosphere. The engine stopped, doors slammed and I could hear grumbles that sent chills up my spine and through my shoulders.

John had turned up.

The click-tap, click-tap, of heels said Sylvia was here too.

There was a lot of jingling and shaking of keys as John battled the front door to let him in. The screwy lock seemed to be protecting me.

I slipped off my shiny, black work shoes, and slinked out to the landing. Hiding out of view from the downstairs, I strained to hear Sylvia and John mutter to each other. Immediately, they were tutting the cleanliness of the living room.

“A disaster,” Sylvia spat.

“That’s what happens when you’re allowed to pick the worst little queers to inhabit our house,” John spat back.

“I thought those things were supposed to be clean,” she said, casually bumping over something dense that thumped to the floor, “But look at what they’re doing to my lovely rug.”

“Clean?” John almost laughed, “Why do you think AIDS happened? Queers aren’t clean, Sylvie. Don’t believe that propaganda.”

“I guess,” she muttered, and I lost their voices as they moved into the kitchen.

I was tense, as flat to the wall as I could be, with my heart racing. I regretted coming back, not insisting I stay at work. What had I gotten myself into? What would happen when they eventually came upstairs, if they found me here, realized I heard them talking? Goosebumps rose on my arms and I couldn’t force myself to breathe. It was too late to sprint out - I would’ve been seen, heard, caught. Then, maybe I’d lose the room, lose the chance to rent, lose my stability. Who knew how far they’d go.

The click-tap, click-tap of Sylvia's heels came back out of the kitchen, and I could tell they were about to come upstairs. Barely putting a foot to the floor, I tiptoed back to my room and turned the lock as slow as all hell, just so they wouldn't come in. Last resort, I dove into bed and wrapped myself up like I'd been asleep this whole time. Eyes squeezed shut, I willed my breathing to mimic a slow, sleepy rhythm as I heard the two demons ascend to the landing.

"Do they know what a vacuum is?" John muttered from just outside my door.

Feet kicked at the carpet in the hallway, a doorknob turned, and they entered Esme's room mirroring mine across the hall. Sylvia cried out about how disorderly the damn lesbian was, while John threatened to tear the *'garish queer flag'* off the wall. The two of them started throwing bizarre remarks back and forth about how lesbians have sex, and whether Esme used her toothbrush for *'pleasure'*, considering no man was in her life to *'give her what she needed.'*

"How ungodly."

"Indeed."

"If only Christ..."

And then my doorknob turned, shook, and made a light tick-click sound. Lord, thank you for providing locks, I said in my head.

"Fuckin' paranoid-" John grumbled, jiggling the knob, before keys clattered against the door. "Did that tranny boy seem like a druggie when you showed him 'round?" John called to Sylvia, who was still distraught over Esme's room.

“Lucas?” She asked. “He didn’t say much. Could’ve been tired from drugs I suppose.”

John grunted and shoved a key in the lock.

Time seemed to slow down when the knob obeyed his hand this time. Heat rose from the bottom of my stomach and stretched across my shoulders, slithered down my arms, with it all the threat of bile and acid. All the devotion I put into slowing my breath disappeared as my lungs stopped working all together. An uncomfortable pain shot through my abdomen like the period pains I never got anymore, and I could hear my blood pump through my red hot ears while my lower eyelids twitched.

John didn’t even seem to notice me hiding in bed at first, taking a thumping step insofar as to be right beside my head. Then...

“Fuck.”

Quick click-taps, a slight huff of air, as Sylvia bumped into John’s back.

“Sylvie, fuck, back up.”

“What is it?”

“Shut up!” John hissed, “He’s here!”

The door whooshed shut, Sylvia and John flying out of the cottage as quietly as they could. The car started up and before it was even warmed up, they took off.

Twenty minutes later, I still hadn’t moved. Every muscle, bone, nerve, in my body was still tense as ever.

The only savior, Ashley called. I'd been meaning to ask her how her new roommate was, so I picked up the phone and let myself relax against her voice for a few minutes.

She sounded tired and strung out behind her honey-sweet words.

"Julie's a strange lady, but no bad intentions," she said.

"That sounds like the lead up to something bad, Ash," I replied.

"Am I that transparent?"

Julie wasn't an overtly bad woman. She was an old patriot, a widowed woman of a military veteran. She was disconnected from most modern technology, and old school in the way she ran her household. She loved the US, 'her country' so she proclaimed, and felt the need to do anything for the sake of its stability.

To Julie's sixty-three year old mind, this meant voting for Trump.

"I'm sitting in the living room doing some applications," Ash says, a smile in her inflection, "and Julie comes in and says how upset she is about needing to vote again. I ask what she means by *'again.'* I've already seen her pro-cheeto man merch, and she clearly thinks nothing of Bernie, but then get this. She says, *'It's such a burden voting, that's the man's job.'* And I'm dumbstruck."

"Wow," I say, "A man's job?"

"She says, *'If only Bobby were still 'round. Now I gotta go all the way to the booths, because Bobby ain't here to do the voting for the both of us,'* and honestly Luke I feel like I'm going insane."

"But she doesn't have bad intentions?" I say, and smirk a little.



“Shut up, you know I’m just trying to be positive.”

“Sure.”

“You’re a pessimist.”

“John and Sylvia came by today,” I say.

“Ew god. Why? What did they want?”

I tell her the whole thing, top to bottom, how I’m still curled up in bed with one ear tuned to the window in case the pair decide to come back and harrass me. How they’re so disgustingly rude. How scared I was to hear them so much as walking around.

“Luke, you have to get out of there,” Ashley says, almost pleads, because this isn’t the first time we’ve had a conversation in this vain.

“The lease is a year long. After nine months I can negotiate with them. You know this Ash.”

“If you’re risking your life, you can totally dip.”

“It’s not that intense.”

“They’re calling you a druggie, looking through Esme’s shit, and coming to the cottage when they know no one is home. That’s sociopath behavior. I think what they did today is illegal. Isn’t that technically breaking into your room?”

I take a slow breath through my nose and try to push those thoughts away, though I know she’s right.

“I’m just trying to stay positive,” I try.

“You can’t flip that one on me. I’m not in mortal danger here.”

For a few seconds, we're both silent. She's serious as hell about this, and I know she's right. John and Sylvia don't seem like they're getting any more sane. But it's not like I haven't been looking for ways to get out.

"What's the new roommate like?" I ask, hoping Ash runs with it and changes gears.

"You don't even want to know," she sighs.

"Fantastic," I say, preparing for a story.

Julie's set up is a three-bedroom house. She rents out two of the rooms, and lives in the last one herself. The largest room being rented out has a bunk bed, one of which Ash inhabits. Originally, there had been a quiet student who had the top bunk. About a week into living there, this quiet kid moved out, and for a month or so, Ash had the whole room to herself while Julie was searching for a new tenant. Finally, she accepts a 'nice young man' named Bradley, and he's tall and buff and loud, and he likes to decorate. That's fine, upon first introductions, Ashley thinks he's all good and fine, and she says she's fine with him putting up his own decorations in the room. She's thinking he has band posters, maybe a potted plant, pictures, a calendar.

But when she comes back from her late shift at the mall, Bradley has settled into the top bunk with his decorations all up and in place. And Ashley is horrified. She didn't think she'd be agreeing to what she sees.

Up on the walls are tons of different versions of the American flag - regular ones of varying sizes, blue lives matter ones, military camo versions. There's pictures of Trump doing different things; shaking hands with Kim Jong Un, smiling with Putin, even

anti-liberal memes that have been printed out. There's Trump propaganda and signs that say 'Make America Great Again.' Different democratic candidates are demonized, literally, with horns and pitchforks, and are crossed out with big red marker like a conspiracy thread. And the grand finale, covering the entrance of Ashley's bottom bunk like a curtain of racism and uneducated pride, Bradley has hung an enormous Confederate flag from underneath his mattress.

"He was on the bed when I came home," Ash says, "I come in and he goes 'sup Tony,' like that's my nickname. Like anyone in my life has ever called me that. Like he hasn't just puked trash all over my walls. I didn't know what to say Luke. It was like a white supremacist movement had redecorated."

"Please tell me you're joking," I say.

"Not even. Then, Julie appears behind me and compliments this shit. Brad says 'I got some extra stock, Mrs G!' and jumps down from his fucking camo bedsheets, like what else would he sleep in, and gives her these confederate fridge magnets. Little flags in a flying form, and they're good quality make too. She thanks him and she's so happy about it and when I go to get some food for dinner like half an hour later there's fucking confederate bullshit all over the kitchen."

"No way."

"He's a parasite. He doesn't back off. It's been a week dude. I might kill him if he talks to me about cheeto-man again. And he keeps calling me *Tony*."

"I can't picture you as a Tony," I say.

“I’m not even my old name, but I’m scared if I tell him to fuck off and call me Ant like everyone else he’ll punch me or set my shit on fire.”

“I don’t think he’d do that.”

“You ever met Confederate nuts? Penn has lots. They’re crazy Luke. You never know what they’ll do.”

The sweetness in her voice has fallen away completely and I can hear how exhausted she is. She’d never admit it, maybe for her own sake, so she doesn’t feel like she needs to rely on her family anymore, but she’s getting worn down. She’s silent on her end of the line, but in the background birds are chirping.

“Where are you right now, babe?”

“There’s this park about fifteen from the house. Brad’s home right now and so is Julie, I can’t really be alone anywhere.”

Her voice is lower, in that masculine way she tries so hard to hide. It’s what happens when she lets her guard down; the soft, feminine voice fades out. There’s rustling in my headphones and I think maybe she’s started to cry.

“Why can’t we just have it easy?” This rough, deeper Ashley comes through and I can hear the pain in her. “What did we do to deserve this? Why is fucking...Bradley allowed to do anything he wants? Why can my sisters fail out of school and get sent to jail but Mom and Dad will still favor them over me because they think I’m fucking gay?”

“It’s not your fault though-”

“It is. If I was normal I wouldn’t be stuck with Bradley for a roommate and I would have a girlfriend and be happy.”

I'm furious for a second and I want to grab her through the phone and shake her.

"No," I say, as I shoot up and start pacing my room, "This isn't your fault Ashley. Being queer isn't your fault and your parents being shitty isn't your fault. None of it is."

She doesn't respond.

"If you weren't trans, we never would've met. Ash, if you were a normal cis guy, you'd be out there *being* Brad. You know it too. And your parents don't give a shit what your sisters do because they think morally you're in the wrong. But you know you're not, Ash. You've helped me find somewhere to live. You've been my best friend since I was seventeen. You're an inspiration to me and so many others as well."

Her shivers and sobs seep through the line. "Thanks," she mumbles.

"I'm sorry it's not easy," I say.

"I'm sorry too," she replies, "I wish we could skip this part of our lives."

"Me too."

I'm all out of words, but thankfully Ash has stopped sobbing. Her lighter voice is back a little, she's putting effort into how she speaks, but she's still sad.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey," I respond.

"You wanna meet me for brunch at the mall before I start my shift tomorrow?"

She asks. "I miss your face."

I smile, a nice proper smile for the first time in a few hours. "Yes, I'd love that."

"Awesome. I'm on at one, so you wanna meet around 11:30?"

"I'll see you then babe."

“See ya Lukey,” and she hangs up.

## Entries About Grandparents

### Buba and Zaida

“So how long are you here for this time, *dahling?*” Buba asks for the third, or is it fourth time, since you turned up at your grandparents house fifteen minutes ago.

Buba’s memory has been getting worse and worse over the years, but the last four months has brought a rapid decline. She’s no longer the same grandmother you had when you were a little kid.

You remember when she used to bake angel sponge cakes that only she could whip up, or that she’d never cook you and your cousins anything but veal schnitzel and chicken soup. Now she doesn’t enter the kitchen - partially because arthritis and a bad back makes it uncomfortable for her in there, but also because she can’t remember where any of the food or utensils are stored. It hasn’t changed in your entire lifetime, everything is still a Kosher setup, cookies and sweets are still on their little shelf, bread is still in the breadbox, pots and pans above the stove. But Buba’s memory has disintegrated and taken those little pieces of information with it.

Sometimes you’ll see her nowadays with flat hair because she forgot to brush it when she woke up. It’s scary to think parts of her life so integral to how you know her are leaving.

“It’s Spring Break, Buba, I’m home for the week and then I’m back at school,” you say warmly.

She's already been holding your hand from the last time she asked how long you're staying home for, so now she lays her other hand on top and gives you a little pat.

"*Gut, gut,*" she smiles under a heavy Yiddish accent. "Are you *likink* it?"

"Yes," you assure her, "I like it very much."

"*Gut, gut,*" she repeats.

"And how are you, Buba?" You ask. You hear your grandfather tut from the kitchen, because this isn't the first time today you've asked.

"*Ach dahling,*" Buba makes this disgruntled face and throws her frail hands up, "To be honest, I am *gettink olt.*"

You love the way she and your Zaida talk. It's this type of English that's almost a different language due to their accents. Yiddish makes it so sing-song-y. Even something as devastating as your Buba acknowledging her slowness sounds more fun than it should because of the way they speak.

"Yeah, but you're still doing great," you tell her. She beams, vaguely looking at you, though her eyes are now cloudy with cataracts. "You still look fantastic, and you have the best fashion sense." You motion at her sunflower yellow blazer with the fluffy white blouse underneath.

She bursts out laughing and puts a hand back on yours.

"*Tank you dahling.*"

She starts smiling at you again and you know if you don't talk for long enough, she'll loop around just like before and ask how long you're staying for. Thankfully, your



Zaida walks through the doorway just in time and sets a cup and saucer in front of you. He's just spent fifteen minutes manipulating the coffee machine your uncle bought him, and still doesn't fully understand how to use it. It's not a great coffee but there's no way in the world you'd refuse their hospitality.

Your Zaida, he's of more sound mind. He remembers things, but he's feeling the effects of age on him now. Years of being the head of the family, of being this strong figure, is finally penetrating him.

They both look worn down in fact - the lines in their skin have deepened, their smiles are more strained, their hair has gotten thinner, and their glasses are thicker. You try to recount times when you ran around their house as a little boy, how, when you and your male cousins were being too rowdy, your Zaida would call out to embarrass you.

"*Gehls*, stop it!" He would yell.

You and your cousins would go red and kick each other in the shins.

"Zaida!" You'd all yell, "the girls are over there! We're boys!"

"Oh?" He'd respond. "*Vell*, boys are *vell-behaved* in *dis* house."

Then he'd turn to your girl cousins, all usually clustered together or following your Buba around, and say, "*Vat gut boys you are.*"

It was all fun and games back then, purposely messing up genders, but now.

Now you're not sure.

You sit with your very Yiddish and very Jewish grandparents on either side of you, and you're nervous about what they might say. You're not the grandson they

thought they had, that they once had. You haven't been that boy for years, but you've never had the guts, the *chutzpah*, to tell them what was going on.

Buba hasn't noticed anything. The way she looks at you so lovingly and so proudly indicates that she knows absolutely nothing. It hasn't occurred to her that you dress any different than you did five, ten years ago. It doesn't faze her that your face has changed so drastically, that your body clearly isn't that of a man's. The look in her eyes says that the old you has been erased, the little boy you were to her is gone from the memory bank. The way she smiles says that she sees no difference, because there's no longer anything different to see a change in.

Your Zaida though, you wonder if he's noticed you change and has decided to avoid the conversation. You wonder if he's ignoring it because there's some secret disappointment you wouldn't want to know about, or he's ok with pretending you're still the same.

You've changed a lot since you started college. When you left, your hair was cropped short, almost buzzed to your head, not letting your curls grow out nice and free and pretty. You had the stubble of a beard you didn't care to shape. Your brows were thick and overgrown, your skin was unclean, you hid under sweatshirts and loose jeans. Buba had constantly chastized you about your grooming and how you needed to try better if you wanted to find a nice young Jewish girl to marry. You never argued back, but instead thanked her.

At college, you met another person like you. You both sat in the common room of your dorm one night and whispered about how you wanted to be girls. Maybe you cried,

maybe you didn't. But this person, she was the first person in your life who felt exactly as you did. She made you feel less alien.

It was like an explosion from there on. You came out and had these amazing responses from friends, and even family dealt well with the news. You let your hair grow out and saw the curls bloom for the first time in your life. You trimmed your eyebrows and shaved off the shadow you'd never admitted to hating. You started to feel more comfortable in your skin with every step you took in your transition.

Hormones, new wardrobe, cosmetics - all things you messed around with until one day, you found a girl in the mirror and recognised her. Something went off in your head, about that disconnect you'd felt for so long. Although you still had a rough browbone, and your shadow was visible without makeup, the less strained, more lively version of yourself was the woman you'd been waiting to find.

You didn't know how to word all this to your grandparents.

As they sit with you, your nerves fill the air like an unpleasant smell.

"*Vat* are you *studyink*?" Buba asks when you take a sip of the coffee.

"Journalism," you say, "I want to write for magazines."

"*Luff-ly*," she replies with a bright smile.

The TV has been buzzing in the background the entire time, and since your Zaida has come in, that's where his attention has been. News about terrorist attacks and politicians passing bad laws. Zaida tutts again and shakes his head.

"Madness," he says.

While he's engrossed, you turn to Buba and say, "Do you like my hair?"

The curls are fresh and bouncy and shoulder length, and with the recent ombre you had done, you've got a sunkist halo of curl circling your head.

"It's very *lonk*," Zaida cuts in, "but it looks nice."

"Shush John!" Buba snaps, "he looks *luff-ly*. I like *ze* color."

She reaches out and brushes a curl away, and you try not to lean back from her touch - an old habit you developed. You wish you didn't have to talk with her about it. You wish you didn't have to tell her you're not a boy. You wish someone else could do it for you.

"Such a *hendzome* boy," Buba says.

You feel tears brimming as you stare in the face of maybe the last time your Buba will ever look at you with such pride and love. The fear that's starting to spread in your chest almost silences you, but instead you cough out,

"What if I wasn't a boy, Buba?"

Her face goes straight for a second, before her splotchy red lips turn to a pout.

"Whot?" She asks, extending the 'o' that doesn't exist in the word.

You stare down at her hand holding yours and you can hear the tremble in your words as you repeat, "What if I'm not a boy?"

When you look back up at her face, her eyes scan over your face, searching for what in the world you could possibly mean. The eerie blue-ish cataracts circle her dull brown irises that are begging for you to make sense of your statement.

“I’m not a boy, Buba,” you say, and feel a tear slip from the corner of your eye and trickle down your cheek. “I haven’t been a boy for a while now. I’ve been living as a girl at school and people know me as a girl, and I feel happy living like this.”

Buba pulls her eyes from your face, finally, and proceeds to look you up and down like she’s actually noticing your breasts, rounder face, smoother complexion, and higher voice for the first time. Like this all makes sense to her now.

“You’re a *gehl*,” she says, doesn’t ask, like she’s telling herself this new fact.

“Yes,” you answer.

“So...” Buba says now, “*ven* you get *merried*, are you *goink* to be *ze huz-bend*, or *ze vife*?”

You can’t help but laugh a bit. It pushes tears out of your eyes and you bite your lip to stop from breaking down entirely, from happiness.

“I’ll be a wife.”

Buba nods a few times, looking down at your hands together, then cups your cheek softly and goes back to her wide smile from before. “As *lonk* as you are *heppy*, *dahling*.”

You can’t help from fully breaking. Tears of joy spring from the corners of your eyes and you wrap your arms tightly around your Buba. She laughs as you thank her and assure her you’re so happy being a girl. When you settle back into your seat, still right in between your grandparents, you look back at your Zaida, who seemingly hasn’t moved a muscle. He’s smiling though.

The TV chatters on and you relax into your seat. It feels a little strange, now really being a girl in this house, not in hiding anymore. But you've been at their place for a while, and you realize it's time to head home. You give your Buba another kiss and tell her you'll see her soon, and your Zaida offers to walk you out.

Just before he unlocks the front door, he puts a hand on your shoulder and says, "I'm very proud of you, *dahling*."

You nod and thank him.

"I'm *glad* you *finelly* told your Buba," he continues, surprising you a little, because he clearly isn't fazed by your transness.

You hug him and thank him again before he unlocks the door and you head off.

A weight has lifted. They're aware of who you are, and maybe they're not always going to get your name and pronouns right, but all you could ask for is to be honest with them.

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Two days later, you're taken to lunch with your cousins and grandparents. At their favorite mall, they find a cluster of their old friends, who are all equally as bent and wrinkly as your 90-year-old grandparents. Zaida takes it upon himself to introduce each and every one of his grandchildren, something he takes pride in every time you meet his friends. He goes through the usual for the cousins before you, and they start shaking hands with everyone. Then, Zaida puts his hand on your back.

“Zis is my *gren-daugh-teh*, Zelda,” He says, fanning his arm out so the whole cafe can see you, “She’s *studyink* at college to be a journalist! She’s *takink* a break from her *writink* to come visit us.”

There’s a chorus of, ‘*Khello dere*, hi Zelda, *gut* to see you Zelda,’ from these old Jews, and all the women start complimenting you.

“Such a *beautiful gehl*,” Buba says, smiling at you getting fawned over.

You never imagined in a million years that your grandparents would be so accepting, that they would accommodate you as well as they do. You’ve never been so proud of them. Even as Buba’s memory crumbles further, she tries her hardest to call you the right stuff. She never stops, and Zaida does his best to help her remember.

Sometimes out of the blue, when Buba’s been calling you the wrong name and pronouns all night, she’ll look at you from across the table and say, “*beautiful gehl*,” and you know she still sees you as who you really are.

Dedicated to my real Buba and Zaida, Cesia and Yasha Silver who, despite age and memory issues, took me as their grandson without hesitation.

## Enbies

Enby: (*en-bee*) derived from NB, is shortform slang for the gender neutral identity non-binary. People who identify as non-binary may feel they do not fit the male or female binaries, that they are a mix, or that they have no gender at all.

As the semester starts, they remember what a kind trans girl said to them a semester earlier. That tip about how you can change your first name on the school's class registration site so that when the professor calls attendance, your name isn't what's listed on your legal documents.

"I've been doing it since freshman year," she smiled at them. "Apparently, a legal name change form isn't enough for this damn school. I need my new Social Security card too. So I'm waiting for my mail to come in and then registration can suck it and stop making me jump through hoops."

Zabyn was not fully prepared to legally change their name yet. Just the amount of money it cost, the fact that they would have to stand in a courtroom and explain why the change of name. The fact that they were so sure they couldn't say it was part of their transition. When had citing a non-binary gender ever helped someone obtain a legal name change? What was the rate of non-binary people listing their gender identity in court? Would Zabyn be able to manage it?



In the settings tab of the school's website, under their birthname, was an 'edit' button. They clicked, and then their birthname was there to erase. Highlighted, Zabyn deleted the whole thing in a chunk and replaced it with their *real* name.

Zabyn, pronounced *Zah-bin*: it was an alternative spelling of Zabel; which came from their maternal grandmother. They were paying homage to their Armenian heritage and the woman who had encouraged them to live their life as freely as possible in one swift cut.

Adding a quick, professional-style selfie to their profile, so they could be easily identified in class, Zabyn saved their new information and buzzed on the excitement of maybe having a better year, identity wise.

Classes began the next day. They checked in the morning, and the registration site still had *SARKISSIAN, Zabyn* in purple block letters. Zabyn was set in place. High on confidence, they popped the collar of their shirt and went strutting to class.

They sat upright and alert in the squeaky desk, waiting for their French Literature professor to arrive. They couldn't wait to hear an instructor actually read their name off a list, couldn't wait to throw their hand into the air and say, "Yes, that's me!" with pride.

A few minutes before class was supposed to start, a frail looking woman with a slight hunch shuffled in. Her hair was different shades of fading grey, the front streaks pulled back and pathetically pinned to the rest of her frizzy hair. Dumping her satchel on the desk at the front, she lifted, polished, and resettled her comically round, Harry Potter-esque glasses on her wide nose.

“I’m sorry, a little held up with rain,” she laughed, splaying her fingers out like she was throwing glitter over her shoulder.

The last few students slipped into empty seats as the professor laid out a list of texts for the semester. She seemed flustered, going in and out of her satchel constantly because she forgot a book or the syllabus printouts or a whiteboard marker. After a few minutes of the class sitting in bored silence, and Zabyn on edge with excitement, the professor turned to the class and said, “Is anyone here a technological genius?” with a soft French quiver to her words.

A couple students started, helped her turn on the projector, and get the online attendance sheet up. She thanked them as the screen was coming to life, and then turned to greet her class for the semester.

“Welcome everyone, I’m professor Guédon,” she stood with her fingers woven together and resting on her abdomen, nodding her head with every sentence, “This is French Literature I, I hope you’re all as excited about these novels as I am!”

She was positive, Zabyn liked that. Not like some of their past professors - the ones who were teaching, but seemingly wanted to be literally anywhere else.

“Let’s start with attendance, I want to get acquainted with you a little,” she twinkled her fingers as her eyes roamed the faces of her small class, “And when I call you, would you mind giving me your major and why you’re taking this class? Thank you.”

She stood behind the desk where the computer sat. This was it, Zabyn could feel an energy boiling in their stomach, something bright and forceful, like stars contained in

a household pot. This was going to be the first time their name would be called, and they wouldn't have to go explaining their birthname out of existence to anyone they interacted with during the semester.

As each new face raised their hand and answered, it felt like Zabyñ was crawling, dragging themselves up a golden staircase towards their moment.

“Hi, my name is Jenna, I'm a history major with a minor in French...”

“Uh... I'm Brian, I'm an economics major but I like French culture so...”

“Siska, journalism and songwriting double major, want to live in France when I graduate...”

The attendance seemed to go forever, but then they hit the R surnames. Riley Ragucci, Angel Reynoso, Garima Rudra. Tingles sparked and spread up Zabyñ's spine, straightening them up further. Their eyes widened and breath became shallow. Their hands were damp, clammy, they were excited, but also praying their voice didn't crack or break when it came their time.

“Thank you,” Professor Guédon said to a girl who'd been mumbling her reasons for the class. She scrolled down the webpage and there they were - Zabyñ's little, smiling face. Their chubby cheeks screaming that they were only 19; patchy, apricot-colored, bleach destroyed strands covering one eye; a light wing of eyeliner barely visible. The professor was paused, holding the mouse next to Zabyñ's name. Until, finally...

“A Mr. Sarkissian?” She called, and found their eyes almost immediately.

Those old, all seeing eyes bore into them, piercing the balloon of excitement and joy that had floated them to class in the first place.

As they held eye contact, Zabyn couldn't manage to get a word out. Guédon held their gaze and waited as Zabyn deflated.

"...here," they finally uttered out, sinking into their seat, a ghost of frustration and sadness wedging itself in their throat.

For the rest of class, they couldn't focus. They stared at nothing, corners of the classroom, the backs of other's heads, replaying those few seconds in their head. The disappointment had shot straight to their heart, like an arrow, spearhead so deep in flesh and bone they wondered if it could be seen protruding from their back.

*Now they know, you're an odd one out.*

*Now they know you were born male, and you didn't argue her calling you that.*

*Now you can't claim you're non-binary, because you didn't correct her.*

*What a disappointment to the LGBT+ community you claim to be such a part of.*

It felt like, even though the class was paying attention to the syllabus and professor and whatnot, every single person was watching Zabyn anyway. All eyes were on them, judging their clothes, hair, makeup, piercings, the way they sat, because they didn't fit a binary gender. Because they didn't correct the professor either.

By the time the class was let out, Zabyn had been staring off for so long, they felt like they'd forgotten how to stand back up. It crushed them, that this was probably how the entire semester would function. That once again, they were going to be that odd, unidentifiable kid hiding at their desk. Unspeaking, unmoving, a little blip on everyone

else's radar. They were something that would just be forgotten when graduation finally rolled around.

The small detail of a title and name, something that seemed so simple, so easy, but somehow, it was such a deep jab. They didn't want to correct and fix every little detail, appear as a disrespectful student, so they packed up their things and headed for the door.

"Excuse me," the professor called as Zabyñ reached the exit, "Sarkissian!"

They turned, and the professor nodded, waving them over.

"Could I talk to you for *un moment*?"

Unsure of what they possibly could've fucked up in a single class so quickly, they ducked their head and headed over.

"I'm sorry *mon amie*, I printed out an attendance sheet the other day to get acquainted on names, and then I saw a different name for you on the list today," she said, pointing at Zabyñ on the site, "and I just wasn't sure what to say for you. I'm not sure if this was a technical issue or..."

"No, that's my name," they said, "Zabyñ. I changed it on the site last minute, yesterday actually."

"Oh I'm so sorry! Zabyñ!" Professor Guédon extended her hand, "Please, let's start over. It is nice to meet you, Zabyñ."

They smiled, a little less deflated than before, and returned the handshake.

"And, I hope you don't mind me asking...I wasn't sure whether to call you miss...or mister. I can't tell very well."

She smiled, and Zabyrn was a little struck. For the first time, they didn't need to single out the professor and purposely bring up the topic of their gender. Guédon was genuinely wanting to know.

"Well," they said, "I'm neither. I'm non-binary."

The professor's eyes narrowed a little, and her lips scrunched, unsure of the words, or how that identity made sense.

"So, what do I call you then?" She asked.

Zabyrn smiled. "The title is spelled like M-X, but said like 'mix.' Here," and they took their bag off their shoulders, bringing out a pen and writing 'Mx.' on their hand.

Professor Guédon nodded slowly. "I don't call you she or he?"

Zabyrn nodded, almost proudly.

"That's going to be interesting to fix into French," She said, a smile forming at the corner of her confusion. "Thank you Zabyrn, and I'm sorry for calling you wrong."

"It's ok," they said, "Have a good day professor," and they turned to head for their next class.

"Bonne journée, Zabyrn," Guédon said.

Heading down the hall to their next class, Zabyrn felt this new thing. It was warm, something comfort-like, that spread through their chest and made their shoulders relax. With the bounce of each step, it dawned on them.

This is what validation felt like.

## Entries About Grandparents

### Grandpa Ben

I moved in with Grandpa Ben during my first semester at college. My parents lived a six hour drive from school, and Ben was more or less an hour drive, so it made sense that I would go spend time with him. And he welcomed me with open arms too - to be a permanent resident with him was a tradition within our family. Each grandchild lived in his spare room at one point or another, and I was no different.

But moving in with Grandpa Ben doubled as a cover, a way to quickly move out of home and live life as my true self.

During first year, I came out as trans. I changed my name and cut my hair and started binding. I was relatively certain that my parents would take it well - they were aware that I had transgender friends, that I was bisexual, that I was involved in many queer movements. They encouraged me to be part of those movements too, saying they were ex-hippies and they supported my bisexuality.

However, it turned out that their support stopped at my own gender identity. When I came out, they were shocked. They asked if they failed me at some point, if there had been some event that drove me to be like this. My father cried about losing his daughter, and when I tried to tell him he'd only gained a son, that there was no loss, he ignored me and told me I'd be burying his only daughter. My mother instead told me that she wouldn't let me live under her roof if I was going to take this route with my life.

They said they'd give me four weeks to find housing, and if I lived at home any longer, I'd have to live by their rules.

So very quickly, I moved in with Grandpa Ben.

"Grandpa," I asked during the adbreak for Wheel of Fortune one day, "do you think I'd be able to move in with you?"

"Is it finally your time to live in the city?" He responded with a grin.

"I'm here all the time anyway."

"Honey, of course you can. I've been waiting for you to ask."

He was a simple man like that. He never pushed for more than you wanted to say. He was content with whatever you handed him.

I received a backlash from my parents when I told them I was moving in with Ben.

"Don't you dare tell him about...that transgender nonsense," said my mother. "He's ninety-four. There's no reason to confuse him and force your views into his life."

I would never force anything, I told her.

"No pronoun shit. No flags in his apartment. Don't try to convert him. He's an old man from a different era and you need to accept that."

I nodded, hurt and newly scared that maybe my own grandfather harbored such feelings of hatred that I wasn't aware of. Maybe that's where my mother got it from. It almost made me second guess the hasty decision to live with him.

But within two years, I was starting to forget her words.



I brought friends from school around who had brightly colored hair, who had multiple piercings, who flashed their body art proudly, who wore black and chains and spikes and platform boots. I brought round people who were the epitome of alternative and queer, who painted drag-like makeup on for every day visits, who donned rainbows in the form of pins and badges and jewelry. One person even had “queer rights” tattooed on their forearm, big and clear lettering so no one would second guess their status.

Grandpa Ben welcomed them all into his small New York apartment, greeting each and every person with smiles and offering snacks and drinks, just like he did with any other guest who’d ever entered his home. He’d always apologize for speaking so loud, and then would joke about how he still refused to wear his hearing aids. He never made my friends feel out of place. If he was ever struck by someone’s look, he’d talk to me later that night or over the phone the day after and say, “Your friend is very dedicated to piercings isn’t he? I can only imagine how painful that is. Good for him,” or “What a colorful young lady you’ve met. How does she make her hair so bright?”

The moment I really started to feel comfortable with the idea of letting Grandpa in on my still silent identity was when we were watching the nightly news at six. They announced that there were going to be some legislations against gay people lifted. For years, I’d censored myself when these topics came onto my radar. It’d become almost routine after my mother’s dark warnings. I feared testing the waters, feared pushing any boundaries with Grandpa, so I’d leave queer things out of my updates to him, even though they always meant a lot to me.

With his arms crossed and his face stony, like usual, Ben said very loudly, “Well it’s about time they lifted it!”

I paused scrolling through my Instagram and stared at him for a second, even though he’d softened and gone straight back to viewing the news.

“What?” I asked.

“Pardon?” He returned, since the story was now something about Con Edison accidentally causing an underground fire.

“What did they lift?”

“A law making it harder for gay couples to adopt,” he said easily. He spoke as seamlessly as anything. “There’s no reason to have that law. It’s old and useless. Those people aren’t any different as parents just because they’re gay. Ridiculous. About time it was overturned.”

“Yeah, crazy,” I agreed, wide eyed and buzzing at how remarkably rational he was.

I returned to scrolling, my thoughts whirring, as it occurred to me that I had to tell him, at minimum, that I was part of that group he’d just been talking about. That I wasn’t straight. The thought of him rejecting me too made my chest tighten and my heart pump twice as fast, but part of my brain said his response to the legislation change meant I was safe. As we watched our game shows, I started forming a dialogue in my head of how to break it to him.

A couple hours later we'd shifted from the living room to the dinner table, him reading his newspaper, and me across from him typing away on my laptop, trying to finish a paper for class. Over the screen of my laptop, I caught him smiling at me.

"What are you writing dear?" He asked.

"A paper for a class of mine," I said.

"What class?"

"It's a gender class. We look at how gender and race interact."

"That sounds wonderful," he was still smiling, "You're still enjoying your school?"

I stopped typing and moved my computer to the side a bit so I could properly talk with him. "Yeah, Grandpa. A lot of writing but it's interesting stuff."

"I'm glad. And I'm glad you still visit me so often." His smile stretched a bit wider and he tipped his head down to continue reading his book.

He looked so content reading his hardcover right there. Ninety-six years old, but he'd barely aged since I was born, only greying hair and thicker glasses on his nose as a change. He worked almost like clockwork, going to read his hardcover for an hour or so every night, sitting in the same seat, right next to where my Grandma used to accompany him and read her hardcovers as well.

I missed her.

It hit me that I wouldn't always have the chance to be open with him, the chance I'd missed out on with my Grandma. He'd withered mentally over the years, become less mobile, lost large parts of his hearing and vision, been in and out of hospital for

what us youths considered minor illnesses. The opportunity for me to tell him was rapidly closing. I started to fear he might never get to know.

“Grandpa,” I said, now closing my laptop.

“Yes dear?” He asked, not looking up from his book.

“Grandpa,” I said again, my voice cracking slightly this time as nerves bubbled up my throat like acid.

He closed his book and locked eyes with me.

“Is something wrong, sweetheart?”

I couldn’t look him in his eyes, both so riddled with cracks from age and hiding behind his thick lenses. Instead, I hyperfocused on my fiddling hands as I asked, “Are you okay with gay people?”

Without so much as a breath, he responded, “Of course I am! Why wouldn’t I be?”

When I looked at him, his eyebrows were pulled together, clearly hurt. I couldn’t rightly give him an answer to my doubt.

“I have no issue with how people love!,” He continued, “There’s nothing wrong with a man who loves a man or a woman who loves a woman. They love each other, they’re happy, they’re not hurting anyone are they?” His tone was desperate, and he was very clearly distraught that I even for a moment considered him not being accepting.

Tears were welling up in my eyes, not because I was scared, but because I almost never saw him get upset. A feeling bloomed in my gut, a disappointment at

myself. I'd dragged this out of him, and it was overwhelming. He wasn't the type to show his emotions.

"Dear, I would never deny anyone who they are. Gay people are part of life and I have no issue with that. Love is love and being gay doesn't mean it's any different."

"Okay," I whispered.

The room was silent and heavy. Once again, Grandpa Ben didn't push for me to say any more than I wanted to. But I wanted to tell him, it felt like his right to know.

"Grandpa," I started again. The fear, as unnecessary as it was now, filled my chest, making me feel like I was stuffed with cotton balls from my belly all the way up my esophagus.

"Yes my dear," he said, softer this time, less of a question, and instead an encouragement. It was his way of saying he knew what was coming.

"I have a partner who's the same gender as me," I paused, read his face as he processed it, "I'm bisexual. I like men and women."

He reached across the table as best he could and rested his fingertips beside mine, "Are you happy with your partner?"

I smiled and nodded, looking down at my fingers as they shook next to his.

"Then I'm thrilled. Would I be able to meet her sometime?"

I mumbled yes of course as my smile spread wider. A weight had lifted, but still existed inside me. My partner, a man, was still a secret while my gender wasn't revealed. But I'd taken a step, and nothing could ruin that feeling.

I went on a study abroad trip during the Summer. We spent four weeks in France, living with a host family and studying art history. Having learnt French for six years, I felt almost at home in the quiet French suburbs around Bordeaux.

My mother and I had been on terrible speaking terms since I came out to Grandpa Ben. Her cheeks had turned bright red when she found out and cut me with a sharp, "You're just lucky he cares about you," almost like she was slowly learning not to care about my feelings. Since then, I'd only gotten sporadic texts about money or my grades, just to show how upset she was that I went against her words.

A week and a half from the end of my study abroad, I got a text saying "Grandpa is back in hospital."

I didn't think much of it, since he'd been going in and out for a while at that point, but when I got home, it struck me how different he was. His eyes were foggy and the lids were being dragged down by the weight of strong medications. His skin was grey and lacking any flush. It scared me how obvious the bones were in his face and neck and hands, how sunken his skin had become.

He insisted he was fine though, nothing but another stupid infection, he said when I visited him at the hospital. But even as he talked, it was clear this wasn't like other times. He was slurring and sentences were coming out in pieces. I didn't want to believe these were the signs of approaching death.

I spent the night in Grandpa's apartment alone, watching what had become our gameshows, knowing Grandpa Ben was definitely watching the same thing on his little TV at full volume in his hospital room. Not even the hospital would break that habit.

My parents came by the next day to help me pack and move my things back up to college for the new semester. On the ride up, I brought up how I wanted to tell Grandpa about my gender. My mom, driving the car, put her fingers to her temples and sighed.

"Don't you ever get tired of repeating this?" She asked.

"He took my sexuality well," I said, ignoring her question. Of course I was tired of this. I was tired of having to repeat my reasons for living as myself, tired of being met with rejection. "He's okay with queer people."

"He's okay with *gay* people," My mother shot back. "He won't know what transgender people are. That might be too much to ask from him, considering the state he's in."

I didn't want to admit that I'd never considered he might not have known what transgender meant.

"He loves you, but he's not doing well sweetie." She knew I hated it when she called me *sweetie* - it felt too feminine while she knew full well I identified as male. "It'd be too hard to tell him right now. Even if he'd want to understand, the state he's in would stop him from getting your pronouns right. And you can't get mad at a nearly ninety-seven year old for that."

“I wouldn’t get mad at him...” I mumbled, curled up in the backseat like a kid who’d just been scolded. I gave up there, trying to be reasonable with her anymore had started to become useless.

~ ~ ~

A week after settling into my dorm, I came back to the city and visited Grandpa Ben. He looked worse than when I’d flown in, disintegrating further into nothing. He was fixated on the TV and barely noticed me enter the room. When he did, he hardly talked, just held my hands and listened to me ramble about moving in and my new roommates, the whole time his trademark warm smile on him. It was a tired one, and I could tell half of my stories weren’t being absorbed, he just wanted me to feel heard and wanted to be with me.

He was fading away in a hospital bed.

I called for him like I always had, “Grandpa?” with a clear question in my voice. For a moment, I felt like a little kid again.

He nodded at me, so I knew he was paying attention. “Do you know what transgender means?”

He turned his head a bit and stared at the wall, still smiling.

“I used to...” he began.

“You did?” I asked, astounded.



His smile reached his eyes for the first time that visit. "I used to... this lovely trans-sexual woman. Lovely... beautiful... she entertained..."

His smile started to droop and his jaw clenched. "They're always treated... so badly... terribly. Kicked out by... family, and ostracized by, by everyone. She only lived... as herself... and her family, they wouldn't." He paused, slowly shook his head and squeezed his eyes, frustrated he couldn't form the sentences he wanted.

"Transsexuals don't do... who do they do to hurt?"

He turned to me with questions in his eyes. Sad questions. My vision was blurry, all in soft focus from warm tears about to fall.

A soft and tired smile bloomed again.

"You look like your...mother, and her mother...your hair like that."

He reached to touch the short strands over my ears, a hairstyle neither my mother nor Grandmother had ever had.

Something cracked my heart in that moment.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I said, and left.

When I returned, I had to stop outside the room to brace myself for Grandpa in his worn down condition before I entered. A nurse was padding around, putting things back in order.

"Who was that visiting you, Benjamin?" She asked.

"It's...my daughter...her child. He's studying at...school upstate. He's very intelligent. My grandson." He answered.

The wind got knocked out of me. He knew.

I spent the afternoon sitting next to him and reading while he watched the TV, and decided I wasn't going to tell him any further. I wasn't going to pull up any more emotions while he was in a state like that.

It wasn't important, telling him outright anymore. What was important was that he knew. Maybe he didn't push or ask any further, but he'd never been dense.

He knew who I really was, and he'd said it.

He died a month later.

For Stanley Benjamin Grey, May 10<sup>th</sup> 1921- January 9<sup>th</sup> 2019. Thank you  
for seeing the real me.

## There Is No Proper Goodbye

The bathwater was warm and inviting when we ran it. It was filled to the brim, the little apple scented tea lights glowing at the edges. Purple lavender sprigs fresh from the garden were slowly floating in sad circles, waiting for us to enter. It wasn't the type of beautiful, luxurious bath we'd see in a film or on a website, but neither were we a proper set designer. This was the best we could do on short notice.

When we stepped into the bath, we felt welcomed. The only place we felt accepted. The water slipped over our skin, like the softest tights being wrapped up our legs. Some bathwater spilled to the floor, taking a few lavender sprigs with it, and dousing a candle. We knew we'd filled it too high, but this was how we wanted it. We wanted a theatrical exit.

We picked up the ruddy box of matches on top of the bath salts and re-lit the one doused candle.

Now, it was perfect. Now was the time to reflect, to witness the beauty of our little bath-haven-creation, then we could leave. Once and for all.

We could finally be free.

As our long hair sat, swam, shifted in slow motion at the surface of the bath, we felt hot tears, hotter than the cooling bathwater, start to fall. It's a scary thought, trying to face the end with your own bare hands. What do we leave behind? What do we miss out on?

Never cutting our hair. That's a goal we'd never achieved.

Never having a boyfriend. Not even being married, just a boyfriend. Or girlfriend, but this was still something we'd take more time to admit to ourselves.

Graduating high school. Not that we cared about getting our name with some stamp and signature saying we made it through twelve consecutive years of English class. Just the idea of being done, having ourselves be celebrated.

Mom and Dad. The idea that we failed them. We failed so terribly at being their miracle birth. That we failed at being their biological anomaly. That we failed them as their child.

And...Manon. Would she get it? Would she understand what happened to us?

It flashed through our head, visions of little nine-year-old Manon, a month short of ten, hearing her older sister had passed. Would she blame herself? Would she understand that it wasn't her fault at all?

It made us cry harder. Thinking of Manon coming home today, being stopped at the gate by police maybe, as they investigate our cause of death or remove our body from the premises. Manon having to grow up and learn about death first-hand so quickly. Manon being forced to face suicide by losing her sister to it. Manon continuing as an only child, having to adjust, having to deal with an endless stream of condolences when her ten-year-old self didn't ask for them. Manon having the entire month before her birthday smeared for the rest of her life as a grieving time in the family.

A messy rapping on the door snapped us out of our patchy bawling.

“Claire?” Manon’s childish whinge came through the soft wood. “Claire I need to pee.”

She started rapping at the door again. We sank in the now frigid bath a bit and clasped a hand over our mouth so she couldn’t hear our pain. The movement sloshed the water and doused two more candles, slamming a wave onto the bathroom tiles as well.

“Claire, this isn’t funny. I need to pee!” Manon said.

We didn’t respond.

Then there was fiddling. And rhythmic banging against the door. For a moment, the tears weren’t drenching our cheeks, and instead we watched as the barely ten-year-old managed to shake the door enough to bump the lock out of place. The old, peeling knob turned and the door swung open to reveal Manon, still dressed in her thick tights and school-approved pinafore. She looked at us with our red face, sitting naked and distraught in a cold tub of water, and the longer she assessed the situation, the more obvious it was that she knew something was going on.

“Give me a minute,” she said with authority. This wasn’t in our control anymore.

She pulled her tights down and sat on the toilet, looking around the bathroom and taking in the almost idyllic set up. We started choking up and tears began flowing again. Manon didn’t say a word, and just went about her business with her eyebrows set in a straight line. She was clearly thinking of what to do.

Once she flushed the toilet and washed her hands, she came over and felt our bathwater.

“It’s so cold,” she said, “How long have you been sitting here?” She knelt beside us and picked up a hand. She observed the lines and lines of deep saturation on us. “You’re a prune.”

She giggled a little and let our hand drop back into the water. She got back up and left the room. We could hear shuffling in the drawers outside the bathroom, and Manon returned with our special green towel hanging over one shoulder. It was from when we were a toddler, somewhat similar to a comfort blanket, so it wouldn’t dry us all the way, but it was a nice gesture. Manon wrapped the tiny towel around our shoulders and helped us stand.

It vaguely crossed our mind that we were stark naked in front of our little sister, that self-harm scars and stretch marks were all visible to her innocent eyes. The heavy teardrops of tissue we were taught to call our breasts sat heavy and painfully obvious, and in any other situation, we would’ve covered our new growth in front of our sister. The clouds in our mind fogged it out though, and instead we just accepted her guiding hand to our bedroom.

Manon sat us on the bed and ran to get another towel. She wrapped our baby towel around our bland, wet, brown hair and twisted it into a spiral on our head as best she could manage. Her long limbs reached high for a kid. She used the corner of the larger towel to pat down our shoulders and back. She slipped our special polar bear socks on our feet and tried to cover the struggle of draping our defeated limbs into pajamas. It all felt like she was doing this to someone else’s body.

“Wait here,” she said, even though we hadn’t said anything the entire time she’d been home.

Five minutes later she returned with a soup mug full of hot water and two teabags, and a plate of cookies balancing on her arm.

“One tea is de-stress and the other is chamomile and Mom always says chamomile is good for everything.”

She set the massive mug on our bedside table, put the plate of cookies on our lap, slipped a cookie for herself, then slid down to lean against our bedframe. We sat in silence for a good five minutes, sipped at the tea, and nibbled the cookies. Manon said nothing, maybe she was waiting for us to talk, or maybe she was sitting as a guard to make sure we didn’t hurt ourselves any further.

Tears brimmed.

“Thank you, Manon,” we said.

“Have your hands dried?” she asked, craning her neck back to see us a bit.

We checked. “No. I’m still a prune.”

She snickered and took another nibble of her cookie.

“I’m sorry,” we said.

“Were you cold at all?” She asked.

“I didn’t feel the bath by the end.”

“Were you going to stay in there much longer?”

We froze. Manon was frozen too, staring at the door to my bedroom, patiently testing to see if I'd give her the answer. She knew we hadn't been just bathing. She knew there was more. Maybe she didn't want to admit she knew, but we could tell.

"I didn't think you'd be home so early," we answered, defeated.

"Ms Caroline excused herself right after class started so we were sent home since it was last period," she shrugged, like it was nothing. "Skylar's mom dropped me off because I said you were home early since you don't have class after lunch on Wednesdays."

Silence fell over us again, staring into space.

"I'm sorry I didn't let you into the bathroom," we said. Apologizing for everything except what we had actually been attempting to do.

"Were you going to drown in the bath, Claire?"

We folded in half and held our head in our hands. She knew. How did she know?

"It's ok," she tried to reassure us as we started shaking and crying, "It happened to someone on Degrassi right? I watched the episode with you. They told us at school that sometimes people get really really sad and they can try to do things like this, like they don't want to live anymore."

We stifled as many yells as we could, fearing that we would scare Manon if she misunderstood our reactions. She crawled onto our bed beside us and held our hand as we started to rock back and forth.

"It's ok, I swear it's ok. I don't mind that it happened because I'm here and I found you, and now you're dry and not in the bath and you don't need to have any more tea if



it makes you think of that. It's ok because this happens a lot right? At school, they said that more and more people think about not being alive every year."

"I'm so sorry Manon, I didn't want you to know."

"I don't mind knowing," she said, a squeak of nerves in her voice.

She reached up and pulled the loosening towel off our head. Damp locks fell lifelessly to our shoulders and draped our face.

"Beautiful," she said with an encouraging smile.

"I hate it," we stated. "I want it all gone."

"Like when Anne Hathaway cut her hair?"

"No. Like a boy's haircut."

"Oh. Why can't you have one?" She asked.

Shallow breaths were the only sounds for a moment. It was pure curiosity from Manon, something not common from her.

"I want a boys haircut and everything else that boys have." We felt all muscles in our chest constrict. Manon's eyebrows drew close as she put it together.

"Are you a boy?" She asked with all sincerity.

We nodded slowly. Manon's lanky arms wrapped around our shoulders as she kneeled up to hug us. "I love you, brother."

"I might have messed this up," Manon said from behind us.

"It'll grow back," we threw back, waving our hand around.

"Ok, you can be a messy boy then."

She would snip another bunch of hair now and then, creating a halo of limp brown strands around the toilet in the bathroom. Clumsy with Mom's tiny nail scissors, Manon tried to give us the closest to a boy's haircut as she could. When all was done, we looked in the mirror and could see how ridiculous we looked. All jagged and uneven, longer over the ears and nowhere else on the sides of our head, but we looked more like a boy than we'd ever looked before.

"Now," Manon said, again full of authority, "Mom wanted to take me bra shopping for when I 'start becoming a woman', but the bra fits me weird."

She dragged us to the drawers in her room and pulled out a racerback training bra for young girls.

"It doesn't make me have boobs so I don't need it now." She said while stuffing it into our palm. "Maybe it'll make your boobs less obvious."

We felt a muted pang of despair at having our useless chest be called "obvious," but we tried to ignore it. We headed back to our room to try it on, but it didn't quite fit, being just a short tank top all in all. All out of energy, we slumped against our bed and hung our head. A few minutes later, Manon knocked. When we didn't reply, she slipped in and slid next to us.

"Sometimes I feel like I shouldn't exist either," she mumbled.

"I'm a disappointment. Mom and Dad tried so hard to have a biological child and I'm the only one that made it and I turn out to not even be born right," we blubbered.

"Yeah, they had to go and get me when they couldn't have another kid. It wasn't even like I was born. I was bought like a dog."

We stopped dead in our thoughts. We'd never heard her complain about being adopted.

"You weren't bought like a pet, Manon," we said.

"Some lady didn't want me, so she gave me to a center who sold me to you guys," she huffed and rested her head on our shoulder. Being referred to as a separate family from her cut deep. "Sometimes, when people look at us I feel like they know I wasn't born the same way. It's like they know we're not related. When we go to see Grandma and Grandpa, it feels like they look at me different too. I'm not the special child that made it. They only waited for Mom to have you. I'm an extra that was bought."

When we looked down at her thick, dark curls, we could feel her tears sliding onto our skin. Tucking her chin down, she was hiding herself under her grand mane.

"Did you know that in primary school, the principal asked if I was the adopted one?" We asked Manon.

"No," she sniffed.

"You have Mom and Dad's dark, curly hair. You have deep brown eyes like them. You're tall and slim like they are. You're tan and don't really burn, like them. And then there's me."

Sitting next to Manon, our straight, thin, reddish-brown hair stood out. We had hazel eyes, we were chubby and pasty, short, and easily burned in the sunlight. We couldn't look any further from Manon, but she looked more like our parents than we ever had. We even had a family in-joke that we were the adopted child instead of Manon.

“You’re part of our family Manon. You’re never going to be anything but that. Being adopted doesn’t change a single thing,” we said, hugging her closer.

“And you being a boy. That doesn’t matter, you know? No matter who is ok with it, you’re always going to be my brother. Being born as a girl doesn’t change a single thing.”

We studied abroad in Australia for college, or University as they called it there. Manon cried when we left, and we promised we’d visit every break we got. Manon had helped us find what school to attend and helped us fill out each application with our newly changed name.

André. She said it was still close enough to a French name, so Mom would like it. Manon had chosen it for us and it suited. She’d been the first person to stand up for us when we came out at sixteen. She stood at our side and said she supported us being a boy no matter what. Mom and Dad tried not to freak out and had us go to therapy to get a proper gender dysphoria diagnosis. Manon, at the same time, had something flare up in her lungs.

It was pneumonia, but so many people get pneumonia.

Between the ages of sixteen and eighteen, we had legal documents change, we started hormone replacement therapy, we went to consultations for top surgery. Manon was our backbone through it all.

She struggled at the same time. She was back and forth in medical care as the original ‘pneumonia’ had not just been pneumonia. Assumed to be an inherited

autoimmune disease, Manon had continual issues with build up in her lungs, or issues breathing due to thinning tissue. But we were always assured she would be able to live with her condition. It would be expensive, but liveable. Just like my existence as a trans person on hormones for the rest of my life - expensive but liveable.

When we thought about it, it wasn't quite so clear if we were so close with our sister because of our near suicide attempt at fourteen, or if we would've been so close anyway. There was always a little part of Manon that looked at us with fear, that she knew we had the capability to end ourselves. She tried to cover it. In return, there was always a part of us that knew she didn't feel like a natural part of our family, and that no matter what we said, she would never be fully convinced.

Manon was in hospital at the end of our first year at University. It wasn't a surprise with what she had. Seeing her in a hospital bed connected to different machines had almost become routine over the years. But a week before our final exams, Mom called us and said Manon really wanted us there.

"She's uncomfortable and wants her brother," Mom said.

So we changed our flight. We called Manon from across the world and tried to talk to her, but she was so under from sedatives that she was barely responding.

We shrugged it off and boarded our plane. We'd speak to her in the hospital.

When we landed in LA and turned off airplane mode, our phone started exploding with voicemails and texts.

We called Mom and could hear in her tears that it was over. Mom couldn't get the words out. Dad took the phone and the pain was in his voice too.

“Can we video call?”

We called our parents back a second later and they were holding the phone to Manon, who was ten times paler than her normal self. Her deep eyes were sunken into her skull and the respirator connected to her face was slowly filling and deflating her chest. Her half lidded eyes, heavy with pain killers, were waving around the phone screen. No expression crossed her suffocated cheeks.

We smiled and waved through the worst. Our face red and burning, our brain feeling like it was about to explode. Blood pumping thick through veins when we tried to say hello to her. Her eyes just rolled between the machines and our parents.

Through us reassuring her, saying we'd be there in only a few hours because we were about to get on our flight, she started to slowly reach for the phone as best she could.

“You're always my brother,” she rasped, not even looking at the screen for us.

She hummed and her eyes closed fully. She took a big breath.

Then, she wasn't there anymore.

The suit jacket was a faded navy, with an old cream pocket square. Vintage.

It was our Grandfathers. When he passed, we got some of his wardrobe, and Manon got bits and pieces of his fine jewelry.

The clothes we wore didn't really feel all that real, they were stale and dark and sad, preparing us for a funeral we'd hoped wouldn't occur for a long time yet. The smell

of mothballs and cologne was foreign, the idea of Manon not existing anymore was totally alien.

Dad drove us to the church with the radio turned off. The silence was eerie. Our family car was normally bouncing with different decades of music. Manon's specialty CD mixes stayed in the glovebox despite how badly we wanted to pull one out and hear her mismatched collection of favorite tunes. Just hear a piece of her.

Mom was already crying. It felt like we should've been crying too.

The church was small and worn down. It looked like it could've toppled over were a breeze to blow down the street. But no wind passed. It was a cold, dreary day; not raining but no sun in the sky either. It had nothing to do with the loss of Manon, but it sure felt like it.

When we entered the church and saw every single person from our family wrapped under black suits and dresses and jackets, we wondered if Manon would've expected so many people to turn up to mourn her, if this could've proved that she really was a true part of the family. All of her friends were clustered in a group toward the front, heads turned down in grieving. People we didn't recognize were toward the back of the procession, already giving our Dad and us condolences. Mom cried her way past everyone.

At the front of the church was Manon's open casket.

In that moment, we realized we almost sent Manon into our place when we were preparing to drown in the tub. Despite how horrible it was to be there in the glaring room

of death, we would've given anything to have been the one in the casket had it meant Manon got to live a full life. We would've traded the world.

We were guided to the front of the church, and the pastor started talking. Everything blurred into white noise.

We could see the tips of Manon's crazy tall curls sticking out of the fancy box. Her embalmed body was in there, promoting the notion of her being in the room.

Everything in our body tightened. Our breathing jerked to a stop and our hands curled to fists, heat crawled up our spine and neck. The hairs stood up on our body and tears threatened to bleed down our cheeks. They filled our eyes to the point where the church looked like it was built from stained glass.

But they didn't fall.

We tried to blame Testosterone for making it harder to cry. We tried, but we knew that wasn't it. Somewhere deep down, we knew it because we didn't feel worthy of crying. We didn't feel entitled to emotion, when we were so sure we failed our only sister.

We thought back to when she told us about feeling like a pet. We thought back to how she didn't feel like part of the family because she wasn't connected genetically. We thought back to how desperately she begged us to come visit when we had breaks in University. We thought about how we brushed off the seriousness of her being in hospital so often. We thought about how we watched her pass on a phone screen.

With our brain clouded, Dad pulled us up from the pew slowly and helped us step toward the casket. Manon's corpse lay still, like a wax figure.



It wasn't her. Manon wasn't dead in a box. Manon wasn't being held together by chemicals. Manon wasn't dressed up in her favorite blue "goddess" style dress just so she could lie still in a padded box, like a Barbie doll ready for shipment.

Her makeup was done simply, something Manon never did. She would always go all out or nothing. Her hair was allowed to expand like a crazy mane all over the place, something she also hated. She had our Grandmother's chunky, hand-me-down turquoise necklace sitting limp on her collar bones. Manon would never match that necklace with her dress.

Why couldn't we have dressed her?

We tugged at our Dad's sleeve.

"Can we leave?"

He nodded, wrapped his arm around our shoulders, and guided us out of the church.

At home, the suit jacket ended up on the floor and we ended up crumpled up in a ball next to it. We didn't deserve the comfort of a bed.

Mom came to check on us soon after. She asked if we wanted tea. We said yes.

The boiling of the kettle rattled through the house, as if calling to us. We jumped up, knowing exactly what tea we wanted. We got the old soup mug from the back of the cupboard and dumped one de-stress teabag and one chamomile teabag, because Mom always says that chamomile is good for everything. We got a plate from another cupboard and put a handful of cookies on it. Then, we balanced the whole affair and shuffled back to our room.

We slipped on our old, ragged pair of polar bear socks, dressed ourselves in pajamas, and slid down to sit with our back against the side of our bed. We faced the door, sitting exactly where Manon had sat when she saved us. From this angle, it felt we were protecting something.

“I’m sorry,” we mumbled to the emptiness.

But we didn’t feel quite as guilty. We had returned the favor.

For Jenny. I miss you. May 14<sup>th</sup> 2002 - April 28<sup>th</sup> 2019.