Chapter *Eight*

Wendi's first words to me were "Mary! You *mahu*?"

I was sitting on a park bench as Jeff ran around with his friends on the lawn that separated my school from his. Wendi was passing by with her volleyball in hand, her backpack bouncing on her butt, and her drive-by inquiry in the air. Though there was definitely a question mark floating around, her direct yet playful approach made me internalize her words as a statement. *If she's asking—even kiddingly—then I must be suspect*, I thought.

Everyone took notice of Wendi. She was hard to miss, prancing around Kalakaua Intermediate School in super-short soccer shorts, with her green mop of hair vibrantly declaring her presence. Subtlety was not—and still isn't—her thing. Her irritated red skin, peppered with acne, glistened with sweat as she played volleyball on campus. I'd never been this close to her, and her scrutinizing stare was intimidating.

Jeff, whom I picked up every day after school while Chad was at basketball or baseball practice, wasn't paying attention, but I remember feeling self-conscious. I was afraid that if I got close to Wendi or someone saw me interacting with her, I would be called *mahu*—a word that I equated to *sissy*. In my playground experience with the term, it was an epithet, thrown at any boy who was perceived to be *too* feminine. Until Wendi crossed paths with me, I was under the impression that I was doing a good job at being butch enough that such words wouldn't be thrown my way.

I was afraid that Wendi had seen me, but beneath that fear of being visible was a sense of belonging that thrilled me. I recognize now that her stopping to ask, "You *mahu*?" (though I would later learn she didn't identify as such) was her attempt at finding others like her—a connection I wasn't ready to make. I gave her a scrunched, crumpled expression resembling adamant denial, which made her roll her eyes and prance away.

At the time, *mahu* was limited by our Western interpretation, mostly used as a pejorative. What I later learned in my Hawaiian studies classes in college was that *mahu* defined a group of people who embodied the diversity of gender beyond the dictates of our Western binary system. *Mahu* were often assigned male at birth but took on feminine gender roles in Kanaka Maoli (indigenous Hawaiian) culture, which celebrated *mahu* as spiritual healers, cultural bearers and breeders, caretakers, and expert hula dancers and instructors (or *Kumu*s in Hawaiian). In the Western understanding and evolution of *mahu*, it translates to being transgender in its loosest understanding: to cross social boundaries of gender and/or sex. Like that of Hawaii's neighboring Polynesian islands, *mahu* is similar to the *mahu vahine* in Tahiti, *fa'afafine* in Samoa, and *fakaleiti* in Tonga, which comes from the Tongan word *faka* (meaning "to have the way of") and *leiti* (meaning "lady"). Historically, Polynesian cultures carved an "other" category in gender, uplifting the diversity, span, and spectrum in human expression.

To be *mahu* was to occupy a space between the poles of male and female in precolonial Hawaii, where it translated to "hermaphrodite," used to refer to feminine boys or masculine girls. But as puritanical missionaries from the West influenced Hawaiian culture in the nineteenth century, their Christian, homophobic, and gender binary systems pushed *mahu* from the center of culture to the margins. *Mahu* became a slur, one used to describe male-to-female transgender people and feminine men who were gay or perceived as gay due to their gender expression. Despite *mahu*'s modern evolution, it was one of the unique benefits of growing up in a diverse place like Hawaii, specifically Oahu

(which translates to "the gathering place"), where multiculturalism was the norm. It was empowering to come of age in a place that recognized that diversity existed not only in ethnicities but also in gender. There was a level of tolerance regarding gender nonconformity that made it safer for people like Wendi and me to exist as we explored and expressed our identities.

The first person I met who took pride in being *mahu* was my hula instructor at school. Kumu Kaua'i was one of those *mahu* who reclaimed her place in society—specifically, being celebrated in the world of hula, where the presence and talent of *mahu* was valuable. Some trans women, who actively engaged in restoring native Hawaiian culture, reclaimed *mahu* at that time, choosing to call themselves *mahuwahine* (*wahine* is Hawaiian for "woman"), just as some people in marginalized communities reclaimed formerly derogatory words like *dyke*, *fag*, *nigger*, *queer*, and *tranny*. It was theirs to claim, use, and uplift. Kumu didn't call herself a woman or gay despite her femininity and preference for *she* and *her* as pronouns. She simply identified as *mahu* and had no qualms about the vessel she was given and nor any desire to change it.

Kumu had long, bushy black hair that waved all the way to her behind, which she draped in bright floral-print *pareos* or *lavalava* (wraparound skirts). I marveled at the unique ways she wrapped her *pareos* around her neck, letting the lush fabric flow over her rotund belly to her long, thick legs. Her skin was the color of coconut husks (a combination of her Hawaiian-Filipino-Chinese ancestry), her nose was broad, and her eyes were framed by thin high-arched brows that curved fiercely, mirroring the sway of her hips when she showed us how to *'ami* and *'uwehe*.

"Soft hands," she would gently instruct our small *hula halau* (Hawaiian for "dance troupe"). "You must always offer the gods *soft*, graceful hands. Don't stomp the land like you're mad! Be gentle and gracious. This dance is our offering to the gods, thanking them for everything."

Kumu bewildered me initially because I had been raised within the strict confines of male and female. This was a far cry from football Sundays with Dad in the projects. I was shaken by the dissonance of bright floral dresses and long hair on the form of a male-bodied person, someone who expressed her femininity proudly and visibly. Adding to that was the regular presence of Kumu's "husband," a tall, masculine man who appeared Samoan in stature and looks. He would pick up Kumu at the end of our practices, affectionately kissing her and helping her load the truck with the hula instruments—the *ipu* (a drum gourd) and *'ili'ili* (set of smooth black stones)—that she brought for us to dance with. I now realize that my fascination with Kumu wasn't that she puzzled me; I was in awe. She resonated with me at age twelve as I yearned to explore and reveal who I was. With time, I accepted Kumu's own determination of gender and learned to evolve past my ironic need to confine her to the two boxes I had been raised to live within. Kumu Kaua'i, like *mahuwahine* who came before, staked a given righteous place in Hawaii by uplifting, breeding, and spreading many aspects of native Hawaiian culture, specifically through hula. Kumu taught me, this mixed plate of a kid, how to mirror the movements of my ancestors and give thanks for the island culture that respected various other identities.

Wendi similarly captivated me because she refused to be jailed by anyone's categories or expectations. There was no confining this girl. I noticed her everywhere after our brief exchange, during which she recognized something in me that I thought I had expertly hidden behind buzz cuts and polo shirts. I took note of her slamming her volleyball at recess, whipping her flamboyant bob around campus, carrying her black flute case as she sashayed to band practice. What still stuns me about Wendi is that no one tolerated her. She was not something to be tolerated. She was accepted as fact, just as one would accept the plumpness of the lunch ladies or the way Auntie Peggy, the counselors' secretary, would grab your palm as you waited for a meeting and read you your future (I recall her telling me, "You're going to get married in white!"). Wendi's changing hues, her originality, her audacity to be fully herself, was embraced and probably even more respected at an age when the rest of us were struggling and striving to fit in.

I refuse to pretend, though, that her uniqueness didn't make her a target. Wendi was called *faggot* at recess and asked when she was going to get her sex change. She used such ignorance as ammunition, threatening to kiss the boys who sought to humiliate her. I wasn't as daring as Wendi, and looking at her I was frightened by what I saw: myself. I

told no one about her calling me *mahu* at the swings and avoided her as her long legs in her rolled-up shorts and knee-high socks glided past me in the halls.

Instead, I became all the more unwavering in my commitment to being the good son that year. I didn't put up a fight when it came to haircuts at the beauty school that offered barber discounts. I earned awards for my academic performance in class, was bumped into advanced courses, and even worked as an editor for the yearbook and the quarterly newspaper. My teachers praised and encouraged me, and in the spring of 1996, I was inducted into the National Junior Honor Society. I was the only boy from our class to be inducted. I loved the distinction of *only*, though the boy part I could've done without.

At our induction ceremony, Mom, Chad, Jeff, Cori, and the girls sat in the audience as I received my certificate and posed for pictures with Mr. Higa, my counselor and our NJHS faculty adviser, and the rest of the girls, who surrounded me in white dresses. I wore a white button-down shirt with black slacks and my knockoff Timberland boots. This was around the time when I began parting my shorn curls at the side, resembling what I imagined was a Halle Berry–esque hairdo, a haircut that Cori loved to tease: "You look like Gumby!" All teasing was aside that day as I beamed in our school library with its gray carpet and rows of books and encyclopedias and Hawaiian quilts hanging on the wall. My family sat in the brown metal foldout chairs, listening to our rendition of Celine Dion's "Because You Loved Me."

That same year, I had my first and only girlfriend for a couple of weeks. We met in Mr. Wong's social studies class, where she sat behind me, wearing gray contact lenses that made her sharp eyes look catlike and a short haircut that complemented her petite frame. Like the majority of kids in Kalihi, she was Filipino. I adored her. We spoke on the phone regularly as friends, and then all of a sudden I was her "boyfriend," something instigated and encouraged by our peers, since we hung out so much. I reluctantly went along with it, carrying the title for those two weeks because she made me appear normal. I didn't want to stick out like Wendi, who would enter my every day during the second half of seventh grade, when we had band class together.

I played tuba, she the flute and piccolo. I was envious of her compact, feminine instrument. We both were first chair of our sections, she swaying noticeably to her own sound. Early in the spring semester, Wendi sat near me one day as the room emptied and I wiped the saliva out of my mouthpiece. Her closeness made me nervous, just like the first time she asked whether I was *mahu*, because I worried others would think we were friends. I knew I could be called out by association, but something about that day made me not care.

"I'm going to the gym to play volleyball," she said. "Like come?"

It was another invitation to connect; she was subtle this time. I think she knew it would take baby steps for me to be as out there as she was, and I knew that denying her would mean denying myself. I nodded discreetly, and volleyball became the foundation of our relationship. On the hot cement courts behind our school, Wendi taught me to bump, set, and spike, which was a feat, because I was about four inches shorter than she was at the time. I approached the ball with confidence and sass despite my height, and I even hit the ball with my head snapping at the exact moment my open palm hit the ball, just like Wendi. It was a flamboyant habit that my high school coach would later drill me to unlearn.

Wendi and I grew inseparable through middle school, a bond that would link us for the rest of our lives. Through association, my classmates learned that I was like Wendi—who hadn't yet adopted any labels to describe her shifting self. I was fortunate to meet someone just like me at such a young age. It was empowering to see myself reflected in her, and I rapidly shifted in her presence. I began dressing like her, shopping at Savers, the thrift store at Dillingham Plaza, scoring soccer shorts and vintage T-shirts. Wendi shopped with a stapler and staple remover to swap price tags according to the day's color-coded half-off specials. If blue tags were half off, we'd shop for what we wanted, then hunt for garments with blue tags, removing them with the staple remover and restapling the tags to our garments. "Sickening, yeah?" Wendi would snap as we giddily skipped out of the thrift store, swinging our white plastic bags filled with donated clothes for just under twenty dollars.

We became a regular sight on Gulick Avenue, prancing up and down that main road in Kalihi from her two-bedroom apartment, where she lived with her grandparents, to my house on Owawa Street. What strikes me now is that no one in my family raised an eyebrow when Wendi came to our house. Mom didn't pull me aside and have a talk with me about my friend. Cori never teased me or Wendi. Chad and Jeff were nothing but cordial, gamely sleeping in the living room so Wendi and I could have the room all to ourselves. Wendi quickly became a regular, welcomed presence in my house. A part of me believes that I brought her around at a time when I was reluctant to vocalize who I was. Her presence allowed me to show another layer of my identity to my family. Their nonchalance helped rebut my fears of rejection.

My baby brother, Jeff, who was only seven at the time, later confessed that he was "confused" by Wendi's flamboyance and even more "confused" by my evolution. "You were always different," he later told me, citing that when he heard he had two older brothers, he thought Mom had misspoken because he'd seen a boy and a girl with wild curly hair get off the plane.

"You were never like Chad and me," he said. "You never wanted to do the things that we liked to do." Jeff even recalled an incident (that I don't remember) when I was picking him up from school. A group of boys at the recreation center asked him how he felt about his brother becoming his sister. Jeff's memory strikes me because I think my growing confidence and self-assuredness under the light of my friendship with Wendi blocked memories of the verbal brutality thrown our way.

As I look back, what impresses me about my family is their openness. They patiently let me lead the way and kept any confusion or worry to themselves during a fragile period in my self-discovery. I recognize this as one of the biggest gifts they gave me. On some level, I knew they were afraid for me, afraid that I would be teased and taunted. Instead of trying to change me, they gave me love, letting me know that I was accepted. I could stop pretending and drop the mask. My family fortified my self-esteem, which I counted on as I embarked on openly expressing my rapidly evolving self.

Reflecting on this pivotal time in my life, I think of the hundreds of thousands of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning) youth who are flung from intolerant homes, from families who reject them when they reveal themselves. Of the estimated 1.6 million homeless and runaway American youth, as many as 40 percent are LGBTQ, according to a 2006 report by the Task Force and the National Coalition for the Homeless. A similar study by the Williams Institute cited family rejection as the leading cause of the disproportionate number of homeless LGBT youth. These young people are kicked out of their homes or are left with no choice but to leave because they can't be themselves. That's something both Wendi and I fortunately never faced.

With an air of acceptance at home, it was fairly easy to approach my mother and declare my truth. Sitting at our kitchen table, I told Mom, with no extensive planning or thought, "I'm gay." I was thirteen years old and didn't know how to fully explain who I was, conflating gender identity and sexuality. What I remember about that brief exchange was Mom's warmth. She smiled at me, letting me know that it was okay. I felt loved and heard and, more important, not othered. From her lack of reaction—her brows didn't furrow, her brown irises didn't shift from side to side—I felt as if I had announced that I had on blue today, a simple fact that we were both aware of. Mom later told me that she remembers feeling afraid for me because she sensed that there was more I wanted to say but didn't know how to. "My love for you never diminished, but a part of me was scared that people would hurt you, and that is what I had a hard time with," she told me recently.

A part of me was scared, too. I couldn't acknowledge the gender stuff because I didn't have a full understanding of it. Saying "I think I am a girl" would have been absurd for many reasons, including my fear that it would be a lot for my mother to handle. I didn't know that trans people existed; I had no idea that it was possible for thirteen-year-old me to become my own woman. That was a fantasy.

But no matter how incomplete my revelation to my mother was, I felt freer and began openly expressing my femininity under the grooming of my best friend. On a throw pillow in Wendi's lap, I rested my head as she tweezed

my eyebrows on her grandmother's plastic-covered couch. I held an ice cube to my swollen eye, trying to numb the stinging pain.

"You wanna look good, right?" she asked as I flinched from her tweezers. "Now I gotta make these even."

As she studied the curve of my brows, I felt them getting thinner with each sting. Wendi claimed she knew what she was doing, and I didn't doubt her skills because she excelled at everything, from volleyball and flute to beauty, her latest obsession. Wendi was unwaveringly authoritative; she'd read something in a magazine or a Kevyn Aucoin book, and suddenly, she was an expert. I accepted her as nothing less. I also didn't doubt her because I trusted her. The tweezing was my first experience of intimacy with another person, and it foreshadowed our current professional roles, with Wendi serving as my makeup artist for photo shoots and TV appearances.

Wendi's bedroom was sponge-painted purple, black, and white, and her grandparents gave her the freedom to be who she was, despite neighbors who referred to her as *bakla* (Tagalog for "sissy," "gay," or "fag"). She had a bunch of male underwear catalogs that she stacked atop her white dresser. She didn't hide anything.

We'd stay up late talking about everything and nothing, the only way two people eager to know each other can. I have never been as open as I was in those first few months of my discovering friendship with Wendi. I had butterflies about having found someone like me with whom I didn't have to explain anything. I was fearless about sharing myself with her. Wendi was the first person I told about Dad's crack addiction, about the disappointment of my mother's absence and her preference for men over me, about the times Derek had made me blow him. She in turn told me things she had never told anyone.

Wendi (I've known her only as Wendi; given names and "before" photos are irrelevant in our friendship) grew up in Kaneohe with her mother, who, like her father, struggled with meth addiction. I remember her giggling at her younger self when she told me she lost her virginity at eleven to a playmate a few years older than she was. "Girl, I was such an itchy queen!" she told me in reflection, adding that she'd been attracted to boys for as long as she could remember. There was never a point in her life when she pretended to be anything other than who she was. "That's a waste of time," she said. "And, girl, you were not fooling anybody, trying to be butch. I clocked you right away."

For as long as I've known Wendi, she's been unapologetic about who she is. I can see her clearly at six years old, snatching her cousin's pink one-piece bathing suit and proclaiming, "I'm a girl! I'm ovah!" Wendi told me she remembers older *mahu* who frequented her family's flower shop. "They were tall, with long hair, and wore *pareos*," she said. "But, girl, you could clock them right away. I didn't want to look like that!" When she learned that her mother was having an affair with a neighbor, cheating on her stepfather, whom she adored, Wendi said it was easy for her—at only eleven—to make the decision to run away, taking the bus across town to her paternal grandparents' home in Kalihi, where she sought refuge and stability. "I knew that I wanted to transform without interruptions," she laughed. "And grandparents are always easy." Her Filipino grandparents took her in with no complaints about her femininity or the girls' world that she had created for herself.

It was in Wendi's room that I heard about hormones. She mentioned them as if discussing milk, something you had to drink in order to grow. She told me the older girls she knew ("These fierce, unclockable bitches!") went to a doctor in Waikiki who prescribed hormones for girls as young as sixteen. "I'm going to get my shots down when I turn sixteen," Wendi, who was fourteen at the time, said with excitement. "Trust."

I knew about hormones and puberty and safe sex from the handouts Coach Richardson gave us in health and physical education class. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, he'd lecture us about how we were raging with hormones, changing the shape and feel of our bodies. I felt nothing, barely five-two and a little chunky in the face and thighs; puberty hadn't really touched me. But I noticed the suppleness of the girls in class, the ones who seemed to be towering over many of us in height and shape. They began to separate from the pack swimming way behind in the puberty kiddie pool.

"Your grandparents are going to let you do that?" I asked Wendi, stunned.

"They don't know what *that* is and can barely speak English," she said matter-of-factly. "My aunt's gonna take

me."

I trusted that she would do exactly as she said she would, and I admired her unstoppable determination. Wendi's friendship gave me the audacity to be noticed. One morning after one of our beauty experiments, I walked into student council homeroom with arched brows that framed my almond-shaped eyes, which were sparkling with a brush of silver eye shadow that Wendi said no one would really notice because it was "natural-looking." The girls in class, the ones who wore the white SODA platform wedge sneakers I so coveted, said, "I like your makeup." I remember tucking my short curls behind my ears, beaming under the gaze my new look warranted.

One early evening after playing volleyball, Wendi and I visited a group of her friends in a reserved room at the recreation center. They were rehearsing for a show they did at Fusions, a gay club on Kuhio Avenue in Waikiki. Most of them were drag queens, but a select few were trans women who performed as showgirls. Society often blurs the lines between drag queens and trans women. This is highly problematic, because many people believe that, like drag queens, trans women go home, take off their wigs and chest plates, and walk around as men. Trans womanhood is not a performance or costume. As Wendi likes to joke, "A drag queen is part-time for showtime, and a trans woman is all the time!"

The lines continue to be blurred due to the umbrella term *transgender*, which bundles together diverse people (transsexual, intersex, genderqueer, drag performers, crossdressers, and gender-nonconforming folks) living with gender variance. Unfortunately, the data on the transgender population is scarce. The U.S. Census Bureau doesn't ask about gender identity, how trans people self-identify varies, and many (if asked) may not disclose that they're trans. The National Center for Transgender Equality has estimated that nearly 1 percent of the U.S. population is transgender, while the Williams Institute has stated that 0.3 percent of adults in the United States (nearly seven hundred thousand) identify as transgender, with the majority having taken steps to medically transition. This number does not take into account the number of transgender children or individuals who have expressed an incongruity between their assigned sex and gender identity or gender expression.

Despite the misconceptions, I understood the distinction between a drag queen and a trans woman because I came of age in the mid-nineties, and drag queens were in vogue. There was the 1995 release of *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar.* I hated that movie because Wendi would tease that Noxeema Jackson—Wesley Snipes's drag character—was my "Queen Mother." Drag queens were on Cori's favorite talk shows, *Sally* and *Jerry Springer*, and then there was RuPaul, "Supermodel of the World." It was a time when a brown, blond, and glamorous drag queen was a household name, beaming on MAC Cosmetics billboards at the mall in shiny red latex.

Like RuPaul, the queens at the rec center staked their claim on a smaller scale in Hawaii, part of the fabric of Oahu's diverse trans community. Toni Braxton's "Unbreak My Heart" was blasting from a boom box, and they were huddled together, about ten of them, discussing their choreography. I watched, seated on the cold tile floor with my backpack and volleyball at my side. They soon reconfigured, gathering in a circle of arms as one woman knelt at the center, hidden by the fort of mostly rotund queens. With the tape rewound, each queen walked clockwise, slowly descending into a kneeling position as the lady in the center rose, lip-synching Toni's lyrics.

The lady had long, full wavy hair that served as a backdrop to her curvy body. She gracefully moved her head to the lyrics, basking in the glow from the yellow-tinted lightbulb directly above her. Her deep-set brown eyes, magnified by a pair of full false lashes, looked straight ahead, stoic, almost numb, mirroring the turmoil of an unbearable heartbreak. She was a diva among a moving mass of chorus queens who appeared blurred; only she was in focus.

"Tracy's ovah, yeah," Wendi whispered at me, snapping her finger. "You can't even clock her!"

I want to be her, I thought, half nodding to Wendi, speechless and captivated. I was excited and afraid of my silent revelations. Though she didn't look it, I knew Tracy had been born like us. I knew she had wondered at night about how she was going to change. I knew she had climbed the insurmountable summit of trans womanhood. Unlike the queens she was performing with, Tracy was a woman of her own creation, and I was moved and on the verge of so many emotions that I was fragile when they stopped the tape and Wendi approached the group.

Lani, who wore a pair of knee-length denim shorts and a stretched white tank top with black bra straps visible on her shoulders, kissed Wendi on the cheek. I stood behind Wendi, looking at Lani's winged black eyeliner, which she had whipped all the way to a sharp point where it nearly intersected with her penciled-in brows. The other girls gathered around her when Wendi turned around to introduce me. They were the first trans women I had met outside of Wendi.

I extended my hand to Lani, and she pulled me to her fleshy chest and gave me a kiss on the cheek, which left a red lip print on my face. My heart was racing because they were staring at me. Tracy was standing off to the side, uninterested, brushing her hair. I could hear her raking through her mane, strands snapping with each stroke of her brush.

"Mary, she's fish, yeah," Lani said with a chuckle, holding me at arm's length by the biceps. The girls around her nodded. Then, looking directly into my eyes, she added, "You're going to be pretty, girl. Trust!"

I tried my best to smile, aware that she was giving me a compliment—blessing me, even. To Lani, my fishiness was something to boast about. To be called fish by these women meant that I was embodying the kind of femininity that could allow me access, safety, opportunity, and maybe happiness. To be fish meant I could "pass" as any other girl, specifically a cis woman, mirroring the concept of "realness," which was a major theme in *Paris Is Burning*, the 1990 documentary about New York City's ballroom community, comprising gay men, drag queens, and trans women of color. Ball legend Dorian Corey, who serves as the sage of the film, offering some of the most astute social commentary on the lived experiences of low-income LGBT people of color, describes "realness" for trans women (known in ball culture as femme queens) as being "undetectable" to the "untrained" or "trained." Simply, "realness" is the ability to be seen as heteronormative, to assimilate, to not be read as other or deviate from the norm. "Realness" means you are extraordinary in your embodiment of what society deems normative.

"When they can walk out of that ballroom into the sunlight and onto the subway and get home and still have all their clothes and no blood running off their bodies," Corey says in the film, "those are the femme *realness* queens."

Corey defines "realness" for trans women not just in the context of the ballroom but outside of the ballroom. Unlike Pepper LaBeija, a drag legend who said undergoing genital reconstruction surgery (GRS) was "taking it a little too far" in the film, a trans woman or femme queen embodies "realness" and femininity beyond performance by existing in the daylight, where she's juxtaposed with society's norms, expectations, and ideals of cis womanhood.

To embody "realness," rather than performing and competing "realness," enables trans women to enter spaces with a lower risk of being rebutted or questioned, policed or attacked. "Realness" is a pathway to survival, and the heaviness of these truths were a lot for a thirteen-year-old to carry, especially one still trying to figure out who she was. I was also unable to accept that I was perceived as beautiful because, to me, I was not. No matter how many people told me I was fish, I didn't see myself that way. My eyes stung, betraying me, and immediately I felt embarrassed by my visible vulnerability.

"Oh, hon, no worry," Tracy said, her brows furrowed in concern. "She never mean nothing by it."

"Sorry, babes," Lani said, pursing her lips emphatically. "I meant it as a compliment."

As Wendi and I walked out of the room, I could hear Toni Braxton singing, and I imagined Tracy rising from the sea of queens.

"How come you cried, Mary?" Wendi said, confused by my emotion. It was the first time I had cried in front of her. I'd learn with time that expressing vulnerability or sentiment made Wendi defensive, uncomfortable. In all the years of our friendship, I've never seen her break down or her eyes well up with emotion.

"They were all staring at me, like they expected something from me, you know?" I said. "It just made me uncomfortable."

"Mary! Life is uncomfortable," Wendi said, rolling her eyes as she remained focused on the dark streets ahead of us. "You have to get used to it or you're going to live your life trying to make people comfortable. I don't care what people say about me because they don't have to live as me. You gotta own who you are and keep it moving."

I pushed myself to stay in step with Wendi's long-legged stride. She didn't have a stroll in her. I reluctantly let her words soak into my skin, like the tears that watered the conversation. We remained in silence for the rest of our walk home. When we reached Gulick Avenue, she leaned in and her cheek met mine. Then she spread her arms around me and squeezed. She turned around swiftly and crossed the street at King and Gulick. I stood on that corner for about thirty seconds, watching her backpack bounce on her behind as she headed home.

With Wendi at my side, I felt I could be bold, unapologetic, free. To be so young and aiming to discover and assert myself alongside a best friend who mirrored me in her own identity instilled possibility in me. I could be me because I was not alone. The friendship I had with Wendi, though, is not the typical experience for most trans youth. Many are often the only trans person in a school or community, and most likely, when seeking support, they are the only trans person in LGBTQ spaces. To make matters worse, these support spaces often only address sexual orientation rather than a young person's gender identity, despite the all-encompassing acronym. Though trans youth seek community with cis gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer teens, they may have to educate their cis peers about what it means to be trans.

When support and education for trans youth are absent, feelings of isolation and hopelessness can worsen. Coupled with families who might be intolerant and ill equipped to support a child, young trans people must deal with identity and body issues alone and in secret. The rise of social media and online resources has lessened the deafening isolation for trans people. If they have online access, trans people can find support and resources on YouTube, Tumblr, Twitter, and various other platforms where trans folks of all ages are broadcasting their lives, journeys, and even social and medical transitions. Still, the fact remains that local trans-inclusive support and positive media reflections of trans people are rare outside of major cities like Los Angeles, New York, Portland, San Francisco, and Seattle.

Recently, the media (from the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times* to ABC's *20/20* and *Nightline*) has focused its lens on trans youth. The typical portrait involves young people grappling with social transition at relatively young ages, as early as four, declaring that they're transgender and aiming to be welcomed in their communities and schools as their affirmed gender. As they reach puberty, these youth—with the support and resources of their welcoming families—undergo medical intervention under the expertise of an endocrinologist who may prescribe hormone-blocking medications that suppress puberty before graduating to cross-sex hormones and planning to undergo other gender affirmation surgeries.

To be frank, these stories are best-case scenarios, situations I hope become the norm for every young trans person in our society. But race and class are not usually discussed in these positive media portraits, which go as far as erasing the presence of trans youth from low-income communities and/or communities of color. Not all trans people come of age in supportive middle- and upper-middle-class homes, where parents have resources and access to knowledgeable and affordable health care that can cover expensive hormone-blocking medications and necessary surgeries. These best-case scenarios are not the reality for most trans people, regardless of age.

Certainly, this was not the reality for Wendi and me or the girls and women we would soon cross paths with in Honolulu.