

H A Z E

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PROLOGUE

When I look back at who I was throughout the past years, I see constant change, turmoil and self-discovery. Who I was at any point during this time seemed an ephemeral phase. It didn't make any sense growing up; but now I realize that my identity has been constantly evolving. These "phases" were not necessarily disjoint fragments, but pieces of a puzzle. I've been slowly coming together. I'm not complete, but I've come a long way.

I

I remember the look of confusion on my mother's face when I picked the girl's toy with my McDonald's Happy Meal, on all the classmates who made fun of my Hello Kitty pencil case and on my suspicious sister who caught me using her makeup products. I remember, a long time ago, that my favorite color was pink. Though, at some time in my childhood it became blue.

I didn't understand why liking pink was such a bad thing. People's judgements made me feel uncomfortable about it though; unfortunately, this was enough reason to change.

II

Adolescence was one of the toughest times for me. In the years preceding it, I could hide behind an innocent child's face. "My sister made me like pink, I'm sorry!". It was feasible. But, all of a sudden, the boys wanted to talk about girls; however, I couldn't find common ground. I convinced myself for a long time that I was a late bloomer. "I'm still 12, maybe recess interests me more". I soon realize that I really didn't care for recess at all.

"Who do you, like?". I hated this question so much growing up. So many things to ask, but that seemed to be the only thing people wanted to inquire of me. Deep down, I always knew I liked Michael. But, I was scared, so I liked Michelle instead. She was beautiful, kind and smart. Yet, she just wasn't right.

III

I was reciting the Spanish alphabet in preparation for a quiz. I was happy that I had finally memorized the whole thing, until a classmate told me I sounded like a girl. He told me to stop because it made him feel uncomfortable. From then, I was mindful to talk in a lower, more monotone register.

I was listening to Lady GaGa on a bus ride to Disneyland. A classmate glanced at my iPod screen and noticed that I was listening to "Bad Romance". He thought that the song was too gay. From then, I made sure to press skip whenever the song came on. I only allowed myself to listen to it in secrecy.

I was sitting down at a lunch table with all my friends one day at school. A boy came up to me and asked me why I always hung out solely with girls with a condescending tone. I felt embarrassed and from then I would sometimes eat at the library alone to avoid being seen with female friends.

IV

In every aspect of my life, I became very watchful, gradually constraining myself into a stereotype that could go unnoticed: the Asian nerd. I thought that diverting attention away from myself would keep my secret safe.

The more I concealed my nuanced mannerisms, the more natural I seemed. Without thinking, I began to speak in a monotone voice, walk stiffly and keep my interests to myself. For a while, I didn't hear any alarming remarks. No one questioned my sexuality. To others—and later myself—I wasn't in the closet, just painfully nerdy.

Yet, by building an identity through my fears, I had so subverted my true self that I became a new person. This new person stood firmly on top of my denials. Somehow, I was so sure of who I was that, even if I looked at Michael romantically, it didn't mean anything. If I looked at Michelle apathetically, I was in love. I was just a straight nerd with a keen fascination for men. I thought that I blossomed into who I was always meant to be.

V

Hiding became a virtue and lying became a practice. These were the consequences I coped with.

Secrecy became a way of life, so much so that I began to feel embarrassed to tell the truth in the most mundane situations. I couldn't tell my mother where I was going after school, tell my friend my dream college or tell my sister why I needed to borrow her car.

In reality, I was going to meet my friend to get bubble tea. My dream college was Stanford University. I needed to borrow the car to return my Uniqlo purchases at the mall. I knew that there was no harm in answering, yet I chose silence.

In muting my thoughts, desires and opinions, I became forgettable. I became someone who no one found interesting. I became someone who I did not want to be.

VI

At a certain point in my life, who I truly wanted to be seemed out of reach. I was tired of people assuming I was too shy or boring; I wanted them to know who I should have been. I would clench my teeth in agitation when people said I didn't have a personality. I sat with my

frustration without trying to explain myself, simply because I was too afraid of stepping outside of a comfort zone that I had slowly walled myself into.

Of course, the discourse of homosexuality and its reputation within a certain social group remains controversial. Homophobic culture is real and there were justifications for hiding. But my hiding was the result of fears and hatred that I, myself, had accumulated through years of self-resentment.

I cannot fully blame homophobia for how trapped I felt in past years. My friends made it clear that they were supportive of the LGBT community. Even my classmates and parents by the end of high school shared similar liberal mindsets. I had the privilege to open myself up to a group of people that could have helped and comforted me, but instead I remained silent.

There was no one in particular that I was afraid of. The only criticism I feared was from myself.

I was afraid to be gay again.

VII

At the time, teens in my school did not understand the larger world around them. They weren't introduced to homosexuality as commonplace, an unfamiliarity that led them to find comfort in teasing others for seeming gay. Liking pink, speaking flamboyantly and idolizing female popstars made me an easy target. I desperately forced myself to change in hopes of maintaining a foothold in a very homogenous group of students.

The things that my classmates said to me at a young age were hurtful enough to warrant concealing myself for years. However, their mean words didn't last for as long as I hid.

I hid from myself until I got lost.

VIII

Now at a better place, I am able to forgive these people. They made me feel strange, but I am sure they were having difficulty finding themselves as well. As adolescents, we were all confused in different ways and if teasing the gay kid meant a sense of security, I can sympathize.

In forgiving, I am able to move on with the rest, leaving their words in the past. I firmly believe that people can change for better and as hurtful as they were, these words should not negatively affect my mentality nor should they poorly reflect upon my past classmates. I haven't talked to them in a while, but I feel that they have become intelligent, sympathetic people.

More comfortable in my skin than ever, I speak in my natural voice again, proudly make public playlists on Spotify with all my favorite female popstars, hang out with all the ladies, and rock pink hair.

EPILOGUE

I had changed multiple times while growing up, living life through different perspectives. At the time, I didn't know why I changed so often, but in retrospect, changing constantly seemed an escape from who I truly was. It's crazy to think that small, unkind words had such a large impact on my self-confidence, but I'm glad I went through these experiences. We all go through growing pains and mine allowed me to fully embrace who I am today.

The fact that I was privileged enough to grow up in a community which would eventually accept my sexuality but still felt unsafe emphasizes the amount of mental turmoil that I imposed upon myself. It also highlights the alarming potency of homophobia within our culture and its ability to infect the mind of young LGBT people.

Everything in my past is seeming to come together, strengthening my identity. Today, I stand a stronger, more confident person. Those who teased me learned a valuable lesson. But, I know there are many who still feel discouraged, scared and alone. This is for you, and me. Don't feel confused. Don't feel scared. Love yourself. For today, we will be more confident—tomorrow, even more so.