HOME, IN THIS BODY

Words by **Quinn Leong**

GROWING UP AS A QUEER, TRANS, MIXED-RACE ASIAN AMERICAN, I RECEIVED MESSAGES FROM THE WORLD AROUND ME

that my dad's Chinese family in Malaysia would be much more transphobic and homophobic than my mom's White American family. It's hard to name where exactly these messages came from, but I had an overwhelming sense that Asian families, and immigrant families in particular, were more rigid and intolerant of LGBTQ+ identities than White American families. I didn't have close relationships with either side of my family growing up, but as I was coming to terms with my sexuality and gender in my late teens and early twenties, I assumed that my dad's side would be less accepting than my mom's, even though many people on her side belonged to a conservative army family in Texas, the stereotypical portrait of homophobia in the United States.

For a long time, I believed that living my life to its fullest and engaging in meaningful relationships required explicitly sharing my queer and trans identities with everyone around me, and seeing them either accept me for who I am—or choosing to part ways. As I was connecting more with my dad's family during my young adulthood, I was living at a difficult nexus of believing that coming out to them was crucial yet taboo—and that it would likely be met with anger, judgment, distance, or perhaps even ostracization.

COME JUNE 2017, SHARING MY GENDER TRANSITION WITH MY EXTENDED FAMILY WAS NO LONGER A CHOICE.

My dad, my partner, and I were planning a trip to Kuala Lumpur. It had been two years since our last visit and I was just over a year on testosterone: my voice a lot deeper, shoulders broader, and chest much flatter after having top surgery six months earlier. The chance that my family would not notice these changes was comically impossible.

Interactions with my dad's side of the family were few and far between since my dad rarely had the time or money for us to return home to Malaysia. The few interactions we did have were brief; I hadn't come out to them as queer before starting my gender transition. Naturally, the months leading up to our trip were filled with nerves and anxiety. I bugged my dad many times to give them a call, send a text, fire off an email—anything that would let them know about my changes so they wouldn't be surprised on the spot, but my dad insisted that we should wait to share the news in person.

I replayed the fear-filled scenario in my head: we would arrive at the hotel after more than 20 hours of travel, and they would refuse to speak to me. While my dad tried to reassure me that everything would be fine, I couldn't help but think, *He's gotta know something I don't.*

On the night of our arrival, my dad made plans for us to meet up with the rest of the family at the hotel before heading out for late night eats. As my partner and I were walking back from a quick shopping trip, I texted my dad one final plea, urging him to preemptively tell the family about me. No response. We arrived in the lobby, and to my surprise, my partner and I were immediately met with hugs and friendly greetings. *Whew*, I thought. *I guess it went okay after all.*

ORIENTALISM MAKES OUR **QUEERNESS** AS THE **ANTITHESIS** OF OUR ASIANNESS, BUT THE **CLOSER** I GET WITH MY **GENDER IDENTITY**, THE CLOSER I GET WITH MY **ASIAN IDENTITY**.

RIN KIM
GRAPHIC DESIGNER AND VISUAL CURATOR

While my aunt, uncle, and cousin arranged the Grab car, I leaned over to my dad and whispered, "So you told them?" He replied, "No, there wasn't any time. Eleanor is very depressed, so that's all we've been talking about." I felt my anxiety rise alongside a growing sense of urgency to get all of this out in the open. It was the same nagging pressure that made me feel like I needed to come out to everyone around me. I just wanted to get the worst over with. I didn't want to spend all of this special time together, only to later have the memories stained by their judgment.

The powerful combination of anxiety, fear, and haste cycled through my head as we drove to Jalan Alor, the main hawker street near our hotel. As expected, my aunt, uncle, and cousin navigated through the chaos like pros and scored a prime table with enough plastic chairs for all of us. I could hear them calling out dishes left and right, along with milo, barley water, and teh tarik. Amidst the cacophony of smells and sounds, it felt just like old times, with each steaming dish coming at me, one after another despite my cries of refusal: "I can't! I really can't eat any more!"

My family was demonstrating their love using our favorite love language: food. As we continued to clear off our plates, I began to relax. We were talking, laughing, and catching up. Here, the pitch of my voice and the flatness of my chest didn't seem to make a difference.

When we got into the car back to our hotel, my aunt pointed at the seat next to me and asked my partner, "Do you want to sit in the back with her?" My heart skipped a beat. Upon hearing my aunt refer to me with the wrong pronoun, the sense of acceptance that had washed over me earlier that night quickly started to dissipate. My partner climbed in next to me and put their hand on mine, giving me a sympathetic look. "It's really okay," I murmured, shrugging.

In that moment, I realized that it didn't matter that my aunt didn't use the right pronoun in English or that she conceptualized my masculinity through a different framework than I was used to. That night, I felt loved and accepted through my family's sharing

of food, their expression of genuine concern, and their desire to want what's best for me.

The expectation that the language we use to describe ourselves is always understood and shared by others does not always translate across cultures, especially when the literal languages are not the same. My aunt grew up speaking Cantonese, a language in which a gendered pronoun does not exist. It was only through the imposition of English that she was forced to gender me. Did it matter if she chose the wrong pronoun? My dad's side of the family had never knowingly met a trans person before. Did it matter if they understood what "transmasculine" meant? What mattered more to me was that I could show up fully as myself, with a deep voice and a flat chest, with no outward explanation, to be with a family who would still love me in all the same ways as they had before.

AS THE DAYS IN KUALA LUMPUR WITH MY FAMILY PASSED, I CONTINUED TO REFLECT ON MY ASSUMPTIONS,

which were largely shaped by my perceived differences between our cultures. I had internalized the stereotype that East and Southeast Asian cultures were more homophobic and transphobic than American culture. Looking back, I can see why I had accepted that message. I was aware of the Malaysian sodomy law, which is still upheld today. I had seen videos on Facebook of queer Malaysians getting arrested for having consensual sex. I recognize now that the situation in Malaysia is a lot more complicated. The struggles that many trans folks in Malaysia face—arbitrary arrest, physical and sexual assault, imprisonment, discriminatory denial of health care and employment, and other abuses[1]—could just as easily be describing the status of trans rights in the United States. The reality is an unsettling dissonance: American Orientalism tells me that homophobia and transphobia only exist "over there" in Asia rather than "here" in the United States, while my lived experiences show me that is absolutely not true.

[1] "World Report 2015: Malaysia," www.hrw.org/world-report/2015/country-chapters/malaysia.

I think back to my experiences coming out to my parents: first as queer, then as trans, and I realize that my dad's reactions mirrored those of my extended family in Malaysia. During my first coming out, our conversation during dinner lasted for over an hour, with my mom reiterating that she would love me no matter what. While my mom's reaction was wordy, tearful, and full of questions, my dad listened, not saying more than a sentence or two. When I got up from the table, he pulled me aside and gave me a long, silent hug. Growing up, I was taught to believe that acceptance took the form of conversation, questions, and other verbal forms of acknowledgement. Because my dad's support did not match this narrative of acceptance, I had nearly missed his deep demonstration of love.

I also think back to the undeniable pressure of feeling like I *had* to come out, that my identity had to be completely vocalized for my family to really know and accept me. The assumption of needing to discuss my being trans was built on a deeper belief that there was only one self to expose or hide. Watching my dad in Kuala Lumpur, I started to see how our multiplicity allows us to show up more fully as ourselves in different contexts.

My dad moved to the United States when he was 18 years old, but he had no trouble reverting back to speaking Manglish without pause as soon as he got into our family's car at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. During our week in his homeland, his siblings called him Loky, an affectionate diminutive of his Chinese name, Theen-Lok. He navigated the stifling and humid city life like a local, despite having spent the last 30-odd years of his life in the often-frigid suburban Midwest.

Those were selves of my dad that I had seldom seen, but I knew were genuinely him. When I arrived in Kuala Lumpur that summer, I was so nervous about being seen as just transgender—but being in the presence of my family helped me realize that I was much more: a kind cousin, a loyal child, and a caring grandchild that travels 8,500 miles to visit my yeh yeh.

I NEVER CAME OUT TO MY PARENTS AS TRANSGENDER OR GENDERQUEER, BUT I LIKE KEEPING THINGS **SOMEWHAT AMBIGUOUS** — IT'S HOW WE GET ALONG BEST... MY MOM USED TO SAY MY **MUSCLES LOOKED UGLY**, BUT NOW SHE'LL ASK ME WHEN MY NEXT [BODYBUILDING] COMPETITION IS SO SHE CAN WATCH. MY MOM STILL **EMPHASIZES** THAT I'M HER DAUGHTER, BUT SHE KNOWS I'M A **DIFFERENT KIND OF DAUGHTER**.

SIUFUNG LAW
GENDERQUEER BODY BUILDER, PUBLIC SPEAKER, AND LGBTQ+ ADVOCATE

That is not to say that my being trans and queer simply disappear when I am in Malaysia. That trip showed me that *how* I share those identities does not have to follow a strict template, one that requires distinctly proclaiming one's gender and/or sexual identity and expecting an explicit reaction, one that is deeply informed by Whiteness and individualism. Sharing those parts of myself, I learned, can also just look like me living quietly and gently within my transitioning body, and allowing my family to observe, internalize, and engage with me in a subtle and silent dance.

ABOUT A YEAR AND A HALF AFTER MY TRIP TO MALAYSIA, MY CANTONESE TEACHER ASKED US TO SHARE OUR CHINESE NAMES WITH THE CLASS.

This was a problem because my dad had not given me one when I was born. When I asked him to choose one for me, he doubted his ability to remember all of the Chinese naming conventions and to catch any potentially disastrous homonyms. After doing a lot of Googling, I stumbled upon a Quora post about an unfortunate Chinese name that could be interpreted as both "menstruation" and "going broke every month"—and I immediately decided to seek outside help. After a series of international WhatsApp exchanges between my cousin, his dad (the same uncle I had visited in Kuala Lumpur a year and a half earlier), we arrived at the name: 昆 (Kwan). It sounds a lot like my English name, Quinn, but it also means elder brother or descendant. Despite us never having spoken explicitly about my gender, my uncle chose a masculine name for me. And it is in these subtle moments, like the hugs and shared meals, that I really feel how our actions can coalesce into a way of talking about gender, identity, and ourselves. It may not be the bold, explicit language of "coming out" that I learned growing up, but it is a language of its own nonetheless—and it is one I seem to already know how to speak. ♦