

## Are You Out There?

My dad and I are insomniacs, and we often spend summer nights sipping decaf on the porch. Our conversations are usually casual, but one night, Dad surprised me.

“You know Vi,” he began. “I’ll support whomever you choose to love.”

I smiled, suspecting where this was heading. So I asked, “Even if that person is a girl?”

My dad, a traditional Vietnamese man, pursed his lips. Eventually he nodded. “Yes...so long as she’s Asian.”

I laughed because sometimes my dad thinks I’m gay. I’m not. But I can’t blame him because, after all, my first love was a girl.

I met Aidan at a neighbor’s pool party when I was 8. I was hiding from the water due to my irrational fear that I would drown in the 2-foot kiddie pool. I looked up when someone started crying; a boy stood behind me, his face a mess from tears. That was Aidan. He was holding a knife, his swim trunks around his ankles, blood running down his legs.

Next thing I knew, my dad was beside me, covering my face with his big hands. I pushed him away, wanting to see, but all I could hear were children laughing, adults screaming, and Aidan sobbing from his first unsuccessful attempt to transition.

When we were 10, Aidan started seeing a therapist as preparation for his transition from a boy into ... someone I don’t know.

“I feel trapped,” he explained to me one day. “I’m not myself in this body...”

I was too young and confused then to change my use of pronouns, too naïve and scared to ask Aidan for clarification. When I didn’t respond, Aidan asked to have my name. Aidan believed that names were like possessions, easily exchangeable with the right price. He wanted a name far removed from his current self. He rattled off many possible names, but I was too busy to listen.

Only looking back do I realize that his obsession with names was not only to complete his transformation, but also to protect himself so no one from his past life could find him. No one ever did, including me.

I was 12 when he left. His dad waited in the car, and Aidan held my hands as I wept. Weeping is different from crying because it takes your whole body and when it’s over there is nothing left to hold you together anymore. He needed to leave for a city that could prepare him for his surgery and fulfill what he desired—a new body, a new name, a new identity.

“I’ll write to you,” he said. I should have known that we were breaking up. I should’ve made note of the way he spoke, and especially what he wasn’t saying. But I trusted him to come back because I needed him. I loved him.

For a while after he left, I woke up every morning feeling heavy. Days transitioned into months and years ... but no letter came. I scoured the Internet and forums, fixated on finding him ... her.

I grew frustrated searching for him because the Aidan I knew was gone. He had transitioned into a stranger with a name I couldn’t guess. I even struggled with deciding which pronoun to use in my search. When we were together, he was neither male nor female, neither gay nor lesbian—he could’ve been all those things or none at all, but I never bothered to ask.

And because I didn’t ask, I’ll never know if I loved a him or a her.

While listening to Lowell speeches, I wonder about life stories, how everyone has one that isn't apparent at first glance. What you choose to reveal or tuck away is your decision; you form your own narrative. But that was a right I never gave Aidan. Instead, I retold Aidan's story from my own point of view. I tried to shape him into a boy that society could accept because I thought I was protecting him—but the truth is I couldn't accept the person Aidan wanted to be.

Since Aidan left, I've been living with the consequences of my prejudice. I thought that if I found him, I could apologize, start all over. But in life, you don't get a do-over. Instead, you get lessons, and I am learning in his absence—to be humble, to ask, and to hear what people do not say out loud. Instead of fixing my biggest mistake, I have to focus on making things right the first time, with the people in my life today.

Our story never got its conclusion because Aidan left with the ending. I'm okay with this. So with the end of this speech ends my search for him. Aidan, if you're out there, when you're ready to tell your story, please come find me. I promise, this time, I'll listen.