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Playing to Draw

Growing up in the closet meant that shows and movies became the best teachers. Gay love stories about acceptance, coming out, connection, slather their melodrama in whiteout as Caucasian actors act out these romanticized and dramatic plots that follow the same formula: socially awkward teenager falls in love with the school's jock who leads to a spiral, ending in his sexual orientation becoming public and, although met with initial resistance, concludes with everyone accepting him and his newly found jock boyfriend. Inspired by these false promises, yesterday I proceeded to blurt out two words that haunt countless Catholic Hispanic parents as their worst nightmare:

“I'm gay.”

Her reaction seemed to deviate greatly from the previously mentioned movies but also from how she reacts to stuff normally. There wasn't acceptance, or anger, or scorn, or sadness, or disapproval, or...anything else. She placed the blue dress back on the rack, its repetitive flowy layers threatening to wash over the rest of the clothes it sat next to. She was quiet. The realization of what I had said infected me, and those two words made me feel nauseous. We left H&M and walked back to the car in a hike that felt like it went on for countless silent hours. She cleared her throat and I tried to fight back the overwhelming pit in my stomach that attempted to swallow me whole.

“Do we have carrots and almonds at home, I need to make a carrot cake today,” she said while looking blankly ahead.

The rest of the day was blurry, it was almost as if I hadn't said anything. I was convinced that it was something she maybe just wanted to skip over and I was alright with that, or so I thought.

That was yesterday and now 10 minutes ago she told me she needed me to come with her to run an errand, and despite it being 7pm I did not consider my current situation to be a possibility. I'm sitting on the passenger side as my mom parks her car in the parking lot of a 24-hour Walgreens. The dirty yellow color of the old streetlight grabs my arm as it peaks into the otherwise oblique car. She turns around and I now know I did not escape the conversation whatsoever. She looks at me.

My mom is an amazing woman and someone who has always spoken eloquently and with purpose. It means that I know that I need to speak clearly if I want her to understand, with a level of methodical thought akin to that of playing chess. The conversation cannot be treated lightly, every word needs to be meaningful. Each of my sentences that I prepare in my head transform into different pieces: bishops, pawns, knights. As we sit in the car and I anticipate what she has to say at first I realize the game that awaits me.

She makes the first move, throwing a pawn forward. A sacrificial piece with the pure intent of seeing how I respond.

“How do you know?”

The question stops me for a second. Who I am attracted to has never been a question for my body despite my mind's constant efforts to suppress the answer. Even before learning that there were sexual orientations beyond straight, I developed odd connections to things like the 4 members of Big Time Rush, an active inability to play anything beside the female characters in video games, and a sense of dread whenever my PE teachers would separate us by gender for an activity. These habits were equally as apparent to my classmates as my transition from elementary to middle school meant getting asked about my sexual orientation at least once a month by my peers who noticed my voice was pitched slightly higher or my music taste had too

much Taylor Swift and a glaring absence of male rappers. Of course none of these things defined sexual orientation. But *he* did. As part of the advanced program I was in school for, it meant that all my classes had generally the same classmates and I had been seated next to him on the first day of 8th grade. I became encapsulated, listening to artists he had shared with me and watching shows he had texted me about. It was a feeling that people write songs about or dedicate poetry to. It was annoying and confusing, but it also meant clarity. It meant I knew what I liked.

I pondered as my hand hovered over a piece of my own. Should I tell her about him? About how I feel? The indecisiveness tasted bitter in my mouth. She wouldn't understand. I want her to take me seriously, not to reduce my decision to a whim based on a mere infatuation. I know what move to make.

“I just know, the same way others know what they like. I didn't choose who to be attracted to”

She stares and I wonder what is going through her mind. We continue to talk, as I continue to try and explain that there is no definite way to know something that your body already does. There comes a moment it becomes biological, but it is not something that she understands nor wants to acknowledge. As we keep talking, I can feel her go somewhere I had previously anticipated. She moves her bishop across the map to try and stabilize.

“Bryan, you know it is not right in the eyes of God, it is a sin. How can you freely live knowing you are embracing sin?”

Religion is a pillar in most families but it represents the very spine of my own. Coming from Costa Rica, Catholicism has not only been a driving force in every aspect of my mom's life since birth but it inspires her daily decisions. She would tell us stories of her childhood often, describing how she would wake up to gospel songs blaring from my grandmother's radio.

Baptisms became a town event as she would recall all her neighbors attending the baptism, confirmation, and first communion of every growing child within their humble town. This also meant that rosaries, mass, and prayer existed in my mind since my earliest memories. I learned stories from the bible before I even knew who Little Red Riding Hood was and why a wolf tried to imitate her grandma. That being said, the environment here was drastically different. Coming to California meant abandoning that unity my mom had for so long and trading it for a world where religion itself was barred from being spoken about in schools unless it was from a scholarly angle. Whenever my siblings or I would groan at the thought of going to church a part of me wondered if she resented this place for it. I wondered if we would have had a different relationship with the church. Although my relationship with God remained a work in progress, I made up my mind on the distrust of the actual institution of the church. Still, I would sit obediently through confirmation and first communion classes, memorizing bible verses and stories because I knew it was important to my mom and thus it felt important to me. All of this also meant I had anticipated this question coming and I would be a liar to deny I had spent countless hours with the very same thought.

I couldn't help but think of the cracked figure of the Virgin Mary back home that sat poised and silent next to wilted flowers, a nearly extinct candle, and a plastic rosary that could snap from a weak tug. Our humble set up was a bleak contrast to the blinding shrine that the St. John's 23rd chapel had thanks to the humble donations they urged all their poverty-stricken guests to give. Every time I looked at the faded figure, I could feel a knot form in my stomach as the guilt whispered obscenities in my head. The church teaches you that our God is a vengeful God. Throwing fits that resulted in world-consuming tsunamis or the slaughter of every first born failed to characterize him as compassionate in my eyes. Moreover, the Holy Spirit and Jesus

were taught to be parts and vessels of his. I often hated my lack of connection and admiration for these three figures as I numbly performed the Holy Trinity prayer in church. However, the Virgin Mary was different. She was a mother and a person, caught in a divine situation that existed beyond her control. Someone who, despite the circumstances, proceeded to act as the embodiment of compassion and love. She became the definition of a mother to many and someone who I felt deep inside I had betrayed for existing in a matter that the Bible recognized to be incorrect—an abomination.

From the moment I realized who I was, anticipation for this question came. Despite the time I had dedicated learning the Bible and its extraneous verses, I failed to come up with an answer. I pull a desperation move, throwing my Queen to the front of the board.

“I didn’t choose this. I was made this way. God teaches forgiveness, he’ll forgive me”

Tension builds as I can see her frustrated, the conversation feels like an endless loop. She grabs one of her knights and shoves it to the front with a move that feels equally as desperate.

“God didn’t do this. Don’t blame God for your mistakes. For my mistakes. What did I do wrong to make you end up like this? How can I fix you?”

The silence comes back. We sat solemnly in the car as for the first time since we parked I broke eye contact with her. I stare at the drops of water that had condensed on the car window. They dance on their way down, ignorant to their impending doom, celebrating their existence every step of the way. I envy them. I see no light at the end of this tunnel, no resolution that could ever justify this brutal conflict. My emotions begin to show my age as an immature rage begins to wash over me. It’s the same emotion that inspired a toddler to cry in frustration and anger. Reasoning begins to flee my body and the game doesn’t matter anymore, the board loses purpose and the pieces blend, losing any sense of individuality. I feel ready to say something,

anything, that'll make her feel as rejected as I felt; all I could feel was the desire to hurt but I pause when I look at her. She isn't angry or disappointed, she's just confused. She has the same eyes that would look at English labels when we had moved here. The same eyes that struggled through medical insurance applications and who struggled to understand the intricate report cards they would send home. Beautiful eyes that had grown a milky haze from all the troubles and struggles they had to endure.

My mom is an incredible woman. At my age she was being woken up at four in the morning to pick coffee beans. Her childhood and my own couldn't be farther apart and our bodies reflected it. Different aches and pains she develops are echoes of the labor she underwent throughout her childhood. Meanwhile, my biggest labors were reflected at my fingertips as I played electric bass and wrote constant essays in advanced classes. These calluses and bumps felt incomparable but they were thanks to my mother's own tribulations. Moving to a new world, away from family and anything deemed familiar would be enough to paralyze anyone in fear and to do it willingly would warrant accusations of insanity; but she did it. She abandoned it all for our sake, to ensure a future beyond picking coffee beans.

I look at the board in front of us and realize the grave indifference on the board. She's been defensive. She wasn't trying to win, she was just trying not to lose. Living in an area where things like "gay" didn't hold the same connotation, where classmates in my same class were coming out and were not getting berated but most of the time celebrated for it, I was quick to call ignorance without acknowledging my own. I look at the scrappy board, pawns and bishops fallen, knights shattered, complete disarray. She agreed to play into a game she didn't fully understand and unknowingly I was berating her for her mistakes. I concede. The game is held in

hopes that we can continue at a time where we both understand. My mouth moves on its own to say the words she wants to hear, to give her peace of mind.

As we drive back, I continue to look out the window. The streetlights dash past our car and the water that previously performed to the symphony of me and my mom's conversation seems to have vanished, holding for dear life against the speed of the car. It all blends together and just for a moment the world seems a little duller.