
COMING OUT

The central cooling system in the house rattled and hummed, pushing lazy waves of chilled air out of the vent above my bed in ripples. I felt it wash down my back, sides, shoulders, arms, like an ice-cold wave at the beach.

The weather feed called for a high of 132° today. In Vermont. Thanks, global warming. If it weren't for the fact that Mom works in real estate, we'd probably still have to live above ground. Fuck *that*.

I rolled onto my back and sighed, holding my hand in front of my face and pinching the virtual screen in front of me, zooming in on a picture of a cat someone sent me. Its eyes are comically huge on its smooshed face, and the fur around its nose is darker than the rest of it, giving it the look of a mustache. Its owner has it styled to look like those hipster mustaches from the 2010's. So cute.

My friend Kennedy is visiting; they're sprawled out on my floor, also on their back, knees bent and arms splayed wide. They must have been watching a video or something, but it's hard to tell when people use the contacts. I was allergic to them and got stuck with glasses; there's always a little reflection of what I'm up to in the lenses. It makes exams SO hard.

They sighed loudly, and I watched their chest deflate like an old balloon, sinking deeper and deeper toward their spine until it seemed like they'd melt into the floor. I couldn't say I blamed them; even underground with a cooling unit the ambient temperature was still pushing go.

"So? Did you decide yet?" They asked suddenly, sitting up and crossing their shins in front of them. I looked up from the cat photo. "Your 18th is coming up, right? You've gotta be thinking about it."

Now it was my turn to sigh, but I tried to keep it more subtle. Great. *This* talk again. I rolled back onto my back to break eye contact and turned my attention to my ceiling. The smooth, grey texture was hardly an attention-holder, but at least it wasn't Kennedy's eager stare.

"Not really." I admitted, closing my eyes. "I mean, just because I'm turning 18 doesn't mean I have to pick right away, right?"

"Well, no, but everyone usually does." Kennedy replied. I heard the pitter patter of their hands and knees as they crawled to my bed and felt the deep depression at the edge of the mattress as they leaned their elbows against it. "I mean, my birthday's not until November and I'm already thinking about it. I heard Congress is even thinking about letting you change your name if you want to."

I tilted my head back to stare at my friend. "You don't like your name?" I asked, surprised by my own... well, surprise. I always liked their name. Kennedy was a cool president. And it's definitely better than Peyton.

Kennedy's shoulders softened as they leaned into their arms. "Well, I don't *dislike* it." They admitted. "But wouldn't it be cool to have one of those classic names, like... Katherine or Michael?"

I felt my face harden. "You mean gendered names."

"Well... yeah." Kennedy mumbled into the crook of their elbow. "I guess you could look at it that way. My grandparents have gendered names and they love them."

"Well, yeah, but they didn't even get a choice." I replied, sitting up. "What if they wound up choosing the other gender when they grew up? Name changing is such a process, and there's all that stigma."

Kennedy hummed in agreement. "It is a lot harder to transition from one gender to the other than just going from neutral." They muttered. "People can be such jerks about it."

"Ugh, tell me about it." I agreed, kicking my legs out in front of me. My foot rested just close enough to Kennedy's face that I could touch their nose with it. Smiling, I did just that. They wrinkled their nose and pushed my foot aside with a laugh.

"But seriously, you haven't thought about which gender you're gonna pick at all? Your birthday's in three days!"

Sighing, I shrugged my shoulders and rested back on my hands. "Not really." I mumbled, keeping my eyes away from Kennedy's intrusive gaze. Truth be told, I *had* been thinking about it. In fact, it's been the one thing on my mind since I turned 17. Since the President Wasser passed the Gender and Sex Neutrality and Equality Act back in the 2060s, picking your adulthood gender on your 18th birthday has become the ultimate rite of passage. It's more important than getting your driver's license (especially now that cars are so hard to come by, what with all the environmental protection laws), it's more important than going to college, it's the most important thing you do as a new adult. Who *doesn't* think about it?

Kennedy sprawled their arms out in front of them, wiggling their fingers at me. "Well, think about it now. What are you gonna pick? I think you'd make a cute boy, myself. You've already got the short hair, and you're so tall."

Scooting backward, I rested my back against the wall and sighed, leaning into the cool concrete. "Girls can be tall." I replied.

"Well, yeah, but boys are supposed to be taller." They grumbled, climbing up onto my bed. "Come on, Peyton! You have less than 72 hours before you have to make the biggest decision of your life! Stop being so cavalier about it!"

"I'm not being cavalier." I whine, knowing damn well I don't even know what that means. I looked away, pouting, and casually pulled my computer feed back up.

Leaning over to see my face, I could just catch a reflection of Kennedy's stern look.

"You're looking up 'cavalier' aren't you?"

"No."

"It means you're not taking this seriously!" They wailed, tossing their limber body over the front of my legs. They sprawled out across my knees, stretching their arms and legs out as far as they'd stretch. "Come onnnn, no one wants to be an adult neuter! God, you wanna keep bottle feeding, too?"

Chewing my lip, I glanced away nervously. It's true that people very rarely keep their neutrality after they reach adulthood, and the people that did often catch hell for it. I never really understood why—it's not like gender neutral people can't function in society—but Mom tried to explain it to me once.

It's seen as childish, she told me. Kids are expected to remain neutral to keep them sheltered from the societal pressures that come with being gendered. But you can't avoid the real world forever, darling. And gender, for better or worse, exists in the real world.

In that moment, I remember wishing it didn't. I felt that again when Kennedy flashed their big, baby blues at me from what must have been an incredibly uncomfortable position on my lap.

"Peyton?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry. What'd you say?"

They rolled their eyes. "I *said* if you want we can talk about it. Let's go over the pros and cons."

"Do we have to?" I complain.

"Yes, because I refuse to believe you've been putting this off so long."

"But Ken—"

"We'll start with boy. What are some advantages of being a boy?"

"I dunno, it's not even supposed to make a difference, is it? That's what the GSNEA was all about, right? Making the genders equal."

Kennedy sighed loudly and sat up, squishing her boney butt into the space between my legs. They draped their knees over mine and folded their arms across their chest. "Yeah, *equal*. Not identical. Boys and girls still present themselves differently and behave differently. American law can't change that, that's just how people are."

Is it, though? I desperately wanted to ask. The more we talked, the more unfair it seemed, to force this kind of decision on someone. Gender is a lifelong commitment. You can't just switch back and forth whenever you want; the red tape alone would be a nightmare. But there's also, you know, the hate crimes and shit you have to worry about. Take our old neighbor, Mr. Nagaoka, who *used* to be Miss Nagaoka until he decided to transition at 45. You know what happened to him? Skinheads broke into his bunker and set him on fire. Real classy, right? America's great.

"So, anyway, advantages of being a boy," Kennedy continued, "Well... your hips are kind of narrow, so pants will fit you better."

I rolled my eyes. "I guess there's that."

"And you're totally good at math and stuff, which people expect from boys. Plus, you look super cute with short hair."

Unconsciously, I ran my fingers through my messy tufts of shit-brown hair. I didn't bother to style it today, so the lack of product has left it feathery soft.

"It's just easier to wash." I admitted.

"There's also that. You wouldn't be expected to wear makeup or high heels, both of which you hate."

"Yeah, but girls don't have to wear those things either." I pointed out.

"They don't *have to*, but you know what adults are like. Girls who don't look feminine always get flack for it; that's just how it is."

I set my jaw. *That's just how it is* seemed to be the reason for all the stupid shit adults do. I wondered if they knew how annoying that excuse got.

"You also wouldn't be expected to know how to cook or sew, which is probably good news if your Domestic Studies grades are any indication of your cooking and sewing skills."

I could feel my cheeks flush pink, turning my face splotchy with embarrassment. Okay, so my Domestic Studies skills are a bit weak. Sue me.

Flustered, I shove Kennedy off my legs, rolling her over to her side, and crawl off the bed, yanking my t-shirt back down and pulling my jeans up. "Now you're just being stereotypical." I mutter.

Kennedy rolled onto her stomach and sat up on her knees, shaking their head at me. "It's not like people pull those stereotypes out of their ass." They countered.

I huffed. "It sure seems that way sometimes."

"Okay, I give up. What's with you?" Kennedy barked, scooting to the edge of the bed to plant their feet on the floor. "You are acting *so* weird, like, weirder than usual. You've gotta be the only kid in America who's *not* excited about picking their gender. What is it?"

I folded my arms across my chest protectively and turned my head away. Always with the judgmental stare. "I dun—"

"Ohhh no, don't *I dunno* me," they complained, wagging a finger at me. "You're going to fess up right now. What is it? Is it your parents? I know your mom's really been hoping for a daughter, but you know it's *your* choice, right?"

"I know."

"Then what? Are you scared of picking the wrong one?"

"I dun—" I sighed hard, catching myself before Kennedy could correct me. "No, not exactly."

"Not exactly?"

"I just..." I sucked in another sharp breath, turning away from Kennedy completely. The wall across from me was bare, save for the monitor that simulated an above-ground window. It was meant to mimic real-time weather patterns, but Dad manually overrode it so it's always spring. Today it's raining, which made me scoff. Rain in August. Yeah right.

I lowered my eyes to the floor and squeezed my arms, suddenly feeling small. I knew I was avoiding the subject—I'd only been avoiding it for *my whole life*—but now, suddenly confronted and forced to acknowledge my inevitable, final days as a neuter, I felt gripped by terror. I was scared, but not of picking the wrong gender. It was more complicated than that.

I closed my eyes and listened to Kennedy squirm on the bed, anxiously waiting for my answer. I wish I was as good with words as they were; Kennedy would know how to explain what I felt, but it's not like they could dip into my subconscious to figure it out. That kind of procedure still definitely required a doctor.

"Have you ever taken an exam," I began, shocked by the frail softness of my voice, "and you got to a true or false question, but both the answers felt wrong?"

I couldn't see them, but Kennedy always tilted their head to one side when they were confused, like a damn dog. I imagined that was what they were doing.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, everyone keeps pushing me to pick one gender or the other one, but what if I don't like either of them?" Emboldened, I turned around to face Kennedy. Sure enough, their head was tilted, and their eyes were getting wider with every word that spilled out of my throat. "What if I... *like* being a neuter?"

The central cooling system in the house rattled and hummed, pushing lazy waves of chilled air out of the vent above my bed in ripples. From here, I could actually see the air drifting downward, splashing against the sheets, causing a gentle draft to make Kennedy's flyaway hairs sway halfheartedly away from their face. I was on the other side of the room, but I could swear I still felt the chill on my back, sides, shoulders, arms. This wasn't a cold wave at the beach, though. This chill was a polar vortex, swirling from the inside out, starting deep in my core and making every hair on my delicate body stand on end.

Our eyes were locked into each other's stare, and I shook from the pressure. For the first time in our 14-year friendship, Kennedy Lewis, who always said the right thing at the right time, was at a loss for words. Their mouth hung open, though their repeated attempts to close it made them look like a suffocating fish.

"You...wait, what?" They finally asked, their voice straining to stay above a whisper.

I had no need to bind my chest regularly, but I could still feel the tight pressure as if I were wearing a binder two sizes too small. It felt like someone had cut off the air supply, and my body felt hot but my skin felt cold.

Somehow, I pushed a sigh out of my body, aching to get air back in. My arms fell to the sides, feeling rubbery and heavy. "Ken, I—" I began, but really, where do you begin a conversation like this? "I *have* been thinking about my gender pick, and honestly? I don't like either option. I like being neutral; I get to wear whatever I want, I can pick whatever school subjects I like, and people don't... *assume* things about me, based on some stupid mark on my ID."

I pushed my glasses back up my nose and kept my gaze as far from Kennedy's eyes as humanly possible. It was easy to predict their body language in familiar situations, but this was uncharted territory.

The room was still, but the tension cracked slightly with Kennedy's voice. "But... you have to pick one." They said, as if in a trance.

I bit my lip. "It's not against the law to stay neutral your whole life." I mumbled. "Not in Vermont. I looked it up."

"But people will think you're a freak." Kennedy blurted. The words felt like a punch to the stomach, and for a moment I truly thought I'd keel over. It wasn't aggressive, but the truth has a way of leaving bruises on your psyche sometimes. They weren't wrong; people *would* think I'm a freak.

I blinked back the dampness in my eyes and finally gathered the courage to meet Kennedy's gaze. They didn't seem mad; just stunned. The feeling was mutual.

"...Do *you* think I'm a freak?" I whispered, and cursed myself for not thinking the question through first. Typical Peyton Harris; Communications is *definitely* not for me. But I had to know. Kennedy was my closest friend; we'd been inseparable since kindergarten, and I couldn't imagine a life without them. My big mouth, however, might have just put me on the fast track to the No Friend Zone. I couldn't stomach the thought. I closed my eyes and begged any supernatural force out there to make me disappear. I felt stuck in time, or Limbo, staring down the box where Schrodinger's Friendship was neither dead nor alive. What would happen if I opened it?

I suddenly felt a body crash against mine. Kennedy's arms circled my body and clung tight; they pressed themselves against me, mashing their face into my chest. I felt their tears seep through my shirt.

"Well, yeah, but can you blame me? I mean, who eats mint jelly with peanut butter? Weirdo."

I hiccupped a sob and curled my heavy arms around Kennedy to finally hug them back. They looked up at me and smiled, wiping their puffy eyes before resting their cheek against me again.

"You're gonna get made fun of." They warned.

"I know." I mumbled.

"Have you told your parents?"

"No."

They nodded and gave me one more squeeze. "Well, no matter what happens, I got your back. I'll beat back the haters with a stick if I have to."

I smiled. "That would be a crime." I pointed out.

They laughed and finally pushed away from me, cupping my face in their hands. "Hating on my best friend should be a crime, too."

I breathed a laugh and sniffled, ignoring the hot tears dribbling down the sides of my face. Kennedy shook their head and swiped them away with their thumb.

"God, stop crying, you look like a girl." They teased.

"That's a stereotype." I scolded.

We both laughed.

SAMPLE: DO NOT REPOST