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Dead Name

The mantle is lined with framed pictures of a girl no one's seen in ages. You've grown pretty good at just ignoring them when you walk past. They're just pictures, but they make you sort of sick every time you see them. You hoped your parents wouldn't put them up in the new house, but, apparently, they make them happy.

Your deadname is what they called her. It's the ghost of the daughter your parents expected. Your deadname is just six letters, but it haunts you to no end. It's a piercing pain in your heart when your mother, who really is trying her best, slips up as she greets you. It's the sudden heaviness that makes your shoulders slump when your father, who isn't trying at all, adds "my precious girl." Your deadname is exhaustion because even though this is the millionth time you've explained yourself, he just doesn't understand what the issue is.

Your deadname is partially why you ask your parents if you can be excused from the family holiday party. It's not that you don't love them or dislike spending time with them. It's just that you kept up a charade for the last fifteen years, and going back to "girl" mode even for a night feels like giving up. Besides, your deadname is a reminder that your family doesn't really know you, and it makes you wonder if they'd love you the same if they did. Despite your uncle's past drunken rants about "the gays," your mother seems to think so. So you don an ambiguous red button-down and prepare a million excuses for your short hair.

Some of your aunts ask if you have a boyfriend, and you can't help but smile. "Not yet."

"Boys won't like you if you keep dressing like this!"

"Some might."

But it gets harder to smile as the night wears on and the dysphoria weighs on you. An eternity later, the party ends.

You hope winter break will pass just as slowly, but each day is just long enough for another knot to form in your stomach.

Before you know it, it's a new semester at a new school. With a new name.

With sweaty palms, you pick up your schedule at the guidance office. Your heart pounds as you find your way to your first class. With shaking hands, you take out a pen and cross out your deadname. You glance around, at the teacher and other students, unsure of the safest thing to do. You begged your mother to request that your real name be next to your legal one on the roster, but your deadname confines you to parentheses and scribbled ink over printed letters. You have no way of knowing which name the teacher will call. Before you can make any decisive move, she clears her throat and greets everyone, and then begins attendance. The room grows warmer with every name she calls. You concentrate on the last names, bracing yourself. The A's, the B's, the M's... She makes her way down the list. And then the room goes cold. You sit frozen, staring at the desk.

“Or, sorry, you go by-?” She reads your real name.

You quickly raise your hand.

“Gotcha.” She scribbles a note.

Your eyes dart around the room to see if anyone noticed, but they all seem consumed by conversations or devices. Except the girl sitting next to you, staring.

“Your name's [deadname]?”

Once again, everything freezes.

"I thought you were a guy at first!"

Your heart breaks. "I am! That's not my name."

"Did you use to be a girl or something?"

"No."

Your deadname is evidently an invitation for her to ask questions no one should ever ask in public. Your palms begin to sweat again as you watch the room. She's speaking loud enough that the people nearby can hear.

"I don't know you. It's none of your business."

Luckily, the teacher hears, too, and she tells the girl to quiet down.

But the damage has been done. You've now been outed to half the class. You just pray no one cares enough to tell their friends or harass you or worse. Maybe it's dramatic to be so panicked in a high school art class, but deadnames can be dangerous.

In the hallway, the very crowded hallway, the girl catches up to you. "Can I call you [deadname]? It's really pretty-"

Your cells may as well burst. "That's not my name!"

She could call you worse things, but your deadname hurts like nothing else. A slur would degrade your identity, but your deadname denies it.

Luckily, after the awkward corrections of the first day, your deadname loses some of its power. Teenagers at this school aren't as terrifying as you expected, and no one (aside from the girl in first hour, who refuses to forget it) cares too much that you're trans.

Still, you can't bear it any longer. A diploma and college applications are all impending, and all you want is to be recognized as who you are without having to announce it. After a year

of begging your parents, they consent to a legal name change. With two hundred dollars and a court date, your deadname is officially no more.

Free from the burden of “Um, actually-”s, you can claim everything you’d been putting off: a license, a work badge, a college ID. And a dating profile. If it weren’t for the courage provided by the recently prescribed testosterone pumping through your veins, you probably would have chickened out on the last endeavor. But, alas, here you are, walking down the street holding hands with a guy. Aside from his comment that he’s “not usually into femmes,” which, in the gay community, is sometimes a harbinger for internalized homophobia and misogyny, he seems great. Polite, outgoing, funny...

You stop in front of the alley near where your car is. Just as you both start to speak, you spot a face you haven’t seen since high school bobbing down the street towards you. And then she sees you.

“Oh my god!” She calls your name. “Is that you?”

You scratch the back of your head and try to disappear into the alley, but she catches up to you. “We went to high school together, right? Your name used to be-”

The summer air freezes over. All of a sudden the sounds of the street are muffled. And your date lets go of your hand.

“You look so different now! Are you taking hormones or something?”

You just stand there, completely frozen. She continues talking, smiling as if she isn’t revealing every aspect of your personal life to a man you just met.

You try to avoid his glare, but you can see his brows twitch and his lips curling into a frown.

A car honks on the street, and suddenly everything is loud again.

“That’s my ride!” the girl says, disappearing into the car. “It was crazy seeing you!”

After a second, you finally manage to say, “Um...”

“You’re...”

“I’m trans.”

He grimaces.

“Look, I didn’t tell you right away because I didn’t know how you’d react-”

Before you can finish explaining yourself he pushes you away. Your head hits the wall with a crack.

You blink and hold your throbbing head. Somewhere amidst the shock is the realization that this is what you were scared of all through high school.

“I like *guys*.”

“And I am one, just as much as you are!”

He grabs the collar of your shirt. “Are you *kidding* me? You’re a liar!”

Your testosterone can’t keep your voice from turning shrill. “I didn’t lie! I was just afraid-!”

He rams his fist into your chest. “You’re afraid? Maybe you should have thought about it before you took me for a joke!”

He drops you onto the ground, shoves his hands into his pockets, and ducks away.

“*Freak*.”

You sit, stunned, with tears welling up in your eyes.

A dead name is a bruised rib, an aching head, and a storm of terror spinning across your nerves. But you're lucky. Your dead name could have been a death sentence, because, to him, it was a threat.