

## Not Your Kind of Faggot

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I'm crouched by my locker to retrieve a fallen pencil when the boy who hisses and meows and breaks open pens in pre-algebra slips by and coughs out the word: faggot. He's disappeared by the time I look up, the slur trailing behind, the ooze of a slug. I look from one end of the hallway to the other, searching for anyone else who fits that word. But there are only the red, faded lockers, lined up straight like boys in bootcamp, and the paper ghosts and spiders and skeletons, posed on the closed doors for Halloween. No one else but me. The faggot.

Our middle school uniforms consist of polo shirts and khaki pants, our own orange jumpsuits before high school permits us our civilian clothes. I dress the same as my classmates, varied only by the color of the polos and whether the khakis are black or tan. Yet I'm the only girl in my grade with hair this short. Half a pixie cut, half a buzz, a cornfield only partially tilled. Anyone who looks at my backpack can see the buttons peppering the sides, with their rainbow stripes and hearts, bought from dollar baskets at anime conventions.

I speed through my essays and science worksheets, enough to maintain an A-B average, all so I can open a book where two girls during World War II hold hands longer than they probably should, or pour over my sketchbook as two men with limbs too long and eyes too big press their lips together, born from my mechanical pencils. I catch their eyes around me, stuck on my hair, my buttons, my art, and hope they recognize what I've made obvious. *I'm the gay kid and you can't ignore it.*

But now someone has said it in their own words. The faggot.

It's something I never would have been called in earlier years. Not even by the kids at summer camp who snorted at a 10 year old with a My Little Pony lunchbox, or classmates who would get up and find another seat when I sat by them at lunch. Not me, the Barbie Princess on Halloween with her purple tulle dress and long golden hair. The kid who woke up early to watch Winx Club, with its fashion and fairies and a boyfriend for every main character. Who collected Littlest Pet Shop toys, whose room was painted bubblegum pink, who once tried to wear light-up Cinderella shoes to school.

I won't chop off that ass-length hair until age 12 (though not before getting a bob-cut that looks like Johnny Depp-Willy Wonka's.) The same time I began to realize I watched Winx Club to look at the characters, boyfriends be damned, in their short skirts and gogo boots, their painted lips and flowing hair. The same reason I wanted to dress as every princess from every Barbie movie, to capture the image of their beauty if only for a night. The same age when I tape a letter to the milk carton where my dad can't miss it, telling him I think I might be gay. He says that he'll accept me no matter what, until the next day, where he accuses me

of being brainwashed by porn.

He can deny it all he wants, but I know it to be true. I know that I'm gay. But this is the first time I've thought of it through this word. The faggot.

I find myself in that moment, still crouched over my pencil and staring down the vacant hallway, thinking that if this kid knew his slurs, he might have called me a dyke. That word spat at short haired girls, girls in flannels, girls with set jaws and chiseled faces, whether they have held another girl in their eyes or not. If he weren't already gone, I might have yelled to correct him. Not for the sake of a correctly gendered slur but because until that point, I figure it must be what I am. I'm a girl. I'm gay, and I want everyone to know it. If I make it known that I'm a dyke, any insult toward my sexuality is declawed. No word can be used to hurt me.

But I sit with that word. I run it through my hands like I'm testing fabric. The faggot.

I like how the word feels in my mouth. Its two syllables, the way both of them have a bite when you speak. Not toward anyone else. Never toward anyone else, because if any one queer person squeezed the word like clay, their handprints would all come away different, if they were comfortable holding it at all. Bigots clutch it all the same, I think. A blunt force weapon, a baseball bat, a crowbar to strike across the skull of anyone who ever dared to walk a way they didn't like, who had a haircut they deemed weird, who dressed too colorful or too mismatched or too different from their own clothes, who found joy in their gender and what that gender meant to them, who assign traits to loving another or loving oneself, the kind of love they don't comprehend, what they decree must be bludgeoned.

They can't comprehend the way I hold that word. The faggot.

I'm a baby gay. I've yet to watch *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. I've been to one Pride Festival, and I caught heatstroke and forgot most of it. I won't kiss a girl until freshman year, when Ryann Murray kisses me on the lips unprompted during a field trip, and I spend the next three days convinced her boyfriend will find out and kick my ass.

I don't know if the heart of that word is whole just yet, but I've felt it beating.

In clips I've seen of John Waters films, where Divine turns a red dress fished from the trash into the red carpet, a hand on her hip and a gun in the other, face as much makeup as it is skin. In the penultimate scene of my latest book, in the cold of night, the brush of near death, when one girl screams to another *kiss me, Hardy, kiss me quick!* In the swirling neon tunnel of a haunted carnival at Halloween, when a girl in killer clown makeup and a poofy skirt jumped out in front of me and ran a finger down my cheek. In the furrowed brows and tilted heads of confused kids asking teachers or parents if I'm a boy or a girl. When my fingers

first ran along the fresh shave of my hair. When I booted up my brother's fighting games just to turn the camera around all the pretty girls. When I looked at a list of gender-neutral baby names and christened myself new, because looking at it felt like coming home.

I don't say anything. I let it roll off my back when I get to my feet, pencil in hand, to walk back to class.

People like that would never understand they weren't even saying the same word anyway. Not to me.

Not to the faggot.