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### Finding My New Emily

I walk down the hallway, holding her hand. You know, pancake style, not waffle style. Waffle style has always felt weird to me. “I can’t wait for homecoming tonight!” Emily exclaims. I can’t wait either. Over the four years of high school, she is the only one I have ever taken to homecoming. Dating is so easy when you’re doing it with your best friend. We walk, gab, and when we get to her class it’s time for me to go. I force a quick kiss goodbye, as I typically do. It has always been like this.

School was a very weird place for me. Shakespeare wrote that “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” I was most certainly an excellent player.

I have always known that I am gay. It’s not so much an issue of knowing; you always subconsciously know. It’s coming to terms with it—understanding that there is nothing you can do that will change who you are—that is the hard part.

Rewind to freshman year English class. There are lots of girls in my class, which is great! I love girls. My entire life, I have had a much easier time making friends with girls than with boys. I never really knew why. Anyways, lots of girls means lots of new friends, which means lots of fun. I get pretty loud, flamboyant, and eccentric when I’m around people I am comfortable with, so naturally that is what happened. Everything was great, until suddenly it wasn’t. One of my close friends told me, “Tyler, you really need to calm down during class. People are asking me if you’re gay.” It was like a blow to the gut. They think I’m gay? They can’t. I’m not. How can they think that? My alter ego, the enemy, takes over. I am telling myself to act different. I monitor my strides, my voice, my movements, and anything that would give off

the vibe that I'm gay. I shut down. The enemy in charge wants me to maintain the façade I have worked so hard to establish.

Living as my second self, hiding who I am, monitoring my actions, being concerned about the rumors, the jokes, the teasing, is absolutely miserable. Being exposed to this amount of stress and anxiety for years, with no ending in sight, brought me to a state of depression. This depression led to more extreme thoughts. "This problem wouldn't exist if I didn't exist." That sort of thing. Looking at me from the outside, you would have never guessed I was having these horrible thoughts. The enemy had become so good at hiding my depressed self that the "happy Tyler" seemed to be all there was. It was like a ghost had taken over my body, and it used my own personality to cover up what was really happening on the inside. The perfect heist.

Fast forward to Thanksgiving break of my first semester of college. I have survived a good chunk of time at a university I know I will not stay at, so it's great to be home even for just a week. Emily and I head over to hang out with my best friend, Jaren, and his older brother. We watch football, play stupid video games, and talk about working out. All the things I shy away from. "Why don't you hit the gym more often, Tyler? Emily, wouldn't you like to have a more muscular boyfriend?" asks Jaren's overconfident older brother. I'm sick of questions addressing my masculinity, and especially the ones involving Emily and I doing the diddly. I shut down. I'm there, playing the games and talking, sort of, but I'm not really there anymore. I can't do this anymore. I won't ever be like them.

I get back home, head straight to my bed, and cry. I can't do this. What will my mom think? What will my friends think? I can hear the ugly-cry noises starting. What if I lose Emily? What if she never talks to me again? I am bawling now.

The next day is the day I decided to come out to Jaren. I sit in my car, shaking, crying,

and waiting for him to get home. He finally does, and asks what I wanted to talk about. I sit there, bawling, trying to force my voice and lips to form the words. I can't do it. The first time is always the hardest. Trying to speak between the ugly crying is difficult, but my sounds finally become words. "Jaren, I'm gay." I tell him about the constant sadness I've been hiding. I tell him I would never actually have the guts to kill myself, but if I could push a button that would make me disappear forever, I would. He says to me, "In a world like today, the last person you want to be enemies with is yourself." He hits the nail on the head. He finally saw the alter ego that was lurking inside me. He quite literally saved my life.

Emily was never my beard. I was a freshman in high school when we started dating, and I thought I was doing it right. I loved being with her. She could make me laugh like nobody else could. She made me happy. That is the kind of person you're supposed to date. To call her my beard, to assume she was only around to cover up my homosexuality, would be completely untrue. I loved her, and I still do, just more as a sister. Losing her was undoubtedly my biggest fear. She was very upset when I told her, but when she heard the horrible thoughts I was having, she became more concerned about my wellbeing than my sexuality.

Today is February 16, 2016, and my life is so much different. The enemy inside me has long been defeated. I believe that everyone needs to be comfortable as their true, authentic self. A friend of mine wrote, "It's time to unapologetically be ourselves. Being ashamed of being yourself or of having subjectively weird passions is unacceptable." I now live life comfortably in my own skin, as I hope everyone can.

I remember the days with the enemy, the days of hiding who I am. The days of the uncomfortable handholding, the forced kissing, the teasing, the depression. Those days are over. Now are the days of finding my new Emily.