

****Content warning: domestic violence & homophobic language**

Canned Identity

By Remi Turner

Scurrying across the faded hardwoods of my mom's, I mean my, apartment, I ice skated towards the door with my new unlaced sneakers in hand. I grabbed the spare pair of dirty socks hanging over the lampshade positioned in the corner. The bulb hasn't worked in months but that isn't my problem right now. My appointment starts in twenty minutes all the way on the other side of town, so I really should get on with the show, but I can't seem to find my keys. I patted all over my pockets, like a frantic TSA agent. No luck. Scanning the open floor plan with laser focused eyes, I thought I saw the shiny silver key ring on the kitchen island. I skipped across the entryway, avoiding beer cans and pizza boxes. The only reason I'm even rushing to meet with a shrink is thanks to my mother's passive aggressive will. Or else, you would never catch me on the L train heading towards Englewood to shake hands with Ms. something that starts with a "C," or maybe it's a "T," who cares— I don't. I listened to the appointment voicemail once then deleted it and sent the message to planet no one gives a fuck.

For the time being, let's go ahead and call her "Ms. Cat." Little Miss Kitty should feel completely honored I even considered stumbling through her door. Leave it to my self absorbed mother to plant an asterisk at the bottom of her will asking her only son to seek help. That woman was always asking and never giving. But since it was mommy dearest's last dying wish for me to cozy up with some shrink, I'll force myself to sit in Ms. Cat's scratchy chair and pretend I'm okay. I snatched the keys off the roly island and shoved them safely in my denim

pocket. I slammed the door behind me, the creaky wood applauded in one big clap. An eviction notice floated down to my feet mocking my lack of sufficient funds in samara style pirouettes. I took my left foot and twisted it back and forth over the yellow piece of paper, crumpling my worries away with fresh rubber soles.

#

The train reeked of freshly secreted urination more than normal today. How inviting. I grabbed a seat next to an old man, nose buried in a book. I try to avoid sitting next to the younger looking types on the train because you never know which teenagers these days are cracked out and carrying switchblades in the sleeves of their jackets. At the second stop, a cheery couple stepped into the same car as me without unlocking their tight hand-holding fold as they surfed through the crowd of commuters. I could tell right from the jump that they were going to be one of those gross, *PDA is so natural and amazing* couples. Ew. The worst part about their interruption of my calm train ride were the N-95 masks they had so obnoxiously draped across their faces. I mean, come on, 2021 is nearly over and I don't need to be reminded of that god awful time cooped up by my mother's decrepit side.

The two guys held onto the ceiling bar since all the seats were taken by selfish train goers like myself. One of the guys kept his partner's balance by squeezing him around the waist. Now I hate to admit it, but it was kind of sweet. The old man beside me let out a grunt, followed by a fierce eye roll. Seems like someone ran out of milk for their Raisin Bran this morning. He was peering with both eyes secretly under his plaid tweed hat at the gay couple I was also hyperfixed on, but in a non-homophobic way. When the car stopped at the next track I was really hoping they would get off so I didn't seem like such a creep, staring them down, but unfortunately, they stayed put. The couple even pulled down their masks and poked their woodpecker lips at each

other for a 3-second kiss. 3-seconds too long if you ask me. None of that shit should be allowed in public. The old man must have noticed the smooch, since next thing I know, he's whispering the f-slur into his scratched up copy of *For Whom the Bells Tolls*. What a joke. This old geezer hates gay people and he's a Hemingway fan. For the next few minutes, the old guy keeps letting out muffled sentences followed by snickering chuckles, like a drunk Santa bellied up the local bar after a long shift at Saks. I turned towards the bearded man waiting to hear what he had to say next. An anxious butterfly flapping its wings through my chest. This can't be happening. I'd trade a crack junky for a hate crime on the train any day. One of the guys in the couple, the old man is now clearly mocking, turns around with his ginger eyebrows furrowed into Cheeto puff curls.

"Excuse me?" the 30-something-looking kid asked. The old man kept his nose buried in the cheesy war novel as if he wasn't teasing at a hate crime for the past five minutes.

"Hello, sir? I'm speaking to you, do we have a problem?" boyfriend #1 asks again, keeping his body facing the old gentleman with his right hand still pythoned around his lover's waist.

"You talking to me?" the old man finally responded with the slightest ounce of enthusiasm.

"Yes. Yes, I am," he nodded with sarcastic approval, "You've been laughing at us this whole ride and I'd just like to know what the issue is."

"The issue? The issue," he laughed more as he responded, "the issue is that you fags won't stop rubbing all over each other while I'm trying to enjoy my \$3 ride up to my daughter's place."

“How dare you! You can’t speak that way to us,” the couple had now let go over each other and were eyeing the old man up and down with disgust.

“Oh ya?” he closed his book, “Who are you two faggots to tell me how I should speak? Now fuck off.”

“Come on, Carter let’s just go,” boyfriend #2 nudged his partner as the train’s automatic voice announced that we were at the next stop. The gay couple stepped off in unison, not turning back once. I sat there defeated. Like a deer who had just been smashed by a tractor trailer wheeled by a sleep-deprived driver. Fuck. Did that really just happen?

#

I had finally arrived at my own personal hell. The office is nothing special. Tattered posters pinned up against the lobby walls begged me to relieve them of their attachment to the water-stained felt, like a girl who's been out of love with her boyfriend for months. One reads, “Tomorrow needs you!” and another, “You only get ONE shot at life,” and of course the classic, “You matter.” Each poster screamed “80s” with the classic neon bubble letters that smeared rainbows into my pupils, just like those aerobic leotards mom stopped throwing on for her TV pilates when treatment got serious.

The scrawny kid behind the glass was the sweet sight I needed to relieve the stinging waves those posters burned through my eyes. I had to redeem myself after that horror show on the train. The gays needed me now. I painted one of my awkward, yet flirty smiles across my face; the one that only came out when mom wasn’t around. I sealed the subtle seduction attempt with a lean in towards the counter. In an attempt to be sexy, I spilled the jar of pens that sat in between me and the office eye candy. Ink-filled jingle bells rang. Stupid fucking pens. As I

frantically attempted to snatch the ball points up and put them back in the jar, the boy looked up at me curiously.

“How may I help you?” the cutie behind the glass asked. I could have gone off on a tangent with a list of intimate requests, but for the time being I exercised some self control. I had been a virgin for 21 years now, I could tone it back and wait 5 more minutes. This was only my third week toying with sexuality after all.

“Asher Ruselli,” I blurted out quickly.

“What?”

“My name, I mean. My name is Asher Ruselli. I have an appointment.”

“With who?”

“You know I couldn’t tell ya, but it was for 2:15.”

“It's 3:30.”

“I know. Stupid L train,” I rolled my eyes with lies fizzling under my tongue.

“Dr. Levina,” he blurted out.

“What?” I asked, still lost.

“Dr. Levina. Your therapist.”

“I was nowhere close,” I chuckled with defeat.

“What are you talking about?” he tilted his head with confusion.

“Oh I thought her name— actually, never mind.”

“Second door on the left,” he sent me off like a plump chicken ready for the chopping block. I think he liked me. No, I know he liked me.

Before grasping the brass knob I took a moment to contemplate. My heart was pumping rapidly in my chest as fast as Jordan’s dribble when he played for the Bulls. Pacing the hallway

that was in desperate need of vacuuming, my fresh sneakers skid across the green carpet. Man, it smelt like crap in here. My nostrils were raided with aromas of mildew and burnt rubber. A truly sinister combination. I sneezed, then sneezed again. My head spinning, like the tiltawhirl daddy used to take me on at the state fair once every year, until one day he just stopped. Around and around, I began to forget why I was even in this moldy office in the first place. Then I remembered: her. The her that clinged onto my will to live with a tight claw grip. A grip that was impossible to ignore when it was only me and her for two decades straight in that shitty southside studio. Why am I here? Just because she told me to in her stupid will?

“Mr. Ruselli?” a middle aged woman with more grays than I could count announced.

“Uh, yes?” I halted the pacing and looked up from the ground.

“Are you my 2:15?”

“Yes, but I’m actually not sure if I’m up for all this,” lightning bolts of nerves shot down my spine.

“Well there’s nothing to be worried about, we’re just going over a brief introduction today,” she waved her hand towards her office door.

“Um, I—I think I’m all set,” I slightly raised my voice out of anxiety. The receptionist emerged from the end of the hallway, clipboard in hand. His seductive, oaky Abercrombie scent hit me with the wave of confidence I needed.

“Dr. L, is everything alright?” the receptionist asked politely.

“Yes, Gunther, thank you.”

“He is your next patient,” he nudged at me with the clipboard. This felt like a rude gesture.

“It’s Asher,” I spitted with a punch, “and actually, I use they/them pronouns. Very rude of you to assume.” I threw my sassy Gen-Z response at him like darts. In reality, I’ve never gone by they/them. I remembered all those nerdy LGTBQ+ Netflix films I’d watch when mom was passed out in her room from all the meds. A wave of queer inspiration suddenly sprinkled all over me and I thought this was my time to try it out nonbinary pronouns by fucking with Dr. Levina and her office peasant. The receptionist threw a smirk on his face then turned back down the hallway to return to his post.

“My apologies, Asher. Welcome,” Dr. Levina spoke with sincerity as she drew the door slightly past her bold hips.

“That’s okay. You should tell that kid to really work on respecting your patients. I mean, aren’t you all supposed to be trained on this stuff, or something?” I followed her in, now ready to initiate a tortuous conversation.

“Well, I appreciate the advice, Asher. If you could go ahead and take a seat then we can get started on today’s session,” she sunk her body into a thick, leather armchair.

“Anytime,” I responded with a hint of sarcasm. “So what are we here for?”

“Um, I think that is what I am supposed to be asking you, no?” she chuckled through the unexpected confrontation.

“You think?”

“Anyways let's start off with a check-in. How are you doing?”

“Hmm, I feel like that’s a rhetorical question.” I paused slightly, “Like today specifically?”

“Yes, today, but als-”

“I’m doing great! How are you? You seem tired.”

“That’s lovely to hear, I’m fine thank you. Now I know you’re here today on behalf of your mother, so how about we talk a little bit about her and your relationship. How does it feel now that she is gone?”

“Amazing, thank you, is your mother still alive?”

Dr. Levina let out one of those sighs you can tell is slightly rooted in frustration. Upon exhaling, her unmanicured hands stroked the top of her Old Navy-looking slacks, attempting to keep her composure. The hefty release of breath was her way of preparing for a session of mental games. I wish I had the courage to tell the old cat she was in for a wild ride, but it’s not my fault she forgot to wear her seatbelt. For the next hour, I twisted every question back onto her like a never-ending verbal boomerang. By the end of the session, she was my patient, dying to reach for that door knob once again. An hour later, she finally succumbed to the hot cooker I created in her office and let me back into the wild. On the way out, I gave the sexy secretary a wink. Even threw him one of my tight left eye squeezes, which I only pull out when I *really* like someone. You’re welcome.

#

It never really occurred to me that my mother still being alive might have been slightly beneficial until I stood in the Dollar General on the corner of Marquette and East 79th, struggling to find Spaghetios. I trailed up and down those dusty aisles endlessly and still, no luck. Maybe my dead mother never taught me how to navigate the basic necessities of life because of the deep shame she felt that her 50% Italian son preferred canned meatballs over Nonna’s 100-year-old sauce recipe. Or maybe she was just a bitch. I’d like to argue the latter. I dragged my index and pointer fingers across the shelves as I continued to pace. Awaking dust bunnies as I scraped them onto my fingertips. Suffocating their innocent lives as I rubbed the soft dust in between my

fingers. There were only two other people in the store besides myself. I assume they were freaks like me. Freaks who live on this side of Chicago and resort to buying their meals from stores where prices can be counted on one hand. Another grumble released hangry vibrations from my stomach. I really needed to get my shit together and find the red cans of heaven. I haunted the aisles five more times, up and down, up and down, like the unfed ghost I am. My ghoully voyages came to a halt when I noticed the god-awful hair-do of the woman at the other end of aisle 3. Her half purple, half blue bob shakes along with her restless leg. Her little body a life-size bobblehead I wanted to glue to my desk. She stares intensely at the different boxes of cereal like the decision to go with off brand Frosted Flakes or Honey Nut O's was bound to be life changing. As much as I mocked her, she must have been my angel from up above since directly behind her sat the cans of processed meatballs and macaroni I had been craving for days. I slid past her split ends and reached for the cans of Spaghettios without speaking a word to my 5'1 fairy godmother. I tucked a can in each pocket then folded the last one into my jacket sleeve, squished right underneath my armpit. Now it was escape time. There was only one cashier at the front when I entered, so fingers crossed the crack that was probably in his system was peaking right about now so I could slip out without notice. I zoomed towards the front of the store with no problem. My Vans doing me justice. Right as I went to pass the threshold of electric closing doors, the beefy guy restocking the shelves took notice of my escape.

“Hey! Stop it right there white boy” his deep, radio static voice shouted. I ignored the yells and kept sprinting. The glass doors couldn't slide open fast enough. I threw my body out into the crisp fall air and didn't look back until I could hear the Dollar General employee's voice creeping back up closer to me.

“You better stop running you little shit head or I’ll tackle you right into this concrete.” He screamed with heavy breaths in between words. I was surprised his fat ass even made it this far, we were almost two blocks from the store. I needed to get this guy off of my tail. I rotated around like a ballerina who hadn’t stretched in years and chucked the aluminum can from under my armpit at the ogre behind me. I stayed turned to watch the can pancake straight into his forehead. Bullseye.

#

Six episodes of Drag Race and two cans of Spaghettios later, and I was pleasantly rotting away on the crusty living room couch. I wish I had the pizazz these divas did, but yet again I don’t think I’m that gay, just hoping to test some things out. After the first death drop I saw on the show I was hooked. Drag Race had become my hidden pleasure in the last few months of my mother’s existence. Now, I enjoyed them all by myself. These were the moments I lived for. Peace and quiet. No one screaming at me from the other room to fetch their pills. No one lecturing me on why I’m the reason my dad left. I grabbed a hold of the sticky remote to change channels since at this point I was getting a little tired of RuPaul’s voice. No offense, queen. As I placed pressure on the *channel up* button it all went black. The TV screen switched to static. All lights went out. My studio apartment turned into a swallowing cave with only the faint hue of skyscraper lights shooting an incandescent glow through the kitchen window. I really should have paid the electric bill. There’s no way I was going to waste a Friday night in this cluttered living room, alone. I landed back on the streets with no plan in mind. I wasn’t much of a partier in highschool, and by the time I could go out to real bars I was stuck in quarantine, taking care of my mother. After stopping at the bodega on the corner for a sentimental beverage, I wandered through the various alleyways surrounding my building, kicking bits of litter and examining

graffiti murals until something sparked my interest. The spotted lights danced through the crack of a rusty metal door at the end of the underlit passageway, as if it didn't want to be seen. A sea of colorful spots poured into the street by a group of young adults covered in feathers and sequins entering the hidden opening. In the few seconds that the door was ajar, I could hear the sound of life inside. Sharp squeals, the ones inflicted by joy instead of pain. Whatever was being served inside, I wanted a slice. I stood surveying the scene before making a move. I must have been nearing unconsciousness during my hyperfixation session, because somehow a slender figure in a see-through lace dress floated right by me and up to the bouncer.

"You coming in honey?" the tall, scandalous figure asked sweetly.

"Huh, me?"

"No, the ghost standing behind you. Yes, child I'm talking to you. In or out?"

"Oh, I think I'm okay, thanks."

"Well then stop standing there like a serial killer and find another spot to stare."

Normally my blood turns to lava when someone tells me what to do, but even in the strangers' judgments I felt welcomed. They had some kind of forgiving energy around them, like a bubble of protection, and them acknowledging my presence was an admittance to their haven. I started to approach the bouncer, feeling drawn in by the unknown behind that door. "You can't take those inside," he drew down his sunglasses and pointed to my Four Loko covered in a paper bag baby blanket. I chugged the rest of Blue Raspberry flavored battery acid and tossed the can in the bin beside the scary man who had no reason to be wearing sunglasses at 11 PM. "Done," I noted as the can hit the rim of the bin. He moved the velvet pink rope to the side and allowed me to slither in.

I stepped into a foreign realm of euphoria and poppers fumes. Behind that nasty door was a sea of floating bodies bobbing in harmony with each other, matching each bounce to the early-2000s jams pumping through the speakers. The bar lacked central lighting, but was nowhere near dark. Disco balls and strobes boogied across the walls. After scanning the room for a few minutes, it started to sink in that this wasn't any average bar. No wonder my mother never took us down this street on our pre-Covid treks home from various errand-runs she refused to tend to alone. She must have marked this alley as "No Man's Land" the second she discovered its speakeasy queerness. Feeling lost, I looked for the bartender. A thin string of pride flags hung over a long wooden counter in the corner. Bingo. The lesbian, yes this is me assuming, behind the bar with a jeweled cowgirl hat offered me a free drink since I explained this was my first time in a place like this and I had no idea what to get. Four Long Island Ice teas later and I was ready to start slurring my words with a stranger. I saw a pretty face decorated in glitter and a pink feather boa swaying alone at the edge of the dance floor. He sent a few love letters masked in winks my way. It seemed like he needed me, so I approached. He spoke loudly, but his words came out soft, each syllable rolling off the tongue like my own personal lullaby. I wanted to grab his face and kiss him right then and there, but part of me got nervous that my mother was right. She always said that when boys kiss boys they get sick and die. Then I remembered she's the one who's dead and that's not how AIDS works. Lucky me. I had never really flirted with a man in the flesh before, but there's a first time for everything. He was sweet, but obviously drunk, and I definitely wasn't sober either. Surprisingly, the flirting came like second nature. Who knew being gay was so easy?

"Want to get out of here?" he pressed his wet lips up against my ear.

"Um, and go where?" I responded with hesitation.

“Anywhere but here,” he rubbed my back in full moon circles, “Your place?”

“What about yours?” I asked in a quick rebuttal.

“Too far,” he planted a sloppy kiss on my cheek. It felt nice. Tingly and hot.

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We stumbled through the back door together hand and hand. I nearly dove into a puddle outside the door, but my new lover pulled me back upright just like Prince Charming would. I guided him back towards the apartment, purposely avoiding the streets mother used to drag me down by my hair after I’d thrown tantrums at her work. It’s not my fault she forced me to sit in her cubicle with her for 8 hours straight with nothing to do and nothing to eat. If only she could see me now, she’d roll in her grave.

All the lights were still off in the apartment. I ushered him in quickly before he could comment on the swarming darkness. He threw me on the couch, tripping over the pile of dirty clothes rotting on the floor, and landed sandwiched on top of my skin. My body spazzed and released layers of tension that had been locked up in secret vaults for far too long. I must have fallen asleep on the couch after our 3 rounds. I woke up feeling like my soul had floated out from the deepest cavities of my exhausted body. This man, whose name I don’t totally remember to be honest, showed me a side of desire I was foreign to the past twenty one years of living. I summoned myself out of the sleepy haze when I heard him accidentally running into things. I rubbed my drunken eyes to find him opening the door to my mother’s old room.

“No, don’t!” I shot up from the couch with my body still exposed.

“Geez, sorry I just need to take a piss.” he continued to walk into her old dungeon. I ran over to chase after him but it was already too late. He had entered the cave full of bed pans and pill bottles, welcomed by the stench of the year my mother spent turning to dust. The sunrise

from her old window exposed the havoc in a clementine smog. I swung the door open and was immediately sent back to a place I never wanted to see or feel again.

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“Asher! Asher! Goddammit I ran out of my PM pills and I need you to go to the store to get me some more,” mom screeched out in between coughs and heavy breathing from the only good lung she had left. No response. “Stupid boy, you better be listening! Go fetch my medication, now!,” she wrestled weakly with the sheets as she attempted to get up. I was in the shower we shared. Attempting to wash off all of her misery and cigarette smoke after tending to her for the past six hours. This was one of my special showers, where I let everything go. It was around 4 PM so I thought I had plenty of time to relax since she normally goes down for her second nap around this time. When I checked her room right before turning on the showerhead, she was fast asleep. The gray bird's nest with few hairs left poked through the door. Her oxygen tank smacked into the door like those bumper cars daddy and I used to ram into each other..

“Christ, son what the hell!” she yelled through the steam.

“Fuck! Mom! What the fuck,” I dropped my Ziploc bag wrapped phone directly over the shower drain, but male grunts and moans continued to bounce inside the foggy doors.

“You little fucking pervert who do you think you are doing that shit in my house?” nearly out of break, she hacked mounds of phlemmy air into the sink, “Turn it off, now!” she continued to yell in between hacking fits. I slipped down to the shower floor and ripped open the plastic bag, exposing my phone to waterfall gushes of scorching water. I managed to stop the clip with my lotion-covered thumb. She stood there. Waiting for me to step out of the glass cocoon and into reach of her wrath. I slid the towel down from over the slimy door before stepping out,

releasing a cloud of steam, but not enough to cover my tears. Her feeble hand took the hair brush off the sink and swung over and over.

“Non sei mio figlio!” She brought out her first language to let me know how mad she really was. Bristles punching against wet skin. I could already feel there would be marks tomorrow. I fell to my knees.

#

“Ew, what is this place?”

“Just get out,” I grabbed his wrist and plucked him out of there as fast as possible.

“Damn, sorry, I really just wanted to pee,” he scratched his head, “I think I’m gonna go,” the awkwardness in his voice punched me in the face.

“No, I’m sorry, you don’t have to. I just really don’t like people going in there,” I grabbed the blanket from the couch and cloaked my naked self.

“No worries. I have work in a few hours so I should probably head out.”

“Are you sure, we can order a pizza or something?”

“A pizza? It’s like 6 AM,” I looked at his puzzled face with desperation. “I’m really all set, but thanks though,” he scanned the room looking for the checkered pants he had on when he arrived. I pointed towards the door where they sat inside out across a floor board.

“Thanks,” his gratitude was short and sweet. I could tell from the change in his voice that he was uncomfortable, and possibly icked out. He skidded over to redeem his clothes before rushing out of my place, but tripped over the floorboard in his escape attempt. “Ow! What the fuck!” he bent over and grabbed his big toe.

“What happened? Are you okay?” I rushed over

“This stupid floorboard was popping up and nicked my toe.”

“Oh shit I’m sorry I never noticed. I can get you a paper towel,” I in fact had no paper towels. I crouched down to assess the situation. Strange. I never noticed that floorboard peaking out before. Totally distracted by this new discovery, I pulled up on the damaged piece of wood and completely ignored the man who just took my virginity. He continued to slip on his pants. Jumping up and down to pull the black and white trousers past his toned thighs. I wrapped both my hands around the end of the floorboard and yanked upward with the little muscle in my arms. I tore the piece up and my body fell backwards like a broken rocking chair, smacking against the ground. My head thudded against the floor, probably waking my downstairs neighbors with a hollow bang. That hurt. My visitor slipped out of the door behind me before I could get up. Nice to meet you too. I dropped the piece of wood beside me before I could get any splinters and sat back up, observing the new hole. A case of old, opened tomato cans sat lining the secret stowaway spot. I claw machined each cylinder of *Cento: whole peeled* out of the opening and lined each one up next to me. Folded pieces of paper filled the cans. Each one inscribed with blue, cursive ink. The good kind of cursive you could tell came from the hand of someone born before the 90s. I brought one can back to the couch and plopped back down on the couch now stitched with me and that stranger’s sweat. I carefully teared back the barely-attached lid, avoiding unnecessary cuts. The letter read:

Mio figlio,

How are you my boy? I’m sorry I haven’t been coming around recently. I’ve been trying to call, but every time I get your mother on the phone she won’t let me speak to you. Is everything okay? Some lady reached out to me about an incident that happened with you and Ma a couple of months ago, something about living with Aunt Carm for a month because of a fight?

They said you are all right but you know you say the words and I'll come get you. I'll come pick you up and you come stay with us, Lenny wouldn't mind, he works all day at the hospital anyways. Ma told you about him, right? She told me she did. Anyway, we're living together now and you would really like him, he's a nice guy. Write me back when you get this mio amore, I miss you.

Ciao,

Papa.

I chucked the can against the wall closest to me. It hit the drywall with a hollow echo. My weeping drowned out the whistles of the birds beginning to line the telephone poles for their daily rounds. I sat there in the subtle darkness that was, rocking back and forth. Classic fetal position. Drips of salty tears splashed the handwritten note. I took two deep breaths. In and out, with pig snort huffs. I grabbed another can and kept reading:

Mio figlio,

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