

Year 11 & 12 Category: Winner

Coffee Name

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My name is Phuc. Yes, I know.

You know your name looks like another word, right?
Is that seriously your real name?
Why did your parents name you that?

The bread and butter of questions asked by the Johnnys, Sams and Davids,
When they interrogate me, probe me for more 'comedy' material.
They feed their childish curiosity,
All fun and games, it would seem to them.

School was the worst.
Fourteen years dragged on
Slowly.
I dreaded every first day of school.
They would learn my name, with great difficulty,
Learn to put the distinctive name to a distinctive face.
They'd chat about it later with the other teachers
Over a cup of coffee.

My name, a ticket for hushed talks about that Asian kid named Fuck,
Like I had three eyes, tentacles and blue skin.
The Jennys and Stacys had the ticket,
They all apparently had one.

Old Mr Dawes asked me a question I would not soon forget.
Him, a greying, middle aged man, sipping his keep-cup cappuccino.
"Do you have a different name, little man?"
Me, a six-year-old, replied with the biggest chubbiest grin: "Why? It's just Phoooc."
"It's just your name looks like a bad word."
Snickers and whispers were low, but they thundered in my ears.

I went home crying that afternoon.

“Ph-ph-phoo...phah-phuh...” that’s my cue.
I use one hand to stop the train before the wreck.
A knee-jerk reaction now.
“Here!” throwing my hand up, rescuing Mrs. Something-or-other from her attempts.
Relief.
I rescued myself from a blood-rushed, red-flushed face,
Being noticed, visible.

I wanted to be invisible.

The friends I did make, they swore they liked my name.
It’s unique, they said.
Exotic, they said.
I chose to believe them every time because they seemed to understand.
Ordinary, I wish they’d say.
You’re not different, I wish they’d say
I wish there was absolutely nothing to say.

Other kids in school, I noticed they didn’t talk to me much
They’d smile
I’d smile
And we’d continue our separate ways, just another face in the maze.
They didn’t want to say it wrong, be mean or something
That’s nice of them.
Really, they couldn’t say my name
Out of fear.
Really, they didn’t want to say it at all.

That’s a bad word, we can’t say that.

“We left behind Vietnam so you could have what we could not,” my dad’s eyes reminisced.
“Be grateful we can live here con*,” my mum would scold, arms crossed.
Pressure,
To make them proud,
To make sure it was worth the effort.
I am grateful.

I knew some Vietnamese kids who had normal names.
Their parents let them become Johnnys, Sams and Davids.
Or they were born a Jenny or Stacy,
“What a beautiful name,” a midwife would gush.
The neat pen strokes on their birth certificate. Permanent.
They wouldn’t have to change.

I asked Mum if I could change my name too, but she shook her head.
“Your name is lucky.”

I’d scoff.

Every day, Dad came home with a blue splotched coffee cup.
Peeking over the kitchen top on my tippy toes, there were always the same five letters.
S-T-E-V-E.

“That’s not your name, Dad.”
He’d crouch down, a tired but soft smile.
“It’s just easier con, it’s my coffee name, yeah?”

A coffee name, I pondered.
Just a white name, hiding the real name
A disguise,
A Johnny or Jenny mask
Or a shield, to save us
From storms of words,
Onslaughts of questioning.

Make us seem a bit whiter.
What’s my coffee name?
It’s Peter.

Because it’s easier.

My mum said she didn’t choose her coffee name.
She was pregnant with me and went for an ultrasound.
The baby blue walls were calming and ordinary,
Unwitting.
It was over and they wiped off the blue gel.
The nurse returned to the baby blue, papers in her hand.
Fiona was written on every other line.
Phuong somehow became Fiona.
And Fiona was written on every coffee from then on.

I asked Dad why he chose Steve.
It was exhausting at work
Could you spell that for me?
What was your name again?
Or nothing.
Even adults avoid difficult things.
Dad got a new job and on the first day
Said to his new colleagues, “I’m Steve.”
No one forgot his name, and everyone could spell it no problem.
Funny thing, how it changed so easily.
Magic.

“Magic was the ‘preferred name’ box!” Dad exclaimed.

The 'preferred name' box.
A solution.
Legally I can't change.
I just need an alternative.
I can be Peter everywhere else,
Anywhere that needs be.

Anywhere that's not home.

I'm working now, making my living.
My parents would be proud.
To my colleagues, I'm Peter
No questions asked, nothing to say.
Thank you, 'preferred name' box.

Life is easier.
I'd wake up and stroll my way to my morning fix.
The baristas know me.
I'm Peter.
On my work ID cards, I'm Peter.
My nametag, Peter.
It's easy for them,
Easier for me.

Transactions happen in life.
I give my money for groceries.
I pay the \$4.95 for my blue-splotched cappuccino.
My parents bought a boat trip and sailed to a foreign land
For me.
I make the trade.
My name, the one my parents gave me, the lucky one,
For a new, normal name.
My culture for ease.
I traded a part of me
For ease.

Assimilation felt like a necessary choice.
But at what cost?
To get a coffee?
To feel accepted?
Normal?
Whiter?

Loss.
I've lost something.

* Con – a Vietnamese nickname that parents call children; sweetie, kid