



## Identity

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Her lips were as soft as the sigh that escaped his. The gentle caress sends a delicious shiver of pleasure coursing through his bones. He sighs again, as she places her body flush against him. Surely it was the cocoa and shea butter gods that he had to thank for this gift — the satin that was her skin. He let his hands roam, delighting in the feel of her beneath his fingertips.

She gently kisses his cheek, marking the origin of a journey that takes her down his neck and torso.

Each new spot being defined by a nibble, then a swirl of her tongue, as if to soothe the brief sting caused by the former. She continues down the length of his torso until she arrives at her destination. In no rush to claim her prize, she runs her tongue under the waistband of his boxers as she grips it, and slowly begins to pull them down his hips — Nate's eyes flash open.

His heart pounding like the bass in a drum line at the crescendo of its performance. Beads of cold sweat slick his skin, glistening in the stream of moonlight sneaking through his blinds. Groaning, he rolls over, an outstretched arm feeling for his phone. 4:03 am. Damn.

He was due to get up in a little less than an hour, but he knew that falling asleep any time soon and waking up refreshed was wishful thinking. He had already woken up three times tonight. With a deep exhale he rolls onto his back, throwing off the sheet that clung to him. Kingston really was unnecessarily hot. It must be all the pagans that made this accursed city such a fiery furnace. "*We'll have no problem spending eternity in hell,*" he muses. Nate's heart sinks as he ponders the curious state of arousal and panic caused by his dream. He scoffs. What kind of man can't even enjoy sex?

A longing seated deep within him caused indescribable agony as images of a future he so desperately yearns for career through his mind. Waking up each morning in a body he was comfortable in. Getting a workout in before he got the kids ready and dropped them off at school. Spending the day at work, then coming home to his beautiful family. Making love to his wife each night.

Nate tosses and turns as the images loop infinitely. Usually, thinking about his ideal future provided him with the fortitude to survive days that were especially hard, but when he wanted to sleep, they only served to haunt him. His supplication to the universe only consisted of one word, "When?"

Most days, Nate enjoys his job as an accountant. As a child, his teachers had found him to be extraordinarily good with figures. It wasn't unusual to find him in his classroom during lunchtime or after the school day had ended, with math problems for company. He eagerly accepted every new challenge his teachers posed to him, so it was no surprise when he attained the top grade in CXC Mathematics for the entire island at the humble age of ten. But today, the numbers swirling around on the pages in front of him might as well have been Ancient Greek.

"Hey Nate," Samantha purrs as she kitches her ample derriere atop his desk; taking care to lean forward so to display the ample swell of her bosom. "I've got some files that Bobby wants you to take a look at," she continues, resting multiple folders against his chest while smiling sweetly.

"Uhh, yeah, sure. Will do Samantha," Nate stutters. She starts to say something else but his mind only registers her lips moving, as his eyes followed Eric entering the department and walking to his desk. Nate

couldn't help noticing how the mustard shirt Eric was wearing complemented his skin tone so well, and the way his chinos accentuated the curves of his hamstrings and glutes. Glancing in Nate's direction, Eric smiles as he sees him.

"Nate!"

Nate abruptly redirects his attention to a miffed Samantha. "Well, are you going to answer me or not?"

"Huh? I'm sorry Samantha. What were you saying?"

"Nate, I've asked you four times, when will the files be ready?!"

"Uhh, I'll try to get them back to Bobby by tomorrow," Nate fumbles, mentally chastising himself for upsetting his boss' secretary. Everyone knew that she was one of two people whom you should never ire, who always got what — or whom — they wanted.

"Swear mi nuh know why yuh even have ears" Samantha chides, as she rises from his desk, turns on her heels and walks off.

"Well you sure know how to make the ladies feel special, don't you?" Eric comments, walking over to Nate's desk after Samantha had left.

"Yuh done know. Man a real gyallis, fi real," Nate jokes, chuckling.

"Dude she was talking to you for a while. Didn't you hear any of it?" questions Eric.

“Nope.”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Mi nuh have a clue.” Nate sighs, burying his head in his hands.

“Guess I’ll just have to read your mind over drinks later then.”

“Alright Safa.”

“Easy nuh gyallis,” Eric returns, walking back to his desk and gifting Nate his second smile of the day. Nate turns back to his work. It was only 10:37 am. Today was going to be a long one.

Four months earlier, Nate sat at his new desk and thanked the gods for his good fortune. Seven months ago he was forced to quit his job, as he was “disrupting the balance” of his previous workplace. As they put it, he just didn’t “fit well into the company’s culture” anymore. It was a load of crap.

Six months after he had started his hormone therapy, his prior boss called him into his office.

The conversation was brief, but it was all a blur to Nate. He only heard “resign instead of being terminated”, and that was that. By the end of that week he was out of a job, with his bill and loan payments threatening to pile high. Months later — after still not having a job — he had to give up his apartment. Apparently his landlord had caught wind of what was going on, and decided that he couldn’t have “that kind of thing” occurring on his premises.

Desperate, Nate started crashing at his friends' places. A week or two here and there, then he'd be on his way and out of their hair. They didn't mind, but he hated the thought of inconveniencing people — even if they were people whom he cared about, who also cared about him. But today, today was the first day of a new chapter in his life, and he was extremely grateful because on this day, he had a job, and a completely fresh start, even if it meant that he had to hide who he was from his coworkers.

Nate looked around. This department — Operations — had an open floor plan, and housed the HR, accounting and IT divisions of the company. The cafeteria was located on one of the remaining two floors, and the call centre customer service agents occupied the other. That morning when Nate had arrived at work, he reported to his boss who showed him to his desk, and about five minutes later, HR dropped by and gave him a set of company policy manuals to read. It was these manuals that he was working through when Eric arrived at his desk. "Hi, good morning. You must be the new guy. I'm Eric." The man looming over Nate extended his hand. "Go..go...good morning," said Nate, hurrying to stand up so he could afford the man a proper handshake, his heart rate elevating immediately.

Nate wouldn't describe himself as tall. A decent five feet eight inches, with a slightly muscular build, and olive brown complexion, he thought he was relatively easy on the eyes. He kept his hair closely cropped, and his face clean shaven — not that he had much to shave anyway. Eric however, was tall, with locs of black hair that ended in the middle of his back. A towering six feet five inches, muscular, and with a darker complexion than himself, Nate had to turn his gaze upwards a significant distance in order to look the man in his warm cocoa eyes.

Eric was from the IT department, though at first glance, he didn't seem to fit the bill given his build. Wearing a pair of khaki Dockers and a dark blue polo shirt emblazoned with the company logo, he was much more comfortably dressed than Nate who — wanting to make a good impression on his first day — had donned his midnight blue pinstripe pants, and a crisp white shirt paired with a finely-knitted navy blue tie.

“So what's your name?” asked Eric. “N...Nate.” “Nice to meet you Nate. I'll be setting up your new machine,” Eric continued, gesturing to the box he held under his arm.

“Okay,” Nate managed to respond. He hated that he always got like this during interactions, especially first encounters. Eric chuckled as he began setting up the new laptop, and Nate moved over to give him sufficient space on the desk.

“So where are you from,” asked Eric. “Uhh, Hanover.” “Nice. I'm from Port Maria, but I grew up in Oracabessa.” “Okay.” “So where did you go to school, Eric asked after a few minutes of connecting cables and tinkering with the laptop. “Utech.” Eric chuckled, “Quite talkative, aren't you?” Nate glanced over at Eric and strained a smile.

A little over two hours later, Nate watched Eric walk away after thanking him for configuring the computer. He thoroughly wished he could put an end to the unsettling feeling he had when speaking with people. More than anything else, he just wanted to be comfortable in his own skin, so he could stop wondering if people could “tell.” His morning prayer came back to him briefly, “*When?*” It took Nate an hour and a half to realize that his anxiety wasn't the only reason he was nervous around the handsome man from the IT department.



Nate strolls into the dimly lit bar and takes a seat at their usual table in the far left corner. Eric was yet to arrive. After ordering a flask of Appleton and a bottle of Ting with two cups, he begins to recall the first time he and Eric had drinks here — it had been sheer happenstance.

Several months ago Nate had walked into the not so crowded bar one evening and was scanning the available seating hoping to acquire the most secluded option. He most certainly was not in the mood to socialise. He was on his way through the dimly lit establishment to a table tucked away in a corner when he realized that it was already occupied. Crap. He was just about to change course when Eric's voice greeted him, "Come on over man. I don't bite."

Hesitantly, Nate joined Eric at the table, cursing himself for not following his mind and just having a quiet night at home with video games for company. Eric hadn't been there for long, judging by the flask of Appleton that was still three-quarters full. As he sat, Eric handed the flask to Nate, then pushed an opened bottle of Ting across the table towards him.

"Come here often?" Eric asked after taking another sip of his drink.

"No," responded Nate, just before he swallowed his drink in one go.

Being around Eric wasn't particularly unpleasant, but he knew he had to loosen up in order to alleviate the funk he was in.

"Judging by your enthusiasm, you've either had a rough day, or yuh faada a rum head." Nate half smiled. "The former."

“Damn man. What happened?” prodded Eric.

Nate looked quizzically at Eric before mixing another drink, and downed half of it before telling the suspiciously curious man bits and pieces of what happened.

“So, you don’t like Stacey?”

“Man, it’s not like she isn’t a nice girl, I just don’t want to get involved with any of the women at the office.”

“So, you’re gay?” inquired Eric, who had somehow edged around the table so that he was closer to Nate, much closer than he would’ve liked.

“Man, wha kinda question that? Of course I’m not gay,” snapped Nate, hoping his tone was appropriately masculine. “I don’t even know why I told you all that.”

Eric looked at him and responded slowly, “I’m bisexual.”

Nate almost choked on his drink. “Hey man, I...I’m so...”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

Placing his order on the table, the waitress disrupts Nate’s reverie. Glancing up, he sees Eric making his way over to him. “How was the gym?” he asks, as Eric occupies the seat across from him.

“Wasn’t bad enuh, but I’m more interested in what’s happening with you today.”

“Bwoy yuh know how dating is. More time I think it’s more stress than it’s worth.”

Eric laughs, “Because you’re any less stressful to deal with? Anyway, tell me what happened.”

Shooting his friend a glare, Nate begins to relay the events of his date the night before and his subsequent dream to his eagerly listening friend. He still found it remarkable how well they get along, even though the man was his polar opposite.

When Nate had started working at the office, he had intended to keep to himself, more so for safety reasons than anything else, but eventually Eric’s lightheartedness and humour made the man grow on him; and over time, he grew to trust him enough to develop what surprisingly turned out to be a really great friendship. Still, there was one thing Nate hadn’t told him.

Around half past ten Nate steps out of the bar into the humid night air with Eric on his heels. They barely enter Eric’s car before he resumes the conversation they were having in the bar. “Man, I can’t believe it’s been two months since you had sex! You should just become a monk and be done with it.”

Nate laughs. “Whatever man. Yuh know how it go: Ms. Palm and her five daughta them.” “You should let me do it for you instead,” Eric returns, glancing at him as they pull out of the parking lot. Nate feels his heart stop, then gallop like a racehorse. Was this a typical response for

close male friends? “Ah...yuh...yuh know yuh ramp too rough sometimes Eric. Mek yuh love run joke so?” Eric’s only response was silence.

Eric pulls up to Nate’s house and parks the car. “Thanks for the ride bro,” Nate says as he looks over at him. “Yeah bro, you know it’s no problem.” The slight hesitation in the man’s response was almost imperceptible, and Nate couldn’t help but wonder if there was something else that Eric wanted to say. He pauses for a second to give Eric time to add whatever else that was on his mind, but it didn’t seem to be forthcoming. Slowly he leans over to give the giant man a hug. “Night bro.” “Night Nate,” Eric responds, throwing one arm around the man’s torso.

Pulling away, Nate’s angled head causes his lips to graze gently across Eric’s stubble. It was merely a fraction of a second, but for Nate, time itself seemed to have slowed, and he could feel every strand of the man’s beard against his lips. Pulling free of Eric’s embrace, he senses Eric’s minor hesitation to release him completely. He finds the courage to glance into his eyes briefly, but the reaction it produces unnerves him.

Grabbing his bag, Nate all but scrambles out of the car. Eric waits until Nate shuts his apartment door, then gives a quick honk of his horn and drives off.

Nate takes off his shoes and paces. Taking deep breaths wasn’t working, his heart was still threatening to leap out of his chest. He was still trying to process the reaction he was having to Eric, his friend, his co-worker, a man. He was surprised by Eric’s silence after his decline of the man’s offer, but he also hadn’t anticipated tonight’s response to

being in such close proximity to him. After all, it wasn't the first time they had hugged.

*Is this what I really want to do? Will I like it? Suppose I'm wrong about this? What if I'm reading into the situation too much?*

With trembling fingers Nate reaches for his phone and dials Eric's number.

"Eric."

"Yeah Nate, you okay?"

"Where are you?"

"At the stoplight. Nate, what's going on?"

"Turn...turn back."

"Nate, what happened?"

"Eric, just...turn back." Eric needed no further prodding.

Nate watches him enter his apartment, studying all six-feet and five-inches of the man named Eric and the way his locs gently sways as he walks. His heart pounding from nervousness, uncertainty and excitement. He had never questioned his sexuality before; never gave sleeping with another man a second thought. And in this moment — as he anticipated what came next — he was suddenly fearful.

*Suppose it turns out to be just like my dreams? What if it ruins our friendship? What if it doesn't, and leads to something even more terrifying? What am I doing?!*

Nate locks his door and turns around, unsure of what to do next. He watches Eric stepping towards him. "Wait!" Eric halts and looks at him, his eyes questioning. "I have to tell you something."

"O...kay?"

"I'm transgender<sup>1</sup>. Does that matter? It's totally cool if you don't want to do this," Nate lies.

Eric answers his question by pulling him closer, lowering his head, and kissing him softly, but confidently on his lips. "I already knew."

The one million and one thoughts that were bombarding Nate's mind all but vanished, but one.

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<sup>1 1</sup> Persons of transgender experience tend to face immense amounts of stigma and discrimination. They are likely to be marginalized, resulting in social exclusion across several facets. Transgender individuals are also reportedly more likely than cisgender and heterosexual people to experience depression, anxiety, and suicidal tendencies. This story explores the queer identity of a transgender individual and how they navigate social spaces and interpersonal relationships.