



By Any
Other
Name

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By Any Other Name

Part 1

*What masks we wear before we know them masks.
I wore one well—so well that even I
forgot the face beneath. A brother, friend,
a boy among his fellows, well at ease
as any borrowed coat that fits by habit
though never once by measure. Years I wore it
and called it mine, and thought the wearing true.*

Sorry about my poetry, I couldn't help myself. But if you spend enough time inside Shakespeare's work, his rhythms start to feel like your own. And that's kind of the whole problem, isn't it? That someone else's words—spoken beautifully or spit with cruelty—can feel so real that you take them to heart, that you start to forget what's you and what's performance. The mask becomes the face, the lines you memorize become the thoughts you hold. And pretty soon, if you're not careful—and none of us are careful enough—you're an 18-year-old boy, you're in a frat, and your best friend is named Hunter.

It all started with him. Which, yeah, obviously. Most of the important stuff in my life started with Hunter. This is very annoying because he isn't as oblivious to this fact as he pretends to be.

Picture this: Sophomore year at Wabash College in beautiful Indiana. The drama club decided to put on *Romeo and Juliet*, and it's here that I'd like to remind you that Wabash is one of only three remaining all-male colleges left in the country.

Now, if this had been the sixteenth century, boys playing girls would've been unremarkable, even boring. But this was 2016, in Indiana, and the idea of putting on a dress and strutting around in front of the entire student body was roughly as appealing as setting yourself on fire—possibly less.

As for me, I didn't even know the play was happening. Back then, I had no interest in theater. All I cared about was track, girls, beer, girls, Pokémon, and, you know, girls. Did I mention my heterosexual interest in girls?

Anyway.

When Hunter—who I swear to God thought “soliloquy” was a board game—told me he was auditioning for Romeo, I assumed he was joking. When he said he wanted *me* to audition for *Juliet*, I knew he'd lost his goddamn mind.

“What?” I said. “Why would I do that?”

He shrugged. “Why wouldn't you?”

We were in the frat house basement, which we called “the dungeon” because it had iron bars on the one transom window. There were beer cans everywhere, a red lava lamp in the corner, and a poster of a topless woman riding a cartoon shark. Oh, and there was a toad. No idea where it came from, it just showed up one night, squatting in a crusty old paint bucket beside the beer pong table.

“I wouldn't because it's gay,” I said.

Hunter had his gross feet up on the even grosser couch, a Keystone in one hand and his phone in the other. “Hey, don't be a hater.”

“C'mon, I don't mean gay like *gay*, I mean gay like... you know. Dumb. Lame. Stupid.”

Hunter picked up the toad and put it on my knee. “You'd be doing me a favor.”

“What? How?”

He ran his fingers through his hair. “Because I want to be Romeo.”

“You said that already.”

“And if I have to pretend to kiss someone, I'd rather it be you.”

The toad was cold and slimy through the denim. “Right,” I said. “So now this is *actually* gay.”

“I just mean I'd rather it be you instead of some random other guy. Because, yeah, that'd be weird.”

“This would *also* be extremely weird.”

“Nah,” he said.

“Nah?”



He grinned. “It’s only weird if you make it weird.”

“Why do you even want to do this? Like, you’re the last guy I’d ever expect to try out for Shakespeare.”

“Right, and that’s why.”

“You’re high, aren’t you? You got high without me, and now you’re getting all performance arty. I’m on to you.”

He shrugged again, “I’m sick of being predictable. Everyone expects me to be the dumbass, the guy who drinks too much and doesn’t care about anything. So, why not mess with their heads?”

I rolled my eyes, tried to hand the toad back, but Hunter kept talking.

“C’mon,” he said, “aren’t you tired of being who everyone expects?”

“And who’s that?”

“Boring old Vince who runs around in circles.”

“That’s a sport!”

“Sure, a boring one. Don’t you ever want to just... I don’t know. Try something different?”

I snorted. “Yeah, like wearing a wig and a dress and getting roasted on YikYak for the rest of the semester. Great plan, Hunter.”

The toad slid off my knee and thudded onto the sticky carpet.

“Fine,” Hunter shrugged. “Beer pong for it, then?”

“What’s the stakes?”

He spread his hands. “Loser tries out for Juliet. Full commitment, too. We’re talking dress, wig, heels—the works. We’ll rope in a girl from The Woods to help.”

“What, like you have one on speed dial?”

“Maybe. Maybe a couple of them, actually.”

Music thumped through the ceiling, some drunk bro upstairs was bellowing “Sweet Caroline” at the top of his lungs. Probably Mark. The toad watched me with the cold, dead eyes of a creature who’d seen too much.

“No,” I said.

“C’mon, don’t be a wuss.” Hunter lobbed a ping pong ball at the stack of empty cans.

“I’m not a wuss, there’s just nothing in it for me.”

Hunter leaned in, eyes red from the lava lamp. “You’re scared.”

“Damn right. Look, I know you were all popular in high school, but I wasn’t. I only really started to fit in here. And that’s only because you dragged me to rush parties and told people I was cool.”

“Which you are.”

“Yeah, right. I’m a gangly runner with a C-plus GPA. I’m the opposite of cool.”

He drained his beer and said, “Alright, fine.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll sweeten the deal—”

“Goddammit, man.”

“—If you win, I’ll give you my car for the rest of the year.”

I looked at him. Hunter drove a brand-new black Jeep Wrangler that I loved more than anyone I’d met at Wabash. “Seriously?”

He held up his hand like a boy scout. “Swear on my mom’s soul, dude.”

“And if I lose?”

“You already know what happens if you lose.”

I held out for ten more seconds, but I could tell from Hunter’s smirk he knew he’d won. How could I resist? The possibility of winning his Jeep—of parking my beat-to-shit Honda in the weeds behind the frat house and forgetting about it until summer—was too much. I could already see it: the sun glinting off the hood, Hunter’s car keys in my palm, every happy, jealous, or confused glance from my brothers as I rolled up to the Union. It’d be glorious.

“Fine,” I said. “But you’re putting the Jeep keys on the table right now, or it isn’t happening.”

There wasn’t even a second of hesitation before he pulled his keys out of his pocket and slapped them down between us. The little Jeep logo winked at me in the half-light.

So we played.

The game got blurry fast. Shots, taunts, cheap beer burning my



throat. Hunter was relentless and cocky. God, he just... enjoyed watching me squirm.

“You’re overthinking it.” He leaned in. “Just throw.”

“I’m strategizing.”

“Sure you are, Juliet.”

I scowled. “Don’t call me that.”

“Get used to it.”

I chucked the ball. Missed. Hunter threw. *Plonk!* He handed me the cup to drink.

I don’t need to bore you with the rest. Hunter crushed me, two games to none, with the kind of stone-cold focus he never brought to anything else. He even did a victory lap around the table, arms raised like he’d just scored the winning goal at the World Cup.

“And that, my friend, is how you seize destiny.” He snatched his keys back and dangled them just out of my reach.

I stared at the empty Solo cup in my hand. “Shit. I’m not wearing heels.”

“Yeah, you are, that was the bet. Heels, wig, dress, the whole Juliet starter kit. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure you look good.”

He said it easily, like this was just another Thursday night, like he

hadn't just promised to make his best friend look good in a dress—as if that was a normal thing to say, as if it didn't mean anything.

I fell back on the moldy couch, drunk, tired, depressed, and, for the first time, worried. This wasn't a new fear. It was the same one I'd had since I was twelve: that something was wrong with me. Not wrong like sad or wrong like anxious, but wrong like broken. What it was, where it came from—I didn't know. It just showed up one day, like the toad in the bucket, squatting in some dark corner of me, cold and still, watching. Nobody could tell me why it was there or how to get rid of it.

So I did what I always did. I closed my eyes, let the room spin, and told myself it was the beer. The last thing I heard before I fell asleep was Hunter on the phone, his voice going soft the way it only did when he was talking to a girl. “Hey, yeah, it's me. No, I know. Listen, I need a favor...”

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College wasn't officially our sister school, but it was close enough that their students always showed up at our parties, and we always showed up at theirs. They were all-girls, we were all-boys, and you can imagine how that went: a lot of good intentions, a lot of drinking, and a lot of weird, bad decisions. The girls from The Woods were like a parallel universe version of us, except their parties had better snacks and no one peed in the sink.

Sabrina was a junior there—theater kid, the kind who said “the craft” without irony. She was also, I'd later find out, one of the kindest people I've ever met. But that first morning, when she showed up at our frat house, all I could think was: Hunter called this girl at one in the morning, and she said yes. Which meant either he was sleeping with her, she owed him a massive favor, or she's really into putting makeup on sad young men.

I tried not to think too hard about that third option.

Hunter brought her to my room while I was still in bed, then stood there and watched me struggle to sit up, blinking at the sunlight stabbing through the blinds. I was shirtless and still a little drunk.

“Don't you knock?” I croaked, clawing around for my nearest pile of clothes.

“Dude, we did,” Hunter said. “For, like, five minutes.”

Sabrina stood in the doorway with a garment bag slung over one shoulder and a toolbox-sized makeup kit under her arm. She was small, with dark hair, glasses, and a big blue sweatshirt that said INTO THE WOODS in letters peeling from too many washes.

“So, you're Juliet?” she said.

“No, I'm Vince.”

“Yeah, he's Vince,” Hunter agreed. “But your job is to make him into Juliet.”

Sabrina looked at me. I didn't like it. She had big brown eyes



behind those glasses, and they moved over my face like a carpenter looks at a hunk of wood.

“Bone structure’s good,” she said, mostly to herself. “Jaw’s a little strong, nose is a little bumpy—”

My hand flew up to my face. “No, it isn’t.”

“It’s fine, we can work with that.” She set the makeup kit on my desk and unlatched it. “Sit down. And put a shirt on. Or don’t, actually. I need to see your shoulders. The dress will show them off.”

“Wait.” I scooted away from her. “What the fuck is going on? We’re doing this now?”

Hunter, who’d been rifling through Pokémon cards on my dusty bookshelf, said, “She needs a test run.”

“That’s right,” she said. “I have our own rehearsals all week, and if the audition is next Saturday, I don’t want to find out I got your coloring wrong from the crappy photo Hunter sent me, or that the foundation I picked doesn’t blend right because you’re secretly a shade darker than you look in fluorescent lighting.”

“Hunter sent you a photo of me?”

“Just your face,” she said, as if that made it any better. “You were asleep.”



I looked at Hunter. He was holding up a holographic Charizard, squinting at it like it was a stock portfolio.

“I thought we were just going to, like, slap some lipstick on me, a wig, a dress—”

“And heels,” Hunter offered.

“—and call it a day.”

Sabrina frowned and crossed her arms. “You think this is a joke?”

“I... Look, I don’t know what he told you, but I don’t actually want the part,” I said. “I lost a bet, that’s all.”

“I know about the bet. That’s not what I asked, though. Do you think this is a joke? Because you’re either going to go to that audition looking like a joke, looking like you lost a bet, or you’re going to walk in there and fucking own it.”

My head hurt and my mouth was dry. Hunter watched me from the doorway with that annoying, lovable smirk of his. Making me panic was his favorite thing in the world: wind me up, step back, watch me scramble. And I was good at it, too—duck, weave, roll with the punch, make a joke. Don’t let it hit bone.

“Well?” Sabrina said.

I buried my face in my hands. “Can I at least take a shower?”

“Yes,” she said. “You’re stinky, no offense. And shave off that silly little beard.”

“It’s not silly. Is it?”

“Very,” Sabrina said. “Sorry, but yeah it’s bad. Anyway, I’ll stay here while you get clean and set everything up. Hunter, go away.”

To my amazement, Hunter grinned at me, then at Sabrina, then at me again, and left.

I blinked. “How’d you do that?”

“What?”

“Get Hunter to just... listen to you.”

“I’m a witch, didn’t you know? Now, hurry up. I have to be back at The Woods in two hours.”

I came back twenty minutes later, clean-shaven and damp, wearing gym shorts and nothing else. My skin still tingled from the hot shower. She’d turned my desk into a field salon, with brushes, sponges, little pots of color, and a red wig—a near match for my own shade—on a styrofoam head. The garment bag hung from my closet door, still zipped.

“Sit,” she said, pointing to my desk chair.

I obeyed. She tilted my chin up with two fingers, turning my head left, then right, then made a sound almost like a groan.

“What?” I said.

“Nothing, you just have really nice skin. It’s annoying. Do you mind if I shape your brows? These are out of control.”

“I don’t want to look like a—”

“I’ll keep it subtle,” she said. “Relax.”

I did not relax. The plastic chair felt cold under my thighs. She produced a pair of tweezers and went at my eyebrows with a focus usually reserved for bomb defusal. Little pinches, sharp and surgical.

“Relax,” she said again.

“You know,” I said with my eyes still squeezed shut, “that doesn’t actually fucking help.”

She snorted. “Screw your courage to the sticking place.”

I stared at her.

“Macbeth. Lady Macbeth, actually—she says it to her husband when he’s being a baby about committing murder. Hold still.”

This went on for a while. I don’t know how long because I was holding my breath between each pluck. Whatever the opposite of a meditative trance was, this was it. Pain, pain, pain, long pause, pain again. A few times, I had to fight back tears.

Sabrina gave one last tug right between the eyes, put the tweezers down, and leaned back. “Okay, that’s better.”

My hands flew up to assess the damage. “Jesus, do I even have eyebrows left?”



“They’re still there, I promise.” She smoothed something cool onto my face, dabbing at my cheeks and forehead with a sponge. “I just cleaned them up. You’ll thank me. Say ‘thanks, Sabrina.’”

“Can I see?”

“When I’m finished.” She picked up a bottle and shook it. “Close your eyes.”

“Again?”

“I must be cruel only to be kind,” she said. “Now close them.”

I peered at the little bottle of flesh-colored paint like it was a vial of acid. “This is a bad idea. Never mind. I’m not doing this. I’m... I’m going to tell Hunter I changed my mind. A bet’s a bet but this is—no. This is too much.”

She sighed. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow, okay, thanks for wasting my time, dude.” She started packing up her stuff, tossing her brushes into the bag with little, violent movements. “Hunter said you were cool, by the way. Guess he lied to me.”

“Wait—shit—” She was at the door before I could get out of the chair. I lurched after her. “Hold on. Look, no, I’m... I’m not cool.”

“Yeah, that’s what I said.”

“No, I mean, if I was cool, maybe I could pull this off. Like, I was never that guy. That’s the point. I’m a stammering, boring, awkward guy who only goes to parties because Hunter drags me and only because I can’t stand being alone with my own thoughts. I’m not the guy who can put on a dress and own it. I’m not even the guy who can put on a dress and be funny about it. I’m just...” I trailed off. Somewhere in that mess, I’d lost my train of thought.

She stopped at the doorway, hand on the knob. “Right. So you’re not cool.”

“Not at all.”

“Do you think Hunter’s cool?”

“What? Of course he’s cool. Hunter’s the coolest guy I’ve ever met. He’s—I mean, he walks into a room and everyone just looks at him. Not because he’s loud, although, yeah, he is loud sometimes, but because he’s—he doesn’t care what anyone thinks. He just does whatever he wants and somehow it works. I don’t know how. It’s crazy, but he makes everything look easy. Hell, he made people *liking me* look easy, which is—that’s basically a miracle. And he’s funny, and he’s kind even when he pretends he isn’t, and he—” I stopped. Sabrina was staring at me. “What?”

She bit her lip like she was trying not to smile. “Nothing.”

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“No reason.” She set the bag back down. “So here’s the thing about cool. You think cool is something you are, something you’re born with, like Hunter just showed up on earth already knowing how to be that guy. But that’s not what cool is. Cool is just deciding you don’t care if it goes wrong. That’s it, that’s the whole trick. Hunter’s not cool because he’s confident. He’s cool because he decided a long time ago that he’d rather look stupid doing something interesting than look safe doing nothing.”

She unzipped the makeup bag again.

“Sit down, Vince.”

I sat down. She spun my chair to face the window, angling me away from the mirror. I felt her eyes on me, appraising, then her fingers dabbing, smoothing, brushing. I tried to keep my eyes open, but the sensation of her hands so close made me blink uncontrollably.

“Stop squinting,” she said. “It’ll crease.”

“Sorry.” I stared at my Avengers poster. Captain America, Iron Man, Thor looked back at me, unmoved by what was happening over here in real time. Would they have the balls to walk around campus in a gown? Probably. Tony Stark would own it. Steve Rogers would be bashful, then pull it off with wholesome dignity. Thor crossdressed in the myths and Loki literally shape-changed into a mare. Why couldn’t I? Not morph into a female horse, obviously, but just let this be funny, or at least not the end of the world.

Sabrina hummed as she worked, and the sound was weirdly



soothing, like being a little kid at the dentist, except instead of a drill, there was a soft, synthetic brush swiping back and forth over my eyelids.

I forced myself to think about anything but what was happening. I thought about my high school cross-country meets, how every race felt the same: that sick anticipation, the gun, the first mile when your legs still remembered how to go fast, and then the long, slow, burning crash. I thought about how I always finished squarely in the middle of the pack, never great, never last. I always thought I had a little more in me, but could never figure out how to reach it. Like there was a gear I couldn't find, a version of myself that ran faster and breathed easier, but every time I got close, something in me pulled away.

"Okay," Sabrina said. "Lips next. Don't talk for a minute."

Fine by me. I had nothing left to say.

The lip gloss tasted like cherries and felt sticky. She worked it in with a brush, then pressed my lips together with her thumb. "Don't smile yet."

"You don't have to worry about that."

More humming, more little touches at my temples and jaw. "Okay," she said at last. "I'm done. Wig time."

“Can we skip—”

“Vince.”

“Right, right. Go ahead.”

She picked up the red wig, shook the synthetic fibers out, and put it on my head. She smoothed the hair against my scalp, tugged gently at the sides, and tucked a few stray bits behind my ears.

“Tilt your chin down. No, not that much. Yeah, that’s...”

Her hands slowed, then stopped. She was still holding a strand of hair near my temple, but she wasn’t tucking it anymore. She was just looking at me.

“What?” I said. “Is it bad? It’s bad, isn’t it? I look like a freak.”

“No.” Her voice had changed. “You don’t.”

“Then why are you looking at me like that?”

She stepped back. Crossed her arms, then uncrossed them. “I need the dress,” she said and turned away.

“My face feels weird.”

“Don’t touch it.” She unzipped the garment bag. I don’t know why, but the sound reminded me of skin splitting.

The dress was blue, with a high neck and little white buttons down the front. The sleeves puffed out at the shoulders, then narrowed at the wrists. There was even lace at the hem. It looked like something from a haunted house, or a PBS miniseries about orphans.

Sabrina held it up, checking it for wrinkles, I guess. “Obviously, this is just for your audition. The real show’ll have actual costumes.” She passed the dress to me. “Try it on.”

“Here?” I glanced at the window. No one could see in. Still, I hesitated.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “You’re wearing shorts. Just pull it over your head.”

“But...”

“God, I promise you’ll be able to take it off. This isn’t permanent. You won’t be stuck wearing dresses for the rest of your life, you won’t have to hand in your man card, you won’t wake up tomorrow and find your voice changed or your walk different or anything else.”

“Okay, take it easy, it’s just weird.”

She grinned, a little too wide. “Weird’s good. Dress on, now. But be careful. You rip it, you owe me fifty bucks.”

I tugged it over my head. The fabric was cool and heavy. She stepped in, buttoned the collar, tugged at the waist until it fit. She spent longer on the cuffs, lining up the buttons and smoothing the sleeves flat.

“There,” she said. “Look up.”

I did. She’d pulled my flannel off the floor-length mirror that leaned against the wall behind my door, the one I only ever used to check if my shirt was on backward.

A girl stared back from the mirror.

Not a guy in a dress, not a joke, not a frat boy who lost a bet. A girl.



She had red hair and green eyes and a face I recognized but couldn't place, like a cousin I'd met once at a funeral. She was pale and thin-shouldered, and she looked scared.

"Vince?" Sabrina said from somewhere behind me. "You okay?"

I nodded, kept nodding, and kept my eyes locked on the mirror, on the stranger in blue. She stared back, wary.

Sabrina watched, brows knitted together. "You sure?"

"I... Yeah, I..."

The bedroom door creaked open. Hunter came in carrying two coffees and stopped. The cup in his left hand tilted, but he didn't seem to notice.

I stood there in a blue dress, a red wig, a face full of makeup, and I looked at him, and he looked at me. And for the first time in two years of friendship, Hunter had nothing to say.















