

2024 Elie Wiesel Competition

1st Place Senior Essay - Marino Bertini Memorial Essay Award

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SAM

There is another name I go by and I only hear it uttered from the people I have carefully trusted. It is one I have never written on paper, raised my hand to correct, or fought to have spoken on everyone's lips. This name is my best kept secret, three letters, easier to say quick and fast in a new ally's ear. It is a blinding, glowing ball of my identity that I've kept safely dull. Less it shines and burns so bright, wonderful, and impossible to hide. Being who I am is now simpler than it has ever been in history and yet, it's not fully possible. Few who have not experienced what it is to hold part of you captive while under the glaring eyes that never blink, cannot fathom the shame. The shame you feel from what you are hiding that object, idea, or word that the world, your friends, your family, will not let you have pride in. The shame you feel for quieting a deafening part of you. I live hand in hand with that feeling, but there are still moments I've been able to let go. There have been so many secret, temporary fulfilling ways, I manage to thrive under those three letters.

The methods I have used to preserve who I am are gifted entirely by the community I have embraced. The individuals that make up the world I've confided in are more than the allies I trust and instead a parallel of who I am. Our shared struggles lead to an endless understanding that reinforces the bond that inherently linked us from birth and within that we can build a net of faith and trust. We share our secrets and in that exchange we can live with a sense of nobleness, knowing who we are is recognized, reaffirmed, and loved. Even when I'm separated from them, I find their courage holding me afloat, pushing me to live who I am in small, quiet breaths, whether it be a pin on my bag or hand that I publicly hold. When you have been drowning, even the smallest taste of air is enough to remind you that there's more than the water. Ultimately, I cannot ignore the full impact of keeping something so significant hidden from most of the world. To take one part of you, run, and rent a space within a community means leaving another and everything you have built with it behind. There is still another name I hold and its seventeen years of history will never stop writing itself. The family who love me and yet would refuse to know me as anyone else, contain the embodiment of what has kept me oppressed. They are the push and pull; the want to stay and live in their love and the fear that made me let go of this society's hand on certain days and run into the open arms of another.

Names can be so bittersweet. Saying one is to recognize a person and all of their history, the essence of who they are. To hide that can sometimes be a necessary burden, meant to protect yourself, so you can live your truth in another place or time, in the future, or the next room. Despite this, the faith in what's to come does not erase the impact of needing to protect yourself, the shame it can bring and the harm it does to your identity. This adversity in its entirety is what many of us must triumph and we can take solace in knowing that it has been done before.