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Creative Non-Fiction Essay  
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## Panda, Expressed

The strangest person I have ever had the pleasure of knowing was a boy who went strictly by the name of “Panda.” He was a student in my Advanced Placement Psychology class during my junior year in high school, and from the moment he sat next to me, I realized that the concept of “normal” was not in his realm of understanding. Panda was what you would call “Goth,” although he was certainly the happiest Goth I had ever seen.

“Panda is always happy,” he once told me. And—yes—he constantly referred to himself in the third person.

He looked like he just stepped out of a Hot Topic store, with his jet-black (clearly dyed) hair, skinny black jeans, and collared shirt, complete with white suspenders, a briefcase, and a top hat. Sometimes he carried a cane.

The first thing he ever said to me was, “What’s your story?” in a fake British accent. I was taken aback by the question itself. No one had ever asked me for my “story” before, and all I remember telling him was my name. It was all I could think of at the time.

People liked Panda. He was the joyful anomaly dressed in black who was impossible to ignore as he passed through the halls. He was also a surprisingly bright and quick-witted student who constantly clashed with a rather dim girl in our class. Once,

during a class stem cell research debate, she nearly clobbered Panda when he responded by lifting a finger, stating, “But, first, a rebuttal.”

“What?” she said, sounding angry and looking deeply offended.

Clearly confused, Panda repeated uncertainly, “A . . . rebuttal?”

“Oh,” she said, somewhat embarrassed. “I thought you had just called me a butt-hole.”

The class erupted into laughter, and it took a while for our teacher to regain her composure. I came to call these spontaneous moments of pure joy “Panda moments.” On another occasion he told me, “Girls are the strongest creatures alive. They can bleed for five days every month and not die!” I have that quote written down somewhere, I think.

I have many fond memories of that class and of Panda. Around April, when I underwent my third brain surgery, my class made a get-well card for me and they all signed it. Under Panda’s signature he wrote:

The void’s unrelentless pursuit to drag thy [sic] into the  
abyss will prove futile. Due to thy’s [sic] inevitable hastily  
[sic] recovery!

Close to the last day of school, I was talking to another classmate and Panda’s name came up. “You know that’s not his real name, right?” she said. “His name’s actually Alec.”

Alec. Somehow, it didn’t sound right. How could the happiness, spontaneity, and life within someone like Panda be contained within a simple name like Alec? It’s like being surrounded by four beige walls. It made me think, though, and to this day I wonder

about the nature of identity; specifically, are we better identified by the names we're given, or the names we choose?

I don't know what happened to Panda after high school, and in a way I don't want to know. I don't want to know if he graduated from college, wears business suits now, has a car, a boat, a wife, a house, a kid, and a dog or cat. I don't want to know if he ended up majoring in Business or Computer Science and spends his time in a cubicle in some corporate office. I don't want to know if he goes by "Alec" now. In this life, there are millions of people named Alec, but very few—if any—are named Panda.