

I CANNOT CELEBRATE

Riley Mitchell

I wake up to congratulatory texts, videos of pride flags outside of the Supreme Court, and my New York Times app informing me that it has passed. Not only did it pass, but it had a 6-3 ruling. Even two republican appointed justices can agree that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 protects gay and transgender employees from workplace discrimination. I read the article, still in bed, sighing as I put my phone down. I allow my eyes to linger on the ceiling. I should be happy. I should be excited, elated, exuberant. I should be dancing but instead, I let my eyes stare until I see shapes in the popcorn above me. I should be grateful for this protection given to me and my queer siblings. Until this morning, we could be fired for simply being who we are in over half of the United States. I know my privilege, and I do not take it lightly, but I can't celebrate when my community is clawing its way towards basic human rights. So, I carry on with my day.

When I walk through the bay door, I hear my coworkers: "Yeah, it's almost 9. Riley should be here soon. She's here until 5, so I think we'll be fine." I look down at my nearly full cup of coffee and tell myself that I will have the energy to correct them in just a few sips. Walking through the warehouse, I exchange slight smiles to those I pass, quietly wishing them all a good morning. I walk onto the empty sales floor and listen to my feet drag and my coffee swing from side to side while wondering if today will be an existing day or a correcting day. I put my things down in the break room, clock in, and take a few deep swigs of my coffee: it is going to be a correcting day. I make my way back to the warehouse and pull my coworkers' attention, "Hey, folks. When I walked in, I noticed you were using the wrong pronouns for me. Just wanted to remind you that my pronouns are they/them." An older associate responds, "Oh, well, you really need to get into the habit

I Cannot Celebrate

of correcting us right when we slip up.” I feel the warmth of my half-full coffee cup and tell myself that I’ve done enough for now. When I have enough inside of me, I’ll be able to tell them that it isn’t my job to correct them, that it’s their responsibility and theirs alone. In the meantime, I smile at my coworkers and turn my back on them to carry on with the rest of my day. My earpiece interrupts a debate over pocket design in rain jackets: “Menswear, line one. Menswear, line one.” Sweet relief. “Riley responding to line one.” I excuse myself to the warehouse, noticing on the way that the time is 4:55. Shooting back the last of my coffee, I pick up the phone with enough energy to get through this one conversation. “Thank you, ma’am.” I throw my cup in the trash. “Have a great evening.”

My father and I have a book club scheduled tonight. The book this month is a series of essays by a non-binary person discussing what being trans means to them. I get on the FaceTime call and smile wearily. My father always has more enthusiasm for these conversations than I do. I understand: he gets to learn, and I get to offer intimate details of my identity in hopes of earning a baseline level of respect. My father boasts, “So, you must be pumped, huh? 6-3. Damn. Do you know how fucking huge that is?” I glance at the top right corner of my screen and get distracted by the bags under my eyes. Quickly shaking myself into the conversation, I reply, “Dude, no, yeah. This is awesome.” He doesn’t notice my hesitation, and we continue with the discussion. Niceties are exchanged, including the obligatory inquiry about how work is going. Fumbling, I say it’s fine. He tells me, “You know, you really did it right. You showed your workplace how invaluable you are as a salesperson and said, ‘Oh. Yeah. I’m non-binary. These are my pronouns.’ I know that if I was in an interview with someone and right off the bat, they shoved their pronouns on me, I would immediately think, ‘Oh, no. HR nightmare.’” I couldn’t begin to tell him how disrespectful every single part of what he said was. That line of judgment can unjustly cost a trans person a fair chance at employment. The ruling this morning does not protect someone from that. After we finish our thoughts on the chapter, I drag myself a few feet over and throw myself onto the bed. I stare at the ceiling, wishing I was able to celebrate.

I should think of my queer siblings in states far from mine and their bigoted bosses whose power is being smothered by this ruling. But how can I celebrate when 90% of my transgender siblings face

Riley Mitchell

harassment at work? How can I celebrate when my transgender sisters receive a 32% cut in their salaries after transitioning? How can I celebrate when my community experiences unemployment at twice the rate of the general population? You cannot be discriminated against at a workplace that will not employ you. I recognize the enormous amount of privilege in my life— I am employed. I have a family that will stand by me. I cannot help but think of the exhaustion, anxiety, and fear that my siblings face merely trying to exist. I cannot look at a panel of justices and applaud them for taking the word “sex” and ruling on what that word can be defined as. I cannot celebrate when the work left to do will outlive me and everyone that I love. I cannot celebrate. But, for tonight, I will rest.