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BIOL 294
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The first character roll I took on in community theatre was *The Wicked Witch of the West*. It was more than fun to play the villain; it was freeing. Perhaps I loved the stage so intensely because there I was expected to be someone else: creating their motivations, detailing their backstory, taking on a whole new identity. In nature we might call it mimicry or camouflage. The expectation was to know the character intimately, and I could feel myself being truly my own under the stage lights.

Growing up knowing I was queer in the humidity of the South made me feel like I was acting all the time. Church three days a week, a private Christian school girl, and an agonizing secret. To hide who I was, I took on every identity that could distract, every accolade that would make my parents proud, not ashamed their “surprise” of a daughter was less than what they desired. I studied hard, played sports, went on youth retreats, lead a small group and, for my own reprieve, acted in every play that would have me.

When I graduated from high school, I started to feel the weight of uncertainty bearing down on me. I had spent so much time trying to be what everyone else wanted me to be, I had no idea what I wanted. I figured that two years of gen ed at the local community college would help me figure it out. But unable to be honest about my own identity, I was still fulfilling career goals with other people’s hopes and expectations.

Coming out as queer changed everything. I lost friends, was blacklisted from family events. No one in my family or church social groups recognized me—an evil twin, a villain. But I was used to being the villain. I knew the villain’s motivations, their backstory and their true identity. I began to learn, to dissect, to make sense of the reconciliation of my faith and who I had always been. I wrestled with philosophy, argued apologetics, and sought to understand the human species in the context of the world.

While on this journey to self-awareness, I bounced between jobs looking for the thing that moved me: from chef to hospitality to enlisting in the United States Coast Guard. One day during my military career, I learned about Fat Bear Week and bear 435, who had lost her own cub and remained cub less for several years after. Who later adopted a genetically unrelated cub that had been abandoned and raised him alongside her own cubs. Who later won Fat Bear Week in 2019. Bear 435 was a role model and something to learn from.

This bear had gone through loss, come through it, and thrived. This realization helped me figure out what I was truly passionate about, what I wanted to do: be a forever student. I loved academia. I wanted to learn, to dissect, to make sense of the world around me and our place in it. I wanted a career where I could continue learning and aid others. What is a scientist but a student of the world around them? I started volunteering at my local zoo and the direction of my studies cemented into place.

When I graduate in 2026, my bachelor's degree will be 16 years in the making, old enough to drive on its own. But it will come with a hard-won certainty. Understanding examples in nature—mimicry, camouflage, loss, adaptation—helps me understand who I am. What better way to stay a forever student than to study the science of exceptions: Biology.