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### ***Say Her Name: Dominique “Rem’mie” Fells***

On June 12 a photograph of a vibrant young woman appeared repeatedly on social media feeds, accompanied by alarming headlines. I can’t quite put into words the shock and sadness of realizing that news of a tragedy is accompanied by a familiar face. Dominique “Rem’mie” Fells, my former student, had been found brutally murdered in Philadelphia.

I am a visual artist, raised in Pennsylvania’s York County but based in New York City. My work was forever changed when I served as an artist-in-residence at the William Penn Performing Arts Institute in York in 2010. The students at the Institute, including Dominique, challenged and inspired me, and together we made a series of short films. I keep a group photo – in which Dominique and her peers smile and goof off for the camera – taped to the door of my Brooklyn art studio. It’s the last thing I see before I head home.

I knew Dominique as a sometimes brash, sometimes shy teenager. At 17, her self-possession was already remarkable. Looking through my camera lens to set up a shot, I would notice Dominique engaged in careful observation of her surroundings, as if sketching out the map of her future. She bristled with energy and creativity. During one video shoot inside of the former Keystone Color Works paint factory, Dominique dressed up the plain white t-shirts I gave them with a long chain necklace. I warned her that the necklace would get splattered with paint. We laughed together when she told me that was her intention – the paint stains would make it look even better. She aspired to be a fashion designer and, according to her peers, was forging her own path in the field. The posthumous photo posted of Dominique reveals her forward-thinking style and the talent that is our collective loss: she complements an outfit rich with color and texture with another chunky, chain necklace.

Dominique was a Black transgender woman. If you’ve never experienced prejudice, the fear of violence, or unjust treatment because of your race, gender, or sexuality, consider yourself lucky. As a gay man who is active in the cause of securing LGBTQ rights, I feel solidarity with Dominique. But as a white, cisgender man, I don’t experience the daily threats of prejudice and violence faced by trans people. Well before Dominique’s murder, anti-transgender violence was a national epidemic. Dominique lived at the intersection of qualities that amplified her everyday risk. 91% of transgender individuals reported killed in 2019 were Black women; 81% were under the age of 30. According to the National Center for Transgender Equality, fear of mistreatment by law enforcement leads transgender individuals to underreport crimes committed against them.

Dominique grew up in York County, as did I, but moved to a big city, as did I. Dominique was just 27 at the time of her death. I was about that age when I came out as a gay man. I was closeted during my teen and early adult years, each day negotiating with myself whether the

pain of not acknowledging my desire was greater than the fear of what I could lose – family, friends, work – if I expressed that desire publicly. I learned to perform “straight.” It’s exhausting to manage a false identity. I kept it up because I could see and feel just how much American life rewards “normal” families. The structures and systems that guide our lives exclude and even punish those who don’t fit in. I’ve had years to forge my path. Dominique was barely granted the time to start hers.

It would be difficult to overstate the degree of daily prejudice queer people have faced in the US. The Stonewall Riots in New York City, a 1969 uprising protesting constant police mistreatment and brutality against the LGBTQ community, were initiated by trans women of color. Even within the movement itself, trans people were subject to prejudice and exclusion. But their willingness to speak truth to power, and decades of grueling work by advocates for equal treatment under the law, made it possible for me to write this today without fear of putting my life at risk. But our transgender kin cannot say the same.

“I have felt imprisoned in a body that does not match my mind,” wrote Aimee Stephens of the day-to-day balancing act of self-disclosure and self-presentation faced by trans people. Ms. Stephens, a plaintiff in a recent Supreme Court case, was fired from her job after she came out as transgender. The Court ruled on June 15<sup>th</sup> in favor of Stephens, making it illegal for an employer to discriminate against someone based upon their gender or sexual orientation. Stephens died in May of long-term health complications and did not live to witness this momentous change. Neither did Dominique. Three days before the Supreme Court decision, as news of Dominique’s killing was circulating in social media – the same day as the four-year anniversary of the mass shooting at Pulse, an LGBTQ nightclub in Orlando in which 49 people were murdered – the Trump administration announced that it would revoke health care protections for transgender and gay people.

Gender occupies a full range of possibilities, including transgender and gender nonconforming, meaning that you don’t conform to strict social norms of a “binary” in which you are either totally and conventionally male or female. No one is immune to social expectations surrounding gender. Maybe you are a man who was demeaned as a boy for crying, or a woman scolded as a girl for getting your hands dirty. I still find myself instinctively deepening my voice in front of strangers.

My own paternal grandmother, a hearty Pennsylvania German born in the 1920’s, grew up in central Pennsylvania’s farm country and worked for most of her adult life in a meat processing plant. She wasn’t particularly concerned about getting “made up,” and wasn’t bothered if she was doing something that men were supposed to do. I have strong memories of her enjoying her riding mower, sweating in a tank top on a hot day, and speaking her mind. She proudly told me that she bought my father a baby doll when he begged for one as a young boy. Of course, these expressions of self are by no means the same as living as a transgender person, and I cannot know whether my grandmother, who passed away long ago, faced prejudice for not always adhering to American ideals of femininity. But she did find room to explore many sides of herself, she did so with ease, and we loved her for that.

Perhaps you believe you've never met a trans person – although most likely you have – and that what happened to Dominique, however brutal, is not your problem. You may be guided by religious beliefs that don't make room for the LGBTQ community. But there is a difference between not being comfortable with a person and casting a vote for a lawmaker who actively denies that person basic human rights: you can feel discomfort and still agree to nurture and protect all of God's children. In our interconnected world, you are just one or two degrees of separation from a person whose race and gender puts their life at risk. If you attended public school in this country, as both Dominique and I did in York County, you made a pledge for "liberty and justice for all." What could be more American than protecting the well-being and the rights of Dominique, who lived and spoke her truth?

Since Dominique's death I've been looking through photos from that video shoot inside of Keystone Color Works. In one image, her name appears – Dominique had found a piece of chalk and carefully wrote out her name on one of the walls of the abandoned factory, as if she was calling out to our collective future, refusing to be forgotten. Let Dominique's courage give you the power to be yourself. Let Dominique's loss give you the outrage to act.

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