

He Shaved Pastel Crayons and Called It Art

Third grade art class was messy, Marco Briggs thought to himself. Eight and nine year olds smeared glue in their hair and drew on their face with markers. Paint was splattered everywhere, and the teachers seemed to have no control over the situation. The only thing they could do was cover the floor in newspaper and pray. Marco wasn't part of the group making the mess, since everyone knew Marco never made a mess. He was a perfect, little angel child that all teachers and parents alike loved.

"What are you painting, Marco?" Mrs. Buttercup asked, smiling warmly.

"I'm painting my garden at home! This will have a lot of flowers and butterflies."

Marco grinned, pausing mid-brushstroke to answer his teacher.

"It looks lovely!" she cooed.

"Kids, we have 30 minutes left! Be ready to present to the class!"

"Yes, Mrs. Buttercup," they all chimed, except for the new boy, Marco noticed.

The new boy sat in a clean corner of the room, hunched over the piece of paper he rested on his lap. His name was Ellis Miles, they were told by Mrs. Buttercup when he refused to speak.

"He looks like a girl." someone whispered to their friend quietly, but it was audible to everyone who sat nearby, including Marco. The more Marco stared at him the more he found himself agreeing. Ellis had a soft jaw, big eyes, platinum-blond hair and freckles. He had long eyelashes, slender fingers, and a button nose. He was pretty, even compared to the girls in the class, said the girls in the class themselves.

But right now as he sat alone, he wasn't so pretty as much as he was lonely.

Kids proudly showed of their colorful drawings with equally colorful hands, grinning widely as the entire class clapped for them.

"Marco, why don't you go next?" he was prompted. Everyone sat in bated breath, knowing that Marco would have the best artwork out of all of them. He always did.

"Ta dah!" Marco revealed his painting, smiling widely as usual. The kids all clapped politely, some yelling out compliments.

"It's beautiful Marco, what did you paint?" Mrs. Buttercup asked.

"My garden at home! I always play here after school." he grinned.

"That's very nice Marco. Okay next... Ellis dear, why don't you go?" she asked.

All eyes turned to the small new boy. He stood up slowly and shuffled to the front of the room. Avoiding eye contact with anyone, he flipped his paper over to show the class. No one said anything, no claps. Even the teacher was surprised.

"Uh, what is it dear?" she asked, trying to mask the confusion in her voice.

It was the first time any of them had heard him speak.

"I used scissors to shave the ends of pastels and glued it to the paper." he mumbled.

“What?” was the collective response from the students, who all looked confused. Ellis visibly recoiled back.

“That isn’t art!” one girl protested.

“Yes it is! My mom said anything can be art if you want it to be!” Ellis protested, clutching the paper to his chest.

“I like it!” Marco said, grinning. The class grew silent and Ellis stared at him, bewildered.

“Thank you...” Ellis mumbled, shuffling away and sitting back down. Marco smiled at him, nodding. Marco thought it was pretty. But not as pretty as him.

“I liked your artwork!” Marco told Ellis after school, shy. Ellis looked up at him with large eyes, before smiling.

“Thanks! Yours was really nice too.” Ellis replied as he pulled his backpack out from his locker, shrugging it onto his petite frame.

“Do you live here too?” Marco asked as Ellis began to walk home the same direction he does. Ellis nodded.

“That’s so cool! Maybe we’re neighbours!” Marco grinned. Ellis felt himself smiling back just as wide. The boy’s demeanor was contagious.

After a silent walk with Marco chatting energetically, the quiet boy stopped in front of a small house.

“This is my house.” Ellis said.

“Oh, mine is still a couple blocks away.” Marco said, slightly disappointed.

“That’s okay, a couple blocks isn’t very far right?” Ellis smiled sweetly. Marco nodded, bouncing on the balls of his feet.

“You’re right, it isn’t!”

“Ellis sweetie, bring your friend in!” A woman called from the front door. She was small and mousy, just like Ellis.

“That’s my mom. Do you want to come in?” Ellis asked. Marco shook his head.

“I can’t, if my mom was here I’d ask but she isn’t. I’ll see you tomorrow Ellis!” Marco waved, ready to walk off.

“Bye Marco.” Ellis waved back, walking into his house.

He looks even more like a girl from the back, Marco thought, before turning away and heading home.

“Mom I’m home!” Marco announced.

“I’m in the kitchen dear!” Mrs. Briggs replied. Marco walked to the kitchen to see his mom baking cookies with his older sister, Leah Briggs.

“Not yet!” Leah smacked his hand when he tried to reach out for some batter. Marco pouted before his face lit up again.

“Mom we painted in art class today! See?” Marco held up his painting, beaming.
“Is that the garden? It’s beautiful sweetie. I’ll hang it up later, just put it down for now. What else happened at school today?”

“The new kid came today.” Marco said.

“Oh right, I heard about that from the other mothers. How is he like?”

“His name is Ellis Miles. He is so quiet! And he looks like a girl!”

Mrs. Briggs visibly stiffened.

“You mean he’s androgynous?” Leah said from her corner of the kitchen.

“Leah...” their mother said, her tone warning.

“What? It’s not a bad thing.” Leah said.

“What’s andro-gee-nus?” Marco asked, curious.

“It describes someone whose appearance looks like that of the opposite gender. Learned it in English class today.” Leah replied. Marco nodded, only half-understanding.

“Invite Ellis over some time okay dear?” Mrs. Briggs said, turning back to continue with the cookies.

“Can I go to his house too?” Marco asked, eager.

“Sure you can.”

“I’d like to get a look at this pretty boy as well.” Leah grinned.

“He’s prettier than you.” Marco said, earning a glare from Leah.

“Mom, I brought a friend with me.” Ellis said when he opened the front door of his house. Marco looked around, eyeing some baby photos on a shelf. A small, smiling woman came out from the kitchen, enveloping Ellis in a warm hug. Ellis visibly lit up from that.

“I’m Ellis’s mother, Mrs. Miles. It’s very nice to meet you. Marco right? Ellis has talked about you.” Mrs. Miles laughed when Ellis sent her a disapproving pout.

Marco liked this Ellis. He was more relaxed, more happy, more animated than he ever was in school.

“Where’s your dad?” Marco asked. Ellis made an unrecognizable face.

“My parents are divorced.” Ellis said.

“He was a nasty man, but it’s okay right Ellis? He’s in prison now,” Mrs. Miles sent the same cheery smile to Marco, and Ellis smiled as well. Marco stopped asking questions after that.

“I think they’re best friends now.” Marco giggled as he and Ellis watched their mom’s converse.

“Just like us!” Marco said.

“Are we best friends?” Ellis asked.

“Yup!”

That was the widest he's ever seen Ellis smile.

Marco and Ellis from then on became inseparable. Even as Ellis (who gained amazing confidence after becoming friends with Marco) and Marco made their own friends in middle school, they still hung out most with each other, and always walked home together.

"Marco, you have flowers in your hair?" Mrs. Briggs asked when she saw her son walk in with fake flowers braided in his wavy black hair.

"Ellis is friends with a lot of girls, and they for some reason love doing guy's hair." Marco answered, pulling the neatly done braids apart with his fingers.

"Ellis... He's friends with mostly girls?" his mom asked slowly and cautiously.

"Yeah, so?" Marco asked.

"So mom's afraid that that could be a sign that he's gay. Duh." Leah said from where she lay on the couch.

"Seriously mom? You're going to think that about Ellis, again? You've known him since third grade. We've been over this!" Marco glowered, raising his voice slightly.

"That's enough Marco! To your room, now." his mom ordered. Marco stormed upstairs.

"I'll go talk to him." Leah muttered, getting off the couch and following upstairs.

"Who is it?" Marco grumbled when someone rapped on his door.

"It's Leah." Leah said.

"Come in." Marco sighed.

"You okay?" Leah asked, sitting down on Marco's desk chair and spinning around.

"I don't know. I'm confused Leah." Marco sighed.

"Well ask me all your questions now, before I leave for college and no one can help you," Leah laughed.

"You still have a year of school left, you won't be gone that soon." Marco grumbled.

"A year goes by fairly quickly dear, so ask away." Leah waved a hand in the air, dismissing Marco's statement.

"Why is mom so against it?" Marco asked.

"Against pride and stuff? Conservative. Lots of people are like that still. It's not a bad thing, but it's bad if they become openly hostile and threatening towards people like that," she said.

"It is bad?"

"No one really knows, Marco."

"Oh." Marco said, subdued.

"Do you have anything else?" Leah asked.

"I think I have a crush on Ellis."

Marco didn't know how it happened or why it started, but he remembered that in his final year of middle school, he started finding Ellis prettier than usual. Even after he had cut his long-ish hair down to a more boyish cut, his blond curls still framed his face in an extremely beautiful way. Elegant, Marco would have described it. It was during a time when Mrs. Miles had invited Marco and his family over. Mr. Briggs was away on a business trip, per usual, so only Marco's mom, Leah, and Marco came. It was the first time Leah had met Ellis and needless to say, she was stunned.

"Okay I accept defeat. He is prettier than I am." Leah said as soon as she saw Ellis standing a distance away from the front door. Ellis made a face and Marco laughed, running in and clapping Ellis on the back.

"I told you so!" Marco grinned, grabbing Ellis by the chin and squishing his face, turning it in Leah's direction.

"Ellis is so beautiful, he puts all girls to shame. That's what everyone in our class says." Marco giggled.

"Shtap!" Ellis protested, pouting and pulling Marco's hand away from his face, before smiling and introducing himself to Leah.

"Your sister, she's pretty." Ellis said when the two had finished dinner and went up to Ellis's room to hang around.

"Pretty annoying." Marco made a face, recalling the amount of times she cooed over Ellis during dinner.

"I dunno, she seems nice to me." Ellis shrugged.

"Ellis Miles do you have a crush on my freaking sister?" Marco's eyes widened.

"No no no, I just thought you were lucky to have such a great sister." Ellis shook his head, laughing.

"Phew. Trust me, you wouldn't want to date her." Marco said, secretly relieved. He didn't know why, but he was felt a little pang of jealousy sprout up in his heart. He kept thinking about it all night, and barely got any sleep.

It didn't take him long to reach that conclusion though.

I have a crush on my own best friend.

It made sense though. When he was younger and all the boys in his second grade class were finding girlfriends within the class, he was the only one who didn't hand out chocolates to the girls. He felt weird, maybe a little out of place. Why couldn't he find any of the girls attractive? It wasn't that they weren't pretty, they were very pretty. But he wouldn't want to date any of them. That would make Ellis the first one.

It didn't help that Ellis was naturally a touchy person. Placing his chin on Marco's shoulder, leaning into him in the car, grabbing his upper-arms and sliding his hands up and down whenever he wanted to comfort Marco, he did all that. And now, when he did, Marco's heart would beat faster and faster. After a while he taught himself how to suppress his

emotions and stop himself from blushing. Afterall, he didn't want to ruin his friendship with Ellis. At least, not now.

"I think I have a crush on Ellis." Marco said. Leah's eyes widened.

"You what?" Leah asked, mouth wide.

"I'm gay, Leah." Marco said. Leah sprung up and cradled Marco in her arms.

"I fucking love you Marco." Leah said, still in shock but visibly happy.

"Language." Marco said. Leah stuck her tongue out.

"Are you going to tell Ellis?" Leah asked. Marco shook his head.

"He's straight. Just last week he told me he had a crush on Erina in our class." Marco said. Leah made a face.

"I don't want to ruin my friendship with him."

"And what about mom and dad?" Leah asked, her voice lower.

"I don't know. Maybe, one day."

No one ever said wrongly of Ellis's feminine appearance when Marco was with him. At least never to Marco's face. But once the two were freshmen in high school, something changed.

Maybe partially because high school was weird. All of a sudden, awkward twelve and thirteen year olds got a grasp of who they were or what they wanted to be, and acted upon it. Everyone was more knowledgeable, and a little less sympathetic as well.

Marco, just like anywhere else they went, was received with open arms. He was Leah Briggs' younger brother, and Leah was one of the coolest seniors in high school. They weren't awkward around each other either, and everyone thought they had the best sibling bond out of everyone in the school.

Ellis still maintained a bit of his shyness throughout the years. He remained attached to Marco, and the few friends from middle school he had that followed him to the same high school. Marco didn't mind, obviously. He could never dream of replacing Ellis with anybody. Of course, Ellis thought the same.

Someone started it. It happened, and Marco wanted to fight someone but also run away, hand wrapped around Ellis's wrist.

Ellis Miles was gay.

It hit Marco like a truck. Whenever he heard the rumor float around, it sounded like his mom's voice.

I need to find Ellis, Marco thought.

"Ellis?" Marco found him sitting on the bleachers, by himself.

"Oh... Marco." he smiled.

"Are you okay?" Marco asked, letting out a breath he didn't know he was holding.

"It doesn't bother me, so yeah, I'm fine." Ellis nodded.

"Are you okay?" Ellis asked, his voice noticeably quieter.

"Why would I not be?" Marco asked.

"Your parents..." Ellis muttered. Marco shook his head.

"That won't change anything. Don't worry El."

"I heard the rumors. Is Ellis okay?" Leah asked Marco at home. Marco nodded.

"He isn't really bothered by it, so yeah." Marco answered. Leah let out a sigh of relief.

"Ugh thank goodness. Bless your friend and his open mind,"

"Do you think mom will find out?" Marco asked.

"Yes. But they're just highschool rumors, so don't worry about it." Leah reassured him.

"Okay... I'll try not to." Marco said. But they both knew he would worry. Maybe because his dad was coming home, and he was even more strict about it, but more because he knew if his parents reacted badly to it, he would be too scared to ever come out to them.

"Hey dad!" Marco grinned, watching as his dad enveloped Leah in a bear hug and then turned to ruffle his hair.

"Hey kiddos, I'm home. How's school going?" Mr. Briggs asked, setting his luggage to the side of the living room.

"Nevermind that! How was Paris?" Leah asked, giddy.

"Yeah, seriously! Did you go to some good restaurants?" Marco asked as well.

"Of course I did! I sent all the photos remember?" Mr. Briggs said back, collapsing on the couch. His two children sat at either side of him, bombarding him with questions of another one of the amazing places he traveled to for his job.

"Take the whole family one day dad!" Marco suggested for the umpteenth time.

"Senior gift!" Leah hinted with a not-so-sly grin. Mr. Briggs laughed.

"Don't get your hopes up Leah." he said, heaving off the couch to go bring his bags upstairs.

"Oh, too late for that." Leah grinned.

"Dinner in five guys." Mrs. Briggs yelled.

"Got it!" all three other residents of the house responded simultaneously. At that, they all laughed simultaneously too.

"Where are you going next?" Marco asked

"I don't know yet," he replied, picking up his luggage. Leah and Marco exchanged looks.

"So that means I'll be here for a while." Mr. Briggs said.

"Yes!" Leah cheered.

"Marco help me with the bags will you?" Mr. Briggs asked his son, halfway up the staircase.

"Oh, right. I got it!" Marco picked up the other one and also went upstairs.

"Dinner's ready!" Mrs. Briggs called.

Marco liked having all three of his family members sitting with him at the dining table for dinner.

Invite Ellis and his mother, they said.

It'll be fun, they said.

Yeah right, Marco thought as he sat next to Ellis, watching his mom and Mrs. Miles converse lightly. Leah kept stealing glances at Ellis, who seemed to have noticed but didn't mind, as usual. So Leah took that as an invitation to keep on with it. And Marco's dad? Silent. Not a word, not a dad joke. Marco was terrified. Ellis could probably tell from where he was, right next to him.

"Me and Ellis are gonna go upstairs, okay?" Marco after he and Ellis had put their dishes in the kitchen sink.

"Alright!" both mothers smiled at them and continued to converse. When Marco saw his dad finally join in the conversation, it felt like a weight lifted off of his shoulders.

"Are you okay?" Ellis asked Marco once he had shut the door, hands reaching out to grasp Marco's upper-arms, comforting him. Marco nodded, sighing. Ellis smiled softly.

"That's good. I'm glad they didn't bring it up though." Ellis said.

"What would you have done if they had?" Marco asked, nose scrunched up at the thought of it.

"I... Really don't know." Ellis answered, before shaking off his uncertainty and picking up Marco's console.

"Let's play a round, maybe this time you'll be able to beat me!" Ellis grinned. Marco picked up the other console and joined his best friend on the edge of his bed, a cocky smirk on his face.

"Bring it, loser!" he taunted, logging into the the game and starting it.

"You really suck." Ellis laughed when he beat Marco again. Marco frowned.

"You obviously cheated!" Marco accused before he was all of a sudden aware of a lot of yelling coming from downstairs.

"Marco... You hear that?" Ellis asked, voice lower and more timid. He looked frightened, as if he could understand what they were yelling about. But to Marco it was all gibberish.

"Stop it!" he heard Leah cry out before the distinct sound of footsteps coming up the stairs followed.

"Ellis!" Mrs. Miles pushed the door open loudly, her face furious.

“Mom? What happened--” Ellis was cut off as his mom pulled his arm away from the bed and out of the room.

“Mom! Mom! Wait!” Ellis protested, trying to reach back for where Marco was at the table. Marco went out from his room and watched as the two left the house, slamming the door closed with a bang.

Leah looked at Marco with a look that he knew all too well, and he felt his heart start to pound with what seemed like anger and bitter sadness. And Marco’s parents wouldn’t look at him in the eye.

“What did you do?” Marco could barely contain the rage in his voice.

“Tell him what you said dad.” Leah joined in, her voice matching Marco’s tone. Mrs. Briggs looked ashamed.

“What did you do?” Marco raised his voice higher, looking at his dad.

“If you don’t tell him I will,” Leah threatened. When Mr. Briggs didn’t answer, Leah did for him, and Marco ran out the house faster than he ever had before.

My dad is the most idiotic person to have ever lived. My parents are ignorant and Ellis, I’m so sorry, Marco thought as he ran down the road to Ellis’s house, praying for him to be there.

“If you don’t tell him I will.” Leah threatened. Marco look at his dad, hoping the intensity of his glare would scare his dad into answering. But he didn’t answer.

“Is it true your son’s a fag?” That’s what he said.” Leah cut the silence, face scrunching up in disgust as she spoke. So Marco ran out the door, slamming it closed with a loud bang.

“Ellis! Open the door! I’m so so so sorry!” Marco begged, knocking on the door. At his 25th knock, the door opened, Mrs. Miles holding onto the handle.

“He’s upstairs.” she said, eyes a little bloodshot. Marco nodded, silently thanking the woman who was like his second-mother and going up the stairs to where Ellis’s room was.

“Ellis?” he spoke lightly, softly rapping on the door. There was a mumble from Ellis, followed by the shuffling of feet.

“Hey, Marco.” Ellis smiled, lips stretched with a small, maybe slightly forced smile. Marco wrapped his arms around Ellis, whispering sorry’s into his ear.

“I’m sorry. I am so so so sorry Ellis. I am so sorry.” Marco whispered, choking up a little.

“It’s okay.” Ellis brushed a hand over Marco’s dark locks.

“It is not okay.” Marco pulled away from Ellis, taking the hand that was in his hair and clasping it between his smaller ones.

“You cannot say what my family did was okay.” he said, stern. Ellis’ eye seemed to twinkle in amusement.

“Okay Marco.” he smiled.

“What’s so funny?” Marco crossed his eyebrows.

“You are.” Ellis giggled, one hand over his mouth.

“This is serious Ellis.” Marco groaned, exasperated but also trying to hide the smile that was creeping onto his face. Ellis had that effect on him.

“But your expression! I can’t take it seriously!” Ellis burst into a fit of laughter, clutching his stomach. Marco rolled his eyes but he was relieved. This meant that he was fine.

“Okay calm down, it’s not that funny.” Marco grumbled when Ellis collapsed face first into his bed, laughing away.

“You good now?” Marco asked with a raised eyebrow when Ellis had finally calmed down. Ellis nodded.

“Good. At least I know you aren’t too upset by it.” Marco said stern face breaking into a wide smile.

“He’s not wrong though.” Ellis said, pulling the ends of his too-big-for-him sweater sleeves over his hands, and back down to his wrists, repeat. He was nervous, Marco noted.

“What do you mean?” Marco asked, looking at him, wheels in his head turning.

“Your dad, he wasn’t wrong. I’m bisexual. And honestly, I never knew I was until I met you. So I guess you could say I’m gay for you.” Ellis said, speaking as if it was an everyday conversation to have. Marco sat there, completely silent.

“...Marco?” Ellis ask his friend, a tinge of fear underlining his voice.

“Well damn.” Marco said, breaking his silence. Ellis made a face, confused.

“I thought out of us two you’d be the gayer one, but seems like I was wrong.” Marco laughed. Ellis’ mouth dropped open.

“You-- You’re?” Ellis stammered, gaping.

“Surprise.” Marco said.

“Wow... This is so weird.” Ellis spoke, looking at the ceiling in disbelief. A wide smile spread onto his face.

“Well, what now?” Marco asked, but was cut of by Ellis’s lunging for him, arms wrapping around his neck, lips planting onto his in a firm kiss.

“Sorry, I’ve been wanting to do that for a while.” Ellis said when he pulled away. Marco was half-bewildered, but he knew what he wanted to do.

“Well don’t stop then, idiot.” he said, pulling Ellis back into his arms, kissing the most beautiful person to have ever lived on this planet.

“Oh, and I’m gay for you too.” he grinned.

Marco marched back into his house, fingers locked with Ellis's.

"Marco!" his mom stood up from where she sat on the couch, looking so relieved to see him there. His dad stood up too, looking apologetic. But one look at where his hand was placed and they stopped where they were.

"Marco?" Mrs. Briggs asked, voice cautious. Marco noticed Leah quietly creeping down the staircase and joining them in the living room.

"Mom, dad. I'm gay. And I'm dating Ellis. I know you guys don't like this, and you can't accept it. And maybe you'll never learn to accept it. But that's okay. I'm going to be staying with Ellis until that time comes, or if it never comes. Mrs. Miles already knows about this, and she's letting me. Leah knew as well. But I just wanted to say goodbye." Marco said, voice trembling. There was a pause, where Marco hoped his mother or father would tell him they loved him no matter what, but nothing came. He felt tears come to his eyes, lip trembling.

"Let's go." Ellis whispered, tugging Marco's hand and leading him out the door, where Mrs. Miles waited outside with her car.

I ship it Leah mouthed from where she stood, with her thumbs up.

"You did so good. You were so brave." Ellis mumbled, letting Marco cry into his shoulder, fingers tugging lightly at his black hair, a gesture that calmed Marco down.

"I love you, so much El." Marco said, hiccuping. Ellis smiled.

"I love you too."