

Spring 2024

You Cry Like a Girl: Narratives of Gender Affirmation

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Recommended Citation

Garnsey, Zoie Aniella, "You Cry Like a Girl: Narratives of Gender Affirmation" (2024). *Senior Projects Spring 2024*. 104.

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You Cry Like a Girl:
Narratives of Gender Affirmation

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2024

Acknowledgements

Thank you –

To my advisor, Franz Nicolay, for reminding me over and over that my writing needs tension, and for letting me know when I explain too much and when I explain too little

To Ziad Dallah, for assigning *Koolhaas*

To Shae Olmstead, Allison McKim, and more, for assigning countless informative and thought-provoking texts

To Frankie, for going on a bookstore date and helping me find the poorly-marked queer section, where we discovered *Gender Euphoria* on the bottom shelf. And for listening, being excited, and giving me more wonderful suggestions than I know what to do with

To my parents, for always supporting my education and almost always supporting my personal decisions, and for knowing how to change their minds

To Rohin, for being his wonderful self and for usually understanding, and always trying to

To the lovely people at BCGS, for listening and sharing

Gabrielle

“I miss my husband.”

Audrey’s words clung to the surfaces of our silent kitchen. I stared at my press-on nails, absorbed by the way they reflected the overhead light. I couldn’t let myself be any more present; I already felt far too raw.

“I know this sounds bad,” Audrey said, “but I miss when things were allowed to be about me.” She was sitting across from me, her new default location. It seemed like forever since our late-night conversations had been on the couch, with her leaning against me. “When we’d go out with our friends they used to tell me how good I looked, and you’d agree with them,” she said. “Now they all compliment you and I’m just an afterthought.”

Audrey paused. I wasn’t sure if she wanted me to console her or yell at her, but I didn’t feel like doing either.

“I miss feeling protected,” she continued. “Before, if we were walking at night, I could relax because I knew I was safe as long as you were there. Now it feels like when we go out *you’re* the one in danger, and I have to be protective of *you*.”

“What do you mean when we go out?” I tried to look at her but in my blurred vision, she became a mirage – wavering and distant. My voice sounded far away, like I

was outside of the body it came from. "You're too embarrassed to go anywhere with me anymore," I said.

"No, Sim – I – I mean Gabrielle. That's not – did you even hear what I said? I'm not embarrassed by you, it's just – things feel different, and I don't like it." She leaned her forehead on the heel of her hand. "I didn't mean it like that. It's just really hard. And I know things changing is positive and exciting for you, but they felt special to me the way they were. And it doesn't feel like that's allowed."

I was staring at my hands again, squeezing them together to try to keep the tears in my eyes. "Of course it's allowed. I just need the new things to be special, t–"

" – Is it?" Audrey interrupted. "I'm not even allowed to have my wedding photos up in my own fucking house."

"*Our* wedding photos," I said quietly. "*Our* house. And I told you, the person in those pictures isn't me. Seeing him every time I walked down the hall felt wrong and uncomfortable and I couldn't take it anymore."

"I don't understand how it can be both: they're your wedding photos but you're not in them?" Audrey looked genuinely perplexed. I felt bad. "It hurts that you can't even stand to look at pictures from one of the most important days of my life."

Never mind.

"It's not because our wedding isn't special to me. It was – is – an incredibly important day for me, too."

“It doesn’t feel that way anymore,” Audrey said. “When we first got married, you – or, um, Simon – wanted to have prints made of every photo taken at our wedding, even the shitty ones, because we ‘needed to remember every moment of *the* most beautiful day.’ He insisted that we hang our favorites where we could look at them every day, where anyone who visited would see them. I miss that. I don’t mean to sound shitty but I really miss him. I miss Simon.”

Audrey’s eyes were red. I turned away so she wouldn’t see the tears slipping out of mine. She reached across the table towards me but seemed to change her mind; her hand hovered over mine for a moment before she pulled it back towards her and cleared her throat.

“Babe?”

“I can’t,” I said. “I love you so much but I can’t be...Simon for you. I wouldn’t survive that.”

“I’m not asking you –”

Before Audrey could finish I got up from the table and went and locked myself in the bathroom. I sat in the tub, sobbing into the new blouse I’d been waiting all day for her to compliment.

I must have been in there for half an hour when I heard a knock on the door. “Hey babe?” Audrey’s voice seemed so small. “Are you okay?” I couldn’t answer. I could only hug my knees and put all my focus into breathing.

“Well, goodnight.” I heard her walk away, toward our bedroom.

When I finally managed to pull myself out of the bathtub, Audrey had gone to bed. I curled up on the couch, still in my dress pants and blouse. I imagined my head was in her lap, and we were swapping work gossip like we used to.

* * *

Evan (Ev)

In my junior year of high school, I started noticing how much of a gender bubble Ms. Carlton’s drama club was. For the first time it struck me how strange it was that the boys I’d been in plays with year after year were the same ones who, outside of the auditorium, had friends who teased each other for being “gay” for stupid reasons like having a hair-care routine or tearing up at movies. Here, though, the boys waited patiently before shows while girls helped them apply their mascara and bronzer, then looked over each other’s shoulders at their reflections and proudly compared eyelash lengths; they jumped around in excitement and playfully chasséd across the stage together before the house opened. I started noticing that the same girls who generally

tried to see how low their necklines could get before they were dress-coded, and who used five different products on their faces every day to avoid the mortification of being seen with a pimple, congratulated each other in drama club on successfully binding for male roles, on mastering mannerisms like manspreading or a slow, wide gait, on well-glued fake mustaches and deep, drawn-on wrinkles. Most of these actions would receive derisive looks in the wider school, but within the confines of drama club, they were not only routine, but held status. I heard someone say once that theater was both where they went to escape themselves, and where they could be themselves most; and for a while afterward I analyzed the people around me, trying to deduce which of those motivations brought them there. *I* certainly toed that line during high school and college, *especially* when it came to gender.

The spring semester of eleventh grade was also when I began paying attention to Lina Hartman. She was one of the best actors in drama club. She had a big, bright smile that was noticeable from the back of the house, and compared to many of the other theater kids, who sounded like they were constantly on the verge of yelling, her voice was surprisingly delicate and smooth. I spent hours watching her onstage during rehearsals, thinking about how much I admired her talent and work ethic, wishing, in some ways, I could be like her, and imagining how much it would mean to have her approval. As an actor, of course.

A few weeks into that semester, amid these new drama club observations, I was cast as the male lead in our spring show. I had been stubbornly avoiding playing female leads for years, because the thought made me nauseous. They just felt too – stereotypical girl, so I never tried out for them. But that spring, some of the few boys in drama club were unable to be in the production, so Ms. Carlton urged me to audition for the male lead. I wasn't sure why, but that felt much more comfortable to me. On the day the cast list went up, I fought back a huge grin when I read the character's name next to mine – I hadn't realized until that moment how badly I wanted it. My eyes scanned down the list and caught on Lina's name: she had been cast as the female lead, my love interest. I turned away from the sheets of paper before I could have any feelings on this.

Lina found me during break. She congratulated me, and said she was excited to work with me. She gave me one of those shiny, signature smiles that I'd seen her use onstage a hundred times. As she walked away, I started getting nervous. I'd never had a stage kiss in my acting "career" of supporting characters, but Lina probably had. I'd kissed a couple guys outside of productions, though, so I couldn't figure out why this time my chest tightened at the thought. I told myself it only felt terrifying and exposed because it was so public. I would have to get over myself, because I couldn't embarrass myself in front of Lina. I couldn't let her see me as unprofessional, a bad actor – her approval meant too much.

The day we blocked the first kissing scene, I almost went home sick. I knew Ms. Carlton wouldn't make us kiss during blocking – she never expected anyone to – but even so I couldn't convince myself it was just like staging any other scene. There was still the implication of a kiss, and the reminder that I would need to do it for real at the end of the week. When we got to the lines leading up to where the kiss would be, Lina grabbed my hand. I became way too aware of how sweaty mine was. She placed her palm on my collarbone and marked the kiss, leaning in close enough that I could smell her mango lip balm. My next line came out as a squeak. So much for professionalism.

“Great job in rehearsal today,” Lina said as we packed up after blocking.

“Hah, yeah,” I said. “Sorry if I was being weird. I always get nervous the first time I do a scene.” I scratched the back of my head and looked down at the burgundy auditorium carpet.

“Me too! It takes me a few times for it to start feeling natural. You were great, though.” She gave me one of those brilliant smiles again. I turned away and stuffed my script into my bag, trying to ignore the new wave of nausea.

Lina zipped up her backpack and put it on. “Would you – maybe – want to take a minute to figure out our kiss before we run the scene Friday? I'm honestly kind of nervous about it, and I want it to, you know, feel natural for the run-through.”

Fuck, my palms were all sweaty again. This shouldn't have been such a big deal. “Yeah,” I said. “That would be nice.”

“Okay, cool.” Was Lina blushing? I must have imagined it; it was probably just hot in the auditorium. “Do you wanna meet here during lunch tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sounds good. I’ll see you then.” I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and awkwardly exited the room, making sure not to turn back in case Lina saw.

When I got to the auditorium the next day, Lina was sitting on the stage, dangling her legs over the edge. We waved, and I could feel her watching me as I walked toward her, past the rows of seats. My walk felt so dumb, like a weird stumble. As I approached, I noticed how her eyes shone, highlighted by the green top she was wearing. *Did it look like I was staring?* I turned away, too quickly, and set my things down in the front row.

We started running the scene from the top, because Lina wanted to get into character and build momentum. She took my hand, and my mouth went dry. We were alone now, and there was no use telling myself it was just another scene. Her hand rested on my collarbone – she must have felt my heartbeat, must have felt my breath rise and fall erratically. I felt *her* breath, warm on my nose, and then her lips were on mine, and –

It was worth all of the anxiety. More than worth it.

I wanted to forget about the scene and the whole production, and just keep kissing Lina until it was impossible to wash away the taste of mango lip balm. I had to remind myself to pull away, that this was only for the show, and I had to stay on script.

Lina wanted to run the scene a few more times “so it feels real for Friday.” I agreed that was best – if her perfectionism as an actor meant getting to kiss her again, I wasn’t going to complain. When we ran the scene for Ms. Carlton later that week, she complimented us on how well we worked together. I blushed, trying not to think of all of the other things we could do well together.

I wanted to ask Lina if she would ever consider kissing me when we weren't on stage, in character, following a script, but I was too convinced I knew the answer to dare. We had gotten closer during the long hours in rehearsal together, but I couldn't detect anything in the way she acted toward me that suggested she wanted to be more than scene partners or distant friends. We would chat a bit during breaks, almost always about the show, but we never sat together at lunch or said hello in the halls. We were doomed to just be theater buddies. I began counting down the hours till each rehearsal, when I could spend time with Lina. When we got to tech week, it hardly mattered that Lina didn't talk to me outside of rehearsal, since we were always in the theater. Even if she might not choose to under other circumstances, for now she was spending all of her time with me. She even started giving me little congratulatory hugs in the wings after scenes went well.

After our first run-through of the whole show, Lina ran up to me backstage. “We did it!” She was beaming. I smiled back and held out my arms to hug her, but she took my face in her soft, cool hands and kissed me. I almost forgot to kiss her back.

* * *

Mona

I've talked to women who, before they started consciously questioning their sexuality, remember paying a lot of attention to other girls' bodies and how good they looked. They brushed it off as jealousy. They just wanted to *look like* the girls they thought were pretty, they told themselves; they definitely weren't attracted to them. My high school experience was the exact opposite.

In ninth grade, I thought I had a crush on a girl in my math class named Adelaide. She had long hair that fell in loose strawberry-blond ringlets halfway down her back, and she smelled like jasmine. Every time she walked into class I thought, *she's beautiful*. I paid attention to how she did her hair, the way she walked, how her jewelry brought out her eyes, and to the smooth, gentle way she talked.

Up until then, I'd felt like an outsider when my friends talked about girls. I agreed that, in a general sense, girls were pretty. But I didn't relate to the *should I ask her out* drama. I couldn't imagine having a strong enough attraction to a particular person

to do that; I couldn't picture *wanting* to go on a date or to kiss someone, much less go further than that. When I met Adelaide – someone who I found gorgeous, paid close attention to, and thought about often – I assumed I finally liked a girl in the way my friends talked about. Logically, I thought, I *must* have a crush on her. I was obsessed with her. And that was how it worked – I was *supposed* to have a crush on a girl. I didn't have any language to understand different reasons I might obsess over a pretty girl. This, I thought, must be how my friends felt. Part of having a crush must be wanting to study the way she moves, trying to figure out how she got her hair like that, wondering where she got her clothes.

Adelaide and I became friends. Or perhaps we were more than that – it was always difficult for me to tell. I think she noticed how much time I spent looking at her, and was flattered. She invited me over to her house a few times and we watched movies, did homework, played Mario Kart. Nothing that screamed “relationship.” Once she asked to put eyeliner on me because it would “help perfect her application technique.” Part of me wonders if she knew I was trans before I did. Or maybe, as an awkward fourteen-year-old trying to figure out how to flirt, she used the first excuse she thought of to be close to me. In any case, she proposed doing my eyeliner, and I said yes. It wasn't something I'd considered wearing before; but when Adelaide asked, I realized I wasn't opposed. The idea was thrilling, somehow.

Adelaide pulled her chair over to mine, and sat so that our knees were touching. She placed a hand on my cheek. With the other, she raised the fine, ink-covered brush to my eyelid. "Don't blink," she warned me. As she slowly dragged the brush across the line where my eyelashes met my lid, my chest felt like a helium balloon fighting to break free, a ball of unexplained excitement I had to struggle to contain. *It must be because she's so close to me*, I thought. When Adelaide pulled her hand away from my face and positioned the mirror so I could see her work, the excitement in my chest stayed.

In the following weeks, I started fantasizing about buying my own eyeliner. Most boys don't sneak their crush's perfume when she's in the bathroom and spritz some on their wrist to see what it's like, I realized. Most boys don't daydream about how people would react if they floated into the classroom the way their crush does, long hair sweeping behind them. Turns out I wasn't a boy, and I didn't have a crush.

* * *

Evan (Ev)

Even though there were girls in the theater department who took pride in binding well, and sometimes appreciated it as part of the process of getting into character as a man, the general consensus was that it was difficult and uncomfortable. I'd always been told that anyone who could get away with just wearing a sports bra should. So I'd avoided binding all through ninth and tenth grade, despite having played several male ensemble roles. Now that I was playing the lead, though, I would be in focus, and had to be "believable" as a man – which meant not having a distracting amount of tit. So one of the costumers had me bring in a sports bra, and during my final costume fitting she showed me how to wrap and pin Ace bandages over top of it. (To be clear I am *not* suggesting binding with Ace bandages – that's just how they did it in drama club. Especially if you're going to bind regularly, *please* use a binder. Or tape.)

When I first saw myself in the mirror, it was as if I had an injury; the bandages that wound around my torso looked like they were covering a healing stab wound. My reflection had changed starkly, as though this alteration made me a different person in a way that a new outfit or hairstyle didn't. At the same time, I didn't look more like a man – I just had a mass of bandages where my boobs had been. Once I put my shirt on over top, though, and could no longer see the bandages and bra straps, I thought I looked – I just stared for a minute, and then ran my hands over my chest a few times. There was

something oddly exciting to me about this new firm, flat surface. I couldn't help smiling.

When I insisted on binding for the rest of our rehearsals, because it "helped me get into character," no one seemed to question it.

Our tech run-through was the first rehearsal I wore my bindings. I explained the giddy feeling I had to myself as part of the excitement of running the show in light for the first time, anticipating the audience that would be there in a few days, and playing the lead opposite Lina. But in my idle moments on stage, I had to stop myself from skimming my hands over my chest. Even if I had been ready to truly understand the feeling, I didn't have the language to name it yet.

When we got to the kiss scene, Lina placed her hand on my collarbone like we'd blocked. As she leaned in to kiss me, it slipped down and rested on my flattened chest. I forgot to breathe for a moment. My arms and torso tingled, and I felt taller, though Lina and I were the same height. Again, I tried to explain it away – the reason this was so exciting must be because of what was beneath my bindings. I was burning up more than usual under the stage lights, and could barely hear Lina's next lines over the hammering of my pulse. I spent the remainder of tech week hoping Lina's hand would slip down to my chest again.

* * *

Sage

When Kayla picked me up from my dorm, her front seat was covered in bottles of soda and bags of chips.

“Sorry! You can move all that,” she said. “I made a snack run on the way so we’d be prepared for the drive.”

I shook my head at her. “It’s only three hours. And I had lunch like an hour ago.”

“Good! More for me!” Kayla grabbed the salt and vinegar chips and started munching on them, while I moved the rest of the snacks to the backseat and put my suitcase in the trunk. I settled into the passenger seat and absentmindedly grabbed a few chips from the bag. Kayla looked over to comment, but before she got the words out her gaze caught on my eye makeup and lacy shirt.

“Hey,” I said. “At least I didn’t wear the skirt.”

Kayla scrunched her mouth and gave a silent nod. “Have you come out to Dad and Grams yet?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Based on how Mom took it, I’m scared to tell Dad. Do you remember how upset he was when we got a new couch without telling him? That man

does *not* do well with change. And honestly, I assume people in Grams' generation will be weird about it, so I don't know if I should say anything to her."

"Well," Kayla started the car and pulled through the loop in front of my dorm building as she talked. "If you show up looking like that you might not have to come out?"

"I think that's kind of what I'm hoping for. It would take some of the pressure off me if they just – figured it out."

"Yeah, that makes sense." Kayla held out the chips to me. "And if either of them are shitty about it I've got your back."

I smiled. "Thanks, K."

* * *

Gabrielle

Audrey and I didn't talk for a few days. It was like we'd forgotten how. We communicated the necessary information over text, like whether the dog had been fed and what we needed from the grocery store, but we didn't say a word in person. I went

back to sleeping in our bed, but I would crawl in after Audrey was asleep and wait until I heard the shower running in the morning to get up.

It was miserable. I just wanted things to go back to normal – whatever that meant now. But I couldn't seem to push myself to break the silence. Instead, I began researching couples therapists. It was a way I could take action without reaching out beyond myself. Once I had compiled a list of therapists, I spent an hour drumming up the courage to text Audrey the links to their websites. I anxiously checked my phone all day. Finally, as I was leaving work, she responded to one of the links, saying *this one looks good*.

The next Thursday afternoon, I got to the therapist's office a few minutes before our session and sat on a green couch across from her. Audrey rushed in a couple minutes late and took an armchair, ignoring the place I'd left for her on the couch. This became a pattern. After a few weeks, I stopped expecting her to be on time. But it still stung, even though I knew her work was farther and it was hard for her to get away. I knew she was putting in a lot of effort to be there, but I couldn't help but feel like she didn't care as much as I did.

After our first session, we started talking again, though it was mostly about what to have for dinner or four-sentence conversations about how work was.

One Wednesday night after dinner, I was putting away the dishes when I heard the creak of the old cupboard under the TV. Audrey must be looking through the DVD

collection. A few minutes later, I walked into the living room and tiptoed to the couch. She had popped in *The Princess Bride*, one of our old favorites. I carefully sat down beside her and looked over to see if that was okay. She just looked at the screen.

Once the scene finished, Audrey paused the movie and stood up. For a moment I thought she was going to bed to get away from me, but she said "I'll be right back," and walked towards the kitchen. She returned with a bowl of microwave popcorn and set it down between us on the couch.

We watched the rest of the movie in silence, save for chewing our popcorn. Despite the bowl, which sat between us like some sort of chaperone or awkward third wheel, I felt closer to Audrey than I had in months. We quoted Inigo Montoya to each other as we got ready for bed, and said goodnight, smiling.

The next afternoon, Audrey arrived for our session just after I did. She walked past the armchair and took the place next to me on the couch. "Hi, Gabbi baby," she greeted me. "How was your day?" She planted a kiss on my forehead. For the first time, I left the session feeling hopeful and happy.

* * *

Sage

Addie ran out to meet me and Kayla in the driveway.

“Sage!” The greeting was muffled against my chest as she wrapped her arms around me. “Oh my god I’ve missed you so much. How’s school? Will you help me make grandma’s molasses cookies? I found the recipe in the cupboard, and I think we have *most* of the ingredients, but we might have to run out for a few things. I think it would be really sweet if we made her some, though, since she can’t really bake them for us anymore.”

“I would love to,” I said. “And school is – you know. School.”

“Hello?” Kayla called from the other side of the car. “It’s good to see you too?”

“Give me a second!” Addie said. “I’m getting to you.” She ran around the front of the car and into Kayla’s arms. “K! I missed you! How’s school?”

When we got inside, Kayla headed up the stairs with her suitcase, but Dad came into the living room before I could follow her.

“Austin! How was the drive?” He gave me an awkward hug. I felt my entire body clench.

“It was pretty good,” I said. It had been less than a minute since I walked in the door and I’d already been deadnamed. This was going to be *fun*. As he released his arm from around my shoulders, I saw him stare at my lavender eyeshadow. I braced for him

to say something, but he simply moved on as if he didn't notice anything had changed about me.

"Come say hi to your grandma." I put my bag down and followed Dad into the downstairs bedroom, where Grams was propped up in bed. She looked so much smaller than when I saw her last, grayer and more fragile. I always pictured her as the same vibrant person who took me and my sisters on bike rides as kids, and who took charge during big family gatherings, ordering people around in the kitchen – it was hard to reconcile those images with the woman in front of me.

"Look who it is, Mom." Dad was half yelling. You could never count on Grams to wear her hearing aids, or expect them to work when she did.

"Hi Grams." I stepped closer to the bed.

Grams searched my face. "Kayla? You look so grown up. And so beautiful." I squeezed her hand and dug my left fingernails into my thigh, trying not to jump up and down or do something else embarrassing. *Oh my god*, I thought. *She thinks I look like a girl. A beauti –*

"– Mom," Dad laughed from behind me. "That's *Austin*, your *grandson*."

I dropped Gram's hand and started tugging on the hair at the nape of my neck. *What had I expected?* Grams looked confused, but nodded.

"Kayla's here too, Mom," Dad said, still chuckling. "She'll come say hi soon."

When Kayla came into the room a few minutes later, Dad took the opportunity to tell her about the stupid, hilarious mistake Grams had made. “K,” he said. “You’ll never believe what just happened.” Kayla saw the look on my face and quietly took my hand before Dad even started his story. I did my best to tune him out, and replay the moment when Grams thought I looked more like a Kayla than an Austin.

After dinner, Kayla, Addie, and I made cookies from Gram’s recipe, while Dad watched basketball in the living room. Addie ran upstairs for her speaker and set it up on the kitchen counter.

“What should we listen to?” she giggled.

“Hmm, I wonder,” Kayla said sarcastically.

“Yeah, no clue,” I said.

We all laughed as Addie pulled out her phone and the opening song to *Guardians of the Galaxy’s* Awesome Mix started. We did an over-dramatic rendition of “I’m Not In Love” while we measured out spices, and then started dancing when “Come and Get Your Love” came on. I stole the batter-covered mixing spoon from the bowl and used it as a microphone for a few lines, before passing it off to Addie. She took over the space between the counter and sink as her stage, then took my hand on the line “You look so divine” and twirled me.

“Do you think Dad still has the videos of us singing these while making Mom’s birthday dinner?” she asked.

"Maybe," I answered. "But I am *not* ready to see my high school self again."

"Yeah," Addie said. "I'm not ready to face middle school me. I'm scared to see myself with braces again."

"Yeah, those were a look," I teased. Addie stuck her tongue out at me.

The oven beeped. "Focus, ladies!" said Kayla. "Let's get these in the oven so they're ready before Grams goes to bed."

Once the cookies had cooled for a few minutes, I put a couple on a plate for Grams. Kayla and Addie were busy scrubbing cookie sheets and wiping down the counter, so I offered to take them to her. I walked past Dad, who was complaining about some foul he thought the ref should've called, seemingly oblivious to me and the entire cookie-making production. I gently knocked on Grams' door before going in.

"Hey Grams," I said. "We made you some cookies."

"Mmm, they smell amazing." Her hands shook as she reached for the plate. She took a nibble and savored it, closing her eyes. "These are delicious, thank you, dear."

"Of course, Grams. I'm glad you like them." I sat down in the chair beside her bed. "We should really be thanking you – for the recipe, and for all the times you made them for us. We'd have to make you about a hundred batches to be anywhere near even."

Grams chuckled. "I'm more than happy with the one." She took another bite.

"Mmm. I'm so lucky to have such sweet granddaughters."

I wasn't sure if she had mistaken me for Kayla again, or if Grams could see what Dad refused to, but I was glad he wasn't there to correct her this time.

* * *

Evan (Ev)

Lina pounded on my dorm room door. "Ev?"

I quickly closed my laptop, silencing the sitcom I'd been watching for days.

"Ash said you weren't in class again yesterday, so I wanted to check up on you,"

Lina said. She was silent for a moment, waiting for me to respond. I pulled the blanket over my head.

"What's going on?" she said. Her tone was perfectly patient and concerned. It made me want to chuck my laptop at the door.

Even if I'd wanted to talk to Lina, and could've brought myself to get out of bed and open the door, I didn't have an answer for her. It had become a pattern that after closing night, and a cast party that was never quite as fun as we pretended it was, I would watch the radius of my life shrink. I would stop my off-campus grocery runs and

cancel plans with friends. I only left my dorm to go to class or to the dining hall, and avoided eye contact with people I knew. Eventually, I would stop going to my classes. I lived off of instant ramen, and only left my bed to go to the bathroom or get water.

Lina rapped on the door again, more forcefully. The patience was gone.

“Seriously?” she said. “I know you’re there. I heard you. Please, Ev, just tell me what’s going on. I’m really worried about you.”

I was worried, too. It had never been this bad. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew I was destroying my relationship with Lina and all of my friendships. I was ruining my grades, and I’d missed several calls from my parents. But more immediately, I was worried because I was nearly out of ramen, and I hadn’t showered in almost a week. I couldn’t go anywhere until I showered, but the thought of being that aware of my body for that long made me feel sick. I simply could not make myself do it.

Lina’s voice shook. “Do you know how fucking embarrassing it is to tell people that you haven’t heard from your girlfriend in a week? That for all you know she could be dead because she won’t answer any of your texts?”

I squeezed the blanket tighter around me. *What was wrong with me?* I loved Lina, but every time she called me her girlfriend I could feel myself contract, broadening the distance between us. She was something tangible that could ground me to reality – maybe the only thing still in reach. But I couldn’t make myself grab on, or even make myself want to.

Lina must have realized that everyone on this end of the hall could hear her, because her next words were more muffled. "I'm sorry, Ev. I shouldn't have said that. You're just really scaring me." Her voice quivered, and I could picture the way she pinched her nose, as if trying to push the tears back in.

"You don't even have to tell me what's going on," Lina said. "I want to help, but if you won't let me then you could at *least* let me know you're alright. How hard would it have been to text back 'I'm ok,' so I wasn't up every night wondering if I should call someone?"

My eyes burned. I wiped them with the sleeve of my sweatshirt and stared intently at the pattern on my comforter.

"Anyway," Lina said, "I made you some soup – the creamy potato one you like. I guess I'll leave it out here for you." There was a soft thud as she set the container down in front of my door. "Text me, Ev. Please."

I waited for her footsteps to fade down the stairs before I got up and grabbed the soup from outside the door.

* * *

I'm so fucking tired of people defining my experience through dysphoria. The little girl I was, or was assumed to be, isn't haunting me. I'm not trying to outrun her. Which isn't to say that the narrative of trying to escape the ghosts of past selves doesn't work for some trans people: I'm just sick of it being forced onto me by others, especially cis people and doctors. I'm not transitioning because my body feels wrong (although it does, sometimes), I'm trying to move toward the things that make me feel confident and balanced and at home in myself. But my insurance needs a gender dysphoria diagnosis in order to cover my testosterone, and my parents couldn't understand why I would want to permanently alter my body until I listed all the things that feel wrong about it now.

It's so important to me to focus on the joyous aspects of being trans in my transition, instead of letting all the negative shit define it. But the thing about needing to prove you're miserable to medical professionals to get the care you need, or to your family in order to be acknowledged and validated, is that you get stuck in that mindset. You have to let all the bad memories you were trying to move past resurface, and be hyperattentive to negative experiences as they happen. It's not long until dysphoria is the most accessible feeling to you, even when you don't need it to be diagnosed or seen. It's there to greet you when you wake up, trying to convince you to stay home so you don't have to be perceived. It's a reason to go to sleep early, so you don't have to risk seeing yourself in the mirror. And if the expectation of dysphoria in society and the medical world doesn't already make you feel cornered, it's there in the media you consume, too. On the infrequent occasions when there is trans representation in shows, movies,

books, those characters' experiences are almost exclusively shown as dysphoric and plagued by transphobia.

It shouldn't be so hard to find examples of people like me living happy lives as themselves. It shouldn't have taken years of combing through the shelves of my local bookstore before I happened across something that focused on trans joy. And I should be able to have conversations with other trans people about realizing we were trans where I don't feel invalidated or "not trans enough" because I'm the only one there who can't pinpoint a series of instances of childhood dysphoria. Way too much of the time, it feels like euphoria isn't allowed to define me, or motivate my transition. The world is only able to see me through my pain, which pressures me to see myself that way, too. And god forbid I express any doubt about being dysphoric or wanting to go on T, or that my body occasionally feels euphoric as it is. Apparently, it's more acceptable to stay in a body that only feels euphoric about 10% of the time than to change it and have 10% of the time when those changes feel dysphoric. I shouldn't have to hide this sliver of euphoria like a shameful secret in order to get the care I need.

** * **

Nico

I first met Evan when they were a senior and I was a sophomore. Months later, when I asked him why he'd immediately let me in, he said he thought of it the other way around, that my dimpled smile always made them feel like we were in on some inside joke together, and that I listened like everything they had to say was valuable to me. But from my perspective, as a transfer student who was questioning my gender, Evan rescued me from the aimlessly floating existence I'd been terrified would stick to me for the rest of college.

Evan had been out for about a year and a half at that point. We joked that they knew I was trans from the moment they met me – well before I had fully figured it out. He let me talk about feeling less and less comfortable in myself, without pushing his own experiences on me, and let me borrow his binder while I was trying to figure out if I wanted to buy one. He waited patiently for me to tell him who I was, and then celebrated me for it when I was ready to share with him.

They didn't talk about it much, but I knew Ev's process of figuring out their gender had been really hard on them. Once, when we were eating lunch in the dining hall, I caught him staring at a girl sitting a few tables over. He looked haunted; the pain creased his face and weighed down on the entire table. I watched the girl's green eyes register him before quickly turning to her plate.

When I asked them about it later, Evan's expression showed the remnants of that same ache.

"Oh, that was Lina," they said. "My ex. We met in high school and applied here together. I – um – didn't have my shit figured out and I really hurt her." He looked down and tugged at his fingertips. "I...kind of ghosted her."

Beyond that, I had to build up my image of that time in Ev's life from the occasional comments they would make, like how they once didn't leave their dorm for a week, or how, without fully realizing it, they used to exhale in relief when they hit the point in a rehearsal process where they could bind without it *meaning* something. Without giving any details, they once told me things got so bad they took a semester off, and that all of their current friends were people they'd met since. Of course, it was hard for them to talk about, but it also felt like by withholding those memories, they were trying to protect me from how dark it could get. I desperately wished Ev had had someone there for him back then, to give him the resources and acceptance he'd given me. I realized how lucky I was, every time his face clouded over when his first few semesters were mentioned, when he let me think out loud with him about all of the confusion I'd been brushing aside for years, and when he called me Nico for the first time.

* * *

Gabrielle

One evening, Audrey got home from work in an unusually good mood. She ran into the kitchen, where I was starting dinner.

“Babe! Can whatever you’re making wait till tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I guess,” I said.

“Good!” She grinned at me. “Get dressed up then, I have a surprise.”

I grabbed a dress I’d recently found at a thrift store out of the closet and pulled it on. It was black with lace sleeves, and it made me feel incredibly elegant. Nervously, I returned to the kitchen, where Audrey had put away the veggies I’d chopped and was washing the cutting board. When she turned around her jaw fell, and she said “You look stunning, Gabrielle.” I smiled so hard it hurt.

Audrey had gotten a gift card from a coworker to a fancy steakhouse downtown. Our friends had been urging us to go for years, and often when we drove past we would remark to each other that we *had* to try it sometime. The food was just as good as we’d heard, and we split an incredible crème brûlée for dessert.

When we got home I went to change out of my dress, but Audrey stopped me. “I – I was thinking that outfit would look really good with red lipstick,” she said. Her eyes timidly met mine. “Do you maybe want me to put some of mine on you so we can see?” I nodded shyly. Audrey grabbed the lipstick from her makeup case, turned me toward her, and applied it carefully. Then she turned me to the mirror and searched my face for my reaction. I started beaming, and I saw her break into a smile next to me. She applied some of the lipstick on herself. “Now we’re matching!” I kissed her on the cheek, leaving a bright lipstick stain. She laughed and kissed my cheek too, and I started laughing with her. “Matching,” I agreed.

* * *

Evan (Ev)

When I first came out as trans, I identified as nonbinary. It was the term available to me, the default for neither man or woman – but it never quite fit. It felt strange to identify myself solely based on what I wasn’t. When I stopped calling myself nonbinary, it wasn’t to don an identity label that fit more precisely. I’d realized that by

definition I could be considered a demiboy – that dot on the gender spectrum that was masc of center but not quite “man” – but it felt uncomfortable on me. Perhaps I didn’t want a label that defined me by what I only partially was, or was lesser than, either. Instead, I started defaulting to transmasc – a general term that indicates I’m transitioning toward masculinity, which will be true for the rest of my life, no matter where I fall on that spectrum at any given time.

A few months after I met Nico, I told our friend group that I was thinking about using they/he pronouns instead of just they/them, and soon it became part of how I introduced myself. It felt like a big milestone to me, a new and exciting piece of myself. But after a few weeks, I started realizing that nothing had changed.

One day during lunch, my friend Rosa was telling a story from before Nico knew us.

“So Jasper and I went to see Ev in this show,” she said, “because we’re nice people and we wanted to support them.” She took a sip of her iced tea. “It was...not great.”

“Hey!” I said, flipping her off across the table.

“*They* were fantastic,” Rosa told Nico, patting the air in front of me in a placating gesture. “Well, as fantastic as they could be with that script. Some sophomore kid wrote it, I think; and all due respect for putting your art out there, but I almost fell asleep during the second scene. Anyway, about halfway through the first act, Evan finally

came onstage, and immediately stole the show. They and their scene partner had this incredible back-and-forth, they nailed their monologues – they took the shitty script and turned it into something compelling and captivating.”

After the fourth or fifth “they,” my jaw tightened. The word started pressing against my ears, seeming louder than the others. I stared at my napkin, instead of looking at Rosa.

“But after a few minutes of this,” she continued, “the freshman guy working the light board apparently bumped something, and there was a blackout, *in the middle of the scene*. And I guess the guy froze up or something – he blamed the lightboard, but...”

Rosa turned down the corners of her mouth and shrugged. “In any case,” she said, it just *stayed dark*. So Ev started improvising this fight with *their* scene partner about how she said she would pay the electric bill, and the audience was *dying*. It was ingenious. And then the lights came back on and *they* were like ‘Oh, it must have been the storm,’ and then just got back on script and finished the scene. I know *they* were technically just a side character, but Ev was the *star* of that show. *They* fucking killed it; *they* totally made the show worth seeing.” She took another gulp of iced tea and smiled proudly at me.

I knew I was overreacting. I wasn’t even being misgendered, really – I wanted people to use they/them more often anyway. I imagined Rosa replacing each “they” with “he” in the story, and that felt even more wrong than this did. I joined the rest of

the table in laughing about the blackout and my improv scene, deciding it was unreasonable to bring up my pronouns. I wasn't even sure if they/he *fit* me, because I hadn't heard it enough to know how it felt. I wished that people would use it so I could figure that out, and wished my close friends had made a clearer change after hearing I had new pronouns. But I also didn't want to be an asshole about it.

A few days later, I was hanging out with Nico in my dorm room. We'd been having a lot of conversations about my relationship to my identity, because Nico was trying to figure out his. This particular day, he asked me what the experience of using new pronouns had been like for me: "Did it just click and feel right when people first started referring to you with your new pronouns, or was there an adjustment period?" I told him that for me, it definitely took a while to adjust to they/them pronouns. By the time I was finally ready to come out to myself, it was pretty clear that she/her did *not* fit me, but they/them felt a bit awkward and detached for me at first. And I misgendered myself constantly in the first few months: I kept forgetting not to include myself in the "we" of women in feminism classes, and when I was alone I often caught myself saying things like *Seriously, Evelyn? What are you doing, girl? Come on, missy.* I frequently wasn't paying enough attention to be upset when someone called me "she." It took some time to shake the routine of the labels that I'd heard used for myself my whole life. I told Nico that in my experience, it was a bit like breaking in a pair of new shoes – it took a while for them to feel comfortable.

“I would say hearing the pronouns used for you can be really important to cementing identity, whether for getting used to how they feel, or just figuring out if they fit in the first place.” I hesitated and looked over at Nico. He was giving me that look: soft but intent, in a way that signaled that he cared deeply about whatever I had to say. “Like right now,” I continued slowly, “I think using he/him pronouns too might be important for me, but it’s hard to know because I haven’t heard anyone call me ‘he.’”

From that moment on, Nico made a conscious effort to alternate my pronouns, especially in front of our friends. Of course it was to help me feel seen and validated, but part of it was also his way of calling our friends’ attention to it, nudging them to use he/him more without either of us having to directly confront them about it. It worked. I noticed that in the next few weeks, when Rosa told stories at lunch, she started throwing a couple “he”s in when she mentioned me.

In the years since, I’ve settled into my pronouns. I feel comfortable with any combination of “they” and “he” that acquaintances use for me, but the people closest to me know to alternate my pronouns. Especially when Nico and my other friends first started calling me “he,” the little wave of euphoria I got made me feel closer to them. The excitement has worn off now, but it’s still an important part of how I feel seen. The conversations I have about my pronouns with new friends always remind me of Nico, and have become a marker of connection in my friendships.

* * *

I'm sick of the expectation that transition is linear. Yes, I'm transmasculine, but no, that doesn't mean I will become more and more masculine for the rest of my life, or until I reach some ideal end goal. I'm constantly transitioning, from femme to masc, back to femme, to some indiscernible mixture, from a femme-y boy to a masc "girl." Sure, T is making my body read increasingly masculine to others, but it allows me to be more femme in other ways. On some days I wear dresses without taping and present more feminine than most of the women around me; but that does not mean I'm "detransitioning," or any less trans than others, or than myself on more masc days. It's fucked up that people are stuck feeling "less trans" all the time, despite all of their logic and self-knowledge telling them that's not true. We wouldn't have to experience that if we didn't receive the message that there's a specific way to transition, a set of steps that give you trans "points" as you achieve them. Being trans supposedly resists the rules and hierarchy of the binary gender system – so why are there so many norms and values placed on transition?

Even worse to me than the assumption that transition is linear is the failure to recognize transitions to nonbinary identities as "complete." It's so exhausting talking to people in my grandparents' generation, who can't seem to understand that someone could have a transition

goal that isn't "man" or "woman." Where do you see yourself in five years? But what will your legal gender be? What will it say on your driver's license? Which bathroom do you use – when there's no gender-neutral one? If you have facial hair and wear feminine clothing, what are you going to do about the fact that people will stare? What they don't say directly is that's all well and good for now, but in the real world you'll have to choose. I've had these kinds of conversations with people who understand being trans, and respect people's pronouns (at least in theory) but it's so hard for them to comprehend that nonbinary identities aren't just a stepping stone toward an eventual binary one, or why anyone who isn't transitioning to the "opposite" gender would choose to "alter their biology." As if without transitioning to being a man, I'm essentially a nonconforming, masculine woman, and therefore shouldn't change my body.

In five years I hope to be myself. I can't tell you exactly what that will look like, but I don't plan on changing any of the core parts of my identity. I've never planned on that in the past either, though, so who knows? I don't see myself being a man in the future, if that's the question. My legal gender is x. That's what it says on my driver's license. That's what it will say in five years. My decision of which bathroom to use, when just to be able to pee I have to miscategorize myself in a way that feels dysphoric and public, is neither something I want to talk about, nor something that should be taken as a reflection of my gender. No one should be put in that situation, and having gender-neutral bathrooms everywhere isn't just a "nice ideal," it's an accessibility issue. And as far as being femme and having facial hair, maybe I want people to

stare. No disrespect to those who came before me, who had to be the first trans person most people in their life had met, and were constantly singled out when they just wanted to fit in. I am in awe of you. I don't think I would have made it this far if I were in your shoes. But I don't want to fit in. Maybe for me, hearing kids ask their parents if I'm a man or a woman is affirming, and means I'm doing something right. Also, being warned about the dangers of sticking out doesn't make me feel protected. Instead, it feels like people don't take me seriously enough to trust that I know who I am and what's best for me, or that transitioning is worth it.

I wish people wouldn't ask so many questions. I want to help them understand — actually, no, I don't want to be the one to help them, I just want them to understand. No matter how good of a place it comes from, explaining my gender is one of the fastest ways to deflate my energy. It makes me feel like I have to justify or prove myself to people. It makes me wish I didn't have a body — every realistic or imagined feature suddenly feels wrong. I dig my nails into my skin under the table and think cis people don't have to explain themselves like this. Why is it such a big deal to you that I'm on hormones? Why do you treat it so differently than anything else I could choose to do with my body or my life?

And the worst part is that I know these people care about me; I know they love and support me. If they didn't, we wouldn't be having these conversations. What hurts is that they don't see me, and every time they conflate transition with being a man or ask a question that implies if you had to choose, I'm convinced they never will.

* * *

Rosa

The first time a straight guy hit on me it took me completely by surprise. I was showing a series of self-portraits in a little student gallery some of the art professors had put together. I had been trying to capture moments of finding joy in my body – twirling, jumping, and swaying in a long skirt that floated and danced like an extension of myself; pinning my hair into elegant updos; posing dramatically in elaborate costumes. When I was alone or showing the paintings to friends, my chest buzzed with the elated satisfaction of having created something I loved. But now that the portraits were being perceived publicly, I became preoccupied with balling up the cuffs of my sweater in my palms, wishing I could be somewhere else until it was over. I wandered around and took in the other students' work, trying not to look over at mine and attempt to read the observers' reactions. Eventually, I had looked at each art piece several times, and could find nothing better to do with myself than land awkwardly next to my own paintings again.

I noticed him approach in my periphery. I had seen his art in a similar setting once: portraits that exposed the core of a subject with the crook of a smile or the slant of an eye, still lifes of dorm rooms that seemed to reveal a student through the contents of their clutter. His work made me yearn to be witnessed the way he saw the people he painted. Since then, I had seen him around campus a few times, and remembered thinking how cute his glasses looked. Now, he stood in front of my self-portraits and studied them for a full two minutes, his hands in his pockets. I pulled my phone out, just to have something to do with my face other than watch him stare at my work. Finally, he turned his gaze from my paintings to me and walked over to where I stood, pretending not to notice him.

“Hey,” he said. “Are these yours?” He pointed to the paintings with a jerk of his head, apparently too cool to remove his hands from his pockets.

I nodded. “Yeah. They’re, uh, self-portraits.” It said that on the wall: *Rosa Valenzuela, Self Portraits*. On the wall he’d been staring at for the last two minutes.

“Beautiful,” he said, not breaking eye contact. “If I had the opportunity to paint you, I would, too.”

I was too shocked to process how nauseatingly cheesy this was. It was the kind of line I outwardly ridiculed, while trying to ignore the way jealousy coiled in my stomach when others received it. And because until that moment I hadn’t experienced feeling desired by others since starting my transition, my brain was too busy squealing to be

critical. When I replayed the scene in my mind over the next couple of weeks, I came up with a *number* of clever responses that communicated that I would pose for him anytime. But in the moment, all that came out was “Thanks.”

He winked, then turned and walked off toward a cluster of sculptures on the far side of the room. I never talked to him again. I told myself I had missed my chance; he wouldn't be interested after I'd been so awkward, it would be weird to approach him now, he would have moved on. Looking back, those were just the excuses I fed myself so I could keep that moment intact. I couldn't risk it being tarnished by what I believed was inevitable rejection. Instead, I kept it to myself and revisited it frequently over the next few weeks, letting myself be shocked all over again: *Oh my god! Guys think I'm pretty!*

It started happening more after that – a couple of guys flirted with me at parties that semester, although things didn't go very far with any of them, either. I gingerly pushed the boundaries of what felt secure, risking enough to feel desired without becoming vulnerable enough to be seen. Then I filed the memories away and pulled them out when I needed a boost of confidence and euphoria.

I know Jasper had a similar experience before we met each other. He was working as a waiter, and one of the things that made him realize he'd started passing was noticing straight girls flirt with him. Multiple girls slipped him their numbers when they paid the check; and unlike me, he had the guts to do something about it. He went

out with a couple of girls he met at the restaurant, and ended up dating one of them for a few months.

When Jasper came along, I decided I was done being cautious. He was so open that I felt less in danger of being too exposed, and I realized I would rather risk rejection than have the way he looked at me become just another memory I clung to.

Jasper and I are both affirmed by being in a straight relationship. I don't have to relive some of my more awkward moments for proof that guys see me as an attractive girl, because my boyfriend makes sure I don't forget it. We've made a bit out of it, where we compliment each other's outfits by saying things like "That is a make-every-man-in-the-room's-jaw-drop-level dress" or "The ladies will be all over you in that suit." I feel self-conscious and silly about it when Jasper does it in front of Evan and Nico and our other (very queer) friends. I know they're biting back comments about the implications that all men and only men are attracted to women, and that the intention behind a woman dressing up is being ogled by every man in the room. But it isn't meant for them, or anyone else. And when Jasper and I are alone, it's fun and sweet and the perfect compliment.

* * *

Nico

Evan looked up from carefully drawing the liquid into their syringe and caught me studying the vial of testosterone.

“Do you want to try?” they asked.

I had recently decided I wanted to go on T, but I hadn’t told anyone yet – even Ev. As usual, though, he already seemed to suspect. Watching him do his shot was making me realize just how much I wished I could skip over scheduling an appointment and having a prescription filled, and to be able to start now. So *yes*, I wanted to try. The only problem was that I was terrified of needles.

I find it symbolic of masculinity that there are many transmasculine people who, like me, choose to *inject* testosterone despite being afraid of needles, and despite knowing there are other methods. There is something affirming about the ritual of proving your toughness, and of noticing (but never complaining about) the soreness of the injection site. It’s similar to how when I work out, I get euphoria not just from building muscle, but from the act of pushing myself, and the ache in my limbs and core the day after that serves as proof of having done so.

I had already settled on the intramuscular injection method for this reason when Ev asked me if I wanted to try my first shot with their supplies. I wanted each dose to

be a moment of affirmation, which I didn't think I would get by applying gel, or even with a subcutaneous injection. But now, watching Ev push the entire needle into his leg, it didn't exactly seem like an experience I'd want to seek out.

"I think I'm good for now," I said. "But thank you. That's so sweet of you."

"Let me know if you change your mind," they said, smoothing a Band-Aid onto their thigh.

Ev cleaned off their desk of the injection supplies and dropped down next to me on their bed.

"Okay," he said. "Now we can watch French people talk about climate change for another hour."

I unpaused the documentary we were watching for our poli sci class, observing how much deeper Ev's voice was than when I first met them. *Soon that will be me*, I reassured myself. Lately, every time I noticed things like the darkening hair on their upper lip or the added bulk in their arms and shoulders, I thought of it like a promise of what was to come for me.

We had only been watching a few minutes when I started spacing out at the man talking on the screen, imagining what I would look like with his jawline, his stubble. I paused the film before I lost my nerve again.

"I changed my mind."

Ev grinned and clapped the laptop shut. He crossed back to his desk and began arranging supplies: vial of testosterone, two needles, syringe, alcohol pad, gauze pad, Band-Aid. Then he called me over and had me sit in the chair.

“Okay, go ahead and open everything first.” They walked me through each step. I swabbed the alcohol wipe over the vial and wiped down my thigh, then slowly drew up the T into the syringe with the needle with the pink attachment, watching for air bubbles. I switched to the blue needle, and Ev showed me how to locate the correct place on my thigh for the injection: three palm’s widths up from the knee, rotate and pinch. I exhaled, trying to relax the muscle and soothe myself, angled the needle to the ridge of raised skin and –

“ – Nope.” I stopped just before the needle entered my skin, my hand shaking. “I can’t.”

I put the cap back on the needle and set it on its plastic packaging. Ev placed a hand on my shoulder. “How about we forget about it for a second?” he said.

He pulled out his phone and put on his playlist of the songs I’d recommended to him. I turned my chair away from the desk and let everything but Hozier and Evan leave my mind. Ev was such a theater kid it was almost painful. They sang *everything* in their musical theater voice, apparently even “Jackie and Wilson.” I sang along with them, trying to mimic the level of drama they were putting into every line. I knew their over-the-top expressions were on purpose, to distract me, and I let it work for both of

our sakes. As the song finished, Ev asked if I wanted to try the shot again or go back to our documentary. I said I would try again, but asked him to replay the song while I did.

I relocated the injection site and uncapped the needle, but froze again before I could insert it.

“We don’t have to do this, Nico,” Ev said. “And there are other ways if injection doesn’t work for you.”

“I know, I know.” I understood they just meant to be kind, but the suggestion that I couldn’t handle injections felt damaging to my pride, despite all the evidence that they were right. In a moment of stubbornness, I jabbed the needle into my thigh and pressed down on the syringe. I squeezed my eyes shut at the stinging, made worse because I had forgotten to relax the muscle. As I removed the needle, Ev was ready with the gauze and Band-Aid, and then with a hug. I felt the tension drain out of me, replaced by relief, then a flicker of joy. Ev let go, and we continued our dramatic rendition of Hozier while he started cleaning up and I wiped tears from the corners of my eyes.

* * *

Gabrielle

The idea started forming when I walked past a bridal shop one day on the way back from lunch. There was a gorgeous dress in the window that I wanted to try on more than anything: it was the perfect combination of fitted and flowy, satin and lace. It would've looked incredible on me. As I turned and headed toward work, I began mourning the fact that I'd missed out on wearing a dress at my wedding.

When our therapist heard our anniversary was coming up, she asked if we had anything planned. "I want to retake our wedding photos," I said. "If that's alright with you, babe."

Audrey looked shocked for a second, then broke into a big smile. "I would love that."

I don't know the last time I had seen Audrey so excited about anything. She called photographers, contacted the botanical garden where we got married, and tracked down a pair of white heels in my size. It reminded me of when we were planning our wedding. The dress I'd seen in the window was too expensive, but we found one secondhand that I loved, and Audrey pulled hers from the back of the closet and got it dry-cleaned and refitted.

On the morning of the photo shoot, we went to get our hair and makeup done together. I felt I was simultaneously performing all the rituals of preparing for formal

occasions for the first time – school dances, fancy parties, my wedding. I was still new to using makeup, and I often ended up with jagged eyeliner and misplaced contour lines.

It felt good to have someone do it who could execute my vision better than I could.

When I looked in the mirror after putting on my dress, I let out an excited squeal.

Audrey laughed at me and wrapped her arms around me from behind.

During the photoshoot Audrey and I kissed for the first time since I came out. I didn't think about it as I cupped her face and pulled it toward mine; we were just following the photographer's directions. But when I pulled away I noticed her eyes. She looked surprised, but full of an adoration that I had missed, sorely. I put my arms around her and held on tight.

"I think we may have gone overboard with the wedding photos," I said after we'd hung them up the next week. They were in the living room, the hall, our room, and even the guest bedroom.

"But you look so beautiful in all of them," Audrey said. "How could we choose?"

I blushed. I interlaced our fingers and turned to a photo above the couch. It must have been from the moment after our kiss – Audrey was looking up at me like I was everything. "You look so gorgeous," I said. When I looked over she was smiling shyly beside me, and I realized she needed to hear it as much as I did.

* * *

Ezra

Nico invited me to his apartment after dinner. I was pretty nervous, since I hadn't hooked up with anyone since my surgery, but his dimples were so cute that I ignored the anxiety and said yes.

The apartment was neat and cozy, with potted succulents and spider plants carefully distributed across the dining and living room surfaces. Nico offered me a glass of water, and we sat on the couch and chatted, about work and friends and our experiences navigating the dating scene as gay trans men. He laughed at jokes I hadn't even tried to make, and looked at me like nothing was more important or fascinating than each piece of small talk I offered. When he kissed me, his breath still tasted like the handful of peppermints he'd grabbed on the way out of the restaurant.

I leaned into him and wrapped my hand around the back of his neck. The way Nico kissed me felt exactly like the way he listened – attentive, as if he wanted to savor each word, each movement. I was finally starting to get out of my head enough to feel confident and present when he started lifting my shirt.

"I – sorry, where's your bathroom?" I said, climbing clumsily off the couch. He pointed to a door just down the hall.

I locked the door behind me and immediately started kicking myself for leaving. I was probably overreacting, and I might have just fucked things up with a great guy by running away and making it horribly awkward. So now I had another thing to be anxious about. I leaned against the bathroom door and took a moment to steady my breathing. Slowly, I lifted my shirt and studied my scars in the mirror. They were still so pink, and looked like wounds in a way that did *not* feel sexy. I remembered Nico mentioning his recovery from top surgery over dinner, and wondered if he'd been scared to hook up after, too. *No*, I told myself. *He was probably normal and put together about it.* I lowered my shirt so I didn't have to stare at my chest anymore. *He knows what the scars look like, though*, I thought. *I'm sure he had to look at his own a lot, so he's not going to be jump-scared or repulsed or anything.* That didn't do much to reassure me or help me feel attractive, but it was something. *And I can always leave if it's too much*, I told myself. I took another breath and went to join Nico on the couch again.

"Hey Ezra, are you okay?" he asked. "I didn't mean to push you or anything. We can just watch a movie, or call it a night if you want."

"Yeah, I'm okay," I said. "Just feeling self-conscious."

Nico looked at me earnestly. "You look incredible, for what it's worth."

“Thank you,” I said, blushing. “It’s not that, though – I just haven’t hooked up with anyone since top surgery. I’m feeling weird about it, I guess.”

Nico nodded. “I absolutely get that,” he said. “I’m sure you look incredible there, too, but we can definitely keep our shirts on.”

“Thanks,” I said. I took a sip of my water, unsure what else to do with myself.

“I was pretty nervous my first time after getting top, too,” Nico said after a moment. “It just felt new and vulnerable, you know?”

I nodded. “What happened?”

“He started kissing my scars, and it was so hot I forgot to be scared.” I watched Nico’s face turn pink.

I smiled with the corner of my mouth, and gently took the hem of his shirt between my fingertips. I looked into his eyes – soft, rich brown, wide. “Can I?” I asked. It was almost a whisper.

Nico returned my gaze and nodded, his breath catching. He helped me pull his shirt over his head. His scars were more faded, but the same shape as mine. And they were gorgeous on him. I leaned down and kissed along the lines of pink, raised flesh, pressing their texture against my lips. His fingers moved to my hair as my mouth traveled the length of his incisions. I pulled off my own shirt and guided Nico’s hands to trace across my scars. When I looked down at the patches of pink showing through

his fingertips, they didn't seem ugly anymore, and they were no longer just a reminder of the pain I endured to get them.

They were beautiful.

* * *

Ezra

I sometimes forget how different the rest of the world is from the very queer and trans social environments I mostly exist in. When I started my new job, it wasn't just being the new guy in the office that made me feel like an outsider. There was clearly an unspoken dress code, which did not include the short-sleeved mauve floral button-up and platform boots I was wearing on my first day. I introduced myself to everyone I talked to by saying "Hi, I'm Ezra, he/him." People mostly responded "I'm Dave," or "I'm Lisa," with the implicit *I have the privilege of never having been misgendered; I won't mention my pronouns because you must already know them*. A few people added their pronouns to their introductions, but in a tone that said *well obviously, as I'm sure you guessed. I'm the default*.

Everyone was very nice though. During my first week, I was approached in the breakroom by a couple of guys who invited me to join their fantasy basketball league. I told them I didn't follow the NBA enough to participate in the league, but I would still be happy to watch the games with them sometimes. I got invited over to Dave's for the game that Saturday, and Benji said if I ever changed my mind about the fantasy league he would help me build a team.

The next day, a woman walked up to me while I was pouring myself a coffee.

"Ezra, right?" she asked. I nodded. "Welcome! I'm Natalie. What do you think of the office so far?"

We chatted for a bit about work, our favorite coffee spots, and Natalie's new puppy. When I insisted I needed to head back to my desk with my now lukewarm coffee, Natalie said "Wait, before you go – a group of women in the office like to go out for drinks on Thursday nights, and we know you're not a woman, but you seem really sweet. We'd love it if you joined us."

"That sounds lovely," I said. "Count me in."

The only other trans person in the office was a woman named Gabrielle. She was about ten years older than me, and she mostly kept to herself. The small interactions I had with her were some of the times I felt most at home in the office, though. Everyone else was very kind; but whether I was watching basketball with the guys or chatting

over cocktails with the ladies, I was aware of how gendered the setting was, and that I was the only one who attended both gatherings.

With Gabrielle, though, I felt like I got a smaller-scale version of the making fun of gender norms and reclaiming them for ourselves that I experienced with my friends outside of work. Every time we overheard a sentence that started with “Women are so...” or “Men always...,” Gabrielle and I would shake our heads at each other. We also loved complimenting each other’s outfits and seeing the little spark of joy it caused. Even though we weren’t very close, I felt like we saw each other more clearly than the rest of our coworkers saw us. It was nice feeling like there was someone who understood, and like we had each other’s backs.

I noticed that Gabrielle was never at Thursday night drinks, so after checking with Natalie, I decided to invite her. In hindsight, it probably would have been better if she had gotten the invitation from one of the women, but she still grinned when I asked her. At the bar, I noticed her deep in conversation with Natalie and a couple of the other women, laughing and trading stories. She, understandably, seemed much more in her element at ladies' night than I did. Her face was lit up the entire time, and whenever I looked over at her, I felt myself smiling, too.

The next time I hung out with the guys from the office to watch basketball, I thought of Gabrielle, and tried to see if I felt remotely as affirmed by being part of guys' night as she had by being invited to girls' night at the bar. I didn't. The office guys'

version of masculinity was so different from mine, which made it hard to feel like I belonged with them in any real way. Doing “guy” things with them didn’t feel like an affirmation of my manhood, because for me, being a man didn’t include arguing about sports over a couple of beers. I had nothing against doing that with them every once in a while, but if anything, it made me feel more detached from my gender.

Once, when I was over for the game, I offered to grab beers for a couple of the guys from the kitchen. When I went to open the fridge, I noticed a small trans flag magnet on the door. I asked Dave about it as I handed him his beer.

“Yeah, that’s for my daughter, Sage,” he said, nodding about five times before opening the bottle and taking a sip.

I saw Dave differently after that – I felt more at home around him knowing Gabrielle and I weren’t the only trans people in his life.

After a few weeks, I made friends with Art, the only other guy who hung out at Dave’s during the games who wasn’t part of the fantasy league. He always brought a dish he’d made, and it was always delicious – a level of quality that stood out from the store-bought onion dip and microwaved pizza pockets Dave had to share. Art spent much more time making sure everyone had tried the mini quiches, or ceviche, or spanakopita, asking how the food was and what he should make next, and sending his recipes to people who asked, than he did actually watching the game. I enjoyed being

the odd one out with him, and liked that it meant I was different from the rest of the group in a way that a cis guy related to.

* * *

Sage

When we started dating, Nola was the definition of masc – short hair; baggy clothing; avoided dresses, makeup, and anything else she considered “girly.” Strangers they/them-ed her constantly; and when trans people heard her pronouns were she/her, they shared a look that said *for now*. But Nola was always very clear on her gender: she felt a sense of connection and solidarity with other women, and thought the label fit her well. She took pleasure in breaking people’s expectations of how a woman “should” look or act. She didn't seem to mind people’s incorrect assumptions about her gender, though – it was affirming for her to be seen as masculine and recognizably queer, even if it came with being misgendered.

In the first few months of our relationship, I experienced Nola’s gender as rigid, something that never reached beyond the mental box it occupied for me. *Never wears*

skirts, never wears pink – there were rules she always followed. So when she broke those rules, it caught me completely off guard.

The two of us had spent a Saturday afternoon in my apartment together, reading on the couch, interrupting each other's books to share a passage or an anecdote from our week. As it started getting dark, I made myself roll off of her lap and get changed out of my sweatpants, before we had to leave to meet our friends for dinner. While I was doing my hair, Nola wandered into my bedroom to retrieve the sweater she'd flung onto the floor the night before.

"Ooh, those are pretty," she said, eyeing the new pack of barrettes I'd just opened. They came in pastel blue, pink, and yellow, and each was dotted with tiny flowers. "I love them."

"You wanna try them on?" I asked. I meant it as a joke, because I simply could not imagine Nola wearing anything that cutesy. She seemed to take it seriously, though.

"Yeah," she said sheepishly. "I kind of do."

I held out the sleeve of cardboard they were clipped on toward her, and she grabbed a blue barrette and a pink one. She clipped one on each side of her head, pulling her short side bangs out of her face. It was striking how such a small accessory could completely change the energy Nola's outfit gave off – it softened her.

Nola examined herself in the mirror, rotating her head back and forth to get a look at her side profile. "Those look really cute on you," I told her. She smiled bashfully at her reflection.

"People don't call me cute," she said.

It was true. People (including me) had called her strong, or hot, or handsome, sometimes even gorgeous, but never cute.

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to read her expression in the mirror. "Should I not have?"

"I don't know," Nola said. She was quiet a moment, fiddling with the hem of her t-shirt. "I think I like it, I'm just not used to it. I'm not sure what to do with it." She turned away from the mirror and picked up her sweater off the floor.

"You don't have to do anything," I said, using a handful of blue barrettes to clip back the front sections of my hair. "Just sit there and look cute." I spun around in my chair, crossed my right leg over my left, and folded my hands in my lap to demonstrate. Nola nodded. She looked unsure, caught up in her own thoughts.

We continued getting ready – I put on makeup, and Nola mostly sat on the bed and waited. When I grabbed my coat and went to turn off the bedroom light on the way out the door, Nola took off the barrettes and set them back on my desk before following me.

"You can wear them to dinner if you want," I told her.

"I think I'd feel too silly," Nola said, "but thank you."

Later, when we'd returned from dinner and settled onto the couch, I caught Nola's eye. She'd had the same expression since we left for the restaurant, like she was contemplating saying something.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Nola shrugged. "The barrettes brought me back to when I was a little kid. I would dress up in my fairy princess costume and use the entire house for my 'ballet' performances." She smiled self-consciously. "I don't think I've felt fully comfortable being feminine since then. It's hard to imagine that girl as me, though; it feels like a completely different person." Nola paused, absentmindedly drumming her fingers on my knee. "I think I miss it, though."

After that night, Nola started opening up more about her relationship to femininity. She and her friends had stopped being girly in elementary school, she told me. They had wanted to be cool and do what the boys did, like play kickball and talk about *Star Wars* and change their favorite colors from pink and purple to blue.

"My friends started caring about girly things again in middle school," Nola said one evening. We were driving back to her place after seeing a movie, and I'd been telling her about how the skirt I was wearing reminded me of one I'd always loved that Kayla had in eighth grade.

“Like you were the odd one out if you didn’t own a mini skirt,” Nola continued, “or whatever the slightly longer, tween-appropriate version is called. By that point, I knew I was gay, and I wanted to fit in with my friends – but everything seemed to secretly be about boys for them.” Nola lowered her eyebrows, apparently still perplexed by this. “I realized ‘slumber parties’ had gone from meaning extended playdates to being code for a set of activities to do while talking about our crushes. I stopped going to them before I got good at makeovers or manicures, because even though my friends were accepting of me being gay, they still treated having crushes on boys – and especially having boys like them back – as social currency. It was hard not to feel like the odd one out.”

In eighth grade, Nola said, a girl on her basketball team found out she was gay and acted surprised. “You don’t look gay, though,” the girl said. On the first day of high school, Nola was unrecognizable. She’d cut her hair, replaced her entire wardrobe, even changed the way she carried herself. She did everything she could to make sure no one was surprised again.

“I showed up to a school dance once in a red dress, and someone teased me about going back in the closet, because it was just so different from the kinds of things I usually wore.” Nola looked down at her baggy carpenter pants and tugged at the hammer loop. “But I really liked that dress, and I was having fun wearing it until that comment.”

“Later in high school, and definitely in college, I started meeting femme lesbians,” Nola said. “I had a moment of ‘Oh, that can look gay, too.’ But by then it seemed like I’d already boxed myself in too much to pull that off. The couple of times I tried, it felt like no one took me seriously. It was like when guys wear drag as a joke.”

I guess when Nola and I met, I was so caught up in my own experience of gender as a trans person that it hadn’t even occurred to me that gender expression could be compulsory in non-normative ways too. Nola assured me that she felt comfortable in her masculinity, and that it felt true to who she was. If she had it to do again, though, it would be a smaller part of her than it was now.

“You know,” I told her, “it’s not too late to change that.”

She shrugged and scrunched her face, but didn’t say anything.

“No pressure,” I said. “But if you ever want to do makeup and manicures and *not* talk about boys, let me know.”

* * *

Gabrielle

Last year, I went to Pride without Audrey. It was the first June since I'd come out; and although things between us had been getting better, when I mentioned Pride I could see the discomfort in her eyes. I guess whatever progress we'd made wasn't enough to make her, a woman who had always thought of herself as straight, but now suddenly found herself in a queer relationship, seek out an environment where she would be surrounded by reminders of the rapid changes in her life: loud reminders wearing brightly colored, skimpy clothing. I desperately wanted to dress up in a tiny outfit that made me feel gorgeous, edgy, confident, and like myself. And I wanted to be able to celebrate without worrying I was making Audrey uncomfortable. So I dropped the topic with her, and started looking for someone else to go with.

We had a few queer friends who I thought of asking, but I worried they would have opinions about Audrey not going, or make judgments on the state of our marriage. Plus they were all cis, and it felt important to me to be there with other trans people. So I decided to ask Ezra. I felt guilty since I didn't know him well, and he had already done so much by inviting me to Thursday night drinks. I finally felt like the other women in the office saw me as one of them, and I owed that to Ezra. I worried that asking for something else would be too much; but he was such a sweet guy, and I could tell it was important to him that the two of us looked out for each other.

Ezra's eyes lit up when I asked him. "That sounds so fun!" He set his coffee cup down on the small break room table. "Wait, actually, I told the guy I'm seeing that I could go with him, so I should check and make sure he's okay with you joining us. I can't imagine he wouldn't be, though. And I would love to have you."

"No, no," I said. "I don't want to impose on your date. I'm sure I can find someone else to –"

"– No, please. Let me ask my roommates if they can join too, and we can make it a whole group thing."

"Are you sure?" I probably shouldn't have asked him. I didn't want him to rearrange his plans around me. I knew that if Audrey had been excited to go to Pride as a date, I wouldn't have wanted to trade that for anything.

"I'm sure," Ezra said. "That honestly sounds perfect to me. Pride should be celebrated as a community, and you're an important part of mine." He said it so matter-of-factly, unaware how much weight those words held. It was so new to me to be wanted and accepted *because of* this part of myself. "Plus," Ezra smiled, "I've been looking for an excuse to drag my roommates along."

I sometimes felt strange when I stopped to think that though Ezra was significantly younger, he had taken on a role as protective mentor for me. My life would have been so different if I'd come out in my late teens like he had. By now, I could be the trans mentor in the office, surrounded by people who had formed relationships with

the person I am now, instead of the one I'd been pretending to be for most of my life. But then I might never have found Audrey. I was grateful that I was out now, and for both of our sakes I was glad Ezra came out when he did.

If I felt odd about my age difference with Ezra, it was even more apparent with his whole friend group there. His roommates, his date, and the two friends his date brought to Pride were all in their early to mid-twenties. As I approached them in a pair of heels I was still learning to walk in, I wondered if I should have come. I'd felt so young in my tight leather skirt and sequined top before leaving the house; but now, next to all of these kids with brightly dyed hair and nose piercings, I felt out of place. *It's weird to hang out with them like I'm one of them, I thought to myself. Right? They'll probably feel weird about it.*

When Ezra saw me, his mouth fell open. "Gabrielle," he said. "You look *amazing*." The rest of the group echoed him, and I beamed. I noticed he sounded, well, gayer than he did in the office. Not that he hid who he was at work. I think everyone knew he was a gay trans man; and, as far as I knew, no one gave him shit about it. But seeing how he acted around his roommates, I realized how toned down his voice and mannerisms were with our colleagues. It felt good to be allowed to see this version of him, like I had been promoted from just a work friend to simply a friend.

Ezra introduced me: "Gabi, these are my roommates Wes, Keaton, and Mona. This is *Nico*." His tone made it immediately obvious that Nico was the guy he was

seeing. I could hear the smile in his voice, and he did this cute little shy, one-shouldered shrug. He seemed to really like Nico.

“And these are Nico’s friends Ollie and Wren,” Ezra continued. “I just met them a few minutes ago.”

I said hi to everyone and we swapped pronouns, then headed into the large park full of vendors and performers.

Ezra’s roommate Mona walked next to me. “I love your heels!” she said, brushing a pink curl out of her eye. “Can I ask where you got them? I can never find any in my size.”

“I actually got these off of eBay,” I told them. “But I think there were a few other sites I looked on that had some good options. I can try to find them for you later if you want.”

“I would love that!” Mona said. “Thank you! Remind me to give you my number once we find somewhere to sit down, and we can stay in contact and swap resources?” I agreed, as the group followed Nico to the end of a line of people waiting to buy meal and drink tickets.

The conversation tapered off, and the suspicion I was out of place settled back in. I looked around – there were crowds of people in every direction, and they all seemed more in their element than I was. I wished I could be sharing this new experience with Audrey. Instead, I felt like as an adult woman with a marriage and a mortgage, I was

masquerading as part of a group of twenty-somethings – who all held so much in common, while I could only relate to being trans.

Mona turned to me as we inched forward in the ticket line. “I’ve been thinking about starting some sort of group chat and hangout for the trans femme people I know,” she said, “if you’d want to be a part of that. We could all get dinner every couple weeks or something. I feel like I don’t have many close trans femme friends, and it would be really good to have that community and support.”

“Yes!” I said, jolting myself from my reverie of anxiety and self-pity. “I could really use something like that.”

“Right?” Mona’s face brightened at my shared excitement. “Maybe Nico’s friend would want to join,” they said. “Sorry, I’m terrible with names, uhh –”

“ – Wren?” I asked.

“Yes! Wren!” Mona replied, loud enough for the entire line to hear.

“Yeah?” Wren called from the back of the group.

Mona and I laughed, and waved them over.

“We’re planning a regular dinner for trans femme people,” Mona said, as if we’d formed the idea together. “And we were wondering if you wanted in.”

“Ooh please,” Wren said. “That sounds amazing!”

We started talking about our favorite restaurants that were good for bringing large groups to, and Mona and Wren brainstormed friends and acquaintances they

could invite. As we left the ticket stand and walked toward a stage of drag performers, I realized that for all my worrying about not fitting in with these people, they seemed completely unconcerned with it, as if it had never occurred to them to see me as the odd one out.

* * *

Mona

My roommate Ezra used to drag me along to gay bars before he and his boyfriend started dating. Sometimes he would meet someone, and I'd end up at the bar alone or swaying by myself; but some nights we would jump around together and twirl each other on the dancefloor, laughing and shouting to be heard over the music.

One of the first times Ezra and I went together, a masc in a leather jacket walked up to my bar stool and told me I was the prettiest person in the room, and that my dress looked hot on me. The rush of euphoria hit me at the same time as a staggering wave of discomfort. Yes, being called pretty was absolutely a positive gender moment, but in this setting it wasn't just a compliment. It meant they wanted something from me –

something I didn't want – and it made my entire body tense with unease and aversion. I had to stop myself from physically shaking off the gross sensation that coated my body. In this case, being seen as pretty felt inseparable from being sexualized, and I wasn't convinced it was worth it.

I forced a smile even though I felt queasy, and delivered a quick, rehearsed rejection. Ezra, standing about twenty feet away, must have seen my face; he rushed over as my admirer shrugged and headed for another corner of the bar. Ezra made sure I was okay; I told him I was fine, but he still decided to take me home and stop for milkshakes on the way. It seemed unnecessary, but I didn't particularly want to stay in the bar anyway, so I didn't complain.

At least by that point, I understood why being flirted with was so distressing to me. When I was younger, I used to beat myself up for freaking out when I received this kind of attention – *I was supposed to want it*, I thought. Pretty soon after Adelaide and I became close, I figured out I was trans. I realized there was a difference between the way I felt about her and how my friends felt about their crushes, and I would much rather look like Adelaide than kiss her. I spent another couple of years after that buying into the “you just need to meet the right person” advice, though, and waiting for the day I finally had my first real crush.

When I was a senior in high school, one of my friends came out to me as asexual. I had never heard the term before. As he told me about how he wasn't interested in sex,

ever, with anyone, I kept thinking back to all the times my friends had talked about their hookups, and I'd struggled to understand why they would want that. I remembered pausing movies when characters started making out, trying to force myself into their shoes but ending up feeling uncomfortable and wishing the scene was over. I had always figured the idea of sex would be more appealing once I met someone I liked enough to do it with.

When I got home, I started researching. The more I read about the ace spectrum, the more convinced I was I was on it. And then I came across the label "aromantic." I felt the excitement reach up into my throat from my chest, and my eyes opened wide, unblinking. For the first time, not having crushes was more than a personal conundrum, something I convinced myself would be "fixed" over time. Now, it was something I shared with a community of lovely people. I felt more connected to my gender than before, like I could finally lean into the aspects of femininity that didn't feel tied to sex or romance to me, without worrying as much about the rest.

After the night I was hit on at the bar, I put meticulous thought into my outfit anytime Ezra and I went. I wanted to toe the line of feeling cute, and maybe receiving a compliment, without being blatantly hit on. I wanted the kind of comments that don't have to *mean* anything else, like when a friend says "You look so cute," or a stranger says "I love your outfit" in passing. Of course, I didn't have control over all that, but imagining that I did sometimes helped me relax. Having someone flirt with me felt

similar to the discomfort my friends described when they were hit on by people who made them uneasy. For me, though, feeling revulsed or unsafe usually had nothing to do with the person – it was about the situation itself. For the most part, when people did try to flirt with me, I focused on the affirmation of being seen as attractive, and did my best not to overthink the uncomfortable parts. I got better at holding onto *this person thinks I'm beautiful*, and telling myself it didn't have to mean anything else. Sometimes when I treated it as nothing more than a sweet compliment, people took the hint and stopped pursuing me, and it became the kind of friendly, gender-affirming interaction I craved. And even when the implications of someone being attracted to me were too much, and separating out the part that did feel good got too complicated, I knew I could always count on Ezra and our other roommates to hype me up in a way that felt safe and utterly platonic.

Ezra and I started hanging out less once he and Nico got together. He would still invite me to the bar on Friday nights on occasion, because it was tradition; but usually Nico was there too, so I would end up feeling like even more of a third wheel than before. He definitely didn't need me along as moral support anymore. Wes and Keaton also had date night on Fridays, so those nights I ended up feeling stuck between two couples, like no matter what I did, I would feel a bit uncomfortable, extraneous. Or just alone. I looked forward to the nights I met with Gabi and the rest of the trans femme group, where I could be in a social setting that wasn't dominated by couples.

When my roommates and other friends talked about crushes or the beginnings of relationships, it sometimes brought me back to middle and early high school, when I felt like an outsider, unable to relate or participate in those conversations. I still felt disconnected from the twentysomethings' version of *I dare you to ask her out*, or *We almost kissed* — something along the lines of *We hooked up and it was really good, I think this could really go somewhere*. Now, though, when Wes and Keaton told me about their crushes or first dates with other partners, I realized I'd chiseled out a life where I no longer needed to twist some remotely related experience into a crush to convince any of us I fit in. I could admire a beautiful woman or get something positive out of being flirted with without wondering why, or why it was different from the way my friends talked about attraction.

* * *

Sage

Once Nola started opening up about feeling unable to express her femininity, I realized how much more we had in common than I'd imagined. She could relate to

experiencing pressure to push down pieces of herself that it felt unsafe to show, or like they wouldn't be well received; she'd encountered the weight of the negative aspects of her masculinity that felt compulsory; and now, she knew the joy of (re)discovering femininity on her own terms. It was a new experience for me to be "ahead of" a cis woman in learning femininity. Getting to lend Nola a pastel cardigan or pair of earrings every once in a while, or style her hair, did a lot of good for both of us.

One thing we were both still unlearning was the pressure not to be "overly" emotional. We both had a hard time with intense displays of emotion. I realized I'd never seen Nola cry, and I only ever cried in the moments that felt like a load-bearing wall in my life was crumbling.

When I finally went on E, I told Nola that one of the things that most excited me was that I'd be able to cry more. She looked at me incredulously, unable to comprehend why anyone would *want* that. I wasn't sure how long the emotional changes would take, but I wanted to do anything I could to prepare and help speed them along. I started by giving myself permission to cry, trying to let go of some of the tension I held in my entire body, and making myself sit in my emotions for longer before pushing past them. I went another two months without a single tear.

When I finally did cry, it was so intense that I almost changed my mind about wanting to. Nola and I went shopping for a birthday gift for her niece, and I found myself face-to-face with a doll from my childhood. Addie had had one just like it, and I

would play with it when she left it lying around. I would change the doll's clothes and set up tea parties where she was the host. Dad kept placing the doll out of my reach, or in places he thought I wouldn't find it, and trying to catch my attention with new toy race cars and monster trucks instead. When I saw the doll in the store with Nola, I couldn't tell if I wanted to buy it or stuff it to the back of the shelf and run away and never see it again.

I told Nola I needed to wait in the car, and left her alone in the store without an explanation. The tears started then. They silently welled up and I brushed them aside. When we got back to my apartment, I went straight to my room and started crying in earnest. Poor Nola came in to check on me, and just sat next to me on my bed when I couldn't catch my breath to explain.

I swore I never wanted to cry again. But that week, still feeling emotionally raw and defenseless, I was able to cry, for the first time I could remember, over having a long, stressful day. The following week, I let it happen again. As the sobs calmed down, and I swept the remaining tears from the corners of my eyes, Nola looked up at me.

"You're crying like a girl, Sage," she said. Her face was blank, but I noticed the hint of warmth that crept into her voice when she made a joke. I snorted, then beamed behind my tissue as I sniffled.

* * *

Jo

For years, when I thought of myself in the '80s, tall and butch in a way that often got me mistaken for a man, I pictured it as funny. I didn't remember until recently how the mistake used to make me smile inside. My girlfriend at the time didn't like that, when we went out together, people thought she was dating a man, so I started adding touches of femininity to my outfits. I learned to wear scarves over my loose sweaters so that people would realize I was a woman – just that little touch was enough. It wasn't until much later that I realized that wasn't what I wanted

When I came out to my friends recently as nonbinary, they felt it was a betrayal – as if it was something I was doing *to* them. We'd all fought so hard to carve out a space for ourselves in the world where we could be women who rejected every norm society tried to impose on us. And now that I knew I wasn't a woman, they were upset, not only because that made me an outsider in our group, but because to them I was mirroring sexist society and rejecting womanhood. To them, I was suggesting somehow that women who loved women and who dressed and “acted like” men were not women at all.

My friend Marge, specifically, had a hard time with it. She had always treated everything like a debate. For decades, the two of us had been giving each other reading recommendations – theory, novels, poetry, whatever we happened across and found interesting. Whenever either of us finished something the other had recommended, Marge invited me over and we sat in her living room and picked the reading apart over a dish of her seven-layer dip.

“Okay, I’ll grant her the compulsory heterosexuality,” Marge had said during one of these conversations, on Adrienne Rich’s “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” “I know we’ve both experienced that. But the idea that women’s friendships are lesbian relationships feels like whitewashing to me.”

“You wouldn’t call this a lesbian relationship?”

“Well, I guess, but only because we’re both lesbians. But my mother and her friend Sue could never be in a lesbian relationship. If you’ve never felt attraction and desire for another woman, if you don’t have to live with the reality of being excluded and looked down on because of that attraction, then you don’t have a right to call yourself a lesbian, no matter how strong your friendships are with women.”

“I don’t think Rich meant that women who are friends are lesbians, or that that’s the same as erotic connection,” I said. “I think she was trying to say that all relationships between women are a form of resistance against male domination.”

“Sure,” Marge said, “but then call it something else.”

These conversations often unfolded in this way – Marge and I would agree on the contents of a given text up to a certain point, and then we’d debate the portion on which we had conflicting thoughts indefinitely. Marge had unwavering opinions. Life had taught her to be louder and tougher than those who tried to deny her existence or tell her who she was. She’d built an unshakeable sense of self, informed by the stubborn rejection of anything that appeared to threaten it. I sometimes felt, when we’d argue, that to her each opinion was an uncompromisable piece of identity. I always *understood* her opinions, and often at least partly agreed with them; but I sometimes got frustrated that, in her refusal to change her mind, she missed what I felt were important ideas. It wasn’t that she never learned from the books she read, but once she’d formed an opinion on them, it was very hard to change it. Still, when I did get frustrated with her I rarely stayed that way. Although we almost always disagreed, the debate was confined to the book we were discussing. As soon as we changed the topic and moved on to our concrete, everyday lives, we seemed to get along perfectly again.

When I came out to Marge, though, things felt different. She, like all of my friends, was shocked. I guess there’s a way in which having a friend of forty years, with whom you’ve always shared an identity, come out to you can be more surprising than having your teen child do so. Of course, parents like to think they know their children, and can be resistant when they find they didn’t know them as well as they thought. But at the same time, their kid has been in a constant state of major growth and change for

their entire life. Marge, on the other hand, experienced the jolt of discovering I was not who I'd claimed – *insisted* – I had been for the past forty years.

When she'd recovered enough, Marge began to question me: *What makes you think you're... nonbinary? Why are you abandoning your womanhood, women, feminism?* It felt too similar to our discussions on books we'd read. I realized that the reason we hadn't argued about our personal lives before was that, up until then, Marge had never felt that my life threatened her sense of self.

"This isn't up for debate," I told her. I grabbed my coat on the way out.

Marge and I were more distant after that. We still saw each other with other friends, and she continued to call me "she" and used the version of my name that I'd told her felt wrong. Most of my friends did the same, but it felt more pointed coming from Marge.

I started to dislike finishing books, without someone to discuss them with. It felt incomplete to silently file their contents away in my mind and move on to the next one.

At the end of a bridge tournament one Saturday, I wordlessly handed Marge my copy of a book I had recently finished – Simone Wittig's *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. To me it was important, exciting, even revolutionary; and I'd been longing to talk to someone about it. I couldn't believe it had taken me so many years to discover it. Of course, part of me hoped this would be one of the few books that altered Marge's perspective as she read it; but I didn't let myself have faith that it would truly change

her mind on anything, or bring us closer together. I still felt it was important to share, though. She took the book from me with a small smile that seemed forced. A couple of weeks later I received an email from her: *I finished your book. Come over tomorrow if you want to discuss it.*

I showed up the next afternoon feeling apprehensive. My presentation hadn't changed much since I came out. I had sported men's haircuts and clothing for as long as I could remember, so it didn't feel like there were any simple changes I needed or wanted to make. I'd heard about binders, but I wasn't sure my back could take that. Still, I felt immensely different sitting on Marge's couch now than I had the hundreds of other times over the years, and not just because things were tense between us. I was mid-transition, even if it wasn't a physical one. I worried though, that my friends wouldn't take me seriously if I looked exactly the same; that they would take it as evidence that I remained the woman they'd always seen me as, and that they could continue to treat me as one.

Marge entered from the kitchen with her usual 8x8 casserole dish of dip and bowl of chips. She set them on the coffee table between us, and settled into her armchair. She pointed to the book, also on the coffee table.

"Good read," she said.

"I'm glad you think so," I said. "I agree."

“Wittig reminds me of an extreme version of Adrienne Rich,” Marge said. “They both describe heterosexuality as compulsory; but for Wittig, the compulsion goes much deeper than Rich imagined.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “For Wittig, heterosexuality doesn’t just oppress women, it creates them.”

“Right. So by Wittig’s logic, if you refuse heterosexuality, you refuse womanhood. Can you just do that?”

“If you can refuse the sexuality being imposed on you, why not the gender?” I grabbed a chip and scooped up as much dip as it could hold.

“But I didn’t choose to refuse the gender,” Marge said.

“Did you *choose* to be a lesbian?” I crunched the dip-covered chip, accentuating my point.

“Well, no,” Marge said. “But when I realized I wasn’t straight, I chose to live my life accordingly.”

“Wouldn’t you do the same if you felt that way about your gender?”

Marge just looked at me for a moment. She ate a chip.

“That’s not Wittig’s point,” she said, when her mouth was no longer occupied.

“She’s saying that any lesbian is by definition not a woman, because the category ‘woman’ is a function of the heteropatriarchy. But in practice, that doesn’t seem to be

true – nearly everyone considers lesbians women. And if we *aren't*, don't we lose an important solidarity with straight women?"

"I think people consider lesbians women, but 'failed' ones," I said. "Not 'womanly,' not 'true' women. We've had to fight for recognition and acceptance as women. And Wittig believes that's the wrong fight. Yes, she thinks we should be in solidarity with women, but as a means of organizing to abolish the category of 'woman.' Because as long as there's difference, there will be hierarchy."

"But what if I *want* to be a woman?"

"Are you asking me, or Wittig?" I said.

"I'm not sure," Marge responded. Both?"

"Well, *Wittig* would say you're complicit in maintaining the system of heterosexuality, and the exploitation of women's reproduction and labor. *I* say that you, as one single person, don't shoulder the burden of either dismantling or maintaining the system. And I believe you should use whatever labels feel fitting to you."

"*You* don't want to be a woman, though." It was a statement, but her eyes were questioning.

"No."

"Because of this?" She gestured vaguely at the book.

"I'd say for me it feels more personal than a political statement or strategy. I do think Wittig makes a lot of valuable points, though."

“So if lesbians, apparently, aren’t women, then are you still a lesbian?” Marge asked.

“Yeah,” I replied. “I’ve thought about it, and it still feels like that fits me.”

“Good,” Marge said. She took a bite of seven-layer dip. “I can live with that, then.”

I chose not to say that having a friend be “able to live with” your personal identity was a lousy consolation prize. I decided that, for now, I’d take it.

Perhaps the most impactful of Wittig’s ideas to me was that lesbianism and womanhood could be understood as separate, even incompatible. My entire life I’d been led to understand lesbians as a category of women. Because of this, as I came to terms with my gender, the label “lesbian” began to feel uncomfortable on me. I mourned this. It was an identity that I had formed community around – it had bonded me to friends and partners in a way “woman” never had. I was saddened that this identity was contingent on “woman,” that to become myself I had to lose it. So when I found a theory that not only suggested that being a lesbian was not conditional on being a woman, but stated that it was a source of *undoing womanhood*, I was delighted and relieved. “Lesbian,” for me, became affirming as a gender identity label outside the binary. Although I never would have defined or applied it to my friends in that way, since I knew to them the identification with “woman” was important, having this other

conception of the word in my mind – where I could revisit and be reassured by it – brought me joy.

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Evan (Ev)

In my mind, there are two kinds of trans parents. The first group views gender as an intrinsic quality, one which occasionally results in transness but usually defaults to some version of cis. They assume their children are in the majority and raise them similarly to how they were brought up, thinking it won't hurt *them*. The second group understands gender as a social construct, one that's compulsory and causes harm – to everyone. So they try to protect their child from this by not imposing a gender on them. I guess there's also a third category of trans parents who view gender as constructed but know from experience the danger of being different, so they decide the best way to shield their child from the violence of the gender system is by giving them the opportunity to fit in.

Lee and I were definitely in the second group. In the weeks before we started IVF, we had a sit down to “figure out the gender issue.” We came to the same conclusion we had when we were younger, and having kids was one of those loose hypothetical dreams like starting a bakery or moving to Iceland: I thought back to how much I struggled in high school and college, trying to force myself into a false binary that I was taught was natural, because, outside of the reprieve of theater, other options had been hidden from me. Lee had their own version of this story too, and we agreed we’d both dealt with too much to be able to justify putting our child through that pain. If we wanted to have a child – and we did – we would have to radically rethink the way gender is treated in parenting.

This was further cemented for me while talking to my friend Jo, whom I’d met a couple of years earlier at a show I was working on at the community theater. In the time since I’d met them, Jo had come out as nonbinary, and was trying to figure out how to navigate this in their friendships within the lesbian community they’d been part of for forty years. When I thought of the toll the time before I came out at twenty had taken on me, and the people I had hurt because of that, I couldn’t imagine what it would feel like to wait to come out till I was in my sixties, like Jo. I couldn’t stand to put my future child in a position to endure anything like that. And Lee firmly agreed.

Between IVF treatments and during Lee’s pregnancy, our lives became one long ongoing conversation – we talked about it over cereal in the mornings, as we cooked

dinner, on our weekend walks, and in the car on our way to do errands or see friends: mapping out how exactly to protect our future child from the violence of the gender binary, or at least do our best not to perpetuate it.

Lee and I planned our parenthood like some people plan their weddings: we kept a binder full of examples of clothes and books and toys, as well as guides we wrote for ourselves, after endless research, on how to talk to different groups of people in our lives about our parenting decisions and how to support us in them. We became the kind of parents who had a carefully painted and organized nursery, with fully stocked dresser and shelves, well in advance of the due date. In making sure we avoided the pink and blue cliches, we ended up with a carefully coordinated rainbow of objects, including an actual mural of a rainbow behind the baby's crib.

"Don't you think this is a little much, Lee?" I asked one afternoon, painting the finishing touches on a cloud at the rainbow's base. "My parents will be even more convinced we're trying to make the baby gay."

It was toward the end of Lee's second trimester, and though both of our families were clearly putting in an effort to be supportive, they'd shared some concerns. I'd been out to my mom as queer since high school and as trans since college, so she'd had plenty of opportunities to embrace gender nonconformity in the years since. But it somehow still worried her that we might have a "son" and "make" "him" go to school in dresses. And, although both Lee's family and mine were filled with the kind of

people who roll their eyes at stories of gender reveal parties, they were having a hard time wrapping their heads around the idea that we wouldn't make the baby's "sex" public information after the birth, either.

"It's not about trying to make them gay," Lee said, as if I were the one who had suggested it, rather than my mom. "It's a representation of the choices we're giving them, and of not associating certain colors with them based on their body and what we think that means about who they'll be."

"I know." I set my paintbrush down. "It *would* be kind of hard, though, for River *not* to be gay, if they don't have a binary gender."

"True," Lee said. "But the point is they could potentially grow up and be a straight man or a straight woman – we're not trying to *make* them *anything*."

"Right," I said. "I think my parents are just less progressive than they like to think."

"Aren't we all?" Lee said. They leaned back in the cushy chair we'd set up for when they needed to rest while working in the nursery, and flipped back to the nursery checklist they'd been poring over in our parenting binder.

Lee and I were very clear that we were on the same page about all of this. We'd been over everything, like how strongly we both felt that refusing to automatically raise River as cis did not mean pushing our own identities on them (in fact, by definition it would be impossible for them to be trans, since they wouldn't have a gender assigned

at birth to transition away from). We'd agreed that until River was able to decide, we would do our best to choose a wide range of things that were "gendered" in a variety of different ways. In the long run, though, we wanted to give them the options to pick the clothes, toys, and haircuts; and later, the labels, pronouns, and even name that worked best for them. Lee *knew* I agreed with them on all of it. So it hurt when they treated the things my mom said like they were coming from me, and tried to explain our parenting strategy to me, as if I wasn't responsible for half of the work that went into formulating it. True, I shouldn't let other people's opinions on our choices get to me, but it didn't feel like whether or not the mural was there would make or break our parenting either way. And if it might help my mom get more on board with things, I thought it was at least worth considering toning down our artwork.

Of course, we were both thrilled about having a baby. But in the process of preparing for it, I realized half of our enthusiasm was about the ways of un-gendering parenting that Lee and I discussed.

"I think you're more excited about that binder than River," I told Lee once. I said it jokingly, but a lot of the time, it did feel that way. They were making a collage with the cover art of the books we'd researched to read to River, ignoring my suggestion to just write down a list.

"That's funny," Lee said, deeply unamused. They continued collaging.

I knew that pregnancy, with all of its gendered associations, distanced Lee from their body. I would catch them frowning at their softened face in the mirror, and grumbling about how all maternity clothes were soft and flowy, curve-hugging, and feminine. I knew *I* would never have been able to put up with well-intentioned strangers congratulating me on becoming a mother. It made sense to me, then, that it was easier for Lee to focus on the nonconformity in our future parenting strategies than on the gendered enclosure society tried to force them into during pregnancy. I couldn't help but wonder, though, how much of this we were doing for ourselves, instead of for River.

However, when I thought about it, what was the alternative? The default of gendered parenting? It felt absurd to suggest *that* was in a child's best interest. At least Lee and I were trying to do something new.

When I brought up my concerns to Lee that we were making parenthood about us, they looked confused. "Can't it be both?"

I tried to get better at that. I let myself celebrate each addition to the parenting binder as something I wished had been part of my upbringing, and that was healing to commit to doing for River. But I made sure to choose each toy, each way of talking to River and the people in their life about gender, because I believed it was the best decision I could make for *them*. I could recognize the euphoria in subverting binary gender expectations and supporting my kid in doing the same, as long as I

acknowledged that those decisions could change, and that once we got to know River, we would adjust our vision to fit them more accurately.

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Gabrielle

"Audrey!" I called down the hall. "We're gonna miss the parade if we don't leave now."

When I'd told her a few weeks earlier that I was considering going to Pride with Ezra and Mona again, Audrey's face had fallen. "I thought we would go together," she said.

"I would love to go with you!" I told her. I'd been picturing it for almost two years. "I didn't realize you were interested."

"Of course I'm interested," she said, taking my hand. "This is important."

But now Audrey had disappeared into the bathroom for the last half hour, and I worried she'd changed her mind. Maybe Pride was still too much for her. "You can stay here," I called to her. "You don't have to go unless you want to."

There was silence for several seconds, and I wondered if Audrey hadn't heard me, or was contemplating how to explain that she couldn't go.

"Give me a minute to finish my makeup and I'll be there," she said from the bathroom. "I want to go, Gabi."

I exhaled, relieved but still stressed we were late. I pulled out my phone to double-check the schedule and the best place to park. "Mona says the lot she found with ten dollar parking is filling up!" I heard Audrey's footsteps behind me before she wrapped her arms around me and rested the side of her head on my shoulder blade. "I swear to god," I said jokingly, "if you get makeup on my dress--"

"– I would never," she said. "It looks way too good on you. I *am* going to make us a tiny bit later, though." I groaned. "I have a surprise before we leave."

I turned to face her. "Ooh, what is it?"

"First," she said, "how do I look?"

I took in her outfit – short sleeve black button-up with the top few buttons undone, jeans with the cuffs rolled enough to show her combat boots, more eyeliner than I'd seen her wear in a long time. It hit me in the stomach. "Incredible," I said. "Very gay."

"Good," she smiled. "Okay wait here and I'll be right back."

Audrey disappeared down the hall again, and returned a minute later with her hands behind her back. "For you," she said, handing me a rolled-up trans flag.

“Oooh,” I said excitedly. I unfurled the flag and wrapped it around my shoulders like a cape. I gave a twirl, letting the fabric billow behind me. Audrey took her other hand from behind her back and unrolled a bi flag, then followed my example and wore it around her shoulders.

“This is so sweet, babe,” I told her. “Thank you.”

“I wanted to thank you,” Audrey said. “I know it’s small, but I just wanted to let you know how much I appreciate –” She trailed off, rubbing a corner of the flag between her fingers. “I’m not sure I would’ve known, if you hadn’t – I – I wouldn’t be here.” She looked down at her pride cape and pulled it tighter around her shoulders.

I nodded, noticing the sting in my eyes.

“So thank you,” Audrey said, wiping a tear and smudge of eyeliner from her lower lid.

I took the corners of her flag and held them along with mine, bunched in my fists, gently pulling her toward me. I rested my forehead on hers and stood there for a moment.

“Okay, okay,” Audrey said, shaking me off. She patted the skin beneath her eyes with her pointer fingers to fix her makeup again. “Maybe I didn’t choose the best day to wear eyeliner,” she laughed.

“It looks great, babe,” I assured her.

She slipped an arm around my waist. "Let's get out of here before we're forced to pay fifty bucks for parking *and* walk twelve blocks."

"Right, *now* you're worried about parking," I teased.

I brought Audrey with me to the kitchen, where I grabbed my bag and car keys from the table. I wrapped an arm around her shoulder, and we walked out the door and into the late morning sun together, in our Pride flag capes.

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Evan (Ev)

"Poppy?" River's head tilted toward me in the rearview reflection. "Why am I 'they' like you and Zizi, but Jared isn't 'she' like his moms?"

I half smiled to myself – Lee and I had been wondering recently when these kinds of questions would start coming up.

Before I could answer, River added: "But you're 'he' like Jared, too. Why am *I* not 'he'?"

“People have all different pronouns,” I told River. “Some kids have different pronouns from their parents, and some parents have different pronouns from each other.”

“What are pronouns?” River asked.

“A pronoun is a word you say instead of someone’s name when you’re talking about them,” I said, turning out of the neighborhood where River’s preschool was and onto the boulevard that would take us most of the way home. “‘They,’ and ‘he,’ and ‘she’ are all pronouns.”

“Jared says he’s ‘he’ because he’s a boy, and his moms are ‘she’ because they’re girls,” River said. “His moms told him I’m ‘they’ because I’m not a boy or a girl. Jared says most people are boys or girls.”

“People called ‘he’ aren’t always boys, and ones called ‘she’ aren’t always girls,” I explained. “And people who use ‘they’ could be boys or girls, too. Zizi uses ‘they’ and I use ‘they’ and ‘he’ because we aren’t girls or boys, but people have different reasons.” I checked my mirror, making sure River hadn’t spilled their juice box. “Zizi and I call you ‘they’ because we decided you should be the one to choose if you’re a boy, or a girl, or something else, and whether you want to keep being called ‘they’ or be called ‘she’ or ‘he.’ Or something different.”

River was quiet, which always made me a bit anxious. As long as I knew what they were thinking, I could work to figure out the right thing to do or say, but in these

moments I was left guessing. I was still getting used to having a child who silently pondered. Knowing them, River would mull over the conversation and start asking questions again at dinner, once I'd forgotten to expect it.

After a few minutes, River turned back to me from gazing out the window. "Ms. Christine says we can bring in two things for show-and-tell tomorrow," they said. "I wanna bring a racecar, like Jared. He has a super cool one with flames on it."

"That's very cool, sweetie," I said. "What else are you bringing?"

"I'm bringing my fairy wings to show Amelia," River said. "Because they're green, and she likes green."

I nodded in approval of Amelia's taste. "Green's a good color. I'll help you find them when we get home."

River returned to watching the telephone poles flash by out the window. As we turned into our neighborhood, they leaned forward in their car seat.

"Poppy? Can I be 'he' like Jared?"

"I—" I faltered. When I pictured River asking questions about pronouns and gender, I hadn't expected this to be one of them – at least not yet. *Like Jared?* I didn't want River's identity or labels to be swayed by their friends, as easily as their show-and-tell selections. This was the kind of pressure to conform that Lee and I had been struggling against. But it was no better if *I* told River what labels they could and couldn't use. That went against our entire parenting method, and all my beliefs.

"Of course you can, sweetie," I said, trying to hide the worry from my voice.

"Should we tell Zizi to call you 'he' when they get home?"

"Okay, " River said. "I want Zizi to help me pick out what racecar to bring. They know what kinds all of them are, and which one's the fastest."

I smiled at River in the mirror, wondering if the he/him pronouns would stick, and how Lee would take it.

* * *

I've heard a lot of trans people talk about the euphoria of passing – the rush when a stranger uses the correct pronouns for the first time, and the more relaxed contentment when having people gender them correctly becomes the norm. And that's great. Of course I'm happy for them, but I really can't relate. I wish everyone would stop acting like passing is a universal transition goal. Not everyone wants to be viewed as a man or a woman, or even to be seen for their gender before and above their transness. For me, being labeled or seen as a man is much less painful than being viewed as a woman, but it's far from euphoric. Passing as cis means I'm being misgendered, one way or the other. My most affirming outcome is if strangers are confused when they see me, and I generally try to present in a way that makes it difficult for me to easily be

placed in a gendered box. It's not possible for people to see me for who I am, in the most surface-level, public way, without seeing me as trans.

Essentially, as long as we live in a society where one of the first mental actions when seeing a stranger is to try to categorize them – man or woman, male or female, AMAB or AFAB – there is no point at which my life becomes “normal,” no point when I start blending in. And sometimes not being normal really fucking sucks, like when I've changed my outfit four times but still can't recognize the person in the mirror, or when I almost backed out of starting HRT because I was terrified it would go too far to the other extreme and make me more dysphoric. A lot of the time, though, I take joy in my abnormality. I love pushing the boundaries of people's expectations, like wearing a short dress with my chest taped and my mustache unshaved, or changing up my look enough from day to day that I'm unrecognizable to people who don't know me well. I love knowing I'll never blend in.

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Gabrielle

Do you ever have one of those days where you stumble on the weird experience of realizing how normal your life is? Yesterday when I got home from work, took off my heels, and went to put my blazer away in my closet, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I looked so at ease, and carried myself so comfortably in a pencil skirt, that it almost felt odd. When I first started presenting femme, I used to hunch my shoulders in public in order to take up less space. When I was alone, I couldn't stop myself from grinning at my reflection in a dress. Now, it all felt routine and natural. I was no longer living the life of my kid self, stealing my sister's clothes when I was home alone and rushing to put them away when I heard someone in the driveway.

In the mirror, I saw the pride flags Audrey had bought us a few weeks earlier. After wearing them to Pride, we'd helped each other hang the bi flag over her side of the bed, and the trans one above my side. They looked out of place amid the rest of our tasteful, carefully curated decor, as if we were making up for not coming out until our mid thirties by decorating this one corner like a teenage bedroom or college dorm. Personally, I thought of it as my favorite part of the room, and based on how excited Audrey was to hang them up, I think it was her favorite, too.

I heard Audrey's car pull up and smiled. I put the hanger with my blazer on it back in the closet and went to meet her in the kitchen.