

A Man In A Dress

I remember the first time I felt beautiful. It was a beauty separated from what I thought it would be: a beauty discovered, rather than taught. A beauty built from the destruction of old. A flower emerging from the ashes. In a rather uninspiring way, it happened on a Tuesday afternoon, in a Nordstrom's rack. I can't summarize how exactly this transformation occurred, but it felt something like waking up after a long sleep: invisible balls of cotton tugged from my ears, muscles groggily awakening after hours of sedentary stillness. A mask removed from my eyes, the gentle beeping of an alarm. It was overwhelming, but it was everything.

Pummeled by bright illumination, I felt my steps dragging; dry desert air whooshed through my lungs with ferocity. Looking up, I noticed my mom deftly sifting through the Clearance rack. Dramatically rolling my eyes, I checked my watch. 3:31 PM. The 4 minutes I had spent in the retail outlet coalesced into hours. Wandering around, I walked below a sign "Women's Clothing." Dresses hung seductively in a sagging posture, almost begging to be worn. I'm not exactly sure how it happened, but in 5 seconds I was standing before the dress stand, staring at it with rapturous intensity.

A man in a dress: not something you see everyday. The stares, the comments, noticing my body more than I have ever before. It's a funny phenomenon, realizing that when you feel the most beautiful is also when you feel the most scared. I remember the first time he saw me in a dress. He laughed, and I looked into eyes, trying to figure out if he was laughing at me or with me. When he stopped abruptly and told me I looked silly, I realized that it was the latter. In one second, I felt an eternity of doubts fill my head like a bowl about to overflow, bombarding me

with regrets. As he picked up his phone with a deadpan head shake, my face flushed a deep rose-burgundy red. Cloaked in shame, I ran to my car, ripping off my heels in the same manner a lion would tear into prey. I felt trapped in a birdcage, a grip of a thousand hands on me.

I noticed a very specific dress. It was black, and slightly separated from the others. The price tag hung like a delicate fruit from the rack. \$45. The worn edge of the tag suggested multiple people had thumbed past it; I glanced at my mom and noticed she was engrossed in her phone. Wrapping the dress in a pair of faded khaki pants in the next aisle, I half-ran to the changing room. I noticed the decorations coating the carpeted walkway, filled with little circles dotting the space, a million deadened stars, a half-baked attempt at breathing life into an aging strip mall.

My favorite thing about wearing a dress is how freeing it feels; spinning around encourages the fabric to lift and helicopter around my legs as if I'm in a medieval ball and the piano ballad has finally gotten a little exciting. Walking propagates a feeling like purposeful villainy, a feminine cape dancing lustroously behind me. The purposefulness, glamour, and beauty of a dress build to euphoria.

In the changing room, I noticed the dress on my body. Cacophonous noises seeped from the store, but I was grounded by a feeling of serenity like nothing I'd felt before. My approach to feminine gender expression had always been conservative; I'd carried heaps of baggy clothing and nail polish remover in my backpack in case I felt insecure in a crop-top or painted nails. Exploring the line between being expressive and blending in was an art that I had mastered. Prioritizing others' comfort over how I felt about myself, the internalized pressures felt crushing.

Every single day, I replay what I wish I could say to him, what I should say to him. I wish I could tell him it wasn't a phase. I wish I could tell him it wasn't a costume. I wish I could de-

scribe the feeling I get during the tiny things he says. Every headshake, every sarcastic laugh, every time I hear his words floating down the hallway after me, I feel a tiny little jab in my stomach, a silver spear poking me with regret, indecision, a flickering flame of anger. Maybe, hiding is the brave thing. Could I forget the allure of femininity entirely to protect myself? "It's never neutrality," he says. "You're my son, you don't know what you're getting into."

Later that month, the school calendar glared at me, in the way that school calendars typically do. Nondescript black and blue was juxtaposed by a dazzling burst of pinks, yellows, and greens on one Saturday: prom. Wrought with historical convention, prom felt like an impending deadline: carefully color-matched couples wearing matching suits and dresses, high heels held in hand as the night grew long, the laughter of hundreds of people, the faint scent of alcohol. The next morning, the perfectly steamed suits and well-kept dresses lie dejectedly on the floor. Prom felt binary, traditional, and overwhelming: all of the things that terrified me.

In my room, I attempted to cram my feet into a pair of dress shoes that I hadn't worn since my cousin's Catholic wedding; the khaki pants I had worn once glared at me, begging me to attempt to try them on just to see how the pant leg hit me mid-calf. The gray and blue-stained blazer hung off of my body like cardboard as the sleeves reached haphazardly up my forearm; pulling them up, they snapped stubbornly back into place. Once again, I stared at the dress.

The feeling of a suit is the same mentally and physically: stiff. Shirts pressed and ironed to perfection, pants that hang with the rigidity of a frozen waterfall. Shoes hardened and shiny, like a tortoise-shell sanded down to a mirror. Walk through a store and notice the blandness of color in suits: muted blues, grays, the occasional maroon. When I glance at a suit, a kaleido-

scope of images populate my head: a business meeting populated with thick mahogany chairs, weddings of gray and white. I see fallen leaves and bowed heads, funerals, ashes spread into deciduous forests. When I see a suit, I see a 60's TV show, a concrete jungle, businessmen vying for the highest salary. I see masculinity, strength, and toughness. I see the sports I've tried, I see the shirt I refused to take off to go in the pool. I see the TV shows my dad used to skip past because of a romantic scene with two men. I see all of the masculine things I've tried so desperately to imbue in myself. I see how the grip patriarchy holds on queer folks, and the damage it can internalize. I see the times I've noticed friends wear hoodies out of fear of sexualization and the times we've cried together; I see the patriarchy, yet I see the beauty behind it.

Brushing a dress, I see glamour, adventure, and self-expression. I see picnics in northern Idaho with my mom and sister, I see huckleberry jam, and the doll houses I played with as my sister watched, intrigued. I see the movie "101 Dalmatians" during Christmastime, and thinking to myself how I wanted to look just like Cruella. When I see a dress, I see the unfettered freedom of childhood, feeling comfortable in my skin. I see myself peeking into my grandmother's makeup cabinet and watching her glance at me with a knowing smile. I picture her grin and her raucous laugh fading into the night.

I knew, in that moment, I wanted to wear the dress to the dance. Not in my room, not for just a brief moment in between school and practice, not in a hotel bathroom with the lock double-checked. Every brief secretive moment, every reserved glance at a thrift-store skirt, felt transformative, but those were the moments that hurt more than anything. They hurt because I couldn't walk down the street without feeling like an abomination, the pain and anxiety cutting deeper than a thousand cuts. The moments hurt because I knew, deep down, that my beauty felt

conditional. They hurt, because I knew that I couldn't offload my internal loathing to the outside world. Why can I only feel comfortable in secret? I ran my hands through my hair, salty tears streaking paths down my face, painting a web of grief. I had some work to do; I had to dismantle the patriarchy in my own mind.

The next three days before prom, I reassured my mom I didn't need a new suit, locking the dress's place in my future. Grabbing my keys unceremoniously before I could change my mind, I drove to the mall again. This time, when I saw a beautiful pink sundress at Nordstrom's, I didn't wrap it up in a pair of pants and stuff it down to the bottom of my tote bag. This time, when I went to the Idaho Youth Ranch, I walked to the women's section first, with my head up and my eyes set straight forward.

This time, I strode into the Sephora without a second thought. I grabbed the first liquid eyeliner I could see, then I grabbed some foundation. Concealer. Blush. Powder. Brushes. Check. Check. Check. My heart pounded a disco beat in my head as I practically ran out of the store, shoes squeaking on split linoleum. This time, when I left, I broke into an earth-shattering grin.

This time, I walked past the overly-shined dress shoes; they stoically scowled at me. I walked past the stilettos (I don't quite have Rihanna's balance) to the largest set of heels I could find. This time, I put them on and looked at the mirror and they fit perfectly. The heels smiled back at me.

It's interesting, beginning to understand that the same forces that were supposed to protect me were also the ones that trapped me. The joy of beauty juxtaposed by the fear of oneself. It's interesting, now, that I hold my non-binary identity as a gift, a savior that had lifted me from the anxiety of conformity, a search-and-rescue mission in pursuit of self-love. It's interesting,

now, that a dress on Tuesday can be accompanied by a pair of shorts on Wednesday, that my femininity and my masculinity peacefully interact instead of waging war. I've come to welcome my fear not as a companion, but as an occasional visitor, each week spending less and less time igniting the flame of humiliation in my mind. I've thought long and hard about other trans folks who feel just like me; a sense of entrapment in a binary, crushed by a patriarchal understanding of beauty. I've spent hours on the phone with my best friend, angry at the glances from strangers and the comments from friends. What I've learned now is that my voice is paramount to me; speaking my truth, speaking the truth of my trans siblings, and existing in cis-dominated spaces are my greatest weapons. For those of us who challenge the patriarchy simply by existing, our expression, our grandeur is everything. Speaking our beauty, finding our euphoria beyond our pain, and navigating our sorrow is the greatest act of resistance.

The next day: Saturday, April 10, 2021. Downtown surged beneath my feet, full of life, joy, and carelessness. I grabbed my friend's hand, bending down slightly, and I sighed deeply. Then, with the grace of someone who had practiced walking in heels for 10 minutes the night before, I opened the door, welcomed the music, and felt truly beautiful.