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Repurposing Final Draft

Removing the “Masc” to my Thoughts

I never thought that an invisibility cloak would be a pre-purchase to shopping for eyeliner and lipstick, but while standing in the makeup isle of CVS, I felt that I needed its cover. Embarrassment pumped from my heart to my head with every pulse while I paced back and forth trying to decide if I wanted the black goo that offered “insane eyes” or the one that promised to improve my nightlife. I hung my head to avoid the glances of the female consumers around me. It was so easy for them to locate their desired product in this mountain of capitalist waste we call beauty supplies. I wanted to reach out to them and ask: “Which brand is best?” “Where are the spongy things?” “Will this shit come off?” But, I remained silent, reading bewildered judgment in those short moments we made eye contact. I remembered being at this very store and having no inhibitions about buying condoms and lube. In fact, I liked throwing my sexuality in the cashier’s face, hoping to give him a little shock (although I’m sure he’d seen much stranger). But this wasn’t a matter my sexuality. Homosexuality. It was a matter of gayness. Not just gayness, but the degrees of gayness. Degrees of femininity—of fitting the stereotype. Being caught in the makeup isle made you a very high degree of gay, indeed, and I was ashamed.

Underneath this shame was a very specific moment: the Gay Olympics. While I was staying in Köln, the every-four year Gay Olympics chose this city (the homosexual capitol of Germany) to be its host. I wasn’t into sports, but the opening party sounded like a blast that promised to bring an eye opening experience to my 17-year small town midwestern self. Paying forty euros and infiltrating with a fake ID, I made it into the

opening party and expected perfection. It was held in a stadium, so the colossal size meant it had to be good; however, it was rather desolate and uncomfortable. The halls were composed of older men in cliques sometimes giving me strange glares that I couldn't tell were sign of attraction or an odd eye tick. The dance floor (literally a basketball court) had large patches of desolation and what was populated held bodies fidgeting feebly to the music. My drunken friend noticed my disappointment and called to a shirtless man walking past. "Talk to my friend," she stated. "He needs more gay friends!" The man looked at me.

"Sorry, I like big masculine guys who can dominate me," He stated simply then walked away. This was my first rejection. Though I wasn't attracted to this man in the first place, it hurt. It didn't have to do with looks, but with masculinity. Yes, I was only 5'6", so I wasn't big my any means and I could never be. But masculine? I knew I wasn't masculine. But should I be? Should I try to be? And were all the men here feeling disinterested in me because I wasn't trying hard enough?

After my trip, I returned to Michigan with this idea planted in my head, but it mostly subsided. But, then came college. I had never lived anywhere with a nearby gay scene before, and once I did, the message, "masculine equals sexy" was clear. Men on Grindr advertised themselves through the preset tribes of "Jock, Muscular, Rugged." There was no tribe for "Femme, Queer, or Queen." No one would want that title. I was told by a friend I was "too gay" to warrant his attraction. When curiosity made me browse male for male craigslist aids, men promised themselves to be "masc" looking for "masc" only. "No fats, no femmes." It didn't seem like men with interests in basketball wanted men with that similar interest, but it seemed like the culture constructed a binary

between stereotypically gay and “straight acting.” The later won. Never before had I felt such pressure to act straight—I always knew I was gay and didn’t need to deny it. But while in the gay community, there was a striation, and I felt like I needed to act in order to be beautiful.

From this mix of shame, anger, loneliness, and confusion, I wrote a play that expressed the different parts of myself in this moment through the characters within it. There was the character who hated his gayness; the one who refused to hate his gayness yet faced erosive insecurity; the one who used his gayness as a weapon in the face of judgment; and the one who needed punishment for not being able to love. They were all the parts of me at war with each other. A year after writing them, I knew they were such intense parts of me that they themselves could teach me about myself and about themselves through close examination. For this reason, I decided to challenge myself. What if I became one of them for a day? To learn as a writer from my characters what I could not learn on my own. To plunge into the subconscious that created them in order to understand the way I worked. To maybe shake off this feeling of shame and anger that created them that I could not, even after a year, pull from my brain and my heart.

The character I chose was Lee—an ultra effeminate street deviant. I was going to have to act as him, dress as him, apply his face and learn from this experience. He was a character that came from the part of me that was free of the stinging rules of masculinity—he even rebelled against them. Becoming him scared me shitless, and for this reason, I knew I could learn the most both about him and me, not just as a writer but as a person.

So I came to CVS to find the materials to create his face. Eyeliner--check; foundation--natural ivory; mascara--anti-clump; triangle sponges to apply foundation--retrieved; concealer--shoved down my pants because Lee would steal. My next stop was for clothing. I searched the lanes at a local store with clothing ranging from metallic boy shorts to vintage floral button-ups and came to a series of tank tops. I had always avoided tank tops because of the shoulder hair that has begun to blossom from my skin in this ripe age of 20 and because of the occasional blemishes that left red scars. Something told me, however, that Lee would expose himself regardless of his flaws. I picked a purple tank, staring at myself in the dressing room as it hung loosely upon my body, revealing my scarred back, undefined chest, and shy shoulders. Adapting the voice of my character, told myself, "Lee, you are a sexy mother fucker." I then proceeded to check out.

With my materials assembled, it was time for the transformation. I lined my makeup upon the bathroom sink, imagining it on my face while I glanced in the mirror. I didn't know if I was excited or afraid—possibly both. I trimmed my beard, showered, then gave myself a close shave. With my stubble gone for the first time in over a year, my face was now prepared to be a canvas. I felt anxious while I hesitated between masculine and feminine. I realized the way that this very binary had affected my life over the past to years. In insecurity, I had labeled manner and speech, clothing article of clothing, and hair cuts as effeminate or masculine. Music became man's music and gay man's music. The flip of a hand became a signal of weakness. Two boxes caged every man I came into contact with as I rated them on the deepness of their voice and the sturdiness of their posture. Before the Gay Olympics, I had only seen men as attractive or unnerve. But my idea of beauty warped, and a man's attractiveness was now contingent upon if his voice

had a lisp or if his hip jutted outward. The binary around me had infected the beauty I saw in myself and in others. Touching the foundation-soaked sponge to my smooth skin, I decided to transgress into what I now believed was ugly.

First, I finished the foundation. Then came the concealer. After that, I applied eyeliner. I remembered applying stage makeup while acting in plays as a middle schooler. The other boys asked me if I enjoyed wearing makeup. I knew their intent behind this question was pointed at my apparent gayness. I answered “no” with a scrunched face. But that was a lie. I did enjoy it. I enjoyed having the excuse to change my appearance into something else. I enjoyed subverting the role the world gave me. Now, I looked at myself in the mirror in the present day. Did I enjoy this? The answer was undeterminable, but it wasn’t “no.” Standing back and examining the thin layer of beige upon my skin and my intensely outlined eyes, I felt the world becoming a stage. But could this stage be an excuse to perform as outrageously as I was, or would all of this end in mockery?

Upon my entrance into the kitchen, my housemates burst with laughter. They were already aware of my project, but their reaction to my dolled up face could not be contained. I wondered if they believed this was for a project or if they thought I simply wanted a reason to embrace fabulousness. I was beginning to wonder that myself. A housemate gave me a bag of nail polish and lip stain. I chose hot pink for my nail polish color because it matched the nails of Lee in my script and because it was my favorite color before kindergarten taught me to change it. Painting them was more complicated than anticipated and an unlikely mentor arrived on the scene. One of my housemates, a sporty engineering student, gave his advice on how to apply the paint: “I think you have

to press down harder so the paint spreads out, but if you do it in the middle, it won't get onto the skin." His advice was correct. I would never have thought for him to be the one to reveal his philosophy on the art of nail painting. He was the type you would think to never touch nail polish with his deep voice, simple cloths, and back-woods masculinity. It was amazing how comfortable he was and how much more comfortable this made me. By rearranging my role, I think I rearranged the role I had given him, and I saw that people are more than a set of expectations.

With nails painted, costume one, and face complete, it was time to make the final transformation. In my room, I sat nervously as I attempted to summon the voice of my character. What was his intonation? I raised my voice an octave higher. But was this it? I thought about my voice--a plague of anxiety throughout my life. "You talk like a girl," said my neighbor in elementary school. When I didn't act phased because I had heard it before, he stated, "dude, you talk like a girl." He wanted the message to be clear for either my own good or for his enjoyment. Maybe both. It resounded, and every time I opened my mouth from then on I wondered if this same sentence was running through the heads of the people I talked to. I was both embarrassed of my voice yet clinging to proudness of it because that was mine. Didn't I have to be proud of what was mine? Like a parent must be proud of their impaired child even though the child sticks out. Even though the child holds you back from the life you think you'd like to live. You must be proud—ten times prouder than all the other parents at the PTA meeting because you are on the defense. You're fighting for survival. Maybe Lee's voice would sound like what I would have sounded like if I never lost pride—if I never faltered.

Once I assumed the talk, I had to master the walk. I paced the room striking the poses he would with hips jutting seductively. I had trained myself to not walk this way since being told I walked like a boy's sister in sixth grade. How could I go back?

It all seemed horribly forced. Could I perform here in my room alone? Could I perform without an audience?

To gain viewers, I went back to the common spaces of my home and began flaunting my new voice and sensuous strutting. My housemates were receptive, but the conversations were forced and strange. Neither of us could fully give into the belief of me being someone else. Conversations were playful, like when talking to a child who does not have the capability to understand you are talking down to them. They smiled at me with every word. They asked questions they didn't really want the answer to. Their words were slower and higher pitched. But them treating me like an entertaining joke wasn't the main obstacle. The worst part was that I couldn't take myself seriously. This wasn't me. I felt like a pig in lipstick. The lipstick didn't make the pig a lady and the lipstick didn't make me into Lee.

I left for my friend's house, and on the walk over, I was highly aware of every person I passed. They were looking, watching my performance, but I didn't want the burning eyes of an audience. But I had to maintain the same sway of my hips. I had to appear proud. Once again, I repeated to myself, "Lee, you are a sexy mother fucker" as I strutted down the street. I began to approach a man who set off my gaydar, and my confidence hit an all time low. He would label me as the ultra-effeminate gay, as the one who wasn't attractive. He would think to himself, "a man only wants a real man." I tried to force myself to make eye contact with him like I knew my character would, but I

couldn't summon the courage. He passed with my eyes desperately averting any glance. I wondered if he would have actually been looking. Would he have noticed? Would he have judged? Or had the judgment and exclusion I picked up on lodged itself so deep inside of me that it began to reproduce and metastasize like a cancer and making the problem far worse on the inside than it had been on the outside? How much of it was in my head?

"Levi has self esteem problems," my friend told me as we had a conversation about me in her bedroom. She knew to call me Lee for this project and to consider Levi (the real me) as someone else.

"Levi's a scared little bitch," I agreed as Lee. I didn't expect to get into a conversation on myself as if I wasn't in the room, but it seemed fitting. I could deliver a heightened honesty about this Levi kid like never before. "Levi doesn't love himself," I said, the objectivity making it more clear and easy than ever before, using the same words that many of my friends had stated to me. I thought of the gay Olympics once more. The night didn't end with the rejection, but by being adamantly swooned into the VIP area and making out with an incredibly hot Spaniard. He couldn't speak English and my Spanish was poor, but our body language resolved my night. Now, I realized it was a temporary relief from the self-doubt. It was a band-aid that taught me to always look for a savior like Filipe to deliver validation. Levi didn't love himself.

The possibility came for us to go out to dinner. I knew I should say yes—I knew that Lee would abuse Levi's wallet and go out to eat, making a scene at the table and trying to purchase an alcoholic beverage in hopes that he wouldn't be carded. But, I couldn't bring myself to leave the house. I felt too naked, as if being Lee wasn't a matter

of putting on a costume, but stripping off all clothing and bearing absolute exposure. We ate in.

At home, my strained conversations resumed. I didn't know how to talk to my housemates as this character. I didn't know how to break into their conversations. I remained quiet, feeling that I was being the opposite of Lee in that moment. The things I would normally say as Levi, I couldn't say. The things I wanted to say, I over analyzed. The things I should say in order to be Lee seemed forced and unrealistic. I realized the stressfulness of performativity. When you break out of your role, it is almost as if an extra force is upon you to perform. Perform because it's how you compensate for your strangeness—everyone is watching to see your abnormality. Was this how Lee felt at all times? Was he such a gender-queered outlier that he felt like he must make his life a performance and the world his show? Or was he never performing and only doing? Or both? Was he compensating for his strangeness or was he owning it? I began to realize that this project was raising more questions about the character than answers. I felt a compulsion to escape the home where everyone knew I was acting. Was this how my character felt? Did he feel the need to run from what confined him because it also defined him?

My escape from my house was a party, but I dreaded this escape as well. I still couldn't separate myself from the anxiety I felt over playing this character with a faggoty voice and painted face. That's how I thought of myself—faggotty. Faggot like the whisper that came behind me in class at the age of twelve. Like the time my lesbian sister stated there was a difference between being gay and being a faggot. A faggot was a queen—dramatic, over the top. Her friend stated that he was gay, but he wasn't a faggot

and she agreed. Like when an enraged gay man called me a faggot during an argument. Like the time in bed when a man asserted his dominance by calling me a faggot. And I believed it. Because the punishment seemed right.

I stood on the porch of the party, afraid to enter. Men on the porch surrounded me, speaking in low tones about the internships they landed for the summer or the recent basketball game. I would speak, then retract and could see that my mere presence made men uncomfortable. They couldn't decipher my appearance. Their eyes quickly shifted over me as to try to not stare. When they did notice me, their posture twitched upward. It felt like middle school again in which boys found my effeminacy offensive. I could see them angered over my violation of the rules of manhood they stuck to so vehemently. I remained quiet at this party, unsure of what to say, and unsure of how much these small mannerisms I noticed from the men were mentally created by me. My friend would announce that I looked this way for a project—I think he was uncomfortable with my stunt as well. When I did speak, I felt so calculated in my words and unable to capture my character. The men were confused by my project—they thought it was funny. They thought it was a joke. On the outside, I'm sure it looked like a strange stunt a humanities major would pull to try to get an A without trying hard. They couldn't have seen the turmoil that was inside of me—the fear. I had expected this experience to allow me to let loose and be unafraid to express myself but it was doing just the opposite. I felt a turmoil over if this project was failing—could I not perform? Was I failing in my part?

Failure meant not gaining the narrative I expected. It meant not letting loose and from this learning about the character that lays within me. It meant returning home more

lost than I was before and with nothing to write about by my fear and loathing (with no Las Vegas to spice it up).

I had expected this experience to be freeing. I had expected that being Lee would allow me to let it all out—hot pink nails and raunchy yet witting phrases. But, I was wrong. Becoming Lee was much harder than hiding. It was a painful experience that made me face fully the scars of the past and the present. This wasn't a matter of putting on a show, but a matter of exploring myself at a deeper level, and realizing how limited I was by fear. As a writer, I had always thought I was a rule-breaker, but I couldn't break out of the rules of Levi. I looked at my reflection in the dusty window of the porch and I felt like a joke.

Then came anger, the familiar flame that started in my gut and crept through my esophagus into my cranium. It was a defense, freezing me from those around me. An anger that blossomed from the moment I realized my best friend wouldn't talk to me on the playground because I wasn't like the other boys. This anger, internalized, grew and grew until it exploded. I remember feeling this explosion the night I degraded another boy for slighting me, shouting, "faggot," at him, a word I would have never used just year before. He was gay, and I was gay, but I wanted to differentiate. I wanted to feel some escape from the anger I had toward who I was and who I am.

But instead of yelling faggot at myself in the mirror, I decided to give up. There was no redeeming act I could perform. There was no big "Lee" moment I could achieve by doing something insane or insanely gay. It wasn't possible.

I dropped the voice.

I dropped the walk.

I dropped the snide, over-sexed comments.

I let go of the idea of what I was supposed to be and entered the party. I began to dance with my friend without worries and without feeling the need to explain my project. With every move I made, I felt a loosening within me. I knew others around could see my beautified face, but I didn't care. I didn't feel the need to play ultra-gay, but I didn't feel the need to play masculine either because the cake on my face would obviously invalidate that. Earlier that day, I had received compliments on my tank top and how it fit me. Now, at the party, looking in the mirror, I began to believe the compliments. In my makeup and tank top, I felt sexy. It was a strange type of sexy, a free type of sexy that believed in itself without the approval of others. I began to see that I had written Lee with the idea that he couldn't be sexy—he was too gay. But, maybe, I was so far from the truth. He wasn't just gay, he wasn't a symbol of ultra-effeminacy. He was a multidimensional person that couldn't be defined to masc or femme. He was like everyone and everything of us on earth, including me.

Giving up on the performance was the best decision I could make. This one moment brought me the closest to the character of Lee. I realized that my play in which Lee exists wasn't about masculine and feminine, but about identity. It was simply about people not feeling free to be who they are. Lee and I shared that common core, no matter how different or similar we were, we simply wanted to be who we were without the rules of how we should perform. With us being one, I could see our multiple dimensions that existed outside of binaries. I had been unfair to him, to myself, and to those around me, and it was time for that to end.

I expected this project to be a matter of happenings. I expected to do an action, and receive an interesting external outcome. I expected drama. But this was not the narrative. The narrative was within my thoughts. Within the way I could connect every action in the present to a scar of the past. Its impossible to totally express mental scar tissue upon a page, but I think the project rendered a representation of the link between the past and present, forcing me to unmask my thoughts and come to terms with all of the parts of me that were Lee. The parts I so desperately wanted to separate from myself, but so desperately needed to embrace. It's made me realize and rethink moments when I try to perform rather than be authentic. I now correct myself when I look at effeminacy as a flaw and not something that can be flaunted both in myself and in others. The project taught me that the enforcement of roles are not as external as they are internal, and if you can change the script you have in your head, you can be happier just being yourself. I don't need to be a jock, rugged, daddy, or muscular to be sexy. I'm beginning to feel like I'm no longer waiting for a Felipe, but validating myself. I don't need to be "masc" to be proud. I don't need to act to play my part. At first I thought this project was about learning about myself from how I could analyze my character, but, now I realize that it was only in attempting to become my character that I could see a clear reflection of myself because of the vulnerability it brought to the surface. I needed more than a script to deal with the damage that dominated my actions—I needed a body.