

We were feathered girls, and I. Lucious and liquid, the baddest of bitches. Despite the blonde hairs starting to burst from our chins, despite testosterone's tight knot forming in our throats, we found a way to glisten. Always glossy and pygmalion in my mom's vanity. So lacquered in goops and greases we could be embalmed that very moment, and arrive in the next life just the same. Mom's closet was a space outside of law or physics. Each secret cream and tchotchke concealed a spell that we were desperate to unlock. Like the kids menus at IHOP, we filled our faces with these grown up crayons. Her clacky pile of nails and gluey lashes, pastels and pencils, liquids that coated our skin with glass. These were the magic tools we tinkered with, morphing ourselves into Mandarin ducks.

This was a regular ritual. Each time my parents left for some business event, some gala, some movie night without the kids, I called Q over from his house down the block, and we took the chance to rummage. We found the family jewels, power totems passed down generations, adorning all my family's women as woman. Crowns of womanhood. Feminine charm carved in sharp citrine and topaz, or at least zirconia the same colors. We found them in small velvet boxes, and we pinned them to our pj's, initiating ourselves in the ceremony of woman. This made us grown folks. Ones who knew things. Ones who had eyebrows that arched in such a way that everyone else would know we knew things too. We found gowns my mother never wore, glittering and crystalline, and we slipped them on, baby chest hairs curling from our makeshift cleavage, yards of fabric flowing past our tweenage feet. We were the feminine mystique, a smoke curling around every sexy villain's plump and overdrawn lips, lips sketched from the fantasies of men. Fantasies we knew nothing about, and still lived inside. Test-tube-egg-blender babies of Ursula, Shego, and our wealthy aunties. We were ugly and proud. Red wax streaked sloppy on our lips, more like the carnage of hot chips than the perfect crisp mouths of church

women or underwear models. Charcoal clumped inside our tear ducts, thick and heavy as the pharaohs'. We were royal in the brief kingdom of my mother's closet.

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This went on for years, even through high school. We grew into the taught new skins of boyhood, smelly and unkempt. Though the boys around us ripened in their stink, we learned to scrub and shave with fury. Weaponless in our day lives, we learned the blade and bend of night, practicing our mugs in secret before the next reconnaissance. My sad clumps of eyeliner sharpened into steely scythes, Q's more like the fangs of ancient beasts. Q crusted his eyes in small green emeralds while I'd cast a red smoke over mine. We long outgrew the polite looks of my mother's tools and were now painting with expensive chinks and creams we stole from the mall. We had it down to a science: For three days we'd each grow our nasty stubble and swear off plucking brows. Dressed in cargo shorts and backwards hats, those Sephora employees never suspected it was us, two queens costumed as frat boys, who looted half the store. The heists were now a rite and a passage. An obligation and a new kind of opulence within our wicked ceremony of transformation. Q admittedly never liked to steal and would recite the Act of Contrition while looking in my rear view mirror to apply his brand new highlighter. But I was surged with power when we did. It was us against the law, against economy, and against giving James Charles our parents' money.

"Hey, Nef."

"Huh?" I turned accidentally carving a thick road of eyeliner across my face. Q snorted, red lipstick staining his teeth

"You look fucking stupid."

"Shut up! You look like something RuPaul puked up after sucking too much dick."

“Like the way you did with Jacob Sheppard last week behind the Burger King?”

“Q!”

We cackled enormous, glass cracking laughs. This was how we loved each other: by being big o’l fags. There was a language to it, a flicker in the eye. It decoded every harsh word into a chorus, a warmth no one else knew how to give. These were rare moments, and we cherished them more than the heavy stones pinned to our shirts.

We had both been “out” for a minute, and by the time we got to high school there was enough of Ellen and Netflix for most people to know you couldn’t bully someone for that anymore. At least not with mass approval. But being out had its own set of burdens that only Q and I could know about. Q was on the soccer team and I was student council president. That meant we had to perform a kind of digestible masculinity to get any kind of genuine respect. People love a faggot that doesn’t act like one. Always checking our posture, our wrists, the shape of our necks, if our back arched when we stood, how short is too short, making sure we spoke with our throat and not our nose, watch our intonation, our tone, being careful to pitch words down at the end of sentences, don’t say “cute”, don’t say “girl”, don’t say “lol” out loud, mention something about sports, doesn’t even have to be in depth just say you hope the Texans finally make it to the Super Bowl. We knew exactly how to say the right words in the right way and around whom, and it was exhausting.

Once, I went to Q’s game, I realized what a toll it took. At home I knew Q as a tropical bird, but here he was something crueller. He trucked meaty defenders flat onto their backs, then smiled at their girlfriends. He slid deep in mud so referees couldn’t see his cleats clipping ankles from their sockets. He was not fair because life wasn’t. He moved through and in the fear others

kept in their eyes. Coming off the field I heard him talking to his teammates, almost a snarl I wouldn't call his unless I saw it.

“Bro we wrecked them!” He punched some guy on his team playfully in the gut, hard. “Pussies man, they should've sent their girlfriends” He squirted Gatorade from a green plastic bottle into his mouth and wiped the red drips on his hand.

“Hey Nef! What's up, I'll see you at the party tonight?” He slapped my back, and stained my polo, kept walking in a funny stride I knew he practiced in the mirror. I clocked him. This was all a fucking show.

“Hey Q!” He turned back, looked up and down then wiped his nose with his thumb and lifted one bent elbow in apathetic hello, a perfect concrete sculpture of a dude we'd have clowned together any other day. “You look fucking stupid.”

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I thought about that moment, watching him now in my mom's bathroom. Legs crossed, bent toward the mirror with a liquid lip in hand. The creatures he locked inside himself. I wondered if they shared cages or if he kept them separate. If his tongue ever got curled up with theirs. If he caught the airy tone in his throat just to let it die there, If he had a voice saved just for me.

“Q, you think you'd ever let your dad see you like this?”

“Nef, if my dad is gonna see me in a dress it's not gonna be your mom's.”

“You know what I mean! In your girl clothes. With your face done. Those six inch heels that lift your butt up. What do you think would happen if he saw?”

“I honestly don't know.”

“Well your parents were really supportive when you came out weren't they?”

“I mean, yea, but... ” He sat down and crossed his legs, my mom’s black sequin dress fanning around him in a pool of night. He looked elegant in a way I knew he wished he could be more often “Sometimes I feel like the reason they were fine with it was because I still acted like a boy, you know?”

I felt something small and glowing in me break off and roll away. Like a wedding band whisked down the drain along with scraps of soggy noodles.

“I know exactly what you mean. When I told my dad, he kept saying, ya know, ‘This doesn’t define you. Don’t let other people say you have to be one way or another just because you’re gay. People are just gonna assume you paint your nails or you act girly, don’t let them stereotype you’. And it’s like, he had all these ways of saying I would be fine *despite*. I don’t think he’s ever stopped to think that maybe I wanted those things. I don’t even think he can conceive the fact that some men just want to be femme. Like queerness is just some unfortunate disease we get, and all have to learn to live with.”

“Exactly! And, like...” Q was starting to well up, and I took his hand. Part of our butch training involved locking up truths that were hard to swallow. Never looking soft, especially around our parents. The danger is sometimes you get stuck in there until everything unhinges. “It was so hard to tell them. I mean, I know they love me, but for Christ’s sake we go to church every Sunday, and I have like thirty fucking rosaries, and I can’t take a shit or sneeze or jack off without the Virgin Mary looking at me from somewhere in the house with those sad little burn-in-hell eyes.” We both half-laughed. I felt a little gush of love for Q. “There were just all these things telling me I couldn’t. And now, I just feel like if they saw me I’d be coming out all over again. I feel like I’m everything they wanted me not to be when I came out. And I can’t carry all of that. It just hurts”

“I know. I know”. I peeled my mom’s dress off so he wouldn’t stain it, and put Q’s head on my bare shoulder. We stayed there until the wound he ripped open dried up, and he was back together inside himself. He sniffled a little, then looked up at me with chunky eyelashes I would normally clown him for, and eyes I loved because they were his.

“You still can’t suck my dick you know that Nef? ”

“Man shut up! Every time I try to have a nice lil tender gay moment with you, you make that joke. I don’t want your sad dirty dick and you know it.”

“Yea whatever, tell Jacob Sheppard I say hi. ”

We laughed enormous broken hearted laughs. Laughs that wrecked the sand we built our lives from. We laughed until so much ink ran down our face we were water colored. And we were ugly, snot nosed, queens, and I loved us for it.

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My mom caught us once. I had my speaker on full blast. Six Inch Heels by Beyonce was vibrating in the bricks of my house. The hollow cells of our bones ringing wicked. I too wanted the knife of my eye to take faint lives. *Goddamn*. Q and I practiced walking slow and sinister in my mom’s black heels. Imagining the ex-husbands we would one day set on fire. And then I heard the unmistakable creak of the bathroom door. I must have missed the car pulling into the driveway, the lock turning open, her shoes on the hardwood floor. But the creak was so loud it split me open.

“Nef?”

My mom stood humble in the doorway. She just peaked her head out of the doorway, like someone who knows they’ve seen something that wasn’t meant for them. Nef and I shouted and

covered our chests, as if we had real breasts to hide. I fumbled for the speaker which just left us in our heavy silences.

“Umm.... I, I just forgot to grab” she pointed at the lipstick in my hand. I couldn’t move to give it to her. I couldn’t pop the membrane that separated her from this world. But here she was, inside and uninvited. I stayed very still while my ears got hot.

“Mom , I just...um had a project... and” My mom put her purse down and tilted her head to one side.

“Honey come here, Q you too” she sat us on her bed, still half gooped. Heels slipping shamefully from our feet. “Boys, I know you’ve been using my make up. I’ve known since you were in middle school.” We shifted where we sat. Deep down we knew this too. Nothing was ever cleaned up precisely. And my mom’s eye was everywhere. Like a scent.

“Come on, all my lipsticks were stabbed and my eyeshadow used up? It wasn’t too hard” she chuckled obviously trying to lighten the mood and failing. We watched the failure flounder for a moment before she continued. “I guess I never said anything because for some reason I felt like this was special to you two. I don’t know why, and I don’t need to, but I wanted to respect that.”

Q and I spoke to each other without speaking. And then we let her in.

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Yea, thanks, Mom”

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We went on like this for most of high school. Someone’s parents would say something harsh. We’d practice beating our mugs at my house, get a little weepy because we could until there was no more make up left to ruin, then watch RuPaul’s Drag Race and quickly play random

episodes of other shows to push it deeper into the recently watched queue. We'd clown each other for sucking so- and-so at such-and-such event knowing damn well what's-her-face was gonna find out. Our vocabulary grew stronger, and much of it unspoken. So I knew what was coming before it arrived. I could hear it before it was said.

"Nef, I'm gonna wear a dress to Prom."

"Huh?" I nearly choked on a pizza roll as he said it. We were streaming Drag Race illegally and eating Totinos as our usual Sunday schedule. "Oh... okay go off. Um. Are you ready for that?"

"Not at all."

"Sis, then what the fuck are you doing?"

"Shut up! No. I can do this. I need to. It's scary, but I've made up my mind"

"I'm here for you, Q. You know that. I just want to make sure you feel safe."

"That's the thing I don't! I don't feel safe ever. I'm constantly worrying if your parents are gonna walk in on us changing, if someones' gonna hack my phone and see my makeup, if I post something to my regular insta and not my finsta. I'm not living a full life. I just keep creeping along on this marginal world of paranoia. It's gonna eat me alive if I keep trying to do the things that make everyone else comfortable."

"You're right, Q. You're right. I'm proud of you."

"Okay Nef, but you have to do it with me."

"What!"

"Nef! You're the only boy in Texas that would wear a dress to prom besides me. And I'm so scared, please" I thought Q was being unfair. Just because he wanted to expose himself to the whole school didn't mean I was ready for that.

“I don’t know, Q. I just can’t promise. I don’t know if I’m ready for that jump.”

“I understand. Will you at least come dress shopping with me? See if something catches your eye?”

Q knew me well. As soon as I saw anything shiny and shimmery with flow I would swoon. And I’d have no choice but to wear it to prom because I couldn’t wear anywhere else. I knew it. And he knew it. And we signed a contract in our unspoken language.

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“Well, what do you think?”

“You look like a wealthy southern woman attending the funeral of her third husband to die under mysterious circumstances.”

“Ugh you’re right. Let me get the silver one again.”

“No! Wait, I meant that as a compliment!” But Q was already on his way into the dressing room. We’d been in the store for almost an hour. Elderly aunties, and concerned fathers with beer bellies all passed by us and exuding some truly rank stink faces. I could tell Q was getting nervous.

“Q, why don’t we just take a peek at Goodwill or something, this is a whole other level”

“Because Nef! I need it to fit! I need to look jaw dropping. If I’m gonna do this, the whole earth beter tremble under my heels. You haven’t even tried anything on yet!”

“Alright alright, give me the one you have on, and we’ll get changed. together.”

I slipped into Q’s elegant black widow dress while he somehow got his big meatball shoulders through a tight silver work.

“You ready hun?”

“Yup, step out on three. One, two, three.”

I gasped. Q was wearing the moon. His whole body was radiating with silky smooth light that draped so perfectly around his hips.

“Look at you Miss thang.”

“Who me?” I had completely forgotten myself in the presence of Q. But standing next to him in the mirror, I saw that I did indeed look maleficent. But it fit well, and I felt like money, a good feeling to have.

“How could anyone think this isn’t beautiful?” Q whispered looking at us in his phone pointed at the mirror. And I was scared. Not for the dresses. But because I knew, soon I’d have to share him. For years this was Q and I’s secret. Our small sanctuary where we called each other lovely and that was all we needed. But now the whole world was going to see his shine, everyone would be trying to learn the language we built. And it shook me to my core. But none of this I could say to Q. Q, who was deciding a new course of his life in this mirror. So I put my head on Q’s shoulder and smiled softly.

“Love, you look like another lifetime.”