

The Velveteen Tranny

I. Theory

I think it would be a very nice thing, to be real.

I don't know for sure. I've never been real, and so it's a bit hard to say. Perhaps there are things about being real that I wouldn't enjoy. But considering the tone and flavor with which I am generally, and have across my lifetime been told I am not real, I assume it must be better. Or, at the very least, that there must be some benefit, if only because so many people *think* it's better than being. . . the things I've been. Not fake, quite. I'm rarely told I'm fake, but I can't imagine why since it seems clear that fake is the opposite of real. Doesn't it? Never having been real, again, I am not sure.

I wasn't ever a real girl, except, I think, when I was so young that I wasn't myself at all, just an extension of my parents' projections about me. I do have photos of myself in dresses with pinafores and petticoats, and I am certainly smiling pink, gummy smiles in them. But it's not long before, in the pictures, I am wearing blue jeans and T-shirts, or grubby shorts showing filthy knees from playing explorer games in the vacant lot with the kids on my street. I played basketball with Michael Carroll, who was fifteen when I was five and must have grown up to be a great dad, as patient as that boy was. My realness never took hold, as a girl, despite all the ways anyone ever tried to make me more real from the outside in, as though if enough eye makeup were applied it would eventually sink in through the skin. I tried and failed, and tried some more.

That narrative is only a little interesting at this point; only useful as a cautionary tale to parents who keep trying to paint some normative gender on their children in the hopes that it will make them more acceptable to the rest of the world. It won't. Please, stop trying. It doesn't make the rest of the world like us any better, because they can almost always still see that we are somehow, ineffably but unmistakably, not real, and now not only that but we can hardly recognize ourselves. It's better for everyone if you can start getting used to your gender-non-normative child now. If you can't manage to buy him a tutu or her a tool belt, that's okay for the moment, but please at least invest in lots of art supplies and science toys, and stop trying to hand your boy a truck when all he wants is a doll, or your girl a pair of dress-up angel wings when any idiot—and you're not an idiot, are you?—can see that she's long on grounding and low on gossamer. If, as children, we can't be real to the world, it's always way easier if we can at least be real to ourselves at home as much as possible.

Eventually, I was a butch. I was never a butch lesbian or a butch woman, though I probably was a butch dyke for a bit there, but only situationally. I always said that butch was a gender all its own—yes, a noun—and I was pretty clear that that was me. I was a masculine female, a he-she, an egg timer in a forest of hour-glasses, and for a time I did okay as a butch. People believed in it to a degree and let me keep my noun on credit, but heads were shaken, and plenty of people told me I wasn't a real butch. Real butches always and only love femmes, and while I adore femmes and have loved several in my life as well as I could, I didn't love only femmes. I melted over other butches. I cruised burly, grey-haired butch daddies twice and three times my age, butches who

had kids older than me. Butches who had boots older than me. And I had no skills in the trades, and I couldn't fix a car. One year, for my birthday, I received a dozen tire gauges from various people as gifts because I thought the channel sewn into my friend Kage's mechanic's shirt was for a pen, and everyone thought that was so funny they all got me tire gauges (which, it turned out, is what the spot is really for). I still have one of them in a drawer of keepsakes, but I've never learned how to use it, like all the real butches. I never wanted a motorcycle or a muscle car or a fishing pole or a motorboat; never worked construction or painted houses. I usually took care of kids or fiddled with computers for work, and the one appropriately butch job I had was working the door at a gay bar, a job I got because my conflict de-escalation skills were better, in ratio to my specific mass, than any of the other applicants.

But as a butch I was kind of . . . girly. I didn't like to camp or hunt, I didn't drink beer, and my pool game is a disaster. I liked to read and write and brunch and shop and cry and go to musicals. I was scared of horror movies, and my favorite part of the Super Bowl was always the commercials. My friends liked me anyhow, certainly, but they took these opportunities to tease me about what a real butch I was definitely *not* when they arose, as with the tire gauges. Or my haircut, which I wore in a flippety Prince Valiant style for some time (because it fell nicely into place without having to put product in it and, on a good day, made me look a little bit like Joey Lawrence). But my buzzed and butched and flat-topped friends gave me so much shit about it, asking when I was going to get a proper haircut for a real butch.

I tried, I swear I did. Not as hard as I did at being a girl,

because I was more stubborn and less dependent on the approval of my criticizers for things like food and shelter, but still. The thing is, it wasn't really the activities or the hairstyles that got me in trouble, that prompted people to comment on how real I was not—those were just the signifiers, the concrete, recognizable things they could point to. But unlike my girlness, their unsettledness ran deeper. There was some discomfort with my performance failure but, I now believe, a much greater amount of discomfort with the fact that I didn't really seem to be working hard to do it right. I wanted to be real, but not fakely real, only really real—real in myself and also recognized as real.

It gets so complicated. Being real, being read as real, being real to myself. Are we all more or less performing something we hope reads as a workable gender, praying no one notices how we're really, seriously, irrevocably fucked up? Hiding carefully how far we have strayed in our hearts from the ideal that gets packaged and sold as realness? Thinking about how much we would cheerfully pay to get a few days off to go somewhere nobody knows us and indulge in all our unsanctioned realnesses without anyone there to drag us back to reality? I think we are.

And then I went and made it all worse. When I finally stepped back and looked at all the pieces, trying to figure out which gender really seemed like the best fit, the one most satisfyingly for *me*, I kept circling back to faggotry. Queer men can be fashionable and cry while simultaneously being burly and wearing suits. They probably—we probably?—have the greatest amount of freedom to shake up gender into something I find really fun, as long as we're prepared to pay for it with our lives, if necessary. No queer man has ever looked at me funny when I said I collected

vintage cufflinks, which is pretty well at the intersection of all of the identities I have ever had (and has gotten me laughed out of more than one conversation). For a long time I said that I was definitely never going to transition to male, because I wouldn't be any better at being Man than I was at being Woman; that if I transitioned I would have to buy tutus, so I might as well save the money and be a gender outlaw in my original sex and butch gender. Certainly I was very practical. Certainly I understood where in the world I stood the best chance of eventually gaining realness, and so I publicly resolved—in writing, even—that I would remain firmly situated in the previously agreed-upon location of butch.

But I didn't quite stay there. Partly, I couldn't seem to make my point about butch as a gender, and people kept insisting I was a butch woman or, more problematically, a butch lesbian. More than one charming femme actually said to me, "I'm so glad you're staying a lesbian," and each time my heart sank; each time I felt like I had been erased. Also, as it turned out, I was rather more suited to the tutu style of gender variance than the carburetor style. I was more *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* than *The L Word* by a factor of, uh, kind of a lot. And so, after some conversation internal and external, I shuffled just a tiny bit there over the line of masculinity into something closer akin to manhood, hoping for authenticity, hoping for my chance to become real. Hoping to finally find a quiet place of gender I could ease into.

Man, did I ever not find it (pun intended). I didn't know, before I made my little shuffly hopeful move, about the great and terrible truth of transgender life, which is that they will never let you be real, ever again. Not even if you absolutely promise

and completely swear to follow every directive from the Home Office immediately upon receipt. I didn't know it when I signed on—maybe I should have, but I didn't—but the transperson is always a knock-off, as in, "Why would you date a fake man when you could have the Real Thing?" (strut, strut, posture, posture), and ze is always the location of deceit.

It must be true, or people wouldn't respond the way they do. Kate Bornstein famously asks, when people ask if she's had the Surgery, if they mean her nose job. She jokes about it because she has been talking about transfolks, and her own trans experience, in popular culture longer and better than anyone else, and after the millionth iteration of some stranger deciding it's okay to quiz you about your genitals after thirty seconds of acquaintance, let me tell you . . . if you don't make a joke you'll scream. I could recount all the impertinent, intrusive, or arrogant questions here, but they're endless and boring and I frankly don't want to give anyone any ideas. What I will say is that, when I mention that something might be a personal question, people tend to say that they're just really curious. They say this in an innocent tone of voice as though surely I can understand, and furthermore, why, I should be grateful. Grateful, I say, that they want to know more about the life and times of the transsexual; grateful that they're not running away shrieking or throwing rotten fruit. If I push the issue and suggest that querying people on their history, former name, surgical status, and so on is rude, my interlocutor gets angry, accuses me of being oversensitive, or asks me if I have something to hide. Which is unfair, and also tiring.

The truth is that I might not mind as much if I didn't understand so well what was going on. I might be willing to believe

that there was some sort of innocent educational journey at work every single one of those times, if I hadn't already answered those questions over and over only to discover that each of my questioners was using the information to decide whether or not I was real. I say that my name is Bear, and when I am asked if I have changed my first name to Bear, I say no, it's my middle name. Not real enough. When people learn that my grandmothers still call me Sharon, it's further proof: not the real deal. These judgments are made about surgeries, about hormones, about sexual orientation, and people who ask them—the same people who moments before claimed the need for my tender educational mercies—are now the gender judge and jury.

Transpeople lose a number of things when we transition. We can lose family, friends, jobs, children, lovers, and money. But the most difficult thing for me to lose has been veracity. I was already used to not being real, but now I don't even seem to be trustworthy. I'm not a reliable reporter about my sex or my gender or even my own name; I cannot be trusted to be my own expert. In each of those querying moments, what I am being asked for are details so someone else can make the final decision—am I real yet? So they can decide what they want to call me or how they want to refer to me or if I deserve the pronouns I have requested (and therefore asserted to deserve). I'm only truthful if they decide, after assessing the facts, that my actions mean I deserve the identity that I am claiming. I only get to be real if they say so.

It's tempting to make the comparison to the Velveteen Rabbit, and tidy as well—and you know essayists; we love to wrap up a good metaphor with a pithy ending. Here I just say that I know I'm real, that I believe in it fully, and if I can become real to just one person it's enough to sustain me. But unlike the Velveteen

Rabbit, who was redeemed from death through love but never allowed to be near his love again, it takes more than one person believing in my realness. It takes cultural change. And so this essay doesn't really end as much as it stops. I'll let you know if I ever get more real.

II. Practice

I had a long, difficult conversation with my old friend and mentor John last year. I was talking about someone important to me who had a new lover, and I referred to him as her boyfriend. John stopped me mid-sentence to ask, "A transsexual guy?"

I'm afraid I kind of lost my composure. I snapped back, none too kindly, something snotty like, "Are you seriously asking me about the genitals of some dude you don't even know?" and we let the matter drop and went for lunch. But as is so often the case with people to whom we are close, we circled around back to it again in our way, after our feelings had cooled a little, after I was ready to talk to my old friend as a friend and not as a full-time professional gender warrior (which is, or should be, the right of friends). After a few weeks, he sent an email with a chatty first paragraph and then, after a tentative opening, he wrote this:

At the baggage carousel, I was, indeed, asking about the genitals of someone dating [name redacted]. There are all kinds of reasons why my question was socially problematic, and deserving of a dismissive or indignant response—but your particular indignant response, as I read it, seemed to have as its subtext, "Why on earth should genitals matter in the least?"

I know full well that sex and gender are different things and I'm well aware of, and fully support, the deconstruction of those parts of the sex-gender dynamic that are constructed, which is to say almost all of it. But genitals seem to matter a lot to people who have them, regardless of their sex or their gender. Which means, I think, that they must matter in any discussion of a human relationship between people with genitals.

Okay, genitals are private, and as a rule ought not to be asked about. But, *but*—when we wish to know or talk about a person's life and relationships, do we not have to basically agree on the terms of the discussion in order for the discourse to have any meaning at all? To the extent that the LGBTQ community is laboring righteously to change the terms of these discussions, I'm all for it. I'm decades past thinking that genitals determine anything, necessarily. But that's not to say that they don't matter, sometimes a lot. They can't possibly be off the table entirely, can they? I just don't see how that's possible. The sex-gender discussion, obviously, is not in a settled or stable state. As long as that's true, doesn't everything have to be on the table (as it were) while we sort it out? Which means, I think, that my question was not as out of line as your response seemed to suggest.

It's half the problem with old friends, I'm afraid. They really call you on your shit. And they make it difficult to sidestep the complex parts of the question by dismissing the entire thing on a bad premise. It's not like answering the questions of a university un-

dergraduate, in which I can address only the parts of the question I want to discuss. On the other hand, with old friends I can talk about things I feel, and ways in which I'm tender, not just what I have studied or can prove. I wrote back:

Okay, that's fair. Here's the thing:

When I identify someone's gender (with a pronoun, name, or other gendered words like "boyfriend") and then someone inquires about genitals, here's the subtext I hear: "Is this person really a man? Help me assess." And that's complicated. Granted, you and I have a long and fairly close history, in a somewhat odd but present way, and so in part I should have been more thoughtful about the fact that you were asking that question in relationship to how it might affect me. I'll take that, and apologize if I was an ass about it. But about gender and genitals, I still have a few thoughts:

Those questions are complicated because it seems to suggest that further interrogation of trans bodies is appropriate, which is a difficult concept. A lot of my work is about saying, hey—here's my gender. Deal with me on the face. If there's some possibility that you might encounter my genitals, we'll deal with that when we get there. And also, it's about creating a space in the world for others to say the same. Asking a transperson about hir sex will always carry a whiff of, "But what are you, *really*?"

It is a lot like asking someone what name they were given

at birth; it's a way of trying to peel someone apart in a way that is intimate or invasive (based, largely, on the relationship between asker and askee). I do not use my first name anymore; no one calls me that except my parents and older relatives. When strangers ask, "What does the S. stand for?" I say, "My first name." When people ask me about my genitals, I invite them to tell me about their own first. Being a display-model transmasculine person is a full-time job, but it does not pay well enough to offer all comers a look into my underpants, metaphorical or otherwise. It's an intimacy, and I reserve the right to reveal it only to my intimates.

So—do genitals matter? Of course. The question for me then becomes—to whom, and why? I talk about my genitals with those people who I may reasonably imagine, through word or deed, have a legitimate interest (a group pretty well limited to my doctor, my therapist, and anyone with whom I have sex). The fact that my genitals are non-standard for my gender matters to my mechanic or bank teller not at all—they are not interacting with them. Does someone learn more about me if I talk about my parts? Well, maybe. But why do they want to know? How many times in a day do I have to drop my pants for the educational good of others?

Am I defensive about this? Yes, certainly. As a transmasculine person, I experience a lot of poking and prodding at that emotional spot—what are you, really?—and it has

become tender in response. So tender that sometimes really perfectly okay questions (like, "will your friend be babymaking with this new guy?") *feel* like the same kind of accusation (Aha! Imposter!) that I more regularly experience.

That's where the "gender crime" part comes in, the sense that I am somehow committing a fraud. Did you follow the Susan Stanton case in Florida? The manager of a small city down there announced her intention to transition from male to female and was fired. Why? Because despite fourteen years service and a sterling record, she was suddenly viewed as "dishonest." They felt they could no longer trust her. She had not been "forthcoming," at which no one should have been surprised, considering what happened, but whatever. Her gender crime made her unfit for service to the city, and they sacked her without delay.

So, it's all charged. And again, I'm sorry—I could have responded better and more thoughtfully to you, and should have. I welcome your questions; I find them thoughtful and interesting. But that's why that's such a tender location of inquiry—people keep hitting it with big sticks.

His reply was a few weeks in coming. By the middle of March, just when I was starting to fear that my response had been alienating, I got this:

You have nothing to apologize for—the world could use more compassionate indignation. I merely noticed your response, which got me thinking, and I thank you for that. And I take all of your points, except one, and maybe half of another one.

The lesser point: Is it possible to interrogate the body without questioning the authenticity of the gender? I think so, because I think that's what I was doing. Of course, I also realize that could easily be taken for a rhetorical dodge—many a respectable bigot sidesteps his own bigotry with a stated desire to “discuss/face things openly” or “see all sides of a question.” Righteous pseudo-rationality is very convenient when one is trying to ratify some noxious norm or convention. I don't think this is what I was doing, and of course the bigot never does, so some self-directed skepticism is certainly in order. (For all of us. All the time.)

The larger point. Re: “The fact that my genitals are non-standard for my gender matters to my mechanic or bank teller not at all—they are not interacting with them.” Not so! And I realize I consign myself to some neo-Freudian hell the minute I say this, but we are all in some way interacting with each other's genitals all the time, just as we are interacting with all the other aspects of each other that we cannot see but know are there—heart, “heart,” brain, mind, digestive organs, soul, etc. Any feeling of kinship or enmity or attraction or caution, however sig-

nificant or trivial, rests on a platform of knowledge that includes the physical. (“Do I not bleed?”) For all of us, all the time. Does that give the bank teller license to inquire about my genitals? Socially, ordinarily, no. But the inquiry is there, and there naturally and necessarily, because we are the same species, whether it's voiced or unvoiced. (And I see that word “naturally” in the preceding sentence, and it's screaming “Delete! Delete! Uncool!” at me, but I'm going to resist deleting it because *I will not* be cowed by a potential connotation, and I do precisely mean “naturally” and not “normally” as the connotation might go. Also because I'm hoping that having triggered your indignation once, your red flags might sit this one out. I hope I've earned that, but if I haven't, if I'm entitling some heteronormative box—I trust you'll kick me out of it.)

And I see that this has big social implications for gender-genital configurations you have termed nonstandard. Okay, they're a complication to the “standard” social platform, but so what? We have to deal with them, hopefully with wisdom and humanity, which is where your life's work tends, may G-d hold you in the palm of hir hand as long as you are willing and able to do it. There's obviously a long way to go, and yes I know the Stanton case, and it's a really bad deal. But our organs can't be taken off the table. They're part of the table, even in the grocery checkout line.

It's lovely to have smart friends. They make you smarter, especially when you've known them for more than half your lifetime, even with time off for good behavior. So I replied:

Right, okay. And for you, who is about a foot smarter and probably a yard more willing to saddle up for variances in the human experience than most people, that'll all probably work in a way that also allows me to have my life. You see? This is a balancing act—how much information do I give, or can I give, and still get through my day? Can the bank teller get a sense of me, in context, enough to do the banking, without knowing about my genitals? Yes. Are they nonetheless at work in some way? Probably also yes, I'll give you that. Maybe especially for me. But where is my responsibility to the bank teller, and where is my responsibility to my own banking chores getting done? Where, for that matter, is my responsibility to my own sense of safety and well-being?

So, theoretically, I am more than willing to take your point, and sign up for the idea that we are all, constantly, interacting with one another's bodies in all their messy, furry, damp, ungainly, brilliant, delicious ways. But also I am not theoretically banking.

In the practical realm, people (about whom I generalize in this Standard American Television Culture) do not react well to things—any things—which are nonstandard. We have a big love affair with normal and abnormal, with

normal getting rewarded and abnormal being punished. So then it becomes this intense thing of assessing: how much educating am I willing to do? What's my risk here? How much energy do I have to be a transthing right now? For a while, right before *Butch Is a Noun* came out, I was responding to queries from strangers about my work by saying I had written a book about the history of bananas, because I got overwhelmed with the sheer number of times a day I was being called upon to stop everything and explain what a book titled *Butch Is a Noun* could be about, and stand while I did it under a newly very measuring gendered eye.

And sometimes, like with Susan Stanton, people do not respond well. Especially if they liked me when they thought I was a regular ol' dude, if perhaps a little better spoken than usual—now their own discernment, maybe their own identities, have been called into question. They liked a tranny? A queer tranny? That cannot be—therefore, I must have tricked them (and G-d forbid if they were in any way attracted to me). The quiet “I think you'd better go now” is not a pleasure, no matter when I hear it. So, the larger point is all very well and good—and I can agree, if we keep it theoretical. But on the micro level, where I actually go with my actual genitals to the actual bank? It's one angstrom of progress at a time, and most of it is getting paid for by transfolk, who can least afford it and have the most at stake. Which is why such interrogations of the body, when undertaken by you (or

anyone for whom it is a place of privilege—that is, anyone whose gender/genital arrangement is standard) should be approached with the understanding that it is a tender spot, that even for those of us who walk around in our bodies more or less just fine there are still a lot of issues about legitimacy at stake, and if you don't want to trigger them you'll want to show your willingness to protect that tender spot in the conversation before you open it (about which, for the record, we're clear here).

After this email, a lot of time passed. That's not terribly unusual between John and me; sometimes there are gaps. But then, in May, I received the following:

Ach. Okay. You're right, of course: we don't live in theory. Which is why I don't have much patience for what people tell me they believe—increasingly I feel like beliefs and actions relate 1:1, which is depressing when you see what people really do most of the time, though not, thank G-d, all the time.

And I wish to heck I didn't have to go where I feel I must go with this, because I care about you so much; your work, yes, to be sure, but also your tender spots, some of which I've known about since you were still, to most of us, a girl.

Suppose, for the sake of discussion, a modicum of decency, intelligence, and mutual respect exists between you

and me, or between you and anyone for that matter. We engage in discourse. On my side there is appalling privilege and a certain amount of ignorance, in addition to curiosity and the aforementioned decency, etc. There is not, however, much ambiguity about some aspects of my identity. On your side, in addition to great generosity and the aforementioned decency, etc., there are widely shared professions of identity prostitution, stories about creating and enjoying warps in the social continuum of gender-normal, and more clinically, the details of your essay "Tranny Bladder" over against references a few chapters earlier to your cock. And even if I hadn't read your book, you met me in a major airport, in all your gender-jamming glory, in a sweatshirt emblazoned "Transmasculine."

I'm trying to see why I shouldn't try to figure out what those things mean, in the most respectful way possible, which is by asking the person who is saying them. By asking you. And here's the hard part—what if "I" isn't me, but someone else. Are the rights and responsibilities of interrogation contingent on the circumstances? At what point—and it seems to me there must be a point—must the choices you have made (above) constrain the choices you can make re: protection of tender spots?

I feel very ungenerous and not a little queasy as I write this, because whatever you might be guilty of, I doubt you are guilty of hypocrisy. And I am constrained by my own humanity, at the very least, from treading heedlessly on

anyone's tender spot. But haven't I, along with thousands of others, been warmly and openly invited to consider your tender spots—indeed, to make ourselves better by the vicarious habitation of your life on the micro level, both physical and meta-physical?

I never replied to his email. Mostly I didn't reply because I didn't know the answer, and I continue not to reply because I still don't (though it hasn't stopped me publishing the correspondence in a book, has it?). How much am I inviting these kinds of questions because I talk about gender and sexuality issues? If I am willing to take some questions, do I have to take all of them? If I wear a shirt that reads *TRANSMASCULINE*, what responsibility am I accepting? If we're likening me to a whore, does the price of my hire entitle the purchaser to whatever ze wants of me? Or am I entitled to keep some things private—or, perhaps, to negotiate a separate price for each? If people have questions, am I responsible to each and every one of them? If I answer them, am I setting the example that people can go ahead and ask transfolk whatever they want, measuring again and again rather than taking us at our word? Or am I slaking their thirst to understand in such a way that will keep them from asking anyone else?

I don't know. I also don't know how much these questions are built on our experience, and how much on our personalities. But I must uncomfortably confess that I leave the conversation in much the same place that I began it. I have great respect for John, and great belief in his empathy, but I can still feel my hackles rising uncomfortably when someone starts their interrogation, however friendly, always understanding that in some way the underlying

question is, "Are you real or not?" On the other hand, I already know that sometimes—as woo-woo as I know this sounds—sometimes if I lean into other people a little bit and offer them my trust before I expect theirs, things can go better than I expect. Which, for a worn-out tranny warrior who spends way more time in airports than with old friends, is kind of a nice thing to be able to hold on to.

It Only Takes a Minute, II

There is, in fact, nothing wrong with me. Or with my husband or with any of my friends, and though I know the Gender Identity Disorder diagnosis-and-treatment model has served some people well over time, I find it harder and harder to get on board. So I apologize for not reacting more warmly to your explanation of how you got your workplace to cover your surgery and medical leave. I know it's a huge relief for you, but I'm conflicted. Glad you got what you need, worried that it's not a good precedent.

In Wisconsin, at a hotel happy hour for business travelers, I accept a glass of a nice white and sit on a low couch. I'm facing a good-looking, sturdy blonde woman with her briefcase and binder set on the seat beside her. "Nothing wrong with free wine," I remark casually. "I tried to get my husband to come down, but he's watching the game," she replies. I grin, and say, "I don't think my husband's ever watched a game in his life," even though we're not married yet. Suddenly she likes me a lot better, and we talk and drink wine for an hour. I remain unsure if I was redeemed as a straight woman or a gay man.

At my wedding, Zev and Turner are taking one of my grandmothers, in her wheelchair, from the place where we were taking photos to the tent under which the wedding will be held. Making conversation, Zev asks my grandmother which side she's on, meaning: my mother's mother, or my father's mother? Grandma puffs up and announces, "The bride's." Turner and Zev make sure not to dissolve into giggles until they are safely out of earshot.

My nearest-by Starbucks, purveyors of the iced grandé caramel double espresso that writes books, employs a cadre of young stylish white girls and one teensy gay boy. My low-level flirting has apparently caused some conversation: one of the girls murmurs quietly to me as she hands over the magic potion that the tallest girl and the little boy were *both* wondering if I was single. I grin and say I'm married, which I think answers the question. She looks vexed.

When I see queer-lookin' people out and about, especially while traveling, I like to at least smile and nod. In Nashville, at the supermarket, I see two short-haired tattooed women standing close together, and grin at them, friendly-like. One glares and the other sneers at me, and I make a quick escape down the frozen foods aisle. Either I have misread them, or they've misread me. Anyone have suggestions for how to tell which it is?