

NOT MY SON

I'm trying to think back to the very first time I knew. I probably knew before I even knew what knowing was, but the first time I really *remember*, I was maybe five years old. It was summer in the Yukon, I remember that, there is no mistaking summer in the Yukon. It was early in the evening when the shadows fall long and sideways under the midnight sun, stretching slender from the tips of my sneakers all the way across the dusty parking lot next to the Qwanlin Mall downtown. I was wearing a baseball hat that was too big for me, I had to heat up a safety pin and melt another hole in the plastic strap at the back to make it small enough to stay on my head at all. My mom and I had just finished grocery shopping and our cart was loaded down with brown paper bags. I held the glass door open for her to push the cart through.

A tourist man wearing tourist shorts and a tourist shirt was on his way in to the Super Valu, and he stopped to let us exit past him. "You're a good boy, son, to help your mama like that," he drawled at me.

My chest puffed up like a little rooster and I stood taller, like I thought maybe a soldier would, or a doorman, someone with a uniform and a purpose. Nodded quick, without smiling.

My mom sighed and squinted into the sun in his direction. "She's not my son, she is my daughter," she told him, without any edge in her voice, just the facts.

"Pardon me, ma'am, my apologies." He cocked an eyebrow like a question mark at me, and then headed inside.

My mom didn't mention the incident again, ever, but I remembered it. Rolled it around in my head after like a small, smooth

pebble. I liked being mistaken for a boy. Liked how it meant I was expected to do things: to stand up tall, open doors, be strong, to help my mother. How I got approving nods from tall men with accents from other countries. I didn't know why it made my heart sing loud to itself that a stranger thought I was a boy. It just did. Made me feel like he could look inside me and see some part of the truth of me in there.

But it did make me inexplicably sad that a stranger could see me, and my own family could not.

The summer I turned six was the first time I intentionally passed as a boy. It had always just happened incidentally, accidentally, before then, before that July and those summer swimming lessons at the Lions pool. My mom had made the mistake of buying me a bikini. The bottoms fit like circa 1974 polyester shorts, blue with red pockets, and the top part was a little tank top, red with blue pockets. It was pretty butch, come to think of it, as bikinis go. It was so easy, that first day. I didn't give it too much thought, really, I just didn't wear the top part. Left it scrunched into a ball and shoved deep into the toe of my running shoe at the bottom of a rent-it-for-a-quarter locker. I pinned the key with the hard plastic orange number on it to the waistband of my trunks and padded barefoot out to the side of the pool. I fell into line with the boys that first day, and it only got easier after that. The short form of the birth name my parents had given me was androgynous enough to allow my charade to continue through all six weeks of swimming lessons. I didn't get busted until report card day. "He has progressed through all of the requirements of his beginners class and is ready to proceed on to his level two?" My mom read aloud in the car in the parking lot outside of the pool, shaking her head slowly. "I knew that bikini was a mistake from the get-go."

I stared at the toes of my sneakers and said nothing. I didn't understand why it was easier to do cannonballs and tread water without a flotation device without being afraid of the deep end when nobody expected you to be afraid. It just was. I still remember that too-good-to-be-real feeling of the water sliding over my bare chest. It's not like I thought I was a real boy. I just knew I was not really a girl.

I was never taught to believe that women were inferior, just different. In fact, I was raised in a family of mostly single mothers. My maternal grandfather was a drunk who died when I was nine, shriveled and yellow and full of bitter. My gran had three jobs and kept everybody fed and spotless and patched and darned and in school, and showed us all with her bent back and arthritic fingers curled into her palms what hard work was. My other grandfather had excised himself from his family and responsibilities in exchange for the sun and winterless shores of New Zealand, and it was well-known family lore that he couldn't hold down a decent job or treat a woman right.

The women in my family handled most of the practical details of everyday life. Men were skilled at some things, at the same time as being inexplicably incapable of performing other seemingly simple tasks. I grew up believing that men were faulty creatures, a little untrustworthy, childlike, even. They needed a woman around to keep them on the tracks. To swipe their paycheque out of their calloused hands right after work every other Thursday before they went and spent it on something stupid like a snowmobile, or a bigger boat. Men swore at the table and were prone to fighting on account of dubious slights, and hardly any of them even knew how to work the washing machine. If you needed something done right, or to get picked up on time by someone after gymnastics or whatever, it was always best if that someone was a woman. Men were mostly just good

for fixing or building things and for hauling firewood. A lot of this work happened out of town in the bush somewhere, or in camps my dad and uncles talked about on their four days off. This work seemed far away, and out of mind, and had little to do with the day in front of us. It was just the way it was.

I didn't not want to be a girl because I had been told that they were weaker or somehow lesser than boys. It was never that simple. I didn't even really actively not want to be like the other girls. I just knew. I just always knew that I wasn't. I couldn't. I would never be.

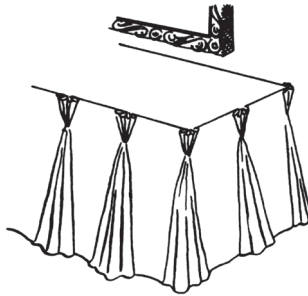


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