

## Outfit Separates

by Maria See

### Get Miles with Chase Leisure Rewards

- L'Oreal Excellence Hair Color Crème in Natural Black
- Bumble and bumble Sumotech
- TIGI S-Factor Chic Shine Hair Spray
- Maybelline Expert Eyes Brow Pencil in Velvet Black
- Almay Intense i-Color Treo for Blues
- Maybelline XXL Volume+Length Microfiber Mascara
- L'Oreal True Match Super-blendable Concealer in Cool
- L'Oreal True Match Super-blendable Blush in Cool
- CoverGirl Professional Translucent Loose Powder in Translucent Light
- L'Oreal Colour Juice Sheer Juicy Lip Gloss in Cherry on Top
- L'Oreal Nail Polish in Breaking Curfew (on my fingers)
- OPI Nail Lacquer in Bastille My Heart (on my toes)
- Wet n Wild Wild Shine Clear Nail Protector & L'Oreal Top Coat (on both my fingers and toes)

That list constitutes what I look like right now, "naked." There has also been lots of shaving. And eyebrow tweezing, shaping and trimming. And my upper lip was waxed. My eyelashes curled. A haircut.

Femme doesn't come from within. It comes from my debit card. It's what I can afford. If I could afford it, my eyebrows would be waxed, and my hair would be colored at a salon. I would buy NARS make-up instead of shopping at CVS. When funds are lower, I'll trade my hair stylist for a cheaper one, and I'll change my hair products. I'll wish that I had long hair that needed much less maintenance.

### Sometimes the Blind See

"You *turned* gay in there," the straight cisgender boy I met that night said to me. We'd left a concert at an Albany bar and were on our way to someplace more club-like.

"You turned gay when she walked in."

I actually didn't see her walk in. I turned around, and the butch paramedic was kneeling on the floor in front of me. That was the first time I saw her.

She was down there looking at her friend's problematic ankle. I wondered how quickly I could harm some part of my lower body. She'd just have to turn towards me then, and her hands would be on my body next. But the chance was gone too soon. She stood up.

"There were like a hundred other women there before she arrived, and I didn't sense that you were attracted to women during that time. You didn't seem interested in any of them."

I wasn't.

The boy didn't know my sexual orientation when I met him at the beginning of the evening. Early in the night, he had assumed that my seemingly-butch-but-actually-straight roommate was gay, and that I was straight. He knew the other two women in our group and also knew they were gay.

I had transformed in front of him. The butch flipped my switch. He was fascinated at the charge, the finely tuned desire.

My spies tell me that the butch paramedic has now transitioned. I have yet to meet another butch as she kneels before me.

### **Return to Sender**

When I first arrived at Femme, I thought it was a lesbian nation. I was a woman in love with a woman. We were young, and we were growing into our genders. I was shaping my feminine presentation and she her boyish one. We were a lesbian butch-femme couple. Ah, life (and femme) was simple.

Fast forward to our breakup, almost three years later. I met the first trans man I dated at a "women's night" event. By "met," I mean I stared him down from across the room for a good portion of the night. We didn't speak, and on my way home, I told my friends about the cute butch. The cute butch woman. A few nights later we crossed paths again, this time at a primarily queer women's bar. A bar where everyone knew everyone else's business, or knew someone who did. I inquired about the butch I continued to admire from afar.

I learned that she was he. That he had recently had a mastectomy (I had assumed his breasts were bound) and had started hormones (he was in an early stage of hormonal therapy and still possessed many feminine facial features).

Liquid courage led me to him, and that night led to a goodnight make-out session on a street corner outside the bar. Our first date and our first fuck shortly followed.

I started dating and having sex with more trans men. I had a tryst with a cisgender straight male. I started to find my way into make-out sessions with gay cisgender men. "Lesbian" didn't fit anymore, and it was a good thing, like when I need to buy larger-sized jeans because my ass has gotten bigger.

I moved to Queer Femme, that popular place where all these femmes nowadays have set up shop. When I said "queer femme," people nodded. They *got* it. Everyone understood

what a "queer femme" was, and thus they knew all about me. The problem was that most people *didn't* know anything about me; most people simply assigned me to an image of a queer femme they had created, one that my reflection did not match. Horrified by these lazy minds, I left Queer Femme; I gave no forwarding address.

## **The Commandments**

I miss when femme was an outlaw label, not a conference title. There was a comfort in knowing that I didn't belong, accepting that fact, and being proud of it.

There has been only one time I paid to attend an event that would supposedly help me become closer to my femme community. I tried to get it. I tried to listen. But there was one moment that caused me to turn to my butch and suggest that we leave for some seafood that very second. I couldn't take a moment more. I would not listen to the femme speaker discuss using the skill that we learned specifically as females: making space for others. I was trying to unlearn that very social conditioning that women shouldn't take up too much space, that women should be sharers and nurturers. I didn't want to "reorient" the "skill." The calamari came with three different dips.

Later, while enjoying smoked pork at a different restaurant instead of being present at the event, I asked my butch, "Why is this a *femme* event? What makes it truly femme? Where's this common glue among us?" I chose a barbeque sauce.

"What is it exactly that I'm supposed to have in common with other people who call themselves femmes?"

And there were the questions I did not ask aloud: why did I never seem to be a part of that community? Why did I consciously reject what so many people thought of as "femme?" Did that mean I was not a femme after all? After ten years of identifying as femme?

I started talking about the reasons people gather in groups. I talked about people attending church, where the thing that brings them together is the religion they claim. "Okay, so the bond that should bring us together is that we're all femme-identified. But, that's a pretty vague thing. I don't relate to what I'm hearing."

I continued the logic of the church metaphor in my head. People who attend the same church pray to the same god. Was a femme community like that? I'm not getting on my knees for *this*--all the dictates by "community" of what femmes are, what we believe, what *we should be*.

And what I'll never be.

There is no *we* in my identity.

I can't want to be a member of your church. I'm not going to pay your tithes.

## **Not White and Black, Different Shades of Gray**

I am not the opposite of butch.

Butch is an identity of female-born queers who *do* gender. I, myself, am a female-born queer who *does* gender. I have more in common with butch than the "Butches Are from Mars, Femmes Are from Venus" peeps ever want you to know.

## **Headspace: Nested Figures of the Matryoshka Doll**

I used to be a "fuck me harder, faster, do *not* stop" femme bitch. I liked watching lovers become sweaty and exhausted.

I used to choose heels by the pain I thought they could cause. "These are going to rip your skin open," I said to a former lover, as I pressed a heel into her arm as a tease of a demonstration at a shoe store, the heel a femme prop that I made matter.

I was overflowing with urges to perform sexually from a male headspace when I met my last love. I was a femme who wanted a butch to play girl to my boy in bed, who could match my masculine top with a distinctly female submission.

She gave me what I wanted. When I penetrated her, I felt like she was housing me, and like access to her was access to myself. She stretched to take in who I needed to be.

I remember wanting to cry during sex because I couldn't feel her with my strap-on the way I would be able to if I were a cisgender male. I was her first femme lover to claim this was "unfair."

## **Unicorns**

For the next act: the committee welcomes "straight femmes."

And here I thought one of the only things femmes had in common with each other is that we are not straight.

## **With This Noun, I Take Thee**

Being *a* femme unnerves me sometimes, makes me feel like I can never leave. The noun owns me.

Femme makes no promises to stretch for me, as my past lover's body did. It forces me to trust that we can pair up and make it work as it changes unexpectedly.

I sit here, for now, uneasy, but still willing.