

34th parallel

**They could be
themselves
with each other**

ISSUE 30



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THE COSTUME CLOSET BY
RHIANNON CATHERWOOD

I leaned against the rear wall of the hotel's elevator while the doors slid open and a six-foot Labrador Retriever walked in on his hind legs. He came to investigate me, his glossy nose hovering several inches from my face, and I did my best not to react. As long as he wasn't going to pee or hump my leg he wasn't bothering me too much. I inspected him right back—the soft chocolate brown of his fur, the rough texture of his paws, the expressive glassy eyes, the leather collar with *Tucker* stitched into it. I had to admit, it was a damn good costume.

Tucker was hardly the strangest encounter that weekend. On the way back to my hotel room, I passed a wide assortment of extra-terrestrials and mythical creatures. I myself was decked out in a steel boned, silver brocaded corset and long, flowing black skirt, with my face, breasts, and arms decorated in glittering sapphire body paint, and a large pair of feathered wings bobbing on my back. I've enjoyed costumes for as long as I can remember. I loved Halloween when I was a kid, and as a grown-up I learned that there is nowhere in the universe quite like a science fiction and fantasy convention.

I went to my first convention when I was eighteen, and two or three every year since. I was drawn to the atmosphere of these gatherings of

social misfits, where no interest or pursuit was too strange, where one might wander from Middle Earth to Babylon 5 in the space of a few rooms, pushing through a crowd of mages and orcs and time lords and stormtroopers. These are magical places where you can be anything you want to be—and of course, you can be that thing while consuming massive amounts of alcohol in the strangest parties you'll ever see.

The night I met the dog, I was tending bar at the Restaurant at the End of the Universe. Tucker blundered into our suite, sniffed the place out, and eventually stood in the corner to observe the crowd gyrating to the music and ducking around the remote-controlled flying dolphins. It was difficult to tell through the bulky, lumbering fur suit and the impersonal headpiece, but after an hour, I started to think he was watching me. Needing a break anyway, I decided to find out for sure. I asked a friend to take over the bar and stepped out, whistling for Tucker's attention and slapping my thigh to beckon him along. We found our way to a quieter party. I lounged on the sofa and snacked while Tucker sat on the carpet at my feet and finally opened his snout to reveal his face beneath the mask.

Tucker was a furry which I learned that night meant something a bit more than a fascination with anthropomorphic animals. Rather, *real furies*, he informed me, had a

psychological and spiritual connection, even identification, with the animals they represented by wearing these elaborate suits. And then he told me why he'd been watching me.

"I come here because it's the only kind of place where I can show everyone who I really am," he explained. "Still, most people don't understand. I just thought *somebody like you* might, you know, get it? I mean you dress up like a girl because you feel like it's who you really are, right? It's the same thing I do when I put on this suit. I get to be more myself. *We're sort of the same*," the man in the giant dog suit told me.

I decided at that moment that my break was over. I didn't like what I was hearing, but I was either too drunk or not drunk enough to engage in a debate with a Labrador. So I shut him up by feeding him a pretzel from my hand, resisting the urge to flinch when he licked the salt from my fingers, and then I patted him on the head and politely excused myself. If I'd had a leash, I might have secured him to the furniture just to make sure he didn't trot along after me.

I do my best to respect and trust the self-professed identities of everyone I meet, but in this case, no degree of queer intellectualism could overcome my gut instinct. I left the room thinking, *No, Tucker. It is not the same. We are not the same. You are not a dog despite your human body in the way that I am a woman despite my once-male body. I'm afraid not.*

And yet...

Several years earlier, I was nineteen and dating a bubbly, curly-haired woman named Misty, the first person to whom I confessed my womanhood. Against my expectations, she was ecstatic over the news, even if she didn't entirely understand it. To her, the revelation of my long-hidden femaleness meant that she had been gifted with an enormous, living Barbie doll to dress up and play with. I might have been bothered by the idea if I didn't love it so damn much. A pressure that had been building for as long as I could remember finally found some small release as she took me shopping for clothes and jewelry and silicone breast enhancers, taught me to apply make-up, and showed me how to shave my legs without cutting myself—most of the time.

But in the first months, these experiments were almost always conducted in private. When we ventured out in public, we went only to places where our families and friends would never be, where no one would see us. It wasn't until my twentieth birthday that she bought me a cute red dress and suggested I wear it to the next convention.

"There's no better place," she said. "After all, everyone else will be in costume too. Everyone will think you're just playing." I didn't take much convincing. If there was anywhere I could go and be myself without anyone realizing the full truth, it would be this place full of freaks and weirdos.

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But Misty's plan didn't quite work out. Though all of our friends praised my new look and no one voiced a word of criticism, their questions and fascination made it clear that they realized something about this performance went deeper than the thin layer of red polyester. They immediately asked about a new name, different pronouns, at a time when I hadn't yet thought of answers to those questions. It seemed that very few people, if anyone, thought I was "just playing". Instead, everyone seemed aware that they were seeing something real about me that they hadn't seen before. Maybe there was some subtle subconscious shift in my mannerisms. Maybe I seemed a little too comfortable. Or maybe, more simply, I looked like a woman instead of a cross-dressing man. A man who cross-dresses for a party, after all, is supposed to be funny, an exaggerated, sometimes even grotesque caricature of woman. One isn't supposed to actually look *good*.

Whatever they saw, it was as stark as the difference between lighthearted Star Wars fans and the devoted adherents who checked Jedi as their religion on census forms. Between the people dressed up as Klingons and the people who *spoke* Klingon. It was the difference between wearing a costume and wearing your clothes.

I wondered how many other trans-people tested the waters the same way I did, with the flimsy lie that we were simply dressing up in costume. And I wondered, for that matter, when I would watch the crowd at conventions, how many of them

felt they were doing the same thing I was. Certainly, for more people than not, their costumes were just that—costumes. Invented personae, a communal fiction, fundamentally unreal. But maybe, for others, what I saw on these rare moments was them lifting the mask, shedding the costume, dropping the pretense they were forced to wear in their day-to-day lives.

Transsexuals may experience this duality of selves to a unique degree, but I suspect that there are many out there who, in some way or another, have more than one identity. The question is: for those who happen to have more than one, what makes a particular identity your *real* identity? The one you act out most often or the one that *just feels like you*? My answer might seem obvious but it took me a long time to reach.

Of course, I knew I wasn't a superhero. I was just a transsexual living in the closet.

I didn't intend to reveal my transsexuality to so many, but once it was done, I couldn't go back nor did I want to. Before long, my friends had forgotten what I looked like as a man. My family and my coworkers, however, saw me only as they always had. I built two wardrobes, slipped effortlessly between two sets of behaviors and inflections, and while still living with my parents, memorized every dark lot and alleyway across five towns where it was possible to park my car and change my entire outfit and make-up, a feat I could perform with remarkable speed.

I call these the phone booth years—Clark Kent going in, Wonder Woman coming out—since I can't resist any metaphor in which I am a superhero. Once, when I was asked about the cause of transsexuality, I explained that I had visited a science exhibit and been bitten by a radioactive woman. But that was pretty far from the truth. The truth, of course, is that the cause of transsexuality is as mysterious and ultimately simple as the cause of homosexuality, meaning that I was more like one of Professor X's wayward youngsters, my mutation was a part of me from birth, something latent, waiting for the right time to manifest.

When I moved from my parents' home into my own lair, I kept two closets. One was stocked with suits and stiff-collared shirts for my days spent in front of a class of eighth graders or visiting my family. The other was full of dresses and skirts and high-heeled shoes for my nights spent roaming bars and clubs and the occasional sci-fi convention with my friends. I lived a double life, becoming a different person when the sun set, an identity kept secret. It was as exciting as it was exhausting. At times, before stepping out my door, I would double-check my mirror to make sure of who I was.

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I rented an apartment more than an hour away from my school district and more than an hour away (in another direction) from most of my friends, so my separate worlds didn't intersect. I might lose my career if my students or their parents ran into me at the grocery store, and after carefully re-crafting my social identity, I had no desire to let my friends see me in my work clothes. It meant often driving over four hours a day and sleeping very little. But I could handle it. I told myself that I was happy, tried to convince myself that maybe *both* of these identities were real, in their way, for their purposes. I tried very hard to believe it. I intended to live this way forever.

I was hardly the first. My bookshelf was full of stories of other trans-women who, like me, had found themselves split between two differently gendered selves, the one assigned at birth and the one hidden inside from our earliest memories. Most commonly, the former is deemed a false performance maintained out of fear, the latter being the *true self* which emerges during transition. Which is to say, we were not men putting on bulky, lumbering woman suits, but women stepping out of the ill-fitting man suits into which we were born. I wish I could say that what I felt was just that simple. That I would look in the mirror at myself in a suit and think, *This is a lie*, and look at myself in the mirror in a dress and think, *This is the truth*. But the reality is more complicated than that.

Rather, I grew to realize that I wasn't living two different lives, I was living two incomplete halves of lives, which somehow added up to less than the sum of its parts. I came to feel I was putting on a performance no matter how I dressed, that *all* of my clothing was costume. Presenting as a man wasn't honest, that much was as clear as ever. But the fleeting moonlit existence of my female self was no real existence at all, she was little but a ghostly image that burns away in the dawn. Thus, no matter how *authentic* it might have felt, at the same time it didn't seem *real*.

The phone booth years came to an end when I decided that I could no longer bear the double-lifestyle.

I admire the genderqueer, the two-spirits, the androgynes, and all those truly fluid beings for whom flux is stable, for whom chaos is a resting state, but for me, it wasn't. For me, realness depended on stability, consistency. It was that which was the same during the day as it was at night. I eventually understood that both lives were tainted, made somehow false, by the way I tried so hard to perceive my own existence, the corseted crusader, the werewoman, the one who was two.

It took me a long time to grow out of that stage. I remember clearly when I knew that I had. The phone booth years came to an end when I decided that I could no longer bear the double-lifestyle. I came out at work when I made the change to higher education. I came out to my family. The men's department of my wardrobe was reduced to a tupperware bin which I only opened on the rare occasions when I would visit the few members of my family who hadn't accepted my transition. For a while, I still appeased them on holidays.

One Thanksgiving morning, I woke up, I showered, and I washed off yesterday's make-up with a little more care than usual. I removed my nail polish and my necklace and all but one of my rings. I tied my hair back in a low-hanging pony-tail. I got dressed in a pair of jeans (just a bit looser than I'd become accustomed to), a stiff black dress shirt (*much* looser than I'd become accustomed to), a suede blazer, and a pair of black shoes that

left me a bit shorter than I usually stood. Just before I left, I stopped in the bathroom, and I froze in front of the mirror. For maybe the first time, it felt absolutely beyond question or debate. I knew exactly what I was looking at, and it was a woman dressed up in a costume, trying her best to pretend she was a man.

Science fiction and fantasy conventions still stand on a special bit of real estate in my memory, so I still attend when I can. In the busy life of a teacher, regardless of what I'm wearing it can still be a relief to step out of academia and into a different world.

Not long ago, as I helped my friends decorate and prepare for the evening, two representatives of the convention staff strolled into our suite to check on us. One of them noticed me and caught my attention.

"Hey!" she bounced over as I set down a case of liquor bottles. "I know you!"

"Have we met?" I asked her. I couldn't remember ever meeting her but that didn't mean it hadn't happened.

"No, but I've seen you before."

In my long tenure at these events, I'd had many conversations begin this way. In the night's festivities, I was sometimes difficult not to notice. She might have been in the audience when I wore my Slave Leia outfit, my wrists manacled over my head to a

pillar while a Dothraki flogged me. She might have been sitting near the table where I laid flat while a high elf drank a shot of Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster out of my belly button. Or she might have seen me dancing outside, silhouetted in the flashing electric song of the tesla coils. And that was okay.

"It was a few months ago," she explained. "I went to a lecture you gave at UIC. You were awesome!"

And that was okay too.

I no longer worry about where I'll be spotted or whether my lives will suffer a tragic collision because now, I only have one. Though I may step between worlds once in a while, I don't spend any time in phone booths or closets along the way.

And if we should cross paths, you might see me wearing a business dress or a cocktail dress or a Victorian dress, jeans and a motorcycle helmet or a miniskirt and fishnets or a gothic pixie outfit and fairy wings, but you won't see me in a costume. I don't wear costumes any more.

RHIANNON CATHERWOOD

I study life writing and how it can be used to understand ourselves and the world around us, and I write my own life to add something to that understanding.

In *The Costume Closet*, I write to disrupt some of the expectations placed on trans authors and trans people—the old fashioned idea of gender transition as all-or-nothing all-at-once, the absurd notion that we must always be certain of our own identities for them to be real, that our lives before transition must be ones of darkness and sadness. I wrote this piece to re-imagine the closet as a place of experimentation, transformation, and discovery, and to explore the idea that these discoveries and experiences are at once unique and universal, magical and mundane, fascinatingly alien and entirely human.

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I've published criticism in *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, and fiction in *Towers Literary and Creative Arts Magazine*, and my own life writing has appeared on *Autostraddle*, and re-published by *The Huffington Post*.

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