

Ivan Coyote

I Like to Wear Dresses

I hadn't been to the Yukon for over a year, and had been absent from the fold the last three Christmases. I could hardly wait: I love how rush hour in Whitehorse is seven cars long, and how nobody even thinks about washing their vehicles until the end of May.

I think my body was actually designed to function in minus sixteen degrees Celsius, in the clear, blue cold. I like when the air just starts to sting the backs of your hands, the inside of your nostrils, and the back of your mouth. I love to skate on lakes. It was only December, but I needed a fix to shake the grey edge of Vancouver off my shoulders.

I got a chance to go up for the Longest Night Storytelling Festival and a free plane ticket, so I jumped on it.

I hadn't seen my friend Chris's boys since September 2001, and they were all a foot taller now. During intermission, I snuck the three of them backstage. Galen was five and wide-eyed, standing dwarfed in front of the timpani drums. Emile was nonchalant at eight. "I know that," was how he responded, coolly, to each of my careful explanations of rigging, and scrims, and backlights.

And then there was Francis. Seven now and topped with a crown of red-brown curls, he was most impressed with my solo dressing room and the remnants of the smoke machine's fog backstage from the rock star's set just before the intermission. Francis has recently taken up the ukulele, his mother tells me.

I noticed Francis was wearing just jeans and a T-shirt, even though the show is more than enough reason to dress up. Usually, he never passes up a chance to break out one of his velvet skirts or long-flowing ladies' blouses. My stomach dropped for him. Chris, his mom and one of my fondest loves, told me a few months ago that it has started already. They have started calling him a ~~flower~~ at school. We knew it was going to happen. I guess we were just hoping it would happen, well, later. He is allowing it to fold up the little flower inside of him. Now he mostly keeps

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his dresses in the closet and wears them only in the safety and freedom of his own home.

Chris tells me later when the kids are in bed that Francis initially had on his long copper velour lace-up blouse, bell bottoms, and pumps when he heard tonight was going to be Uncle Ivan's big show and they were going to the Arts Centre. When he swooped down the stairs to look for his little mittens on strings, Emile reminded him that Sebastian (from school) was going to be there, too. Francis went back to his room and changed into jeans without a word.

I took him alone (after quite a bit of bickering with his brothers about us needing special time together) to see the *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*. I for one am scared ~~of~~ of the Dark Riders or Ring Wraiths or whatever, and thought maybe it was too scary for a seven-year-old, but he reminded me politely that I had said he could pick. So he, my big old Cheshire cat-grinning dyke buddy Brenda, and I set off for a little queer quality time together, as per the request of his mother.

Francis wasted little time. He spent three dollars on those plastic eggs with rings and miniature tea cups in them, bought popcorn with his own money, and started asking questions, the first of which were brought on by me going to the bathroom.

Francis had leaned across my empty seat to enquire of Brenda just which washroom I used when out at the movies.

Brenda told Francis that to the best of her knowledge, I utilized the ungendered wheelchair-accessible facilities whenever possible, so as to avoid confusing anyone in the men's room or scaring anyone in the ladies'.

Francis then asked Brenda if she knew for sure if I was a boy or a girl. Francis had asked me this himself on several occasions in the past, and each time I explained myself to him as best I could. I'm not sure if he forgets when I go away, or if he just needs to process it all again as a three-, then five-, and now seven-year-old might. Brenda told Francis that she figured that I was technically a girl, but that I had a whole lot of boy in me as well.

I returned to my seat, and Brenda brought me up to speed on

their conversation. Francis's eyes were lit up in recognition and he grabbed my wrist. "I'm just like you, but the reverse." He nodded repeatedly and sat up on his heels in his seat. "I'm a boy, but I have a little girl in me too." He lowered his voice and looked left, then right, and continued. "I like to wear dresses," he whispered in his most conspiratorial voice.

My heart felt like it was going to climb out of my mouth for the love of him at that moment, and I hugged him over the armrest between us. He was warm and sinewy and smelled just like his brothers, but he isn't. I don't love them any the less for it; it's just that I love him more.

"I know you like to wear dresses, Francis," I said. "I've known you since you were a baby, remember?"

"Since I was inside of my mom? Since Emile was?"

I told him I knew his mom since before she even met his dad, and he shook his head in amazement, like he couldn't fathom a time that long ago.

"Is that why you like to kiss her on the mouth so much all the time?" he asked loudly, in the not-so-innocent way of babes. I shushed him because the movie was starting.

Turns out that *The Two Towers* was too scary for both Francis and me, and at one point he grabbed my hand and bravely whispered, "If this is scaring you too much, I wouldn't mind if you wanted to leave early."

But we stuck it out, and then the three of us drove up Grey Mountain and looked at the tiny, snow-silenced metropolis below us. All the way up the mountain Brenda and I told Francis about our people; those of us who are boys with girls inside, and girls with boys inside, and all of the beautiful in-between and shape shifters that are his ancestors. We told him that since before even his older brother was in his mom's belly, there were people like us.

Brenda told Francis that she was like me too, a girl with a whole lotta man in her; just it was harder to tell with her on account of her gynormous breasts.

"Yes, they are big," he responded almost with reverence at her

frame, which for years now has been nicknamed by her friends as Tyrannosaurus Rack. We told Francis that his people have forever been artists and mystics and healers and leaders and librarians.

We talked a lot about bullies and their ways. Francis blew me away, as seven-year-olds are known to do with relatives who don't see them everyday as their brilliance unfolds, by explaining that he reckoned that his bully was mean cuz he'd failed Grade Two twice already, and his mother drank alcohol when he was in her tummy.

I wondered, as Francis's fairy godfather should, when is too soon to warn my young friend about gay bashers, and how exactly I would go about explaining to a northern boy-girl a thing as incomprehensible as what happened to Aaron Webster, who was found naked in Vancouver's busiest downtown park, beaten to death by a crew of teenagers armed with baseball bats and pool cues. Would I leave out the details, and not mention how the police couldn't find any witnesses brave enough to come forward?

I cried at the sight of his face, so determined, and sure, and self-aware of his difference. So entirely void of shame. I cried with relief in the knowledge that my very existence in his life might make it easier for him to make it all the way through Grade Three. I cried for the hope he makes me feel, now that I'm not the only cross-dresser born in the Yukon in the family, that I will never be alone again. My own seven-year-old loneliness forged my promise to him to see that things will, indeed, be different for us as a team.

Guess what I got Francis for Christmas? Earrings, both dangly and sparkly ones, and fancy French cologne, the same stuff I wear. It all fits perfectly into the jewellery box he got from his older brother.