

## **Not to Be**

**by James O'Brien**

### **Third Prize**

I'm a white guy in a white shirt and tan chinos, white boat shoes. Most people assume I'm straight, and I don't correct them. Straight is easier.

I'm not queer enough to use the word. I remember being at a yoga studio on Chapel Street years ago, in warrior pose, sweating and struggling, trying to look effortless. I was dutifully watching the beefy instructor, also in warrior pose. All of a sudden, my gaze wandering over his body, I found I had a boner. I couldn't drag my eyes from his arms. It was a bit embarrassing. I wondered if he noticed me looking, if I disgusted him. I didn't want to freak anyone out.

I'm in a relationship, with a woman. I'd feel too embarrassed to call myself queer. Who am I to use that term? If anyone had ever shouted it loudly enough at me, punctuated it with a fist or a boot, maybe I'd feel like I had the right to use it. Some kids called me gay in high school. Okay, they meant it as an insult, but it's not the same. I pretended it was a funny joke and laughed along with it. I'm not an over-the-top kind of guy.

I've felt like I didn't belong to my assigned gender before. We had been reading in bed for an hour before I worked up the courage to talk about it. "I think I want to act more like a girl sometimes." She was sweet about it. She washed my hair in the shower, let me put my hand on my hip while she was doing it, in a way that made me feel feminine. She said it didn't turn her off at all. I made my voice even higher. "Oh." I said, as she scrubbed away. "Ohhh." She asked if I wanted to do it again sometime, and I said that I didn't want to bother her, that once was enough. She seemed relieved.

I had sex with a man last year. I went to a gay bar in Fitzroy, alone. I only went because I couldn't not go to one anymore. It was all painfully new. The guys looked strong, defiant. They wouldn't cry angry tears if someone called them gay. After half an hour of trying to be invisible at the bar, I gave up and made friends with two guys I wasn't attracted to, because that was less scary. I stopped my hand from shaking when I shook theirs.

I paid for them to come upstairs with me to the cruise lounge. It was dark and scary, maze-like; rooms everywhere with thin sliding doors and vinyl benches. A guy sat in a cinema jacking off to hardcore porn that danced across a whole wall, loud and bright and beautiful. My new friends tired of my nervous babbling, and wandered off. Eventually, I found a guy I liked in a lonely corridor. Were there signals, codes? He was big, and

kind, and sweaty, with strong hands. In the room, I sat on the bench and told him I wanted him to top me. He said he was usually a bottom. I was sorry I didn't know the signals. He told me not to worry, that I was so hot he didn't care.

He left first, after.

A woman in class last week told me that bi people were misunderstood. That being bi didn't imply gender was binary, and that they weren't second-class queers. I thought, *okay, maybe this is me.*

She took me to a bi drinks thing on Smith Street. I tried to make conversation, but their eyes kept sliding off me. They all sat at a big table, but there wasn't enough room. I stood close for a bit, laughing at jokes and trying to make eye contact with someone. It was probably because I looked too standard, not queer enough. Waiting for the tram a few minutes later, I thought, *maybe I'll just be straight.*

Looking back, there's a greyness to the memories. It's a safety thing. I don't know. The word just isn't that important to me, not as it must be to people who've struggled for it, suffered for it. *Queer.* I don't want to bother anybody.

Maybe I can be privately queer. At least I'll know; and if I was to wake suddenly at night and find myself crying unnamed, unnameable tears, I could whisper it, over and over, until I could sleep.