

First Time

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My hands are trembling as I ready myself for my first time. It's a sweltering summer day as I look out the window trying to decide whether to wear a hat. Everything feels slightly, no, ridiculously surreal as I get ready to attend my first social event for transgender people. Before this morning, my only contact with people like me, not counting online forums, has been awkward glances in the waiting room at the gender counselling service. For a reserved person, being friendly with strangers does not come easy and I would tend to divert and close down any attempts at conversation as I would wait for my appointment.

But today, my life is about to change. The isolation and loneliness which begins in my heart and extends to the extremities and that follows me everywhere is forcing me way, way, outside of my narrow zone of comfort. The need to seek out someone, anyone, a little like me. Another soul who shares this experience being transgender, alone and confused in a largely straight world.

Queerness has always been present and visible around me, I live in Sydney's inner west after all. But fear has kept that world at a distance. My housemates have no clue of what I am going through, the visits to the counsellor kept secret for fear of the consequences and fallout. For them, being gay is vaguely okay, as long as you don't act on the desires, but being transgender is simply not tolerated. God, how did I end up living in a largely conservative Christian household in Newtown?

Fumbling with my backpack I add my colourful scarf and pack a small hand bag. That's the best I can do today. I am too nervous to be seen leaving the terrace with anything other than my guy clothes, but small accessories like these do give me a little boost. My wardrobe makes me no more or less of a woman. My identity is not my clothes, but I am always amazed how something small and feminine helps alleviate the disconnect I currently feel.

Walking down King St my destination is The Carlisle Castle Hotel. I have lived here for three years, but didn't know this place existed. Off the main street it is tucked away in the narrow streets of Camperdown. My accessories are still on my back, because I don't feel ready to walk down a busy street expressing who I am. Feeling scared, I am a traitor to myself, but what can I do? I regularly read online about "brave" trans people coming out, but that isn't a strong characteristic of mine. I thought I was anxious when getting ready to leave the house, but that felt like nothing in comparison to right now. Leaving the main street and navigating the maze of one ways, my head is swimming. I recognise the symptoms of anxiety shutting down parts of my brain as I feel overwhelmed. Don't forget to breathe, I tell myself.

It is a sunny day, but the world looks even brighter today, every sensation feeling heightened. Stopping, I see my destination at the next corner. Taking a

deep breath, I pull out my scarf, wrap it around my neck and grab the womanly clutch to give my hands something to do. I think the orange and sunflower yellow patterns are a fashionable contrast to my otherwise plain jeans and white t-shirt. Am I an impostor, should I turn around now? No-one needs to know the agony I feel, the daily turmoil of living a lie and pretending to be someone I am not. But deep inside I know that is not an option for the long term, I won't survive unless I press forward. People on the outside find it impossible to understand that profound sense that the deepest part of my being is not what the world sees and the distress that results.

Entering the pub, I check in with the Covid app and just as I finish, I hear someone say "Hello, Charlie!" When I turn around to see who it is, there stands Richard, my housemate looking at me with a dirty look as he scrutinises my scarf and bag. He didn't need to say anything, the disgust on his face says it all. Fuck it, I think as I tell him my new name is Charlotte and excuse myself by saying, sorry I can't chat right now, I have a transgender social club to attend.