

First prize outstanding LGBTIQ Short story Competition 2017

He/Him by Stacey Malacari

Alex stands on the edge of the footpath. They sway back and forth on the balls of their feet, hands in pockets. The dusk is fading into night but it's hot out. Sweltering. The city smells like petrol fumes and too many people. Alex adjusts the binder they wear under their shirt, wishing they could wear tight singlets. Or no shirt.

Over the road, Alex watches their friends lining up for the bar. They all have fake ID's, Alex included. Laura is there. Alex sees her check her phone. Alex is late.

The lights of the bar flash, calling Alex in. They look down at their ID. Tonight is the shift. This shift is not physical. Their body stays the same. Nothing taken, nothing added. This shift is internal and harder than the last time. Last time, when Alex changed from 'she' to 'they', there was non-one else to consider. No Laura. No anybody. Alex was only a kid then. They decided gender binaries were fucked so threw them out the window. Now, this.

The ID. It wasn't a big deal. Just paid some guy, who paid another guy, who called a girl, and then there they were. The issue wasn't getting the ID. The issue was how people spoke to Alex when they used it. They thought Alex was a 'he'. And Alex liked it. The name on the ID was 'Alexander'.

On the footpath, Alex faces two choices. To cross the street and greet their girlfriend and their friends, as the person he is. Or to turn away from the bar and hide. Alex wipes sweat from his brow. His lip. His neck.

He. Alex repeats this over to himself, affirming his identity. Is it ok to be a 'he' and still fuck the gender binary? Alex isn't sure. He knows he can define what it means to be male for himself. But can he navigate this without becoming part of the problem? He battles with this.

He's not sure Laura will understand.

A bus passes, obscuring Alex's view of the bar. He met Laura here six months ago at a Queer night. She was loud, Alex was quiet. Laura liked that Alex was non-binary. They danced. They dated. They kissed.

Now the shift has occurred and Laura doesn't know that she now has a 'boyfriend'.

Alex smooths down his hair. She will accept him. He wants to believe she will accept him, as he is. As a 'he'. His gut is telling him otherwise.

It is little things that make him scared. Comments made across cappuccinos. Past experiences for her, and for Alex as well. Sharing a common anger toward the patriarchy. Toward the toxicity. But now it is she and he. Him and her. Hers and his. Will they move to the suburbs? White picket fence? 2.5 babies? Alex reminds himself that if she does freak out, if she runs, it is not his fault. It is not his shame. He must be true to himself.

He steps off the footpath and crosses the street.

Laura greets him with a kiss, compliments his shirt. He does the same in return, deepening his voice, though he doesn't mean to. Is this how it starts, he wonders?

As the line moves, each step takes them closer to the point of no return. Will

the person checking ID's even gender him? How long will this take? Does he have to come out and say it without any context? He needs someone to call him a 'he' in front of his friends. It is his way of cementing the shift.

Laura and his friends chat about people they know and things they do. Alex joins in, when he can. His friends are in summer clothes. He feels suffocated in his button down.

They reach the door.

'Hey man, got ID?'

Laura jumps in. 'Oh they're not a-'

'It's ok,' says Alex, 'I am.'

Laura pauses. Her mouth twitches. Alex's gut twists, waiting for the reaction to click into place. He feels like he has made a mistake. That this was the wrong way to do it. He should have just told her. Had a conversation. This affects her identity too.

'Right, of course,' she says, taking Alex by the hand and turning to the bouncer. 'It's his birthday today. He's going to be spoilt all night.'

'Is that so?' says the bouncer. 'Well, you're a lucky man.'

'That I am,' says Alex.