

AM I A MAN?

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Am I a man? he thinks, looking at himself in the mirror, pausing to assess his shoulders and chest, the takeaway being a need for tautening. At what point does one become a man? Do I even *feel* like a man? This morning I woke up and couldn't tell if I was afraid or just very horny. It was still dark out. Is it possible I was both of those things? Can men be both of those things? The word itself, man, seems to imply one thing happening at one time, always. It is such a singular word.

The kid on the downtown bus. He inspired this inventory. Queer, the boy said yesterday, the slur flopping out like a fish, slithering and stinking til it gasped out on the gritty floor. He almost did not hear it. He had earphones in, but the boy spoke in the few seconds between songs. Between the music the word.

Perhaps it is his hair? Too much product. Men could use hair products but covertly, the way women strove for natural-looking makeup, makeup that looked as though it had not been applied. Flushed cheeks. Eyeliner like lashes, lips the stain of

cherries or plums. Sly, intelligent makeup. He could switch from gel to mousse. He could even cut it so that it no longer fell in front of his eyes. He had to touch it often, and this, he guesses, is not a very manly thing to do. But he likes touching his hair, and having his hair touched.

Is he lustful enough? Likely not. He would work on that. He would spend more time looking at women. He remembers a poem by Jewel, the Alaskan folk singer, about a father and son taking in her breasts like a meal. He admits he does not think much about breasts.

He turns to examine his profile, his torso. His jaw is good. He has abs, but he's skinny and has abs by default. His muscles are small, and he is fond of them. They are neat and tidy. He has the body of a dancer without needing to dance. He likes to think he moves gracefully. Still, his muscles could be bigger. He could be bigger and still move with grace. He could do push-ups, and sit-ups. A round in the morning and a round in the evening. He could buy protein powder.

Is it something else? Something in his appearance he can't change, something he is not even aware of? Like, his affect or something? His walk? The way he closes his eyes? The way he sits down onto the bus seat, or the way he stands up? People were always telling him how nice he was. One does not think "man" and think "nice." That had to be it. He was too nice, and possibly too graceful.

He thinks of Max Smasserford, from high school. Max lumbered rather than

walked, a thick leather jacket stretched over his broad back like a second hide. It looked made just for him, with not an inch to spare. He hopes Max didn't grow much after high school. It would be a shame to part with such a jacket.

He only spoke with Max once, over a cigarette. It was mid-January and sleeting. He was sixteen, a junior, and leaning against the brick wall behind the gym. The fields glittered. Max emerged from the heavy gray double doors like a cannonball slowed down. Max was a super-senior. He had trouble with English and P.E. but his math scores were rumored to be perfect.

“Hey.” It was a growl. Max put a cigarette between his lips and cupped one hand around. His opposite thumb spun the sparkwheel of a lighter. It produced tiny fireworks and a grinding noise. “Hey,” said Max again. “Got a light?”

“Matches,” he said, holding out a box. Max took a few steps toward him and leaned in. There was stubble along his cheeks and jaw though it was clear Max shaved that morning. He lit Max's cigarette, then let the match drop to the wet pavement, where it burned itself out. They moved away from each other. Max sucked that cigarette down then lit another with its butt. The roof overhang only partially covered them from the weather. He lit another cigarette too. He wanted to keep leaning against the brick, smoking and looking at the fields beside Max.

Genetics was a factor. He would never have a back like Max Smasserford's, even if he added pull-ups to his exercise regimen. He simply isn't wide enough. He

imagines he could fit five or six of his hands along the breadth of Max's back, thumb to thumb and little finger to little finger. Two to three of Max's hands would cover his own back. He clears his throat.

“Hi,” he says into the mirror, watching his mouth, his stature. “I'm James. Jim. Jimmy.” He takes a breath and pulls his abs in and says it again, louder, looking himself straight in the eye. “Hi. I'm Jimmy.”

That time was better.