

Trans Visibility Cloak

Audacia Ray

One Sunday afternoon, as Aiden walked through the vestibule of their Brooklyn apartment building, they saw a long cape hanging on a coat hook near the mailboxes. They thought this odd. Often there were packages dropped off here on the floor, but they'd never seen a tenant use the coat hooks. It was a remnant of a bygone era when this brownstone was inhabited by one family instead of split into three apartments.

Aiden had been a goth girl in high school, wore a homemade cape then, a thing that shrouded their ever-changing body in mystery. It made the hated curves of their body invisible but made them a target of merciless teasing. In the New Jersey suburbs of the 1990s, it got Aiden the nickname Dracula. Secretly, they were kind of into being called Dracula, because it meant that the girl name they'd been given by their parents wasn't being formed over and over again in the mouths of sneering teens. They felt a pang of nostalgia and kindness toward their teen goth self as they looked at this cape.

What the hell, Aiden thought, and they lifted the cape up and, with a practiced flourish, swung it around their shoulders. They had been heading out to go buy some snacks anyway, might as well do it wearing a cape and play into someone else's story, *I was out getting coffee and I saw someone casually walking around in a cape!*

When they got to the bodega, one of the men who was often sitting outside on a broken milk crate was on his way into the store. "Sup, bro?" the guy asked, holding steady eye contact with Aiden as he held the door open for them.

Aiden tried not to look startled. This guy usually looked offended by Aiden's existence, like Aiden's asymmetrical haircut and gender

nonconformity meant they were a threat to his cis-hetero existence. In the cape, they were no longer a threat, but—what?—a comrade in arms?

Aiden gathered their snacks and continued a slow saunter around the neighborhood. They began to get in the groove of getting head nods and uncomplicated greetings from men. What was this sorcery? Men being nice to them? They stopped briefly in front of a chaotic window display in a hardware store, which depicted a backyard BBQ with plastic flames fluttering in the breeze of a small electric fan, and lawn chairs with red, white, and blue NY football helmets emblazoned on them. “Go Giants!” a passing man said to them cheerfully.

They continued their walk, thoughtfully crunching away on Funyuns. Their feet took them toward their favorite neighborhood plant shop, where there were always tiny succulents in adorable little ceramic pots with faces painted on them. Very hard to resist. They swept into the store, feeling the whoosh of the cape around their ankles. A twenty-something femme with a lip piercing and an undercut with the long part dyed cactus-green gave them a nod of queer acknowledgment. How could it be that on this one walk, they had been treated with kindness by cis men and also given the community nod from a queer femme?

Maybe it was the cape? Was the cape gifting them with the smoothness of a visibility that toggled depending on who was looking?

When they left the plants shop, they took off the cape, draped it over their arm. An experiment. They resisted the urge to wipe their greasy fingers on it and instead used their jean shorts. As they rounded the corner onto an avenue, a group of people in a coupe drove by with the windows down. One of them yelled, “What is *that*?” and threw a partly full cup of ice and soda at them. The cup exploded at their feet, splashing sticky cola onto their legs. They stared straight ahead at the ground, did a practiced override of their flinch reaction, dissociated briefly from their surroundings.

Aiden felt a creeping sense of sadness. They wanted to be the nonbinary gender freak they are and be left alone. They didn’t want a safety only made possible by a magic cape. They wanted to be read as a man by straight cis people and as a queer person by other queers and have those assumptions run in parallel tracks. But they knew that the world wasn’t ready for their kind of trans visibility. They swung the cape around their shoulders and continued down the block.

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