

Being Samantha Masters



an homage-sequel to Being Christina Chase

by Miriam Robern

First Date First Date

Sammy had to make Finley wait downstairs while he put on his makeup, breathing very intentionally so he did not rush or mismatch his eyeliner. That done, he tousled his hair until it looked vaguely correct, and added a few little white clips to keep his bangs under control.

The hiccup came when he went to grab his backpack, which had his wallet and keys in it, and stilled. He couldn't very well take his backpack on a date. And the skater dress had no pockets. Reluctantly, he turned to his closet and pulled out the little white purse that Rowan had insisted he'd need. Wallet and keys inside, he looped it around his shoulder and scowled into his full-length mirror.

A girl with a purse scowled back at him.

He rolled his eyes at himself. He was wearing a polka-dotted dress, sporting flawless if simple makeup, and had two almost-embarrassingly-large tits pasted onto his chest. And the purse was the thing giving him pause?

He didn't have time to parse through these feelings. He added his lippy to the purse and hurried out the door.

Finley was waiting outside on the dorm's stoop, leaning against the railing and smiling up at the clear blue summer sky. The wrap dress they wore was bright green with curls of tie-dye white reaching up from the skirt's hem. A few brightly-coloured, chunky necklaces dangled over their chest, under a beard that Sammy suspected had been recently trimmed. Vibrant green eyeshadow and a comparatively muted lipgloss completed their look.

Sammy took his time getting to the door. He couldn't help smiling through the window at them. At his date.

Eventually, though, Finley noticed his appraisal, so he had to push open the door and step outside. Their eyes went a little wide. "You look amazing, Samantha."

Sammy rolled his eyes and touched his collarbone. "It needs a necklace but I don't have anything that goes. And I... kind of ran out of time getting ready, worrying about if this was a date or not."

Finley grinned. Was he amused that Sammy had worried over the evening? "And the verdict is?" they asked. "You didn't actually give me an answer."

"Oh shit," Sammy laughed, and reached forward to squeeze their hand in sympathy. Which left him holding Finley's hand. Now what was he supposed to do? And where had that gesture come from in the first place? He looked from their joined hands to Finley's face. "Um. I'd... like it if this were a date."

He willed himself not to blush. He failed.

Finley turned their hand to squeeze his. "I'd like that, too." The two of them stood there smiling at each other for what felt like a full minute before the genderqueer tipped their head away from the door. "Shall we?"

Finley had made reservations at a restaurant at the north end of Battery Park, but they took the subway to the south end to have a leisurely walk before dinner. For most of the way down, the subway was crowded and even when it thinned out enough to permit conversation, they talked about nothing. Classes. Videos they'd seen. Pizza toppings, inspired by the passenger who boarded with a stack of three very aromatic pizzas.

And then the train reached the end of the line. They stepped out into the fresh air and the long leafy stretch of the park, and the lazily lapping water alongside it. And out beyond the water...

"Is that—," Sammy stammered, staring off at the horizon. "It is. Holy shit."

Finley looked where he was looking and chuckled. "The Statue of Liberty? Yeah, that's her. Have you... have you not seen her yet?"

Sammy shook his head and shot a sheepish grin back at them. "I guess I just haven't been where you could see her."

Finley gestured across the park to where they could get a slightly better view. The two of them ambled, with Sammy hardly looking at anything else. "You know she's trans, right?" Finley finally broke their silence to ask.

That got Sammy's attention, and he looked from the monolithic statue to Finley and back again, confused. "Wait, what?" They'd come up to the railing that separated the park from the Hudson river, and Sammy leaned up against it. "They had trans people back then?"

"Trans people have always been here," his date chuckled. "But yeah. Before she was Lady Liberty, she was Sol Invictus, the god of the unconquered sun. That's why her crown has sunrays around it."

Sammy slitted his eyes at Finley skeptically. "Seriously?"

The genderqueer shrugged. "So the story goes. And since she is a story, that's about as good as we get, right?"

Sammy smirked. "I should tell Rowan."

"Who do you think told me?" Finley laughed, leaning up against the railing, himself.

"It does sound like a Rowan factoid."

They looked out over the water. "If I'd had known you hadn't been out there yet," mused Finley, "I would have taken you. Distinguish myself with the most memorable first date you've ever been on."

"That's not exactly a high bar," Sammy snorted, tearing his eyes away from the statue. They were heading up the green length of the park, which was... this way. He started walking, glancing back towards Finley to make sure they were following.

They did so with alacrity. "What do you mean, not a high bar?"

"I um—" Sammy started, stopped, decided to press on. He confessed, "I've never been on a date before."

Finley's eyebrows jumped up their forehead. "Oh! Oh." They tried to compose their features, but couldn't completely banish the ghost of a smirk. "So this is a *first date* first date."

Sammy didn't think they were trying to be condescending, but he decided he wasn't going to allow it, even accidentally. He crooked an eyebrow at them. "I don't know, first date implies that there will be more dates after this one, and if you keep acting like that..."

Finley laughed and threw up their hands to demonstrate their innocence. "Understood. Understood. But I'm sure there will be. More dates. Somebody will ask you, or you'll ask them... emphasis on 'them.'" They leaned in to waggle their eyebrows.

Sammy shoved them playfully. "Only if you behave yourself," he grinned.

But instead of grinning back, Finley looked away and cleared their throat. "Well, I don't have the best track record on that."

"Okay, no." Sammy shook his head, and reached over to pull Finley

back from spiralling away. "I don't want to rehash that all over again. You apologized, I accepted, it's over." They both walked a few steps before he added, "And apparently I just need to get used to it."

"No," Finley leapt to argue so fast they might have sprained something "Nobody should touch you without your—"

"Not the touching, just the... attention," Sammy clarified. "I'm not used to it. And like... I swear I'm not bragging, but you're not the only one."

Finley spread a hand across their collarbone. "I have rival suitors?!"

"Oh my god," Sammy rolled his eyes towards the sky. "This isn't fucking Persuasion."

"I would make a clever literary reference here, but I'm a bio major," his date admitted. "Honestly I'm kind of impressed with myself that I recognized the book title."

"Yeah well, we're reading it in Lit class," Sammy explained. The park scrolled past them, the sun swollen fat on the horizon painting everything orange. "And there's a girl there who I bet you money is going to give me moony eyes over it. She already told me if this date doesn't work out, she'd like to be next in line."

"I do have rival suitors!" They pumped their fist as if it was an accomplishment.

Sammy couldn't help but giggle, but his thoughts kept circling. A few quiet steps later, he sighed. "I'm worried about it being a distraction. I need to focus on my classes."

"Well, like you yourself said," Finley pointed out, "you're going to need some downtime, too. Blow off some steam with a little flirting and dating. Believe me, you can burn yourself out in eight weeks, and you don't want to do that just in time for the final."

Sammy made agreeable noises instead of answering and they kept walking. Dating to avoid burnout? That seemed even less plausible than people hitting on him in class in the first place.

Eventually he realized Finley had not spoken for a while and was in fact watching him. They smirked when he looked up. "It's not the distraction that's bothering you, though, is it?" they asked. "You seem, like, really frustrated about puzzle pieces that don't fit together."

Sammy rolled his eyes to pointedly ignore Finley's observation, but the genderqueer wasn't letting go. They just kept walking alongside him, waiting. Sammy told himself that he could ice out Finley right back until they gave up and struck up a different conversation. But they resolutely did no such thing, waiting while Sammy marinated in

his own thoughts. Finally his brain boiled over, and he gesticulated into the empty air before him. "I mean, I don't even pass!"

Finley quirked an eyebrow. "What's passing have to do with it?"

"Cause when they... pay attention to me, they pay attention to me like I'm—" He slapped his chest, a little harder than he meant to, and winced.

They treated him like a girl, even though he wasn't a girl, and yes he did a whole bunch of things to look more like a girl, but even then he didn't look all the way like a girl. He knew what he looked like, and it was not *girl*. Maybe at first glance, but not after any length of time. He had so many tells. But they still treated him like they were seeing a girl.

But how to put that into words, especially without admitting to Finley that he wasn't exactly trans? Fuck if he knew. "I mean... I just... I don't see what they see."

"Is it not enough that they like what they see?" his date asked gently.

Sammy shook his head. "They don't. They can't. People look at me and they... they know what they're looking at."

"I think they do, yeah," said Finley, not quite suppressing a chuckle. They reached out to grab Sammy's hands and pulled him to the side of the walk path, under a leafy tree. "Samantha, listen to me," they said, voice so earnest that Sammy couldn't help but look them in the eye. "Passing isn't important."

"But—"

But Finley cut them off. "Passing isn't important," they repeated, emphasizing each word.

Sammy frowned and looked away, would have scrubbed his face if his hands weren't trapped. "You think they're... what do you call them? Chasers?"

Finley burst out laughing and then scrambled to rein it in, not very successfully. They squeezed Sammy's hands before releasing them, and then wiped their own eyes. "I mean... they might be curious. But that's a far cry from a chaser."

Hands freed, Sammy went to rub the heck out of his face. He remembered just in time that he had makeup on that he didn't want to muss. Instead he flexed his hands and wrapped them both around the back of his neck. "Then... what?"

To their credit, Finley's eyes only dipped down into the cavern of cleavage Sammy was presenting for a moment. Then they made very

deliberate eye contact and said, "They just think you look hot, Samantha. I swear."

He snorted, dismissive. But he also dropped his arms so his tits weren't squished together on lewd display. He had to get better about that.

"You say they know what they're looking at," his date pressed, and gently guided the both of them back onto the path along the waterside. "I think you're right; I think they do. They know they're looking at a hot, femme-of-center queer chica. Further details irrelevant." Before Sammy could object, they added, "Do they suspect you're trans? Maybe. Embodying some flavor of queer or genderfuckery? Probably. But if they're chatting you up, then they don't care. Passing is not a prerequisite for hotness."

This time Sammy managed to get out a "But—"

"You think I'm a chaser, Samantha?" asked Finley, eyes rhetorically wide. "I don't just suspect you're trans, I know you're trans. I think that is just one beautiful piece of a much bigger, grander picture. Are my motives suspect?"

"No, of course not." All the emotion sluiced out of Sammy, only to replaced a moment later with panic. "Oh shit, you didn't think I thought—"

Finley smirked, disarming Sammy's rising anxiety in an instant. "I did not think you thought."

"Because you've always..." he started to say, and then stumbled to a stop. Closed his eyes. His big stupid mouth.

When he finally looked back at Finley, their eyebrows bounced up, curious. "Out with it. Finish the sentence."

Sammy rolled his eyes. Fine, fuck it. All the cards on the table. "Because you've always been into me. Even when I looked like I'd fallen through Rowan's backup closet and landed face-first on her makeup palettes."

"First of all, that is not what you looked like then," they retorted. "And secondly, and this may be a bit of a tangent but... fucking christ, you really have had a glow-up. I'm just saying. You went from notable country girl visiting the big city to, like, fucking trans diva."

"Rowan took me shopping," he said weakly, fingering the hem of his dress.

"Yeah, it's not just the clothes, Samantha," Finley laughed. After only a moment, though, the laugh died on his lips. "Oh. You don't see it, do you?"

Sammy shrugged. "It's a costume. It looks good, but it's..." Fuck it, he could say what he was thinking without giving away the whole thing. "It's all façade."

Finley considered him for some time before answering. "Samantha, it's not... allow me to revise myself. I don't think it's the clothes at all. Nor is it the... *very* on-point makeup. It's not the image you present. There is a light in your eyes, a fucking spring in your step. An ease in your shoulders that is... incredibly compelling."

Sammy scowled off across the water instead of responding. What was Finley seeing? Maybe his new sense of purpose? More likely his twice-daily microdose of party drugs.

"You were cute at Preview Days," Finley went on. "And also overwhelmed, awkward, and profoundly self-conscious—"

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it," they grinned. "But now you... it's like you've found your spine and you're standing up straight for the first time in your life. It's fucking glorious to watch."

Compliments on his appearance were one thing; Sammy didn't even know how to deal with whatever this overblown and patently wrong bullshit was. "I think you're getting fooled by my Fake It Till You Make It act."

"I think you're further along in that process than you think you are," Finley shot back immediately, a cheeky smirk on his face. But then he nodded across the street. They'd come to the end of the park. "We're here."

The restaurant served as the western anchor of what looked like a shopping mall, but also had its own exterior entrance. Finley led Sammy across the street—Andrei would be scandalized—and opened the door for him.

"Thanks," he said with a small smile. It was still new to have doors opened for him, even if it only happened a few times a day on campus. He was slowly accepting the fact that for the next couple months, he'd be smiling and thanking helpful men who—oh fuck.

There was another couple in front of them talking to the hostess, so Sammy cleared his throat and said, "So um. This is a dumb question, but like. You opened the door for me..."

When Sammy trailed off, Finley raised an eyebrow. "Is there a question part of your question?"

Sammy gave up trying to phrase it elegantly. "Men open doors for

women, for manners or whatever, but you're not a man, so... how's that work?"

His date grinned. "Yeah, non-hetero dating can get confusing sometimes. But there's usually one half of a couple who likes having the door opened for them more than the other half does. And in my experience, it's usually a safe bet that a newly-hatched trans girl will enjoy getting a little chivalry laid at her feet."

Sammy had to smile. "Are we that predictable?"

"Follow me for more queer dating tips," Finley quipped, tapped the side of their nose, and then shrugged. "We can take turns opening doors for each other later, if you like."

And then the hostess asked for Finley's reservation and they were being led through the restaurant to a table by the window, overlooking the water. The sun had almost reached the horizon and the river was all golden sparkles.

"There's Jersey," Finley remarked, nodding past the water to the dark, blocky horizon beyond. "Your homeland, right?"

Sammy scoffed. "I mean, yeah, that's Jersey, but it's not my Jersey. Like that Real Housewives and Jersey Shore stuff? I don't even recognize it. The Jersey I know is all backwoods isolation and winding mountain roads."

Finley settled back in their seat. "Tell me about it?" they asked, but were immediately interrupted by the server.

There were a number of specials that the server rattled off from memory—the curse of a seafood place—and the two of them listened to the litany with only slightly strained politeness. Sammy was realizing that, while he liked fish when his mom made it for dinner, he had no idea what kinds of fish she'd ever served him.

"Um, what would you recommend?" he asked when the piscine diatribe drew to a close. "Imagine that I like fish in general but I've mysteriously forgotten what all their different names are."

Did the server flinch? Sammy knew his question was odd, but that seemed like an extreme reaction. But she recovered quickly to recommend the tuna steak. That sounded straightforward so he ordered that, along with a diet soda.

Finley put in his order, the server retreated, and they were alone. "That's an interesting mysterious ailment you have, forgetting the names of fish."

Sammy rolled his eyes at himself. "My mom makes fish all the time and I love it, but like. I say, 'hey Mom, what's for dinner?' and she tells

me the name of the fish, and I look at her confused and stuff and then she just says, 'Fish.' So I nod and then dinner is delicious."

Finley grinned. "Don't go out for seafood much in the Jersey backwoods?"

"No, Oak Grove has got, like... a diner, a chinese takeout place, a pizza place, and, um, this place that calls itself a 'grill' but it serves exactly the same stuff as the diner."

"What, no fast food?"

Sammy shrugged. "Not unless you want to drive all the way to Dover."

Finley whistled. "Wow, you really do live outside of civilization."

Sammy lifted a finger. "Used to live outside of civilization. Now I live in New York City."

"Never going back?"

He shook his head. "Not if I can help it. I mean, go back for visits and stuff, sure. But that's the people. I'll miss people. I won't miss Oak Grove."

Finley nodded. "I get that. I miss my family, definitely, but I gotta admit, sometimes I miss home, the place."

The server reappeared with their drinks and a basket of bread. Sammy thanked her and waited until she'd left to ask, "Where is home again? You said back during Preview Days but I was overwhelmed and awkward."

Finley stuck their tongue out before answering, "Nebraska." Sammy nodded. That sounded like something he'd been told months ago. "A sleepy little suburb called Waverly, outside of Lincoln. Flat as hell. Green in the summer, white in the winter."

"And you miss it?"

"I miss bits," they nodded. "Outdoor seating at the Runza that looked out over a field. The creek where my friends and I hung out. My favourite club down in Lincoln."

"What's a Runza?"

"Sandwich place," Finley clarified with a shrug. "Fast food, because Waverly sits within the bounds of proper civilization."

Sammy gestured with his buttered roll, plainly egging Finley on, because apparently he liked listening to the genderqueer talk. "So you miss a fast food sandwich with a view across a green field leading to a flat horizon."

Finley smirked. "Yeah. I do." They described a particularly memorable summer day with friends, hanging out at the sandwich

place, and Sammy just listened, smiling softly and making encouraging conversational noises every once in a while.

When their food came, Sammy's didn't look much like any fish his mother had ever served him. But he figured he was trying new experiences and dug in. The tuna steak was surprisingly good.

His date was less than enamored with their food. Despite trying to hide their disappointment, they finally admitted that the upscale restaurant's mojo isleño sauce paled in comparison to their mother's home cooking. "I had a little spark of hope when I saw Puerto Rican food on the menu, but I should have known better," they sighed.

Sammy made sympathetic noises and got two more bites into his own steak before his curiosity piqued. "Are there a lot of Puerto Ricans in Nebraska?"

"Not really," Finley answered. "There's, like, almost a real Boricua community in Omaha, but not in Lincoln. Certainly not in Waverly."

"Boricuwhat?"

"Boricua," Finley grinned. "It's just what Puerto Ricans call ourselves. I should be able to tell you why but um. I really have no idea."

"Well there's no Boricua community in Nebraska," Sammy pointed out, dimly proud of himself when he didn't stumble over the new word. "Who would have taught you, right?"

His date guffawed at that. "I am, if you can believe it, third-generation Nebraskan Boricua. My great-grandparents moved there when they were discharged after World War Two."

"They were?" Sammy echoed, eyebrows raised. "Not just him?"

"Women's Auxiliary," they answered with no small amount of pride. "She was a mechanic, he was a driver. They met in Italy, got secretly married in London a year before the war was over."

"Secretly married?"

They grinned. "You weren't supposed to get married, it would distract you from your important work fixing jeeps."

"That's so awesome," Sammy grinned. The back of his brain told him that the story might have been mildly amusing, but certainly didn't qualify as 'so awesome.' The rest of his brain, which was now sure it just liked listening to Finley talk, told the back to shut up. "And then they chose Nebraska."

"Nobody on the east coast was giving brown people mortgages under the G.I. Bill, so they had to go inland," they explained, wrinkling their nose. "But it worked out, I guess. They opened a garage in

Lincoln; my grandpa worked there his whole life. My mom worked there part-time through college. She's an accountant, now. Terribly exciting."

"And the garage?" Sammy asked, thinking about his family's patchwork collection of small businesses in Oak Grove.

"It's my uncle's now. Mom moved out to Waverly to be closer to her clients. All agribusiness stuff. Taxes for farms are complicated, apparently. But it kept us housed and clothed and fed, so I'm not complaining." They grinned. "My mom is complaining, but more about the farmers and their bookkeeping practices than the tax codes."

Sammy hesitated only a moment before asking, "Single mom?"

"Sometimes, not always," they answered without hesitation, and then smiled. "Had me when she was on her own; IVF. These days she's shackled up with a girl named Tiff who's like half her age. It's kind of adorable. She asked me a couple months ago if it would be weird for me if they got married."

"What did you say?"

Finley took a moment to chew, swallow, and wash down the disappointing fish sauce with a gulp of water. "I told her, 'you're not going to find another *lesbiana boricua* in Lincoln. You better lock that shit down while you can.'"

Sammy tried not to wince when Finley slipped into Spanish, which he didn't speak, but the meaning was clear enough. He grinned to cover the sudden spike of unease.

Finley just asked, "What about your family, Samantha?"

"Oh, not as exciting," he demurred. But then his brain railed against his own words: Now it's your turn, now you have to be interesting to listen to, and tell a good story, and be engaging and clever. You're on a *date*. So Sammy cleared his throat and said, "My dad's side has been in Oak Grove since, like, time immemorial. They probably fought the British during the Revolution."

Finley grinned at that, but the expression took a moment to hit their face, as if it wasn't quite genuine.

Sammy suspected what was going through his date's head, so he forced himself not to smirk as he set up a sort of conversational surprise. "My mom's family... they're more recent immigrants."

At this, Finley nodded and the trace of hesitation in their face faded. "From where?"

"Russia," he answered, and Finley visibly flinched. Sammy grinned. "What, don't I look like I'm half Sons of Liberty, half Pushkin

heroine?" He only remembered to add the '-ine' at the last moment and wasn't even sure if there were Daughters of Liberty that he should have referenced, but Finley did not seem to notice.

"Respectfully, Samantha, you do not," Finley laughed. "Is there a story there?"

"Not really," he said, shrugged, and tamped down a rising tide of panic. He should have planned further ahead; now he was heading into fraught territory. "I'm adopted. A foundling left on the steps of a fire department in Jersey City."

Finley hooked a thumb out the window, at the twinkling skyline across the water. "So you are from over there, after all."

Sammy snorted softly. "Only technically. My parents adopted me as a baby; I only remember Oak Grove." He looked down at the remnants of his tuna steak, picking the flake apart with his fork. The conversation lulled, and he felt compelled to fill the silence, even if it would bring down the mood. "It's not like I was the only brown kid in Oak Grove, but... it was close. And none of the Martinezes or the Sozas had kids my age, so."

Finley reached across the table to put their hand over his, and had the good sense not to say anything.

Eventually Sammy turned his hand over to clasp Finley's, and they sat in silence—companionable, not stilted—as the red sun sank behind the Jersey City skyline.

After dinner, Finley suggested they walk to a nearby ice cream place. Sammy was more than eager to make the date last longer, so he grinned and said he was never going to turn down ice cream.

They left the restaurant by a different entrance, connecting into the mall. Finley held open the door to the brightly-lit thoroughfare.

Sammy hesitated. "I thought we were going to take turns opening doors for each other?"

His date grinned. "Yeah, but you like this."

He considered protesting, but a beat later stepped through, cheeks burning. Sammy wasn't about to admit anything out loud, but something deep within him blossomed warm and giddy. He did like it. Not because he was a newly-hatched trans girl, of course, because he wasn't that. Finley had said one half of the couple usually liked that sort of thing, and maybe he was that half of this couple. He was okay with that.

He probably should not be thinking of himself and Finley as a

couple, he realized, and flushed even more.

They ambled along the mall walkway without talking, but Sammy slowly became aware that Finley was less comfortable with the arrangement than he was. The genderqueer was tapping their fingers on their thighs, looking furtively at Sammy and then away. Were they actually nervous?

He leaned sideways to bump his shoulder against their upper arm. "Okay, now it's my turn. Out with it. Say the thing you keep not saying."

"You got me," they sighed, and then held their hand out, towards Sammy. "I'd like to slip my arm around your waist as we walk. But I don't want to presume, for obvious reasons, so I need to ask..."

"Oh my god," Sammy giggled, and stepped closer. Finley's hand slid across his back and settled against his far hip. He mirror imaged his own arm around Finley and squeezed. His head tipped against their shoulder, just for a moment, which felt wonderful. "This is nice," he murmured. "And thank you for asking."

"You didn't actually let me get to the asking part," his date pointed out, and added playfully, "Nor did you ask me—"

"Finley, shut up and enjoy this."

"Yes, ma'am."

They walked the length of the mall like that, talking only sporadically and about nothing of import. Sammy could get used to... whatever this was. A walking hug? And Finley was smart and funny and charming, and something about their arm around him made Sammy feel... safe wasn't the right word. Taken care of? Like Finley thought Sammy was worth holding onto—something special—and they weren't shy about demonstrating it to everybody they passed in the mall.

Sammy's musing was interrupted when Finley said, "Ooo!" and used their walking hug to steer them both into a hard ninety-degree turn, plunging directly into a store decorated in purple and pink.

"What's happening?" Sammy asked, just slightly panicked, as they were suddenly surrounded by plastic teenybopper jewelry on all sides. "Where are we?"

"Claire's," Finley answered cheerfully, and disengaged their arm from Sammy's side. He tried not to pout. "I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that Rowan didn't bring you here during your shopping spree."

"Uh, no. Isn't this place for, like, twelve-year-olds?"

"Twelve-year-olds and working class queers," Finley corrected with a smirk. They grabbed Sammy's hand and dragged him between the display racks. "It's not that Rowan has no appreciation for trash fashion, she just prefers designer trash fashion."

"So we're shopping, now?" Sammy asked, bemusedly allowing himself to be pulled through the claustrophobic store.

"Just for one quick thing," Finley promised. "I thought I saw it through the window—ah, here." They plucked something off a rack and tore its cardboard holder apart. Sammy could mostly see wide black ribbon. "Turn around?"

More than a little unsure, Sammy turned his back on Finley. A moment later, their hands passed over his shoulders and exposed collarbones, fiddled for a heartbeat, and then laid the cool, plasticky necklance against his skin. Fingertips brushed the side of Sammy's neck, and then they were fastening the clasp behind him.

"There," Finley said proudly, and with their hands on Sammy's shoulders, turned him to face a mirror. "Now your outfit is complete."

Sammy's immediate "oh, that's right, I look like a girl" reaction blossomed as he took in his reflection, but over the last week it had been worn down to little more than half a second. So he focused on the necklace that Finley had put on him. It was simple—a wide black ribbon supporting an oversized white plastic cameo—and if he looked close as he was now, it was plainly cheap. But this last week had also shown him that most of humanity did little more than glance at their fellows, and he doubted anyone would think really think poorly about him wearing a plastic pendant.

And it did complete the outfit rather nicely.

...even if it did draw attention down into his fake cleavage.

"It looks good, yeah," he told Finley, and put on a smile. Something tugged at his memory, though, and he scrutinized his reflection for a little longer, and finally laughed. In his blue skater dress, black hair in a swishy bob, and now this necklace... "I look like Betty Rubble."

"Like a hot Betty Rubble, sure," Finley grinned back through the mirror. A trace of uncertainly flickered across their features. "You like it, though?"

Sammy touched the generic figure on the cameo and nodded. "I do, actually."

Finley waved the cardboard backing the necklace had come from. "Okay, let me go pay for it."

"You're buying me jewelry on our first date?" Sammy smirked

through the mirror, raising one arch eyebrow.

Finley checked the back of the cardboard. "I mean, I'm spending eight dollars, here," they grinned, and disappeared behind the displays.

Sammy looked back at his reflection. The necklace might be cheap plastic and ribbon, but it worked with everything else perfectly. He stepped back, fitting his reflection into the thin display mirror. Leaving his dorm room, he'd felt thrown together and rushed. Now he looked poised and put together. Was it the addition of the necklace, or just fewer nerves?

Sammy really wanted it to be the latter option, because Finley had been careful, sweet, and gentle. He was having such a good time, and he was a lot less worried about how the date might go, now that it was mostly over.

But if he was being honest with himself, he was pretty sure the outfit was the larger part of his looking better. If only he could swap out these little earring studs he was stuck with for something that properly complemented the necklace...

Finley returned, slipping a thin billfold into the pocket of their dress. Sammy tamped down a sharp flash of envy; where had they got a sleek dress with pockets? The genderqueer met Sammy's eyes in the mirror and held their hands out over his hips, question plain on their face. Sammy smiled, and Finley's hands settled over his hips comfortably. He leaned back against them.

His date dropped their chin onto Sammy's shoulder. "Ice cream?"

Sammy placed his hands over Finley's, squeezing softly in the hopes of silently communicating how the contact had been nice and his date should do it again. With actual spoken words, he said, "Oooo, ice cream."

The ice cream place was out the far end of the mall and a half-block down the street beyond that. Despite the sun setting almost an hour ago, it was still warm out and Sammy had been happy that they'd exploited the mall's air conditioning. It was also, somehow, less crowded in the mall. Now they had to dodge pedestrians on the last leg to the creamery, and holding hands was off the table. Sammy contented himself with frequent shoulder bumps.

"It's not the most prestigious medical school," Finley was saying, "and not even the most prestigious school that I got accepted to. They just put together a better financial aid package for me. I'll still be in

debt for decades, but you know... one decade fewer sounds nice."

"Finley in sunny California," Sammy grinned. "When do you go?"

"I move out of my apartment August 12th," came the answer. "Lease is up then, so it's convenient. I'll head home for a bit... Mom wants me there till the last minute, like three weeks, but I think I need some time to settle in before things start getting hectic."

"That sounds like a good idea, yeah," Sammy grinned. "Home in small doses, even if it has a Runza with a view."

"What about you, what are your plans?"

Sammy shrugged. "I mean, I go home after the final exam, and then hopefully I'm back here a month later."

"You will be," Finley nodded encouragingly. "You're gonna crush it. But I mean in broader strokes. Major? Grad school plans?"

"Oh gosh, that's so many steps ahead," he said, shaking his head. "I don't have any plans beyond 'get into Columbia.' Anything more concrete seems like setting myself up for disappointment."

"There's no rush," his date insisted. "And honestly, I think spending some time figuring out what you want to study and what you want to do after school... that's a good thing. Or maybe I just hang out with too many pre-meds who are super focused on—"

"Hey Tranny!" The shout cut through the humid, acrid air from across the street. Finley rolled their eyes.

Sammy moved to turn, but Finley grabbed his arm to still him. "Don't even turn around. Come on."

He didn't turn, so he scowled at his date instead. "If somebody's gonna shout slurs at me on the street, I want to flip him off at least."

The man shouted across the street again, this time backed by other voices laughing.

"He's not shouting at you, Samantha," Finley told him with a wan smile. With their arm around Sammy, they hastened their pace down the street. "His idea of a tranny is somebody wearing a beard and a dress at the same time."

"Hey chica!" came the next shout. "Ditch the tranny and come on over here. I'll show you what a real man is like!"

Finley tipped their head slightly. "Okay, now he's shouting at you."

"Does that mean I can flip him off?"

"I wouldn't recommend it," they answered, pulled open a storefront door, and guided Sammy inside. "They're probably harmless, but you never know."

In the process of turning and stepping into the ice cream shop,

Sammy cast a hasty glance back down the street. The view was complicated by a tide of moving vehicles and a wash of pedestrians on the sidewalk opposite. But the culprit was most likely the scruffy-looking man in tattered clothing, leaning on a lightpost and leering across the street at them. If whoever had laughed along with him had stuck around, Sammy couldn't spot them.

"He looks homeless," he reported to Finley in a whisper. The ice cream shop was tightly packed with display refrigerators blasting hot air out along the floor. A rainbow of colours beckoned to them, but another couple was ahead of them, being helped by the sole worker.

"Might be," his date said with a shrug. "Not getting my sympathy today, though."

"Yeah," he answered weakly. The couple ahead of them were taking their time. "Seems weird, though, that he thinks a trans girl would wear a beard."

"I mean, some do," Finley shrugged. "But it's more that... he saw something different than he expected, it had something to do with gender presentation, and he's only got one word to apply to that situation."

Sammy made an agreeable sound, and then it was their turn to pick flavours.

Later, hunched around one of the two tiny little tables in the front of the store and halfway through their dessert, Sammy said, "Hey um. Can I ask a question about... I mean it's not really about the guy outside, but it's sort of... tangentially related?"

His date made a show of calculated deliberation, and then pointed their spoon at Sammy's ice cream. "Only if you give me a bite of that lemon curd swirl."

Sammy scooped out a generous spoonful and held it out to Finley, who grinned before slurping it up. "Good, right?" he smiled, and then switched tack. "He thought you were transgender, yeah, but... I don't know how to ask this right but... are you?"

"You mean, do I self-identify as transgender," his date rephrased for him, and bobbed their head. "It's a good question. Wish I had a good answer."

"Well if you're not going to give me the answer I paid for," Sammy smirked, "it seems like you owe me a bite of ice cream." He leaned forward slightly and watched Finley's eyes wobble down and snap back up, not quite taking the bait of cleavage that Sammy had put on display.

"It's good chocolate," Finley said, and scooped out a bite of theirs to hold forward. "Not as good as your lemon curd, though."

After sampling the bite, Sammy tipped his head side to side. "I'm not sure I agree with your ranking, there."

"You want to swap?"

"No," Sammy smiled. "But I think I do need another bite, just to make sure."

"That so?"

"I can make it worth your while," he proposed in a soft, tempting drawl that surprised even him. Then he dangled his spoon, lumped high with yellow ice cream, between them.

"Well," Finley smirked, and prepared their own spoonful. "In the interest of rigorous testing."

The two of them traded bites back and forth for a few minutes, which inevitably resulted in melted ice cream on the tips of both of their noses. And then as both their paper bowls neared empty, Finley said, "So like, definitionally, I am transgender. My realized gender does not match the gender I was assigned at birth. So yeah, I'm trans. Technically."

Sammy nodded, accepting the belated answer and sudden return to the previous topic because, well, he wanted to know.

"But, like, colloquially?" Finley grimaced. "There's a picture of what people think of when they think of transgender people, and I share... only some of those characteristics and experiences, you know? I will never pass. In fact I am trying, every day, not to pass. As either binary gender. So I don't know if it's a useful label in most contexts. I'm happy just claiming genderqueer and leaving it at that."

Sammy bobbed his head and held forward his spoon with the last of the lemon curd. "That's a good answer."

"I'm glad we got to do this," Finley said as the two of them approached Sammy's dorm, steps slowing to prolong the tail end of the date. The long summer day had finally surrendered to darkness, not that the humid heat had gone anywhere. Campus was lit up around them, floodlights spilling across red brick and up alabaster columns.

"Me too," Sammy murmured, and leaned his head against their shoulder. He'd maneuvered them into a walking hug when the dorm came into view, savoring the contact.

"I really enjoyed getting to know you better," they continued, and

then grinned down at him. "And I'm glad you decided to make it a date."

"I didn't decide that!" Sammy recoiled, a little more affronted than he wanted to be. "I decided that I'd like it to be a date." He poked Finley's shoulder. "You decided it was a date when you asked me out on a date."

"Is that what I did?" they asked, all skepticism and cheek.

"You may have played it cool when I asked if it was a date," Sammy argued, trying to play it off as funny. Why did this suddenly matter so much? "But we both know what you were doing."

They came to the foot of the stairs up to the dorm's front door, and their steps came to a halt. "Plausible. Certainly sounds like something I'd do," Finley said, and then their performative musing cracked into a devilish smirk. "So. Since this is and always was a date... may I kiss you goodnight?"

Sammy turned to face his date, slipped his arms around their waist, and smiled up at them. "Please."

Finley mirrored his smile, then slid one hand up his back until their fingers nestled into the hairs at the nape of Sammy's neck. They drew him close and gently pressed their lips together. Soft and warm.

Sammy felt his eyes flutter closed more than he shut them with any intention. Finley was taking their time, with slow, light kisses along his lips. He pulled the genderqueer closer and might have made a little quavering sound he'd feel ashamed of if he wasn't presently consumed by sensation.

And then Finley was pulling away gently, which brought out of Sammy a frustrated little squeal. This wasn't over, not yet! He stood up on tip-toes to push his face into theirs, parting his lips to plant a little, inviting lick on Finley's lower lip.

The movement unbalanced him and he wobbled slightly—damn sandals—but his date caught him with the simple expedience of their free hand cupped under his butt, holding him close. Sammy giggled into the kiss; he could feel Finley's lips curl into a responding smile. Lips parted; tongues darted; Sammy started to run out of breath. He didn't particularly care.

Eventually, though, Finley set him back down on solid ground. They pulled back, and this time Sammy's head was spinning too fast to mount a bodily counter-argument. His date nodded up the short stack of stairs behind Sammy. "It's slightly more pragmatic chivalry than holding restaurant doors open, but I'd like to see you safely through

your front door before I head home.”

Sammy nodded absently; that made sense. He staggered up the steps, fished keys out of his purse, and managed to get onto the other side of the glass door. It latched and locked with an audible kerthunk.

Through the glass, Finley waved; without thinking, Sammy blew them a kiss. He watched them turn and go, heart pounding. At some point, after Finley was long out of sight, he rested his forehead against the door. “Oh, this is bad,” he sighed to himself. “So much for no distractions.”

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