

Joy Bye

'Clang, Clang, Clang,' Went the Trolley

I am 23 and in a large dressing room full of half-naked drag queens primping and pouring themselves into scintillating ball gowns. There is a leggy black bombshell to one side who pushes her hip pads into place beneath a pair of opaque tights. Her pink brassiere is overflowing with taped man cleavage and thick contour lines have been drawn in beige and brown eye shadow to give the illusion of breast. I am sitting in a corner with an old Minolta 25 in my hands and I place it over my right eye to adjust the aperture and snap her photo.

Next to me, at a dressing table is my best friend, Brett, aka Rose Petal. He is sitting bare-chested in front of a large mirror with globe lights above it. In front of him are rows and rows of neatly laid out makeup supplies: brushes, tubes and jars all arranged on a white towel. His short dark hair is hidden beneath a wig cap and he is using a sponge to apply dermablend to the sleek curves of his face. Dermablend is a heavy foundation people with skin abnormalities use to cover birthmarks and scars, he tells me. It is the basis of every good drag queen's makeup because it covers stubble so well. He is telling me this because it is my first time being allowed behind the curtain so to speak. Straight women, even those who have earned the title of endearment known as "hags", like myself, are not typically allowed upstairs in the green room before a show. I don't ask why this is, but I am aware that they have bent the rules for me on this night. I am shooting a series for a photojournalism project and though Brett is my main subject, the others have extended this courtesy and are giving me a crash course in what it takes to be a professional showgirl.

A middle aged queen named Lena Myers takes a long drag of her cigarette and leans into me. "That one over there," she whispers while pointing at a stunning brunette who looks similar to Linda Evangelista and is wearing a Barabarella costume. "She's ten years post-op... The tits look great, but they slaughtered the vag. It's a train wreck down there."

"Ah..." I say, without knowing what else to offer. "Well, she's still gorgeous."

"She is, isn't she? Makes me want to gag. She's got a trans-fan man and lives her life as a woman full time. But she's really the only M2F on the circuit. Almost everyone lives in boy mode."

I know most of these terms from hanging out with Brett, but I have to ask what exactly is an M2F.

"Male to female, darling," she whispers back while patting me on the

head. "You're a good little fruit fly, but you really need to bone up on your terminology."

Brett and I have been friends for a few years by now and he knows I am fascinated by the world of drag. We were introduced by my other close friends, who also happen to be gay, and immediately hit it off based on this mutual enchantment with wiggled and sequined men. Brett, or Rose as his friends and admirers affectionately call him, was in his late twenties then and had just moved up the ranks from sometime female impersonator to real-live-money-making-crowd-pleasing Drag Queen. His shtick is Judy Garland, and I have to admit that when he is fully made up and outfitted, he looks incredibly like her. Some nights, Rose will appear wearing different outfits, different wigs, lip synching to the likes of Michelle Nedegocello or Blu Cantrell. But when he is most lauded, most cheered, is when he costumes himself as a 1950s Judy and performs something like "The Trolley Song" from *Meet Me In Saint Louis*.

"Well, honey, whaddaya think," he says, as I look up from messing with my camera. Her face is a work of art at this point. She has painstakingly applied layers of dermablend to make a perfectly smooth canvas. On top of this is contoured shadowing that isn't readily evident, but gives the illusion of fuller cheekbones and a thinner nose bridge, though to tell you the truth, Rose really doesn't need these touches. Her cheekbones are already high and full, her nose already petite. Another layer of blush and powder finish off the skin. Blood red liner and gloss fill her lips. But the eyes are the most splendid feature. She has shaved off her brows and drawn higher, dramatically arched lines that remind me of Joan Crawford. Her brown doe eyes are black rimmed and made even larger by the false eyelashes and shimmering powder. The face before me is incredibly feminine and flawless.

"I think you are beautiful," I say. The final touches to her dark brown bobbed wig are being made with pins and several thick coatings of hair-spray. When she stands to slip into her gown, she has a woman's stunning face and the muscled torso of a small man. His hip pads and gaff, the device used to tuck the penis and testicles back, are hidden under control top pantyhose and girdle. In a moment Rose puts on her bra, places the silicone breast inserts into the cups and slides her size 10 feet into six inch silver stilettos. Bronzer is dusted in vertical lines to simulate cleavage and then she holds up THE GOWN. It is stunning; a black and silver full length covered in crystals and bead work. *Will you zip me up?* She questions. As I finish and clasp the top of the gown I am standing behind her in the mirror. The stark contrast between my pale face and bohemian dress and this stunning creature makes me instantly want to fix my hair and reapply my

lipstick. She smiles at me in the mirror and then assesses herself. "Not half bad, if I do say so myself." One last tweak with a brush and Rose slips some cash and a pack of Virginia Slims into a beaded handbag and says, "Follow me. I need to do one last thing before I am ready."

The two of us walk down the narrow stair well to a back door. The stage manager is nearby. He's talking into his headset and turns to us: "Rose, you are on in ten. Don't be long." She swings the metal door open, grabs my hand and we step out into a dark alley. "I just need to loosen up a bit before I face the crowd," says Rose as she pulls a tiny joint from her pack of smokes. Her hands are the only things that betray her here. They are too large and square for a woman, even with the long press-on nails. One of them reaches up and places the joint gingerly between her lips and the other lights the end. She inhales deeply, holds her breath and then seizes into a coughing fit as the smokes trails from her mouth. "Here," she croaks as she passes me the joint. To be fair, I have had a few cocktails by this point and am already worried about the quality of my vision to continue taking photographs. But, out of politeness, I take a hit from the joint and pass it back. She inhales one more time and asks me what I am thinking.

"I'm wishing there were straight female drag queens. I want a reason to wear rhinestones and sequins."

She chuckles, "Well, honey, gold is in the dust that blinds all eyes. You get to have real boobs and wear makeup in the middle of the day without anyone thinking twice. Unfortunately, that means we've got the monopoly on drag and there's not much room for straight women...that is unless you are willing to do the Victor/Victory thing and run off to Broadway."

As we head inside, I ask if she needs anything and tell her to break a leg. The venue is such a hole in the wall that to get to your seats out front or get to the bathrooms in back you have to wait for a performer to finish their routine and race across the ten foot by ten foot stage and down a few steps in front of the entire audience. Iman, a 6'3" Janet Jackson impersonator, is winding up her routine with the raucous crowd. Right after she leaps up from the splits her song ends, she bows and runs behind the curtain. I take this as my cue to run out to my seat that a group of our friends has saved. As I step onto the stage, this group begins to hoot and holler: "TAKE IT OFF, BABY!!!" and "SHOW US YOUR TITS!!!" I look into the blinding spotlight and knowing I am on the spot, I swing my camera strap to the side, throw back my shoulders, curtsy and blow the now laughing crowd a kiss. For some unknown reason, I am wildly comfortable in this setting. "My gays," as I call them, have brought me into their mix in every regard and after a few years, I am acutely aware that among them is the only place I truly feel I can be myself.

Rose is on after the next performer. Only in certain venues, usually in the largest cities like New York and San Francisco, do the Queens sing their own songs. On most circuits and in most gay bars, Drag Queens lip synch to music, perform a dance routine and play to the adoring crowd that hands out money to the passing performers. It's usually the same drill. Performers start the song on stage and then walk through the crowd, continuing their routines. Dollar bills are waved by the crowd, and then ever so graciously, the showgirl will take the crowd member's hand, slide the money into her cleavage and lean in for an air kiss that doesn't smudge their perfect faces.

Our table is right up front, and though I feel extremely comfortable here, I also don't want to move around too much to take photographs and spoil anyone else's view. There is that, and also the fact that I love these shows so much I don't want to spend the entire night behind my camera. Tonight, Rose is doing a middle aged Judy tune. If you are familiar with Judy Garland's career you know that late in life she began to quickly spiral out of control from an addiction to pain killers. For some reason, this time period in her life is the most endeared to true Judy lovers. I believe the vast majority of gay icons have several things in common. They are glamorous, out spoken, flamboyant, and typically quite tragic and vulnerable. These qualities are what draw gay men and women to them. The more talented and flawed an individual, the more they love her (I say her, because gay icons are almost always female. Be it Barbara Streisand, Bette Midler, or Cher). My friend David tells me this vulnerability is why they are adored. "We must be able to see a bit of ourselves in them," he says. "And it also doesn't hurt if they love feather boas and can sing the hell out of ballad."

The show's presenter, Candy Cane, comes on stage to tell a few jokes and remind the crowd to tip the bartenders and waitresses. "OK, PEOPLE!" she says in her low, feminized voice. "Get ready for a little Judy... and welcome our reigning Miss Gay Muncie to the stage....MISS RRR-ROOOOSSSE PETAL!"

Rose steps from behind the black velvet curtain and the music begins. *What a day this has been/ What a rare mood I'm in/ Why it's almost like being/ In love!* I am always struck by how much she reminds me of an old movie star at the beginning of her routines. She stands statuesque. Her arms flutter out for dramatic effect, like a ballerina accentuating the music. Then she will walk slowly to one side of the stage and open her arms to the crowd. Midway through the song, Rose glides down the stairs into the audience to begin accepting tips. She elegantly uncurls her fingers toward the bills being offered, leans in while still lip synching and blows a kiss to each person. She is so skilled at her performances that she has timed out exactly

how long she has to make it through the crowd and back to the stage while stopping to present her cheek for a smooch or wink at a patron. Working the crowd this way is how Rose makes her money for the night, working entirely for tips in the smaller venues. When the music begins to take off in certain sections or Judy belts out a few notes, Rose stops in a theatrical stance, throws her head back and reaches her arms out as though she is releasing the potency of Dorothy right into the air above our heads.

As the song ends, I realize I haven't taken a single shot. My Minolta is still on the table, so I snatch it up, aim and shoot. Later, when I am alone in the dark room, I will see this image fade into being. Rose's chin is raised to the adulating spectators and she has an enormous smile on her face. Her hands are clutched to her heart and the edges of multiple bills spill out the sides of her fists. She is resplendent against the darkness of the stage's curtain and the glowing spotlight. In the moment, the photograph captured adoration for the man underneath the flawless makeup. Rose has said in these instants, it is as if the audience is cheering for a little boy she was; the one who grew up in poverty, dysfunction and spent much of his life persecuted for being true to himself. The audience senses this tonight and cheers louder.