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A Blissful Life: Excerpt from Skin Deep

Abstract:

This creative excerpt from my novel *Skin Deep*, titled “A Blissful Life”, explores the intersection of queer identity, performative femininity and the politics of self-reinvention. Hendrix Anderson is a hyper-visible, unapologetically feminine gay model, who navigates his desire for fame, fortune and love, while battling his own trauma. Drawing on theories of hybrid-masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), gender performativity (Butler, 1990), and gay male subcultural aesthetics (Fischer, 1977), this creative work is intentional in its reinscriptions, with the work pushing to destabilise the trope of gay male femininity from within. Rather than rejecting feminine-coded behaviours (or disempowering them), Hendrix embraces them as tools of empowerment, self-expression, and fluidity within a landscape that is patriarchal and heteronormative in its underlying ideals. The accompanying exegetical statement situates the narrative within current academic discourse and reflects on how the piece aims to open conversation around visibility, authenticity and queerness.

Biographical note:

Harrison (Harry) Stewart is a South Australian writer, PhD candidate, and Primary Educational Support Officer. He holds a first class Honours degree in creative writing and his PhD centres around the gay male romance genre and its depictions of queer male love and desire. Harry is a co-host of two podcasts (*The Winey Writers* and *Amy &*), as well as a member of the Degrees of Love research hub. As a writer his work can be found in the Glimmer Press anthologies *Last Call: We're Dying for a Drink* (2022), and *Futures* (2024).

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Life is fucking good.

The sun shines down and kisses my skin as I strut down Oxford Street, one hand on my Chanel bag, the other tucked neatly into the pocket of my pants. I know I look good. Twelve months ago, I would have been so embarrassed to look like this. You wouldn't have caught me dead in six-inch boots, flared suit-pants and a tight crop top; I would have thought I was a walking stereotype. The feminine model twink, with the smooth, tanned skin, and the light covering of make-up.

But fuck that noise. Because I look hot as fuck.

I am Hendrix Anderson. *The* Hendrix Anderson. Boyfriend to Peter Klinson. *The* Peter Klinson, heir to the Klinson empire, that only a few weeks ago became the largest skincare brand in the world.

In less than three years – since I'd escaped Adelaide, and completely reinvented myself, legal identity and all – I had become an *icon*. I was the face of Klinsons Men's Makeup. I was the gay model of the future. Something I never would have considered possible. I wasn't hot, I wasn't ripped, I wasn't Manu Rios, or RuPaul, or Colton Haynes. I was a small – rather thin – white boy from Adelaide and, suddenly, hand in hand with Peter Klinson, my face was on bottles and packaging in every major store in the world.

The looks of awe and disgust from those that pass me don't bother me as I strut my way into the studio. I turn on that 'model' smile the moment I'm through the doors, suddenly the picture of excellence both in and out.

How did I do this though?

I mean picture this: a golden-haired, chiselled prince with the world at his fingertips decides to settle down with *you*, fuck *you*, love *you* – a young, lost, lower-class kid from a deranged, abusive, isolating family. The answer was simple. You drop the baggage, you realise your potential, and you – well, this I'm not overly proud of – fictionally kill your family to avoid them ever damaging your life again. As far as Peter and the Klinsons are concerned, I am the dreadful orphan of a fatal car crash in 2018. I'm void of nothing but devotion to them, because they're the "only family I have!"

It was kinda annoying how quickly the guilt started to eat me up every time I thought about my family. Every time I worried they'd see my face on a box in-store and realise it was me. I mean, the touch-ups in post-production did change my face *slightly*, and I'd had a sprinkle of filler, so maybe now I was unrecognisable to the people that raised me?

But in truth, I was unrecognisable to them when I wasn't Hendrix Anderson, but when I was Izak Wright. The small, outgoing, incredibly confident gay kid from a lower-class, homophobic family.

So, I'd left.

Packed up my shit without so much as a goodbye and booked a one-way ticket to Sydney. I forged an identity based on a tragic newspaper story about a car crash and threw caution to the wind for the first time in my life.

Was it worth it? Yes.

Was it fucked up? Yes.

"Good morning!" I say as I enter, stopping in the entrance to raise my arms up for a hug. "Let's fucking do this!"

Michelle saunters forward, with a clipboard in her hand, her gorgeous black hair tied neatly into a bun at the back of her head, the exquisite braiding of her cornrows so symmetrical I can't help but click my nails together.

"Mother!" I say in compliment, and she stops short to touch her hands to her head and pout her lips in appreciation.

"Hendrix, darling!" she saunters forward to give me a light squeeze. "You look angelic, baby doll."

Michelle is the closest thing I have – outside of Peter – to a friend. Admittedly, she works for the Klinsons on a contract basis, but we've had our fair share of drunken nights together and been in far too many states of unprofessionalism while hand-in-hand. The first day I met Michelle, she reminded me so much of Ally, an old high school friend of mine that I'd been the first to "out" myself to. Minus the obsession with brightly coloured clothes and the penchant for cigarettes. But Michelle was a rose amongst the thorns, the thorns being everyone other than Peter and his baby sister, Abby.

I chuckle lightly at Michelle's compliment and direct my eyes down to the clipboard she low-key shoves in my face.

"This is the schedule for today. We only have two shoots to do, because—" she raises a finger to cut me off before I interject about the change, "because," she repeats, "the shoots from last week were absolutely perfect, so we don't need to reshoot the blush, or the concealer, just one for the Prada collab, and then the half-nude Gay one," she finishes and looks up at me as I nod my head in approval.

“Slay.”

“Mhmm, I thought you’d say that! You lil narcissist,” she reaches up to poke my nose with an acrylic nail. “Now get over to make-up, they’ll give you some touch-ups.” She pulls back with a little smirk, “I’m gonna go talk to Ricky about the shoot, and then I’ll send over the Prada outfits for you to choose from? Okay?” She pouts up at me and raises an eyebrow.

“Slay,” I repeat, cracking a smile. “This is gonna be fun.”

“I knew you’d say that too,” she says with a wink, before tottering away past the front desk and toward the large black curtains that mark the border of the shooting stage.

Suddenly I’m alone again, standing in the white tiled entrance with my bag hanging loosely in my hand.

You can do this, I say to myself, pursing my lips to no one but myself. *You’re Hendrix Anderson. You’re Hendrix Anderson.*

I shake away the growing feeling of anxiety that starts to creep up and threaten my exterior performance, and I give my hips a little shake before strutting my way past the desk and toward the stage.

Everyone I pass gives me an excited, adoring smile that I return tenfold. All the while repeating my mantra in my head: *You’re Hendrix Anderson. You’re The Hendrix Anderson.* The calm soon starts to wash over me again, and suddenly I am surrounded by the make-up team, who direct me to my chair and shower me with affection.

“You’re amazing!”

“I loved your Chanel shoot!”

“What is your skincare regime? Is it *really* all Klinsons?”

I smile my usual smile, laugh when things seem to get too personal, and soon enough Michelle is back with a rack of clothing that probably costs more than my childhood home. There’s Prada belts, loafers, clutches, handbags, and of course an array of blazers – from slutty, to conservative – and pants and socks. I make my selections with relative ease—after all I had insisted that no hired stylist would be determining my vibe—and I quickly settle on an open blazer look with some wide leg pants – you know, show off the body, the tan, but still keep things looking modern and presentable. The make-up team finish up after my selection and pass me onto the hair stylist who pastes my hair down into a wet-looking helmet style, with a thin curled cowlick above my left eyebrow. It’s a look I’ve done before, with the intent on focusing the photos on how the Klinson make-up range has “The perfect bronzer for highlighting one’s facial features!”

After one final look in the mirror while the assistants make the final adjustments – people here do *everything* for you, which is another thing I had to get used to the first time I did this – I am ready and raring to go.

Soon I'm pushing through the curtains and marching across a great big, staged set that looks designed to be some sort of fake, all-white, curved wall...museum?

Typical Prada shoot then.

Prada always insisted on things like this. The sole-Klinson photoshoots were usually a little less elegant – despite the brand being marketed as the picture of opulence, it was rare there was anything other than a plain white background, and the occasional potted plant. Although, there were a couple of shoots in the Camelot Castle in Kirkham that we did last year, which had been an exciting change.

Every head turns toward me as I make my way out from the backstage toward the camera crew, and Michelle – who looks to be in a rather intense conversation with Ricky, the lead photographer – turns toward me with a smile that says, “Don’t come over here.”

So, despite drawing everyone’s attention, I’m forced to just stand there awkwardly, having moved a little too far away from the entrance point to return without looking like a total fuckwit. I take a long, deep breath as twenty people turn back away from me toward their work. There are easily another ten people fussing around with various cameras, another two messing around with a table stacked full of Klinson products, and the rest checking the lighting and the position of the decorations spread amongst the set.

My confidence starts to creep away from me again, and my nerves take over. In my head I repeat the mantra, but its usual robustness doesn’t take hold.

I take a long deep breath and pull my eyes from the room to start focusing on my outfit, lightly twisting my belt, and shifting my feet in my loafers.

Hendrix Anderson.

Hendrix Anderson.

The cowlick pressed tight against my forehead starts to itch as I feel my anxious sweats begin. It’s hot in here. Like *really* hot. The ten different lights illuminating the set are probably the cause, blaring radiant heat that seems to absorb itself into my skin like I’m a fucking plant out in a field.

“Stay calm,” I mumble under my breath.

“You’re gonna do great,” a voice from behind me says, and I almost jump at the sound before the anxiety just melts away.

It’s him.

He came.

I turn around just in time for his hands to grip my waist firmly, already exploring the shirtless body beneath the blazer.

“Hey, baby,” I say, reaching up to hook my hands around his neck and plant a long, slow kiss on his lips.

“Nervous?” he says, pulling back from the kiss and twinkling his sapphire eyes at me under a raised eyebrow.

“Always,” I whisper, a genuine, warm, oh-my-fucking-god-I-love-him smile cracking across my face.

“Let me guess, you’re being your sassy, powerful Hendrix today? Hiding the real you?” His eyebrow raises a second time as he kisses me again, and my head spins at that.

You don’t even know the real me, baby.

But I push that aside. No anxiety. No baggage. Not anymore!

“Shut up,” I reply, willing a twinkle into my own eyes as I pull my hands back from around his neck to give him a soft, playful push.

He’s dressed in the most immaculate suit, tailored to perfection against his lightly muscled body. His clean-shaven angular face is cut nicely by the room’s lighting, offering a jawline that could cut steel. He. Is. Perfection.

Something I often remind myself when I wake up next to him in the morning and run through all the ways that my life is different now.

If young Iza—Hendrix, could see me now, he would *freak*.

“Thought I’d come and see your shoot before I head back to the office,” he says, catching my hand mid-push and pulling me back toward him.

“Hendrix!” Michelle calls, and we both turn to see her face go from “Hurry up!” to “Oh the boss is here!”

“Yeah,” I call over, biting the bottom of my lip as Peter’s hand snakes up my blazer again and lightly squeezes my waist, in the exact way he knows turns me on like crazy.

“We’re ready,” she replies, lowering the intensity in her voice before leaning over to no doubt inform Ricky that the man next to me is Peter Klinson.

“Rightio, time for the show,” I say to Peter, turning back to kiss him one more time as his hand slips from my body.

“Go kill ‘em, baby,” he replies, as I strut my way over toward the stage.

The moment those lights hit me, I don’t need my mantra because I am the fucking mantra.

I’m fucking Hendrix Anderson.

Exegetical statement

Gay male romance is packed full of references to feminine bottom twink and masculine gay dominant men. When Tristan Bridges and C.J. Pascoe created a theory of “hybrid masculinity” in 2014, in an effort to offer “resources for alternative masculinities that illustrate a great transformation in styles of masculinity”, (p. 255) it did little to “challenge the boundaries between gay and straight”, or “masculine” and “feminine” (p. 255). Instead, “hybrid masculinity” allows straight men to select and adopt traits or aesthetics from minorities, without facing the social risks or stigmas that members of these minorities often endure. By avoiding these risks, straight men are able to co-opt aspects of queerness and utilise aesthetics, mannerisms, and experiences in maintaining the hierarchal systems of gender and sexuality. Inspired by Judith Butler and her work on the dichotomy between male and female being a social construction over a biological fact (Butler, 1990), the aim of this excerpt is to establish a character who exhibits typically “female” presenting attributes. The intention is to embrace the feminine “gay man” stereotypes and then subsequently destabilise and deconstruct them within the constraints of an established relationship and the trope of second chance romance.

The character in this excerpt exhibits typically “female” assigned physical attributes that were inscribed based on an early study on masculinity and femininity by Kay Deaux and Laurie L. Lewis in 1984. They state that “physical descriptors for the masculine condition were tall, strong, sturdy, and broad-shouldered, and for the feminine condition, soft voice, dainty, graceful, and soft” (p. 999). My creative work describes Hendrix wearing “six-inch boots, flared suit-pants and a tight crop top” (Stewart, 2025, p.1), but given the setting is a world mirroring our own and its patriarchal social norms, he references derogatory, categorical language that would be used by others to describe him: “I would have thought I was a walking stereotype. The feminine model twink, with the smooth, tanned skin, and the light covering of make-up” (p. 1). I believe that Hendrix can maintain his identity as a cis-gendered, gay, white

male, while actively engaging in typically “feminine” behaviours. Throughout *Skin Deep*, Hendrix displays mannerisms and strategies that are culturally coded as feminine. He has grace, charm, and a certain level of emotional and social intelligence.

For Hendrix’s character, his use of feminine-coded traits is not a sign of passivity or submission, but a deep refusal to be confined by a set of rules of cultural social assumptions regarding gender and sexuality. This is a deliberate character arc for Hendrix because, normally, simply changing the stereotypes of gay men in fiction from a traditional focus on the “masculine” and “feminine” stereotypes would seem like the answer, but in this excerpt I embrace them. I lean into Hal Fischer’s belief that “gay culture has evolved a set of public, sexual stereotypes ... Men are pictured in situations which are initially inspired by established male fantasies” (Fischer, 2015, p.15). I also incorporated Fischer’s research on the visual language of gay male subcultures, using Hendrix’s style of dress as symbolic of both his identity and his struggle against presenting masculinity, affirming these ideas through his striking visibility. Hendrix’s context as a privileged white male is also clear and writing in elements of Bridges and Pascoe’s “hybrid-masculinity” theory (2014), Hendrix is aware of his privilege and safety as a male dressing femininely but also flipping the script by having his sexuality as a gay man upfront and unapologetic. “A Blissful Life” is an excerpt of a novel that aims to challenge one specific stereotype of gay male representation in fiction. Hendrix refuses to be anything other than unapologetically himself. He is not feminine nor masculine but instead represents the idea that assumptions about gender and sexuality are fluid and ever-changing. Hendrix at the end of *Skin Deep* is a person comfortable with his aesthetic, his sexuality, his desire, and his love: someone who learns to reflect his identity through his femininity because of who he is, not because it is who people want, or need him to be.

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