An illustration of two hands, colored with watercolor washes of yellow, green, and pink, holding a rectangular cardboard box. The box is light brown and has the title 'Right Body, Wrong Junk' printed on its front face in a bold, dark brown, sans-serif font. The background is a textured, light brown surface.

**Right  
Body,  
Wrong  
Junk**

**by Avery Edison  
with illustrations by  
Elizabeth Simins**

**expanded and updated**

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# Introduction

Over the course of two years, I wrote ten pieces about my experiences as a transgender woman for the website *The Bygone Bureau*. I tried my best to accurately represent what it had been like for me to make the transition, and what I had been through since coming out.

This collection contains every piece from that series, in addition to extensive annotations that (hopefully) provide further detail on the events portrayed and the process of writing about them.

As well as annotating the essays, I've also added a new piece, *Doing The Deed (Poll)*. It is not annotated, as it was so recently written that I do not yet have the benefit of time to see what it lacks.

With the annotations and additional essay, this collection clocks in at twenty-two thousand words—double the combined length of the essays as originally published online. I've put a lot of work into this book, and I sincerely hope you enjoy it.

Note: all names (except my brother John's) have been changed in an attempt to limit the number of angry emails I get.

# The Man (And Woman) In The Mirror

First published on the 27<sup>th</sup> of August, 2012



Even the most rational of people feel a sense of unease when it comes to broken mirrors. And, as someone who recently bought a new unicycle because “my other two unicycles aren’t great for my commute,” I’m clearly not the most rational of people. So when I dropped my bathroom cabinet while moving into my new apartment, smashing the glass on its door, I worried that it was an omen, an ill start to my home.

*Actually, the ill omens started when I flooded the apartment with excrement. Before I moved in, my now-girlfriend was living there by herself, and her toilet had stopped flushing properly. I'd spent just one night there, but when she popped out to the local coffee shop for five*

*minutes, I had a go at trying to fix the bathroom issue. When my new lover returned, she found me astride the bowl with my hands in the tank, desperately trying to stop the flow as water flooded in from the entire building's plumbing system and cascaded over the tiled floor and into the hallway.*

*I'm still not sure how I messed it up so quickly, or why she forgave me. I'd like to note that I **did** fix the toilet, and after we cleaned up the all the filthy water, it was a net good that I'd intervened.*

*But we should have just called a plumber.*

I still had plenty of stuff to bring in from the van, so I propped the cabinet up on the sink, with shards of glass still stuck in the frame. I continued shuttling my possessions up eight flights of stairs, ignored the idea of just living in the street rather than continuing to punish my quads, and attempted to forget about the broken mirror.

Putting mirrors out of my mind has been tricky for the past few years. I'm not a vain person, but I am a transgender woman. I learned early on that there is a danger that can come with not looking your best.

*I detailed in a later essay just what happens when one doesn't "look your best" as a transgender woman, so this is what's called a "tease". Or, I suppose, it's a line so vague as to be frustrating.*

*I suppose that the lack of specificity in this section was supposed to leave the consequences of poor personal grooming to the reader's imagination, which is likely to assume to the worst and create more sympathy for me than is warranted. This was the first piece I wrote, remember, and I wanted to ingratiate myself to my new audience. Was this an underhanded, dishonest technique? Sure. But maybe my current honesty is redeeming it?*

It's only in the past few months that I've been able to leave the house without a half-dozen once-overs in the hallway mirror, or the webcam on my laptop, or the shiny surface of my neighbor's silver SUV.

*Tip: dark car windows can be very forgiving; brightly colored car finishes can straight up hurt your feelings.*

I like to check my make-up and my hair, ensure my clothes look feminine enough (whatever that means), and even tense the muscles above my ears so that the shape of my face changes ever so slightly.

*I've recently figured out that the shape of my skull around my eye sockets is not symmetrical, leading to the height differential between my eyebrows that has bugged me for years. I'm even more vigilant about doing the facial tensing now, despite the fact that it often gives me a headache. The fight against vanity is a constant one, and sometimes it is weird.*

These behaviors are paranoid, yes, but they're also the behaviors of somebody who has been attacked in the street (not as bad as it sounds—the “assailant” was a twelve year-old drunk on cider who was disturbed by the incongruity of my voice and my gender presentation).

*Again with the tease. At least I'm walking back the horrible imagery you, the reader, probably supplied yourself with. But am I just downplaying the event to make myself seem braver?*

They are the safeguards of a girl who still has trouble inspecting her face and seeing anything but a boy, albeit a boy who used to get teased for looking like a girl. It's complicated.

As happy and comfortable as I am as a woman (and believe me, I feel better now, five years after coming out, than I ever did as a man), there's still the issue of re-training my brain, making it acknowledge that what

it sees in every reflective surface is accepted by the world as just another female member of the species. I was nineteen when I transitioned, and I'm only twenty-four now, so for the majority of my life I was referred to by my male name. My instinct is still to respond to it if I hear someone call it out. Similarly, nineteen years of people looking at me and treating me as a dude means I have a tendency to sub-consciously treat myself that way too.

*Two years on, I've stopped instinctively responding to that old name (which was Kyle, if you're curious). I'm very glad to leave it behind, and I love my new name, the one I chose for myself.*

But when I returned to that broken mirror, that smashed and dented cabinet, I saw something new. Each small section of glass reflected a different fraction of my face, and each of those slivers looked utterly feminine. I saw myself in a way I hadn't before, the pieces of the whole more true to me than my complete face ever was.

I remembered reading about a woman with prosopagnosia (face blindness, for those of you not addicted to Wikipedia) who couldn't recognize her own appearance. She had echoes of Capgras Delusion, at times convinced that the person in the mirror was an impostor, that she had been replaced. She suffered from this disorder for years, until her doctor noticed that she could apply lipstick with no problems, and surmised that smaller mirrors presented her with no difficulties. He assembled close to a hundred mirrors in escalating sizes, so the patient could work her way up from the tiny recognizance of her mouth to an acceptance of her full-length image.

When I sent this essay in for editing, my editor asked if I could provide a link to an article or encyclopedia entry about this woman. I could not find one then, but now, with some more creative Googling, I found the entire case detailed in the book *Altered Egos: How the Brain Creates the Self*. [Google Books has the relevant pages](#), for those who are interested.

I experienced a similar effect. I observed the individual aspects of my face and acknowledged their womanliness without the years of associations that my complete visage carried. After I'd finished inspecting my eyes and lips and eyebrows individually, I could look in an unbroken mirror and see how they came together to make a woman's face. For a few moments, I could see the girl everybody else did.

It wouldn't be smart to keep a broken mirror in the house, as tempting as it is to end this story with my accepting the smashed cabinet as part of my life. It's a bathroom item, after all, and that's a room in which you're guaranteed to spend most of your time barefoot. I threw it out, and now I have nowhere to store spare tubes of toothpaste.

I did keep a small shard, though. I sanded down the edges, stored it in a pocket in my purse. When I'm feeling self-conscious I can take it out and study my features. I can look. And I can see.

*I've no need for this shard anymore. Again, time has been my friend, and most days I can look in the mirror and see a woman looking back at me. Even without make-up on, and even when I haven't shaved in a few days and small hairs are starting to poke their way out my chin. I don't think I look beautiful, but I do think I look like myself.*



# Drawing Myself Out

First published on the 17<sup>th</sup> of September, 2012



I can remember exactly when I first got the urge to draw something, because it was only three years ago. I'd started hormones a few weeks earlier, and in addition to noticing the almost-instant changes my body began making, I felt my mind making adjustments, too.

Every doctor, mentor, and Internet guide tells you not to expect hormone medication to perform miracles. If you're unfortunate enough to have gone through natural puberty (something that is becoming less common with the greater use of hormone blockers, but which is still the typical experience for most transgender people), you'll have aspects to your physicality that are going to be difficult to remove. Transgender women typically have to deal with their wide shoulders, deep voices, Adam's apples, and facial hair. Transgender men usually struggle with binding their chests, dressing to hide their hips, and a lack of height.

*Weirdly, I didn't go through "natural puberty". After my mother expressed concern to our doctor that, at fifteen years old I was still the size of a child, my arm was x-rayed and it was determined that I hadn't yet begun puberty on my own. I was given steroids to kick-start the process, and after taking them for a year I finally started growing. It's one of my great regrets that I didn't realize at the time how much better it would have been to stick with that pre-pubescent body.*

It's a good general rule that if your old hormones gave you something, new ones won't take it away. But, during your second puberty, those new chemicals can add to your body, pile on to the myriad changes that marked your transition from child to adult. Transmen can grow stubble, their voices can deepen, and musculature can make itself more obvious. Transwomen often get softer skin, a decrease in libido, and breasts.

But again, this is all a crapshoot, and the kindest thing you can do for yourself is lower your expectation of change. So when I noticed swelling on my chest only a few weeks into my daily 2 mg estrogen doses, I figured I had to be imagining things or kidding myself. But my girlfriend confirmed it—I was growing tits. And that was only the beginning.

*I take estrogen (now at 6 mg a day) and nothing else. Often, transgender women are also prescribed with an anti-androgen to limit or stop testosterone production. I am lucky enough that my natural production level is very low, and simply adding the estrogen to my system brings my testosterone levels down to "female".*

*I take six milligrams of estradiol valerate every evening, in pill form. Some people get their hormones in injections, once a week, and when I talk about hormones, this is the assumption that's usually made: that every seven days I jab a needle into my thigh, that I've learned to get through the pain because the results are so wonderful. I think people are a little disappointed when I tell them about the pills. Perhaps it's not extreme enough for their liking, that I simply dissolve*

*a couple of tablets under my tongue?*

*I'm not sure why I get my medicine orally rather than via injection. I never expressed a preference to anybody, so I guess it was just luck of the draw—I happened to visit a doctor who tended to prescribe pills rather than needles, and no doctor since then has wanted to deviate from that.*

I'm lucky in that even before the hormone therapy I did a decent job of “passing” for female. I've always been thin, fair of skin, and feminine. It wasn't unusual for me to get called a girl by a customer during my after-school job at a local supermarket, and I'd been bullied throughout my entire childhood for not fitting in with the boys.

*I remember one particular shift at that supermarket. I was scanning items at the checkout, and a shopper told her child to “put those [candy bars] on the conveyer belt for the lady”. I looked up and said, “I'm not a lady,” and she apologized in the quiet way that we apologize when we realize we made an incredible faux pas. In hindsight, that moment has a nice irony to it, a denial of gender from someone who would later claim that gender as her own. At the time, I was just embarrassed that yet another person didn't think I looked like the man I was supposed to be.*

So after my little blue pills did their thing, I became—and this is going to sound arrogant, but I'm assured that I'm not delusional—a fairly attractive chick. My boobs are small, but just right for my frame; the discrete amounts of fat that migrated to my face added a softness to my already-defined features; and my British accent (although not a result of my medication) can't help but get a lot of people's engines running (I left England for Toronto a couple of years ago, and I attribute a lot of my success hiding my male voice to the alien nature of my patois).

*There are days when this does seem, to me, like a delusional*

*paragraph to write. And it doesn't seem like it fits with that last essay. But we all have days when we feel ugly, and days when we feel gorgeous. At least that's something about the trans experience that is actually universal.*

Like I mentioned, though, physical alterations weren't the only things I experienced. And so, three years ago, I felt an urge to draw, and I picked up a pencil. I stared at a stapler on my desk and made lines on the paper. I got lost in the process. I felt a calm and focus that I usually only experienced when reading a book. Half an hour later I had a pretty good sketch of the stapler before me.

I'd never been artistic. I remember being jealous, in my childhood, of my friend Linda and her natural gift with a sketchbook and pencil. You know those annoying people who are so used to their ability to make art that they say, "It's easy, everybody can do it"? I was always so frustrated by how effortlessly her particular talent came to her.

I'm not a scientist. Nothing I'm claiming about the differences between my brain pre- and post-hormones has been checked or verified with any kind of scientific rigor. I've never heard of this kind of thing happening to anybody else, and I have nothing even close to medical proof for what I'm describing.

*There is something in the public record that's similar to what I'm talking about. This American Life did an [episode on testosterone](#) in which a transgender man, Griffin Hansbury, talks about how he got better at science after taking hormones. It's an pretty offensive concept, right? The idea that chemicals closely tied to gender can affect our ability at certain subjects? I feel gross about it, too.*

In the weeks and months following that day with the stapler, I saw the world differently. I watched movies with new eyes, noticing the composition of the shots and lighting. I paid attention to pictures and images, taking

apart the perspective, the angles. I drew more and more. I went out and bought clay and sculpted videogame characters, animals, and people I knew. All this, from the same person who cried in elementary school when asked to make a crocodile mask for Egyptian studies.

*To be fair, when I was in elementary school I cried at everything, not just artistic tasks.*

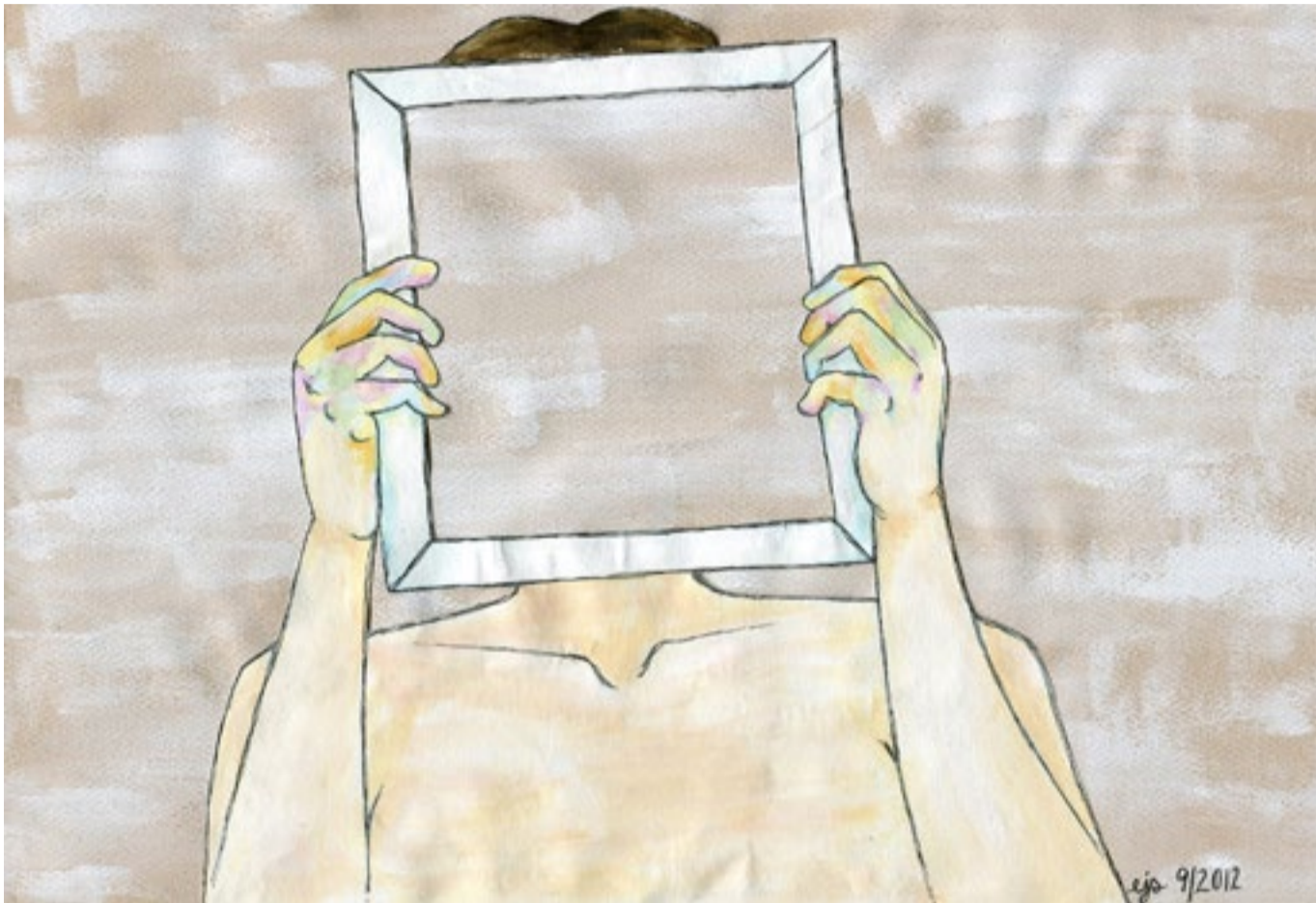
My theory as to why these changes were even possible borders on quackery at best and self-indulgent fantasy at worst. My theory is that I was born one of those annoying art people, and that I would have been one throughout my whole life if only my brain had had access to the right hormones. Now that I finally have the correct body chemistry, I'm getting stuff from my brain that I never did before. If this hypothesis sounds ridiculous, that's because it is. You should take it as seriously as my friend Damian took my fourth-grade claim that I was a mutant like the X-Men.

But I really don't care. Because what I know for certain is that not only did my body slowly become something I could live with, it also became a tool I could use to create things in a way I'd never been able to before. I won't pretend that I'm 100% happy with how my transition has turned out, or that I never feel disheartened by my height, and my skeletal structure, and my voice, and a thousand other tiny things. But in those dark moments I can be comforted by the thought that I'm finally able to do the things I always should have. That I'm shaping my body, my life, into what it is meant to be.

*I draw less than I used to, but it makes me happy that when I need to illustrate an essay or humor piece, I can pick up a pencil and sketch out something passable. This gift didn't come for free, though. I've noticed, since starting hormones, that I misspell words more often, and that I'm not as good at math as I used to be. That could be coincidence or that natural loss of school-taught knowledge, or it could be chemical. Still, we have spellcheck and calculators, but no equivalent tool to help those who have trouble drawing, so I think it's a fair trade.*

# Two Short Biographies

First published on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October, 2012.



The story of my life begins with my brother's death. His name was John, and he was five years old when he died in 1985. He caught measles, which developed into something more aggressive, something that the doctors didn't catch in time. His kidneys stopped working first, then his liver, and then everything else. Within the space of a week John went from healthy and happy to dependent on a machine. His brain shut down, and then the machine was shut off.

*More than once, I've asked my mother for the name of the specific disease that killed John, and whenever she's told me, I've forgotten it. As I've gotten older, the awkwardness around asking yet again for those details has increased, and I don't feel comfortable clarifying the exact terms with her. I know it started as measles, and I know it got worse, so that's what I say.*

*Except, that is, for when I've talked about this subject as part of my stand-up comedy. On stage, I've attributed John's death to chickenpox, because it's something I also had as a child, and I can draw parallels. This fudging of the truth is okay, I believe, because it still gets across the main point: that John caught something that many children do, and it is a tragedy that did not survive.*

The loss of John is a moment in my family's life that I didn't experience, so it distances me from them. But that loss is also the event that caused my own existence, because I was born to replace him.

My older sister was seven when John died. She wasn't present when my parents watched as the doctor switched off the life-support. Two years later, my parents began planning for a second son, and my sister was excited that she would have a sibling again. She was disappointed when I was born. She had been expecting a facsimile of John—someone nearer to her age. She didn't want a baby.

*This was always presented to me as funny story: my sister, annoyed, complaining that there was a dumb baby in the house when she'd been promised a new brother, someone to play with again. Of course, it's anything but funny. The idea of a small girl losing her sibling and then being given hope that her loss will be ameliorated, only to then be disappointed, provokes a deep sadness. But perhaps the framing of that sadness as fodder for a cute anecdote is part of the reason I've felt so comfortable talking about this whole tragedy as part of a comedy routine. Maybe I'm just bringing my family's gallows humor coping mechanism into the light.*

My parents gave me five names, and the middle of them was John, a name whose significance I wouldn't know until I was nine years old.

*For the record, my full name was Kyle David John Marriott Hayes. All*

*of us—me, my sisters, and John—were given five names, and I've never been given a satisfactory reason as to why, although I have asked. At least I can account for the provenance of one of mine.*

I remember the first time I was told that there had been another boy in the family. It didn't seem like something that could have actually occurred—death was something from the news. I actually said that. “But... that's what happens to people on TV.” No, it happened to us, too. But now we have you and things are all better.

A few years later, my aunt told me that she thought I was a reincarnation of John. That had certainly been my parents' intention. The idea was that our family was just a jigsaw puzzle that was missing a piece, and my parents felt pretty assured that they knew how to make a new one. It worked out for a while. I looked like him, or I at least looked similar enough to the few pictures that hung on the wall in whatever house we were renting that year. The chubby face, bright blond hair, toothy smile. I idolized our older sister. I shared his distaste of the dirt and fear of germs.

After my parents' divorce, I was the only one my dad wrote to, sending cards to “my little soldier.” I didn't write back. I was too young to understand the complexities of marital life, and so I bought into the narrative of my father as an evil man. I cut him out of my life.

*My father certainly was the bad guy, the villain, and I don't mean to say he was blameless, or that my mother was the true monster. He was the alcoholic, the abusive husband, but part of growing up has involved understanding that he was also a man broken by life, and by death. If you had to call anyone involved in my parents' divorce “the bad guy”, it would be him, but now I'm aware enough of life's shades of grey that I try not to think of anybody as evil.*

It's probably for the best that he didn't get to watch me grow up. As the years went by, I started to reject my body. When people ask me if I



“knew” about my true nature when I was a child, I say yes, although I’m not exactly sure. I do know that in second grade I brought home school pictures and took a ballpoint pen and covered the images of my face with ink and scratches. I do know that I told my mother that I did it because I didn’t look right.

That same year we went to see Mrs. Doubtfire, and I discovered that there was a precedent for the male-bodied to wear women’s clothes. The pictures my mum took that night, of me in an old wool dress, were a family joke for years.

*When I came out as transgender, memories like this—the dress, the ruined photograph—reassured me that I wasn't being crazy or making an impulse decision. There's a narrative in our culture, an idea that transgender people always know what they are, deep down, and I didn't recall having that lifelong awareness. But I did wear that dress, I did ruin that picture. I may not have always known, but that doesn't mean I was completely in the dark.*

*As time has passed, I've recalled more and more "signs" from my childhood and adolescence. Maybe the most obvious of them is my teenage devouring of young adult books, usually first-person novels about girls the same age as myself. I didn't have a female adolescence, but I managed to vicariously experience one via the California Diaries series, the Princess Diaries, and the entries in the Animorphs series that were narrated by Rachel and Cassie. Animorphs, in fact, was an especially good salve, as it also offered the titular morphing technology, the imagined escape from one body into another.*

*Gender dysphoria is a term for the discomfort a transgender person feels with their body. I am lucky enough to not feel especially dysphoric any more, as transition has made me happier with myself. But to this day, a surefire way to provoke dysphoria, for me, is to*

*think about fictional characters that can morph or shape-shift, and how jealous I am of them. Even the scenes in Harry Potter involving Polyjuice Potion, a concoction which enables one to temporarily become someone else, can make me upset.*

*I can take hormones for the rest of my life, get every surgery possible, and for all the progress I'll make in getting a "female body", it will still be a form field with an asterisk beside it. The promise of science fiction and fantasy tropes is the complete and indistinguishable change, and I used to lay in my bed at night and wish and pray for such a thing. I would beg for help from gods I didn't believe in, I would hope for the impossible, I would try and convince myself that maybe there was some magic solution out there.*

*There isn't, obviously. The closest we have is those fictional representations, and they will probably always make me remember—and perhaps re-experience—that desperation.*

Children at school always sensed that something about me wasn't quite right. After a decade of bullying I buckled under the stress and attempted to pick up my desk and throw it at a boy who was teasing me. The school-assigned psychologist asked if I knew why I was so often the target of attacks. I told him that I didn't feel like a boy. I was scared to say those words out loud, to admit that nothing about my internal experience seemed to be reflected by the gender I'd been given.

I needn't have worried. My nervousness stopped me from elaborating on my dysphoria, and the psychologist assumed that I was referring to my small size in relation to every other male-bodied person my age. Later, I was sent to an endocrinologist who informed me that I had a testosterone deficiency. I prayed that the steroids they used to start my puberty would make me feel right inside. Instead, I became even more alienated from myself: my shoulders were widening, my voice was growing deeper, and I could no longer pretend that I looked feminine. I cried the day I realized I would need

to start shaving my face.

*I was so proud to be put on those steroids, proud to finally be starting a process which most of my friends had practically completed by then. Looking back, my reluctance to say more to that psychologist, my acceptance of those pills, is possibly the biggest mistake I'll ever make. In recent years, there have been news stories about younger and younger children coming out as transgender and subsequently being put on puberty blockers. My body gave me those blockers for free, and I rejected them. I know I look pretty okay these days, and that male adolescence didn't do too much damage, but it did enough. I see it, and I know I could have avoided it.*

I've always hated the phrase “woman trapped inside a man's body” (I've never thought of myself as trapped—there are just some things about my body I don't happen to like), but it's a good platitude to distill the experience into. So that's what I said to my mother when I finally came out. It was the best way I could think of to say, “you're about to lose another son.”

All credit to her, my mom actually took the news well. She didn't yell at me, or try and convince me I was wrong. In fact, she didn't seem to have any emotional reaction at all. That has to be a kind of reaction of its own, right? Did I do something so terrible to my mother that she couldn't even face her feelings about it?

My sister once said that John was the first thing she thought of in the morning, and the last at night. She had always kept her personal and emotional life private from me, perhaps wary of again risking the kind of closeness that could cause her harm. I asked my mother if John lived in her thoughts the same way. She said, “Of course not.” Denial is probably something she's lived with for a long time.

*Maybe my family's reliance on denial (which I'm aware is hardly a unique trait) is the reason none of my relatives—close or otherwise—*

*have talked to me about these essays. I know they've read them, but I've gotten no feedback, neither praise nor complaint. There's plenty we don't talk about, so my writing is just another topic of conversation to avoid.*

I feel so strange writing about all this. It feels like a story that isn't mine to tell. I wasn't there when my parents and sister lost somebody they loved—it's an event that belongs to them. I never felt like I could discuss the pressures of having to live up to John's memory, because that seemed like complaining about the fallout while in the company of those who survived the blast.

I've only ever been able to talk about these issues under the guise of performance, as part of my stand-up comedy material. I've been callous about the subject, referring to my mum's ".000 batting average when it comes to raising sons," but that joke unjustly shifts blame from myself. The simple truth is that I couldn't be a son or a brother or a nephew to the people that needed me to.

In my darkest moments I feel like I've failed utterly at the one task life actually gave me. My family asked one thing of me: be this person. And I couldn't do it. I managed it for nineteen years, and then just couldn't make it any longer.

Wallowing in the guilt of that failure is self-indulgent, though. And the fact is that the suicide rates for transgender individuals are staggering, and the metaphoric death of a son is surely better than the literal. I did not ask to be born "trapped in the wrong body" any more than I asked to be the replacement for a child I never met. When I'm not struggling with those darkest moments, I like to think that I've made choices that are best for all involved.

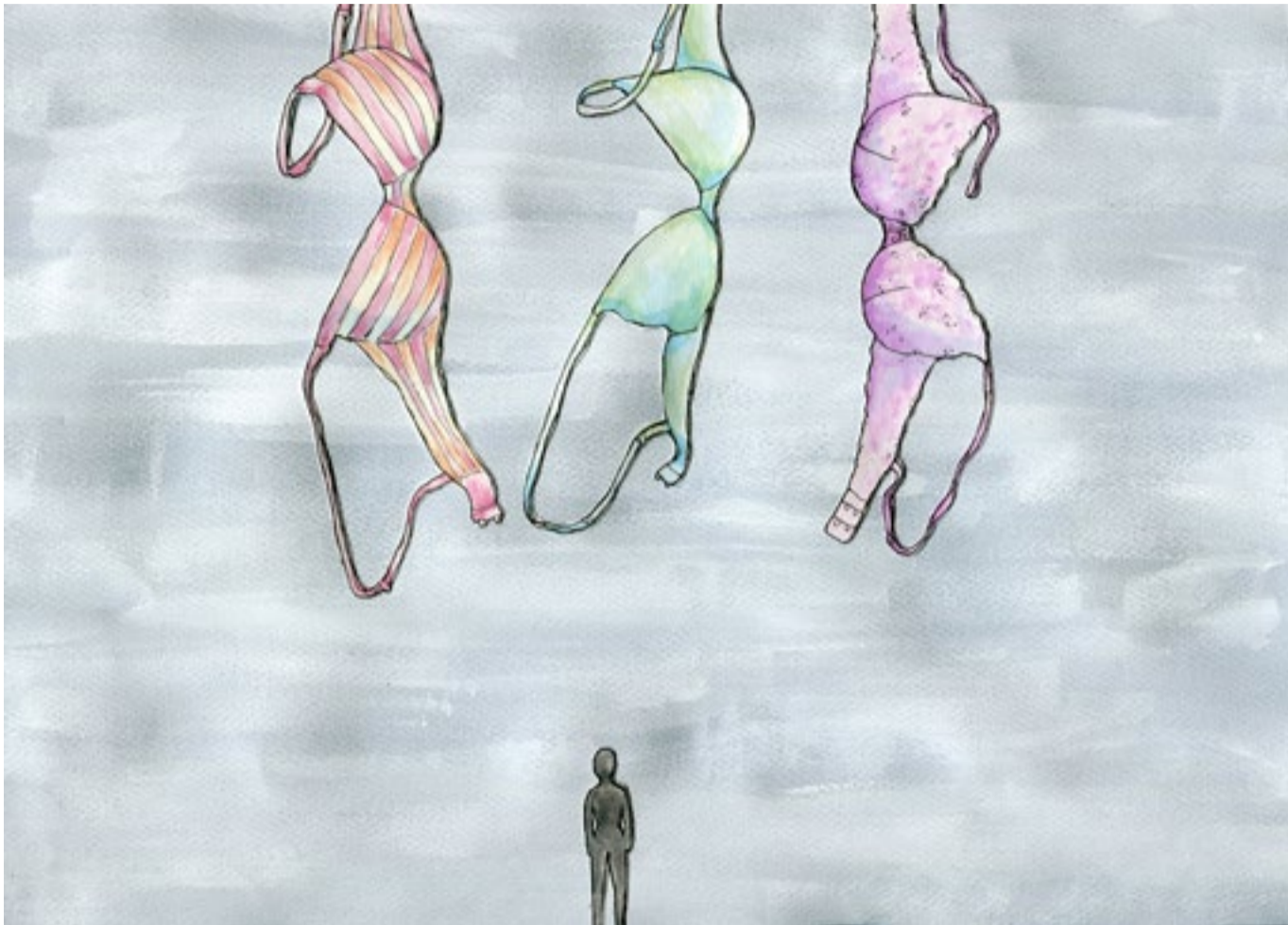
Sometimes I mentally zoom out, and treat this all like a simple story. Just pronouns and verbs. He was born and he lived and he got sick and he

died. I was born and I was sick and then I died and then I lived.

*In the moments when my sense of humor is at its darkest, I think that betraying my family is the ultimate emulation of John. After all, he abandoned them, too—I'm just following in his footsteps by taking another male Hayes child away from our parents. Like I said, that's some pretty dark humor, and it's not something I believe. But it is nice to think that although John's death made my transition probably more painful than it otherwise might have been, at least he gave me precedent. He taught my mother and my sister how to lose someone they loved.*

# Say Yes To The Dress

First published on the 28<sup>th</sup> of November, 2013



When I told my family, “I’m not a cross-dresser, women’s clothes just fit me better,” I knew they would believe the lie. Because I believed it too.

I’d always struggled with finding men’s fashions that fit me and made me look good. Since childhood I’d been both short and thin. School uniforms were always too big, and hung on my frame like elephant skin on a scarecrow (a simile that sounds less poetic when it’s being whined by a twelve-year-old boy on a shop floor). Even in my final years of high school, when I’d begun taking testosterone pills to kick-start puberty, I had trouble catching up to my peers (although the rages I would fly into thanks to the medication’s side-effects definitely established me as a cool person they should hang out with).

I finished out my education still rake-thin, and when the rules changed and we were allowed to wear our own clothes to class, I had to choose

between buying clothes that fit but were made for 10 year olds, or clothes that were age-appropriate but made me look like a child playing dress-up.

*I still remember spending a decent chunk of money on a blazer that—despite being a “small”—was far too big for me, and hoping that soon I'd grow into it. That never happened, but I resigned myself to wearing it anyway, the sleeves going past my arms, and my tiny shoulders mocked by preposterous pads. It was a great jacket—brown, pinstriped, with multicolor paint splotches around the front bottom-left pocket, and I wish I'd been able to wear it well. I think that even now, after I've filled out and grown taller, it would still dwarf me.*

After high school ended, I resolved to take charge of my fashion life. In fact, I wanted to re-define my entire life in general. School had never been fun for me, but I felt like university could be a fresh start. Rather than work on my self-esteem, work ethic, or social skills, though, I thought I'd start with something more surface-level. I was sure a change in my appearance would magically summon up a better existence.

*That's a feeling that's never left me. I still get the urge to dye my hair in order to create a new personality. On my good days, I use my past experience to remember that that won't work. On my bad days... Well, my hair has been through some hard times, let's put it that way.*

As soon as I received my student loan, I headed for the mall, determined to spend as much money as necessary to make myself look good. I visited all the stores I'd seen other guys my age buying clothes at, stores like Burton, Top Man, and Diesel. I even managed to find some clothes that fit me okay (mostly thanks to the popularity of skinny jeans, which fit like regular pants on my pipe-cleaner legs).

I still didn't feel comfortable, though. I'd hoped that getting clothes that looked good would make me feel like I looked good too. Instead, I felt like I was wearing someone else's outfits, like I was still playing dress-up. I

was convinced that I still looked awkward and out of place. My new clothes weren't the camouflage I wished for.

*A year before the events of this piece, I'd attended another university for three weeks before dropping out and wasting the rest of the year. A huge part of my decision to leave was arriving on campus, seeing everyone else and feeling like they fit in and looked the part, but that I was just wearing a costume. It was classic imposter syndrome, but with an added dash of gender dysphoria, although I didn't know it at the time. I just knew that other people seemed like they belonged, and I didn't even belong in my outfit.*

I was frustrated, so I started to indulge memories of the only times in my life when I felt like I belonged in the clothes I was wearing. On several afternoons during my teenage years I'd borrowed my younger sister's clothes and tried them on. I wore her jeans, her shirts, and even messed around a little with her make-up, never understanding what I was doing. I had dismissed those experiences as just teenage experimentation. But now there was a part of me that wondered if there was something more to what I'd been doing?

*I still haven't talked to my younger sister about my phase of wearing her clothes, and I think I owe her an apology. It's a bit awkward to bring up, though, as you can probably imagine. "Hey, did you ever notice that your t-shirts were a bit stretched-out for no reason?"*

My dorm room was miles away from my sister's wardrobe, of course, so there weren't any female clothes easily available for me to borrow and try on. If I wanted to take a closer look at how cross-dressing made me feel, I'd have to pony up the cash and buy myself something pretty.

I tried to ignore my rapidly diminishing student loan balance, and headed back to the mall. I browsed the women's section of the department store nervous and worried, convinced that everybody around me knew that



I was a creepy pervert who wanted to prance around in women's knickers. I mentally prepared a story about buying gifts for a girlfriend, but I tried to choose clothes that looked like they'd work on my body. I picked up a couple of pairs of jeans, a few tops, and some ballet flats. I raced back to my room, eager to indulge myself with a fashion show.

I stayed up all night mixing and matching the few items I'd purchased. I looked okay, I thought, but it wasn't the outfits I was focused on. It was how I felt. I was a little embarrassed that I looked like the stereotypical "man in a dress," but that didn't stop me from feeling like I was finally presenting myself the way I'd been meant to my whole life. I didn't want to ever go back to menswear, but I knew that that would mean wearing women's attire in public.

I psyched myself up and managed to run a test case, going to a corner store wearing a new pink blouse, deflecting any weird looks with a smirk. Inside I was terrified, but I tried to project an air of I-know-something-you-don't. The next day I went to class in that same blouse, trying to maintain that false confidence.

*Why pink? Why something so ostentatious? There are plenty of women's clothes that would blend pretty well into a guy's outfit, especially if I'd stuck to more neutral colors. I should probably have picked something more subtle, and eased into cross-dressing more gently. But I dove into the deep-end, and I've been swimming there ever since.*

My friends and fellow students were all members of the comedy program I was studying, so to them I passed off my new look as an Eddie Izzard-like transgression of societal norms, a strange comedic bit that they could respect for its daring nature (the class in general was filled with misfits doing weird stuff). My family was unsurprised by what they wrote off as just another in a long line of attention-seeking stunts on my part. (I'm pretty sure they figured it was less embarrassing than my obsession with unicycles.)

For a while, that was the new normal. I'd wear a couple of items of women's clothing as part of my outfit and the people who knew me would just make a tiny joke of it, if they even mentioned it at all. When I was by myself, of course, I spent a fair amount of time figuring out just why I felt so good in my new clothes. I devoted days to trans-themed websites and message boards, borrowed books from the university library, and wrote drafts of blog posts that were quickly deleted. I came to the conclusion that I must be a transvestite. I'd always thought those people were gross, but I was apparently one of them, so maybe they weren't so gross after all.

*I mentioned Eddie Izzard, and I really cannot overstate his importance in my acceptance of my own—at the time—cross-dressing. Izzard owns his clothing choices so earnestly, and expects others to not have a problem with it, that I was able to come to terms with the part of myself that was like him. I wasn't normal, but neither was he, and he seemed to be doing just fine.*

I started expanding the range of my new appearance. I dyed my hair platinum blonde and pierced my ears, nose, and bellybutton. I further experimented with make-up, showing up to class wearing lip-gloss and badly applied eye shadow. I was blurring the lines enough that the people around me felt awkward when they said my name or referred to me as "he." Clearly, I was more than just a transvestite, more than a straight-up cross-dresser, even. I was a little muddled on those terms, but I knew that those words were for people who either didn't want to present entirely as the opposite gender, or who only wanted to for short periods of time. I didn't want anything about this to be temporary. I wanted my new look to be my life.

*The bellybutton and nose piercings have gone, despite my desire for them to be a permanent part of my self-expression. The nose stud was too close to a nerve and made my eye water all the time, and I decided the bellybutton piercing didn't suit my personal style.*

I resolved to run another experiment. I would try as hard as I could to make myself look like a girl from head to toe. I wouldn't just apply a couple types of make-up and mix a skirt with one of my high-school-era sweaters. I'd put on a full face and wear an entire outfit of women's clothing. I needed to see if this was something I really wanted.

I'd have to fake some breasts, of course, which meant buying a bra. I definitely wasn't confident enough to get a fitting (and I worried that even asking for one would be grounds for police action), so I tried to gauge the sizes by sight and picked out a beige B-cup. I read on the internet that pantyhose filled with millet seed made for good bra-stuffers, and I researched how to duct-tape some of the looser skin on my chest to gather near the top of the brassiere and give the illusion of cleavage (which, yes, led to a frantic late night Google search of "duct tape solvent").

*There are many, many guides available on the Internet for those who want to gather up the flesh around their pectorals and fake some tits. It is extremely painful to stretch and tape skin like that, but it does get results. With the millet inserts providing the lower half of the cup, and my real skin moved up to the top, I had a convincing pair of breasts. So long as I didn't run, or jump, or do anything else that would dislodge the precarious arrangement or tear the tape from my skin.*

I timed my full-outfit trial to coincide with a stand-up comedy performance, so that if anybody asked what I was doing I could say it was all part of a character piece. I picked a temporary name for myself and roped my comedian buddies into using it for the evening, along with female pronouns. I spent my first night as a girl. It felt fantastic. And, considering that so many thing about me at that moment were fake—my nails, my eyelashes, my tits, to name a few—I felt completely natural.

*That was one of my first ever stand-up performances, and it was unlike anything I've done since. I set up a projector and gave a*

*humorous slideshow presentation, full of bad Photoshops and fake graphs. Since then, I've stuck to the traditional spoken word format. Restricting oneself to performances in venues with a full A/V setup is counterproductive at best.*

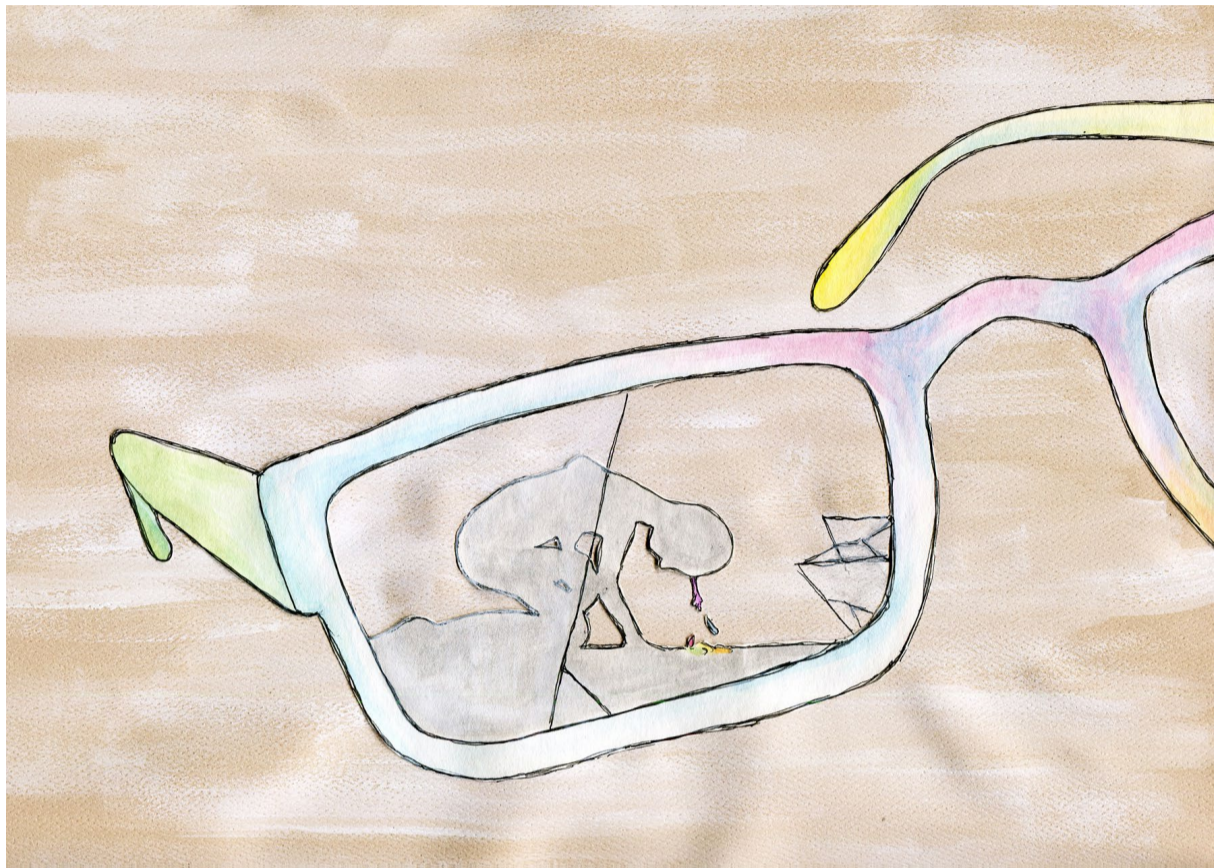
I was scared, though, because as soon as I figured out what I was—a transgender woman—I knew how difficult the path ahead would be: embarrassment, social alienation, dozens of medical and therapy appointments, hormones, and surgery. But before all that, I'd have to go back to my family and take back my lie.

“Remember when I said women’s clothes just fit me better? Well, that was way more true than I thought.”

*"PS. I'm going to throw away all those 'guy clothes' I bought with my student loan money." Ugh, way to make sound financial choices, Past-Avery.*

# First Night Out

First published on the 1<sup>st</sup> of February, 2013



*When I wrote this piece, I wanted to experiment a little with the form of personal essays like this. Each of the four previous pieces had been written in the past tense, as is usual for a retrospective piece of writing, and I was worried that I was becoming complacent in that.*

*I also hoped that the use of present tense in this essay would make the story more immersive and compelling. I received messages from people telling me that the story had emotionally affected them, but it's hard for me to know how much of that effect was down to the "immersiveness" I hoped for, and how much is inherent in the essay's subject.*

*I'm still proud of making the formal change work.*

My main concern is with my glasses, because I'm materialistic, even in the face of danger, and these are the most expensive glasses I've ever owned.

I'm not quite sure why my head hurts, but I know that the reason my vision is blurry is because my brand-new frames are in the middle of the road. I'm so busy worrying about scratches on the lenses that I barely miss the second punch. But I do, and it whooshes past my head as I finally activate the reflexes that would've really come in handy ten seconds ago.

*As a lifelong fan of comic books, I've always half-hoped that a truly dangerous situation would activate some latent power or ability within me. It's not something I actively invested in as realistic, but it was enough of a notion that it became something I was disabused of by my experience of getting assaulted. I couldn't even dodge a punch, let alone shoot lasers from my eyes.*

An hour earlier, I'm in my dorm room. Luke, the only person in my class who enjoys my company, has invited me to a night of drinking with some other students at my university in Southampton, England. I'm nervous because it's going to be my first night out as a woman. Or as somebody trying to be a woman. Or as a woman in a man trying to look like a woman who's been a woman all along. It's the very early days of the transition, and I'm still not sure of some things.

I am sure that I'm annoyed with my hair. My widow's peak used to bug me as a guy, but now it makes me downright terrified. I look at it and see a signifier that I am not female, not "really." I'm hypercritical of anything about my body that doesn't conform to a platonic idea of femininity. My outfit for tonight: a bulky belt to widen my barely-there hips; ballet flats to minimize my height; a billowy shirt that (hopefully) distracts from what I feel are the shoulders of Atlas.

*I still hate my widow's peak, and worry that it's less "peak" and more "receding hairline". I always make sure to inform hairdressers that I'm looking for haircuts that will minimize it, and I've become less concerned with the daily effect it has on my appearance. Still, if I woke up tomorrow with a million dollars, maybe I'd try and do*

*something about it.*

Luke is picking me up and telling me I look nice, because he's a good guy. A conservative assessment of my look might be "convincing enough," if you buy into the idea that I need to "convince" anyone. (Which you shouldn't, because that reinforces the stereotype of transgender women "tricking" people. Except my goal is always to trick you. I want to utterly hide my Y-chromosome, and that involves a sophisticated level of illusion. Sorry.)

*Discussing the stereotype of the deceptive transwoman in this way is-to use a word that is rapidly getting diluted through overuse-problematic. It's hard to avoid reinforcing the stereotype while, at the same time, being honest. In those early days, I did feel like I was deceiving people, or at least committing a lie of omission. I felt like I should be telling people I was "a woman, but..." instead of just a woman.*

We're walking to the pub. Everyone will be celebrating the completion and handing-in of a difficult essay that I have yet to even begin. Tomorrow I'll go speak to the professor and leverage my "troubles," and then, after several deadline extensions, give him a two-page polemic on why I think we should be allowed to cite Wikipedia in academic works. If you're the type of person who can brave the embarrassment of coming out as transgender, you're the type of person who can believe she's going to blow her teacher's mind with eight hundred double-spaced words.

*I have dropped out of higher education institutions three times. I am not good at structuralized academic pursuits.*

None of that gusto is with me as Luke and I walk up Southampton High Street to our destination. I'm freezing, because I'm wearing a thin jacket out of fear that a bulky one may obscure the presentation of my frame that I spent so much time on. I'm convinced that a puffy coat will immediately signal to the masses that I am man and must be destroyed.

Luke and I are talking about why I should, according to him, start listening to Russell Brand's radio show. I guess we are talking pretty loudly, because I attract the attention of a group of youths loitering at a bus stop.

*Luke and I had a show on the university's radio station, and Luke wanted our show to be more like Brand's. To say that we failed would be an understatement, but we had fun, I think, when we weren't getting in trouble for ill-considered "jokes".*

One of them calls out, "Oi! Mate! What the hell are you wearing?"

*To this day, that's the worst thing I've heard yelled at me in the street, although one time a group of teenagers pointed at me and laughed after one of them shouted, "what the fuck is that?", which is a close runner-up.*

I turn, see him pointing at me, and realize that I am the mate of whom he speaks, and that he has noticed the huge disparity between my deep voice and my ladies' garb. I've not learned to shift my pitch yet (I would argue that I never will, and that my upcoming emigration to the Americas is motivated by a desire to live in a place where my accent masks my voice), and so the playful banter with my friend has broadcast to everyone around that I would be a good target for some hooliganing.

*I still feel like my voice hasn't changed much since I came out, and it amazes me that people aren't constantly telling me I sound like a man. My girlfriend and friends all tell me I sound fine. I know that my voice could be much deeper, and that I'm comparatively lucky, but I still cringe when listening to recordings of myself performing stand-up or watch back a video I've made.*

I yell back, "What are you, twelve?" because I'm in a comedy program and think that a witty rejoinder will shut down even the angriest of hecklers,



on-stage or off. It doesn't work, but I don't know that yet. I turn away, confident that I've won, and a couple of moments later I get punched in the head by this boy. This adolescent. This child.

So I'm thinking about my glasses, and I'm lucky enough to miss that second punch. I hear a whoosh past my ear and think, "Yes, my mutant powers have kicked in and I have spider-sense!" (Ignore the fact that Spider-Man isn't a mutant. Yes, I know.) Luke has now entered the fray and is pushing the boy (a boy, a little boy) away from me and asking him (in very strong language) what his problem is.

*See, I wasn't lying about the comic book stuff.*

There's a part of me that's thinking about that single Tae Kwon Do class I took four years ago, and I'm considering slamming that infant (practically an infant, I could definitely beat up an infant) against a wall and punching him until I feel satisfaction. But there's another part of me that just wants to get to the pub, that thinks fighting someone wouldn't be very ladylike, that thinks maybe it wouldn't be the best course of action to escalate things by whaling on a minor.

*Also, I probably wouldn't win, single martial arts class or no.*

I shout at Luke that we should just leave. We get called faggots as we walk away, but that's hardly a new experience for either of us (see: Luke's aforementioned Russell Brand fixation), and I'm not really thinking about that so much as I'm focusing on the throbbing on my upper-forehead. It's right in the corner of my widow's peak, actually. I'm feeling around there and I think there's a lump, as well as some blood.

Things are looking up, though, because now we get to arrive at the pub with a story, and whenever a bunch of comics gather together, he (or she, but come on, statistically we know that it's a he) with the freshest and most exciting story gets all the attention. And so for a couple of minutes after we

walk in I get to hold court, until attention shifts to Luke (the defender of the weak, and thus the star of the tale) and I am handed some ice in a napkin by a Scottish girl who tells me that this is “the sort of thing you have to expect, really.” Really?

*It seems, from the way I've written it, that it was some random Scottish girl who handed me the ice, and it's odd that I've singled out her nationality. The girl was a fellow student in the comedy program, and was a friend of mine, and I wanted to avoid using her name. I could have just gone with a fake name, instead of making her seem like a stranger, and I'm not sure why I didn't. Residual passive-aggression, even though she'll likely never read this piece?*

She's right, of course. The statistics for violence against transgender people are frightening, and there's a Transgender Day of Remembrance that happens every year in November to keep track of our losses against a world that fears and hates us. But this is the first time I've had to actually live the discrimination in an empirical way, and it's leaving me shaken.

Not too shaken to go out and party, though. By which I mean: follow the group to various clubs and bars; actively hate the loud noise and crowds of sweaty, drunk idiots; go home early in the drizzling rain accompanied by Luke, who's annoyed that he had to quit before closing time, but who most certainly will not let me walk home alone.

*I don't like parties or clubs or drinking or fun. I am anti-social, or what the Internet would term "introspective" in an effort to lionize the standard tendency of some people to not especially enjoy the company of others.*

When I get home (safely, thanks to Luke) I'm more worried about how quickly the lump (and subsequent bruise) will go away than about anything else, like how I'm going to have the confidence to go outside ever again. And that shallow concern helps me ignore the larger fears my encounter

should have provoked. The next day I wake up and get dressed and venture into the world with no problems, physical or mental. I figure that I must not mind that much. It even feels a little nice to have my hate-crime all done and accounted for. I think I'm safe now, and I put the whole experience behind me. For a while.

*"My hate crime", as if the statistics mean that every trans person is due a negative encounter, and that once it's out of the way you can live the rest of your life worry-free. A complete misreading of statistics, obviously, but I already told you that I'm bad at math.*

Months later, I'm walking back to my dorm room with my girlfriend, Abby. I'm wearing a large coat she bought me in New York, and yes—my worries about big outerwear are about to be confirmed. We're talking, as lovers do, but the conversation halts as we get closer to a seedy pub near campus. There are three older men hanging out front, smoking, and they leer at us as we approach.

There's no violence this time. Not even a word spoken. But they each spit at my feet as I pass them. And I get home, take off that damn coat, tuck myself up in bed, and proceed to relive each *ptooie* over and over for the next week. Suddenly I'm scared to leave my room, barely able to work up the courage to go downstairs to buy food from the in-building market that will keep me alive for the next three months as I dive deep into agoraphobia.

*Abby was with me for the majority of those three months, on vacation from Albany, and I ruined her visit for the both of us. We are no longer together, but I'm still grateful for the patience and empathy she showed during that time. She deserved much better, and I was lucky to have someone who could take care of me.*

I'm forced back into the outside world by my ejection from the university program (due to non-attendance of classes, obviously) and revocation of eligibility for student housing. I have to leave the nest I've built

myself in my room. It's terrifying outside, and I'm skittish and nervous and my eyes dart around, looking for danger. I can't tell if I'm overreacting or if this is how I'm meant to live from now on, constantly afraid, always watching.

*Does this sound like I was suddenly homeless and living on the streets? I wasn't—I went home, back to my family's house in the small town I grew up in. I slept on an air mattress behind the couch. My mother's tolerance for my difficulty going outside was not as high as Abby's, but she allowed me time to heal all the same.*

I want to be a strong, brave person, and refuse to give into the anxiety and fear that I feel when I think about strangers being able to guess at my past. But I make negotiations with the bigoted every single day, when I put on makeup before a short trip to the convenience store, or when I decide that the number one priority when buying clothes is how feminine they make me look.

I wish there was a nice message to this piece, something about being strong and remaining true to yourself in the face of adversity. But the truth is that when I chose to change gender I did so in a time when there were some who hated me for it. I have to make concessions to those people, and if it keeps me alive then I will do so gladly.

If a boy punches someone out of hatred, he's definitely a villain. But that doesn't mean that the person he punches is a hero.

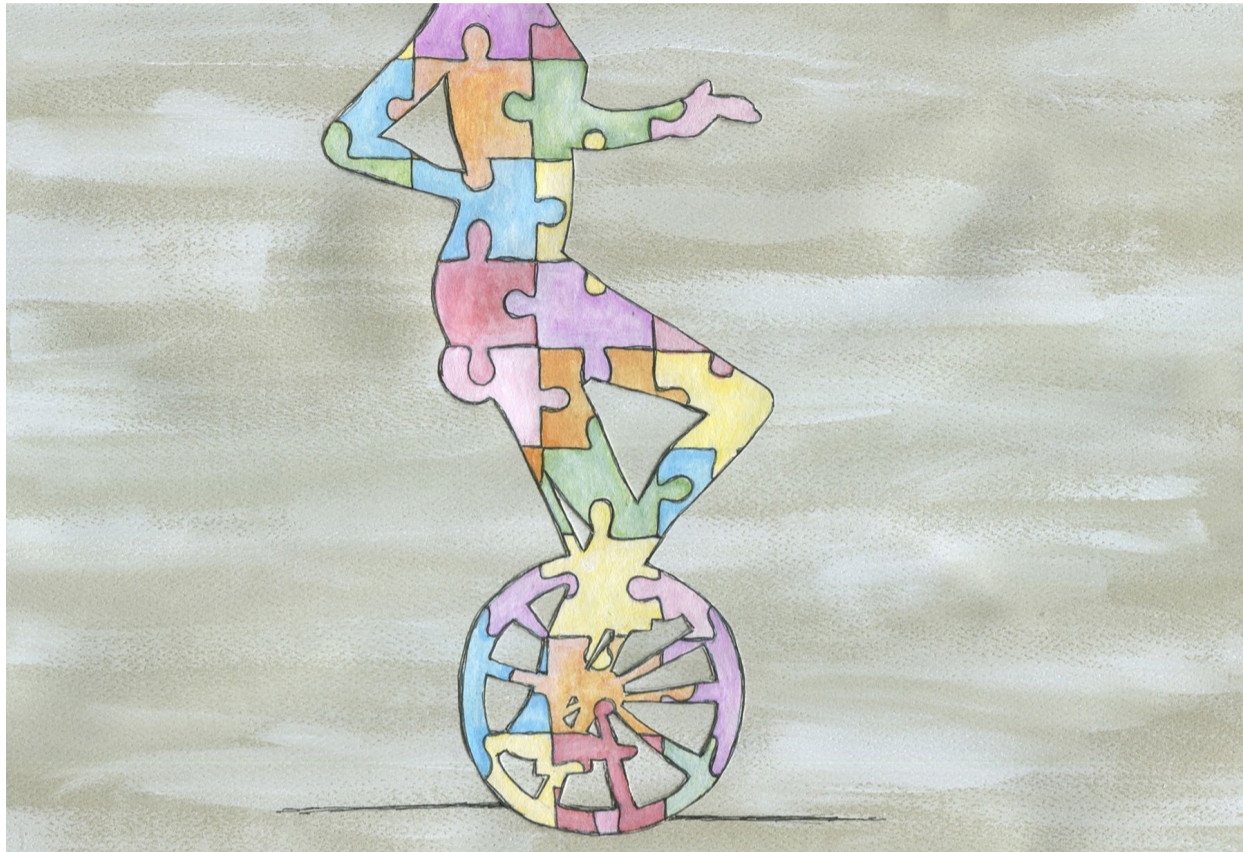
*It's been a year since I wrote this piece, and four years since the incident occurred. I still struggle with anxiety and agoraphobia, in part because it's difficult to distinguish between the latter and my natural inclination to stay indoors with a good book (or, realistically, the Internet) rather than do something in the outside world.*

*I'm on medication which helps combat the anxiety, and I make an effort to remind myself that I pass much better these days, that I will*

*not get "clocked" in the short journey to my corner store, or bus ride to the bank. Some days are easier than others. Some days, I even skip make-up, although that might be more out of laziness than personal growth or inner strength.*

# Everything Else

First published on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February, 2013



There are so many things about me that aren't the fact that I'm a transgender woman. I haven't talked about them so far in this series because, obviously, this series is about my experiences as a person becoming a new person. To talk about anything else would be beside the point.

*I worry, sometimes, that I might become pigeonholed as just a transgender writer, and that my work on things like these essays only serves to further establish that as my 'thing'. I do talk about trans issues and my personal experiences a lot, but that's by no means all I ever want to be known for. This piece was definitely an attempt to ameliorate that; I wanted to take a break in the middle of the series to say, "hey, I know that there's more to me than this."*

*At the same time, this essay is still part of a series on transgender experience, and so it needed to speak to that. My hope is that by talking about everything around that side of my identity, I*

*communicated something with the negative space.*

I'd wager that success in transition, in being a transgender person, involves a lot of simply being able to forget that you're transgendered at all. It's only natural to think so much about my gender identity—something which was burrowed away in my mind for so long and is finally on the surface and deserving of attention. But every second I spend thinking about how much this sucks is time I should spend living the life that was saved by my decision to embark on this change at all. Because that's what somebody is telling you when they say they have to transition. You change so that you can keep on living. It seems pointless to me to keep living only thinking about that change.

There are people who think that the only thing I am is trans. Medical professionals have been eager to attribute every ailment I suffer from, mental or physical, to my transition. They're always especially interested in the hormones I take, and are all too eager to blame those wonderful blue pills for everything from depression to stomach pains.

*I recently started new medication for my bipolar disorder, and during a follow-up appointment a few weeks into the prescription my blood pressure tested slightly higher than usual. The doctor I saw that day was not my regular GP, but she had read all my notes, so I was surprised when she started talking about taking me off estrogen to bring my blood pressure down.*

*I've been on hormones for five years, with regular checks and blood tests indicating no problems. Surely if there's an anomaly in my health after introducing a new medicine—like the recently-introduced bipolar medication—to my system, it is that new medicine which should be under suspicion? And yet I was in the position of defending the pills I need to help keep my body the way I like it. It was a little humiliating, and very dispiriting.*

*I saw my regular doctor two weeks later, and although my blood pressure had not dropped from that slightly higher level, she wasn't concerned about it at all, as it was still within the normal range. I was relieved to not have to worry about the estrogen prescription being stopped, but incidents like this are always in the back of my mind when I think about my healthcare needs. It's an added pressure on top of the regular hassle of medical care.*

I can understand why. When you're a doctor and you're presented with a person who is sick, you have to start looking for things that make them different from the Platonic ideal of the non-sick person. I don't attribute any malice to, say, the physician who thought my eczema would go away if I stopped taking estrogen. He was just doing his job, as frustrating as that can be for me.

Equally frustrating is the conversation I'm required to have with every new acquaintance, friend, or colleague who Googles me. I say *the* conversation because there's usually very little variation. I feel like I'm doing a little good in the world by acting as an educator on transgender matters, but nobody likes answering the same questions all the time. *When did you know? Is that your real name? Have you had the surgery? Do you think you should grow your hair out? Isn't it bad for you to take these pills? Couldn't you just be gay?*

*A wonderful thing about publishing these essays on the Internet is that anybody who does Google me will find them, and have easy access to the answers to most of the usual questions.*

I mean there's a lot of other stuff about me that we can talk about, and most of those other subjects don't involve picturing my genitals. But again, I understand. We're curious people, and we want to hear each other's stories. It's inconceivable to new friends that the rest of my life could be anything other than backstory.



*Wow, this paragraph is a harsh judgment on humanity! Who was I hanging out with when I wrote this? I have many friends who couldn't care less that I'm transgender, and I try not to approach new relationships with bitter pre-judgment.*

Even if every doctor in the world and every new person I meet could be convinced to ignore my trans-ness, though, it'd still occupy my thoughts every time I have to deal with my body. I haven't had sexual reassignment surgery yet, so there are daily tasks that start silent conversations with myself, conversations focused on how odd my body looks, how much it doesn't make sense to me, and how much it intrudes on my life. I can't even buy a pair of jeans without having to consider the mess below my waist. As much as I try and convince myself that there's more to me than my gender identity, my physical form refutes that whenever it can.

I can't control that, right now. But I can control this essay. I can make it about something else.

*A bit of a trick, that line, because the majority of this piece is about the fact that I'm transgender. I'm having the cake, and I'm eating it too, and then I'm regretting eating it because of the flour content (that joke will make sense in a few sentences.)*

I'm Avery. I'm 24 years old. I have brown hair and blue eyes. I'm wrestling with the fact that I love one of my cats more than the others. That doesn't feel fair.

*I still love him, my little Escher boy, the most, and I no longer feel bad about it. The heart wants what the heart wants, guys.*

I'm trying to get up the courage to ride my unicycle in the city, even though I'm scared of getting hit by a car. I don't like to wear a helmet because I'm vain about that brown hair I previously mentioned. I know I should work past that and save my life by wearing headgear because

somebody has to be alive to take care of the kitties.

*I bring up my unicycle hobby in way too many of these essays. One essay is entirely about unicycling. Was I secretly writing a series about life with one wheel?*

I'm transitioning away from a largely wheat-based diet, even though wheat is delicious, because it makes me too sleepy. So I'm trying to eat more fruit, but I'm finding that to be torture. Seriously, the first bite of an apple feels fine, but then it's like there's a thousand bites to go. Pizza seems easier, guys.

*Ha-ha, this did not end up happening. I felt so, so much better when I was wheat-free, but I couldn't keep it up. Most of my diet is wheat right now, and the thing I eat most is a British cereal called Weetabix, which is literally a block of wheat. Wheat is delicious, and I just can't quit it, even though I definitely should.*

I haven't read a whole book in a while. I keep my apartment pretty clean, although not clean enough for visitors. I like to be called mean names in intimate moments. I look good in hats (except helmets, as I mentioned). I am never happy with anything I do, but I'm working on that. I'm not happy with my progress. I like washing dishes, but I forget that fact whenever I'm not washing dishes.

*I feel the same way about writing as I do about dishes. Love it in the moment, hate it the rest of the time. I need to employ someone to keep tricking me into writing. And washing up, I guess.*

I'm helping my girlfriend quit smoking.

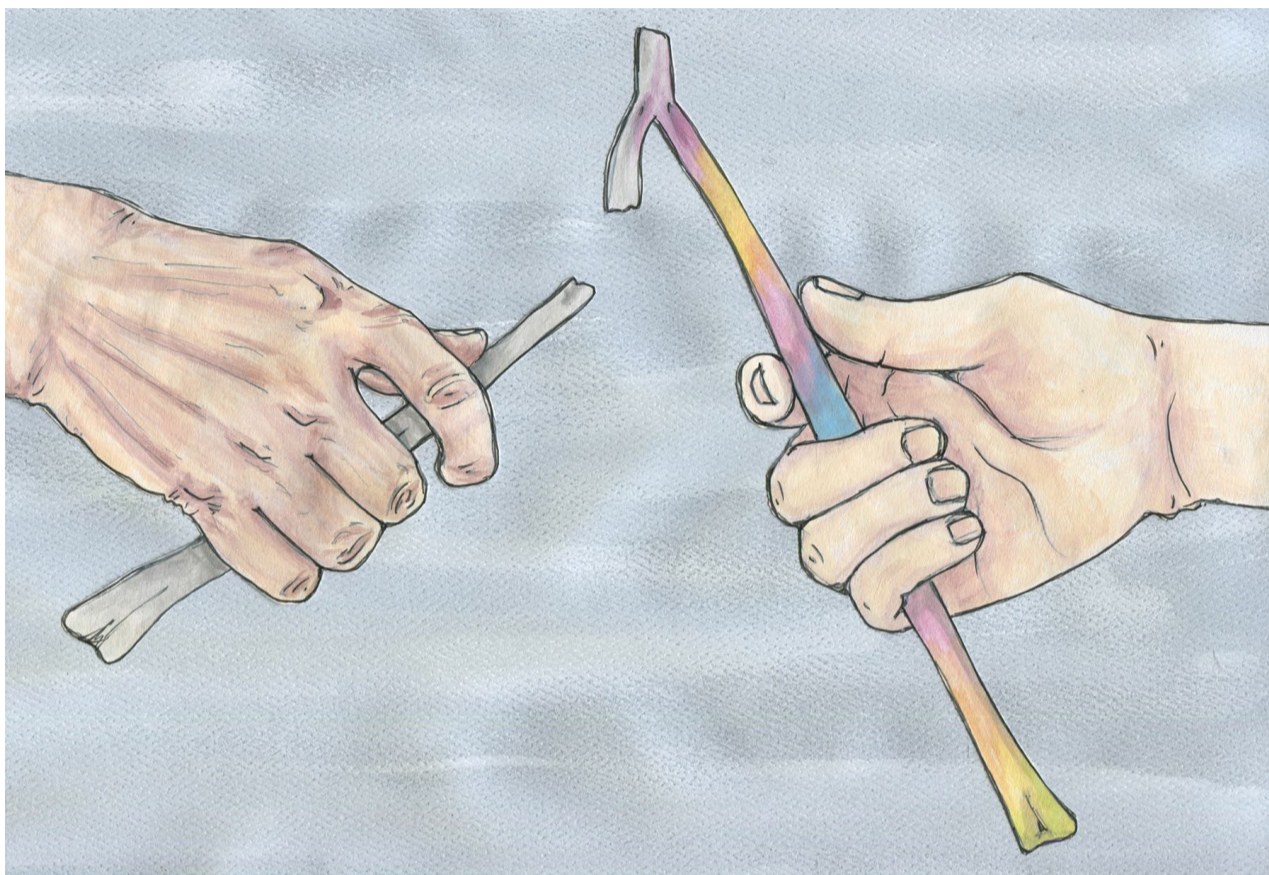
*Read: trying to guilt her into quitting smoking.*

Oh, and I used to be a boy. But that's not important.

*That's a pretty flip kicker to the essay, considering that the fact that I used to be a boy has meant I've been locked up in a male prison, among other things. So it is kind-of important. But I understand your sentiment, past-Avery.*

# Some Luck

First published on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May, 2013



*The third formal experiment in a row. This piece is built around the repetition of the phrase, "You're so lucky." When I was writing this essay, I tried to think of every way that phrase could be said, and every perspective from which it could be said.*

“You’re so lucky,” she said. I was seated between two women in the reception area of the Gender Identity Clinic in London. Each of us was there for a biannual appointment with the doctor assigned to us. No matter how far along you are in the process, you have to come to the clinic presenting as your desired gender as a show of commitment. It’s a cruel expectation for some people, making their trip to and from the clinic an exercise in embarrassment, but it meant that the three of us knew we were each shooting for the same hoop.

*I’m grateful that England has clinic set up especially for helping*

*transgender patients, and that they've been going for so long, and have helped so many people. The process is pretty streamlined by now, although overwhelmed (as so much of the British medical system is). That said, they lost my blood work after my second appointment, delaying my starting estrogen by six months, and I'm still a bit annoyed about that.*

“You’re so lucky,” she said, and I didn’t need to ask why. I was barely twenty years old at the time, fresh-faced and with a young body that would guzzle up female hormones and adjust itself well to a new gender. But the other two women in line were older—late forties, early fifties—and their bodies would not be so accommodating. They’d spend the rest of their new lives dealing with five o’clock shadow, rough skin, and—worst of all—the regret of a half a century’s worth of shame, secrecy, and waiting.

I was lucky, because I was born into a time when I could come out as transgender and make the transition while I was still barely born at all. They were unlucky, because they’d never really be able to make themselves into the women they felt like inside, not to their satisfaction. I didn’t know what to say back to her. I didn’t know how to alleviate the guilt I was feeling right then. Probably, it’s not something I deserve to feel okay about.

*Reading this back, it seems judgmental. Maybe they would be able to be happy with themselves, who am I to guess? But I have some idea, from reading the hundreds of pages written over the years by older transwomen and published in books or on the Internet, that as one gets older, transition provides diminishing returns.*

*So much discussion around what it’s like to be transgender is downbeat, because although we have come far in how we are able to deal with mismatched bodies and minds, there is still a level of satisfaction yet to be reached.*

It seems like every other week I read an article about someone coming

out as transgender. If I happen to miss these articles when they first come out, people are kind enough to email them to me (which feels like I imagine it does when the one black friend in a group keeps getting forwarded blog posts about racism in HBO's *Girls*).

*I can't believe I made the all-too-common error of comparing a queer experience to the experience of people of color. I believe if I wrote this piece today, I would not so readily try to equate those two struggles.*

I read these pieces and invariably discover that the subjects of them are younger than me, younger even than I was when I came out. Partly that's because they make for better photos alongside the text (nobody likes seeing the depressing image of a trans-woman or -man who doesn't meet their expectations for a "convincing" look), and partly that's because our culture is fascinated by the ever-lower age limit for awareness in children and acceptance by parents.

*It's frustrating that many media outlets are still stuck on the term "sex change" and apply it to children and adolescents who come out as transgender and begin transition. Nobody under the age of eighteen receives gender reassignment surgery, and that will probably be the rule for a long time to come. But sensationalist media are going to sensationalize, right?*

Fifteen-year-old transgender girls, ten-year-old trans boys, a gender-queer infant blowing three candles out on hir half-blue/half-pink birthday cake. I see them all on my computer screen, and I know that if I met them, I would say one thing:

"You're so lucky."

Of course, it's ridiculous of me to feel jealousy toward those who have managed to do something about their dysphoria faster than I did. My transition has worked out okay, even accounting for my (by these kids'

standards) late escape from the confines of my assigned gender. But you could say the same thing to the woman I stood next to in that clinic. Sure, her situation looks bad to her, but there's an 80-year-old transwoman who would give anything to get back on that side of the pension line.

*“She wrote, sounding like she had just discovered relativism for the first time.”*

The children in these articles have it better than me, and I have it better than the old women at the clinic, and they have it better than dead trans-people who never had the chance to come out at all, and every one of us probably has it better than starving babies, political refugees, and the guy who has to polish L. Ron Hubbard's tombstone. The transgender community is all about hierarchies: how well you pass, how much surgery you've had, how much strife you've been through. The age you came out at is just another ladder to count rungs on.

*The websites, forums, and support groups that exist for transgender people always, always succumb to these hierarchies, and it sucks. It's a part of the larger problem within the transgender community, that we are all incredibly different people, united not by common interest or political view, but by a shared suffering. There is a lot of infighting among transgender folk, and it's perhaps the inevitable result of a group forming around an experience so difficult and, often, traumatizing.*

But the knowledge of that relativity, of those pointless and divisive hierarchies, doesn't stop me laying awake at night and thinking about how my life would be different if I'd had the courage, or the awareness, or the gall to come out as transgender when I was sixteen, or thirteen, or ten. And believe me—I wanted to at ten. (Hell, I wanted to at *five*, so please be sure to place me high up on that particular scoreboard.)

*I'm not making that scoreboard up: there's the idea, common to both*

*trans and non-trans people, that the earlier you were aware in any way of your dysphoria, the more “real” you are as a transgender person.*

*There are guides on the Internet advising transgender men and women seeking treatment what to say in their doctor’s appointments and therapy sessions. These guides recommend saying that you’ve been aware of your gender dysphoria since childhood even if you haven’t, because the expectation is so strong that not meeting it could hurt your chances of receiving treatment.*

I imagine standing up in front of my class at the all-boys school I was part of in eighth and ninth grade, telling my peers that the thing about me that was different—the thing that led them to bully me mercilessly from the day I started there—was that I was a girl, and would become the first girl to graduate that school in spite of its segregated nature. Everybody is shocked, but my speech is so moving that they all cheer and fully support me.

I picture speaking up to my doctor when I was eight years old, as he examines my penis and informs my mother that I need a circumcision because I’d neglected to play with myself (as, apparently, young boys do) enough to stretch the skin down there. I picture telling him that the reason I did my best to ignore that organ was because it didn’t feel right. I picture that conversation leading to a long discussion of gender identity, my place in the world, and how everyone in my community can help me through the difficult journey I’m about to embark on. There are tears.

I think about my mother asking my five-year-old self why I’d scrawled all over my face in the school pictures I’d just brought home. I am honest.

Like all regrets and should-have-beens, these are pointless daydreams. None of these scenarios would have happened, because none of them *did* happen. I just wasn’t ready, for whatever reason, to deal with all this stuff until I was nineteen, and that’s nobody’s fault, especially not mine. It’s



just how it worked out for me. Any anger I feel about that is wasted. Any bitterness will just fester in me and achieve nothing, especially not personal growth. Any sadness is silly. I know that.

*I think if you were to ask a group of adults if they feel like they truly know themselves, most of them would at least hesitate before saying yes, if they even said yes at all. To expect that self-awareness from a teenager, or a child, as I do in my regretful fantasies, is absurd.*

But I know it only intellectually, not emotionally. And so I can't help but have the visceral reaction of envy and sourness when I read of the new generation of trans-kiddies. And so I understand why the woman at the clinic said those words.

“You're so lucky,” was a statement I agreed with, sympathized with, and had no idea how to respond to. Acknowledgement would seem like bragging, deflection would seem like lying, gratefulness would seem greedy. So I just said what I felt. I said that I was sorry.

*My full response was, “I know. I'm sorry.” The woman half-smiled, and shrugged, and went back to the magazine she was reading. I looked at my phone. We waited, as if we hadn't already waited long enough.*

# Already Plucked

First published on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, 2013



Philip had already seen one of my breasts. We met at an improv class (ugh) and one week we played a game involving passing an imaginary ball around the group (improv is the worst).

*Improv isn't really the worst—I'm just the worst at it. It's common for writers and stand-up comedians to have a difficult time with improvised comedy because we can't get out of our own heads and work from instinct. I've taken a variety of classes over several years, and I still have a very difficult time doing even basic improv. But I adore watching skilled improv troupes perform together, and I'm envious of this skill, which does not come naturally to me.*

When the pretend ball turned into a pretend cat, I hammed it up by pretending the cat was attempting to tunnel under my shirt. I wasn't wearing

a bra. I didn't even realize that the entire class had gotten a peek at my chest until Philip let me know as we were putting our shoes on after the session. He wasn't creepy about it, though, and we had a good laugh about it.

*Although he wasn't weird about my breasts, he did show me a picture on his phone of his girlfriend posing for him in lingerie, which is its own kind of creepy boundary crossing and betrayal.*

So when we grabbed pizza together, a few weeks after that glimpse of my tit, I decided to tell him that I was a transgender woman.

"I had no idea," he said. Which, from my perspective, is a great response. I don't exactly want to trick people into thinking I'm a natural-born woman, but I do want to avoid people being able to identify me as "other." It was reassuring that Philip could get a peek at one of my private parts and still not notice anything different about me.

*Whenever someone says something along the lines of, "I couldn't tell," I always wonder if they're lying to make me feel better. Depending on my mood I'll read more into their expression and tone of voice than is there, and try and judge the veracity of their words.*

*I'm always so, so worried about looking silly. Maybe that's part of why I'm bad at improv—that I have such a hard time coping with even the idea of embarrassment. To me, seeming un-self-aware of something like not being a "convincing" woman is so humiliating that thinking about it can bring me to tears.*

Once the surprise wore off, he asked all the usual questions. How long have you been "out"? (Five years.) When did you know you were a girl? (Always.) Have you had the surgery? (No.) Do you want to? (I do. But it's expensive.) Do you call yourself a lesbian? (I date girls, and am a girl, so yes.) Are your boobs fake? (Only if I went to the worst plastic surgeon in the world.) What did your parents think? (You should read my series of essays.)

*A joke from my act: “People ask me if I’ve gotten breast implants. And it’s like, only if I went to the worst plastic surgeon in the world. ‘I was hoping you could give me a B or C cup?’ ‘Hm, I can’t do that, but I can make it look like you’re a guy who’s smoked pot every day for five years.’”*

There’s a reliable consistency to the queries of non-transgender people. To some extent, I’ve based these essays on that very consistency. They’re generally prurient, but I’m okay with that, even if at times the questions border on the rude (I mean, in what other situation do you ask near-strangers about their genitals?), because they provide me with the opportunity to educate, in my small way.

*That was the perspective from which I approached these pieces: how can I talk about the aspects of being a transgender woman that people usually want to hear about, but in a new and interesting way?*

But then Philip moved from inquiry to suggestion, turning his questions into notes on my appearance. “Have you thought about plucking your eyebrows?” he asked. And I sighed, not only because my eyebrows were already plucked, but also because I knew where this was heading. I’d been asked those questions before, too.

“Oof, a bit heavy on the make-up today, eh?” “Can you try not to be so strident now you’re a girl, sweetie?” “Nobody will think you’re pretty if your teeth are so bad.” “We really need to get you a butt, girl!” “Can you blame anyone for looking at your hair and thinking you’re a boy?” “Um, I think you need to wear a little more make-up.” “If you think you can pass without getting your ears pierced, you’re kidding yourself.” “Psst! Maybe it’s time for a shave?”

*Not all of these are real comments I’ve received, but more than a few are. See if you can guess which! (Don’t really. That’s an upsetting*

game.)

Everyone has advice. They think they're being helpful. Women have hints, men have comments, friends speak up, and strangers offer their opinion. According to everybody, I need to be helped, and they are the one to help me. Especially Philip, already the kind of cocky guy who dominates a Level 1 improv class.

Philip changed from a friend who'd had no idea I was transgender into someone who felt it was important to let me know that my eyebrows might as well be screaming "man in a dress!" (Speaking of which, he said I should wear more dresses. Like a lady would.)

*I'm more of a jeans type of gal, mostly because I'm lazy about shaving my legs, and it's just easier to hide them under denim. As a feminist, I feel good about not succumbing to the societal pressure to remove the hair, but as a neurotic transwoman I worry that I'm not putting in an appropriate level of effort. As if I'm not meeting everyone halfway in maintaining a "false" gender presentation.*

What's the correct response to this unsolicited advice? Should I just grin and bear it, perhaps demurely nodding in appreciation? Should I dive into a lecture on constructed ideas of gender identity, societal sexism, and what it would mean to be a "man" or "woman" in a truly feminist society? Or should I take the implicit (sometimes explicit) criticism to heart, and return home to weep at my failure to look, act, and talk like the woman people want me to be?

Obviously, it depends on whom I'm talking to. My ex-girlfriend got the hours-long debate on the appropriateness of what she said. My aunt got the empty smile and assurance that I was thankful for her input. Philip's eyebrow comment sent me into a shame spiral, courtesy of Google Image Searches for "eyebrow," "eyebrow styles," "thick brow," "eyebrow arch," "woman eyebrow," "heavy brow," "threaded eyebrow," and "caterpillar."

*My aunt's suggestion was the one about my teeth: that nobody would think I was beautiful if they looked so bad, which was not helpful because they **already** looked bad at the time she was dispensing this advice. I can only assume she expected me to receive her wisdom and then conjure up \$20,000 to get my mouth fixed? Some people just want to give input, no matter how pointless.*

But before I could retreat to a quiet evening alone with my forehead, I felt like I had to stand up to Philip. I felt like I had to tell him that I'd been a woman for longer than he had and, more importantly, I'd been *my* version of a woman. I thought I should tell him that my eyebrows were my choice, and I didn't care if he didn't like them. (Besides, Philip's own eyebrows were a little sparse, if you ask me. Maybe if they had been bold and bushy, like a real man's are, I could have taken his suggestion more seriously.)

*Obviously a joke. His eyebrows were plenty thick, and he even had a broad mustache.*

It's a stand I've had to take on too many occasions, though, and each new time I lecture someone, I grow wearier of it, and weary of losing the people in my life who can't handle being asked to keep these kinds of opinions to themselves. Philip seemed like a light-hearted, cocky, and confident guy, but I'd already seen him shut down when receiving criticism in class, and I didn't want him to put an end to our friendship the same way. At the very least, I wanted to keep my improv pal. So I smiled, and told him that I'd put tweezers on my shopping list. And then I let him pay for dinner.

# The Best Of Both Worlds

First published on the 21<sup>st</sup> of October, 2013



*This essay was controversial. There is a subsection of the radical feminist community that is trans-excluding: the members of this community consider transgender women to really be men trying to steal women's identities and infiltrate feminism. These TERFs, as they are often called, operate mostly online in small groups, harassing transgender women and posting lengthy diatribes about gender and non-gender-conforming people.*

*One of their main beliefs is that pre-operative transgender women are trying to force lesbians to sleep with them, even though lesbians do not desire sexual intercourse involving penises. This essay was used as proof of that desire, which was surprising to me, as there is nothing in this essay that suggests that. Force is not a part of this story.*

*For me, this essay is about my desire for a sexual partner who will think of me as entirely woman, despite my still having male genitals.*

*That doesn't mean I want to force those genitals on my partners, but that I—at the very least—don't want to be with someone who considers that part of me as still a man.*

*My time with Julia ended with her expressing that my body was subject to the same rules as a man's body would be, and my receiving that information and subsequently concluding the relationship. To me, this essay is about the triumph of consent, and informed consent. Julia and I held and expressed conflicting desires for our interactions, so those interactions stopped. Nobody was forced to do anything.*

*I thought that was clear in my writing (and I still feel that way), but the point was misconstrued by many TERFs, and to this day my words are used as "evidence" for a transgender conspiracy to engage in intercourse with "real" lesbians. But I do not hold myself responsible for others' willful misinterpretation, and I am still proud of this piece.*

“It’s every bisexual’s dream. The best of both worlds,” she whispered into my ear as we watched a drag queen lip-sync to Katy Perry’s “California Gurls.” Julia had brought me to this Toronto gay bar promising an introduction to the city’s queer culture. I needed one: I’d been in town for three months and hadn’t even had a meaningful conversation with anyone from my end of the Kinsey scale, let alone spent an entire evening in a club full of them.

*I had gone to a lesbian bar a few times, and had a terrible time. I don't drink alcohol, I was there alone, and I am bad at approaching strangers and talking to them. I would enter the bar, order a coke, then lean against a wall, furtively looking around and taking in the place between periods of looking at my phone to try and pretend I wasn't just some friendless loser. After fifteen minutes, I'd bolt and head home, dejected.*



*But even on those short, unsuccessful trips out by myself, it had been powerful and invigorating to be in a room full of women like me—women who were attracted to women. I come from a very small town, and being part of a larger queer community was a new experience for me.*

I'd envisioned slutting it up big-time when I moved to Canada for college. I still had a girlfriend back in Albany, New York (in fact, her parents were the ones funding my education), but she and I had an understanding: she knew that I'd spent my entire life feeling unattractive and unwanted, and she was kind enough to look past jealousy and let me experience the dating world from the point of view of a gender I actually identified with.

*This was also something people took issue with, taking this paragraph to mean that I was stringing some poor woman along so I could scam her parents out of a free education.*

*I loved my girlfriend, and her family, a family who took me in as one of their own, and made me feel loved and cared for in a way I'd never experienced. We were in an open relationship, a not-uncommon arrangement, and not something I think of as evidence that I'm a con artist.*

So before I made the trip up north, I went to a salon and cut off the hair I'd been attempting to grow out ever since I announced to the world that I was a woman now. I printed out some JPEGs of asymmetrical haircuts and instructed my hairdresser to “dyke me up.” Surely some suitably gay hair would be all that was necessary to let the lesbians of Toronto know that I was on their wavelength and looking to get lucky? Well, no. Not quite.

*It's common for queer people of all kinds to try and fit themselves to some stereotypical image of the sexuality they identify with, at least at first. There's nothing intrinsically "dykey" about an asymmetrical haircut, but it seemed like good shorthand. I had no idea how difficult*

*it would be to style, though, and I ended up getting it my whole haircut evened out just a couple of months later.*

Maybe Canada threw off my gaydar, maybe I didn't know how to flirt properly, or maybe it took more to shake off two decades of sexual awkwardness than a quick pass with some shears and a study visa for a new country—either way, I was having zero luck even talking to other girls, let alone dating them.

I should have been focusing on my studies, I know. I should have been appreciating my girlfriend more, yes. I should have tried to get more comfortable in my own skin before trying to press it against other people, absolutely. But so much about my life changed when I came out as transgender: whole worlds of experience and fulfillment opened up to me; I found it easier to talk to friends; more satisfying to get praise for achievements; and less stressful spending time alone with my thoughts. I'd spent my entire life feeling like nobody could ever be attracted to the stupid boy-suit I was forced to wear, and I wanted to feel what it was like to have someone desire, on a visceral level, my body.

I was greedy. I still am. There are days (lots of them, to be frank) when the most gender affirming vibe I can feel from another person is “you're not just a woman, you're a fucking gorgeous woman, and I have to have you.” I know that's shallow, but so much of the transgender experience is deep-level introspection and depression and wallowing in self-pity. Don't I deserve something a little shallow?

*That last question was sometimes inferred as entitlement, whereas to me it was an expression of nearly two decades of pain and longing. I don't think there's anything wrong with me expressing the need to feel like a sexually attractive being, the desire to get drunk on the feeling of being wanted that way.*

Shallow like the way I approached Julia when I saw her trying to

navigate our campus. She was short, and cute, and she had a nose piercing and—bingo!—an asymmetrical haircut. Not only did I feel like it was a solid indicator that she'd be down for dating someone on my end of the gender spectrum, but it also gave me a low-risk conversation topic once I'd exhausted the linguistic possibilities of pretending to help find the building she was looking for.

“So, I like your haircut,” I said, pointing to my own similar ‘do.

She responded by making fun of her own hair, but saying complimentary things about mine. She said it looked soft, and asked to touch it. She took over the whole interaction, asking me why I was in Canada, what I was studying, and if I'd been to her favorite bar.

“Actually, don't tell me. I'm taking you anyway. I could do with a hot date.” The magic words. She thought I was hot, hot enough to go on a *date*, even. I felt giddy and proud to be objectified.

*"Proud to be objectified." Yikes. I mean, if you want to say something that'll stir up some seriously hard-core feminists, that'll do the job. It's true, though, I do get a kick out of being (consensually) objectified.*

Before things went any further, I filled her in on my open-relationship, and discovered that we had more in common than our haircuts: Julia had a boyfriend, but he was cool with her seeing ladies. So we made plans, and a few nights later we were watching “California Gurls” get the performance it deserved, and I asked her why drag queens were even a thing.

*I've always felt uncomfortable with the concept of drag performance, and that's something I still work to move past. It's hurt me to see someone so easily taking on another gender and being accepted, even celebrated, for it. But too often I've manifested that hurt as judgment for people who are just expressing themselves and having a good time. As when I leaned over to Julia and half-whispered, "I don't*

*really understand the point of this whole thing."*

When she responded with that “best of both worlds” comment, I felt optimistic about our chances in the bedroom. Prior to that moment, I’d been trying to figure out how to tell Julia that I was a pre-operative transgender woman—that I still had a penis. I knew she was bisexual, but I was still worried that the weirdness of my gender status would put her off, regardless of sexuality. But this comment indicated that she was more than open to bodies that blurred the lines.

So I was not as worried as I usually am when, the next time we met up, I sat down with Julia in my dorm room and told her there was something she should know. Maybe the tone of my voice tipped her off, or maybe she’d just glimpsed my Adam’s apple a few too many times and suspected something, but she came right back at me with an offhand, “What, do you have a dick?”

“Well,” I replied, after a moment, “*that* certainly makes things easier.”

I get nervous whenever I tell someone (especially someone I hope to be romantically involved with) that I’m a transwoman. My gender identity is hardly a secret (Google will even suggest it to you), but it’s still something that’s odd to talk about one-on-one. People don’t know how to react, and the conversation can get uncomfortable. But Julia knew exactly how she wanted to react: amazed, interested, and turned on. Barely a minute after I came out to her, she kissed me. Soon we were on my bed together.

*Disclosure is one of the hardest things about being transgender. Who to tell, when to tell, how to tell... The answers to those questions are different for everyone, and it takes time and experience to figure them out. I've bypassed the process as much as I can, I think, by maintaining this publicly out status. The Internet never forgets, so it will never be a secret that I am a transgender woman. Most people who meet me will either already know, or find out when I mention my Twitter account, or website, and they subsequently look me up.*

*That said, there are times when I do get to tell people who don't already know. I was introduced to a group of people just last weekend, and in the time we spent together I told a story which necessitated divulging my status. The fact that it's not a secret makes it all the easier to say. I still worry about how someone might react (there's always the possibility of a hidden bigot in the mix), but the whole process is easier. I don't feel like I'm unburdening myself, I just feel like I'm providing relevant info.*

And then she paused proceedings for a quick side note. “You know this means we can’t have sex, right?” I hadn’t been certain, but the possible specifics of her boyfriend’s “it’s fine if you date girls” rule had been niggling at me. Julia clarified that her dude was pretty territorial when it came to penetrative intercourse. As she put it: “No p-in-v for you and me.”

The rhyme didn’t make the information any less upsetting. Because as much as Julia claimed that if I said I was a woman then that’s what I was to her, her boyfriend’s rule reduced me to nothing more than the body part I hate most. She may have thought I was the “best of both worlds,” but she wasn’t allowed to walk in one of them.

Of course, Julia isn’t the only person who’s used some variation of that dualistic phrase, not by far. I’ve come across more than one OkCupid profile expressing interest in transgender people as a chimeric mix of sexual characteristics. I’ve had a couple of friends express that my penis must make it easier for me as a lesbian, since it means I have all the fun of gay-identified sex with the added bonus of interlocking genitals.

*It actually makes it harder, as plenty of gay or bisexual transwomen will tell you. Many lesbian and bisexual will not even consider relationships with a transgender woman. That situation is changing, as the queer community becomes more educated and open to its own sub-groups, but it can still make dating difficult.*

And, let's not forget, vast swathes of the pornography industry sell the image of the “she-male,” a beautiful woman with a secret, whose implanted breasts you can feel against your back as she takes you from behind.

*The "she-male" porn industry does have a silver lining: many transwomen who couldn't otherwise afford to transition in a way they'd like are able to fund things like hormones and surgery by performing in adult video. However, that silver lining comes with an enormous cloud: it can make some women feel like they have no option but to do porn, even when they don't want to, and the relationships between transgender performers and their employers can be abusive.*

Ultimately, it all boils down to one thought: Yes, you can say you're a woman, but your physical reality makes you something else. Something in-between.

Look, it's not like I require the women I date to be cool with having my dick inside them. In fact, I'm fine if that never happens. But being shut off from the very idea of it, not even considering that having my penis inside you is different from having a man's penis inside you? That hurts. It's such a tiny slight that I wish I could get over it, and not let it fester into something I feel the need to write an essay about, but apparently I can't.

*This was something that struck people as ridiculous. Could my identity as a woman really be expected to make my dick feel different from a dude's? Even ignoring all the physical effects of estrogen on male sexual performance, I've been told by every sexual partner I've had since my transition that I make love like a woman, that there's nothing "dude" about it. I am entirely different from a man, because my entire being is not a man, even if I share body parts with men.*

Now when I hear someone (especially a potential romantic interest) use

a phrase like “the best of both worlds,” I see it as a red flag. As a sign that for all their intended openness, the person I’m speaking to still categorizes me as something other. Sometimes I just end the conversation there; sometimes I try to talk with them about how that’s maybe not the best language.

*I don't hold it against people, though. Our culture perpetuates the idea of transgender people as different, as abnormal, and it's so difficult not to succumb to those messages.*

What did I do with Julia? How did I address my feelings? I wish I could say I was principled enough to stop making out with her, there-and-then, and discuss with her why I thought the blanket ban on my junk was upsetting. But I still so wrapped up in feeling sexy, in feeling wanted, that I mutely nodded and agreed to the restriction.

*We just continued making-out a little, for those who worry that I had these reservations yet still "took advantage" in some way.*

Later, after she’d left for class, I sat in bed and thought about this all for the first time. I didn’t make arrangements to see her again. No matter which world I belonged to, I didn’t want her to be in it.

*We're still friends on Facebook, though, and recently I saw a post from her expressing some extremely right-wing political views. I'm incurably liberal, so I don't think we'd have gotten along long-term anyway.*

# Pivoting On The Groin

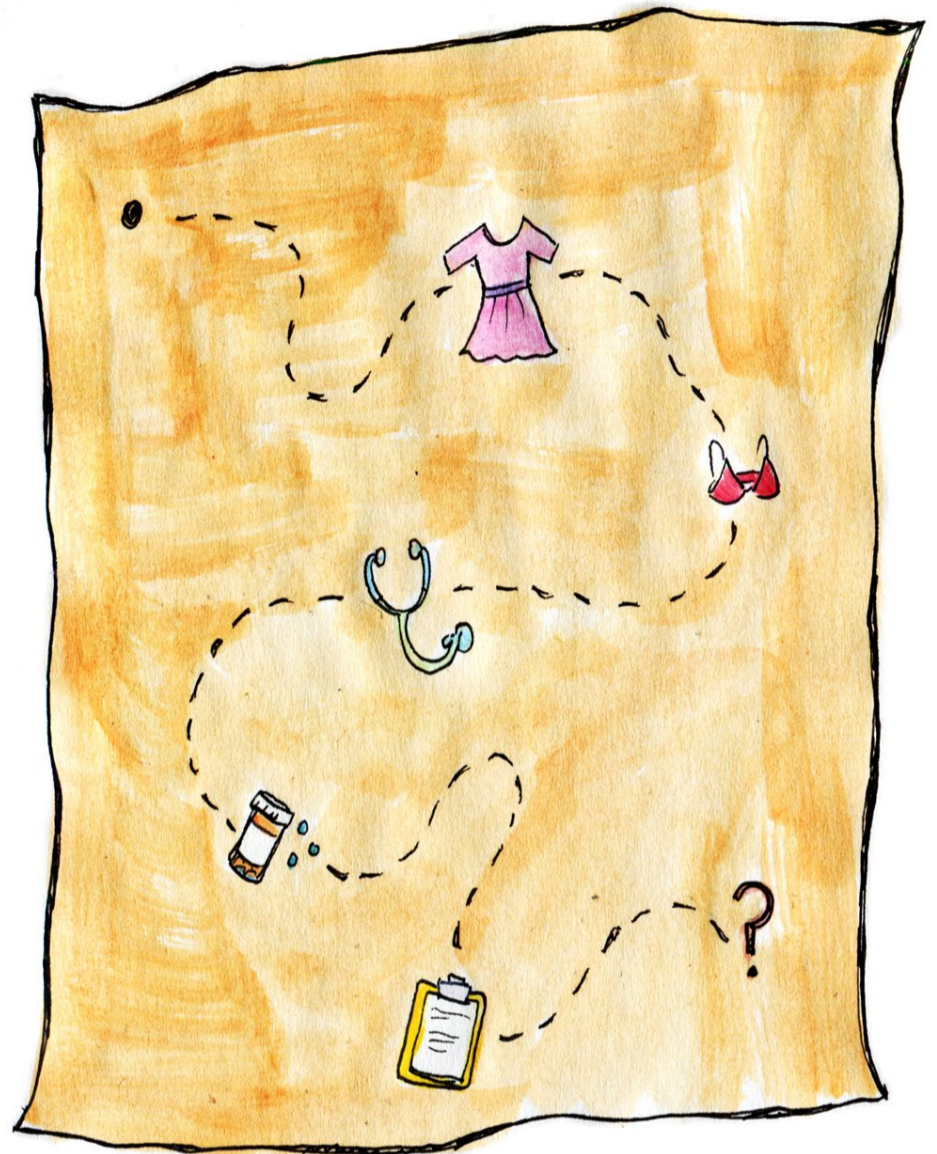
First published on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 2014

The first unicycle I rode, I borrowed from Jessica. My friends had pooled their money and bought her the wheel and the seat for her 17th birthday, thinking it would go well with her juggling hobby. It's indicative of my status on the periphery of that group that I did not know about—and was not part of—this plan. The first I heard about it was when Jessica was presented with the wrapped gift before class.

*Funny story: the name Jessica is a pseudonym, as are all the names I use in these essays (except my own, although transphobes would debate that, I suppose), for privacy reasons. Jessica's real name, though, is the same as Julia's, the person at the center of the previous essay, **The Best Of Both Worlds**. When I wrote these essays, **months apart**, I gave both of them the same pseudonym.*

*I guess my brain is very strict about what names get converted to. Maybe I'll always look at Simon, for instance, and think the pretend version of that name should be Michael.*

*I did catch the repetition in editing, but for some reason the final, public version of the essay ended up with the Julias intact. That*





*has been corrected for this edition, with the fake name changed to Jessica.*

*In short, I am not smart.*

I'm even more on the periphery of that group of friends now. When I came out as a transgender woman six years ago, they all stopped talking to me. They still get together, and Facebook showed me a photo of the Christmas dinner they shared this year. I'm almost grateful for my exile, though. Missing the meal is preferable to being there and feeling like a turkey.

*Jessica actually got in contact after reading this piece, and we met up for coffee, as we both currently live in London. She was as kind and hilarious as I remembered her being, and didn't mind me writing about her, which is very accommodating of her.*

*Jessica actually counts as my oldest friend. We met in the first year of school, were best friends for a couple of years, drifted apart, and then ended up being part of the same social group again in high school. We've known each other for just over two decades, and it makes me happy that we could get together and find out that we still get along great.*

Jessica soon figured out that actually learning to ride the unicycle wasn't especially high on her list of priorities, and we had enough good faith between us that she was happy to lend it to me. I explained that I was interested in adding another quirk to my series of defense mechanisms.

There was a sizable contingent among my friends and family who presumed, after I came out, that the whole transgender thing was just another affectation—a phase I assumed to make myself feel different and special. Like when I started taking a briefcase to school in fifth grade. Or when I practiced escapology in the common room during lunch, eventually

getting stuck in a suitcase. Or when, in this case, I started unicycling.

*The plan with the suitcase was that I would be locked inside, carried into the cafeteria and placed on a table, and then I would escape and surprise everyone eating lunch. I was not able to escape, though, and onlookers instead saw the suitcase move around for a bit as I struggled, then my friends walking back over, letting me out, and walking back to the common room, embarrassed.*

*High school kids! They're idiots.*

There's a misunderstanding about "different" kids, I think. It's not that they act out or do strange things to make themselves different. It's that they're trying to figure out why they're *already* different. Peers and bullies knew, from the very first day of school, that there was something about me that didn't fit in. I spent the next decade and a half experimenting with my personality to figure out just what that was.

*What made me different, obviously, was that I did not feel comfortable with the gender I was assigned. But at the time I thought it was maybe because I was a huge fan of comic books, and should maybe make that my entire identity for a little while, just to check.*

*That's one example.*

It's not good scientific practice to experiment in public though (a principle I would stick to a few years later after buying some new clothes). So when it came to the unicycle, I would wait until my mum and sister had gone to sleep, then sneak out of the house to a small, hidden path nearby. I spent two or three hours a night for the next couple of weeks hopping on the saddle and attempting to peddle down the way.

*Again, this goes back to my utter horror at the thought of being seen as even slightly foolish. I was happy for people to see me ride a circus*

toy, but only as long as I could **actually ride it**. While I was in the falling-down phase, it was something I needed to keep private.

Usually, I'd fail. Riding a unicycle takes a lot of getting used to, as your leg muscles have to adjust to maintaining balance in a new way. The first thing you learn to do on a unicycle is fall safely, because falling is inevitable, and it's better that you do it with as little danger as possible.

*There's maybe a greater life-lesson to be divined from this principle. "You're always going to fall, so learn to fall safely." Honestly, I don't think I've taken that to heart. My response to the advice is a hubristic, "no, I will never fall, I am a god."*

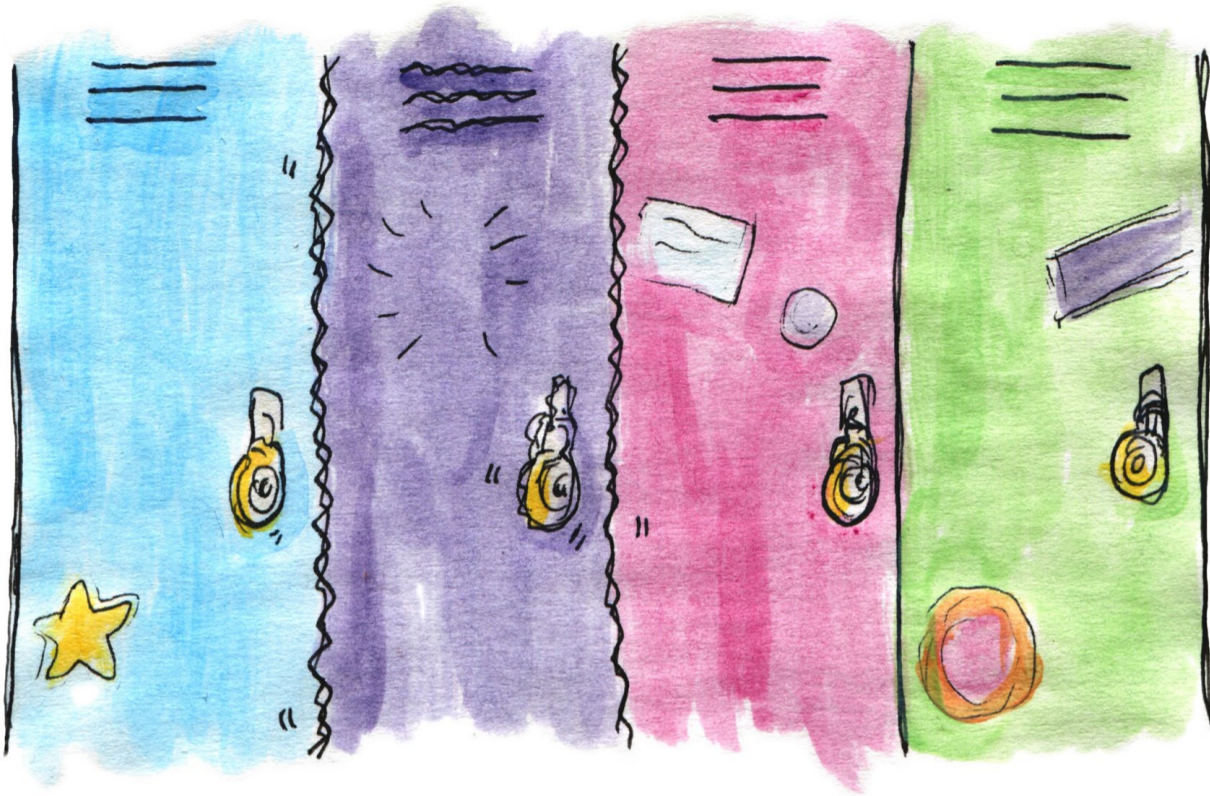
*I'm not sure how I manage to have self-esteem problems while also being so arrogant, but the fact that I make it work is just another very cool thing about me, I guess.*

Over many nights, I was able to locomote further and further, until eventually I rode down the whole path and turned the corner at the end. I mastered mounting the device without leaning against a tree or lamppost. I even started using the unicycle to make the trip to school and back every day. I got some extra mockery, of course. But hell, when strangers already call you a faggot in the hallway, you might as well have them make fun of you for something you enjoy.

*Once a teacher heard a younger student call me a faggot, and gave him detention on the spot. She then took me aside and told me that the school wouldn't tolerate that, and that if it happened again I could come tell her, and that I didn't have to feel unsafe just because I was gay.*

*Which was nice of her. It was. But I was an insecure teenager, still under the impression that I was a heterosexual man, and I was infuriated and embarrassed that even the teachers thought I was gay.*

*I thanked her though, and laughed about it with my friends, although none of them piped up with anything like, "how could somebody think you were gay?" We all knew, and also didn't know, back then.*



And I did enjoy it. Zipping along on the ludicrous object felt like flying. I felt fast, and nimble, and unencumbered. I felt like I'd actually gotten good at something, something other people couldn't do. Learning to ride that inefficient vehicle was probably the first time in my life that I made a goal for myself and achieved it. On my bad days, I feel like it was the last time, too.

*I'm awful when it comes to self-discipline, work ethic, and meeting deadlines, and always have been. See: how long it took me to write the essays in this series. See also: how long it took me to write these annotations and publish this eBook.*

When it comes to school, I don't miss the people, or the rules, or the cafeteria food. But I do miss the clear sense of progression, of getting an assignment and completing it, of filling something out and receiving a grade. I miss the clear journey from the start of the path to the end, moving your feet and making your way. One of the comforting things about my transition

from male to female was that it had a roadmap, a plan of action. Dress as a woman, meet with a doctor, take your hormones, and change your name.

That was satisfying, for a while. It felt like I was making headway, working towards something. It felt like growth. But the transgender journey isn't like completing homework—there's no box that can be checked, no final grade to be assigned. What's the final stop on the transgender roadmap? When will I be done?

*Many, many people enjoy and crave that feeling of clear and delineated progression. It's why RPGs, and video games of all stripes, are so popular—you are given a task, told the steps to achieve it, take those steps, and get rewarded. It's comforting, and it's the opposite of real life, where everything is so uncertain.*

*I'm one of those people, and there are I spent more than a few months immersed in Skyrim instead of writing this book, recently. I had to cut myself off, and still miss my Khajiit archer.*

The traditional narrative for transwomen is that genital/sexual reassignment surgery is the finish line. It's the brass ring, the end goal. For the first few months of my life as Avery, I was thrilled at the prospect of and desperate for “the operation.” I've never hated my current equipment, but I have felt hamstrung by it. I want genitals that fit the clothes I wear, and the sexuality I identify with. I want to not worry about getting “discovered” in a swimming pool or a changing room or a public restroom or an airport scanner or a thousand other places where your junk isn't an issue until it is. And I want other things, the type of things I only talk about with my girlfriend.

But even after that goal is, eventually, accomplished, that's not the end. That's not success. I'll still have insides that are different than the standard definition of “woman” would indicate. I'll still have a past that doesn't gel with my present. I'll still be taking hormones forever, and having disclosure

conversations with potential partners. I'll still always be working hard just to stay the person I am. There's no end, except death. You can't "win" being transgender. I'll be transitioning until the end, because there's no end to transition.

*This sounds hopeless, or at least downbeat, but it's really anything but. Yes, there's no real end to transition, but that means that you get to decide the end for yourself. There are transwomen who feel they've completed the process and done everything they need to do just by acknowledging their feelings to themselves, even if they never make any change to the way they live their life. It's not a choice to be a transgender person, but everything after that is entirely up for choice.*

In the meantime, I'm in no rush to get that operation. I still have that ache, that desperate need to be "fixed" downstairs. But I also have so much fear. Fear that sex will forever change if something goes wrong during the procedure or aftercare. Fear that the end result won't fit my expectations. And the basic, primal fear that accompanies the prospect of any major surgery—the fear of pain. I want to be changed, but I don't want someone cutting into me.

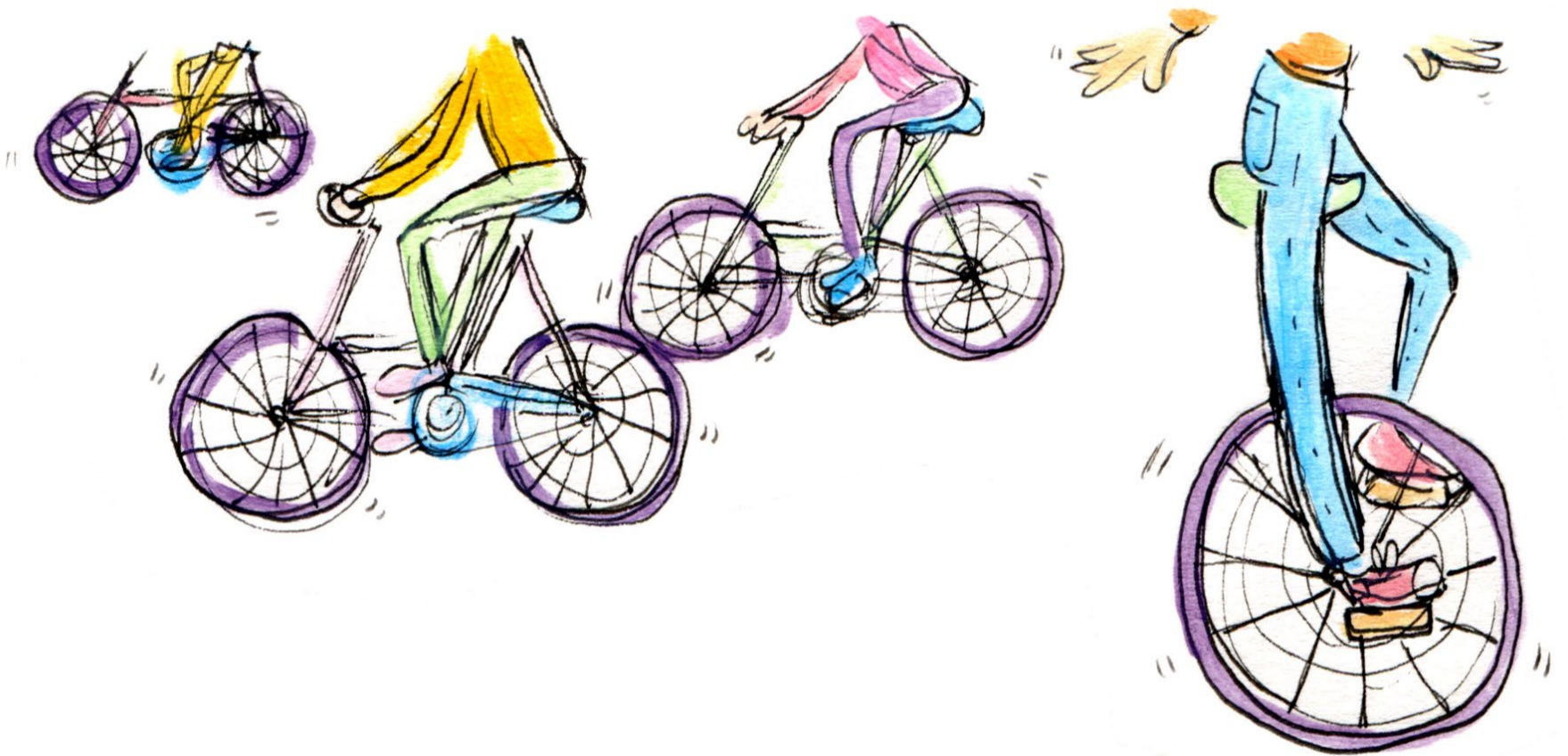
*I've only had surgery once in my life, the circumcision I mentioned in a previous essay. I can still remember the days afterward, full of pain in such a sensitive part of my body. At least I was young enough that walking around without any clothes to irritate the wound was more "cute" than "disturbing".*

*I joke, onstage, that although I haven't had the reassignment surgery, my circumcision gets me 10% there.*

When you ride a unicycle, you're meant to put most of your weight on your saddle. Successful journeys pivot on your groin. I used to find it funny that my years of riding one wheel and mashing my dick on the seat were good training for the uncomfortable tucking that trans life makes a daily

necessity. Now I worry that post-surgery, I will have to abandon that flying feeling, that balancing my body mass on a constructed, delicate part of my anatomy will be too risky.

I'm not sure I'll be able to resist trying anyway, though. "First unicycle ride with my new vagina" is a great bucket list item, even with the danger of damaging thousands of dollars of surgical work. If the job of transitioning is never done, it might as well be interesting.



# Doing The Deed (Poll)

Not previously published

The other Avery Edison shouldn't exist, but she found me anyway. She plays varsity softball in the States, and she commented on my Instagram. She tagged her friends in the comment, saying, "Here's the other me I was telling you guys about!"

She is a teenager, so she's had the name longer than I have, which would seem to imply that she has more of a claim to it. But her name was given to her, and she has it only by accident of birth. I *chose* the name Avery Edison, made it represent me of my own free will. That has to count for something, right?

In 2007, I was experimenting with my gender presentation. I had gotten far enough along in the process—wearing multiple items of women's clothing, and doing so in public—that cross-dressing entirely and presenting as female on stage during my stand-up seemed reasonable.

I visited home, and told my mother I'd been experimenting like this, that I was doing comedy as a transvestite, the term I figured applied to me most. "It's like Eddie Izzard," I said, trying to use her familiarity with his work to cement what I was doing as a rational, perhaps even laudable. Maybe I was being brave?

Her own bravery had limits. She wanted me to assure her I wasn't sullyng the family name with my lady-play. "Do you have a stage-name?" she asked. And I told her I did, even though I'd not yet said it out loud.

"Avery Edison."

I think I was keeping from myself, at that point, that the reason I was



investigating names was not that I needed something for the stage, but that I needed a label for the person I was slowly becoming. I was still so cautious about my deeper feelings, and still trying to convince myself that transvestitism was all it was. Even so, I put effort into finding that name.

I knew I wanted it to be a unisex name, because I thought that would make it easy on people. Saying something clearly female, like Victoria or Sarah, might make friends and audiences uncomfortable, and the comfort of others felt important to me, then. I'm not sure I'd have the same concern today; I hope I'd be focused on myself enough to forget everyone else and choose something that felt right for me.

I found baby name websites, and looked at lists of unisex names. They were long, and I didn't relish reading pages of names for every letter. Is it laziness that I found one I like at the bottom of the As? Or was it luck that the name that felt perfect for me came so early in the process?

Avery. I liked it. It was so unspecific, almost like a blank slate. You could put whichever gender you wanted on it, and it would sound right. It's utility wasn't the only selling point, though. It felt... new, to me. Something modern, and not classically poetic like Sophie or Elise, but not so modern that choosing it for myself would mark it as obviously false, the way a twenty-year old choosing the name "Blue Ivy" would clearly have not been named that at birth.

Avery felt comfortable, and familiar. It was mine.

Some people ask me why that wasn't the end of it. Why did I feel like need to change my last name, too? Part of that choice was wanting a more complete stage persona. Something more interesting than "Avery Hayes" (which also had a repeating "ey" sound that I didn't like). But I also wanted to define myself with this new name, and I thought reaching into the past and borrowing from someone I admired would highlight something in myself that I liked, and wanted others to see.

I'd always thought of myself as clever, and that arrogance had not yet been punctured by repeated failure. In school, I'd succeeded most in the sciences, and although I did not pursue them in higher study, I spent significant personal time reading the history of our discoveries, and acquainting myself with the giants on whose shoulders we all stand.

To be honest with you, I liked Tesla more than Edison. Thomas Edison pragmatism (or cruelty, depending on how you look at it) always struck me as cold, and unappealing. Tesla was eccentric, and ahead of his time, and broken. He was the underdog, and who doesn't like to ally themselves with David, rather than Goliath? But Tesla is not so common a name, these days. I felt like wearing it would be like carrying around a sign reading, "I had the gall to choose my name." Again, I was worrying about how others react.

So I picked the Goliath. Edison, a name which would not be impossible to come by honestly, but which still had that mark of individuality and theatricality, and a clear spiritual lineage. I was inventing my new self, so I anointing myself with the name of a consummate inventor was only appropriate.

I mocked up new website designs with the name in Photoshop, "Avery Edison's Internet Diary" proudly displaying itself in large type. (It's a title, which still appears on my blog, although the text is not displayed so ostentatiously.) I covered pages in my notebook with the name, as if I were exercising a classroom crush by seeing how their name would fit with my own. But the infatuation here was with my future self, and I wanted to see how much I could really identify with that person.

I identified almost immediately. I'd never cared much for my old name, but the act of choosing this new one, the feeling of self-determination, gave it a gloss I felt worked on me, too. I shined with pride, at choosing such a good name, and at having the strength to take it for myself. I felt like me. I felt like something was clicking into place.

In the years since, I've managed to unmoor the name "Kyle Hayes" from the dock of my identity. At first, I would still turn my head if I heard my old first name, either from a friend misspeaking, or a stranger calling out to someone else who shared it with my past self. Six years have gone by, and I don't even twitch when I hear it now. I am called Avery in my dreams, and even my memories have re-written themselves. I can hear people calling the five year-old me by my later name, even though I know that never happened. Brains are funny, flexible things.

After I told my mum the name, I became more confident in it. I used it on stage, as planned and promised, and started thinking of myself as Avery more than Kyle. And in January of 2008, I sent a message to friends and family, letting them know who I was now. Two months later, I signed a deed poll, with two friends as witnesses, and the switch was legal. Avery Edison was who I was.

(Legal name changes are easier in the UK than in North America. I simply had to print out a form, and sign and date it, with those witnesses. From then on, I could use it to secure new identification. I took my completed deed poll to the passport office, expecting only to change the name listed next to my photo. But for some unknown reason—administrative error? Sympathy?—the gender marker was flipped, too. My new travel documents arrived in the mail two days later, and my mum read them and said, "I have another daughter.")

As the past decade has worked its way over our lives, my bond with and existence on the Internet has become more concrete. It's not unreasonable to say that these days I'm more myself online than anywhere else. So after I told the people in the real world, I made complete shift online, too.

I changed my Twitter handle and display name, my avatar showing me in a wig I'd recently purchased. My website received the facelift I'd planned in Photoshop. My Facebook changed, the gender switching, too (which took

approval back then, and there were a few hours where my identity stood in limbo). I opened a new email account, and forwarded all mail from my old address there. Flickr is, oddly, the last holdout of my old name. The site does not allow you to change your user name, so while my profile display name is my real name, the link that takes you there still contains “kylemhayes”, and it will until I close the account or the site shuts for good.

After the digital shift completed, and my new self propagated across servers and data centers, I searched for my name on Google, wanting to see if I was the only one. There were a few pages full of my social sites and personal pages, and then only links referencing Thomas, or ancestry lists in which the Avery and the Edison were separated by generations. I thought I was the only one with my name, and it was an odd point of pride. I was unique.

And then the other Avery found me, only a few months ago. I read her comment and then searched Google for her (and me, I suppose). I found the high school sports page that listed the results of a recent game. She only existed on the public Internet in this one place, a recent addition, which is why I never found her before.

I'm not upset or disappointed, though. I've gone through no emotional pain after finding out my unique identity was only an illusion. And I don't mind sharing the name. After all, I know how important they are.

# Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank Kevin Nguyen, and everyone at The Bygone Bureau, for not only providing an outlet for my writing, but expertly editing it, and helping me become a better writer. Thanks also to Elizabeth Simins, for the beautiful illustrations which accompanied the online essays, and which she kindly allowed me to include in this collection.

Abby Finkelman was with me for much of my early transition, and her love and support was vital during some difficult times.

Romy Sugden, my girlfriend (and co-parent to our cats Kitten, Penrose, and Escher), has helped me with many of these essays, as well as helping me live my life in general. I'd be a mess without her.

I could not have written any of this without the knowledge that there would be people to read it. Thank you to everyone who has ever read my work, and special thanks to my Twitter followers—some of you have been putting up with me for half a decade. I don't know how you do it.

Lastly, thanks to me. I am the best.

