

# Everyone Transitions

An evolving story

*By Kelly Witcher*

*For little me,  
Thank you for finding me again.*

*'Cause I know there is strength  
In the differences between us  
And I know there is comfort  
Where we overlap  
~Ani DiFranco*

# Prologue

I was born in 1983 and I will die someday the end

Imagine life like that, with no punctuation. No chapters. No breaks. Just one long run-on sentence, speeding ahead without taking even the slightest moment to pause.

It's so simple to veer onto that track, and be miles off in the wrong direction before you realize you haven't even exhaled.

Why is it so hard to stop and celebrate things?

I started testosterone in May 2019. It's been four years full of shifts, a world literally and figuratively on fire, and exhaustion. So much. And I'm just now realizing I've been running on...and on. I haven't given myself a semicolon's worth of praise or pride for taking this next big step. For being bold enough to wade through my layers of tin-can armor to get here, which is back to where I originally was as a kid, before the heaping on of what I should be.

It's time to stop. 39 years of moving in various directions and u-turning when things felt too uncomfortable. 39 years of avoiding the spine that binds my book. It's like I was wrapped with an ill-fitting dust jacket, a different tale, a different synopsis, where a scrappy tomboy blossoms into a tough, fearless woman. A small bio on the back that distilled me down to a few sentences that were a bit more palatable to the masses. But now, the jacket is off. And underneath, embossed on tattered cloth, is another title. Another story all together. A story where I choose my own adventure.

So this book is my pause. My way of punctuating these last few years. A way of giving myself room to celebrate. A new chapter is something. A new sentence is something. It's time to recognize that. Because if we can't even pause at a period, then when do we give ourselves a moment to stop running on?

## A start

Life is one big transition. Birth, endless bobbing and weaving, and then death. And in that time, our bodies reflect the change, the time. Dents and divots of a life well-lived.

Metamorphosis is standard. But, in my case, made more drastic by weekly shots of testosterone just above my right butt cheek. My first shot was May 15, 2019, just a couple weeks after meeting my new doctor and discussing the entire process, my partner seated beside me. Having done some homework, nothing was that shocking. The desired and undesired outcomes, including the very real chance I morphed into a bald, rageful, toxic man who could only handle adversity by punching through drywall. As my doctor put it, he had spent his life practicing not being an undeveloped neanderthal, whereas I would be thrust into barbarianism unprepared and unaccustomed.

What I was not prepared for was the stat that 25% of trans men pivot their sexual preference. A 1 in 4 chance of being miraculously aroused by peen and peen-adjacent forms. As an incredibly indecisive Gemini, it can be tough to

be clearly decisive about big life things. I love living in the country but also thrive in the city. I want an unstructured, creative job writing sentences that include phrases like “peen-adjacent”, but I also want to be responsibly practical and not make any mistakes. However, there are two things I have absolutely never wavered on: my attraction to women and my desire to have, at most, zero children. So suddenly, a statistically sound, peer-reviewed article had thrown one of those into jeopardy. Should I just give in and download Grindr now? I still felt certain I had enough of myself to stay nestled in the 75%. But to my partner, M, it was the beginning of doubt droplets that would ripple across our relationship in the months to follow. What if I was a gay man? Or preferred men also? Beyond that, how did she shuffle her own transitions? Could she still be a lesbian while staying with a man?

She cried in the parking lot after that first visit. The fear of me losing attraction to her was one thing, but really, it was the flood of uncertainty over what was to come, of who I would or would not grow to be. A foundation that seemed so solid, reinforced with concrete, had now shown the potential for shifting. The threat

of miles of separation starting with a millimeter of movement.

Four years after that, and most of the story has changed. I still am very much attracted to women, but M and I are no longer together. A hard transition to traverse at the same time my body and identity morphed on a daily basis.

At some point, I joined an FTM support group, seeking empathy through shared experience that was as close to identical as mine, at least based on labels alone. The sessions I attended skewed toward folks much younger than my ancient age of 36. People struggling with parental permission and practical next steps. I was elated they had a space to share, to be heard. However, I found myself assuming the role of mentor, doling out advice on job searching and navigating the abysmally-evolving world of health insurance. While it felt purposeful to put my extra years to some use, I quickly realized I was missing my own scout leader.

Which started me thinking...so often we look for role models in people who have identical experiences to us. Empathy in exactness. Whereas, most of the people I confided in,



friends I'd known for years, were not trans or even part of the LGBTQ community.

My boss, L, had just found out she was pregnant. A small-business owner in her 30s, she very much shared the millennial belief that kids were not necessary to happiness and flourishing. And like all surprised new moms, she was scared. By then, I had enough testosterone surging through me that it was becoming harder to accept she/her, harder to keep an inner secret when my outer shell was very much giving me away. One day, I asked L if she was excited about having a new little human to take care of. Since she is a thoughtful, soulful person, she answered honestly, "I have no idea what to expect, and I think it's something that's impossible to fully prepare for." Sure, you can buy the Baby Bjorns and binkies, but that doesn't actually make you mentally and emotionally prepared for the seismic shift your life is about to take. And, in that moment, I looked her in the eyes and nodded, with the full understanding of someone whose entire life was about to shift, in ways I could absolutely not predict or prepare for.

Driving home that night, it started to really sink in. My transition to the gender I have always been was not identical to L's in a literal sense, but the emotional and mental shifts mirrored one another in some ways. In other words, there was complete understanding and unity in the places we overlapped. Invaluable intersections.

Around the same time, my amazing friend C was going through a divorce. We talked one night via Facetime, our images connecting over the many fields between our two states. He knew that his news would reshift family dynamics and spur on judgment, skepticism, anger, and worry. What's the appropriate answer to "Oh I'm sure you can work it out if you just try"? And at the same exact time, I was also swirling, struggling with how to tell my family and my new coworkers about my transition. How do you word the request to have someone shift their perception and their pronouns? I barely talked to my parents, so would an awkward email suffice?

"Congratulations! It's the boy you probably always kind of knew I wanted to be." So, I smiled to C in solidarity. He knew I got it. We both had life-altering messages to share and absolutely no way to control how others would

react, no matter how much the people pleasers in us tried to convince us we could. Both of us were on the edge of rewriting a definition of ourselves that so many had grown comfortable with. Both of us creating the discomfort we would usually bend over backward to prevent.

Sure, we aren't all transgender, just in the same way we aren't all divorcees or new moms, but the beauty lies in where we overlap. Everyone transitions.

# 1. Always the bridesmaid, never the boyfriend

The sabotage of puberty and hormones jolts us all into the most unscripted and chaotic transitions.

One day you're playing flashlight tag and Marco Polo in the shallow end, and the next your best friend is relentlessly replaying a 20-second message from Josh, trying to decode every single word to see if maybe he really did LIKE her like her, even though he had just agreed to go to the dance with Stacey the Friday before. We are thrust into this world of relationships with no tools and no understanding of who we are or what we actually want. We just know that our body really wants to be close to the girl that sits behind us in third period social studies, and the knowledge ends there.

For me, the laws of attraction were less orderly and more chaotically contradictory. My hormones figured things out before my brain, and my emotions just got overloaded trying to translate between the two. I knew I felt so good being close to my best girl friends. I knew it

made me mad when they would date idiotic boys. For a confusing couple of moments, I thought my jealousy meant I had a crush on their new boyfriend. What else could it be? After all, I had all these feelings, and it pained me to see them together. So, it must be because I liked him. It was the only thing that made sense in my small Republican Ohio neighborhood, where gay was just a slur and no other labels had even made it into our vocabulary.

The story of what happens next has actually changed over time. For years, when people would ask when I realized I was gay, I would point to these moments of infuriating envy. How I eventually realized I didn't have a crush on him, but her. And that was THE moment. That story worked for years, until I found my high school journals. Reading through, it became painfully obvious that I was oblivious for so much longer than my overtold narrative indicated. In actuality, it took several more years to correctly put my finger on why I felt so lost, the lone sock in a whirling cycle full of pairs. Why I never tried to talk about that with anyone. Why I craved every moment of closeness and wanted desperately to interpret it as some cryptic symbol that indicated they

felt the same, somehow. That if things were different, she would proudly wear my varsity jacket around school. I clung to everything and was anchored to nothing.

While everyone around me clumsily flirted and learned how to stick their tongue into someone else's mouth in a way that was actually sexy instead of slobbery, I was learning that I was not enough. Of course, I didn't think of it like that at the time. But years later, when I began unpacking the jumble of emotional bookbags, with the benefit of hindsight's bifocals, I saw it. I saw how alone I was. How I couldn't comprehend my feelings, let alone give them words. How school year after school year enforced shortcomings I had absolutely no way to overcome. No matter how sweet I was, no matter how many times I read her mind or remembered her favorite flavors, no matter how many times I was there, I would still not be him. I would still not be A him.

Once I finally understood that I liked girls, which in reality took until my very first girlfriend kissed me in my parent's Coca-Cola themed basement, the only label I had at my narrow disposal was lesbian. If I was attracted to

women, that must be it. Nothing else made sense.

When I was even tinier, around 2nd grade, I have a vague memory of crying to my mother, asking why I couldn't just be a boy. It just wasn't an option. End of discussion. Now walk your boyish bowl cut up those stairs and go to bed.

So, if I couldn't be a boy, then what was I? A lesbian I guess.

But even after years of a dozen Ani DiFranco concerts, multiple colors of cargo shorts, women's tackle football leagues, and every single other thing I did to lean into an identity that was supposed to make sense...something still didn't fit.

What if, all along, I was a tomboy without the tom?

## 2. The burger that broke me

It took bottom to finally unbutton me.

In my 30s, I fell for the most amazing woman. And unlike when I was growing up, she liked me back. She wanted me back. This was it. I had made it. But where the hell was I exactly?

To say I was anxiously attached at the beginning would be an understatement. I would sob when I had to leave her and then sob even more driving away because I knew I was smothering her with an uncomfortable amount of emotion. At least I had the wherewithal to understand that much. So, I started therapy, which seemed like a better choice than torturing her and triple torturing myself.

A little before our one year mark of dating, weeks after I had met with my new therapist for the first time, we went to visit my parents for the weekend. It was a typical muggy August weekend in Michigan. Looking back, it's hard to even remember what happened. Was it seeing my parents new state of voluntarily lonesome isolation? My mom sleeping in a disheveled, dog-hair covered twin bed in the tiny den where the TV never turned off? Was it my sister making sure to point out a small whisker that had sprouted from my chin or the extra pound that poked over my waistband? Was it my brother-in-law saying something gross



about his Mexican coworker? Was it all of it?  
Was it none of it?

The last few solo trips home, I'd driven the two hours back across the state feeling disheartened and drained, usually crying. Maybe that should've hinted at what was ahead after this specific weekend. But I swallowed the maybes and returned to Ann Arbor with a sinking feeling I couldn't immediately catch.

The next bit is kind of a blur. I know I went to work the next morning, but I left at lunch. At that point, the weight of depression had submerged me far past consolation or concrete thinking. I went to a local bar, thinking I could drink the darkness away, but I never went in. I sat outside, spiraling and distancing myself from any of the worried texts that came trickling in. And then I drove to nowhere in particular, but I ended up out near M's house. I called her, and I didn't know what I was saying. Something between a cry for help and a way to pick a fight. She agreed to meet me in the parking lot next to a tiny trailhead in the middle of nowhere. When she showed up, I remember being mad that she had brought the dog. I don't know why. I just wanted to be upset. At

her. At the situation. At the world. Because I had no idea what was happening inside myself.

She convinced me to come back to her dad's house, where she was staying. And then, I shut down. Completely powered down. I laid in her bed, spiraling inside myself, until I stopped everything. Stopped responding to her. Stopped eating. Stopped functioning.

The next morning, I had moved from just incredibly sad to scaring her. She asked if I was thinking of hurting myself. I didn't say yes, but I didn't say no. Because, I was having awful thoughts, like running my car off the road, but I knew I was too scared of dying to ever actually try something. She took me to the ER, where I learned you don't get to stay unless you're suicidal. We thought for a second about lying, but the straight A rule follower in me just couldn't. So, I left. Mad that the doctors couldn't just magically fix me. Why couldn't I just go in sad and come out relieved?

Instead, I crawled back into that bed and continued beating up on myself. M ended up calling my best friend, who dropped everything and drove up to Michigan to sit and keep me

company when M had to go to work. I wouldn't even talk to her.

A few days in, M was ordering food. She sat on the edge of the bed until I spat out what I'd like: a burger, which sounded especially good since I hadn't eaten at all. It's hard to describe to people what it feels like to be drenched in a depressive episode. It's like this weird Civil War reenactment inside yourself. Line after line of your inner saboteurs marching toward you, firing, reloading, and firing again. The sound of gunshots and delusional drums drowning out any compassion or reason. Until, at a certain point, you lose the energy to fire back.

I heard M get home from picking up dinner. She came up and told me the food was ready. I asked if she'd just bring it up to me. She said no. If I wanted it, I would come downstairs and eat. I was so upset. I couldn't. I could not escape the bedroom battle. So, I sat and stewed. Until finally, my hunger won out, and I left the bed that I almost lost myself in. I shuffled down the stairs. It was a start.

Step one, more therapy, which is really just one giant lesson in unpacking your shit, evaluating it, and refolding it in a way that serves you

better. And then, you slowly build a toolkit to throw open when life tries to derail you.

I was like a Russian nesting doll, one layer after another. When I got to the last layer, I was so relieved. I'd done it. Until, I heard the rattle of one more piece inside. I did what years of therapy had taught me not to do, and I ignored it. The only thing that would drown out my core's cacophony was self-destruction. Taking a flask of whiskey to the bar when drinks were already \$2 until 11. Flirting with people. Flirting with disaster, like driving home drunk. A mess. A mess I thought I had cleaned up already.

And then, like the burger, came the article. An essay by Daniel Ortberg talking about when he realized he was trans. And in those sentences, I finally found a small shred of my own truth. Found that missing label. It hit me very hard. A brief moment of relief demolished quickly by fear. Another identity? Another transition? Another change? Another coming out? Another transformation?

On the couch with M, I managed to sputter out that I'd kissed someone else before hyperventilating in a way I'd only seen in movies and finally saying, "I think I'm trans." It

was too much at once. Too many emotions at once. I just wanted to run away from that reality, from that last pesky doll rattling around inside of me.

In the middle of the night, I tearfully said goodbye to my cat, grabbed a six pack from the fridge, and slipped out. I went to the woods, to the middle of nowhere by the lake. I parked. I walked down and sat in the cold by the water's edge. And one after another, I opened the cans, hoping I could re-swallow my new reality. I ignored everyone, including desperate calls from the people that cared about me the most, including my therapist. I was at the bottom. I texted my childhood best friend and said, "I think I'm trans, and I want to kill myself." We texted back and forth. I can't remember exactly what was said. I just remember looking across the lake, thinking, "I cannot do this. I can't take this journey. I don't have it in me."

But, I did have it in me. I left the dark woods and found my way back home. I left the bottom to begin.

### 3. The lion, the witch, and the closet inside the wardrobe

Coming out is exhausting. In every way. Something inside of you that just needs to burst out in an explosion of erratic emotions, even though you know it will blow up everything around you. The way it used to be. The you that everyone knew...or thought they knew.

First love has the strength to catapult you into the bravery you had been seeking. My first love happened just at the end of high school, which is a time already overloaded with question marks and tumultuous unknowns. But there she was. On a decades old couch in a dark basement scattered with Green Day posters and Sega Genesis games. She laid next to me, and we kissed. A first kiss that started the butterfly migration I thought I'd never see. But there it was. For us. I could be that giddy, too. What a gift, to know what could be, what was possible.

A whirlwind summer ended in inevitable change. Different schools in different states. A pain in my chest I thought was just the myth of longing poets and emo bands. All the emotion packed into an uncomfortably tight box of secrecy. The happiest and hardest thing that had happened to me, and I couldn't tell anyone.

She left with her family on a vacation to North Carolina a week or so before I was set to start school in Indianapolis. I'd be gone before she was back. I had found a part of myself, and now it was on the way to a beach in the Outer Banks. The only person who knew. The only person that I let see me.

So, I did what any heartsick 18 year old would do. Without telling anyone, I got in my car and headed for the coast. I just needed it not to be over. I needed that small window of belonging not to close. I made it as far as Virginia before I called my parents in Ohio. They could not understand why it meant so much to me to see her, why I needed just one more day. And then, in a random rest area, I spoke. She was my girlfriend. I loved her. And I could not face losing that. I cried. I don't remember exactly

what they said other than asking me to come home so we could talk. And so I did.

Looking back, maybe it was less about driving toward love's comfort and more about driving myself into the reality of finally opening up.

Talking to my parents started a cascade of other admissions. No one was surprised. They had known before I had. I was lucky enough to have life mostly go on as it had, without losing the relationships that had propped me up for years. But, it was not easy. Each honest confession came with the gut punch of what if. What if this time they turned away from me? What if this time I lost?

The thing about coming out is...it never ends. Every new person, every new job, every new town, brings a new set of people that get let into your truth. With every bit of small talk, you prepare yourself for their reaction when you drop in pronouns they might not expect. With each year, I paused a little less and words came out more fluidly. Until one day, it didn't even make me blink. No more energy expended on second thoughts or tiptoeing around until my calves ached.



And just when I could coast along confidently, I circled back to the starting line. Back to a place where only I knew exactly who I was. The closet is smaller and darker the second time around. All alone with the clothes nobody wears and that box of old stuff you haven't opened since you moved five years ago. It was almost too much. For a moment, I didn't think I had it in me to open the door again. It had taken all I could give the first time. I was tired.

My favorite people had all adapted alongside me. They knew me. They accepted me. Being a lesbian was a non-issue. And here I was, at 35, getting ready to ask them to evolve with me again.

Before they could, I'd have to tell them. The thing about speaking it into existence is that, even when you are 99.9% sure they'll love you no matter what, even if they have other trans friends, even if they've marched beside blue and pink flags, that .1% creeps inside your mind. It's multiplied by headline after headline letting you know that some people will loathe you regardless, until your inner saboteurs shift the decimal from .1000 to 100.0.



## 4. In other big news

The ebbs and flows of my relationship with family over the last 6 or so years could be a whole other book. At the time when I started testosterone, we weren't really talking too much, but my dad and I would exchange emails every once in a while. Mostly, they were full of the typical dad content: job updates, taking care of 401Ks, last week's playoff game, etc. I knew I wanted to say something about transitioning, since it was the biggest news in my life so far. We all have things we struggle saying for hundreds of different reasons. But, if it helps at all, here's how I initially explained it:

### **Friday, July 19, 2019**

In other big news that has been hard to figure out how exactly to share with you guys (I was hoping to in person)...a couple months ago, I started medically transitioning from female to male. What does that mean? Well, basically that I take testosterone once a week, and my body will start to change accordingly. It took 36 years for me to come to and unbury this, but I finally have and I couldn't be more excited and proud of

myself. I just want to be my authentic self, inside and outside.

I know this might not make a lot of sense to you, but just know you've raised an incredibly strong, unique human that will continue to do great things, regardless of how life may change.

I love you,  
Kelly

He never really addressed it after that, but the relief was in the telling, in the new boldly honest relationship I had started to carve out with him. I do think cracking up that concrete facade creates a contagious vulnerability sometimes, even if it takes years:

**Tuesday, December 28, 2021**

Hi Kel, My hope is that the two of us have been too stubborn to reach out to each other. Hopefully we can re-open communication. I definitely would like you in my life, however short it may be. So if you see fit let me know about your life, both physically and mentally. Have you avoided the dreaded COVID. We

have had the 3 shots. So far so good. Maybe you can update me on all your changes. I heard you are living in Lansing..still have the same job? Hope you are happy in general. Thanks to UofM and a "donor" pig I've been given a few more years. As I said, my hope is you can again be a part of my life. I miss you so much..we always had a special relationship. All my love, Dad

## 5. Caspers and Cupids

My dating pools have always seemed more like backyard ponds. But the more I talk with...every person...I realize it's the same for them, regardless of who they want to date. Maybe it's just really hard.

And now, with the devilish combination of pandemic precautions and dating app roulette, we are stuck distilling ourselves down to a handful of photos and some preset prompts. On top of that, I've moved from women seeking women, which was a narrow, but comfortable, landing to a wide open expanse of women who may or may not be interested in a trans man.

I went back and forth about what to put in my profile. The constant teeter totter between wanting to be upfront and honest and wanting to just be a man seeking a woman. Honesty wins out, mostly because I can't figure out what that conversation would look like down the road, after one date or two. And would she think I had been purposefully deceptive? For me, it was easier to just put it up on the screen in black and white font: Man (who has transitioned).

My therapist recently brought up the point that having to openly identify opens me up to potential ickiness and toxicity. I suppose it's a privilege that I hadn't had to think too much about that yet. Also, women tend to be less disgusting on a whole, so that certainly helps. But for trans women, especially, I can't even imagine. Most of us fill out a profile based on our own preferences, for which to put out into the world. For some people, protection must consistently pummel preference.

I put myself up on the app and put my new self out into the world. And...it wasn't as horrible as my inner gremlins made me think it would be. The trick is not letting every ghosting ignite the gremlins. "IT'S BECAUSE YOU'RE TRANS!

She read the profile more closely, and that was it.” But that, that’s my own insecurity. It’s not a fact. It’s a fictional story I tell myself when I want to wallow.

Sometimes, it’s just not a match.

It’s small, but in the early stages of putting myself out there, every like, every bit of babbling back and forth, is affirming. It rips a page out of the book I’ve written that says no one will date me now. I’m too short. Too feminine. Too too too. Too is not true. I have a few things to offer for sure. Here are just a few (in no order and also not applicable to all trans men of course, but a list to help you see some of the bright sides that may not always show through. Or maybe it’s just some bullet points to make me feel better. Regardless, please read and consider what it is you’d like to consider):

- The toilet seat is NEVER up.
- Toilet paper is always replaced.
- I’ve read Brené and Glennon and Mary Oliver.
- You will never have to have even the slightest fleeting worry about pregnancy. Say goodbye to birth control-induced hormonal sways and side effects.

- I know what a clitoris is and where to find it.
- I will not make a big deal or a big scene about tampons, pads, or periods.
- I know how bad cramps actually hurt, so I'll never scoff or roll my eyes.
- I do my own emotional labor, instead of dumping it onto you.
- If my penis isn't the right size for you, we can order one that's better. We can enjoy the trial and error.
- I like to debrief about the details.
- I'm masculine without the toxicity.
- The sex does not stop after I come once. Plus, no messy clean up.
- I don't need to imagine to understand.
- I am a feminist, by my words and my actions.
- I unironically watch women's sports because they are bad ass.
- I make fun of how ridiculous men are all of the time.
- And I have felt the misogynistic deck stacked against me. In ways, I still do.



## 6. Dancing in circles

Having a sex drive is fun. Reminds me of when I didn't know I needed glasses in high school, assuming everyone had to squint at the scoreboard when dribbling the ball up the court. Then I tried on a friend's glasses. Clarity. A realization of what I'd been missing for months. I'd assumed my interest or lack of interest in sex was average at worst. What I absolutely did notice, however, was how timid I was. It took until very recently to realize that I'd never actually asked for anything during sex. I buried that under the cover of "being a giver". I didn't need the attention on me. Of course, if you don't like your naked body, it makes sense that you don't want anyone to focus on it. Funny how I spun that into a selfless badge of honor instead of what it actually was, feeling less than myself. I was craving confidence. I wanted to be James Bond, minus all the misogyny and with manhattans instead of martinis.

When I was in elementary, I would often pretend to be a secret agent, always rescuing a woman at the very last moment, who would fall instantly in love with me and my heroism. I'd pack my dad's old briefcase with Nerf guns

and a walkie talkie and army crawl down the hallway. A whole world of espionage inside my excited brain. I always rescued the girl, which in reality was my extra pillow (which doesn't quite need additional elaboration at this juncture). In my mind, in those moments, I could be the suave, confident, forward man that I could never be in reality.

Injected with hormones and confidence, things changed. As my friend B said early on, "Get ready to want sex all of the time and be mad when you can't get it." Luckily, the angry part hasn't shown up or perhaps is constantly snuffed out by the running ticker of feminist rhetoric and realizations running at the bottom of my memory, right before the lyrics to every Garth Brooks song and right after whatever odd idea I have this minute. (Opens a new tab to look at the best binoculars for beginner birding.)

But the desire, the desire is definitely there, mixed with a new infusion of boldness. (Author's note: My old version of bold was dancing in the vicinity of a cute girl for the whole night in hopes she would be so taken with my one-two step that she'd pull me close and never let go until the following morning.

So, this newer, bolder spice only took me to pepperoni levels.)

I was still nervous to kiss the first woman I dated as a man. But I did. It took me until the very last minute, having already put my boots on to leave. Old me would have mulled it over until I absolutely overthought it into paralysis, kicking myself for days after. But, I did it. I leaned in and kissed her, then pressed her against the wall, her leg wrapping around me. If I would have just left, the old pitiful feeling would have crept in again. Instead, what passed between us moved the gauge from pitiful to powerful.

With her, sex became synonymous with play, with unabated desire. We talked about what we wanted to try. I finally let myself dive into what I wanted, what I craved. And now it's only forward from here. I'm only forward from here.

## 7. Undercover other

A couple months ago, I went to my first Pride since starting my transition. Streets full of color and joy. An actual space for everyone. I went with my friend J, who I am now convinced knows every gay man in Metro Detroit. We went for drinks at the packed gay bar, and something hit me I wasn't expecting.

I no longer fit.

Sure, I'm still the T in the LGBTQ alphabet mafia, but as I watched introductions being made and drinks sheepishly being bought, I realized none of it was for me. What a wild thing to feel alone in a sea of rainbow unity. Now, I'm just a boring white dude that likes women. And yet, hyper straight scenarios (Read: A sports bar called the Nuthouse where bartenders wear shirts that say "We screw. We nut. We bolt.") do not seem to be for me either. A new man in no man's land.

So, where do I fit? As if it's an endless swirling parking garage, and somewhere there's the exact space for me. If I just choose the right turn. If I just let that car go in front of me.

Tricked constantly by the motorcycles masked by F150s.

I've changed spaces and climbed to new levels, and it's starting to sink in. There's no magic spot for me. I need to park wherever and take the stairs to the top before I miss the sunset. The lines are made up. We cannot fit if we're constantly changing. In fact, the times I've felt most out of place have been when I'm surrounded by people who want so desperately to fit that they'll reshape the best parts of themselves to make it work.

~

I spent decades wishing I could just be a man. That people could see me, identify me, as who I knew I was on the inside. And then, one day, that just starts happening, until you're startled by a stray ma'am among a litany of sirs, bros, mans, and dudes. And every one of those confirmations, even if they are silly, even if they come from a 24-year-old bartender at Buffalo Wild Wings, are affirming...are a grain of sand rebuilding a beach that had been eroded.

But then, a random wave of realization. Now, most people simply see me as a straight white

man. The privileged patriarchy I have been taking jabs at since my first women's studies class 20 years ago. Years of finding familiarity and family among society's underdogs. Rallying together to chip away at a foundation that had failed us, that had failed most.

And now...now I sit here at a bar in a flannel and a Red Wings hat, looking like any other average white man from Michigan. And when people look at me, they see the assumptions earned from all the assholes that have added toxic waste to the masculinity landfill. I want to wave a flag saying, "Not me. Not me." What to do when what you've desperately needed for so long is in exact contradiction to what society needs more of?

In this way, I join a new club of invisible others. Society's spies that lull you into comfort until your true colors show. I imagine there must be bisexual folks that understand, especially those in seemingly "heterosexual" relationships. Some of the baddest Bs in LGBT, often underrepresented and unappreciated.

I suppose there is a new type of power that comes with smashing expectations from within. People tended to bite their tongue around the

very obvious lesbian, but now they slip into the comfort of a locker room society, where the towels tend to come off and assbattery is revealed. And it's now become my job to double cross them with a double jab of accountability and embarrassment. Because whatever THAT is...is not me. I am something more. An invisible warrior with indivisible strength.

## 8. The bearded elephant in the room

The world shrinks when you're worried about other people's comfort. I spent years leaping and twisting myself to be sure everyone else was having a good time. If I picked the restaurant for a group of friends, then it became my duty to make sure no one had any complaints, tracking down servers or running up to the bar to get drinks if the wait was taking a few minutes longer than expected. Their happiness was my responsibility, even though their happiness was never within my ability.

Last weekend, I was getting ready for a Christmas party where there would be a lot of friends of friends. People I'd known peripherally for years but that had not seen me since the start of transitioning, and the anxiety crept in like a lyric you can't stop singing. I would be the bearded elephant in the room, noticeably different while everyone pretended they were unable to notice. And sure I could explain, but I don't want to have to. And sure people could ask, but they don't. What I would love for them to say is not, "Oh you're trans!" or "Oh you look different!", but just, "It's so good



to see you. You look wonderful.” “Loving the five o’ clock shadow.” And we move on.

However, what I realized in the days leading up to the party is that I was the only one putting so much thought into it. People, generally, don’t care. They aren’t thinking, “Oh my god what happened to Kelly!?” They are thinking, “Should I try the deviled eggs that Sarah brought even though they might make me fart in this room full of people?”

I was dipping back into the murky water of worrying about everyone else’s comfort. The Dumbo in the room is just discomfort, and I can’t manage other people’s comfort. It’s their job to do with that what they will. By now, I know my demeanor is warm and inviting. I know I’m showing up as me, in suspenders from Target, and that’s all I need to worry about. Anne Lammott says, “Help is the sunnyside of control.” Ironically, that always helps me.

It’s not my job to control every situation. As an empath, I’ll continue to sense others’ fluctuating feelings, but I don’t need to do anything with that information. I especially don’t

need to sponge it all up until my heart is bogged down and heavy.

In the end, I spent most of the night just giggling with my best friend. More concerned with eggnog than elephants.

## 9. Hair & there & everywhere

Having black hair against SPF 50 skin has been an odd mix of battles. Hair seems to be an issue, regardless. Women are expected to pluck and wax, while men are expected to keep the hair on their head while also growing it on their chin, but not on their back and shoulders. And yes, now I have thick black hair popping up on my shoulders. I expected this.

I have always been hairy. I'll never forget jumping barefoot on my friend's trampoline in middle school, when they started making fun of my hairy toes. I don't remember if I responded, but I definitely went home and shaved them, on that day and every day after. Even when I went through rebellious stages of letting my leg hair grow, I would still shave my toes. That kind of peer ridicule has a way of sticking around.

From early on, I had to wax my eyebrows and my upper lip. And I fought daily with whiskers jutting out mockingly from my chin. I'd feel one absent-mindedly and then it would consume me until I could go to the bathroom and pinch myself dozens of times until I pulled it out.

What if someone saw in the meantime? I'd be that weirdo bearded girl, the hideous teen she-wolf.

I...don't miss that. What a relief to welcome every whisker. To root them on, hoping they cover more and more of my face. No more shaving my legs or worrying about the happy trail on my stomach. Bring on the burliness. But now, now I'm anxious about going bald. Every time I run my hand through my hair and a single strand comes out, I think, "This is it." Of course, I know many sexy bald men. But, we humans are extremely good at making ourselves the exception. Sure every bald person I know is debonair and distinguished, but surely that wouldn't apply to me. (I ask my therapist almost every session why humans are so fucking hard on ourselves. She has yet to give me a satisfactory answer, no doubt to ensure her job security.)

If someone gets to know me and proceeds to reduce me to my receding hairline, then it's not a match. Do you hear that brain? Maybe believe it this time.

## 10. Trans positions

1. The first time I used an STP (Stand to Pee device), it was great to pee standing up, but I am not good at controlling my flow I guess. Nothing says sexy like a backfill of pee flowing onto your underwear. I'm already gun shy, so worrying about peeing or pouring down my leg was just never going to be practical. Maybe I'm doing it wrong? Maybe I just need to relax more? Maybe that last bit is true of everything in my life.
2. I really miss women's restrooms. The open chatter, the escape from whose been annoying you out in the bar, the swapping of makeup, of tampons, of soothing and supportive advice. There is a vibrancy, a strength, a commonality. Plus, it usually smells good and is clean. But now, like Dorothy returning to a lifeless black and white, I'm left with the Wal-mart experience instead of Target. The most startling thing is the silence. Absolutely no acknowledgment of one another. Head down. In and out. And 99% of the time, out before they wash

their hands. I am now convinced the unspoken fear of allowing trans men in bathrooms is that we know what it's like on the sparkling other side, and men are afraid we will expose them for spreading shaft germs all across the land.

I have brought this up with a few men. The most common response is, "Yea, but I'm just touching my dick." Oh sure sure. Then by all means go cram your hand in the bar nuts or hold hands with your girlfriend. Basically, the dark truth is that everything is blanketed in dong, much like society in general.

3. I definitely smell worse now. Man wafts. Gone are the days of pulling off a couple days without showering.
4. Testosterone has made it really hard to cry. I especially notice this when I watch Queer Eye. I used to cry every single episode. I still feel the welling up jamming into my throat, but nothing comes. I asked some of my guy friends about this. They said they cry a few times a year and always alone. They said it would build and build until one

day you'd drop a cup on the floor, and everything would burst out. I think my tears will come back. I hope they do.

5. I didn't realize grown men still called each other "champ". Or wait...is that a weird way to assert dominance? I'm the little champ, and you're the burly one? It's probably not that complex. Things usually aren't.
6. I knew I had made it when a man in his 70s was dropping off the porta-pot for my lake party, and we bonded over how it was the lady folk that needed all this special hullabaloo.  
Sidenote: Nothing feels more adult than reserving a porta-pot so your friends don't have to stress about their needs during a long day by the lake.
7. I really miss singing along to Always Be My Baby. I could hang with Mariah, at least that's what my rearview mirror told me. But then one day you open up your mouth and just creaky squeaks come out where lyrics used to be. How am I supposed to live my tire swinging, one moment in time fantasy?

Now I'm stuck literally finding my voice. I keep trying to sing along with my incredible friend's music, but she's a soprano. Even before, I was a reluctant alto. I've tried "harmonizing", which is really me singing the same exact thing as her but comically dropping my voice down as low as that one guy from Boyz II Men. I have found it hurts my throat less if I add a country twang. What if my new voice propels me into country stardom? I'm definitely as sappy as Tim McGraw when it comes to green grass and rockin' chairs. See y'all on tour.

8. I still have to fight the urge to look over my shoulder when someone calls me dude or man or bro. I started a new job this year, and in our first big company meeting, my CEO excitedly announced, "Kelly, dude, so happy to have you, man!" My thought in that moment was, "Oh that Kelly guy seems cool, and the boss is so genuinely glad to have him. Lucky guy."
9. Will my experience being a classically trained female and my incredible



personality make up for my 5'3" height? People say it doesn't matter, but every time a woman makes fun of an idiotic man on TikTok, she brings up his height and lack thereof. TikTok never lies. Although, I'm not an idiotic man, so I suppose I'm not in the loser's bracket that absolutely deserves to be roasted.

10. At what point do I need an ear and nose trimmer?
11. Why do I keep thinking about driving a woman around on a 4 wheeler or snowmobile? Is this the intro task to get into AP Manhood? I need answers. In the meantime, if anyone is interested in jumping on the back of my ATV (that I will need to rent after I worry about needing the extra insurance or not), then let me know.
12. Do my dogs and cats think I'm a stranger now? I know I smell horrible now and sound like a squeaky Darth Vader toy that needs new batteries, but they probably know. Right? Also, Macy and Penny, please don't run far away because I can't do the cute high-pitched

happy call for you anymore.

13. Swimming topless was one of the most euphoric things that's happened to me. It helped that it was at a fancy rooftop pool in the middle of Louisville. Somehow, I was all alone. I think because it was cloudy and too cold for the Southerners. I took some pictures of myself to mark the moment, and my smile is full.  
It'll take some time to swim in just shorts around other people, but that time will come and then pass into normalcy. Plus, even then, I'll probably still wear a long sleeve rash guard so I don't burn in places that have never seen the sun.
14. Do people really look at men's junk? Just a peek? The odd thing about packing for the first time is thinking the bulge is absolutely OBSCENE. I can't walk around the streets dick first. I see posts about sexy gray sweatpant imprints. How much is too much, if you're not Jon Hamm that is?
15. During a bold night fueled by newly found Freshman year feminist rage, I

wrote to the two girls I had crushes on in high school, the ones who kissed me over sheets and snuggled with me in hammocks. I told them that it had been so confusing for me. That some part of them had felt the same. (If years of therapy has taught me anything since then, it's that people love to have you explain their own feelings back to them.)

16. During one of my first weeks at my brand new elementary school, our gym teacher Mr. Carr split us up into boys and girls and sent us to opposite ends of the gym. Always the eager, obedient student, I jogged down with the other girls right away. The noise of dozens of giddy second graders moving around had just died down when, flipping his toupee to the side, Mr. Carr noticed something was amiss. "Hey! Get down with the boys!!" He looked right at me, but I still looked side to side in some desperate hope that one of the boys had miraculously ended up next to me as a silly joke. I froze, until the bold, brash J yelled out, "She's A GIRL!" I mean she wasn't wrong, but she wasn't right. I can only remember a handful or so of

things from elementary, but this one is permanently stuck. It's the perfect metaphor for why aggressively dividing humans into two camps is so painful.

17. My oldest friend, B, recently reminded me that all I wanted to do was play football with the boys at recess. He remembered a day when my mom and sister had dressed me in an awkward, overly-feminine outfit, and I was begrudgingly hanging out with him and a few girls by the monkey bars.
18. What are men doing about chest hair tickling the inside of your upper arm? Are most men just continuously tense because they constantly think a small spider is working its way up their arm?

## Overall

Being a kid during the age of film cameras means I don't have a ton of pictures of little me. Those I do have are grainy pictures of pictures I found in dusty albums that have been on the same shelf at my parents' place. There was something satisfying about peeling back that crinkly paper and peeling a photo away from the stickiness to see what handwritten message, if any, was on the back.

Somewhere in the early transition days, I found a picture of a picture on my phone while scrolling to look for something else. Without my mom's half cursive half print note on the back, I can't be positive how old I am, maybe third or fourth grade? Sometime after I was finally able to cut my hair really short. In the pic, that unkempt fringe is haphazardly tucked under a backwards Chicago Bulls hat (from right around the height of the Jordan era, when everyone I knew loved the Bulls). I'm wearing a plain tshirt that sits underneath denim overalls with one side unclipped. I have no idea what inspired that fashion choice. I'm sure I saw it somewhere. Oh! Maybe it was Fresh Prince? That probably started right around that time.

But what really gets me about this specific picture is my smile. A wide unapologetic grin complimented by the adventurous twinkle in my eye, the one that's hard to find in later photos.

I stared at that picture for a long time, a recognition swelling inside me. That overalled little kid was who I'd lost underneath layers and layers of new disguises.

But, there I was, complete with unencumbered and relentlessly comfortable joy. There I was. It was me.

I hadn't realized how much I'd wandered away from myself until that rickety time capsule cracked open. This little me instantly became my biggest motivation.

I promise not to lose you again.

I promise to spend each day reigniting that twinkle. You are still very much alive. Sorry if it was lonely in there for a bit. I hope you at least had Legos to keep you busy while you waited around for me to remember you.

Overall --

I'm just that 8 year old  
in overalls.

When all was ahead  
And nothing was over

Before I buried it all  
And assumed my boyhood was over

It's the all that holds you back  
Digging under  
when you should've gone over.

But now --  
Now there is hope all over  
Nothing is all over...  
Overall.

~