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SECRET PASSAGE

I.

The furnace in the house I grew up in was massive. As tall as my father and wide enough that it acted as a rumbling steel wall, partitioning one side of the basement from the other. The huge silver vents that protruded from it gave it the appearance of a metal octopus-monster, and when it came to life, the sound it made was more roar than hum. It had a six-by-six-inch glass window at its base, the pilot light visible inside. When it was dormant, there was only the single blue flame. But when the heat turned on, peering through the window was like watching hell being born. One moment, the blue flame would be silently flickering in an unknowable darkness and in the next, the furnace's giant belly was consumed in flame, brilliantly hot, blindingly light.

Though the whole basement was dingy and a bit spooky in the way of hundred-year-old-house basements, the area behind the furnace took on new levels of creep. It was very dark, for one. To get back there, I had to sort of hold my breath and then plunge into the black, pushing past the spiderwebs that clung to my face, shuffling my feet so as not to trip, while simultaneously reaching my arms out, grasping blindly for the thin cord to the single bulb that hung back there…somewhere. When I was smaller, I had to jump for the cord, which only made the stakes in that quiet darkness--racing against my own panic—that much higher.

Given the aforementioned furnace-monster, the spider-webs, and the terrifying small-child-consuming darkness, my sisters found very little reason to attempt the journey. When we played hide-and-seek, it was a safe bet that they never hid back there. But that little secret room did call to me. Once the elusive string was pulled and the light was on, there were treasures to be found; my dad's old paperbacks lining dusty shelves became my own private library. I

shamelessly read my parent's love letters, carefully tucked away in a cedar music box, even in the dim 15-watt lighting. There were baubles and gadgets—some from my parent's lives before kids, like my dad's old red yoyo that had survived the six or seven moves from the apartments and houses they lived in before settling down and having us. Or things that clearly predated my parents, things that had lived in the silent, dark room for decades without being touched—glass canning jars or giant, rusty bolts from god-knows-when, and going to god-knows-what. I had no idea what to do with them, but I still liked to hold them, to try to imagine things I could make with them.

On the wall across from the bookshelf was what must have been a crawl space, but I could only ever think of it as a secret passage—the kind you see in mystery movies. The door was made of white wood planks and held in place by two twisting wood handles. It was large enough to climb through, but I never did go inside. Sometimes, when I had enough courage, I would open the door, stand on my tiptoes, and peer into the black. The air smelled differently in there—stale, but also earthy. If there were things inside, it was too dark to make out what they were. Almost an impossible distance away it seemed, there was a small square of light. The crawl space was under the front porch, so this must have been a vent to the outside. But it seemed more magical than that to me back then, like it was an entrance to another world.

II.

There is a photo that shows, better than words, how I was as a child. It's a picture taken at Easter of my sisters and me. My older sister is dead center, holding our pet bunny. Her long, dark hair falls in waves down past her shoulder. Her brown eyes sparkle. To her side is my little sister, her red hair shining in the sun. They are both smiling at the camera, happy and at-ease in their new Easter gunny-sack dresses and white gloves. And there I am, leaning slightly forward,

one corner of my mouth turned up, my short blond hair brushed for once, in what has since been coined, “the pink tuxedo.” I am wearing an eight-year-old’s suit, with broad lapels and a dapper vest, in Pepto-Bismol pink. I am doing my best to look handsome.

While my mother reluctantly agreed that I could wear a suit instead of a dress on that particular occasion, she could not be prevailed upon to purchase the item in gray, black or blue. Hence: pink. The clothes I wore as a child were the outcomes of ongoing negotiations with her on the level of Paris peace talks. Both sides won and lost in these interactions; both sides at times gave up utterly and then regrouped, pushing strongly for their own agenda, before returning to the table for further détente. One of my earliest memories is of hiding under my bed in a doomed attempt to escape the awful fate of having to wear a dress to my christening. Conversely, I’m sure my mother bit back comments any number of times when I came down dressed for school in baseball caps or camouflage. She could never understand why I didn’t want to go swimming with my sisters on hot summer days; wearing a one-piece instead of trunks seemed like such a silly hang-up to her. This was the 80s, after-all. If there were places where gender identity discussions were taking place, it wasn’t in my house.

Which is not to say that it was a constant battle. I think there moments when we all seemed to forget that I was biologically female. While she balked at buying me super-hero briefs or a genuine Rambo knife with a compass in the handle, the highlight of each birthday was getting to pick a new Star Wars iron-on at the T-Shirt shop. My best friend was a boy, and we pretended we were ninjas and GI Joe. We rode dirt bikes and played football and basketball until the porch lights came on. When my sisters and their friends played with us, Mike and I were the husbands, the soldiers, they were the nurses, the wives.

Not that little girls can't pretend that way too. It's just that I've lived so long as two people that it's hard to remember that there were some times early on that I did get to be undivided; when the ambiguity that descended at puberty like a poison gas and that I would shoulder into adulthood was still safely at bay and no one, not friends, not family, not even myself seemed confused about who I was.

Of course, the moments were fleeting, even back then. With each year that passed, how I was drew more and more attention—what was once tolerated as an eccentricity when I was a toddler and young child took on an undeniably tense charge. It's hard to pinpoint the exact age when people's patience with how I presented was all used up, when strangers turned unkind, when the double-takes of older women in public restrooms became malicious, when my family began, with soft, tender words (which almost made it worse), the constant refrain of suggestions about how to "act more ladylike."

My parents and I never really talked about it. I have no idea what they perceived; what they understood. It may be that they knew perfectly well what they had on their hands. Yes, they were a little distracted by work stress, money problems and jugs of *Ernest & Julio Gallo* wine, but they were good people. I like to think that if we all had lived somehow in a vacuum, they may not have blinked or skipped a beat. I suspect that their veiled concern wasn't only dictated by their feelings about needing to correct people when I was called a boy, or by any latent biases they had from growing up in a small farm town, never having had cause to question the gender binary. Although all of that may have been true, they also were probably very worried at what the world would do to me. Which, in retrospect: fair.

III.

Imagine the *Wizard of Oz*, but in reverse; opening the door and going from brilliant technicolor to black and white in the span of a few minutes—that was like the grist mill that Junior High became for me. I had the privilege of growing up sheltered; protected for the most part by a loving and well-meaning family, my strangeness indulged, if not exactly celebrated. And from that first day of seventh grade—as suddenly as a soap bubble popping—my reality altered to one of almost constant fear, shame and isolation.

At the core of it was my gender identity. I had experienced the question, "are you a boy or a girl?" before seventh grade, and when it happened it did preview the bullying that was to come, but now it seemed like the most important question in the world to everybody, including me. As many times as it happened, the interactions were always the same: I would be alone, I would be approached by a girl or by a few girls. There would be a barely suppressed mirth and a feigned benign confusion (as if it was necessary to ascertain my gender status as a part of a graded research project, due Monday). The question would be asked, and then, always, the slow, cruel smiles would come as I asserted as evenly as I could, "girl" (an answer I had to choke out because it didn't feel true). This was followed by satiated giggles or outright laughter. It got so sometimes I could sense the question coming even before it seemed to occur to the perpetrator, so that I wanted to say, "girl" before it was even asked. There was never any winning; heaven help me for the times I tried to switch it up with: "what do you think I am?"

I could keep my face blank, blank, blank, my voice even. But I hated the way I would flush, the sweat that would form immediately on my lip and in my pits, the nausea that settled in

my stomach. It felt dangerous and charged. I learned quickly to avoid direct eye-contact, which helped only some of the time. The shame was palpable and heavy, so much so that my shoulders settled into their now permanent slouch. It could not be predicted or avoided. The more I tried, it seemed, the more it happened. I held my urine to the point of pain so many days to avoid the girl's bathrooms during school, but I still had to change in the locker room for P.E. Art class, which had been a haven for me in grade school, seemed to present countless opportunities for THE QUESTION (was it because I dared to look peaceful or content there, sitting by myself quietly drawing?). At times I would wonder why people I barely knew cared so much about my gender. I was too young to understand that while these girls were undoubtedly getting some base personal thrill or satisfaction out of it, they were also society's unwitting actors too, recognizing at some level a threat to the binary, and enforcing order through their anything-but-innocuous questioning.

Boys were much more straightforward, though no less terrifying. They never needed to ask; they just seemed to know. And because I dared to look like one of them without the requisite anatomy, all bets were off. A possible upside to the patriarchal system: boys are taught early that women are delicate; it is taboo to be physically violent with a girl. While it can be argued how well that rule is ever truly followed, it certainly did not apply to me. Passing periods were…fraught. I was short, I was skinny, and they could smell the fear in me. I lost count of the perfectly timed collisions, the blows to my shoulders or torso that ping-ponged me against cold metal lockers or worse, another unyielding body. I learned the lesson of weaving around males so well that to this day I step off the sidewalk when one passes me. They never spoke to me, and their gaze never fully landed on me.

This indoctrination, this aligning, was State-sanctioned, too. Though the teachers were required to stand in the hallways outside their classrooms during passing period, not one of them ever intervened on my behalf. I used to believe that they just hadn't seen; that they didn't do anything because they didn't know. Then, on one of so many days like it, I was carrying my giant, three-ring-binder—with dividers neatly labeled for all seven classes and full-to-bursting with college-rule paper—to my next class. As I passed my own seventh-grade English teacher, Mrs. Baronway, an older, bigger kid slapped it out of my hands. Gen-Xers will know this about three-ring-binders: when they are thwacked forcefully enough, they will hit the floor just right and the rings will open. And then all the paper comes out. And then everyone else kicks the paper up and down the hall, glad it's not them and so happy to be in on the joke. There was so much that was terrible about that moment, but what I still see perfectly so many years later is the smirk on my teacher's face—her small eyes twinkling out from under her blue eye shadow in amusement as I sweated and scrambled with tears in my eyes, trying to gather the papers scattered at her feet.

There were the things that happened, and then there was the fear of what would happen next. I became a 13-year-old insomniac. I would lie in my bed, listening to the reruns of M.A.S.H. my mother watched every night playing in the living room downstairs, and stare down the red minutes and hours on my alarm clock. At some point deep into the night I would drift off, which was terrible, because waking up in the 6:00 a.m. darkness to its maniacal bleeping was such a cruel and immediate return of anxiety and dread to my belly that to this day I can't hear a stock alarm sound without being instantly transported to that headspace of doom.

Things did not improve as the year rolled on. My sister and I would get off the bus in the mornings, and I would watch as she was enveloped into a circle of smiling girls. I would sit off

to the side on the trumpet case I had plastered with scratch-n-sniff stickers back in happier times and watch the various groups forming before the bell rang. Some of these kids were rocking adolescence, for sure. They wore the right clothes; their hair always fell into place and their make-up was just-so. But there were also the nerdy ones, and the stoners and the dorks, who were all clearly struggling and awkward in their own ways. It was too much to believe I could ever be a part of the popular crowd like my sister, but what I couldn't understand was why I couldn't even pull membership in those other, "lesser" cliques. I had no friends; no one to walk with in the hallways, no one to sit with at lunch. No protection. No acceptance. Ever.

Because I was so thoroughly, undeniably, entirely rejected, there was no other option but to conclude there was something very wrong with me; that fundamentally, I was a mistake. It was a full-blown existential crisis; a burden the weight of which I couldn't shift or share or put down. I didn't have the maturity, the perspective, the language to think my way out of it, or the trust in others to ask for help. And so, continuing on, for me, boiled down to a choice: who I was wasn't okay, so I had to become someone else. I made the decision that in order to survive, I had to kill who I really was and bury that person like the mafia hides its hits.

Figuring out how to do that was its own challenge. I was too ashamed to ask my sisters or my mom. Admitting I wanted to become a girl felt like acknowledging the unthinkable: that I hadn't been before. So, I watched; intently and so, so carefully. I remember covertly eyeing other girls as they put their make-up on in the locker room after early morning basketball practice. I could throw a football in a tight spiral, and I knew all the names of World War II airplanes, but how much blush to use and where to put it felt like trying to learn a lost language with no codex. I started growing my hair out, and I got my ears pierced. The dull throb from the

cheap mall earrings was foreign and unwelcome, but I liked it because it felt manageable; it was a pain that finally made sense.

Some things were easy to change: different clothes, a hot pink Esprit bag instead of a backpack. Others were much harder: I had to learn that girls almost never put their hands in their front jean pockets, that they fold one leg over the other at the knee, instead of ankle-to-knee like boys do. After an intermural basketball teammate told me she recognized me on my way toward the gym even in the dark because of "the way I walked," I began the daily practice of remembering to shorten my stride. Like a queer anthropologist, I was always quietly observing, making mental notes about ways to change how I existed in the world. These were just some of the things I had to remember on my long, always incomplete, how-to-be-a-girl-list: when boys look at their nails, they hold their hands up, palm out and fingers extended; girls flip their palms toward their face and curl their fingers down. When girls check the bottom of their shoes, they lift a leg behind themselves and look back over their shoulder; boys pick up their foot and look down. I kept watching and making furtive changes, pleased when I got something right; devastated all over again when I failed, and those changes didn't seem like they would ever add up to enough.

But then things…got better. Not all at once; my transfiguration took most of junior high. There were still some nasty comments, aggressive interactions. I was still bullied at times. But I got better and better at the wardrobe, the make-up, the hair, the ways to behave, the things to say. Eventually, it was no longer a question of "passing." I learned enough, rehearsed enough, curbed the way my body wanted to move enough, that to everyone else and even on some levels to myself, I was a girl. It also helped that biologically, my body was starting to agree. My breasts

and hips became an irrefutable passport to the women's restroom, and I was so grateful for that, even if they otherwise felt foreign and unwelcome.

And in response, my family exhaled a collective and decade-long-held sigh of relief. Nothing was ever said; nothing was overt. I could just feel it silently emanating from them. My sisters no longer had to explain who I was, and *how* I was, to their friends. The lines around my mother's eyes softened just the littlest bit. There was less worry, more ease. When we gathered for Thanksgiving or Christmas with my backwards, small-town relatives, there were no longer sideways looks, pauses in conversation that lasted a second too long, drunken comments I got the gist of but was too young to entirely understand. Any pain my dad felt at losing his quasi-boy, his catch-partner, his Broncos-watcher, must have been assuaged by the audible click of conformity, the sudden release of the fear and anxiety a parent feels for their trans child.

I became eligible for friendship. I didn't stop playing sports, and I was liked and accepted for being a good athlete, so long as I was willing to be clear about my gender and my sexuality. I didn't have access to enough language to parse out the differences between gender identity and sexual preference, but I knew that there was something wrong with me, whatever you called it, and I knew it had to stay hidden. This was the late 80s; AIDS was an epidemic and homosexuality was still anathema in my suburban Colorado town. Homophobia was the norm, not the exception among my peers. Girls' sports were still a bit of a novelty 10 years into Title IX, and sapphism in women's basketball was its own sort of Red Scare. The more you denounced dykes and proclaimed your own straight-as-an-arrow straightness, the safer you were, the more you were welcomed. Unfortunately, my willing and vocal collaboration never gave me much pause; I was so relieved for the isolation to be over I would have sold my soul a thousand times over.

More than that, though, I got to have a best friend through high school. We laughed, we passed notes in class, we had sleepovers. I told her most things, just not the one thing. It was a feeling I would become so, so familiar with over time—the magical pull toward intimacy, the desire to know and be known…that could only ever go so far. Sometimes I thought I could actually feel the thud of that doomed hope hitting the wall inside of me; no relationship could scale it.

Although I felt the tug of attraction to girls, those feelings had to be killed and buried deep, too. I only ever dated boys. Being asked to homecoming, to prom, diving slowly into the world of high school sex felt strange, but also wonderful; the way that an actor feels when they win an Academy award—gratified, vindicated perhaps, for having played a part so well.

I know there were others, even back then, who chose differently. I am in awe of anyone who felt the way I did, and who was brave enough to honor it, to persevere through that maelstrom, because to me, it didn't feel like I had a choice. Or if I understood it as a choice, it felt like life or death. I chose to be an imposter, and for the love and acceptance I received—both in my personal relationships and from society at-large—I thought I could pay any price.

IV.

So, I went about building a life on that choice. I knew the boy who would become my husband in high school, but we didn't date back then. He was athletic and handsome—with dark brows and piercing blue eyes. He was funny and driven and so far out of my league I never once considered the possibility. But we ended up in college together and became friends. I showed him the campus when he first transferred and after, we started spending more and more time together. Eventually, he became my best friend. We played basketball, went to movies, shopped;

we got coffee together at trendy 90's coffee nooks. I told him most things, just not the one thing. At some point, something shifted for him, and we became more than friends. I had been complaining to him about my boyfriend over pizza one night when he simply asked, "why don't you date me?" By the next day I had broken up with my boyfriend and we were together.

Whereas sex with my ex-boyfriend had been awkward, unsatisfying and infrequent, my husband and I spent the first years together fucking all the time. A latch-key kid with a porn habit that substituted as his caretaker, he was an undiagnosed sex addict. He had been obsessing over and objectifying women from an extremely young age. I was only too happy to be the subject of the XXX scripts he ad-libbed in his mind. At first, it made me feel desired and wanted, not for who I was, but even better, for who I was not—a woman.

I had never been so glad to be someone else. All my life I was convinced that I deserved less, that I would receive less, and that I needed to learn to accept less, because I had been born Other. But when he turned his attention to me, I felt like I finally got to win at something. When I told him I loved him, I meant it. He loved me too—the me that I gave him. The problem for both of us was that Other me. As much as I cared for him and as much as I sought an intimate connection with him, a part of me remained hidden and apart. It was like I was watching a movie of someone else falling in love. I felt like I had six winter coats under my skin and that the feeling could only seep in one or two layers deep.

I think things felt off for him, too. As much as I've bragged about my impersonation skills, I was never able to remedy all my tells. The first Christmas we were together, he gave me a little girl's mommy's make-up kit as a gag gift. I laughed, but I didn't think it was funny. Any passing or pointed reference to my femininity always seized my heart and made me instantly queasy—the way a hidden criminal feels when he hears a heavy knock on the door. He was a

meticulous dresser and obsessed with his hair. His good looks, fashion sense and confidence conferred on him an expertise on appearances that I never questioned. I felt lucky for the subtle suggestions he made to me—slowly at first, but increasing over time—about my make-up, hair, clothing, nails. I was always a good student in school, but despite my best efforts at mimicry, I felt I had struggled to fully pull off my assigned gender role. Now, finally, I believed I had found someone who could tell me with absolute certainty and authority exactly how to be a woman.

Together, we entered into a decades-long dysfunctional relationship that pivoted on my insecurities and his never-quenched desire for more. Striving for love and acceptance, for legitimacy, had become what I knew how to do. Maybe he would have found what he was searching for with someone who identified resolutely and indisputably as a woman, but with me he got a project he could never quite finish. Perhaps prompted by a vague and unnamed frustration that although I had all the right parts and said all the right things, I was not what I said I was—and not what he thought he deserved—he would press my edges more firmly into the mold he had in his mind, and I would shift and shrink and pinch to try to fit.

But anyone who's lived on the outside will tell you being loved by mistake or being loved under false pretense still feels pretty-damn good. And so, so much better than not being loved at all. I wasn't naïve enough to believe it was a fairy tale. I knew that I would always be different and so would always have to be a little lonely; but by being with him, I didn't have to be *alone*. With him, I was safe, I was accepted, I was sanctioned. When Matthew Shepard was beaten and killed only miles from where I had sat taking law school notes the same day, I was so sad, and yet also very insulated from the fear I used to feel. It was something terrible that happened to someone who didn't fit in the way I had figured out how-to. Nonbinary wasn't a word, or at least not one I had ever heard. When I saw trans people or butch women in person, on tv or the

movies, I yanked my attention away like I had touched a hot stove. When relatives laughed and joked about my tom-boy days at our wedding, I smiled through the shame and pretended, even to myself, that it had all been just a phase.

It is disingenuous to suggest that choosing that life didn't make so many things easier, didn't bring me so many gifts, so much joy and love. Or that it didn't spare me from pain I can only begin to imagine. I got to marry my best friend. I didn't have to overcome our families' prejudices or suffer social or theological condemnation. I took for granted the rights and privileges heterosexual marriage (the only legal marriage at the time) conferred. When I wanted to hold his hand in public, or kiss him, I just did. Strangers didn't stare at us; we risked nothing walking down a street together. We applied for jobs and got them. We applied for loans and got them. We bought cars and houses and furniture together. We reaped the financial rewards and prestige that society confers on all white, cis-gender, heterosexual couples.

Eventually, I became pregnant with our first daughter, then two years later, our second. I got to feel them growing inside me; to experience the simplicity of my body taking care of theirs, without complication or even conscious intention. For the first time, my parts did not seem like a mistake to me; becoming a mother allowed me the peace of finally appreciating my biological sex for what it was and what it could do. I never felt the pain of trying to conceive by IVF, or of trying to adopt; instead, I got to experience the miracle of my husband's eyes manifested in my oldest, to kiss my own-same-colored blond hair on my youngest's round toddler head. I got to revel in the sounds of their voices, so much like mine, and to be amazed by their sheer muscular strength, so much like his. I got to focus on how hard it was to have small children, to be just their "mom;" I didn't have to try to explain to them, or to others, the things I never knew how to explain, even to myself. I worked part time and made passable dinners. We would wait,

giggling, by the garage door for him to come home so we could pelt him with beanie babies. We would read, all together, after bath time in the big bed and I'd smile and watch my daughter in her jammies jump with blind faith from the top of the stairs into his waiting arms as he stood on the landing. Having kids with my husband finally soaked through all my winter layers—I fell entirely in love with him and the family we created.

I got to raise my girls in a nuclear-family photo at a post-millennial time when being a non-traditional family was still taboo. But the thing about photos is that while they try to capture time, they are almost never only what we first see. I have dozens of photo albums with pictures of the four of us together—on high mountain trails, grinning at the Gulf of Mexico, gathered around a Christmas tree, faces smudged with ice cream on Pearl Street with all the tulips blooming, or cradling beloved pets, long-gone, in our arms. But we are not just the *nows* in the photos—we're the *befores* and probably the *afters*, too. Here we are at Disney: sweaty faces and broad smiles. But look closer: he is looking slightly away, with the same angst and unrest he felt as an isolated 10-year-old coming home to an empty house tensing the set of his jaw. I am standing there, smiling—a mother of two at 31—but there is also the pink-tuxedo me peering out at the world with sad eyes. Time and our own minds demand clarification and categorization of our histories—a neat chronology that lays out the linear progression of a relationship. But the truth is, we were not one thing to the exclusion of another: we were happy, and loved, and successful, and we were also very restless, lonely and heartbroken.

Our commitment to each other when we got married was for monogamy and fidelity, but in the first few years of our marriage, that was not something he was able to give me. When I found out, my youngest was an infant and my oldest was two. My husband was hospitalized after threatening suicide, our finances were a wreck, and I was left to somehow take care of our kids

and deal with my own emotional trauma in the minutes between naps, baths, feedings and tantrums. I was devastated. I felt the pain of rejection and betrayal that every spouse who is cheated-on feels. I was wrecked by the loss of all those pictures in the photo albums. When I looked at them, our past was obliterated, and the future was gone. I remember watching my two-year-old from the window overlooking her tumbling class with tears in my eyes—so very sad that the fairytale life I had crammed myself into was not how she would get to grow up after all.

And also, I was so scared. I was scared that he went outside our marriage because I had failed at being a woman. And I was also terrified that if I left over the betrayal, there would be nothing to keep Other me from resurrection. As deep as it had been hidden, it was never really gone, and of course I knew that. So when I lay in bed at night in the dark, wondering what to do and what that life would be; even though I was grown, and responsible, and drove a minivan, and employed, and paid taxes, and the therapist I finally broke down and went to see assured me adults can never be abandoned, it didn't feel any easier to contemplate than it had when I was 13. I didn't want to be different. I didn't want my kids to have different. I didn't want to be forced to reveal the freak that I had always known I was; to have my family and friends finally understand the truth of me, to be outed unwillingly because he had chosen to betray me. I'm sure that makes me a coward and weak. But also, I think I was still trying to figure out how to survive, and this time I was trying to keep my girls safe, too.

So, I didn't leave, and I guess I thought that it would be easier that way. As a divorce lawyer, I of course knew that other people ended their marriages over infidelity, and I certainly understood the reasoning. The damage to our friendship, to our intimacy, and to my self-worth all seemed blown into tiny, fleshy bits in an explosion of pain that left me feeling we were beyond repair. But even with all the sadness and hurt oozing and dripping out from under my

hands, I couldn't convince myself to just stop applying pressure and to instead embrace the me I had long-ago abandoned. I didn't even have to learn how to decide the pain and heartache didn't matter; I had done it all before. I knew how to seal it off behind a leaded door; how to ignore the ghosts of hope that whispered about a life that could be, like brushing hair out of my eyes.

Which is not to say it was easy. We worked hard to stay together—12 step groups, therapy, lots of lost conversations, full of angry and sad words, words that couldn't change what happened, or who we were. Some of the damage was irrigated; enough for it to scab over and after many years, to scar. Some trust returned, and always, the love was there. We stayed married, we stayed friends. We raised our daughters together. Eventually, I could look at our pictures again and see our past, present and our future.

We've been married for 25 years now. We've had so many adventures together—good and bad. We've camped and fished and hiked in the mountains we grew up beside. We've listened to a violin quartet from an open window in our hotel with a view of the Pantheon. We've laughed hysterically as I peed in his Starbucks cup speeding down the L.A. freeway, late to catch a plane at LAX. We've team-parented—adjusted to each other's strengths and weaknesses; made up for things the other lacked and gave our girls more time, more resources, more stability, than we could have apart. I've drained blood and pus from his leg after surgery. He was the first person I called when my mom died. I helped him care for his dad before he passed; he helped me care for mine. We've been there for each other and our children, through illness, through despair, through a pandemic. When our kids looked out at the crowd at school or sport events, we were always standing there together, waving back. We've listened as the other complained about work stresses, work goals. We've whispered our dreams for our girls and for

ourselves to each other. We've held each other so many nights. We have witnessed each other's lives.

But there have been costs for me to pay, too. At 13, I thought the Other me was dead and buried and that there would be no consequences for that crime. I thought back then that loneliness was the least of my problems—that the real me was the danger that threatened my existence. It's taken almost four decades to understand what I lost.

Mary Oliver wrote of Walt Whitman and his hidden sexuality,

> What else can we say? What else can we know? That it was not a trivial loneliness, or a passing loneliness, or a body loneliness only, but loneliness near fatal.

Her words for Whitman may as well have been her words for me, they feel so acute and true. Loneliness is a cancer; a malignancy that eats you slowly from the inside. I have felt beyond reach most of my adult life, because when no one really knows you, *no one really knows you.* And the truth is that I am so, so alone. And loved like we love pop culture icons—from a distance and only vaguely; not for who I really am. I have discounted it for years; told myself it's not that big a thing, after all. I've tried to remember there are so many others born into less privilege than I was; I've reminded myself over and over that it has always been my choice to live this way. But there are things that I think and do and feel that prove to me that there has also been real damage, that the decision was never benign; that tell me that although all those things are very true, it is also true that I am in a lot of pain.

In the category of too-much-information: one day I noticed a few years back that when I sit down on a toilet, my default position is to slouch forward, eyes closed, my elbows on my knees, my head in my hands. This is true if I'm in a public restroom stall or in my warm, quiet hall bathroom at home. This is true no matter what reason I have for being in the restroom.

When I follow the trail of feelings to discover why that is, the answer is that I am tired, and sad, a little bit, always. Those minutes alone in a space where no one else can intrude are the only moments I feel safe enough to take off the mask and catch a breath.

I started cutting when I was 17. Nothing dramatic or particularly noticeable. I'm a tidy person and in truth not really up for cleaning those kinds of messes. Also, it does hurt, and I worry about MERSA infections. As far as the actual cutting goes, I am a bit of a wuss and the drama of it all is embarrassing. But I have done it on and off over the years, enough to draw blood, enough to leave some faint scars. Even when I don't follow through, I think about drawing a blade through my skin every single day. The answer to why is that although cutting hurts, it hurts in a good way; it is a pain that feels governable. It is a tangible release, and a small relief. Like somehow through the blood-letting, I am getting a bit of the suffering out—I am trying to purge Whitman's pain.

And yes, there are times when I am so weary. When the exhaustion is soul-deep. When I feel like everything I am and do is wrong. In those moments, unbidden, come visions of a gun I don't own, barrel cold and firm against my chin, my finger resolute on the trigger.

My friends as an adult have mostly been dogs because they intuit truths about people on an atomic level; they understand you immediately without explanations, filters or bullshit. It's been a small reprieve for me that my dogs have always immediately known and accepted all of me, regardless of the clothes or make-up I wear, of the things I say or the way I act. For so long they have been the only other living creatures in this life who knew. But of course, those connections are limited also. They are furry incompetents, who require my constant care and protection, who are mostly mute, and who die too soon. My lack of human friends is a fact that my therapist scolds me for consistently. She says my world is too small, and that I am too

isolated. I struggled for a long time to explain to her why all my relationships with people can only go so far. That no matter how much I want to get closer to others, eventually, our interactions always end short of true intimacy. After so many promising starts that fizzle into small-talk-play-dates because I can't go deeper, the effort no longer seems worth the inevitable disappointment.

She should know. I have been going to her for 20 years now, but in fairness, she didn't see me cry until year five, so progress has been slow-going. I began therapy very reluctantly, after I discovered my husband's affairs. I trust almost no one, least of all myself, and therapy up to that point had always seemed like an obvious trap. But after our first session, when she looked at me for a long moment after I had dutifully recited all my husband's struggles and asked me, "but how are *you* doing?", I latched onto her like an orphaned monkey to a wire doll. The first 13 years we tried to unwind the tight knot of shame, loss and pain inside of me, but for all that time, I left out my most important fact. It was certainly supremely unfair of me, if not a little sadistic, to show up week-in and week-out seeking help, all the while withholding the existence of that Other me. It must have felt like trying to turn a doorknob with grease on your hands.

There were many moments during that time with her when the truth was as close to being voiced as it had ever been. I even brought that pink tuxedo photo in once. What was that, if not a desperate attempt to show, not tell? For years and years, I parked myself like a sad beagle on her couch, and at least 80 percent of every hour I spent longing for her to figure it out without me having to say the words. But if she had her suspicions, she understandably kept them to herself. I know it's no one else's job to tell me who I am. Still, it was frustrating to be forever tempted toward the truth, to stand as close as I ever had to the wall. To touch it, to look up and scan for a way over, and then retreat again. But as close as I came, again and again, the solid, strong,

rational part of me would step in and remind me that to keep safe the life I had chosen and those I loved most, the secret had to die with me.

VI.

And then, seven years ago: the Total-Barf-a-Rama. In the list of things I do related to Other me, drinking is one I haven't mentioned yet. As a child of alcoholics, I really should know better. I *do* know better. But I still insist on treating my pain with wine and gin. I still crave the numbness, the unclenching, the simultaneous detachment and assimilation; the integration inside of me that for a few blissful heartbeats allows me to feel whole. But it is always a tight-rope I walk 50 feet in the air with no net; balancing precariously between euphoria and a plunge into abject misery.

The Total-Barf-a-Rama took place on my husband's work outing at a comedy club. That evening, we encountered the woman he had the affair with back when the girls were small. The pain of that old betrayal, coupled with being surrounded by dozens of other people who knew what had happened, conspired with my always-constant sense of unbelonging and an open bar to create a perfect storm. There suddenly was not enough alcohol in the world for me to drink—I would have emptied strangers' discarded glasses…in fact, I think that I did. I didn't even know I was in trouble until I was puking all over myself and those unlucky enough to be seated near me in a scene that was indeed very reminiscent of the story Chunk confesses in *Goonies*. We fled. My husband was ashamed of me; I was ashamed of myself. Still drunk on the drive home, I said to him, "Why are we together? We both know I can't make you happy". He stared out at the highway for a long time, but only said, "You're drunk."

When I went to see my therapist a few days later, she was maybe a little over it all? Tired of waiting for a why from me for so long. So, she pressed more than she had before. She impatiently brushed the binge-drinking and vomiting aside in the first two minutes. She asked me to explain why I feel so alone with other people, why crowds always make me want to hide in a bathroom stall, why I feel like I never belong, no matter who I'm with. Maybe it was because I was still too weak and embarrassed from the abject, total and complete humiliation of bazooka-retching in front of my husband's mistress and 50 other insurance salesmen. Maybe it was because it was a "rock-bottom" of sorts, a forced self-flagellation brought on by my catastrophic decision to light my own personal dumpster fire on a Saturday night at the Denver Comedy Works.

Of course, those things. But also, maybe it was because she had finally earned enough of my trust over those many years. Enough trust anyway, so that my inner skeptic, already exhausted from agonizing over my sloppy weekend dramedy let down its guard at the same moment that Other me glimpsed a way through. My ears were both silent and full of the noise of my own blood pulsing in my head. My lungs and heart seized; my stomach clenched. The second hand on her little clock kept marking time, a fact I found confusing because it felt like the universe should stop when I said to her, "Do you remember that photo of me in the pink suit? That's who I really am. That's why I'm never okay." I told her that for as long as I can remember, I have not felt I was a woman, and that my biology certainly excludes me from being a man. I told her I know I will never belong to either gender and that the shame and fear born from that fact has informed every single thought, decision, interaction and relationship my entire life.

I was both horrified and unbearably relieved at the same time. I think I was a little surprised that a giant hole didn't open beneath my feet the minute the words were uttered. I envisioned her head exploding like a Looney Tunes cartoon character, but to her credit, if she was shocked or surprised, she didn't show it. And she didn't recoil, or question whether what I was telling her was "real" or valid. She listened to what I was telling her, and graciously accepted the title I foisted upon her without her consent of the Only-Other-Human-On-Earth-Who-Knows.

It has been a gift in so many ways that I told her that Other me exists. Speaking the words made it real and in accepting that reality I've found a level of compassion for myself that had been too complicated to consider before. I accessed a new perspective on my past and the decisions I've made. Telling her allowed me to take one long, slow exhale. Her witnessing felt like a soft hand, laid gently on my head, a whispered, "it's okay."

But please don't assume that it means I decided to come out. I felt some relief from saying the words to another human, but also, because I did, all plausible deniability has been lost. I can no longer fool myself about who I am, which means that I am much more aware of the fraud I have been perpetrating for 49 years by presenting as a woman in my family, my marriage and to the world.

Which, although terrible, in no way encourages me to put an end to it. My husband and daughters, my sisters—people I love and who love me have accepted that version of me; have built their lives on the foundation of what I have told them again and again is true. Every family has a last Jenga piece—the one that can't be removed, no matter how swiftly, or delicately, or artfully, without it all falling apart. It's not deluded or arrogant of me to say that I am my family's last Jenga piece; some things are just true whether we want them to be or not. So, I

cannot envision a way to unmask myself without rending them all to the quick irreparably with my dishonesty, and also with the truth of who I am. All the blocks will come tumbling down. It seems so incredibly selfish to even consider.

And if I'm being really honest, beyond any benevolent concern I have for them, I am also petrified that when I tell them who I really am, they'll stop loving me. A thousand hours of Internal Family Systems Therapy, of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, pages and pages of self-help books, Taylor Swift's best songs on repeat, and all the weighted blankets in the world have yet to convince me that somehow, Other me is worthy of love. The world we live in has limited resources and infinite prejudice. From what I know of it, all love is conditional. Even honorable and kind hearts have lines that can't be crossed.

The reality is this: my husband is a good person; he is smart, not truly bigoted, and he cares about me, deeply. But he is not someone who could accept his spouse as trans. And my kids want what all children do of their parents: for me to be their rock, their foundation; uncomplicated and simple; not someone who embarrasses them, or who forces them to explain to their friends why their 50-year-old mother got a sleeve tattoo and an undercut.

Nothing feels safe about the possibility of telling the world who I am, either. I decided so long ago that I was a mistake, an aberration. The world has always agreed. Shielded in my drag, I have been removed from its open antagonism, but I have not missed the messaging, nor, despite some small signs of progress over the years, has the tagline really changed. On our last trip to Florida, I felt queasy and scared reading the "Female" and "Male" restroom signs. I've watched bleakly as our president and his lawmaker cronies curtail medical help for trans people and block schools from educating children about gender identity. I listen again and again to acquaintances debate with fervor whether trans kids should be allowed to play sports—as if the fate of our

civilization hangs in the balance. Like the double-agent that I am, I am privy to the snide comments, the snickers my friend and family don't hide because they think I'm in on the joke.

If I were reading this, I would roll my eyes and think: just be honest. Stop hiding. Tell them who you really are. Let the proverbial chips fall where they may. I get it. Reading the words on the page feels like a lot of handwringing to me, too. But that's because I can't make them accurately capture the conflict that is going on inside of me every moment of every day. The murmurs of hope I feel at the idea of coming out are met with the equal and opposite heartache of knowing that the truth will harm everyone; that it will change everything. And while it might feel so good to stop lying, to be finally whole, I have no illusions that it could be that way for my husband, who is my person, my best friend and the man I have shared 30 years of my life with.

The question of how much loyalty and love to offer him at the cost of my integrity and freedom is not one I can find an easy answer for. Our relationship, and the other relationships I've known have never been equal; someone always gives more, endures more, cares more. Always, I've lived with the presumption that how I am is wrong. So, what feels comfortable to me, what makes sense to me, is to love him more than I love myself, to honor his vision of me more than what I know to be true. When I lie awake at three in the morning with sweat on my neck and I think about breaking free, these questions haunt me: how can I value my peace over his? How can I trade my constancy and fidelity to him for an authenticity which will only guarantee more pain?

When that Other me was buried deep, when I hadn't yet spoken the words that allowed it access to my life on the outside, the conflict was muted—a dull pain, like a toothache. But after I said the words, the turmoil inside found a pathway to the surface. Now, most days, it feels like

my skin can barely hold me together. At any given moment I am either awash in longing for the life I didn't lead, crushed with the guilt of considering betraying my family, or both of those things at the same time. I've been so used to living always in iron-fisted control, that the new internal chaos is terrifying and exhausting.

I love my family so much, and I don't want things to change, as they must and would if all were revealed. So again, and again, I try to shove that Other me back down into the tomb. Each day I commit, and then I recommit the day following, to the choices I've already made. I tell myself that if I did it once, I can do it again. I am trying so hard, all of the time. But. But like a chemical leak, it keeps leaching out of me. It was slow during the first few years after I told her, but it's been gathering speed lately as the truth has saturated the soil. And, to extend the metaphor for a record-breaking third sentence: I am scared that it will inevitably hit a watershed at some point and come gushing out despite all my best efforts to deny and avoid.

Other me is starting to feel autonomic; a physical embodiment that is occurring without my conscious thought and more than a little against my will. Things I have been longing to do for years? I'm doing them now. I cut my hair. I've worn it long since I was 13 and it has always served as my reliable Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free gender card. So, it wasn't a simple decision, but it felt so right when I did it; still feels so right when I run my fingers through the short hairs on the back of my neck today. I've stopped wearing skirts and high heels to court. I ordered three pairs of boxer-briefs the other day. I'm trying hard to no longer alter how I walk, how I sit, how I lean. When I notice myself doing it, I cut off my silent apologies to the world for wearing my nails too short, for not carrying a purse. But the new liberties I am stepping into are mixed always with fear and sadness, and with the unanswerable question of: how will this all end?

My husband and kids have noticed. There are jokes made that acknowledge the changes, but that also serve as subtle warnings: “careful; don’t go too far.” Society is weighing in, too. So far, I am taking the contempt in strange men’s eyes in stride, because it is tempered with an unexpected, but unmistakable look of attraction from certain women. The idea that I am desirable this way is its own little miracle to me; something I never imagined possible. Still though, the lessons I learned at 13 will never be forgotten. So, I wait and wonder when the ritualized shaming, the threat of violence will begin again. Will public restrooms return to the hell they were in my youth?

I am balanced precariously but precisely, down to the molecule, between freedom and fear. I am just as terrified of putting these words to paper, of leaving evidence of Other me in the physical world, as I am of the idea that it’s possible, probable even, that no one will ever read what I’ve written.

So, for now, I get up every morning. I rub a hand through my hair and settle the weight of it all across my shoulders again for another day. I am trying not to drink so much. I am trying to think of other things. I am watchful for the moment when the stalemate will be broken, full of hope and also despair. I don’t really believe that either way, there will be a happy ending for me. I don’t think I can linger in this purgatory forever, and I don’t think that I can go back to how it was before. But the future is obscure and unfathomable, and I can’t see a way through.

But sometimes, when I sleep, I dream. When I dream, the last vestiges of control I have are torn loose. And the same visions come to me again and again, even after all these years. I dream about my parent’s basement. Of feeling my way slowly through the dust and cobwebs to the room behind the giant furnace, to the secret passage. I dream of removing the door with

strong, sure hands, of crawling up and in, and of following the light to the other end of a great darkness.