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TRANSGENDER

**Visibly Female,
 Invisibly Male:**



PHOTO: DOK WRIGHT

The Story of My Gender Identity

BY TOBIAS NOVAK

This is the second in a series of three pieces by Tobias Novak.

I begin to tell my story... In the beginning, I hesitated... I thought I'd been telling my story all along, but then I realized I'd been telling someone else's story - the story they wanted, the story they asked for - and, like any good story, I got caught up in it. I believed. I sympathized. I forgot that there could possibly be anything outside that story. But there are other stories even when one doesn't realize they exist; these stories were sitting on my bookshelf, unread, dusty, forgotten.

Not so long ago, I took one such story off my bookshelf. It was the story of my gender identity. I began to read: "There's a part of you that has been neglected - one that you've seen before, but never really noticed."

I was curious, and read on: "Have you ever thought that 'femme lesbian' is not your label; other labels might fit better?" I was mystified. What label could I be if not femme lesbian?

"Have you ever wondered why you feel like a man in bed? Why you date women who are successively more butch? Why your breasts always hurt?"

"I just thought that was me," I said aloud.

"It is you," read the story. "But there's more to think about."

"Like what," I asked?
 "Have you ever wondered why you feel out of place in the company of women, but at home in the company of men? Did you ever think that by sleeping with butch women and trans men you were basically sleeping with yourself?"

Now I was beyond intrigued. I was captivated. I also felt confused, overwhelmed and rejected. I've identified as lesbian since age twelve and have been a girl (or, rather, been labeled girl) since birth. How can I switch labels after so long? Men have messed up this world; why would I want to be one of them? Wait a minute - I've always said that men can be feminists, too. This doesn't suddenly make me a jerk.

Wow. Man? Me? Somehow, it made sense. I put this book back on the shelf - it had no title - and reached for another. The title: "Stories of my childhood gender experiences."

This story read: I remember how I never thought of myself as a girl. I wanted to think of myself as a boy, but didn't know that was an option. Instead I did boy things whenever I could, like climb trees and get dirty and salt slugs and trap bugs and admire little girls and play catch and destroy block castles with plastic dinosaurs. I did girl things too - but I thought dolls were cute in a different way than other girls did.

I noticed differences between my father and mother's bodies, but didn't know what any of these parts were called. I noticed that Daddy yelled at Mommy. He was mean and scary; he drank, he hit my brother and me. I thought, why would I want to be a boy?

I wore dresses with pants underneath and played with Barbies in my own way. I'd shave one Barbie's head so she'd be a sort-of-Ken, and my sort-of-Ken would kiss Barbie. I didn't know what sex was or what lesbians were, but this made sense to me somehow. Other girls dressed up Barbies and took them shopping. I made mine kiss and blew them up with fireworks my brother had bought illegally from the Puyallup Indian reservation. Barbies with arms and legs ripped off, exploding beneath the cedar tree in my backyard. This wasn't violence against women to me - it was something to do besides make Barbies play dress-up.

My family allowed me to be a girlish tomboy (as long as I was still a girl). The Dad I was scared of took me fishing almost every weekend. He pitched to me so I could practice my swing, and taught me the importance of batting left-handed in a world of right-handed pitchers. We bonded silently through fishing and sports without any emotions or feelings; talking was unnecessary. My father never treated me like a daughter or a son. I was someone to be trained into the ways of manhood, but a silent manhood, where talking

isn't necessary. But I was still a girl, even though deep down I felt like his son, not his daughter. Men were scary. They hit little girls and their brothers. Why would I want to do that?

I remember the time I taped my developing B-cup breasts with masking tape, age thirteen or fourteen. My parents were gone, and I walked around the house with my breasts taped flat under my shirt, admiring how I looked with a boy's chest. The tape hurt like hell when I pulled it off my nipples. I never did that again, but sometimes I thought about it. Later, when my breasts grew much larger, I wished they could go back to that B-cup size, where tape made them go away.

I closed this book. I decided that I'd found enough evidence to support my hypothesis: I am a boy. I have always been a boy. Just because I make an attractive woman doesn't mean I have to live as one.

I can't say I'm not scared of my gender transition. I'm at the very beginning. I'm an infant, and babies are often afraid. I'm afraid of what it will feel like to not have breasts, as much as I hate having them, and of what T will do to my voice, as I'm a singer-songwriter. I'm afraid of how my father will react. When I came out as lesbian, he yelled, "I always knew you'd turn out to be a lesbo," hit me, and kicked me out of the house. I was still in high school.

But babies are also excited by everything. It's exciting whenever I introduce myself or hear someone call me Tobias. I can't wait to walk around topless outside after surgery. I look at myself in the mirror, and picture what I might look like with T. I somehow think my voice is getting deeper, even without hormones. Or maybe I'm just trying harder, or noticing my voice in a way I haven't before. I'm excited when I hear my girlfriend call me her boyfriend. I'm excited about everything that I'm afraid of.

I know I'm right about this. Boys may not be PC, but I am one, and I fully intend to prove that not all men are jerks. ▽

➔ Tobias Novak is a co-organizer of the Transcending Boundaries conference on Oct. 27-29. He lives in Burlington.