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Stages of Visibility

Elliott DeLine

We were getting to know one another. I dread these classroom activities, but this one seemed to be going well. This round, we were to tell a story of a journey we went on with someone we loved. I stalled and let Gina, the girl I was partnered with, go first. When she finished, I hesitated for a while. Then I decided to tell an emotional journey, rather than a literal journey. I was apprehensive—Gina’s story led me to believe she was heterosexual and cisgender.

I told the story of my “emotional rollercoaster” with Peter. I told her he already had a girlfriend, but was secretly involved with me. He would say he was going to break up with her, but it never happened, and he strung us both along for months.

Gina thought the story was really interesting, and was enthusiastic to hear more. Was Peter bisexual, then?

I said, “Yeah, or gay in denial,” and laughed.

The truth is, I just said that automatically. Really, Peter and I are both transgender men, and Peter firmly identifies as queer and is open to all types of people. I just found it easier to play the part of a regular gay man (whatever that means) and lie. I’m not sure if I was afraid she would judge me for being trans, or if I just wasn’t in the mood to explain it. But why did I assume she would need an explanation? I guess, in my experi-

ence, most people don’t know much about transgender men. I also have trouble talking about these things aloud, though I think I may want to and even need to. I was raised to be a very private person and to not make others uncomfortable.

In high school, I didn’t like showering—I preferred just taking a bath so I could lie down. On my back, it didn’t look or feel so bad, and submerged in hot water with my eyes closed, I could almost enjoy myself. But on mornings like this, when I was in a rush, I had to shower. I sometimes skipped days, but today I smelled weird so that wasn’t an option.

I barely took note of my naked body—I washed it and my hair with soap then rinsed and was done with it. I scrubbed myself dry then wrapped the towel around my chest, wearing it like a dress. In the mirror, I looked at my head and shoulders and make-believed, just for a few seconds. Then I went back to my cold bedroom.

I had stolen about half of my brother’s underwear collection. I was afraid to ask for my own—or worse, be seen shopping for them. This made my brother and mom angry when they discovered me, but I kept doing it anyway. I pulled on a pair of small boxers, stretched and worn over the years, designed with a twelve-year-old boy in mind. Then I slipped into baggy jeans, pulling them down

below my hips—I'd read online that this would help me pass, as my ass would look flat, and most young guys wore their jeans in this manner. I searched for clean socks, then gave up and searched for the cleanest socks, pulling them each on as I stood on one foot.

My chest binder lay on the mattress where I'd left it. It was once white, but now a grayish yellow, with some green spots I suspected were algae, left from the few times I swam in the lake. It looked like (and was, for all

practical purposes) a dingy tank top made of lycra. The only time I didn't wear it was when I showered. I'd tried it though.

It was a battle getting into the thing. I took the neck hole and stretched it over my shoulders, usually burning them slightly in the process. I then wiggled it down to my stomach, and, putting my arms through the holes, pulled it up over my chest and back. I still feel revulsion recalling how I then reached inside my cleavage and spread my mammary

glands apart, creating the appearance of a flat, male chest.

I tried on various combinations of T-shirts and button-ups. I liked layers, to be safe, and I had read online that a white triangle of an undershirt beneath your collar gave off a masculine impression.

After I settled on my usual army-green colored shirt, I looked in the mirror, parting my thick, still-wet, dark hair. Though cut short, it would be hours before it was dry. I made sure my bangs were swept off of my forehead—I had read, once again, online, that bangs were feminizing. I checked to make sure my hair around my ears was cropped enough—though I longed for sideburns, I couldn't grow them, and I was paranoid that allowing my hair there to grow long would make me look like Liza Minnelli.

After that, there was nothing else I could really do. I put on deodorant (unisex, as that was less scary to request from my mom than men's). Before leaving I slipped on my skater sneakers (a few sizes too large, for effect) and added a third layer of a baggy hooded sweatshirt to my outfit. I then pushed my way out the door into the dark of the early April morning, backpack slung over one shoulder, hiding under my hood as I passed the other

houses on the street and headed towards the bus stop on the corner.

I was in homeroom, and, yet again, the teacher was doing roll call. "Laura DeLine?" It hurt to raise my hand. I was not this person anymore—I was Elliott. But there was nothing I could do. There would be a sheet in front of me. A test in French class. Name _____.

I scribbled the first part so it was barely legible, then wrote DeLine. It felt like it was being beat into me for the millionth time. For the assignment, I had to write about myself. *Je suis une fille*. I tried otherwise once and got an F. So I played along.

Square dancing in gym class—everyone split into boys and girls. Oh, how sorry I felt for the guy I was paired with. I said nothing. I bowed out early and skipped the class. I would not curtsy. There was only so much I could bear. I'd rather fail the class.

And nearly three years later, I emailed my college history professor. "If you don't mind, can you please change my name on the roster? I go by Elliott."

In class, I had my notebook open, in the huge lecture hall. The professor was young but bald. He announced, "Oh, by the way,

to anyone who emailed me asking to go by a different name...it's hard enough to learn all the students' real names. If you care so much, get it legally changed." Then he did roll call. I blushed and didn't say anything.

More years passed. I sat in another class—West African Literature and Politics. I was legally Elliott now. Roll call didn't hurt, I could write my preferred



name on my papers.

For homework, we had to read a disturbing story about female circumcision that made me wince with sympathy pains. So what do we think? Is it the West's place to interfere and stop this? My hand shot up immediately—I had meditated on it all week. “Let’s hear from the girls first,” the professor said. I said nothing and lowered my hand. I spoke eventually from a distanced point of view with the other boys, never revealing that I cringed at the thought of my own clitoris being amputated and felt confused by the deep, empathetic connection I felt with these women, even if we identified differently.

Class ended. Gina and I lagged behind as everyone else exited the room. “It’s so funny,” she said as she put her papers away. “I was the only one who noticed Jordan’s the only straight guy in the class!”

I nodded and smiled, unsure what to say.

“I mean, I couldn’t be sure at first,” she said, “but then you and Ian both said you were gay.”

I think she said this so I wouldn’t be offended that she thought we were from the start. “I’m not gay,” I said, surprising myself a little. I realized it was very casual sounding, and that most guys would probably say something like, “I’m not gay! You thought I was gay?” Super defensive, even if they were open-minded.

Gina must have noticed too, because she said, “Oh, or queer, or whatever.”

“Actually, I’ve had girlfriends,” I said. “And it’s kind of different for me, because I’m transgender. Female-to-male,” I quickly added.

We’d packed up our books and laptops and headed into the hall. There were many students surrounding us, and I wondered if they could overhear us.

“So you used to be a woman?”

I really don’t like looking at it that way. “I was born female.”

“Seriously?” She didn’t sound as shocked as I thought she would be. Still, it’s clear she hadn’t pegged me that way. I nodded, and we walked down the stairs.

“Did you have the surgery?”

Invasive question. But I’ve learned you have to let things go sometimes. “I’ve had surgery on my chest,” I said. I hate the moment after I’ve answered this question. It seems like I can feel the other person trying to picture me naked.

“I would never know,” Gina said. “Seriously. Never!”

“Yep, I know.”

Should I have told her I don’t need her approval? Told her that I wish I had the nerve, when cisgender people reassure me I’m handsome, to say “Really? I think you’re hideous.” As if I ever asked to be reassured... As if the subject were somehow up for debate... As if they were expressing some contrary opinion.

“I guess that’s what you’d want though, right? Not to have anyone know?” She laughed, seeming a little nervous again. I hate when people are too comfortable, but I hate when they are uncomfortable even more. So I smile.

“Well, honestly, it’s a double-edged sword. I kinda feel invisible either way, it’s---”

We were outside now. Gina avoided eye contact and didn’t seem to be listening anymore.

“---Never mind.” I said. “Well, see you later.”

“Yep, bye!”

I lowered my eyes and didn’t see which direction she went. I walked across the quad, squinting in the sun. I still felt the physical manifestations of anxiety—a sped up heart-beat, warm face, slight vertigo. But strangely, I also felt really good.