

What should have taken 12 months took 2.5 years.

It's the day before surgery, there's something ticking in your mind trying to break through a formidable defence of cognitive dissonance.

You neatly lay your character on the bed, ready for the surgery you're convinced will make you better and save your life.

You wake up in a hospital bed. Your character was just that all along, it was you. This is the big reveal, the curtain call – the gravity of what you've just done hits you so hard.

It's not what you thought it would be and it's full of hidden terms and conditions; incontinence, discharge, areas of no sensation, some sensation, pain, UTIs, infections, low energy, varicose veins...

You become demoralised and realise this wasn't worth it all.

You can climax, that's great, but actually you've started to realise your dysphoria down below wasn't even that bad to begin with, and in fact the idea of being with another male is quite a nice idea in your head.

Then you realise actually you wrote your character all wrong to begin with, and no one really helped with that.

You're gay, and you're traumatised from a life of severe homophobia.

You realise there is no undoing any of this.

But you do realise you can come home.

You can detransition, which means throw away the character. Scrap it, it never was you to begin with, it was an idealised fiction that never met the test of reality.

You were always a feminine soul, but that doesn't mean you're a woman, it just means you're a feminine man. And that's okay! In fact it's freeing.

I feel like the shackles have come off, and I am myself again, I am back in the room.

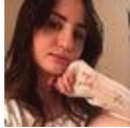
I realise it was always just a character to begin with.

-TR

By Any Other Name

Helena, <https://lacroicsz.substack.com/p/by-any-other-name>

The story of my transition and detransition.



[Helena](#)

Feb 19

My name is Helena, and as of this writing I'm a 23-year-old woman who, as a teenager, believed I was transgender. In the years since detransitioning (stopping testosterone treatment and no longer seeing myself as transgender), I've become interested in exploring why, in the last decade, nearly every English-speaking country has seen a meteoric rise in adolescents believing they are transgender and pursuing cosmetic medical and surgical interventions. Here, I'd like to go over how and why I came to see myself as transgender, the process of transitioning, and the events leading up to and following my detransition.

The short version of my detransition story for those who want the bare details is that when I was fifteen, I was introduced to gender ideology on Tumblr and began to call myself nonbinary. Over the next few years, I would continue to go deeper and deeper down the trans identity rabbit hole, and by the time I was eighteen, I saw myself as a "trans man", otherwise known as "FtM". Shortly after my eighteenth birthday, I made an appointment at a Planned Parenthood to begin a testosterone regimen. At my first appointment, I was prescribed testosterone, and I would remain on this regimen for a year and a half. It had an extremely negative effect on my mental health, and I finally admitted what a disaster it had been when I was 19, sometime around February or March 2018. When the disillusionment fully set in, I stopped the testosterone treatment and began the process of getting my life back on track. It has not been easy, and the whole experience seriously derailed my life in ways I could never have foreseen when I was that fifteen-year-old kid playing with pronouns on Tumblr.

But what leads a girl with no history of discomfort with stereotypical "girl" toys and clothes, or even the slightest desire to be a boy in childhood, to want to be a "man" through hormonal injections as she approached adulthood? In a vacuum, such a profound confusion leading to such drastic measures sounds like it should be rare and a sign of some sort of severe mental disturbance. Was I a fluke? Was I some kind of idiot who mistakenly believed I was trans because I'm crazy or just downright irresponsible?

The truth is that there has been an extreme rise in adolescents, especially girls, believing they are transgender. UK NHS referral data shows a [4000% increase](#) in pediatric gender service referrals (not a typo). So-called "gender dysphoria", which was once a very rare diagnosis that

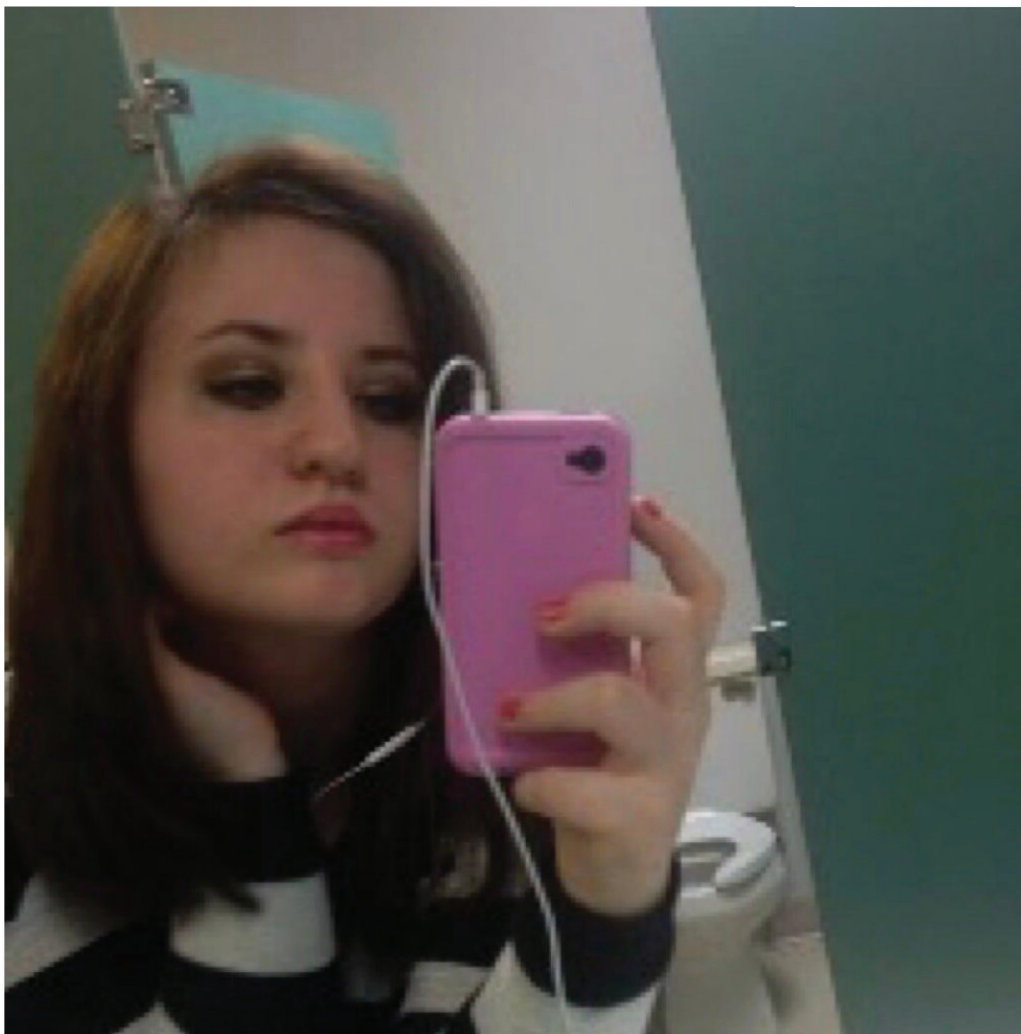
described mostly prepubescent boys and adult men, is now most commonly diagnosed in teenage girls. Activists will argue that these explosive numbers are a result of increased societal acceptance, and that at long last trans people are coming out of hiding and living as their authentic selves. If this were true, one might expect to see comparable rates of transgender identity across all age groups and between both sexes, but its disproportionately adolescent females feeling that warm and fuzzy inclusive acceptance. Considering “acceptance” now implies suprphysiological doses of cross sex hormones and having healthy body organs surgically rearranged, it’s worth a deeper look into what kinds of factors are driving this population clamoring to go under the knife.

How did it happen?



As a child, nobody would have pegged me as a future transitioner; I was never particularly masculine or even tomboyish. I hated sports, roughhousing, and getting dirty. I liked Barbies, playing dress up, and getting toy makeup sets for Christmas. Of course, nobody is a walking sex stereotype so there were certainly “boy” things I enjoyed, but my point is that neither female-typical activities nor being seen as a girl caused any distress for me before I was introduced to gender ideology. On the other hand, even at a young age I was beginning to experience some deep emotional difficulties unrelated to gender that would get more urgent over time. I suffered a serious loss when I was seven, and the rest of my family took the “don’t talk about it” approach, so my grief festered like an infected wound. My family was also very preoccupied with image, especially dieting and weight, and this began to have a pronounced effect on how I saw myself (and on my brother, too). By the time I was thirteen, I was isolating myself, self-harming, and had developed an eating disorder. In eighth grade, I lost touch with most of my school friends, and was too self-conscious and preoccupied with my eating disorder to put myself out there again. I started skipping school, spending lunch in the bathroom, and in general just keeping my head down, trying to get through the day unnoticed.

During this time, I developed an obsession with classic rock, and while searching the internet for photos of young Elvis Presley I found a website called Tumblr. I immediately noticed that on Tumblr, there were many accounts posting about 50s, 60s, and 70s artists and that best of all, they were other teenage girls. I made an account and began posting scans of some vintage pop magazines I had bought off eBay, and soon enough, these accounts were following me back. Between sharing photos, drawings, and fanfiction, these girls were posting about their lives and going into deep detail about their struggles. Many were social outcasts like me, also struggling with things like self-harm and eating disorders. Finding a community of such like minded people felt amazing, and I quickly began spending nearly every waking moment on Tumblr or messaging some friend I had met on there. If I had any remaining motivation to integrate myself into real life, I lost that here. At school, I would sit in the back of the class, scrolling Tumblr and talking to Tumblr friends without engaging in class. When I returned home, I would open Tumblr on my laptop or hop on Skype to voice call with girls halfway across the planet, ignoring homework and studying all the while. As you can imagine, my high school GPA was abysmal. Tumblr would stick with me as I moved through various interests, from classic rock to Harry Potter, to One Direction and Justin Bieber, each iteration subsumed in a community of countless other intense, obsessive girls like me. I was in love with my new world, and even now I look back on some of these times spent on Tumblr, and the girls I met, with incredible fondness.



Me at 15; not identifying as trans yet but well into Tumblr, eating disorder, and being sad all the time.

Tumblr, though, wasn't only a place to post art and make friends. Being such a secluded platform with a fairly homogenous user base not only

demographically (mostly teenage girls, many of whom white and middle to upper middle class), but especially in terms of personality type, it developed its own culture, distinct from the youth culture of the general population. Because many of its users were like me, using Tumblr as an all-day alternate reality escape from the real world, this “culture” should be understood in the most literal sense of the word. One should think of Tumblr, especially from 2009-2016, as a secluded island nation whose people rarely interact with the outside world, and thus have language, customs, hierarchy, and history that is entirely unique and at first incomprehensible to people from other nations visiting the island. There’s something about it that almost selects for a particular type of person, and I’ve heard so many times from normal people (for lack of a better word) that they “tried Tumblr, but couldn’t figure it out.”

We’ve all read *Lord of the Flies*, right? A bunch of tween boys get stranded on an island and all of their deepest, most repressed urges surface as they desperately attempt to organize and manage the tiny preteen society they’ve found themselves in. The novel ends in bloodshed, as the author theorizes that the immaturity, communication breakdown, and decision making difficulties one would find in a group of adolescent boys would create a chamber of destruction. How would it have ended differently, some have asked, if the story was one of a stranded group of girls? What would happen if every troubled, isolated, self-loathing, depressed, and emotionally overwrought teenage girl in the world wound up alone on an island?

Tumblr. Tumblr would happen.

~A quote from [this series](#) I began long ago, and unfortunately have yet to finish.

A major aspect of Tumblr culture has always been social justice ideology. Things that are now being played out and witnessed by the general public on platforms like Twitter and TikTok, like dissociative identity disorder LARPer, demisexuality, neopronouns, otherkin, and everything you see on @LibsOfTikTok, have long existed in an uncannily identical form on tumblr.com. The oppression hierarchy of racial and gender identities now being written into law in many of our once serious nations was the state religion of the People’s Republic of Tumblr long before your political junkie uncle knew the term “CRT”. As cultish religions tend to operate, open devotion to the religion is mandatory. Perhaps the outsiders most likely to understand the way social dynamics worked on that website would be survivors of Scientology or the Jehovah’s Witnesses. On Tumblr, the situation was such that any claim to being “oppressed” would accumulate social credibility, while any unfortunate “privileged” status was justification for verbal abuse. As a “privileged” person, you were expected to constantly grovel and apologize, you had no right to speak on any issue involving the group you were “oppressing”, and you could not object in any way to any mistreatment hurled against you because of your race, gender, or sexuality.

I found myself in a bit of a double bind. On one hand, I had found what felt like the perfect group of friends who understood me on an intuitive level, who I was able to talk to openly about the things I liked and made me “weird” in real life, but on the other hand I was a “cishet white girl” in an environment where that was one of the worst things to be. Since Tumblr users are mostly

biological females, the “cishet white girl” holds the position of most privileged and therefore most inherently bad group. In this climate, you are made to feel guilty and responsible for all the horrors and atrocities in the world. No hardship you could possibly go through could ever be as bad as the prejudice and genocide POC and LGBT people face every. Single. Day. Insert clap emoji. LGBT people and POC can’t even walk out of their houses without being murdered by cishet white people just like you!

Its understandable that any young person exposed to this kind of belief system would grow to deeply resent being white, “cis”, straight, or (biologically) male. The beauty of gender ideology is it provides a way to game this system, so that you can get some of those targets off your back and enjoy the camaraderie of like-minded youths. You can’t change your race, pretending to have a different sexuality would be very uncomfortable in practice, but you can absolutely change your gender, and it’s as easy as putting a “she/they” in your bio. Instantly you are transformed from an oppressing, entitled, evil, bigoted, selfish, disgusting cishet white scum into a valid trans person who deserves celebration and special coddling to make up for the marginalization and oppression you supposedly now face. Now not expected to do *as much* groveling and reaffirming to everyone how much you love checking your privilege, you can relax a little and talk about your life without wondering if you are distracting from the struggles of or speaking over marginalized groups, because you are marginalized too. With the new pronouns often comes a wave of positive affirmation from friends and followers, and the subconscious picks up quickly that there’s a way to make the deal of being on Tumblr even sweeter.

This is the incentive I felt to comb through my thoughts and memories for things that might be further evidence that deep down, I wasn’t really a girl. I hated my body; it must be because I don’t like that its female. Boys have never been interested in me like they are with other girls; well, maybe I would be attractive as a boy, and then I could be like all these cute “gay trans boys” I saw dating each other online. I didn’t have many friends, it must be because being a girl isn’t my “authentic self”, and that was getting in the way of my social life. Plus, people were nicer to me since I said I was trans so that must be an indication that being trans is the right thing to do to make friends. Female sexuality is hypersexualized and pornified, yet it’s supposed to be “empowering” for women to do porn, be prostitutes, or have dangerous, kinky, scary sounding sex with many different men. I heard that my discomfort with this made me “vanilla”, and a girl who is vanilla has no chance of really pleasing a man when competing with “empowered” women. I must not have really been meant to be a girl, because if I was, this wouldn’t all be so scary and confusing. I felt like my family didn’t care about me or pay attention to me, it must be because they subconsciously have always known I’m trans and they’re transphobic. I mean, they did make fun of Caitlyn Jenner that one time. They hate me! Just wait until I tell them I’m going to start testosterone; they’ll *have* to pay attention to me then.

I was also certified boy-crazy, but in the weird nerdy stalker way, not the actually dating boys way. I always had a crush on some boy I would never talk to, whether he was a celebrity, fictional character, or someone I just saw around at school. When I had a crush, it would utterly dominate my mind. I would become infatuated with every little detail of how they looked, spoke, laughed, and moved. I had elaborate fantasy worlds in my head down to the minutia of what we

would talk to each other about on the drive back from delivering our third baby at the hospital. I had a one-track mind and I craved an intense fantasy element. This led me to the world of fanfiction, mostly male/male pairings. What could be better than boys? Double boys! But they're written by girls so they make sense and feel familiar instead of different and intimidating. I loved the unlimited amount of creative and exciting content other girls were writing about my favorite characters. I wasn't super into erotic fanfiction, and if I did read it, it was always within the context of a longer, more relationship-oriented story, but pure erotica was popular too (often carrying heavy kinky themes...). I began to identify with these representations of boys written by other young females, and the themes within male/male fanfiction were so much more titillating than anything in mainstream, professionally produced media, or even heterosexual fanfiction for that matter. The pairing being same sex seemed to give writers and readers the freedom to explore these characters and their relationships without being constricted by the norms that come with heterosexual dynamics. It became this liminal space where I could explore what interested me about boys and fantasies about relationships, connecting it to whatever my media obsession was at the time, without the pressure of interacting with real boys, as real boys made me painfully bashful.

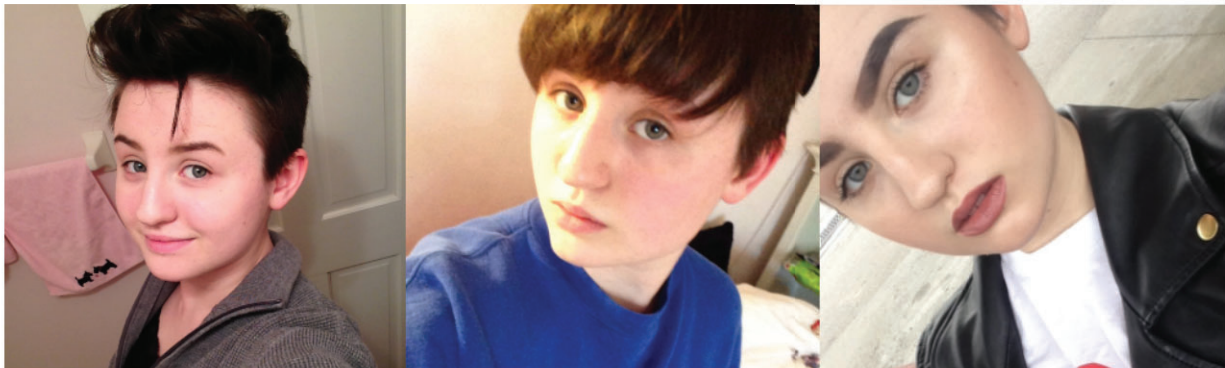
I wasn't alone in these mental and emotional traits that led me to shipping and fanfiction, and I *certainly* wasn't alone in wanting to be a boy after immersing myself in this kind of content. "Shipping" is the word for being interested in a pairing between two characters or people, and each "ship" has a community comprised of devoted shippers as well as people with a casual interest in the pairing. Being involved in these communities, comprised of mostly other trans-identified teenage girls, created a feedback loop in which we would obsess over these male characters or celebrities, share fantasies, art, and writing, and affirm and engage each other over these interests. One last aspect that bears discussion is the concept of "head canons". In a story, the "canon" is the timeline and facts of the story as the official author or historical evidence relays. A "head canon" is anywhere where one's personal perception of or preferences for the story deviates from the official canon. For example, if in the canonical Harry Potter story Harry is an English teenage boy attending wizard school, one might have a head canon that Harry is actually black, nonbinary, and drops out of Hogwarts to become a professional chef. The concept of head canons opens a whole world of possibilities for projecting onto a character and muddling the fantasy of one's personal identity or desired reality with the fantasy of the identity and life of an entirely fictional character in a fictional universe. In my head canon, Harry Potter, who I related to and was a meaningful character to me, was born female and was either nonbinary or a trans man depending on what point in my life you would have asked me. When I watched the Harry Potter movies, where Harry is obviously played by a male actor, or read the books, where nowhere in the text does J.K. Rowling state Harry is transgender, I would still kind of interpret the story through my own lens in which he was, and thus further see myself in him.

The adolescent brain is in a developmental stage primed to incorporate experiences into the process of identity formation, and spending so much time in fantasy without building much of an identity through real social and life experiences can lead to the identity and fantasy elements becoming indistinguishable.

My perception of myself as transformed in the intersection between overwhelming emotional struggles, heavy fantasy, emotional and intellectual infatuation with males (real people, fictional characters, and the idea of males generally), fanfiction, social and ideological incentives to be trans, and insulation from experiences and perspectives that might have challenged the views I was developing about myself and the world. Each individual girl's story will vary, give or take a few factors, but in the broadest sense these are the basic factors that comprise the trans "social contagion" described by people like researcher Lisa Littman and Abigail Shrier in her book, *Irreversible Damage*, particularly when we are talking about male-attracted girls. What I've said here barely scratches the surface.

From fantasy to reality

Over the three years that I identified as trans prior to reaching legal adulthood, I kept this huge aspect of my self-perception to the confines of Tumblr and the few school friends I met after switching high schools, also avid Tumblr users, and all but one also identified as trans. I cut my hair, wore baggy clothes to hide my body, and was gifted a breast binder by a friend from Tumblr that I would wear out and about, but I didn't talk to my parents about any of this until late into my senior year of high school. By this time, I fully identified as a "trans boy", wished I had a male body, and wanted to medically transition.



Some examples of how I looked in high school after beginning to identify as trans. I would alternate between wearing a lot of makeup, long fake nails, and other very "feminine" things and making awkward attempts at looking more boyish.

When I told my mother about all this it was on an impulse. I had a whole spiel planned out where I would tell her all about how I was always trans, I just didn't know it, and hand her a big packet of printed out articles from pro-trans organizations about what different words meant and why I needed to transition. For some reason I still don't quite understand, on one gloomy day we were driving back from the grocery store and I just blurted it out mid conversation, telling her that I was going by a male name, male pronouns, and was going to transition. I immediately wanted to stuff my foot into my mouth, but it was too late, and the dead awkward silence was setting in. For what seemed like eternity, she drove in silence. I stared at the headboard, eyes wide and heart thumping. Finally, she responded with a word: "No."

“No, I am not going to call you that. You are Helena and you are a girl,” she said, maintaining her glare at the road before us.

Deflated and conflict avoidant, I remember saying something meek and passive aggressive like “if you feel that way, I guess...” and we finished our drive in silence.

The next day, I went to the school library and printed out all those articles I had saved for my planned “coming out”. When I got home, I scrawled a long-winded letter on loose leaf paper with what was originally going to be my “coming out” spiel, stapled it all together, waited for her to get home late and head to bed, then I slipped it under her bedroom door at night as she slept. The following day, I anxiously awaited speaking to her, wondering what she thought of all the articles. Had they convinced her? They had to, right? I was showing her that experts clearly agreed that trans people like me are valid.

When I returned from school that day, the packet was face down in the kitchen trash.

Distraught, I agonized over what would happen when she got home. Would she yell at me? What did she think of the packet? I wondered if she had already read “transphobic” material that countered the articles I sent her. Hopefully she read my letter and could see past any transphobia and realize that this was the real me. She didn’t yell at me though. Instead, we mostly avoided each other for a few days and then both acted like nothing ever happened.

This would continue for months until another fateful confrontation, ironically at the same grocery store we were driving home from the first time. I don’t remember how the argument started, but somehow, we got into it over my conviction that I was transgender.

“I don’t understand why you can’t just be a masculine woman,” she said.

I responded, “Because I’m not a masculine woman! I’m a trans boy!”

She didn’t understand that the issue wasn’t of repressed masculinity itching to be let loose, it was a conviction that I was a part of the transgender identity group, and any masculinity I engaged in was a conscious supplement to that end.

Yelling and crying between us ensued, very classy for the middle of the dairy aisle at Kroger. She told me I had lost my mind and needed to see a psychiatrist. I told her she was a hateful person who wanted trans people to die. We went back to not talking much after that.

I was heartbroken. Now that I’m older and on the other side of this, I understand why my mom was struggling so much with her reactions to what I was demanding of her. We never had a relationship where we confided in each other often, and she can be somewhat emotionally distant. I don’t demonize her for it anymore, but at the time I interpreted her unwillingness to entertain my identity as a disregard for what I was feeling and a rejection of who I was. To me at the time, being trans and wanting to transition was a desperate attempt to do something about my misery, and when she rejected my trans identity, it felt to me like she was telling me I didn’t

deserve to feel better, and she wanted me to continue feeling the way I was, which was suicidal, lonely, and self-loathing. I do wish she had responded with more compassion and curiosity, but she was doing the best with the skills she had. It's an unreasonable expectation for most parents to respond perfectly to something as outlandish as an unexpected transgender identity and the possibility of irreversible medical interventions, especially when teenagers like I once was are under the influence of a noxious ideology that makes authentic communication nearly impossible.

To add fuel to the fire, I went to my school guidance counselor and told her I was very depressed (true) because my parents wouldn't accept me as trans (not so true). She completely affirmed my perception and told me how sorry she was that my parents weren't more supportive. She looked online with me at the local children's hospital gender clinic and said she would call to see how long their waiting list was. We also came up with a budget plan for how I would pay for testosterone using an informed consent clinic if I waited until I turned eighteen. In the meantime, she said I should talk to the school psychologist to help me deal with my family being so transphobic. I asked my mom if I could stop seeing the therapist I had been seeing occasionally and switch to the school psychologist. My mom, having no idea that the school was affirming me and helping me put together plans to transition behind her back, agreed.

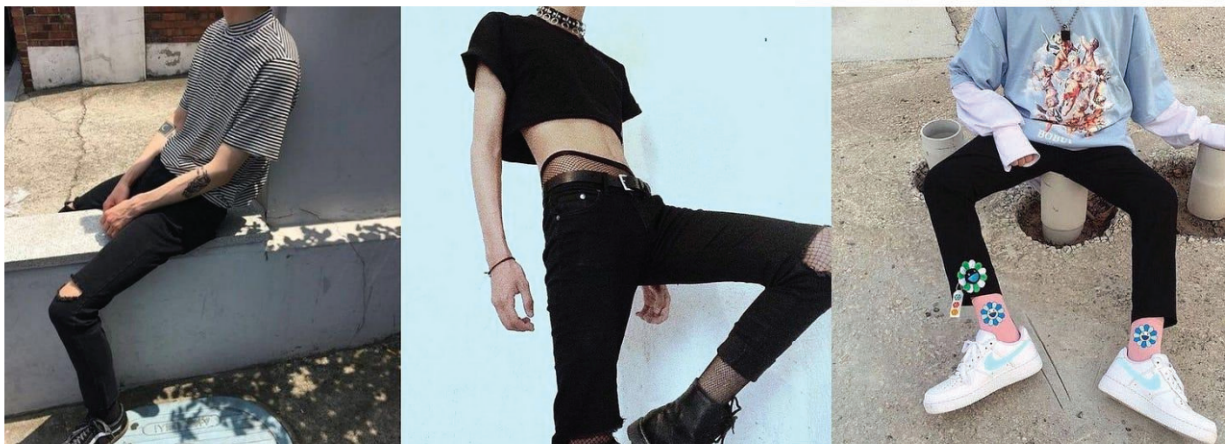
The psychologist was also very affirming, and again told me how sad it was that my parents weren't supportive and that I was a real and valid boy. After years of self-harm, depression, and struggling with an eating disorder in silence, it felt nice to have all these adults suddenly take such an interest in my "mental health". It was just further proof to me that being trans was my ticket to happiness, anybody who urged caution only wanted to hurt me and hold me back. The psychologist brought up the idea of a family session to work things out between me and my mom, and once I felt assured that she would take my side in the matter, I agreed. I hoped coming face to face with a psychologist would finally convince my mom to take the fact that I was transgender seriously. In our session, the therapist and I all but ganged up on my mom, telling her that I needed to transition to be happy, and that trans youth are at a high risk of suicide if they are not given "access" to hormones and surgeries. Predictably, my mom did not respond well and we both left the session feeling bitter.

Some time over the summer, my mom told my dad about my "trans thing" and he told me calmly that he didn't think I was a boy, but he wasn't going to fight me on it either because he could see it wasn't going so well for my mom. He even took me out to drive his stick shift car thinking I might like to do something "manly". I couldn't figure out how to do it and got really upset that I wasn't able to easily do something he considered "manly". I think he was trying to show me that I didn't need to be trans to enjoy "guy things", but that was sadly missing the point. It was this weird belief system I found on the internet that made me want to be trans, not a repressed yearning to do "guy things". I had never been all that interested in "guy things". My dad and I didn't talk about it much other than that.

Soon after, I turned eighteen. I have a July birthday, and over that summer after graduation I began to put more intention into "passing" as male in preparation for testosterone and my plan to "live as male" in college. I went out and bought what I thought were "boy" clothes that would

fit my curvy, slightly overweight female body. Joggers, basketball shorts, and hoodies. Ugh, I cringe just thinking about it. So not my style, but I wanted people to think I was a boy. I believed once the testosterone transformed my body, I could be more creative with my outfits.

I want to take some time to explore what my expectations were for how testosterone would change my body. I am a female, 5'3 and a half, and at the time probably weighed about 150lbs. I don't have the curviest body, but I certainly carry a lot of my weight in my legs and arms and almost none in my waist. Even with the fat redistribution caused by testosterone, there's no way that a testosterone regimen could give me what I wanted: a tall, lanky, bony male physique. During puberty in natal males, testosterone is able to sculpt the male body while bones are still growing, which is part of the reason why this kind of physique was unrealistic. Testosterone also cannot change a female's height, or elongate leg bones, so no matter what I did I would never be tall or have long, spindly extremities. I also have long struggled with my weight, so my expectation to look bony was unrealistic in that regard too. I would look at male "thinspo" (pro-anorexia term for imagery of very thin people that is used as inspiration to restrict food) and "transition goals" (a similar concept in trans circles where people look at photos of the opposite sex that they want to emulate through style, hormones, and surgeries), which caused a massive disconnect between how my body really looked and what I thought could by some magic happen in the future. This kind of unrealistic fantasy obsession over body changes is one of the many ways in which trans identity resembles anorexia, which also involves an unhealthy obsession with unrealistic body goals and shifting goal posts. I spent much of my time before being trans looking at pro-anorexia content and chasing the ideal of an ultra-thin, androgynous [female] body. My restrictive dieting led to binge eating, and I convinced myself testosterone would do what I never could myself through starvation.



These are examples of the kinds of images I was perusing daily which formed my "transition goals". Notice the cropped faces in each picture; the images are objectifying in a similar way to anorexia "thinspo" images. This allows the viewer to enmesh their self-perception with the bodies in the images. Anime and Tumblr art were also hugely influential. Search terms like "tumblr boy aesthetic outfits" or "tumblr soft boy art" will show countless additional examples of this aesthetic which is popular among young trans identified girls. Incidentally, these

androgynous, pretty boy types are also the kinds of young men that adolescent girls tend to be attracted to.

Now a legal adult, I could pursue testosterone without my parents or laws holding me back. I searched around in my area, but back in 2016 there weren't any informed consent model gender clinics around. Informed consent is the model of treatment whereby someone of the legal age according to their state (in the US) who desires an intervention must only sign their name on a legal disclaimer informing them of certain risks in order to acquire those interventions. There is no therapy, psychological screening, or in my case even physical health screening involved in the informed consent model. At most, a provider could decline a candidate for some reason at their personal discretion. Whereas in the past, people who wanted to transition often had to be in treatment with specialists for years before being prescribed hormones or operated on, informed consent is now the most popular methods of distributing cross sex hormones and surgeries to people old enough to give medical consent in their state of the US today. There are even online telehealth services that will ship you hormones so you don't even have to leave your house to get them. Don't you love innovation?

Since there were no informed consent clinics in my area that I could find in a quick Google search, I decided to see which Planned Parenthoods offered it, as I had heard raving things about Planned Parenthood from people on Tumblr. The closest location to me offering informed consent HRT (hormone replacement therapy) was all the way in Chicago, a six-hour drive from my home town. I figured I could tell my parents I was out with friends and would make the drives to and from Chicago in one day. I had only gotten my drivers license a few months before, and had never attempted such a long drive. On the drive back, I got caught in a terrifying thunderstorm so bad that I couldn't see 10 feet in front of me and the winds were shaking my car. Now that I'm older and have done many long drives, I recognize this was a stupid thing to do. But I was doing a lot of stupid things.

My appointment, and first injection of testosterone, was on August 15th, 2016. I had just turned eighteen.



Me at 18; putting more effort into “passing” as male. I wore that hat all the time because I had no idea how to do or cut my hair in a way that resembled a typical man. I was too scared to go to a barber or men’s hairstylist. Also, because people have made this comment before, the thing on my shirt isn’t a confederate flag, its the logo of a local pirate themed laser tag place my brother used to go to and I stole the shirt from him.

I woke up early on the morning of the appointment, which I believe was for some time around noon, got together my couple hundred dollars in cash, put on my uniform of basketball shorts

and hoodie, and got in my car. I was banking on my parents waking up and leaving for work without coming to my room and would text them I was heading over to a friend's house at some point during the day. My mom called me during my drive, at which point I remembered I had actually been supposed to attend a dentist appointment that day, and I made up a story to her about how I was on my way to the dentist appointment and would head to a friend's house after. She wished me luck at the dentist, and we said goodbye. I still have always been too scared to admit to her what I was really doing that day, and that I didn't get that cavity taken care of for an embarrassingly long time.

This was my second time in Chicago (the first was for my high school senior trip), and as I merged onto Lake Shore Drive, the urban landscape excited me. I felt affection towards the city, believing that this place with its ultramodern lifestyle and progressive values was going to deliver me into a whole new life. As I exited onto LaSalle, I was met with several posters and signs related to LGBT, and felt my affections confirmed. This place was welcoming me. Validating me. I couldn't wait to get to my appointment.

I was probably late because I didn't factor in the whole issue of finding parking, and if you've ever been to Chicago its always a disaster. Directly through the door was a woman behind plexiglass next to a locked door. She asked for my identification, and I remember thinking how great it was that Planned Parenthood was keeping women and trans people safe from violent haters who might try to get into the clinic. Upon confirming my identity and appointment, she buzzed me in and I proceeded to the reception area. As I completed my intake forms, I looked around me at the people in the room with me, mostly women and a few couples, mostly black and Hispanic. I remember thinking how cool it was to see so much diversity in such a great and helpful place like Planned Parenthood. Being a Tumblr SJW from a mostly white area, I was euphoric at the thought of a place that affirms trans people and caters to a poor black and brown people. I think I was feeling that this connection confirmed my status as "marginalized", as this was still very important to me.

Before long, my (trans) name was called and I looked up to see a tall, heavy woman with shoulder length brown hair and a clipboard. As we walked back through the halls of the clinic, she introduced herself as a social worker and told me we would do a brief intake to understand what I was looking to get out of the services at Planned Parenthood. I told her that I had drove six hours all the way from my hometown, and I think she responded with some comment about how I must be so determined. When we arrived at our room, she motioned for me to sit and she began the intake process. This process consisted of a handful of basic questions, which you can see below, along with her notes on my answers.

Social Work Intake Form

TODAY'S DATE: 8/15/16	PATIENT #: 4 [REDACTED]	DATE OF BIRTH: 07/24/1998
PREFERRED NAME: [REDACTED]	LEGAL NAME: Helena K [REDACTED]	PRONOUN(S): Male
GENDER: Male	SEX ASSIGNED AT BIRTH: Female	SEX LISTED W/ INSURANCE: N/A

<p>What do you know about Hormone Therapy? What are you hoping Hormone Therapy will do for you? Patient was well versed and knowledgeable about hormone therapy. Patient reports that he has thought about using hormones for some time, especially over the last 2 years. Patient states that turning 18 is why he was able to start the process.</p>	<p>Who knows about your plans to start hormones? Patient states that he is "out to everyone" and identifies trans. Patient states that he has told one friend about starting hormones and is also connected to online communities for support.</p>
<p>Why hormones now (vs. past/future)? Patient states that he is now 18 and can initiate the process himself.</p>	<p>Do you live alone or with other people? If with others, does it feel like a safe place to transition? (consider coping methods if they do not know or may have negative reactions) Patient does live with his family; however he is going to college in Columbus in 2 days. Patient states that his family is not supportive of his transition; however he does indicate that his mother and father have started to come around more. They refuse to identify him by his preferred name or pronoun in the home and with family, but have made a commitment to do so at college. Patient feels that once his family sees how truly happy he is once he transitions; he feels they will come around and be more supportive.</p>
<p>Aside from hormones, are there other changes you are considering or thinking about making? Patient states that he is 100% confident that he will get top surgery in the future. Patient states that he has considered some facial masculinization work as well, but states that he wants to see what the hormones will do first. Patient states that he would consider bottom surgery if the options that he would like for a penis became available, but he is not interested with the current options.</p>	<p>Do you work and/or go to school? If so, are you out at work/school or considering talking to your employer/school? Patient does not work currently. Patient going to college in a couple days and would like to study biochemistry.</p>
<p>How are you thinking about coping with stressors from the changes you will experience? Patient states that he feels like he will be much happier. Patient states that he has struggled with depression currently and in the past. Patient states that this summer was tough for him with depression and suicidal thoughts. Patient states that since he has been able to make this appointment, his depression has already started to improve. Patient expects that his whole life will be quite different and he will be very happy when he starts to change.</p>	<p>Do you date or have a partner? Thoughts about how you might talk to partner/dates about your identity? Patient is not in a relationship currently. Patient states that he has no fears about this as he believes that he will only connect with other trans people or an individual who is supportive of his process.</p>
	<p>General Screen: Oriented to person/place/time/situation: YES / NO Mood and affect appropriate to situation: YES / NO Suicidal ideation or thoughts of self-harm: YES / NO Patient endorses a hx of depression and SI. Patient denies any current SI, plan or intent. Patient states that his most recent thought was about 2 weeks ago. Patient states that he was very suicidal over the summer and it was tough for him. Patient states that now that he has started his transition, his depression is significantly improving. Client can make informed consent: YES / NO</p>

Feminizing: How do you handle depression when you get sad?
Masculinizing: How do you handle anger when it happens?

Patient states that he feels that he will be able to manage his emotions. As stated, patient feels that his mood will significantly improve.

In most of the records I share here, certain information is redacted, because at the time I took these photos I was speaking to a lawyer who advised me against naming Planned Parenthood publicly, or releasing other information. Nothing came of those pursuits, and I am now more

open about these things. My real name, Helena, is also used on the Planned Parenthood records because their policy was to use my legal name on official records, but my clinicians called me by my preferred name, and on some of the records my preferred name was also listed.

I remember the intake process taking about 20 minutes, at which point the social worker told me she would talk over my intake with the nurse practitioner, and they would decide if I was a good candidate for testosterone. I waited anxiously by myself for a couple of minutes, and then the social worker came back. She told me that I was a perfect candidate for testosterone, and since I had traveled so far, and seemed “so sure”, that they would even work around their typical policy of taking blood samples and waiting for test results to prescribe the hormones, and give me my prescription that very day.

Ecstatic, I burst into tears of joy and called my friend who was also trans (at the time, she isn't anymore) that they were going to give me my first injection that day. My friend and I squealed to each other over the phone and when we calmed down, we hung up and the social worker motioned me into a new room. There, I met the nurse practitioner who handed me the informed consent document and asked me to read it over. I gave it a glance, knowing that I had already made my decision and some silly formality wouldn't stop me. I and the professionals already knew what was best for me. I signed the document.

The image shows a printed informed consent document for masculinizing hormone therapy. The document is titled "Client Information for Informed Consent Masculinizing Hormone (Female to Male) Therapy" and is dated "Revised June 2016". The top right corner has the name "Helena" and ID number "072498". The document is signed by "Helena" on "8-15-16". The bottom of the page has "Proprietary property" and a page number "2".

Key sections of the document include:

- What is masculinizing hormone therapy?** Masculinizing hormone therapy is medicine that can be used as part of your gender transition process. The medicine is called testosterone.
- What is testosterone?** Testosterone is the sex hormone that causes the development of masculine characteristics. It can be given as a shot or put on the skin as a gel, a cream, or a patch.
- Before taking testosterone, you need to know the most common benefits, risks, side effects, and other choices you have. We are happy to answer any questions you have.**
- What are the benefits?** Testosterone will change your body in the following ways:
 - Your voice will become deeper.
 - You may grow a mustache and beard.
 - Hair on your body will be thicker and will grow faster.
 - Your clitoris may get bigger.
 - Your muscles may get bigger and stronger.
 - You will probably stop having a period.
 - You will notice less fat on your buttocks, hips and thighs and more on your belly.
- What are the risks?** Testosterone can:
 - Increase your red blood cell count.
 - Increase the amount of fat and/or cholesterol in the blood.
 - Increase the chance of getting diabetes (sugar).
 - Harm the liver (rare).
 There may be long-term risks that we don't know about. The risks of testosterone may be higher for people who:
 - Smoke.
 - Are overweight.
 - Have a family history of heart disease.
- What are the side effects?**
 - Acne.
 - Thicker and more oily skin.
 - The hair on your head may get thinner or fall out (male pattern baldness).
 - Head changes.
 - Increased sex drive.
 - Legal or prison.
- Besides testosterone therapy, what are my other choices?** You could do nothing. Another way to masculinize is to have surgery. If you are interested in other options, talk to your doctor or nurse. You can choose to stop taking testosterone at any time. If you decide to do that, talk to your doctor or nurse.
- What else do I need to know?**
 - How long does it take to work?** It can take a month or longer. Some of the changes can take 2 to 5 years. No one can tell how fast — or how much — change will happen.
 - How long do I need to take testosterone?** You will need to take the medicine forever to keep some of the changes in your body. The following changes are usually not permanent — they will probably go away if you stop taking the medicine:
 - Increased sex drive.
 - Changes to your body fat.
 - Changes to your strength.
 - Faster hair growth.
 - Some of the changes will probably not go away even if you stop taking testosterone. These include:
 - Deeper voice.
 - Lower voice.
 - Mustache and beard.
 - Male pattern baldness.
 - Thicker body hair.
 - Can I get pregnant?** No one can tell you for sure if taking testosterone will affect your ability to get pregnant. You could get pregnant or you may never be able to get pregnant in the future, even if you stop the testosterone. If you have sex with a person who makes sperm, you need to use birth control to prevent pregnancy, just in case. If you do get pregnant, you must stop the testosterone. If you think you may want to be pregnant in the future, you should talk to your doctor or nurse about your options before you start testosterone.

The document also includes a section for the patient to indicate their relationship to the clinic and a signature line for the patient, which is signed by "Helena" on "8-15-16".

My full informed consent document. My main criticism is that testosterone as a hormone and testosterone as a treatment are presented as primarily cosmetic, when in fact testosterone is involved in many physiological processes, and healthy in different amounts for men and women. I took a closer look at the contents of this document in [this thread](#).

Now that all that legal liability nonsense was taken care of, it was time to get to the exciting part: dosage. Typically, females beginning a masculinizing testosterone regimen are started on a relatively low dose and monitored for a few weeks or months, at which point the dose may be

increased. Considering I hadn't even had blood work, in hindsight this would have been the more responsible way to do it. That is not what happened in my case, though. When the nurse practitioner suggested a lower dose to start, I objected, saying I believed I had "higher estrogen than most AFABs" (people "assigned female at birth"), citing the size of my thighs and breasts as evidence. This was acceptable to the nurse practitioner, and she asked me what dose I would like to start at. Nervously, I said something along the lines of, "well what's the highest we can go?"

Most female transitioners I've known have told me they started at 25mg, or even less. Some of my FtM friends who are still on testosterone and look remarkably like natal males, are only on 50mg. I was prescribed 100mg of testosterone, to be self-injected into my thigh muscle weekly, starting that very day.

There were no words that could have prepared me for what was about to come.

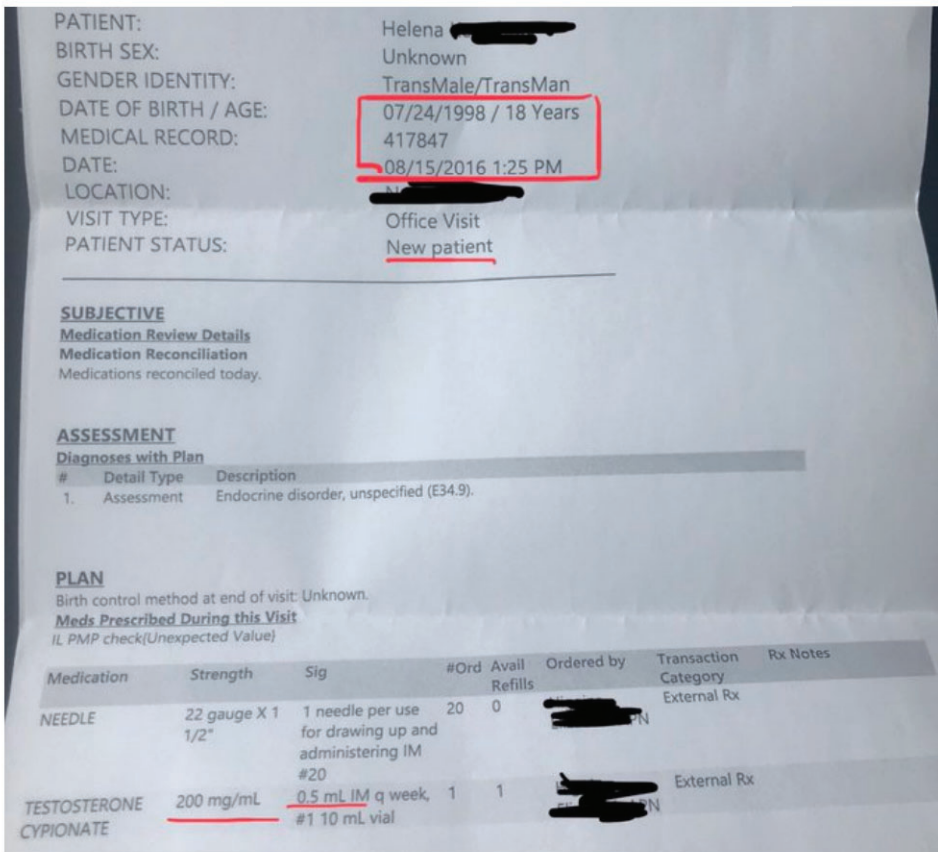


Table 1. Hormone preparations and dosing (Grading: T O M)

Androgen	Initial - low dose ^b	Initial - typical	Maximum - typical ^c	Comment
Testosterone Cypionate ^a	20 mg/week IM/SQ	50mg/week IM/SQ	100mg/week IM/SQ	For q 2 wk dosing, double each dose

My medical record showing that I was prescribed testosterone cypionate on my first appointment, without blood work (results take at least a few days), and that my dosage was the maximum recommended dosage per the [UCSF dosing guidelines](#).

Shit, meet fan

Two days after I started testosterone was my first day of college. The weekend prior, I told my mom that I had requested for the university to list me under the male name I had chosen, and that to avoid confusion she should use this name if only when interacting with the school. She agreed to use the name and male pronouns when she and my dad dropped me off at my dorm so that at least I could start my first day of college on one page, even if she wasn't on that page herself. I was content with this, and felt like I was finally getting her to understand.

On August 17th, 2016, my parents and brother dropped me off at college and helped me carry all my new college stuff into my dorm, unaware of my testosterone expedition. I hid my vials and needles deep in the recesses of a bag of clothes, which I insisted my parents let me unpack later. My bed sheets were standard red and navy-blue plaid from Walmart, my school supplies were all some mix of grey and navy blue, and my only dorm decoration was a Star Wars poster. My wardrobe was a handful of sweatpants, hoodies, and t-shirts, all mostly from Walmart or the men's section of TJ Maxx. Gone were the days of glitter gel pens, notebooks covered in cat stickers, my cozy bedroom with a plush, floral comforter, fluffy rug, and One Direction poster. It was now time to "act like a boy", because if I acted like myself, nobody would believe I was trans.

My roommate was another trans guy (whom I will call "he", because that is how I remember him), who I later learned was one of the youngest people in my state to have gone on puberty blockers and testosterone. My school had a "self-ID" policy, and I was originally supposed to be placed with an actual male, but when I looked him up on Facebook, he was some massive ripped sports guy and the idea of sleeping next to him scared the living hell out of me. I'm sure he wouldn't have appreciated coming to school and finding out he was rooming with a girl, either. I chickened out of rooming with him and asked an administrator if they could find me another trans person to live with. That first day, I was simultaneously intimidated to meet another trans guy and feeling incredibly awkward introducing my parents into this whole new trans world when just a few months ago they'd had no idea I wanted to be trans at all. We all went through the motions of pretending everything was normal until my mom accidentally called me "she" to my roommate and he locked eyes with me apologetically, signaling to me he witnessed the incredible violence that had just occurred. My mood soured for the rest of my parent's visit, and I gave them both attitude until they left for the drive back home. That night, my roommate and I got to talking, and he said he was sorry that my parents were so transphobic and unaccepting. He told me that his mom was very supportive of him being trans, and fought tooth and nail to get him "access" to transition at a record setting age. I was seething with jealousy.

That week was eventful, and I made a bunch of new trans friends. My roommate introduced me to his ex that he was still friends with, who at the time was also trans and eventually became my

closest relationship for nearly four years (I will call her “Jamie”, and “she”, because that is how I know her now). She and I clicked immediately and would be inseparable for years, even long after any resemblance of a romantic relationship fizzled away. I consider myself heterosexual and would not date a trans man now, but at the time as a “gay trans man” under the influence of gender ideology, which tells you biological sex isn’t real, and experiencing surges of testosterone, I convinced myself I was attracted to this girl who looked like a boy at the time and had rapidly become my closest friend. Since in the back of my mind I knew she was a biological female, she didn’t intimidate me as much as actual men did.

In a classic *me* maneuver, I had forgotten one of most important items: my laptop. The first week was just orientation week, so I didn’t need it, but I would need to drive back down to my home town to retrieve my laptop before Monday. On Friday or Saturday, I said goodbye to my friends and drove the two hours back to my parent’s house. As I pulled up to the house, I saw my mom had just arrived home from work. Stiffly, we greeted each other and entered the house through the garage. I nervously wondered if either of my parents would be able to guess that I had started testosterone, even though a week is hardly long enough for there to be visible effects.

As I walked from the kitchen to the stairs, my mom called me “Helena” and I whipped around, snapping back at her that she needed to respect me now and use my “real name” (my trans name). She yelled after me as I stomped upstairs to my room, and as I was collecting my laptop and charger cable, she stormed in behind me. Six months of pent-up frustration and rage spilled out of her, and she tore into me in a tirade that felt eternal as it was in progress. I don’t say these details to demonize her, I understand why things happened the way they did, but it’s an important part of the story. The tirade reached some dark places, and she said things I won’t repeat here but hurt me deeply. As she yelled, I sat on my bed staring at the floor and whispering “okay, okay” over and over. One of the last things she said was that I shouldn’t come back until I realized I was a girl. Whether she meant this literally or not, I already had a narrative in my head that transphobic parents disown their trans kids, so that’s how I took it. Plus, I thought I would never stop being trans.

She left the room, and I began panicking. Hyperventilating, I grabbed my laptop, a few extra things I meant to retrieve, and headed for the door. As I went to walk out, my sweet old cat, Puff, was standing in the doorway like he always would when he came upstairs around the time I went to bed. He was my little buddy, and always slept next to me. The night before I left for college I cried and told him that I would be back to sleep next to him all the time, but I never got to again.

Tears welling, I patted Puff on the head, and gave him a little kiss goodbye.

I was properly shaking by the time I started my car and drove it to a near by gas station. There, I allowed myself to break down and called a [trans] Tumblr friend of mine. I cried to her and told her that my mom had just disowned me, and I didn’t know what to do. She helped me remember that I had left money in a box in my room, and told me to call a family friend to retrieve it for me, which I did. Once I had the money, I began the drive back to my university, getting in at one in the morning, throwing my belongings on the floor and crashing to sleep in my top bunk bed.

The Dark Days

Everything that followed this altercation with my mother was dark, and things were dark for a long time. I won't bore you with every story, but let's just say there was a succession of demotivating, stressful, and painful events in quick succession. There was a lot of drama, I lost nearly all my new friends, and I started to feel really, really down again. Within a month, I moved into the campus LGBT house due to issues with the room mate and the three other people who lived there with me were my entire social circle. We mostly sat around smoking weed and drinking, and my academic performance plummeted. I was also advised to financially emancipate myself by one of the campus gender studies professors who was "helping" me navigate being "disowned" by my parents, which just created financial issues for me down the line that added to the stress. I remember feeling numb for months, and when I wasn't numb and checked out, I was angry. I'm still not sure how much of that was due to the testosterone or the general state of my life.

The anger started as a smoldering anger at first. I found myself feeling more irritable, less able to put up with the little things that bothered me about other people. I was uncomfortable with my newfound tendency to get bent out of shape at everybody so I started isolating myself, trying to hide this awful person I thought I was turning out to be. I didn't make the connection between this and the testosterone, I just thought I was a bad person. I didn't feel like being around people, and when I was, I felt so unlike myself that I didn't know how to relate to them. Even five years after the fact, I still feel like this experienced has damaged my self esteem and social capabilities in a major way. It definitely changed me as a person.

These next few years of my life are still incredibly hard for me to think about, much less write about for everyone else to see. The one redeeming quality of this dreadful time period is that I adopted my cat, Corndog (yes that's his name) early in 2017, and he has been by my side through all of it. I remember myself as a shell of a person, a monster, someone who didn't recognize the feelings in her own body anymore. To make things worse, the testosterone injections themselves were causing significant distress for both me and Jamie; it would take us hours of crying and hyperventilating to drive the needles into our flesh once a week. I had always had emotional problems, but this was different. In high school, I had always banked on the future where I would be in college, transitioning, and part of me genuinely thought testosterone would somehow make me into this outgoing male jock archetype and I would be handsome, have lots of friends, and love life. That wasn't really panning out. I was lonely, enmeshed in toxic and stressful relationships, on academic probation, in legal trouble due to substance use, and feeling possessed by some sort of demon I now recognize was at least partially the testosterone's worsening grip on my mind. With the reality of my old future fantasy having rapidly deteriorated, but not yet realizing the fundamental issues with my life, I set my sights on another route of escape.

Jamie, who was in a similar position of plummeting mental state, still maladaptively coping with the trauma of growing up in a severely dysfunctional family, one night suggested that we run away; just take what little stuff we can fit in the car and move to a whole new city, one that will

embrace our transness and will allow us to realize our true potential. I told her I knew just the place...

Chicago.

And so not long before the end of that school year, we told the few acquaintances we had that we were moving and they wished us luck, excited to hear we were getting out of suburbia and moving on to better things. I remember feeling awkward telling them, like there was some cognitive dissonance between the fact that chasing trans had only made my life worse, and the fact that I was making another drastic life decision to chase trans once more.

I quit my crappy fast food job, unenrolled from the university, which was going to kick me out anyway, paid a visit to my mother to let her know of my plans (we were on strained speaking terms at this point), and soon enough I was en route to Chicago. We had managed to rent a small studio apartment, and both applied to schools in the city. I didn't end up attending school, though, because not long after getting settled in to the new apartment my mental health would get even worse.

What I thought would be a fresh start turned out to be more of the same. I isolated, too uncomfortable with myself to even make eye contact with other people. I didn't get a job, didn't go to school, didn't meet any people, and for the most part, didn't even get out of bed. It was around this time that something really weird started happening to me, and this part I largely do contribute to the testosterone.

When they tell you about testosterone, they mostly frame it as a cosmetic thing. Sure, you might feel more irritable, you'll probably have a higher sex drive, and there is that whole thing about increased risk for heart disease and cancer, but for the most part its all about fat redistribution and getting a deep, commanding voice. My informed consent document even generously warned me about "mood changes". But I don't know if anything would have prepared me for what it actually felt like.

During the initial months following my first shot, I recall a general feeling of suffocating numbness and inability to identify my emotions, with bouts of anger that were easy to trigger dispersed throughout. Something that before would have made me mostly sad, or even frustrated, made every cell in my body overflow with rage. The anger was also of a different quality than the kind of anger I experienced before. Previously, I might have gotten so angry that I cried, or yelled, or very occasionally slammed a door, but I rarely if ever felt much more of an urge to externalize it physically beyond that. While I was on testosterone, the anger demanded to be externalized. I felt like my body would explode if I couldn't hit or throw something, and this scared me. Crying was no longer an option, at least at first, as crying was nearly impossible to achieve. When I was emotionally overwhelmed, instead of easily crying like before I would start to feel extremely angry, and instead of hitting others or anything in my surroundings, I resorted to hitting myself. I would struggle against the anger by punching myself and eventually, after there was enough pain, I could cry and when I cried I'd cry for hours, often falling asleep and not

remembering much when I'd wake up. I had these kinds of meltdowns about once a week or so, and regularly had bruises on my head and body from where I would hit myself.

One day, I had a meltdown like this and instead of hitting myself I hurt myself quite seriously with a kitchen knife, and when I calmed down enough to be spoken to I was coaxed into going to the emergency room by Jamie. I can only imagine how traumatic it was for her to be around me during this time. I still, at this point, made no connection to the testosterone. We both just thought I was a severely mentally ill person; even though I had never experienced anything remotely like this before testosterone (and never again since!).

I was checked into the hospital psychiatric ward that night and remained for seven days. There, no inquiry was made into my high testosterone dosage or whether it might have been having an impact on my behavior. Instead, I was diagnosed with borderline personality disorder, depression, and acute psychosis, for which I was prescribed four separate psychiatric medications. Upon my discharge, I dutifully took my prescribed medications and even felt validated by my being prescribed an "anti-psychotic". I was thankful that I had finally been diagnosed as severely mentally ill and given strong medications that would fix my faulty brain chemistry and allow me to live a better life. For the next few weeks, I was to attend a thrice weekly outpatient group therapy program that was three hours a day. In this intensive group therapy, we talked about mindfulness and how to manage the demands of work while living with "mental illness", but deeper psychological work was absent, and once again the fact that I was a young biological female on a supraphysiological dosage of synthetic testosterone remained completely unaddressed. Throughout every experience in any mental health treatment during my trans identification, my testosterone treatment was never identified as a potential source of mental health symptoms, and my desire to be a "boy" was never questioned as possibly a result of pre-existing emotional issues. My "preferred name and pronouns" were always used without hesitation or question, and I was "affirmed" by every professional I saw during this time. I had still not developed the skepticism of the mental health and medical industries that I have now, so I saw this as even more reason to not question my identity as trans.

While I was enrolled in the outpatient program, I was not improving. I was still unemployed, using substances (including some of my prescribed medications), unable to get out of bed most days, talking about suicide in group, and having "episodes". Eventually, the psychiatrists and therapists at the outpatient program sat me down and told me I needed to go back into inpatient. I did, and this time stayed for about half a week. When I got out, I decided these programs were not helping me and that once I unenrolled from them, I was going to get a different therapist (at the local LGBT center), get a job, and try making some friends, the latter of which didn't happen until after I detransitioned.

For the next six months or so, I worked in a small cookie shop where I often worked ridiculous hours, including relatively frequent 10 hour solitary night shifts, not returning home until nearly 5 am. Needless to say, this wasn't fantastic for my mental wellbeing either, but its where some changes started to take place. I started interacting with people regularly, and though I didn't make any long-term friends, it was helpful just to know some names and faces and be a fly on the wall listening to the drama in the lives of my coworkers. A trans coworker of mine clued me

in to an organization that issued grants that paid for trans surgeries, as my insurance at the time didn't cover them. My coworker showed me the website to apply, but I always procrastinated it. Strange, considering I would publicly talk about how badly I wanted the surgery. So I never got any surgeries, something for which I am extremely grateful.

During some of the late night, solitary shifts, I had a lot of time to reflect. In some ways, it was a bit maddening, but dispersed within the general neuroticism were moments of clarity. I remember deciding to take my chest binder off at work for the first time, because it was just me and one other worker who always sat in the back, and that fucking thing hurt. It felt so much more natural not to have anything constricting my chest underneath my work shirt. I started skipping testosterone injections because they made me so anxious, so I was only injecting once or twice a month. With this, my "episodes" dramatically decreased. I remember browsing trans subreddits in hopes I would get some answers for what to do if transitioning wasn't improving my mental health. There were many posts asking this question, and by far the most common answer was to "just keep going" and that one day, when you passed well enough, it would all be worth it. There were times when I sat back and questioned nearly every choice in my life, like the relationship I was in and moving to Chicago. I thought about how all these things I desperately jumped into thinking they would save me had not don't anything of the sort. The only thing I didn't outright question was my choice to be transgender. That would require a more up-front reality check.

The call is coming from inside the house

Not everyone has an "a-ha!" moment when they realize they want to detransition, but I did. Mine was after a few weeks of occasionally thinking back to before I had transitioned, the comfortable clothes I used to wear and how I didn't worry about whether or not the "feminine" stuff I liked would make people "doubt I was trans". I thought about how much I loathed the way men's clothes fit me and the way masculine styles looked on me in general, and I remember wishing society was more accepting of "gender non-conforming men like me". I also wished I "wasn't trans", and even recall making a reddit post to this effect, lamenting how even though "being trans" was making me miserable, I knew it was who I really was and after I got surgeries it would be right for me.

This kind of thinking, I now realize after talking to so many detransitioners, is common in the weeks or months leading up to detransition. My "a-ha!" moment happened in February of 2018, when Jamie made a video montage consisting of photos of us chronologically from the day we met (2 days after I started testosterone) until recently, set to music. As I watched the video, I saw the way my face changed from so young, hopeful, and most of all, recognizable, to weary, deadpan, and foreign.



Top row: Photos of me from the first month of my transition. Bottom row: Photos of me from the final months before detransitioning.

I began to sob uncontrollably. At first, Jamie thought I was crying because I loved the video so much, but I quickly informed her it was something else, but I wouldn't say what. I cried, and cried, and cried. Every memory those photos evoked was flashing before my eyes, all the pain I knew was behind my eyes was emerging vividly. I saw innocence turn to anguish and I knew I had been on the wrong path for a long, long time. I didn't know. I didn't know it would be this way. I was just a kid.

How could I have been so stupid?

I couldn't bring myself to tell Jamie what I was truly thinking. I knew that she would probably freak out and try to make me rationalize away these feelings, but it was too late for that now. The dam had broken. Instead, I silently berated myself and catastrophized internally until I mustered the courage to tell my very pro-LGBT therapist: being trans had been a massive mistake.

I remember her response clear as day: "But you always tell me about your terrible dysphoria!"

"I know, but I... I don't think that's what it is" I replied, and started to tell her my still developing thoughts on how I had developed the "dysphoria" after finding out about gender identities online as a teenager, when I had been struggling with so many other emotional issues for a long time, and that in retrospect I must have gotten carried away, thinking that being trans was the explanation and solution for all of my problems. She wasn't really hearing me, and questioned the things I said from the angle of "you're trying to talk yourself out of being trans because transphobia is making you hate yourself." Ironic that nobody ever questioned my desire to be trans that way.

This was the first moment I started realizing something was off about the trans movement, and institutions in general. I had experienced this massive realization, and it was agonizing but at least it was finally something real, and here I was being met with all these rationalizations for why this of all things was a psychological symptom. Not the effects of the testosterone, not my belief that all of my problems would be solved by transitioning, not my aversion to being female, but the fact that I now knew transitioning had been a mistake.

I left this session feeling frustrated, and I don't think I ever went back. Sitting in the car outside the building, I told Jamie that I was regretting my transition and questioning my trans identity in general, and predictably she was extremely upset. She reacted in anger, saying I must be confused and, like my therapist, accusing me of having these thoughts due to some underlying psychological issue, like only an insane person would ever regret being trans.

She was not being uniquely harsh here, this is a common occurrence in the trans community. In one direction, there's a desire to encourage gender questioning in others who have not questioned their gender yet (some people call this "cracking an egg"). In the other direction, there is an intense fear of others changing their minds about being trans or wanting to transition. Once someone is questioning their gender, there's a push to encourage them to take steps towards social and medical transition, which, once initiated, makes changing one's mind more complicated and going back to living as they did before more difficult. I personally have gotten very angry and desperate when friends in the past would voice doubts about identifying as transgender, and I have also encouraged gender questioning and trans identity in friends of mine who did not yet identify as trans. I regret this very much now, as some of these friends have gone on to medically transition, and I no longer believe this was remotely in their best interest. But in the trans community, people cope with the inherent doubts and cognitive dissonance of pretending to be someone they are not by encouraging others to do the same. This is also why so many adult trans people advocate for child transition. If an innocent, pure child can "be trans", that validates their identity and belief system too. An enormous amount of

mental energy is devoted to the crowdsourcing of validation and firefighting of anything that triggers internal conflict, which is always nagging in the back of the mind.

When a person is at peace with themselves and expressing themselves naturally, they don't desperately micromanage everything and everyone around them.

Around this time, Jamie and I were preparing for a trip my mom had invited us on with herself and my brother. Now finally on cordial terms, we agreed to go, and our dramatic conversation in the car occurred in the week before. We both felt pressure to act like everything was fine because I had worked so hard to get my mom to tolerate my transition, and I was feeling guilty and humiliated. Being somewhere else kind of felt like a neutral ground where we could have conversations more freely with less judgement. We took many long walks to talk about our transitions, trans identities, and reflect on our lives up to this point. During these walks, Jamie also admitted to herself and to me that she didn't want to be trans anymore. We felt crushed, scared, confused, and regretful, but so much more free.

Back in Chicago, we now had to figure out what to do next. Neither of our families knew what we were thinking, and we were both scared to tell them. There's an enormous amount of shame in realizing how much hurt and chaos has been inflicted on others in your pursuit of ideas you now think were ridiculous and destructive. You think of all the decisions you made that weren't directly related to your transition, but were made in the effort of chasing the fantasy more broadly, and you feel like you've just woken up in a pit of your own digging, too deep to climb out of. You feel trapped, cornered, panicked, and deeply ashamed. Regret comes with a lot of self flagellation, and at the time, there wasn't the big detransitioner community there is today to let us know that we weren't alone. I remember looking up transition regret online, and I found one essay by an older lesbian. While we did have detransition in common, everything else about her experiences were different and I couldn't see myself in that story. I felt an incredible emotional whiplash, like I had just woken up from a five-year spell and was suffering amnesia about how I'd gotten to where I was. I was hungry for clues that would help me make sense of my position.

I began to search online with key words like "regret", looking for anything that might resonate with what I was experiencing. I knew the standard trans narrative was wrong, at least in my case, but looking at other perspectives still scared me. In fact, I called myself nonbinary, and picked a "gender-neutral" name to go by, because I was still reflexively averse to being myself, a filthy "cis girl". It felt incredibly uncomfortable -- more uncomfortable even than being FtM -- and I dropped that pretty quickly. Once the dam broke, the same old tricks of self-deception were no longer tolerable to me. I remember finding the reddit r/detrans forum, which at the time had only around 100 subscribers, if memory serves me (it now has tens of thousands). This clued me in to the fact that at least a handful of people out there were feeling regret too.

When I had my detransition realization, I immediately wanted to go back to looking like a girl. The men's clothes, short hair, and my wispy little testosterone moustache made me sick to look at. I bought some basic clothes, like leggings and long sleeved, women's cut shirts, simple things I used to like wearing before I transitioned. I also bought some cheap make-up and a wig. Though these made my reflection in the mirror less jarring, I felt kind of like a man in drag. It was

a really gross, uncomfortable feeling. I didn't know if I would ever feel normal. The realization that my escapist fantasy I had hoped would save me from my teenage misery was a fraud sucked me right back into that old misery. The consequences of my decisions compounded it further. I felt utterly, hopelessly trapped.

Somehow, I kept picking jobs where I'd end up doing entire shifts alone, which once again made things more difficult in some ways, but also allowed me to do lots of internet searching, and it was during these lonely shifts that I found a subreddit called *r/GenderCritical*. At first, the "transphobic" language (such as calling trans women "men") horrified me. I felt so incredibly guilty for even reading the words in front of me, but I couldn't look away. It was my first exposure to a perspective towards trans issues that wasn't the mainstream narrative, which I now knew was at least not true for me. I searched the subreddit for topics of detransition and regret, and I saw other young women posting similar stories to mine. I made a post, and was met with a surge of positive, encouraging comments. Somebody recommended me the book *Female Erasure* by Ruth Barrett, which presented me with both illuminating facts that contradicted the trans narrative and an alternative, positive image of womanhood. I still remember the exact moment, standing crouched over the work iPad alone in my smoothie store, when I had the mind-bending realization that not only was I not the only one going through this, but it was a full fledged phenomenon. I had been manipulated, taken advantage of, and involved in a cult-like community.

For a short time, I became enthused by radical feminism, and the gender critical feminist perspective greatly appealed to me. I was still very confused and used to receiving external validation, so I tried to fit myself into the "lesbian who transitions due to internalized homophobia and misogyny" narrative that I found was common in gender critical circles. With time, I would grow to form my own beliefs and understandings of myself and I gradually distanced myself from radical feminism, but it was a stepping stone away from gender ideology.

From *r/GenderCritical*, I found out about parent groups and advocates like 4thWaveNow and Lily Maynard (who I wrote [this essay](#) for early on in my detransition). Here, I could read a lot of thoroughly researched information on trans activism, corruption, regulatory and institutional capture, and more non-ideological critiques of the trans movement that weren't from a strong feminist angle. I found out about "Rapid Onset Gender Dysphoria" (ROGD), which is a term coined by researcher Lisa Littman. It describes certain patterns parents have reported that preceded the sudden declaration by their adolescent children that they are transgender, most notably in adolescents who showed no pronounced gender incongruence in childhood. I read her study, and I just about ticked every box.

Pre-existing mental health issues, check. A friend group where multiple people began identifying as trans around the same time, check. Decline in mental health and parent-child relationship since identifying as trans, check. Expressing distrust/dislike of non-transgender people and spending less time around non-transgender friends, check. Isolating self from family, check. Only trusting information about gender from pro-transgender sources, check. Increased social media use directly preceding the identification as trans, check.

I was in shock. This was... me! Perhaps more importantly, this was... EVERYONE! All of those young biological females I had been friends with online and offline who identified as trans also fit this *exact* description.

While researching this phenomenon, I also learned that in the years that I began identifying as trans, the demographics of people seeking to transition had changed dramatically. I learned that gender dysphoria was once seen primarily in pre-pubescent boys and adult men. I learned that there had already been research into these men, and that they had completely different histories and motivations to myself and the other girls who fit the description of ROGD.

Finally... I saw that Dr. Littman had been targeted for her research. Targeted by activists infuriated by her evidence that contradicted the trans narrative they were so emotionally dependent on, her institution turned its back on her, unwilling to stand up to the activists.

I was pissed.

I was angry about having this kind of information kept from me by the community, which I now understood exhibits information control dynamics similar to that of cults or extreme religious sects. I was angry that clinicians either didn't understand or didn't make the effort to read this information about demographics and gender dysphoria. I was angry that I had been affirmed every step of the way, and only questioned when I was starting to express regret. I was angry that people who seemed to be making a genuine attempt to understand this new phenomenon were being targeted, and I was angry that I would have targeted them too if I had known about this not long ago.

This inspired me to boot up that old 25 follower twitter account I had made in college and subsequently abandoned. Furiously, I began typing away a thread defending the idea of ROGD, and offering details of my own life trajectory to back it up. I didn't know if anybody would see my post, but I wanted to get these thoughts out. People did see it though, and I began to interact with other detransitioners, parents, and gender critical people. Hearing how deeply so many people were being affected by this phenomenon that had been so damaging to me too was invigorating, and I became passionate about understanding it (and my experiences) as thoroughly as I could and exchanging ideas with others who were lost in the confusion with me.

As I began to feel strengthened by the knowledge that this was a phenomenon and not a personal failing, I decided I would tell my parents when I saw them next. Sometime in the spring of 2018, they invited me to visit them back in my hometown. I felt myself growing more and more nervous as the day of my flight approached, and on that day, I was a wreck. The airport in my hometown has a long hallway that requires maybe 10 minutes to traverse from the terminal to baggage claim. I distinctly remember my walk down this corridor and seeing my parents as two little dots at the very end. The dots grew and their image came into focus, and with every step I felt more afraid, my heart pounding in my chest, stomach churning, and a dizziness overcoming my body. At about 50 meters away, my vision blacked out for a few seconds! That's how terrified I was to admit to my parents what I had realized!

When I told them, it was that night at dinner when they asked me “what’s new?” It was an awkward conversation, but at least they didn’t say “I told you so”. They didn’t say much; maybe they didn’t know what to say. They did say they were glad to hear it though and that they thought detransitioning was the right decision. My brother was fairly silent throughout, and later that night I heard him say to his gaming friends on Discord, “Sooo, my sister isn’t trans anymore.”

The hardest thing about detransitioning in my case has thankfully not been living with permanent damage to my body, something many other young people with similar histories to mine cannot say. It has been coming to terms with the bad decisions I made that made my emotional struggles much more painful, my ability to socially adjust and have healthy relationships much more difficult, and generally took my life in an unexpected direction that has been *very hard* to climb out of. In many ways I am still climbing out of it. The years following my initial decision to detransition have been fraught with challenges that, with each overcoming, have required me to mature beyond my age. I am very thankful for that, and am growing to truly enjoy and respect myself, but it has also made finding my place in the world difficult. I have continued to struggle with many of the original problems that lead me to identify as trans in the first place, like social weaknesses, anxieties about not fitting in, poor body image, unresolved childhood grief, shame, and conflicts in my family.

Living life by delusion and going to such extreme lengths to chase a falsehood steer one away from true resolution of such natural human issues. Even if the testosterone itself hadn’t had such a damaging effect on my mind and my life, the very act of trans identity and transition was, for me, an act of immense self-harm. Emotions are a way for the unconscious, all sensing body to communicate to the part of us that experiences conscious thought information about how our environment and the people around us affect us. In order to move through and overcome painful emotions, we must first acknowledge the core emotion that is occurring and have compassion towards ourselves for feeling the emotion in the context within which it is occurring. Trans identity took me far away from this into blaming and punishing my body for the emotions I was feeling. It resulted in an even wider disconnect from understanding the conditions that led me to feel such sadness, fear, and grief. Transitioning made my mental health much, much worse. Not better. It was a “fuck you” to the hurting child inside of me. It was telling her that she didn’t matter. It was telling her that I hated her and wanted to annihilate her. It was an act of war against myself.

War against yourself comes with a cost. In the aftermath, there are fires to put out, ashes and debris to clean up, towns to rebuild and ground to fertilize so that life may exist once again. Having just been at war, these necessities of the aftermath feel insurmountable; the body and mind is too exhausted. I had to begin not with action but with turning inward and finally respecting the emotions I had tried to cast away and smother. With each level of depth into compassion with myself, I could then turn to one step of action that would move me forward in the outside world. That has been my back and forth process of healing and recovery from years that not only were wasted, but pulled me down so deep I nearly drowned.

I often felt that upon waking up from “the spell”, I was transported backwards in time into the consciousness of my fifteen-year-old self. Like all the years of being trans were not really me,

and the real me lied dormant under it all, finally able to come forward once the false persona disintegrated. Being the “real me” again, years out from detransitioning at this point, I still can’t fully wrap my head around having been consumed by that false persona. It doesn’t really feel like that was me. And it makes me sad that I did feel the need to reject myself to such a degree as to completely dissociate from who I was, because I quite like myself now, actually. I recognize that many of my qualities that have made certain aspects of life more difficult also make me unique in a very powerful way.



Photo 1: about 6 months after I quit testosterone. Photo 2: About a year post detransition. Photo 3: About 2 years post detransition. Photo 4: About 2.5 years post detransition, I still was really not doing well up until the time of the next photo. Photo 5: About 3 years post detransition. 2021 was a big year for me because I made some major strides in my emotional wellbeing and

started practicing far better nutrition. Photo 6: About 3.5 years post detransition. My mental and physical health are better than they have ever been, but there is still much work to be done!

I firmly believe now that overcoming adversity is the only way a human being can truly come to enjoy and feel proud of themselves, but there is such a thing as unnecessary harm. I am undecided on whether my experiences constitute this, and I guess I just hope the reward is sweet when I more fully overcome the challenges I have been dealt.

My story is not a fluke, and I am not uniquely troubled or irresponsible. What I am though, is fortunate, because there are others for whom the harm has been exponentially worse. Though there is much strength to be found in overcoming, the fact is that today, any young person who remotely struggles with self-esteem, making friends, fitting in to common gender roles, or body image is now vulnerable to being subjected to what amount to medical experiments that may permanently destroy the prior functioning of their bodies before they have had the chance to build identity and strength through the normal means of overcoming life's challenges. I have seen firsthand that for some people, the medical and psychological damage is far beyond what could be considered a healthy amount of adversity.