

CHRISTOPHER, BADASS DRAGON

The first time I spoke to Christopher on the phone, we were in the middle of a conversation, when he sighed and asked me to hold while he stepped away and threw up. When he came back to the phone, he joked about it. I was surprised that he could feel that unsettled in his stomach and still carry on a conversation, and impressed with the way he laughed it off. As I struggled with my own health challenges, I appreciated his sense of humor about something so ongoing, demanding, and overwhelming.

When I met Christopher in 1993, he was skinny and female-bodied, wearing a wrinkled white T-shirt and jeans with a dark blue bandanna wrapped around his head. He was speaking about living with CFIDS to a small gathering of people at the San Francisco Women's Building. Not long after he began, he said he didn't feel well and proceeded to lie down on the cold, hard floor. We in the small audience craned our necks to view him as he continued to talk.

Christopher and I became close. He was hapa, his father Chinese and his mother Caucasian. We both came from butch identities to embrace ourselves as transgender, as FTM. In the early '90s, we were two of the four transgender-identified people in the API lesbian community in San Francisco, a community in which we were both deeply involved.

But our connection stretched beyond our shared experience as hapa trans people. It wasn't just that we both had a deep reverence for Chinese culture. It wasn't just that we were both gender-transgressive people struggling to navigate acceptance in our families and communities while

coming into our true selves. We bonded deeply because we were both living with the same life-shattering, debilitating chronic illnesses: CFIDS and MCS. Though our symptoms and limitations were different, we both knew the gnawing daily struggle of living with a body that worked against our dreams, trying to connect to a world that didn't understand our experience, through years of grinding disability poverty.

My disability undermined my masculinity and confidence, but Christopher wasn't afraid to wear his disability on his sleeve. He pushed people to see him in his wheelchair and surgical mask. When I was extremely debilitated, I was devastated because I had to stay home, but Christopher wasn't going to miss being in the world because he was too sick. And sure enough, there he was, marching down the street in the Lunar New Year parade with a pretty girl pushing him in his wheelchair, expressing himself in all his brave authenticity.

Christopher was family. He was there to mark the occasions—the Lunar New Year and other holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, Oscar nights, Halloweens—with love, respect, laughter, and fabulousness. He was the best man at my wedding. He was a pioneering filmmaker, community organizer, and activist. He was a bold, driven artist. A witty tough guy who once showed up on a dark night to help me fix a flat. A pansexual gentleman who knew his way around the kitchen and had a flair for home decorating. A rebel who deeply honored cultural traditions.

Christopher Lee was another beautiful, talented trans person of color tragically lost to suicide.

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Christopher had a tremendous capacity to take risks, whether in the way he loved with so much heart or in the way he celebrated his unique self. He embraced so many different kinds of people without judgment and wasn't afraid to stretch himself in his creative work or the groundbreaking community organizing and community building he did with Tranny Fest.

In 1997 he cofounded Tranny Fest, North America's first transgender film and arts festival, which has since evolved into the thriving San Francisco Transgender Film Festival. In collaboration with cofounders Al

Austin and Elise Hurwitz, he presided over the festival with red-carpet flair and a penchant for community service, providing free Chinese food for a cash-strapped transgender community long before other organizations were doing it. He welcomed everyone, properly painted with black eyeliner and sporting a fly black-velvet suit and his signature flirty, twinkle-eyed smile.

Christopher was an innovative, award-winning filmmaker who produced four films that stretched audiences to imagine a gender galaxy that transgressed race, culture, and sexual prescription. His first, *Christopher's Chronicles* (1996), told his transition story long before the immediacy and prevalence of transition stories on YouTube. *Trappings of Transhood* (1997) was a smart, sexy reflection of early trans pride that documented the lives of a multicultural group of transmasculine individuals at a time when few genuine representations of us existed.

After his first two films, Christopher turned his attention to porn. It was his dream to celebrate trans male bodies and sexuality in all of their beauty and diversity. In 1998, *Alley of the Trannyboys* rectified the absence of trans men in porn, and in 1999, *Sex Flesh in Blood* depicted his special brand of horror porn with a racially, sexually, and gender-diverse cast. Upon the release of each new film and each Tranny Fest, the momentum grew as the Bay Area transgender community built itself from a handful of folks in the early '90s to a vibrant scene by the late '90s, a burgeoning community that was still small enough to know everybody. In 2002, after a successful campaign in partnership with Shawna Virago involving hand-copied flyers distributed at art and political activism events, Christopher was the first FTM grand marshal in the San Francisco LGBTQ Pride Parade.

Nowadays, the word "tranny" is considered pejorative because it is associated with dehumanization and hate violence, especially directed at trans women, but in the '90s in San Francisco, the word was a spirited term of pride. For Christopher, being a tranny was a fierce celebration of individuality, rebelliousness, and beautiful complexity. Whenever I think of the word "tranny," I think of Christopher because he wore it so well.

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Between 1995 and 2000, we organized the Dragon Club, a small group of Asian trans guys and butches hanging out and supporting each other. Our big event was the presentation, in June 1996, of the film *Shinjuku Boys*, which documented the personal and professional lives of female-to-male transgender individuals working as nightclub hosts in Tokyo's Shinjuku District. We all dressed to the nines in suits and ties, our ladies in the finest dresses and heels, for a movie in a dank old theater with threadbare seats. When the four of us stood onstage to introduce ourselves as the Dragon Club, it was the first time we'd ever announced our Asian transgender selves to our larger community.

At the time, Christopher was the only one of us who was medically transitioning. As many of us in the API queer and trans community struggled with difficulties embracing our full selves, he was a bold force who celebrated his truth. He educated the API lesbian community about trans issues, and for that I am grateful.

When Georgia and I got married in 1998, I asked Christopher to be my best man. He was so honored and took the job seriously. He was enthusiastic about the ritual of helping me transition into being a married person, organizing my bachelor party and the large, red "double happiness" characters he pasted to my car. He brought our mothers flowers at the rehearsal dinner, and it was hilarious to watch them both swoon. After that, he always gave them little presents at family gatherings for years to come: red roses, a card he got in Chinatown, a lottery ticket, a little trinket. He was all about the charm.

When I think of all the family events we spent together, one Lunar New Year stands out in my memory. Christopher, Georgia, and I drove with good friends Chino and Maya to San Francisco from Oakland to get some delicious Chinese food. We were all *dressed*, but my look was not working. I had this long black coat that Georgia had given me that was too presidential. My shirt was too white and my tie was too wrong. Christopher was known for his well-meaning fashion critiques. He and Chino gave me the hardest time, a memory that still makes me smile.

Christopher was many things: a gender hybrid, a bold trans man who transitioned long before there was much understanding or support, a paradoxical creature, larger than life, intensively creative, and boldly

innovative. He had a strong sense of what was right. When he was good, he was so good, so charming, so sweet, so giving. But when he was bad, he was so bad. He was a bad boy who lived at the edges.

Of the twelve animals in the Chinese zodiac, the dragon is the only animal that is a mythical creature, which means it has a connection with the transmuting power of heaven. It's a combo animal, an amalgamation of the tiger, fish, serpent, and eagle. Dragons are free spirits, a symbol of power, getting things done, breathing fire. There's a soft underbelly of compassion yet a sharp tongue. There is no natural predator for the dragon, so they are never cautious and things usually go well for them. They naturally do things—their ideas, gestures, and ambitions—on a grand scale.

Dragons know that rules are for other people. Christopher was a fierce, badass dragon like I have never known.

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Christopher and I went our separate ways about seven years before he passed. I felt saddened and confused as to why. Whenever I ran into him at parties, he was warm and joked around with me, though he appeared troubled as he stood at a distance from others. I was always happy to see him; I never stopped thinking of him as family.

As I wrestled with my profound grief after he passed, I wished I had known that Christopher was suicidal and that I had tried to connect with him in his time of need. I felt gut-punched by the loss of him in both life and death, and devastated to learn that he had been in so much pain. With suicide, there are so many questions, and never enough answers.

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At Christopher's memorial in February 2013, as I stood onstage before a mourning community, I felt stiff in my body, racked in my soul. I had slept fitfully the night before, replaying so many moments spent with Christopher. My insides ached with sorrow, the whys, the hows, the what-ifs interfering with everything that made sense in life.

I looked out from the El Rio stage at all the people whose lives he had touched: kinky queers, androgynous Asian dykes, leather daddies,

experimental filmmakers, presentable lawyers, long-term activists, starving artists, and tattooed rebels. There were many people who, like he and I, had come out as transgender during the '90s. After a month of online grieving, it was moving to see everyone there to mourn in community.

I had wanted to play a music video, but, not being much of an Asian rechie, I couldn't make it happen. At the time, Macklemore and Lewis's "Thrift Shop" video was starting to gain popularity. Christopher knew how to work a thrift store; he would be stoked to find slick suits he got for twenty-five bucks, or loud aloha shirts that only he could pull off. The first time I saw this music video, I was convinced the dude had borrowed Christopher's fur coat to shoot it. It seemed like a fitting commemoration of him.

As I reflected on his life, the most difficult part was knowing that the health care system had failed him. I spoke with Chino and Maya Scott-Chung, and Shivaun Nestor, who recounted that at the time of his death, he was in great physical pain in the aftermath of trans surgery, deeply depressed, and was marginally housed. Though he was estranged from his family of origin, he had a dedicated chosen family⁵¹ with expertise in how to navigate the health care system, who worked tirelessly to house him, look after him around the clock, and help him access care. A social worker at San Francisco General Hospital told his friends that he had the strongest support system of anyone she had worked with in her twenty years of service. I was grateful for the way his chosen family had worked so hard to help him, and devastated that even with a well-coordinated support system, he ended his life through suicide.

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Though a community-based organization in San Francisco had a dual-diagnosis unit specifically for trans people, the program was designed for trans women and was sadly not accessible to him. Christopher told his friends that when he visited, he found that he couldn't stay because the women's strong perfume set off his MCS and CFIDS symptoms—an important reminder of the need for scent-free access in trans community programs.

After a staff person at an inpatient mental health facility inappropriately disclosed his transgender status to other patients, a psychiatrist

told his chosen family that Christopher's problem was that he was not out and proud about being trans—an ironic assessment, given that he had cofounded the first transgender film festival in the United States. The disclosure of a patient's trans status is a clear violation of HIPAA, the federal rule that protects the privacy of patient health information. In a residential treatment setting, disclosure of a trans man's status can gravely impact the individual, inciting his fears of violence and setting him up to be targeted for harassment, ridicule, and physical and sexual assault. This egregious breach of confidentiality made Christopher feel unsafe, threatened, and distrustful of mental health facilities, which made it difficult for him to access the care he needed.

The tragedy of Christopher's story is that a network of Bay Area providers failed to meet the needs of a well-connected and supported, marginally housed, trans man of color with mental health and physical disabilities. Sadly, he was far from the first trans man of color I've known personally who committed suicide. The alarming data speak to this monumental issue in the transgender community, which is unparalleled in any other demographic. As I've stated previously, the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, with 6,456 participants from every US state and territory, found that 41 percent of transgender people have attempted suicide, nine times the 4.6 percent rate for the general population. Trans men have a higher incidence (46 percent) than trans women (42 percent).⁵² That means that nearly one in two trans men—or every other one—has made an attempt to end his life. This is not ideation we're talking about, but actual attempts. And the situation is not getting any better. Even though we now have awareness about transgender people, educational opportunities for the general public, and many resources, we are losing more trans people to suicide than ever before. We have so much work to do to stem the tide.

A number of other studies have corroborated this high suicide rate, showing that 25 percent to 43 percent of trans people have attempted suicide at some time in their life.⁵³ The suicide rate goes up for people who lost a job due to bias (55 percent), were harassed or bullied in school (51 percent), worked in the underground economy (60 percent), or were the victim of physical assault (61 percent) or sexual assault (64 percent).⁵⁴

Rates are high for trans and gender-nonconforming people who experienced homelessness (69 percent), had been turned away from a doctor's office because of antitrans discrimination (60 percent), had a physical disability (56 percent), and had a mental health disability (65 percent). Rates are high even for trans people who are considered "low risk"; people with graduate degrees have a 31 percent rate.⁵⁵

There are so many factors that lead trans people to contemplate or attempt suicide: rejection by our families, schools, and communities; difficulty securing and maintaining employment, health care, and housing; physical and mental health disabilities; and the constant dehumanization aimed at us that still goes largely unchecked throughout society. Structural inequalities and structural violence are clearly a contributing factor, yet one thing is clear: trans people attempt suicide across a demographic spectrum.⁵⁶ I don't know a single trans person who doesn't have the scars.

According to the interpersonal theory of suicide, risk factors for suicide include "thwarted belongingness," or a lack of social connectedness, and "perceived burdensomeness," the belief that one is a burden to others.⁵⁷ The idea of thwarted belongingness is an important concept given the many ways in which communities can exclude people who do not fit narrow rules of membership. Many trans people and others who challenge social rules experience social isolation, which can put them at risk. This issue of belonging hits home for me as someone who has never fit neatly into community rules of membership. It is a reminder that we need to be gentle with each other and to establish membership and systems that are as expansive and welcoming as possible.

In addition, people who are struggling with economic issues, unstable housing, and health conditions, as Christopher was, become exhausted asking others for help and start to believe that they are a burden to others. His death, and the death of so many others, is fundamentally related to the pervasive structural inequality that plagues transgender communities, especially trans communities of color, which are disproportionately impacted by educational, employment, housing, and health care discrimination.

Data indicate that one of the highest predictors of suicide is difficulty accessing trans competent care. I find it devastating and deeply

unsettling that in his time of great need, and with a strong social support system, Christopher was unable to find a facility that could care for him without judgment or interference. This tragic tale is an important reminder that programs that provide mental health support need to ensure that their staff are well trained on transgender issues.

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Christopher's death impacted those around him in myriad ways. Some people whose lives he touched became more resolute about following their dreams, working creatively, and changing the world. But his death left an indelible hole in so many of our hearts. In an article in *Psychiatric Times*, Ronald Pies, MD, described the impact of suicide:

"Any suicide—even in the direst circumstances, and even after much deliberation—leaves a grotesque gash in the emotional life of families and communities. It may take years for such a wound to heal, if it heals at all."⁵⁸

Years later, Christopher's chosen family and community continue to mourn him and the tragedy that led to his death.

Yet, in true badass-dragon style, Christopher created change even after he passed. When the coroner listed him as female on his death certificate, Transgender Law Center worked with Assembly member Toni Atkins and Equality California to pass the Respect After Death Act, which took effect in July 2015. This law helps ensure that transgender people's gender identity is reflected on their death certificates. Thanks to Christopher and the advocacy of his chosen family, Chino and Maya Scott-Chung, no more trans people in California will be misgendered in death.

As I reflect on the beauty and the sorrow, the joy and the tragedy, that are Christopher's story, I am thankful for the gifts of his brotherhood. As I navigate my path as a hapa Chinese trans man with a disability, I carry the gift of his kinship and his ability to juggle all of who he was within all the layers of ambiguity and complexity. As a parent of three small kids, I feel his gift of love and family. And as I work to help people and systems stretch to be more trans-affirming, I feel his presence—not just because he was a well-loved trans person who tragically fell through the cracks of the mental health system, but also because he had the confidence and

the fire to take big risks to be his true self. His spirit informs my life and work every day.

The day after the memorial at El Rio, there was another gathering, at a meditation center, a spiritual send-off with loud drumming that vibrated my insides as I wrote words of love and forgiveness to throw into the big outdoor fire. The deep bass tones reverberated to the bone, the heart, and the soul as a grieving community sent our brother off, another trans angel to watch over us.

For more information about Christopher Lee's life and legacy, visit www.dragonsbloodrising.org and www.facebook.com/ChristopherLeeMemorial.

Suicide Prevention Resources

The Trans Lifeline is a free suicide prevention hotline for trans and gender-nonconforming people in crisis. Hotline volunteers are all trans-identified and educated on the range of challenging life experiences that trans people experience: www.translifeline.org; (877) 565-8860 (United States); (877) 330-6366 (Canada)

The Trevor Project provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services for LGBTQ youth ages thirteen to twenty-four. Its lifesaving programs are available by phone, online, and through text. The Trevor Lifeline is the only national twenty-four-seven lifeline for LGBTQ young people: www.thetrevorproject.org; (866) 488-7386

FALLEN ANGELS

Angels are falling in the streets
Our grief more desperate with each drumbeat
Beautiful souls taken in their prime
Being true to themselves their only crime

Chased stabbed shot raped and beat
Every week the horror repeats
Gentle spirits gone but no headlines
Cuz the victims expanded narrow gender lines

Angels are falling in the streets
Not just cuz they startled between the sheets
Fathers lovers thieves laying the blame
Desperately trying to exterminate their shame

A national crisis, state of emergency
Institutional violence, structural inequality
Racism, classism, trans misogyny
When will they see trans humanity

Angels are dying in the streets
Rest in power, loved ones, your spirits ever sweet
Bigotry and hate the vicious shrapnel
Taking beautiful women whose bodies were assigned male

EXPANDING THE EDGES

IRREVERENT, VOLUPTUOUS GRAD STUDENT

The headline read, simply, "I Like Fun," which sounded reasonable enough and got right to the point. The ad read, "Irreverent, voluptuous grad student seeks brainy, brawny girls to frolic with. If you like wicked laughter, bitchy banter, and opening doors, take the risk and call. I won't bite unless you want me to."

There was no picture, of course, because this was in the days before the Internet. That's right. Gather 'round, children. Grandpa's gonna break it down. Let's talk about life in the last century.

The ad ran in the *San Francisco Bay Times*, the only real option for lesbian personal ads in the Bay Area in the mid-'90s. In a sea of badly written personals, this one jumped out at me. People who placed ads left a voice mail on the phone system, and if you were interested, you left them a voice mail. Though this ad had been published two weeks prior and it was almost time for the next issue of the newspaper to come out, I knew I had to respond.

I listened to her voice message, which struck me as friendly, unpretentious, and, surprisingly, not nervous. I left a voice mail: "I'm sure you have a long line out your door. I know it's late, but I was wondering if that irreverent, voluptuous grad student got laid yet."

She called the very next morning, at ten o'clock, on January 1, 1995. Georgia was the first person I talked to on that New Year's Day. We hit it off right away. We talked about butch-femme relationships and cultural traditions. I talked about *Stone Butch Blues*, Leslie Feinberg's seminal 1993 novel, which sparked a timely conversation about transmasculine

experience and butch-femme relationships. We talked for an hour, and by the time we spoke a day and a half later, she had already gone down to Mama Bear's Bookstore, bought the book, and read it. I was impressed.

We talked on the phone for a couple of weeks before we met. I told her I was butch—transgender, actually—and that I had long hair. She said she liked long-haired butches. I told her that her beautiful voice was "mellifluous." She was impressed that I used a word she didn't know. I said that it meant that her voice was flowing like honey. She said she was Greek and confirmed that the word *meli* meant "honey." I told her I was Chinese, and she shared that her two previous significant lovers had been Chinese. I asked, "Is that your flavor?"

That's when the needle scratched the record and the "get into the groove" music came to a sudden stop. I was strongly woman of color-identified and held "white women" in suspicion. What was her thing about Chinese people? Did she think we made ornamental decorations? Were we accommodating? If she had a "rice" infatuation, I was *gone*.

She responded, "I grew up in San Francisco, in the Richmond district," referring to a section of town that was largely Chinese and Japanese in the '70s and '80s. "Most of my friends were Asian. My parents are immigrants from Greece, and I was the kid they sent into the butcher's shop to get the lamb's head, so my parents didn't get ridiculed for their accent. Even though our cultures are really different in some ways, I think there are a lot of cultural similarities." I loved her response but was still wary.

I told her I was in a show at a community performance space and invited her to come by and meet me. Though I normally wouldn't have shared this piece of information, I told her that the show was about disability, that I had a chronic illness. She said she'd check it out.

On the night of the performance, I searched the audience for someone who could be a cute, femme, irreverent, voluptuous Greek American but didn't find her. She didn't show. I later found out she'd decided she was done with me because I had challenged her about race too aggressively. She didn't want to be held under suspicion and have to prove herself like that.

But I didn't know this yet, so I called her again, and we found ourselves in another deep conversation about race, culture, gender, and creativity. We

challenged each other to examine our long-held assumptions and pushed through walls of distrust. I was intrigued by a woman who was "white" but whose cultural, linguistic, and immigration framework was so much like that of the women of color in my community, for whom the world was neatly divided into women of color and white women. Georgia's reference points disrupted the ideology of those around me.

I invited Georgia over for lunch at the San Francisco apartment I was subletting while my friend was out of town. She wore a gray, high turtle-neck sweater that said "Back off, Big Boy" but cruised me with a twinkle in her eye. I made her some of the few dishes I could put together in the kitchen: chicken adobo, tofu with *dau miu* (pea sprouts), and rice. As I leaned over to lift the lid off the pan to peek at the steaming *dau miu*, I could feel her eyes nibbling on my backside.

Soon afterward, I went to her house on MacArthur Boulevard in Oakland to pick her up for our first dinner out. Crossing the street in the dark, blustery night, holding one long-stemmed rose, I stepped into her warm house and tried to understand the significance of a tall, rusty wire birdcage, which housed sketchy-looking Barbie dolls, at the top of the stairs. I scanned the assortment of flea market finds around the room and told myself that I would never live with her.

We headed out for dinner. After rejecting a brightly lit Japanese restaurant that her coworker had recommended, we found an intimate Italian place that served large quantities of delicious food and left us alone. She told me about the year she lived in Greece. I heard about her rural, agricultural people, their food, and their family life. As I got up to use the restroom, I told her not to touch the bill if it came and leaned in to kiss her. She leaned toward me, and I felt a sense of familiarity, as if we had been kissing each other at the dinner table for years. As we walked to my little green hooptie, she said, "I bet you wish I was a woman of color." I assured her that I appreciated her for who she was. I appreciated her cultural framework, that she had a people, a language, and a home country. She gazed into my eyes, open and sparkling in the moonlight. When I leaned in to kiss her again, it felt magical.

After dinner, we returned to her apartment. As I parked, I craned my neck to read the street-cleaning sign. Just as I registered the words

NO PARKING 2:00–3:00 AM, she quipped, "Don't worry, you'll be gone by then." We talked, made out, and gazed at each other for hours.

Afterward I told her I needed to take a break for five days because I was writing and preparing to audition for a solo performance at what was then Brava! For Women in the Arts, now the Brava Theater. A few days later, I was impressed that she had respected my needs by not calling me, but found myself picking up the phone anyway.

I got the solo show, and we got ready for our first big night out, the annual gala of an organization called ETVC, for Educational TV Channel. It was started by cross-dressers and later became known as Transgender San Francisco. Along with my buddy Chea and his date, we were some of the few people there who were assigned female at birth. In preparation for the big event, Georgia had gone downtown to buy what came to be known as her prom dress, an expensive purple silk dress. That night at the event, we emerged from making out in the bathroom to find a long line of antsy people waiting.

We went back to my Lower Haight apartment and a well-stocked fridge and didn't emerge for a few days. The last Sunday in January 1995, the San Francisco 49ers competed in the Super Bowl, hosted locally. That evening we lay in each other's arms as the sky darkened and listened to the excited revelry of people honking and cheering in the streets. "They won!" we exclaimed to each other, as we began to realize our own sense of winning a seemingly impossible lottery.

Over the next few weeks, she cooked for me and I began to understand just how masterfully she knew her way around the kitchen. We talked all night, shared our past hurts, and snuggled under covers in her heatless apartment, her feet warming my Popsicle toes. She whispered, "I want you to tell me all your secrets." I asked, "Are you ready to heal your life?"

When we met, my chronic illness played a major role in my life; each day I awoke and assessed the state of my energy and abilities against my hopes for the day. Not long after we met, Georgia came to my apartment in the city so we could go out one night, only for me to have to tell her that I was too ill. I was devastated that my body had failed me and that she had to see that so soon. I needed to know right then and there if she was

the kind of person who could deal with the unforgiving reality of a lover who lived with the unpredictability of an incessant, debilitating illness. I said, "If you're gonna leave, leave now." She asked questions about what I needed and adapted to an evening in, rather than out. It meant so much to me that she was able to be flexible and that she still wanted to be with me when I couldn't get out of bed or out of the house. I had had a lot of lovers since I'd gotten sick, and they'd tried to get with it, but no one took care of me like Georgia. I knew she was a generous, special person.

Five weeks after we'd first spoken on the phone, three weeks after we met, we were brushing our teeth in the mirror, when I said, "Okay, marry me." It wasn't exactly a proposal. It was an acknowledgment of what was happening. A few weeks before I met Georgia, I had a premonition that someone was coming, that I had better stretch out wide in my lonely bed and enjoy those last moments of being single. After a lifetime of thinking I was not the marrying type, I had come to the realization that I might be. And then I met her. I felt fed in my stomach, heart, mind, and soul.

BECOMING DADA

We had been together nearly a decade when we embarked on a journey to find a roommate. I knew, after spending so many years gabbing until we no longer made any sense, or holding her hot little mitt in a dark movie theater, laughing out loud, that our lives would be enhanced by the addition of someone with whom we could share the joy. And what our new roomie could bring was unquantifiable and entirely unimaginable.

So we looked and we dreamed and we called to the heavens, to Quan Yin, to God, and to everyone who lived before us. Our hearts lifted with the possibilities and sank with every loss, and there were moments of tremendous loss. We wondered if we had found the right "biomagical matter" that would make our dreams come true. But still we persevered, knowing full well that this one who would share our home was just waiting by the curb, waiting for that celestial bus that would bring him or her home. As it turned out, it was no express bus but one that hit every bump, jolted at every stop, broke down in the worst ways. But it came right on time.

We communicated along the journey, in dreams and visions in Morse code, muffled underwater and punctuated by the jab of a singular dance step, leaping through flesh and fluid. He sent us cryptic pictures, flickers of light, a grain of rice, the profile of a round head, a surprise in his lap, a slumbering face. We came to know him as Luvbug, Jr., one who jumped playfully in quiet times but stopped to listen attentively at others.

When the day arrived that we met him, there was still a difficult journey ahead. Mama pushed till the blood vessels in her eyes popped; Luvbug, Jr., was in distress. But in the moment when he could finally lie peacefully and take it all in, the bright lights, doctors, and machines faded as our firstborn son looked me in the eyes as if to say, *I know you*.

We brought him home, enveloped in joy and wonder and amusement. Why was our new roommate so loud? So messy? So small and yet in possession of so much stuff?

He had us from the moment we first saw him: the sparkle in his eyes, his sweet, sensitive spirit, his love of mischief, and his tendency to find so many things freakin' hilarious. Right away he started showing us his hidden talents, like doing sign language with his toes or making a mean pocket of curry stew. He was just two weeks old when he started to put his little lips together to try to pull me in to kiss me, a seemingly impossible gesture for a baby so young. After all the hoping and dreaming we did before his birth, we never could have imagined what it would feel like to experience how precious he would be in person, the innocence and wonder and laughter, the depth of our love-fest. We got hit hard and couldn't even see it coming.

This little guy never wasted any time when it came to flirting with everyone in sight, especially the pretty ladies. At six months, he showed how *dynatos* (strong) he was. As he held his flexed arms up with seriousness and force, he looked like he was going to burst a blood vessel in his forehead, while everyone peed in their pants from laughter. At eleven months he would speed-crawl with total abandon at the sound of the washing machine, just so he could see the *gyro, gyro*⁵⁹ spin of the clothes. At two and a half, he jumped up every morning, squealing with delight as he ran into our bedroom to wake us and wish us *kali mera*, good morning. When I arrived home from work, he'd run to me, giggling with abandon. He would steal every last "stawbuddy" off my plate and request "clockit" milk.

One night, at two and a half, my son tried to stall bedtime by announcing, "Let's chat awhile." I held his warm little man hand while he drifted off to sleep. Suddenly he jolted up, threw his arms around me, and exclaimed, "I looove you, Dada!"

I wondered how long his precious spirit would remain unfettered by

the trappings of cool, and school, and social rules. Or how our experience as parents of one child would shape us for the next leg of the journey. He was two and a half when, after a grueling attempt at getting Georgia pregnant that ultimately involved in vitro fertilization (IVF), we celebrated the beginning of his sister's second trimester in utero. He nicknamed her after a character in a popular children's story. I tried to imagine the prospect of sibling rivalry, sharing, and double the playful spirit.

* * *

Our daughter arrived six months later in warm, low light under the best possible circumstances, with a team of fierce female providers and me coaching Mama on. After all the walking and massaging and bathing and pushing, the baby's head became visible and she finally made it out, tiny and snuggly and sweet. Georgia was incredibly strong; whoever decided that women are weak must not have been around when they were birthing babies. The moment after Georgia gave birth, she rolled over and said, "Let's do it again." Once home, our daughter hung out next to her brother in her bouncy chair while he played in his playhouse. He couldn't wait until she was big enough to play with him.

I would sit on the couch, holding her swaddled in her soft blanket, my head drooping to the side as we both slept. When she awoke, I'd put her in the baby carrier and take both kids for a walk around the neighborhood while Mama got some rest. Though the adjustment was sometimes hard for my son, as it is for any older sibling, he always showed his love for her, at one point telling her, "You're the milk in my cereal."

Like her brother, she giggled and played and luxuriated in the trappings of toddler time—washing her hands in the sink, playing in the kiddie pool, drawing free-form pictures.

When she was two, we decided to try once more. Georgia prepared her body with acupuncture and fertility meds. We had two embryos left from the IVF cycle. It was a one-shot deal, and we were elated to learn that we were pregnant again. My son announced, "We have a boy and girl, so this baby should be transgender, so we have one of each."

At the twenty week ultrasound, we saw our little baby's fist in a power salute and the clear image of a "frank and beans." We kissed in celebration;

then Georgia quipped, "I see a lot more light sabers in my future, and our bathroom will never smell fresh again!"

After searching for a vehicle that could safely and comfortably accommodate three car seats, we realized that there was no way around getting a minivan. We got a good deal from a neighbor's brother, whose wife and kids had just relocated to the Philippines. The interior of the car looked like a crime scene: seats that had tangled with scissors, black marks of unknown origin, and the putrid funk of spilled milk. We had it repaired so it was running smoothly, then took it to car detailers, who looked us up and down judgmentally and asked, "*How many kids do you have?*"

After they made it pretty, we took it to the upholstery repair guy, a chatty Lebanese man who had spent time in Greece and wanted to try out his Greek with Georgia. As he spoke, I couldn't make much sense of what he was saying but figured that my intermediate Greek just wasn't good enough to catch it, or that he spoke an unfamiliar dialect. But actually it was just bad Greek, ungrammatical and oddly accented.

At one point, Georgia told him that we had two kids and one on the way. He turned to me and said, "He's doing his work." I thought, *Who is this guy talking about, God?* He threw his arms out and looked at me with a knowing grin and a glint in his eye. *Oh yeah, me. I'm so virile.* It was an odd moment, the beginning of life to come, gender-affirming yet crudely sexist. I was only four months into medical transition. Later that day I used the men's locker room for the first time, no sweat.

* * *

When I began the journey to parenthood, I wondered what my child would call me as a third-gendered parent who definitely didn't identify as a mom. When my son was born in 2006, I was a transgender butch in a butch-femme relationship and had not yet pursued medical transition. I wanted to ensure that the magical moment when our child emerged into the world was not marred by someone referring to me inappropriately. I told the doctor that I wanted to be referred to by my masculine parent name, and though he was gender-nonconforming himself, he discouraged me from documenting my parent name on the birth plan or

patient-room communication board. "There are a lot of lesbian nurses at the hospital who wouldn't support that," he told me. As it turned out, the hospital staff understood who I was as a gender-transgressive parent, and no one called me Mom. In 2006, health care providers had a limited understanding of nonbinary gender identities, and I felt relieved to be seen.

As I cared for my baby, I found that people often said he looked like me, a surprising privilege I never expected as a nonbiological parent. But when I was alone with him, people assumed that I was his mom, which was hard to hear. It felt taxing to have to explain that though I was his parent, I was not his mom.

Yet I also experienced some gender relief as a trans person with a baby. People, especially women, who might have scowled at me or glared with suspicion, now smiled at me warmly. After a lifetime of people giving me dirty looks, it was a welcome change. I found that I could access the women's room much more easily. Prior to having a child, if I wanted to use the women's room, it was best done with Georgia present, while talking, so my voice could be my ticket in. But a baby gave me a solid membership in the women's room, which I often needed, since the sexist, gendered rules of parenthood often meant that there was no changing table in the men's room.

Ultimately, my son named me Dada when he was sixteen months old. It was the perfect parenting title. He always knew who I was.

When he was four years old, he enjoyed playing with a neighbor girl who was the same age. His friendly, progressive mom told us to drop by anytime. So we did. But the girl's unsuspecting grandmother answered the door and was stricken with an attack of facial incontinence. With a look of absolute horror, terror, disgust, and disdain, she made it clear in no uncertain terms that the child, who was standing right there, was not available. I wondered what it was like for my son to experience those moments with me.

Next thing I knew, I was at a kiddie birthday party in Piedmont, a small, wealthy enclave next to Oakland. There was a picture of Laura Bush on the mantel, and I thought to myself, *How the hell did I get here? Who let my queer, trans ass into this house?* Later, we went to another kiddie birthday party, in the backyard of a mansion. When I tried to enter

the house to use the bathroom, the maid who had been directing the guests to the bathroom eyed me suspiciously and informed me in a very unfriendly manner that the house was off-limits.

As a gender-transgressive parent, I often felt like I wasn't recognized as a real parent, in the absence of a standard title and gender presentation. Even though people understood us as a queer family, I felt like they saw me as this person who just happened to live with the real family and help out. The world of preschool parents and our Greek community were very straight, and oftentimes it seemed that people just didn't have a cultural reference point for me.

In addition, I quickly discovered that many LGBTQ people lacked a basic understanding of parenthood. No, kids are not furless pets, and no, I could not do whatever I wanted. It was hard for people who had to manage only their own lives, and who had at best a distant awareness of family life, to understand the demands of parenthood or how to be around kids. I still have to explain to people that it's not okay to swear around my kids, or discuss sex, drugs, violence, or scary topics. And people can't go on and on about themselves, as if the kids aren't present, and have ongoing needs for attention and assistance.

Rather than attending a queer community event, I might spend my Friday evening having movie night with the kids, watching the latest, fully merchandised, animated blockbuster or some washed-up, talking-animal movie starring my favorite D-list actors as pigeons or horses. While the kids kick back, I'm busy jumping up to fetch food and drinks, cleaning up spills, and managing some little person's chewed-up food on my plate.

* * *

Ultimately, it was my experience as a parent that led me, after decades of contemplation, to decide to pursue medical transition. I needed to be seen as the father I always was.

About a year into my medical transition, Georgia introduced me to a woman who ran a kiddie play center. The woman remarked that she had seen us each there separately but not together. Georgia joked that we never saw each other anymore. The woman responded, "You got to-

gether at least three times!" It's an odd thing being perceived as a straight couple, as if we got pregnant easily and are both biologically related to our kids. It felt bizarre to all of a sudden embody other people's idea of a standard, unquestioned way of being, as if millions of depictions of family were made in our image. Yet every time someone referenced an aspect of straight culture, I was slow on the uptake. Despite a lifetime of having been inundated with straight culture in endless ways, I felt as if I lacked the cultural competency to be straight.

Male privilege and straight privilege are astounding, and I'd be lying if I didn't acknowledge that I enjoy being respected as the provider and family man that I always was. Everyone should be respected the way men and straight people are. Suddenly, not only was I seen as a parent, but I became a much better parent, an awesome dad. When I took all three kids to an amusement park or the pool, I was "daring Papi" or "brave Dad." True, it's no easy feat managing three small kids in a public space. But even if I just take them to the park, the general feeling is *Isn't that nice that he's helping out?* Is the bar set that low for fathers? Women are expected to inherently know how to change a diaper or manage a tantrum as if they were born with the knowledge, while men are celebrated for taking any amount of responsibility for caring for their kids. True, I know fathers who are pretty checked out. But I also know many men who are dedicated, hands-on dads.

It's hard for people to fathom that it can be a huge orchestration as a trans father to go to the restroom with my three little kids, bringing them all into the men's room while barking, "Don't touch anything!" With the insight of a three-year-old, my youngest asks, "Why do we always go to the triangle one, not the circle one?" referring to the restroom with the urinal, which points out like a triangle, as opposed to the throne, shaped like a circle. I answer, trying to remember to keep my voice in the male range, and hope that the kids don't see someone's penis. With so many states trying to legislate away our right to urinate, it's hard enough as one person, and a whole other dimension to pee in peace as a trans parent.

I've learned many skills as a parent. I can stumble awake in the dead of night and provide whatever is needed. I can change a nasty poop mid-air and be fun at the drop of a hat. I can manage a toddler throwdown

involving wet sand and hard objects. I can quickly come up with creative solutions to conflicts involving the sharing of toys or the need for attention. I know the racing fear in my heart if I have to give milk to a little person in the wrong-color cup. I can stay extremely focused for hours in order to guard everyone's safety. I can comfort the pain of hurt feelings and boo-boos. I can come up with answers to life's most mystical questions. I can assess mysterious liquids on the bathroom floor and roll with the almost-daily certainty of personal injury and property destruction.

At any given time there are three insanely cute, barely clad little individuals talking to me at the same time and climbing me like a play structure. Barefoot, with deliciously plump, tater-tot toes, they exclaim, "Dada, watch this! Did you see that?" "Play catch with me, Dada! Did you see me do the monkey bars?" "Dad, do you want me to show you my space station?"

From the day they're born, they tell you when, how, and if things are going down. Every night at bedtime for years, I sang a medley of Greek songs, until my youngest gave me the hook. With a serious look, he shook his head and said, "No, Dada." They tell you who is doing what, and often it's Mama they want to feed or comfort or help them. I learned early on not to take it personally if I was considered sloppy seconds. She birthed them, after all. And then, one by one, they charm me with gifts of art or feed me freshly picked tomatoes from the garden.

Three kids means the cuteness quotient has gone through the roof. They brighten my day every day with their beaming smiles and unbridled giggles and "I love yous." And they get me. They have a whole *community* of transgender stuffed animals who all have their individual gender journeys, though most are FTM, thank you. In fact, my daughter has informed me that all but three of the stuffed animals that take up residence on half her bed are trans.

* * *

In 1984, I was in Boston when *Choosing Children*, the now-legendary film about lesbians becoming parents, debuted. I eagerly watched it on-screen because I was curious about this new phenomenon and I knew one of the families it depicted. At the time, lesbian families were un-

known territory. Over the past few decades, there has been an explosion of LGBTQ-headed families, especially among lesbians.

In 2003, Georgia and I were part of a group of multicultural friends who organized Baby Buds, a group of lesbian and trans prospective parents of color and/or in interracial relationships. We supported each other through conception, birth, and life with baby, meeting monthly for years to build community. We got together less frequently once our kids became school age, while new groups of multicultural queer women started iterations of Baby Buds Next Gen every few years.⁶⁰

In 2015, I am excited to partner with COLAGE to launch the first program in the nation to support the kids of trans parents in a K–12 school setting. I am a member of the early wave of parents who are embarking on parenthood as trans-identified people. Those who went into parenthood straight-identified, and to some extent lesbian-identified, and then came out as trans, have much older kids. But most of us who came to parenthood as trans-identified people have young children because we are part of a new movement that is gaining momentum.

As more and more trans people choose parenthood, providers, educators, parents, and caregivers need to develop cultural competency in the many ways in which trans and gender-nonconforming people identify themselves. At the 2015 Philly Trans Health Conference, I had the privilege of conducting a workshop on trans family issues, where I heard the incredible stories of trans and gender-nonconforming parents from all over the United States and Canada. Over the past few years, I've also had the privilege of organizing and hosting the annual Trans Family Forum through Our Family Coalition in San Francisco. I have come to know many prospective parents or new parents across the trans spectrum, most of whom were assigned female at birth. The number of parents with nonstandard presentations and parent titles is growing. These are parents who locate their gender somewhere in the vast, nonbinary space between male and female. Some masculine female-bodied folks are defying traditional gendered prescriptions by choosing pregnancy while confusing providers and enduring ridicule from trans men who pressure them not to get pregnant.⁶¹ In addition, there are also many trans parents who identify as male or female but have a history that is not visible to the

naked eye. This is an opportunity for all of us to question the extremely gendered, pink and blue rules of parenthood. I hope that we as a society can develop greater understanding of gender-expansive parenting.

At the same time, LGBTQ people have an opportunity to develop their cultural competency in the issues of parenthood so that queer and trans parents can find support and family in LGBTQ communities.

As a parent, I feel very protective of my kids. I don't want them to have to experience hatred and bigotry because I am trans. As the transgender movement continues to move forward, I hope to see more images of us in the context of our families, caring lovingly for our kids, to help the world push past the outdated prejudices that paint us as less than fully human, so that our kids can thrive.

TRANSFORMER

I pulled into the driveway in my red-hot, middle-aged hooptie. Small and scuffed rough, with an inconsistent sheen, it had a ragged look that said nothing about its reliability as a mid-'90s Honda Civic. But the jewel was in the cargo. Riding high in the back was my then-four-year-old son—a rugged, sweet beauty of a little brown boy in a navy blue NASA jacket and rain boots. The kind of little guy who could build complex Lego airplanes, work a Transformer in minutes, and use a multisyllabic new word after learning it once. A mischievous charmer who could romance a pretty girl in his Batman gear and get the digits of her captivated mama with his conversational stylings and a flash of his killer smile.

We had just come from one of our adventures at the “waterfall,” the landmark Oakland fountain that flows luminescent through redwoods and creek bed. We did our thing, having packed our adventure backpack with rope, binoculars, snacks, juice boxes, and something to scoop up river rocks. It was what my son deemed “boy time” at its finest: he and Dada hanging in the woods, jumping rocks, being dudes together. Never mind the gender requirements. It was our special time.

We established our self-protection as we fought invisible bad guys lurking in the forest. We investigated nature as we gathered flat, smooth rocks and evaluated their colors and textures. And it was a time of immense wonder. “Dada, how old are the redwood trees? How far away is the moon?”

As I turned off the engine, he asked, simply, in his high little voice, "Dada, are you a man?"

I pocketed the keys and thought, *Cool, this is it.* It was time to answer to that parental call of duty, teacher of life's mysteries and miracles, with a continuation of the Pride conversation we'd initiated six months earlier, about men who love men and women who love women, boys who feel like girls, and girls who feel like boys. At the time, he contemplated the options and pronounced, "I'm a boy who feels like a boy, and I'm a man who loves women."

But this was me we were talking about, so I responded, "Sort of. I wasn't born a guy, but I feel like a guy."

"Were you born a girl?"

"Yeah, but I think I'm a guy. I always have. But not everybody sees me that way." I noted my non-medically transitioned female voice and body as I spoke, and considered how it might be confusing to him that people sometimes assumed I was his "mama."

He thought about it.

"People like me are called transgender. Can you say 'transgender'?" I asked.

"Transgender," he said, enunciating very well. I could see the wheels turning. Then his eyes lit up with the fire of a new wonder to behold. "You're a transformer! But not exactly that—you're a person who transforms!"

"That's right!" I said, amazed at his ability to draw connections.

"Dada, there aren't that many people who are transgender."

"Yeah, but I know a lot of people who are."

"Mama's not transgender. You're way more like a man than Mama is. I'm not transgender."

"Yeah, cuz you're a boy who feels like a boy. I super-love you."

"I super-love you, Mister." And he smiled that killer smile.

WINTER OF LOVE

When Mayor Gavin Newsom defied California law and allowed city officials to begin issuing marriage licenses for same sex-couples in San Francisco on February 12, 2004, it was a pivotal, magical moment. Queer people, driven by the desire to celebrate our love and be recognized as fully human, dropped everything to journey from across the United States and other countries to take part in the emergence of an exciting new chapter in LGBTQ history.

When I originally published the following article in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, which explored the sociopolitical intersections between my parents' interracial marriage and my own same-sex marriage, the response was overwhelming. Though the article predated widespread use of social media, the link was shared throughout the world. People told me they printed out multiple copies of the article and distributed it among those they felt needed education, as well as those who were celebrating. I received hundreds of enthusiastic responses from people I knew throughout my lifetime, as well as those I never met, who wrote to me to express their gratitude, tears, and congratulations.

"Half a dozen people called me this morning. Have you *seen* this article?" said Shane Snowdon, who was my editor back in 1984 when I wrote "Asian Lesbianism as a Political Identity" for *Sojourner*.

"Well, I am undone," wrote a legislative staffer in the California capitol.

"Your article touched my intellect but slammed my soul," wrote an effusive, conservative family member.

* * *

Freedom to Love: Where Same-Sex and Interracial Marriage Convene
First published by the *San Francisco Chronicle* on March 5, 2004:

The morning after my parents went on their first date, my mother's co-workers rushed up to her and fervently admonished, "It's just not done!" "What about the children?" they demanded. My mother simply replied, "We just had one date."

The year was 1949. My father had picked up my mother the night before at the elementary school where she taught first grade, and they had enjoyed a night of dancing. For them, their evening was perfectly innocent and sweet. For others, it was an abomination. My mother is Chinese, and my father is Caucasian.

My mother had just begun her career as an elementary school teacher. [She was the] first Chinese teacher in the Berkeley schools, [and as such], the assistant superintendent told her, "The eyes of Berkeley will be upon you. If you don't do well, you will close the doors to other Orientals coming to Berkeley." For the first two months of the school year, there were two rows of observers in the back of her classroom taking notes on everything she said or did.

When my parents married in 1951, the minister told them that their timing was fortunate, as California's anti-miscegenation law had just been repealed three years prior. Enacted in 1880, the law prohibited the marriage between a white person and "a Negro, mulatto, or Mongolian." It was written to prevent intermarriage between Chinese people and whites, and was supported by San Franciscan and future U.S. Senator John F. Miller, who in 1878 declared, "Were the Chinese to amalgamate at all with our people . . . the result of that amalgamation would be . . . a mongrel of the most detestable that has ever afflicted the earth."

In 1945, Gov. Earl Warren reiterated and expanded the ban on interracial marriage to include "Malays." In 1948, the California Supreme Court ruled against antimiscegenation laws in *Perez vs. Sharp*, calling such laws "by their very nature, odious to a free people."

But social change was less forthcoming. In 1958, the first Gallup poll on the subject found that 94 percent of white people opposed interracial marriage. That year in Virginia, newlyweds Richard and Mildred Loving, a Caucasian man and African American woman, were awakened in the middle of the night by police wielding blinding flashlights and arrested for violating the state's ban on interracial marriage. The judge who convicted them ruled that "Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, Malay, and red, and he placed them on separate continents because . . . he did not intend the races to mix." It wasn't until 1967 that the federal ban on interracial marriage was lifted in *Loving vs. Virginia*.

Today in 2004, as interracial marriages flourish and mixed-race people abound, these stories seem archaic, mean-spirited, and representative of an era of ignorance left in the past. But are they? Opponents of interracial marriages considered the unions to be "immoral" and "unnatural." Sound familiar?

In 1998, Houston police broke down the doors of John Geddes Lawrence and Tyron Garner, arresting them under a twenty-eight-year-old Texas law making same-sex intercourse a crime. Last June 26, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down Texas's "Homosexual Conduct" law, ruling it unconstitutional and in violation of the defendants' fundamental right to privacy and equal protection rights. Considered a major victory for gay rights, the decision struck down most laws governing private sexual conduct, but it did not affect marriage laws.

On February 24, President Bush endorsed a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. Today we are again at a crossroads between the freedom to love and form families, and the zealous, fearful forces that seek to control these unions.

Call it what you want—codifying and controlling the rights of marriage for heterosexuals only, insisting that heterosexuals are uniquely qualified to love each other and raise families within the institution of marriage, or just plain asserting that heterosexuals know best—it all piles up to unequal treatment under the law, and that spells discrimination.

The U.S. Constitution does not allow marriage discrimination on the basis of race, religion or criminal status. Justices of the Supreme Court have called the freedom to marry a fundamental human right.

Why, then, are same-sex couples legally forbidden from marrying? And why is it necessary to write discrimination into the constitution and declare war on gay America?

Granted, not everyone, straight or queer, is fond of the institution of marriage. Some don't see this as a pressing issue. Fifty percent of heterosexual marriages end in divorce. But regardless of where folks stand on the issue, everyone deserves the basic human right of choice. When in the history of this country has separate been equal?

California has the most comprehensive domestic partner law in the country, yet with just fifteen rights and responsibilities, it provides little more than 1 percent of the more than one thousand state and federal legal protections offered to opposite-sex married couples. Marriage equality is a civil rights issue like any other.

When the smoke clears, it remains to be seen where those of us who married at San Francisco City Hall—arguably the happiest place on Earth—stand legally. Some of us have taken tremendous legal risks, such as bi-national couples whose immigrant partner could be deported, and people with disabilities who could lose meager subsistence benefits. But anyone who has witnessed the marriage rush knows that for many of us, societal validation and affirmation in the eyes of the law outweigh the risks.

When my wife, Georgia, and I tied the knot at City Hall two weeks ago, we were unprepared for the flood of emotion that came with it. Although we had been married six years earlier among family and friends in a ceremony with no legal standing, there was nothing like the feeling of being recognized under the law, whatever that would come to mean.

Despite the many social and legislative victories in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender arena over the past few decades, same-sex couples have continually been denied a basic human right that so many others take for granted. The deciding moment when we finally obtained this right was immeasurably profound.

When you have been told all your life that your very essence is wrong, when you've tried to play by the rules but got judged anyway, when you've broken all the rules because you had no choice, when you have fought long and hard for the right to be different, your life boils down to choices. We choose whether or not to be the best "me" we can

be, to not let the legacy of negativity dictate how we feel about ourselves, and to stand up for ourselves and not be stunned or bullied into silence. Sometimes we go about our business without having to make those choices; sometimes we make them every day. Many times we are required to make those decisions on the fly without any warning.

For Georgia and me, the decision to get married at City Hall was thoughtful yet immediate. Like many others in the community, we followed our hearts and didn't look back.

When I had heard Wednesday evening, February 11, that something exciting might be happening at City Hall at noon the following day, I just knew Mayor Gavin Newsom was going ahead. Yet when we walked into City Hall at 11:15 Thursday morning, it was business as usual. We asked someone at the Assessor Recorder's office in Room 190 where we should go to get a marriage license. Perhaps perceiving us as a straight couple, she matter-of-factly instructed us to go to the County Clerk's office in Room 168.

But when we arrived at the clerk's office, no one was there. We hesitated in the stillness of the air. A city employee who appeared to be a lesbian hurried by. We asked her what we needed to do to get a marriage license, and she told us that they would not be ready for us until noon.

I ducked outside to see what was going on with the Freedom to Marry demonstration. On the steps of City Hall before a small group of reporters was Kate Kendell of the National Center for Lesbian Rights with Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who had just wed in a private ceremony. Lightning shot me right back into Room 168. I knew it was for real. By the time noon finally arrived and we got our number to be served, a handful of ebullient couples stood in line, giddy with the buzz of love, excitement, and courage. We were in uncharted territory, with no guarantee that it wouldn't all be shut down before it even began.

After nervously filling out our paperwork, hands trembling and writing our birth dates in the wrong place, Georgia and I stood and waited as people behind the counter ran back and forth, from desk to printer. There was a problem with the software. The licenses only printed out as groom and bride, which would have been fine with us but, since we are both legally female, would have voided our documents.

We had waited our whole lives for this moment, and now we felt impatient. The person who was helping us, a slight, bespectacled man—professional, efficient—whisked by in the midst of all the confusion, turned to us, and confided, “As much as this is momentous for you, you have no idea how momentous this is for me.”

After more tension in the back room, he grabbed our form in frustration and exclaimed, “I’m just going to type it in,” replacing “groom” and “bride” with “first applicant data” and “second applicant data.”

With that, we raised our right hands and swore that we had told the truth. Excitedly taking our license, we wished everyone good luck and walked into Room 190, where Assemblyman Mark Leno was holding a press conference. Leno was introducing the Marriage License Non-Discrimination Act, AB 1967, named after the year that anti-miscegenation laws were repealed on a federal level. In this historic moment at City Hall, I realized I was continuing my family’s legacy of fighting for the freedom to love.

Someone called out, “We have our first couple!” and before we knew it, we had been ushered in front of the cameras to become the first couple to have a public same-sex ceremony, officiated by City Assessor Mabel Teng and Leno. I felt awkward and nervous about all the attention. But as I gazed into Georgia’s eyes, a wave of calm passed over me, just like at our first wedding. This was about us, pure and simple. We’ve been loving each other for nine years. We’re best friends. She’s my family. We’ll soon be expanding our family. She cracks me up every day of my life. Her mind is my playground. She’s the soft place I land in a world that doesn’t always make sense.

Although we had written our own ceremony for our wedding in 1998, there was something surprisingly special about getting married with traditional vows, usually performed for young, bright-eyed couples before they’ve journeyed together. When they asked if we promised to care for each other in sickness and health, there was nothing cliché about it. We have survived debilitating chronic illness together. For richer or poorer, we felt every word. Then Mark Leno said, “I now pronounce you . . .,” and I turned in anticipation and wonderment about what he was going to say. “Spouses for life,” he continued, and I beamed as I registered this perfect choice of words.

Afterward, as we shared our stories with our new wedding pals, we realized that we had been so used to second-class status that we hadn’t been able to imagine things being any other way. The caption on an Associated Press photo of us said that these same-sex weddings were an act of civil disobedience. That may be technically true, but all we were feeling was the afterglow and excitement of our ceremony, private and sweet in its meaning yet public in its acknowledgment. A wedding like any other wedding, and that was the best gift of all.

As word spread in the days that followed, ecstatic queers pulled their sweeties out of work or school, jumped on red-eye flights or drove all night. They arrived with flowers, family, friends, champagne, and mariachi bands. They stood in line for hours; they camped overnight in the rain and bitter cold. Straight, transgender, and religious allies brought food, blankets, and good cheer. Through all the sleep deprivation, hunger, and soggy clothes, San Francisco was filled with the spirit of love, dedication, gratitude, and generosity. The community swelled with the sweet triumph of pride like never before.

As the media covered the phenomenon of the busiest wedding chapel in America, we saw real images of our community in all its warmth and complexity. These were depictions of everyday people, living everyday lives, emerging out of the woodwork in droves. Couples who had raised families together, survived cancer and AIDS together, escaped religious and family persecution together. People who knew exactly what it feels like to care for each other, day after day, year after year, in sickness and health, for richer or poorer, through discrimination and equal rights.

In 1959, my mother went to San Mateo to interview for a teaching job. The principal said, “Wilkinson is not a Chinese name. Do you have any difficulties in your marriage?” She replied, “My husband doesn’t have a problem being of another race.” The principal slapped his knees and laughed so hard he had tears rolling down his cheeks. The next day, she received a telegram offering her the job.

My mother retired after thirty-eight years of teaching first grade. In March, my parents, who live in San Mateo, will celebrate their fifty-third anniversary [sixty-fourth in 2015]. They’ve raised four children. They’ve cared for each other through all stages of health, finances, and

discrimination. They are our role models for the freedom to love and create family.

Next year, on Valentine's Day, an entire community of folks will celebrate their first wedding anniversaries. Regardless of the machinations of the right, no one will ever take that away from us. And we are fighting, stronger than ever, to end discrimination and file this time where it belongs—in the annals of the historical past.

* * *

When I wrote that piece, I knew I was in the midst of an incomparable moment in history, yet I could not imagine the societal changes to come. San Francisco city officials married over four thousand same-sex couples during the Winter of Love before the marriages were voided one month later. For the entire month, the first segment of news broadcasts on every TV channel in the Bay Area was devoted to the city hall marriages. Never before had I seen authentic, unscripted images of my community on TV—Asian sisters carrying each other over the city hall threshold; Chicana couples who arrived with large, supportive families; mixed-race transmasculine folks with their partners; and interracial African American and white butch-femme couples. It was a welcome change from years of sensational Pride coverage and HIV/AIDS reporting. Though visibility of these aspects of LGBTQ life was vitally important, the media until that point had often portrayed us as flamboyant, half-naked, sick, or responding to a public-health emergency. What better way to understand our struggles for acceptance and equality than to hear our stories of love and recognition? It was an image of queer stability that we hadn't yet seen on TV.

Since Georgia and I got married in front of a bank of news cameras, the footage of our wedding graced every news channel daily and accompanied news stories about marriage equality for years to come. Strangers stopped us on the street to congratulate us. People I interacted with in everyday life—a Puerto Rican woman who worked at the post office, our Vietnamese mechanic, an African American guy who was a checker at the grocery store—told me that they were thrilled to see me on the news, happy about this turn of events. I would never have had

those conversations about LGBTQ rights with any of these people if the news media hadn't documented what was quickly becoming a profound cultural shift.

Back in 1998, following our wedding, we traveled to Paris for a few days, enjoying sweet and savory crêpes while walking the streets of the City of Light. Then we spent three weeks in Greece with Georgia's extended family. Georgia's mother had sternly instructed us *not* to come out to her relatives. It was the antihoneymoon in living-queer-love color. Though I loved her family and could appreciate that it may not have been safe to come out, this thinly veiled closet wrenched my soul as I tried to shield myself from all the stares and put-downs, as I walked the gossiping dirt roads of the family's village in the Peloponnese.

But in 2004, her relatives saw us getting married on CNN and finally knew the truth. Back in San Francisco, Georgia's father, who chose not to attend our 1998 wedding, exclaimed to his wife, "Georgia and Willy are on TV! Buy a newspaper!" He proudly displayed my newspaper article, with its large, half-page picture of us, until he passed away in 2010.

"I saw you on CNN the night you got married and squealed out loud with delight. What an irony that a transgender person and a female-identified person were the first so-called 'same-sex marriage,'" e-mailed Marcus Arana, a trans man who worked as a discrimination investigator with the San Francisco Human Rights Commission. "Congratulations on making history. And thank you for writing such a thoughtful defense of the right to marry."

Indeed, the Winter of Love provided a platform for education by displaying LGBTQ people engaging in a familiar, joyful, archetypal rite of passage, as well as experiencing the overwhelming emotion that came with disrupting the status quo. For people like Georgia and me, who came out in the '80s, a very difficult time to be out in our daily lives, we had no basis for reexamining the unwritten assumption, wired into our DNA, that we weren't full citizens like non-LGBTQ people.

In order to show our stories and facilitate this collective learning process, messages about marriage equality were often simplified. When my article was published, the *Chronicle* scrapped my title for a headline that did not reflect my gender identity: "Family Values: Lesbian Newlywed

Breaks Barriers Just as Her Parents Did More Than 50 Years Ago." At that point, I no longer identified as a lesbian or used female pronouns.

In 2004, few people in the general public and even the larger LGBTQ community had a basic grasp of trans issues. As I trained substance use disorder and mental health providers throughout California, I watched them puzzle over the spectrum of gender identity, straining their brains as they quizzically searched for a way to understand. The concept of non-binary gender identity had not yet come into use. In my article, when I said that the terms "bride" and "groom" would have been fine with us, and that we were both "legally female," few acknowledged or understood this nuance. Because I was a trans person who had not medically transitioned, my gender identity was inconvenient and complicated the larger message of equality for same-sex couples.

Following the publication of my article, I was pleased when a friend, transgender author and activist Jamison Green, contacted me to ask if he could submit my article to the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association (NLGJA) to be considered for an award. In his cover letter, he described me as a trans person whose identity was erased by the article's title. When I heard that I was to be honored with a NLGJA Excellence in Writing award, Georgia and I traveled down to LA for the event. During the ceremony, the white gay man who presented the award to me referred to me as a "giddy lesbian." Aside from invisibilizing my trans identity, the comment felt like a sexist dismissal of a writer's authentic rendering of a profoundly emotional, historically momentous experience and overrode James's attempt to right a wrong. This comment was another example of the oversimplification that occurred.

Over the years, the movement's messaging often used sanitized images of nice, middle-class, mostly white people. Largely absent were images and stories of trans and gender-nonconforming people who also benefited from marriage. Moreover, the marriage equality movement didn't help the general public understand the profound ways in which LGBTQ people experienced discrimination in all aspects of society, or the pervasive physical, emotional, and structural violence perpetuated against us.

But despite the limitations of the marriage equality movement and its messaging, it was successful beyond measure. Who knew that a little

over a decade later we would secure comprehensive, federal marriage recognition?⁶² Indeed, these victories have been won by the hard work of so many dedicated activists and the power of storytelling.

* * *

On August 12, 2004, the Supreme Court of California ruled that the City and County of San Francisco exceeded its authority and violated state law by issuing marriage licenses, and voided all same-sex marriages performed during the Winter of Love. Though considered a hero by many in the LGBTQ community, Gavin Newsom was blamed for causing the Republican backlash in the November 2004 elections, in which eleven states passed ballot initiatives banning same-sex marriage and high voter turnout among conservatives helped secure Bush's reelection. LGBTQ people were heartbroken and devastated.

But several years later we experienced the elation of the May 15, 2008, California Supreme Court decision, which made California the second state, after Massachusetts, to legalize same-sex marriage. Thanks to the brilliant efforts of lead attorney Shannon Price Minter, highly accomplished trans man, longstanding legal director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), and a dear friend, this landmark marriage equality case argued that same-sex couples have the fundamental right to marry, and that laws that prohibit rights based on sexual orientation are inherently discriminatory and unconstitutional.

Alas, the excitement was short-lived. Two weeks later, Proposition 8, an initiative to overturn the court's decision and enact a state constitutional amendment eliminating the right of same-sex couples to marry in California, qualified for the November ballot.

One morning during the summer of 2008, I opened my front-window drapes and saw several yellow YES ON 8. RESTORE MARRIAGE signs in the front yard of the house across the street. My heart sank. As I stood on the street to put my son in his car seat, I saw more YES ON 8 signs two doors down, on our side of the street. The people in these two houses were part of the same family, and they each had five YES ON 8 signs in their front yards pointing in our direction.

As the weeks went on, Oakland became a nightmare for LGBTQ

people as mobs of forty people at a time stood on street corners throughout the city, every day, rain or shine, frantically waving these menacing yellow signs, sometimes screaming, "Repent!" People with opposing VOTE NO ON PROP 8. UNFAIR AND WRONG blue signs got screamed at and sometimes physically attacked. Police presence at these corner rallies was frequently necessary.

The energy that people had to campaign for Proposition 8 (commonly referred to as Prop. 8) felt overwhelming. I wondered why they weren't talking about the war, injustice, the Oakland murder rate, or our country's financial crisis. But the idea that two people of the same sex could get legally married presented a crisis of grand proportions. As eighteen thousand same-sex couples rushed to marry before the November elections, we felt the sting of the increasingly inflammatory Prop. 8 campaign. It falsely claimed that without Prop. 8, churches would be taxed for refusing to marry same-sex couples and kindergartners would be taught in school that same-sex marriage was okay. The implication was that children would receive sex education that was not age appropriate.

During the campaign, LGBTQ people and our allies discovered who our friends and enemies were. The ugly came out. Though the Mormon Church repeatedly lied about its involvement in the Prop. 8 campaign, it raised \$25 million for Prop. 8, over half of all campaign contributions in support of the measure.⁶³ The First Presidency of the Mormon Church sent a letter that was read in every congregation on June 29, 2008, urging church members to "do all you can to support the proposed constitutional amendment by donating of your means and time."⁶⁴ At the center of these "Yes on 8" demonstrations in Oakland was our neighbor Joe, two doors down, a bishop in the Mormon church, who organized his congregation to campaign for Prop. 8.

Back in the year 2000, Joe and his family members had pointed multiple signs that supported the Knight Initiative in the direction of our house. Also known as Proposition 22, the Knight Initiative explicitly defined marriage as the union of a man and a woman, and the only valid form of marriage recognized in the state of California. Ultimately, it passed by a wide margin.

Despite our neighbors' politics, we always said hello to members of

these two families, who threw large, multigenerational parties and practiced their intricate Polynesian dances in the street. But they were very unfriendly, scoffing at us and even mocking me. Except Joe. He was the kind of neighbor who would offer to jump our car, or knock on the door to remind us to move our car for street cleaning so we didn't get a ticket.

Our relationship improved with these families when we had our first child in 2006. As we strolled by, Joe's wife, Anita, would stop us to coo over our baby and offer us leftover baby formula, which we politely refused. Suddenly she became very friendly with us, and some of her family members followed suit.

And then came Prop. 8. Mobs of "Yes on 8" people, organized by Joe, stood on nearby corners, screaming us down as we drove by. We felt betrayed by our neighbors. It seemed as if our progressive Bay Area enclave had imploded into a close-minded, ignorant, and mean-spirited nuthouse. In an effort to take back the neighborhood, I organized many progressive neighbors to counteract the hate with blue NO ON 8 signs, which they gladly displayed in their front yards and windows.

One evening, as the election approached, the demonstrations had escalated, and the campaign ads had become especially inflamed, Anita knocked on our door. We were surprised to see her. Though she often stopped us to talk on the street, she had never come to our door.

She entered quickly, crouched furtively, and asked that we close the front drapes. She was concerned about being seen. Offering us gifts of soap that had been freebies to her, she recounted how her African American coworker had explained that there was a time when interracial couples had not been able to marry, and that not allowing same-sex couples to marry was similar. Like her husband, Joe, she had been worried about the impact of Prop. 8 on children. But a light had turned on for her that day. She was beginning to see the issue differently, and she wanted us to know that she supported us even though she couldn't do anything to change the minds of her husband, family members, or church community.

As I listened intently to what she had to say, I felt a sense of relief and vindication. In my mind she was family, always had been from the moment we'd moved in and I'd seen her auntie sporting a brightly colored muumuu that looked like something my mother would wear. I told her

my parents' story. I knew the street demonstrations were only getting more upsetting, but I felt happy to know that in her heart, she stood with us.

On November 4, 2008, Prop. 8 narrowly passed, which immediately ceased same-sex marriage in California. But Barack Obama won the presidency. At 9:00 p.m. on election night, folks were dancing in the streets of Oakland. Queer people battled mixed emotions, and some wrongly blamed black people for the passage of Prop. 8.

Ultimately, federal judge Vaughn R. Walker ruled Prop. 8 unconstitutional in August 2010. On June 26, 2013, the US Supreme Court denied the appeal to the 2010 ruling of unconstitutionality, legalizing same-sex marriage in California. That sunny June morning right after the victory was announced, standing on the steps of San Francisco City Hall before a bank of news cameras on live TV, Kate Kendell, oblivious to the live coverage, famously uttered the words on the lips of so many: "Fuck you, Prop. 8."

At the time, some speculated that dropping the f-bomb would hurt the movement, but after a video clip of Kate putting a dollar in the "bad-word jar" was released, all was forgiven. The same day that Prop. 8 was finally dust, the US Supreme Court ruled that Section 3 of the Defense of Marriage Act was unconstitutional. Nine states won marriage equality in 2013, and an astounding eighteen more in 2014. By the spring of 2015, thirty-six states and the District of Columbia had won the right to marry. Same-sex marriage became legal nationwide on June 26, 2015, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in the landmark *Obergefell v. Hodges* case that state-level bans on same-sex marriage were unconstitutional. Denial of marriage licenses and refusal to recognize marriages performed in other jurisdictions violated the fourteenth amendment.⁶⁵

The insults of Prop. 8 and so many other anti-LGBTQ assaults around the country galvanized the unwavering strength of the movement to change the course of history.

* * *

In February 2014, Kate Kendell contacted me to invite Georgia and me to attend the ten-year celebration of the Winter of Love. On February 12, 2014, along with our three little kids, we walked down the steps of San Francisco City Hall in a small procession as cameras flashed and the media documented this milestone. There was much to celebrate as we remembered that day when it all began and reflected on how far we'd come.

As Kate spoke eloquently about the many states that had won the freedom to marry over the past decade, the crowd clapped and cheered. As she described the many injustices same-sex couples had experienced and the ways in which marriage equality helped correct years of indignities, the crowd went wild. But when she said that in California we had won rights for trans kids to be treated fairly in school, the crowd fell silent. It wasn't until I made some noise that they halfheartedly clapped for *the rights of trans children to have equal access to education like everyone else*. I was appalled. I was reminded of how far we still needed to come so that everyone in the LGBTQ community cared about the struggles of trans people.

The next day, Facebook announced that it would include over fifty options for users to describe their gender. Publicity about this move provided opportunities for education about trans issues and the complexities of gender identity. I saw many of my non-LGBTQ training participants question their assumptions about gender and seek learning opportunities that explored the spectrum of gender identity.

By the end of 2014, thirty-five states had won marriage equality, a tremendous victory that no one could have imagined ten years prior. But in fourteen of those states, you could get married on Sunday and be legally fired on Monday. Only seventeen states and the District of Columbia had legal protections in employment, housing, and public accommodations based on sexual orientation and gender identity.⁶⁶

In late 2014, a reporter asked me where I saw the LGBTQ movement going as we moved toward comprehensive marriage equality, and whether I thought the marriage equality movement influenced public discussion of trans issues. I said that, as someone who conducted a high volume of LGBTQ and trans-specific training, I thought that the marriage equality movement had *humanized* lesbian and gay people and, to

some extent, larger LGBTQ issues. I would often hear people say, "Gay people—I get that. They're just like us!" In my trainings, I witnessed many participants who were touched by these powerful stories of love and discrimination.

And yet because trans people were largely invisible in the marriage equality movement, I said that I didn't think the movement had helped people understand trans issues. That the general public had a very low level of cultural competency in trans issues, and that there were many ways in which LGBTQ people, especially trans people, continued to be impacted by discrimination, violence, and dehumanization.

Many people in the larger LGBTQ and trans movements haven't loved the marriage equality movement. People have been concerned for years that limited financial resources have been distributed disproportionately to marriage equality while our community has struggled with underemployment and unemployment, poverty, homelessness, criminalization, incarceration, injustice, violence, and difficulty accessing culturally competent, affordable health care. Marriage equality has seemed a privileged cause in light of the state of emergency among trans women of color, who were murdered weekly in the United States during the summer of 2014 and the winter of 2015.

At the same time, donations to LGBTQ rights organizations that have poured in from community members who might not otherwise have contributed to trans issues have helped fund trans justice projects and other LGBTQ causes. What's more, the frequent images of queer people in love, however simplified or washed out they may have been, have put LGBTQ issues on the radar and made the larger society question the legacy of LGBTQ inequality.

Though marriage and trans issues have been distinct and separate, I do believe that the marriage equality movement has helped, rather than hindered, the trans movement. For years, trans rights and LGBTQ rights organizations have partnered to pass trans rights legislation and ensure gender identity protections alongside sexual orientation when possible. The cultural shift that has been an outcome of the marriage equality movement has, to some extent, helped the general public confront their homophobia, which is often tangled with transphobia when trans people

are feared. Marriage equality has provided a platform to highlight the injustice that LGBTQ people face. If marriage had not been such a high-profile subject for years, would trans issues be discussed in the mainstream media with the frequency and depth we are beginning to see? Would Laverne Cox have graced the cover of *Time* magazine in 2014 with the headline "The Transgender Tipping Point"? No one can say for sure, but I believe we owe more to the marriage equality movement than many of us are willing to concede.

As we move past the marriage equality movement and the long, unsuccessful struggle to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), it is time we have broader goals. I am excited about the 2015 push for comprehensive federal nondiscrimination protections in employment, housing, public accommodations, education, and lending. It may not be as sexy to talk about the multiple ways in which LGBTQ people are still treated like dirt, but it is the reality. The marriage equality movement displayed our humanity in all our beauty and love; the time has come for full civil rights protections akin to the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In order to remove the myriad structural inequalities we continue to experience, we need a cultural shift, and we need legislation.

Comprehensive Nondiscrimination Protections

The United States has taken action to ensure federal civil rights protections for various marginalized populations since the end of the Civil War.⁶⁷ Most notably, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 barred discrimination on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, and national origin in voting, public accommodations, education, and federally funded programs. The Voting Rights Act of 1965, the 1968 Fair Housing Act, Title IX in 1972, and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are other notable pieces of legislation that have addressed fundamental civil rights. These key legislative victories weren't always fully inclusive, however; LGBTQ Americans were explicitly excluded from the ADA.⁶⁸ In fact, while other segments of

TRANSITION IN THE FIERCE YEAR OF THE DRAGON

The blast caught me by surprise, slicing the still nighttime air with rapid-fire explosions. Faster than my heart, louder than my excitement, the deafening release announced Lunar New Year's Eve at midnight in a cloud of smoke wafting to the sky. It continued for about ten minutes, a long time for firecrackers, a little extra firepower chasing away the evil spirits and welcoming the auspicious Year of the Dragon in 2012.

Minutes before, I had launched my own firecracker on Facebook. "*Gung Hay Fat Choy! Chuc Mung Nam Moi!* Did you clean your house? Don't sweep or wash your hair tomorrow. I want to announce my fierce dragon year news. I'm finally transitioning to male, a process I started when I changed my name to Willy at age nine."

Responses blew up my e-mail with the same rapid-fire succession as my next-door neighbor's explosive fireworks. As the firecrackers went *bang bang bang*, my iPhone went *ping ping ping*.

"Thanks for the reminder, and congratulations on transitioning! What an awesome way to start the new year!"

"I'm so proud and happy for you. I did clean my house, and again, you rock, brother!"

"Hoping this Year of the Dragon brings you happiness through your transition, Willy."

When I was growing up, we celebrated Chinese New Year, as we called it, with the following edict: Clean the house ahead of time but never on New Year's Day, because you wouldn't want to sweep away your good luck. Wash your hair ahead of time so you start fresh, but never on New Year's Day, so as not to wash away any good fortune. I once went to the club on the Lunar New Year, and a hapa Chinese dyke told me she had gotten into a car accident that day. Her mother told her, "That's because you washed your hair!"

You're also supposed to pay all your debts. Well, I always say two out of three's not bad.

No matter how American I might be, I consistently adhere to these Chinese traditions. I clean my house before but not on the Lunar New Year. I display a pomelo, a tangerine, and *li-see* for the sweet life. Even if I go to the pool on Lunar New Year's Day, there's no way I'm going to wash my hair, drenched as it is in chlorine. These traditions and superstitions are ingrained in my core.

In my family, we prepared for Chinese New Year by getting new clothes that we were to save until New Year's Day. As a small child, I felt excitement about the buildup toward that day, tampered by my loathing of the frilly red dress I was expected to wear. Despite my intense discomfort with the female clothing assigned me, I enjoyed the heightened anticipation of stepping into those untouched garments and performing an annual ritual that centered us within our family structure while valuing our legacy and our hopes for the future.

I remember that special year when my mother finally grudgingly realized that I needed Chinese New Year clothing from the boys' department. I was fourteen. She took me to a sleepy downtown store, which seemed really fancy, and let me pick out a fly polyester jersey button-down shirt with a fat collar and a black-and-brown artistic print, which reminded me of my year, the tiger. Combined with my slick polyester white pants with stylish pockets, it made me feel like I had arrived. Though the opportunity to wear the right clothes came with an extra dose of ridicule and shaming, some of my family members did respect my name change and started to call me Willy a little more consistently. The anticipation of getting into those clothes on

New Year's Day had such meaning for me that afterward I wore those superfly threads into the ground.

Every year on New Year's morning, my three siblings and I got up early, donned the new garb, and waited to be called to the living room for the traditional tea ceremony, oldest to youngest. First, my brother, Steve, would pour tea for my parents, then pass them the tray with ginger and other goodies for strength and the sweet life. My sister Sunya would get called next, while my other sister, Su-Lin, and I waited and watched in the hall, whispering the play-by-play. Then, after what seemed like a long time, Su-Lin would be called, and as the youngest I remained, waiting alone. Finally, I would get called in to pour tea, first for my parents, then for my siblings, in birth order from oldest to youngest.

I felt conflicted about the hierarchy of birth order, compounded by being the youngest girl and a gender lawbreaker. And yet there was also allure in the precision and order of things and I couldn't have imagined it being any different. A little nervous, I would serve the tray with ginger, coconut, and other treats, to be placed in the tea. I would then say the blessing: "Remember your ancestors, because they paved the way for you. Honor your parents. And always respect your teachers, because they prepare you for the better life." Then we would receive *li-see*, red envelopes with a piece of silver, or a few dollars, for something sweet and auspicious in the new year.

* * *

Chinese New Year was the most important holiday in my family and has always felt very special to me, so it was fitting that I would announce my transition on the eve of the new year. I loved the rituals and the festivities, the loud clash of energy that welcomed the new and disposed of the old.

My family celebrated with a flair and flamboyance unparalleled in our San Francisco 'burb. Every year starting on January 1, my mother would make three dozen almond cookies per night until the Lunar New Year, the date of which changed year to year but which generally arrived in late January or sometime in February. She used her father's special recipe, which used almond extract, rather than almonds, to cut down on the expense. The goal was to bake delectable cookies that mirrored

my grandfather's, which famously melted in your mouth but could be dropped from three feet high without crumbling. Maybe that said more about the Crisco trans fats, but people walked miles for the chance to savor my grandfather's cookies in Hawaii, and in the Bay Area, they received ours with eager anticipation.

My mom froze all those cookies she baked, saving them for the Lunar New Year. Then I would ride around with her in our banana slug-colored Dodge Dart and distribute handmade Lunar New Year greeting cards with *Gung Hay Fat Choy* written in Chinese, party invitations featuring a picture of the animal of that particular year, and cookies by the dozen. Each year we threw four Chinese New Year parties over two weekends, filled with a multicultural array of hors d'oeuvres and the continual sounds of the gong. Though the inebriated guests usually addressed me by my birth name, which irked me, and I wasn't thrilled about having to be the dutiful daughter who was expected to serve treats with an accommodating smile, I appreciated the enthusiasm with which we honored our traditions as a welcoming way of educating people about Chinese culture.

During the celebrations, as each person or group passed through the front door, we rang the gong to chase away the evil spirits. Grabbing these two bronze cymbals connected by a red rope, we sliced the gong up and down, rather than banging them head-on, to get just the right reverberating sound. The flustered guests would inquire, "Why, do I have evil spirits?" The answer was always the same: "We have to chase away the evil spirits to be sure they don't come in."

As the legend goes, Buddha, the emperor of the heavens, called upon the animals to share in the New Year's celebrations, rewarding their loyalty by naming a year after each one in the order in which they arrived. The twelve animals that answered the call raced to see what order they would be designated. The ox was in first place. But the clever mouse, riding on the ox's back, jumped forward at the finish line to take first place. The names of the animals are not consistently described; some say rat rather than mouse, snake rather than serpent, rabbit rather than hare. The sequence that was etched in my brain as a child goes as follows: mouse, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, serpent, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog, boar.

Every year we would make a papier-mâché mask of that year's

animal so we could dress up and chase out the old year. At a certain point during the parties, one of my sisters and I would each don a mask and costume, one of us representing the animal of the old year and the other the animal of the new year. The Year of the Tiger was special, not just because it was my year, but because I got to wear animal-print boys' pajamas, with fly, along with a tiger mask, as I pursued the Year of the Ox, the old year. My dad and brother would light a string of firecrackers out front, and my mom would stand at the front door, clanging the gong. All the drunk people would jump back, clutching their dim sum and gin and tonics, while we jostled through the crowd, broom in hand, sweeping out the old year. We chased away the evil spirits as we welcomed the new year in style.

Evil spirits are the demons, the negative elements, that can bring on bad luck, whether it's poor health, economic challenges, or disharmony in the family. People who promote hatred and bias are not evil spirits, *per se*, but rather have opened themselves up to be influenced by evil spirits. Though evil spirits are external, they can be self-generated, like when we internalize negative messages about ourselves. So while my family fended them off at the front door, it didn't occur to us to consider how they impacted us in our daily lives, such as in the form of gender-based shame and ridicule.

* * *

It was Lunar New Year's Day 2012, the first day of the Year of the Dragon, the day after my next-door neighbor's fiery festivities and my own Facebook blast, that I announced my medical transition to my colleagues via e-mail.

"Gung Hay Fat Choy! Chuc Mung Nam Moi! Happy Lunar New Year! By all accounts, the Year of the Dragon is going to be bold, innovative, and full of good luck. Ideas will flow, creativity will abound, and love and life will blossom in the Year of the Black Water Dragon. I look forward to our continued collegial brilliance and collective successes.

"I'm writing to share my fierce dragon year news with you"—and I announced my transition. "Oh, and my lovely wife, Georgia, is gestating our third child, due in July."

Responses exploded with the same rapid-fire succession as the others. "I knew you were a fierce dragon when I met you."

"CONGRATS & HAPPY LUNAR NEW YEAR, WILLY!!! How exciting for you and the family. . . . Wishing you good health and peace in your transition and a BIG WOO-HOO on baby #3!!!"

"We also rejoice with you as you make continuing changes in your life that are consistent with fully expressing who you are and thus modeling dignity, self-respect, and love of self, enabling and strengthening love of others. In so doing, you clear a path for many others, and that truly makes a world of difference. Congratulations, and thank you for making the world a better place."

I never expected that congratulations would come with my decision to medically transition. I'm just one person trying to find my way, just doing my best to live as my authentic self. As the messages poured in that day, I felt overwhelmed by the exposure and elevated by all the good energy. The positive responses were so loving and oddly devoid of challenge and difficulty. My house was clean; there were no evil spirits on my street.

As it is understood in Chinese and Vietnamese culture, the dragon is a profound symbol of power. It is the only animal in the Chinese zodiac that is a mythical creature. A dragon year is a blessing, a time to improve oneself and to make a major transition in one's life. It's a good year to take calculated risks, accomplish a mission, encourage change, and embrace innovation. This is the year when we may be able to achieve what seemed impossible before.

Before I knew it, the fierce Year of the Dragon was already instigating change. Three days into it, I awoke in the deep night and showered long and scalding hot in a cloud of lingering steam. It was late January 2012, the morning of my long-awaited surgery with Dr. Brownstein, the legendary surgeon who'd performed chest reconstruction for thirty-five years. The house was dark and cold and quiet. I dressed in the kind of comfortable clothing I would never normally wear in San Francisco, ate and drank nothing, and caught a ride into the buzz and hustle of work-day predawn headlights. Once at my destination in the Castro, I adjusted my eyes to bright fluorescent lights and handled the paperwork. I was instructed to don a homely gown, recline, and go to my happy place.

I drifted out to the delicious warm water of the Hawaiian islands, my home country of sorts, where deep blues were sprinkled with brightly colored fish and my movements carried my soul through a gentle ocean. I pushed my arms in a breaststroke, kicked my legs into the depths.

As I swam farther out into the ocean, my surroundings changed into a white room with searing bright light shining through a lone window. I knew the place well but had never been able to get the window open. The room had held an energy for so long that it had settled in with a lingering odor. From time to time this energy would get restless, gnaw at me, make me feel uncomfortable and anxious. Then it would calm down. But lately it had become more resolute. At first it started knocking, then it began banging, on the window. Then it started to run laps around the room, circling, panting frantically. It couldn't sit still, and I couldn't breathe.

I had always wondered if I would ever be able to open the window, or if I really needed to. The doctor knew without my having to tell him that it had been painted shut, so he brought a knife.

Every time I wore a seat belt I felt this anxiety, this reminder that this energy was caged in my chest. Every time I got dressed I had to manage them, cover them, keep them at bay. I was never one to bind or wear a jog bra. I couldn't stand feeling constricted. Every day I wore a white tank top and a button-down shirt. But the anxiety I was feeling at their presence on my chest was escalating. They wanted to be gone, and I was losing my mind.

It had been only two months since I had decided to medically transition, and it was just three days after my announcement. Sure, I had circled around it for decades, but every time I came to the realization that I wanted to medically transition, that I *needed* to transition, I talked myself out of it. But I had reached a point now where I was uncomfortable and pissed off every time someone called me "ma'am" or "she." But was it the right thing for me? Couldn't I just continue being a trans guy in a butch's exterior? Did I really have to radically alter my body to live authentically in my gender? Couldn't I just be the complex gender creature I was without going under the knife?

Over the years, my body had been referred to as "the petite ideal"—the kind of female look that the magazines idealize, an impossible standard.

People were always checking me out in my swimsuit, a sports bikini or board shorts with a bikini top. When I looked in the mirror, I was satisfied. I didn't have a problem with my body.

My wife had a deep appreciation for what she called my "A-plus chestesses." I never let her come near them, though; my instinctive reflex to her proximity was to elbow my arms into an automatic "defensive block," as she called it. They were there on my chest, but unavailable and trying miserably to hide.

As much as others liked my look, I came to the realization that the body I had was not letting me be me. In some sense, yes, it was finally cooperating after my years of struggling with a disabling chronic illness. I was swimming several times a week and living my dream as I used my body to work hard to support my family. But I was getting "ma'am-ed" and "she'd" and relegated to the women's locker room.

I finally realized that the notion that my body should stay female was not my own. I was dining with a colleague at a restaurant overlooking a swimming pool, and she asked me, simply, why I didn't live as my true self. I turned from her and stared into the depths of that expansive pool, caught in that underwater breath, struggling to emerge at the surface. I did *not* want to hear it. Afterward, I conducted a transgender cultural competency training for an organization that provides substance use disorder treatment for troubled youth, a large percentage of whom are transgender. When I saw how they supported these young people, I felt pained in my grief. I thought about how I tried to socially transition at age nine, but without family or school support, there was nothing I could do but insist that people call me by the appropriate name. My emotions spun through the roof on the drive back from rural Northern California, but by the time I got home, I had talked myself out of it. Again.

Still, this nagging feeling was not going away. Over the next couple of months, the realization rose again and again, until one day, as I facilitated a preemployment workshop series for homeless and marginally housed transgender people, it came to stay. I was surrounded by these wonderfully smart, insightful trans folks, whose emotional presence taught me so much about staying strong. When I, as facilitator, asked them to brainstorm about what they do to boost their self-esteem, they were quick to

respond: "Talk to supportive people." "Don't listen to negative messages." "Nurture your gift." One day we invited transgender entrepreneurs to speak about their careers, including a buff personal trainer. I liked his physique and how he carried himself. I decided I wanted that for myself—to be a guy, a physically fit guy.

My long-awaited moment had arrived; it was finally time to medically transition. It was a long time coming, or perhaps it was the next step in a very long transition. I was ready to take steps to change my body to fit my mind. It was time.

As I tell training groups, transition refers to the process by which people change their gender expression to something other than the sex they were assigned at birth. It can mean different things to different people and can involve many different pieces. Social transition can include changes in clothing, personal styling, name, and pronoun—things I did, or tried to do, at a very young age. Medical transition can involve hormones, surgeries, and other transition-related procedures. The myth in the general public is that all transgender people get "the surgery": they check themselves into the hospital one day as one gender and emerge the next day, magically transformed. The reality is that the vast majority of trans folks never access any surgery at all. Moreover, transition can take years and varies depending on the individual's preferences, finances, health status, and health care access.

In some ways, I had been living as male, or transmasculine, for many years, but only people who understood my trans identity saw me that way. I identified as third gender and had tried the gender-neutral pronoun "ze" for a while, but it was too hard to work with. Very few people were used to gender-neutral pronouns in the '90s and early 2000s, whereas nowadays there is an evolving understanding of individuals with complex gender identities who might locate themselves between or beyond male or female. People had not yet started using the pronoun "they," and no one was announcing their gender pronoun in introductions, on name tags, or on their e-mail signature. Over the years, more and more people, mostly trans guys and colleagues, called me "he," but many, especially lesbians and the straight parents of my kids' friends, assumed I was "she," based on my biological status and my wife's insistence on referring to

me with female pronouns. I didn't feel empowered, energetic, or entitled enough to continually assert and explain who I was.

When I navigated a third-gender identity in the '90s, I was one of only three people in the San Francisco-based FTM community who identified as trans but weren't changing their bodies. As the years went on, it became less of an anomaly to claim a complex gender identity. After Annalise Ophelian's film *Diagnosing Difference* debuted in 2009, I became the poster child for a nonbinary gender identity, as we were beginning to call it. I am featured in the film saying, "As a third-gendered person, either way, transitioning or not transitioning, there'd always be something that wasn't totally congruent for me." Since I've medically transitioned, I've found that that hasn't been the case.

I never identified as genderqueer, though people often labeled me that way and still do. It wasn't a term that resonated for me, though I suppose that technically I was genderqueer, since I inhabited a gender identity that was not uniformly male or female. I saw myself as a trans man who had not pursued medical transition. I always knew that I was male, but in my generation it hadn't been an option to express myself as such, so I had to be some kind of female. In the process of discovering what that was, I fell in love with women and the world of badass female empowerment. I loved being butch in a butch-femme relationship. I loved the connection I had with women. Yet, at the same time, I felt myself pulling away from women because I knew that I was a different gender. I was nearing the exit for nearly two decades before I was truly ready to leave the world of women.

When I was on the verge of transitioning in the '90s, I was a grad student in public health, where I was struggling to get support as the only out trans person I knew of on campus, and extremely debilitated by chronic illness. I was too sick to attend class on a regular basis, getting notes from classmates who were paid by the disability program to take them for me. I was always "those people" that my classmates talked about—*those people* on Medi-Cal, *those people* with Medicare, *those broke people* who had health issues and needed services. As much as I felt deeply pained about not being perceived as male, I didn't pursue medical transition at that time because I felt I lacked the confidence to stand tall as a man.

I also needed to find some peace with my family. My family of origin had been a painful mess since 1997, the year my sister got together with a man who changed all our lives. After he picked a fight with me, two of my siblings vilified me, and interactions over the next decade were painfully unproductive. But once she left the man in 2011, we all began to heal. Georgia and I hosted a family reunion in October 2011, the first time my parents and siblings had all been together in one room since 1995. Two weeks later, I was ready to medically transition.

I had reached my tipping point. I had recently turned forty-nine and knew that I was not going to arrive at fifty in a female body. I came home from the trans preemployment workshop and informed Georgia, between responding to the needs of our interrupting little kids, that I wanted to medically transition. This wasn't the first time in the seventeen years we'd been together that we'd had this conversation. She had always been against it; I had always known I wanted it, but I wasn't sure if it was the right thing for me.

When twenty-four hours passed and I hadn't talked myself out of it, I knew. This time I was sure. We were waiting to hear whether Georgia was pregnant with our third child. Her recent focus on trying to get pregnant again, plus the fact that we had two kids already, ages two and five, meant my announcement was more than she could handle in the moment. "I can't deal with this!" she told me.

But I could no longer prioritize anyone else's needs over my own. After circling around it for decades, I became filled with a sense of urgency. I immediately made an appointment with a doctor who could prescribe testosterone, and Dr. Brownstein, the surgeon known for excellent results with "top surgery," or chest reconstruction: removal of the breasts and creation of a male chest.

A few days later, we learned that Georgia was in fact pregnant. She was conflicted about my decision, which was one of five or six other family priorities, including addressing our kids' emotional and developmental needs. At the time, I felt upset that she didn't support me. She knew from our first date at a trans event that medical transition was something I contemplated. What I didn't fully understand was how difficult it felt for her to envision an end to the unspoken visual display of our queer-

ness. She needed me, in my butch expression, to convey the queerness of our relationship and family, since her femme expression led people to assume that she was straight. She had fought hard to come out as a lesbian at age sixteen within the traditional Greek cultural framework of her family. Understandably, she did not want to have her experience erased. But eventually she adjusted to the idea that I was transitioning and assured me that she wasn't leaving me, and not just because she needed my help with the kids. She loved me no matter what, and as time went on, she saw how happy I became.

* * *

It was a couple of weeks before my initial intake appointment in November 2011 at a trans-friendly clinic, the first time I sought care for medical transition. Since Georgia was busy with the kids, I went alone in midafternoon and filled out pages of paperwork about my gender identity. How long had I known? Since before I could talk. Did I understand the risks of testosterone? Yes, I was well aware.

I was escorted to the treatment room, where they took my vitals. And then I waited, alone, in the empty room. The next person to come in was an intern who began to go over my paperwork. As she reviewed my responses, I felt a sudden typhoon of emotion. It ripped the house down to the studs and everything in it—the meanness, shame, pain, grief, dismissal, lack of access, ignorance, years of contemplation, exhaustion, prohibition. I was finally, finally there in that room, at age forty-nine, asking without reservation for the tools to become my authentic self.

The storm rushed from deep inside, pushing itself into the room, as I struggled for air. Her eyes widened in alarm. My breath stilted; I managed to sob, "I've been wanting this my whole life!"

Two weeks later, in early December, my lab results in, I emerged from a follow-up appointment, script in hand. Within one month of having made this enduring decision, I received the package with the juice I had been longing for for decades. I ripped open the box, quickly loaded the syringe, and shot it into my ass, shaking and hurried like a down-and-dirty dope fiend. Relief couldn't come fast enough.

Six weeks after I started testosterone, the surgeon took out his knife

and pried open the painted window in that stuffy white room, and when I woke up, I knew immediately that this imprisoned energy had left the building. I saw the evil spirits leave through that open window like the haze of the dragon, the smoke of the firecrackers welcoming the dragon, the dragon breath itself. As I came into consciousness, I smiled into Georgia's eyes. The anxiety had lifted. They were gone, and it couldn't have felt better. That's when I began to feel free.

CELEBRATING A PARENT'S TRANSITION IN AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL SETTING

Georgia and I moved in together in September 1995, after dating for nine months. Times were lean, and we laugh now about the time she found her boss's discarded clothes in the trunk of her car and how excited she was that she could try to sell them at a consignment shop. We relied on \$14 "share packages" that consisted of a big block of bright orange government cheese and odd groceries that didn't go well together, like celery and piecrusts. Every week we would go down to a church on Grand Avenue to pick up our share package, along with big hugs and airy smiles from old ladies in dusty sweaters. But no matter how broke we were, we always maintained our credit. It was a tremendous accomplishment a few years later when we managed to buy our first home with no down payment, back when you could get a loan with no money down.

It was a tiny two-bedroom bungalow in a mixed Oakland neighborhood: sweet and homey, with a small backyard where we spent many afternoons relaxing with family and friends over Georgia's scrumptious home cooking. Shortly before our son was born in 2006, we tore down the rat-infested, wood-rotted garage and built a beautiful, detached home office from the foundation up. The house itself was only about eight hundred square feet, so small that a visitor could take a few steps into the front door, do a 360, and have seen it all.

SHOW-AND-TELL

In September 2015, I had the privilege of attending Transmission, the first-ever retreat in the Sonoma County woods north of San Francisco, where a beautifully diverse group of transmasculine individuals connected in community, shared intimate vulnerabilities, and built their self-acceptance and self-confidence. After spontaneously joining the six-person panel at the well-attended Lower Surgery workshop, I educated community members about the medical details and got real about my phallo journey. When I was researching the subject, guys who had been through the experience educated me and showed me their surgeries, so I've been happy to reveal my dong at genital surgery forums, behind bedroom doors at house parties, and in awkwardly intimate moments in bathrooms with giggling partners of trans guys. As one appreciative participant remarked, seeing pictures online is not the same as seeing a surgery outcome in person.

When it came time for the show-and-tell portion of the session, I dropped trou and entertained six revolving groups of ten guys each with stories about my dick. They asked questions about sex, orgasm, masturbation, implants, surgical stages, and how I felt in terms of my safety. As the small group session came to a close, I quipped, "Okay, now you need to either buy me a drink or show me your junk!" One guy, who had never shown his mera to anyone before, complied.

At next year's retreat, I'm sure there will be an enhanced entertainment factor. We'll put on some *Magic Mike* music, rip off our stripper pants, do some circus tricks, and circulate a tip jar. No dollar, no show.

BEAUTIFUL SYMMETRY

The movement for transgender equality has two key messages: 1) As trans people, we have the need and the right to live our lives authentically, and 2) despite navigating ongoing challenges in multiple spheres of life, we have tremendous resilience. These ideas are not unique to trans experience; we can all absorb and find our agency in these fundamental truths. My story took an unexpected turn that taught me the power of harnessing my inner strength to rise above life's challenges so that Georgia and I could be true to ourselves.

It was early April 2015, the night after the first cystoscopy, my first foray into the excruciatingly painful series of diagnostic tests in which tubes and wires were jammed repeatedly into my urethra and bladder. I had had no pain medication, screamed on the table for an hour with level-ten pain, and broken down in the parking lot afterward. The procedure was so invasive that I was unexpectedly left with a catheter.

Still in agonizing pain, I helped host a kiddie slumber party. After food, rowdy times, and a meltdown, the kids finally knocked off after eleven o'clock. I got connected to my nighttime catheter bag, which hooked onto the side of the bed frame, and got into bed. Georgia had seemed distant at the party and in recent weeks. I decided to go look for her to check in. There, in my underwear, with a pain level of eight, holding my nighttime catheter bag, I learned the intricate details of my next major life decision, made for me without my consent.

We sat down on the couch and had a conversation that was surprisingly calm. It felt surreal watching words that I hadn't seen coming

tumble out of her mouth. She had come to understand that, in order to be her authentic self, she needed to be in a butch-femme relationship, rather than a heterosexual relationship, and that she needed to end our romantic relationship.

I was surprised, but honestly, my first feeling was a deep sense of relief. It had been exhausting holding myself tight in a little ball, pretending that everything was okay. We had been emotionally disconnected from each other for a long time. We had both tried to be someone we weren't for the sake of the relationship and for the kids.

Georgia suggested that I live downstairs and she live upstairs so the kids wouldn't be displaced. She said that she wanted us both to be happy and that she would always be my family. She wanted me to be with someone with whom I could enjoy my new body, and she knew she couldn't give me that.

She had received wide acclaim when she'd published an article nine months earlier about her process of accepting my gender transition. I was proud of her for bravely and honestly describing how difficult it was for her to be with a man when she had worked so hard to claim her lesbian identity. But there was more to the story. We both knew in our hearts that as much as we celebrated my choice to live *my* life authentically, we weren't actually living *our* lives authentically, not in our marriage. At the same time, I believed that we would survive transition. We had worked through so many other things. We took on major life challenges and came out the other end. We built beautiful things from *nothing*. I believed that we would work this out, too.

I was in the middle of a manuscript deadline, a long, painful health crisis, and a deep financial crisis. I had multiple high-profile events scheduled. My urethra and bladder were torn up, my pain level was excruciating, and my chronic illness had flared up. My ass was buck naked in the wind.

I can catch a curveball. I've had a lot of practice. I quickly rose to the challenge. I knew she had made the right decision for us.

* * *

Every night that first week, we told each other hard truths, hashing out the past and where we went wrong. Sure, there were other reasons it took

me so long to medically transition, but I had stayed in a female body in large part because I didn't want to lose her or our kids. But I had reached the point where I was suffocating; I could no longer prioritize anyone else's needs. When I medically transitioned, I got to experience the profound psychic relief that I had craved for so many years but that had been prohibited. And Georgia rose to the occasion. She supported me and championed my bravery. She saw how my decision made me phenomenally happy, and she loved me for it, even when it hurt her.

Now it was my turn to do the same for her—to give her the space to be the lesbian she is. As the youngest girl children in our families, neither of us was raised to take care of ourselves. We were not raised to honor the inner voice that told us we were dying inside. When we could no longer ignore that voice, we knew we had no option. Our survival depended on it. Georgia spent all day every day taking care of other people. It was her turn to prioritize herself. I could support her as she stretched her wings and flew. I could champion her bravery as she took steps to live her life authentically. I could mourn her and cheer her on, just as she did for me.

As we grieved together, I began to feel elevated. I now had permission to really, truly come into myself. I hadn't even begun to live my life authentically, and now I was going to find out what liberation felt like.

A week after the breakup, in a moment of confusion, she wondered whether she'd made a mistake. But I had already had a taste of a life where my male gender expression and body were not a defect I had to overcome, but rather a positive, congruent representation of who I was. She had let me go so I could be me, and I had already started to come into myself as a polyamorous, pansexual man with a new body. I couldn't go back.

Three weeks into our breakup, the Asian Pacific Islander Queer Women & Transgender Community (APIQWTC) presented me with the Phoenix Award at its annual Lunar New Year Banquet. There were three hundred people in attendance. Georgia and I felt surrounded by so much love from the community that we became nostalgic about our past. The next day, we went our separate ways to contemplate. When we came back together that night, we found that we had both come to the same conclusion: we had made the right choice in ending our relationship.

Even if we could resolve everything else that wasn't working, the penis was the line in the sand.

The next day, I was "divorced dad doing IKEA," buying beautiful dark-wood furniture and kitchen basics. I thought I got clocked at Bed Bath & Beyond for my home-decorating flair, developed over years of watching HGTV with Georgia. When the seasoned, sassy saleswoman eyed my color-coordinated satiny curtains and silky sheets, she asked, "You having company, girlfriend?" Only later, when I recounted the story to a trans male friend, did I realize that the saleswoman assumed that I was a gay man, not that I had once been female.

At four weeks, when the timing felt right, we told our kids in an age-appropriate way that we had broken up, which meant balancing vagueness with enough information to help them understand. We wanted them to feel confident that we would always be there for them—a promise we demonstrated every day. A short time later, my son told me, "I feel fine about the divorce because I know it's not because you and Mama are mad at each other. It's because Mama's a lesbian and you're trans."

It was my highest priority to ensure that the kids' lives weren't disrupted. It was very fortunate that we had the capacity to create separate homes in the same dwelling. I always knew that I would never leave my kids; I wasn't going to live in some tacky, overpriced apartment somewhere, missing everyone. It hadn't occurred to me that we could turn our home into a duplex. The space that had been my office during the day and man cave at night became "Dada's house." The kids helped me arrange my stuff, and I stocked my kitchen with all the right kiddie snacks. Excited to help me decorate my place, the kids embarked on an art project to produce lots of colorful, smiley drawings, which they lovingly taped to the walls.

* * *

Partners of trans people often get the message that in order to support us, they aren't supposed to discuss what's difficult about medical transition, which may include the addition of new body parts and the loss of the sexual markers that attracted them to their partners in the beginning of the relationship. For some, the shift is not congruent with their social iden-

tity or sexuality. Fifty-five percent of relationships end when one partner medically transitions. The older the person is at the time of transition, the more likely the relationship is to end; 64 percent of relationships end when transition takes place between ages forty-five and fifty-four. The incidence is much higher for trans women (67 percent between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four) than for trans men (39 percent between the ages of forty-five and fifty-four).¹²⁰ I didn't expect to be part of that statistic, but I also couldn't imagine how powerful the experience of opening the door to new possibilities would be.

Through bouts of sadness, doubt, hope, and fear, Georgia and I both began to glow. We mellowed out. We each hummed at a new vibration. We became more gentle and patient with the kids and each other.

Over time, we developed clear boundaries for our houses and maintained a flexible coparenting schedule so our kids could run freely between our homes. Every evening they ran excitedly downstairs to spend time at Dada's house, bouncing off the walls, creating a fort in my bed, and playing enthusiastically with me in the backyard.

Sure, there were bumps in the road, some messy moments, but Georgia and I worked through them with the foundation we had developed over the past twenty years.

I felt myself expanding into my masculinity without reservation. I was a tough guy, a sensitive poet, a jaded old fart, and a bright-eyed virgin, decidedly queer. I imagined myself being single for some extended period so I could take my time to get to know myself. I felt calm in the quiet of my alone space.

But I couldn't help but feel the tracks of Georgia's turned heels across the disabled landscape of my mixed, trans body, crooked, burnt, and scarred. The trans body that had a catheter running through it, was oozing funk from the open wound, and had been in gnawing physical pain for nine long months. The trans body that reeked of apparent rejection but also radiated with new beginnings. Like a puzzled deer caught in headlights, I tried to make sense of all the mixed messages, the sorrows of what didn't work, and the beautiful memories of what did.

I had begun the process of adopting my third child the week we broke up, a task I hadn't gotten around to since his birth two and a half years

prior. Even though I got the paperwork in quickly, it took two months to get a home visit from the social worker. We were eager to announce our amicable divorce, but since I was engaged in a legal process that required us to be in a domestic partnership, I didn't think it was strategic or safe for us to make any written statements about it. Disclosure to friends about my divorce was a slow process, and even so, I was overwhelmed by their reactions. People were sympathetic about the multiple challenges I faced, yet I still felt their pity. I was being perceived as a "tragic trans person." There was no escape from the subjugation I experienced as a result of the assumptions people made about my story, and I hated it.

Mine is not a tragic trans tale. I am not a pitiable, victimized trans person, marked, once again, by defect and rejection. Georgia isn't a villainous, transphobic lesbian. This divorce was a mutual decision made with love, the courage to let go, and elation as we changed our marriage into a family relationship and celebrated the latest evolution of our authentic selves.

After I told my parents, they sent me a sweet note about how I was a "person of strength," listing challenging moments in my life from which I had emerged with resilience. Georgia's mom told me, "You'll always be the father of my grandchildren. I love you, Willymou."

* * *

In mid-June, two months after the breakup, I went to the Mixed Remixed Festival in Los Angeles to perform spoken word about the intersection between mixed and trans experience. Before the event, Emily, an APIQWTC member who had been an acquaintance for the past decade, contacted me to tell me that she planned to go, and to ask if I needed any assistance at the performance. I was happy that there would be at least one other queer person in what appeared to be a predominantly straight, cisgender scene.

After the performance, I hung out with Emily and a few other women over dinner and lively discussion about the complexities of our mixed lives. Korean and Jewish, racially nonconforming, and gorgeous, Emily captivated me when she articulated in brilliant detail the racially charged nuances of one of the performances. It was LA Pride weekend,

so, after dinner, a few of us drove all over, looking for parties, which in each instance had ended hours before we arrived. But the party was in the adventure, not the destination. After the others headed back to their hotels, Emily and I hit a twenty-four-hour diner for breakfast at four in the morning. I asked her how she identified, and she replied, "Like you, I'm pansexual and polyamorous." I was intrigued.

A couple days later, when she arrived in Oakland after I had already returned, I picked her up from the bus station. I just wanted to see her again, carry her bag, and give her a ride home. It was the last two weeks of Pride Month in San Francisco, and we kept hitting each other up to attend various events. Both compact in size and compatible in many ways, we found that we had much in common besides being hapa. A Pilates instructor, personal trainer, trapeze artist, and circus performer, Emily shared my love for swimming, hiking, writing, and performance. One night, over Spanish tortilla and sangria, I asked her if she would help me with my performance at the upcoming Trans March. After I read her my piece, she made astute suggestions, which I thought were spot-on. I found myself gazing at her beautiful features as the words fell from her lips, thinking, *Oh, shit, I'm gonna fall in love with her.* By the time I performed on the Trans March stage a few days later and we marched in celebration of trans pride, we were radiant with the buzz of our newfound connection.

Whether we were staying up late at my place or laughing at live performances, we had so much fun together. We found ourselves surprisingly in sync on multiple levels: in our racial nonconformity, our strong queer identities, and our sexual compatibility. I loved that she was both queer and attracted to men, and that she had been down with trans issues for years. Emily embraced my maleness as an inherent part of who I was, without the need for explanation, modification, or justification. She said that she appreciated my ability to recognize her queerness in a way that no cisgender, straight man ever had, and without the prejudice and rejection that she had experienced from some lesbians for being attracted to both women and men.

I never thought I would get laid while I had a catheter. It was unexpectedly exquisite to find someone with whom I could celebrate my trans journey. Psyche and body became one as I integrated my new body part,

connecting my brain and lifelong imagination with the mind-blowing sensations of my virgin flesh. As my nerve endings lit up like a Christmas tree, I felt the electricity of our heteroqueer connection.

When Emily went to a presurgical doctor's appointment with me at the crack of dawn, Georgia was impressed with her kind heart and remarked, "That's all I need to know about her." Since Emily was going to be caring for me after surgery, Georgia and I decided to introduce her to the kids. Emily brought Georgia jam that she had made from apricots she grew in her garden, and Georgia gave her a big, welcoming hug. The next day, when Georgia went to Southern California to spend time with her new burch, Amy, Emily and I and the kids splashed, played, and giggled in a beautiful lake. Emily knew exactly how to engage each one of them in age-appropriate ways. I basked in the warmth and effervescent smiles that surrounded me.

* * *

Four months after Georgia and I broke up, we had our first double date, Georgia and Amy, Emily and I. We ate, shared stories, laughed, cared for the kids, and celebrated our newfound love.

Over the summer, it was beautiful to see the kids playing with such levity. Georgia and I were no longer transmitting our stress to them; there was happiness all around. When the kids went back to school in late August, the new principal pulled Georgia aside and said, "I want to give you a hug. Your kids are so happy and well adjusted." She didn't even know we had divorced.

When Georgia published her article about accepting my transition, I enjoyed the five minutes during which we were the poster children for long-term trans love. But our relationship shifted, and, rather than being a devastating experience, it has been an opportunity for growth. As we move forward, I'm going to work hard to ensure that we continue to prioritize our kids' best interests, support each other to live as our true selves, and be family to each other in new and different ways. I hope that as a community we always remember that we have resilience, and that love can multiply when we live our lives authentically.

GETTING FED

At one point on our cross-country bike trip so many years ago, after a long, grueling ride, my friend Checka and I arrived in a small Kansas town in the early evening and were disappointed to discover that there was no lodging for rent. We knocked on the door of a house with clucking chickens and a vibrant vegetable garden and asked the small family if we could camp in their backyard, though we knew the temperature was expected to drop to thirty degrees that night. The woman who answered exclaimed, "No, but you can camp inside!" She had had a vision that someone was coming and had been cooking all day. I ate a hearty steak for dinner, slept in a warm bed, and in the morning enjoyed the best grits of the trip.

The journey is long, but sometimes you get fed along the way.