

Our Exhales

A series of vignettes

"You get to be more you than you've been in a long time" -Love,
Simon

"All young people, regardless of orientation or identity,
deserve a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve
their full potential." - Harvey Milk

Introduction

Take a deep breath and hold it. Keep holding it as long as you can, then finally let it go. The exhale feels freeing, almost euphoric, right? That's what coming out is like for us. Holding in your breath is like realizing you have feelings that don't fit what society calls "normal." So many of us try to ignore them, push them down, or move on. They stay with us, silent on the outside but screaming on the inside. Until we exhale. That freeing breath escapes our lungs at the moment that we choose to fully share ourselves with the people we trust the most.

I have spoken to some peers and compiled a series of coming-out stories, powerfully told in the first person. Each story encapsulates that person's experience, their exhale. Each story is unique—some more of a cathartic, purgative experience than one of true relief and liberation. Some are anger-filled, passionate, brave. The common denominator of these experiences is that the individuals in these vignettes chose authenticity. I hope these glimpses into their truths encourage someone, somewhere, to live as their authentic self.

Easter

It was the day before Easter in 2014, I was 14-years-old. As I sat next to my dad in the car on our way home from softball practice, he began to talk about our plans for Easter morning. I remember looking out the window. I had so much to say, but the only thing that I could manage to get out in that moment were tears. My dad got confused and angry. He always got frustrated when I cried because he wanted to understand why. I wanted to tell him every thought that was going through my mind, but I froze.

I decided, instead, to tell him that I didn't want to be a Catholic anymore. He began to raise his voice and get angrier by the second. My dad was born and raised Catholic. Therefore, it was in my blood to be Catholic. I mean, I went to Catholic school for eight years of my life. He started listing off every holiday that I wouldn't be allowed to celebrate with my family, "No Easter, no Christmas, no gifts anymore." I cried even harder. I knew I was already disappointing him. He thought I was crying because I wanted the gifts. I never corrected him. I let him continue to rant. I let myself continue to cry without a word coming out of my mouth.

When we got home, I ran right upstairs. My mom was getting ready in the bathroom. She was curling her hair, probably getting ready to go grocery shopping. She noticed that my face was red, and my nose was running. She hugged me. I burst out of her arms and through muffled sounds, I whispered, "Mom, I'm bisexual." I ran right into my room without letting her say a word. I don't think I wanted to know what she would say. So, I closed the door behind me and sunk down into my baseball-shaped chair. There was sadness and of defeat lingering in the doorway when my mother opened it. I'm not sure if it was from her or me. I looked up and saw that she was sharing in my tears. She walked over to me, knelt, and grabbed my hands.

I don't know what made me tell my mom before my dad. I had the opportunity. Maybe I didn't want to say it in a car where there could be no escape from my declaration. Maybe I felt safer with my mom. After all, she was less Catholic than my dad. I think I felt closer to my mom when I was young. It seemed harder than usual for her to find words to say. She asked why I was crying. She tried to calm me down, but there were worried thoughts scattered in her brain. "Is someone hurting you? Are you being bullied? Are you okay? Why are you crying?" It was one

question after another without a moment to let me answer. I kept shaking my head.

"I want to go over to Hope's house," I begged my mom. I didn't want to be a part of the conversation yet. I wanted to give my parents the chance to talk it out. Subconsciously, I think I was hoping my mom would forget.

"Okay," she replied as she dug for her keys. We drove to Hope's house in silence. Neither of us had any idea what the other was thinking. *Did she hate me? Did she want me to leave? Did she just not know what to say?* My mom always knew what to say, but this time, she had nothing.

I got out of the car and went into Hope's house. As I approached her, I nervously chuckled and said, "I just told my mom that I like girls." Hope knew me without a filter. I felt free for a moment to think about what I had just done. To think about the words I couldn't take back. The only thing I could do was laugh. I just wanted Hope to help me pretend that nothing was different.

We always played Xbox together and she handed me the remote. We only got to play for twenty minutes before my phone began to ring. I picked it up. "We are coming to pick you up. I told your father. We want to talk, we aren't mad." *Why did we have to talk?* Any regular talk with my dad would last for hours, so I knew this constituted a record-breaking talk. I second guessed if I was ready. Something inside of me knew it was time.

I sat with Hope, anxiously awaiting my parents' arrival. They must have been close when they called because it only took them about five minutes to get there.

I walked out of Hope's house. As I shut the door behind me, it felt as if a million eyes were watching me. When I got in the car, my dad turned back at me and reassured me, "You know we aren't mad at you, right?" He continued to talk because I still hadn't said anything, "We just wanted to talk-discuss what's going on. We want to make sure you're okay." My mom wasn't talking. He was talking for both of them. He kept looking back at me and smiling to assure me that it was going to be okay. I spent the ride home composing myself. I wanted to show them that I was mature and that I was ready to answer any questions they had. It might have been new for them, but it was a huge part of myself that I was finally ready to share.

When we got home, we all walked right into the kitchen. I took my seat at the counter. My dad poured a glass of wine. To start the conversation, my dad said, "Mom told me what you said. It's okay. We just want to know what's going on. We want to make sure that you're safe. I'm sorry I was yelling at you in the car earlier, I had no idea."

While my parents weren't always the best at knowing what to say, they did try their best to understand me. They gave me the unconditional love and support that I needed, which has gotten me through some of the harder times.

Next to the Bus

I was in eighth grade. I had to attend court-mandated therapy. I was used to telling my therapist my deeper thoughts and feelings. But, there was something different clouding my ability to share-Nikki. Nikki went to my school. Platonically, we worked great together. We would hang out, listen to music, talk about movies and dumb TV shows. But my platonic feelings began to snowball, and I began to feel a lot more for her. I wanted to be more than just her friend. I didn't understand if these feelings for her were real. It sort of felt like a daze that I couldn't snap out of. I had crushes on boys in the past, but for the first time, I had those feelings for a girl. I told my therapist that I felt this way and I wasn't quite sure what to do or how to place what I was feeling.

"Well, why don't you just tell her?" my therapist asked, tapping her pen on the spiral bound notebook on her lap. That was the million-dollar question she asked. *Why don't I tell her? How could I tell her? Would she reject my feelings? Would I be the absolute joke of my school? I already stood out amongst my peers, but being the gay one, too?* I wasn't sure how to even begin to approach something like that. My feet were cemented in place. "Tell her just like you would tell a boy that you liked. There's nothing wrong with giving it a shot. The worst she could do is say no."

The validation from my therapist gave me the spec of confidence that I needed to run with the idea of telling Nikki. I mustered up enough courage over that weekend and planned to tell her at our passing period that following Monday. What would you know? It turned out that she liked me too.

We had a thing. You know, as middle schoolers do. Hand-holding, sappy Kik messages were sent at ungodly hours of the night despite needing to be at the bus stop at 6:30 the next morning. It was puppy love, but It meant a lot to me because she was the first girlfriend I ever had. Although my feelings for her, for a girl, were still brand new. For some reason I wasn't ashamed to be with her. I was proud. I felt like air, I wanted the whole world to know this was my person.

Just as cringy, embarrassing, little middle schoolers do, we planned our first kiss. Calculated as ever, we decided the location of our first big milestone would be outside where the buses picked up the students. I mean, most middle school couples did it that way. We talked about it for days. The afternoon

arrived and I felt my heart skipping beats. This was going to be special.

The last bell rang, and I swung my overstuffed backpack onto my shoulder and booked it out the south wing. Speed-walking to the buses, scanning the entirety of the walkways looking for her. I finally saw her. I greeted her with a hug and as we pulled away, we kissed. It was an innocent act, a soft peck on the lips. Awkward, but so comforting. We smiled through the whole encounter. Before I could get a word out to her, I felt a tight clammy grip on my wrist. Mr. Grigus, a short and stocky man, was on the other end of the palm. He was our assistant principal.

"Let's go," he snorted. He led me into his office. All I could think at that moment was I'm going to miss my fucking bus. It wasn't even a thought in my mind that my interaction with my girlfriend could be the cause of this. I figured I cheated on a math test, or they found out I skipped my gym period again. Maybe they found the cigarettes in my locker. I never thought that the cause of this man's anger was my girlfriend.

"What the hell was that?" He barked. Most of the conversation was a blur. I was humiliated. I felt like an exhibit at the zoo as administration passed by his closed door, peering into the window to see what possibly could have evoked him to pull a student after the bell rings. You would have thought I started a fight or keyed someone's car. But no, what was so "inappropriate" was the fact that I had the gall to kiss her. That's completely fair, criticize PDA and forbid anyone to come close enough to each other where there wasn't space for God in between, but why wasn't he stopping all the straight couples that were kissing?

I was suspended for two weeks. For some reason, Nikki never got spoken to. Everyone at school found out. When I got back to school, it wasn't easy. I got picked on and made fun of. The word "faggot" was thrown at me a lot. Even though my fear had come true, I just shook it off. I was now "The gay kid" but despite that, I was still proud to be with her. She got me through it all.

It was easier to come out knowing I had someone to do it with, someone to do it for. I wasn't ashamed and I wasn't going to hide who I was. I let people have their thoughts and judgments against us, but I needed to be true to who I was and who I am. Sure, I got treated differently. In the locker room,

girls would go into the stalls so they wouldn't have to change in front of me. It was a huge deal to me at the time, but it showed me that I was strong. I'm proud to be bisexual. I decided to kiss her next to the bus that day and I will never regret it.

Text Message

I had a girlfriend of three and a half years during high school. Her name was Brianna. Near the end of our "relationship", I realized that I hated even looking at her. It wasn't her fault; I just came to terms with the fact that I was gay. The issue being: I was still dating her.

It was March 2017, the year that I graduated from high school. Brianna and I were going to hang out. We made it five minutes in and then I couldn't stand being in the same car as her. I decided to have my aunt call me to remind me of a "doctor's appointment" that was urgent. We dropped Brianna off at her car and I hugged her goodbye.

As soon as she was far enough away, I jumped into my friend's car. I asked her to take me back to her house so that we could talk. We went into her basement where I told her that I liked boys. "I know, so what next?" she said.

With the immediate acceptance from my best friend, I knew that I had to break up with Brianna somehow. I didn't know how to do it, though. So, I handed my phone over to my best friend and asked if she could do it. She took my phone and wrote out a text message to Brianna. I still have the text:

This is going to sound corny but it's not you, it's me. My whole life people would call me gay, and I would always toss it to the side and say "no." So I just assumed my whole life that I wasn't gay. I just realized lately that I've never thought about who I am as a person. I think I'm confused about who I am, and I never got a chance to figure that out. It's not that I didn't and don't love you, it's just that I'm not sure who I am and what to do. I just never wanted to hurt you, I think you're a perfect girl, but I just don't know who I am, and I need to do this for myself.

Brianna went on to say that she wasn't mad that I was gay, but she was mad that I lied to her for three and a half years. People had always told me throughout my life that I was gay, and it never allowed me to fully think about it because I was so defensive about it. When you tell yourself a lie for long enough, you begin to believe it.

Brianna told me that she needed time to process it. She stopped replying to my texts. I finally felt free to be myself. However, I ended up getting a message from her little sister

shortly after. She explained to me that Brianna ran out of the house screaming and crying. She asked, "What did you just do to my sister?" It went downhill from there. I said something about not meaning to hurt Brianna, but I couldn't live a lie anymore. That was when Brianna's little sister called me a "fag."

People called me a "fag" back in junior high and at the beginning of high school. It bothered me. For the first time when her sister said it to me, it didn't bother me. In my head, I thought, "Yeah, I am."

The next day at school, one of Brianna's friends came up to me. She said, "congratulations on coming out." This completely stopped me in my tracks. I didn't know I had come out. I didn't know that Brianna was going to tell anyone. I wasn't ready to deal with it, but at this point it was too late. It was already going around the school and Brianna was trying to insinuate that someone else was telling everyone. I knew that wasn't true. She even texted me that day and said, "this is a lot easier for you than me, remember that."

Brianna tried to belittle the fact that I was forced to come out to the entire school. I had my own issues to think about. I felt bad that we broke up and I felt terrible that I did that to her, but I needed to do it for myself. I knew the only thing I could do was move on and be myself. It felt like things at school got better once everyone knew that I was gay. Ironically, people stopped making gay jokes about me once they found out that I was actually gay.

Secrets in the Garage

I think it's important to start way back. Back to when I was a young kid. There were always signs that I was gay and my family members kind of knew. They would give me a hard time about it. I had to mention that because it seems important for later in my story. I realized that I was gay in middle school, probably in the seventh grade. I started to notice that I was having thoughts that my guy friends didn't have. It honestly kind of felt more like the same thoughts that my girl friends at the time were having.

When I was growing up, I was always taught that being gay was wrong. It scared me, and I tried to suppress it as much as possible. I can remember praying about it all the time, praying to be "normal." I used to cry myself to sleep because I hated the thoughts and I felt like I shouldn't be having them. I tried everything that I could to get rid of them, but they would never go away because it's who I am. It took me a long time to accept myself. It was a hard journey, but it was one that I had to face alone because nobody else knew about it.

For a while, I was struggling with my religion because who I am wasn't accepted. It made it difficult to believe. It honestly made me question God because I always thought that if he was real then he would take these thoughts away. I started to believe that I was going to go to Hell for something that I can't change.

When I felt completely alone, I started to turn to YouTube and social media to find other people that were going through a similar situation. It made me feel less alone with my thoughts. I met some amazing friends that helped me get through the harder times. It made me realize that I wasn't the only one struggling. I wasn't alone. These friends gave me a lot of confidence to be myself.

I think it was my freshman year of high school, maybe a little bit after, my friends and I were chilling in my garage talking about our deepest secrets. At that point I was so ready to come out, I thought; *okay this is the perfect opportunity*. I went back and forth, but I finally decided to be honest with them. I told them that one of my deepest secrets was that I was bisexual. For a lot of people, it seems easier to come out as bisexual first. Even though I knew I was gay, it just seemed easier to say that I was bisexual.

When I told my friends, they were pretty cool about it. They said that they kind of already knew or had a feeling. They were happy that I told them. It felt good that a few other people finally knew. It was a huge relief to have people that truly accepted me and didn't judge me. It brought us closer to each other. I felt so free because a few people finally knew the secret I had been hiding for so long.

For a while, my family still didn't know. I was still hiding from people, but I had a support system. I had my friends. Knowing that I had them made it a lot easier to come out to my family and everyone else. Not feeling ashamed or like I have to hide a part of myself is the most freeing feeling in the world. It took a weight off of my shoulders and I finally felt genuinely happy with myself.

Written in Letters

Growing up was interesting. When I was younger, I really couldn't tell the difference between sexual attraction and jealousy. I would see attractive men on TV or in magazines and think "Oh, this is a good-looking guy, I want to look like that when I grow up," It was hard to make the connection that I was appreciating his looks but at the same time I was attracted to the male physique. I realized that I was attracted to men around my junior year of high school. I spent the next couple of years becoming very religious and I truly was trying to "Pray the gay away."

Over time, I realized that I wasn't going to be able to change the way that I felt. It was a really difficult internal battle to fight. My feelings were contradictory to a lot of what I had been taught. At the time, there was no normalization of homosexuality, at least from what I was experiencing. Something that foreign didn't seem like a possibility. There was no gay culture in my environment. It was hard to accept and it took some time. I was still religious and who I am is considered a sin. For a while, I would wear a rubber band and whenever I would have sexual or romantic thoughts about boys, I would snap it against my wrist.

I soon realized that the only way that I was going to be happy was to be myself. Sophomore year of college was when I decided that enough was enough. I was going to live my life the way that I wanted to live my life. I decided to take a trip to New York City and go out to a gay bar. It was a very different experience for me. I was afraid of making eye contact with other people. I felt like a deer caught in headlights, blinded and waiting for the impending doom.

I started going out a lot more. I felt like I needed to talk to somebody about it. I knew that my first-semester freshman roommate was an active ally in the LGBTQ community. Like guys do, we started talking about *conquests*. When I was telling him my story, I explained that it was actually about a boy. For a bit, he thought I was joking until I didn't back down. He was very accepting. I knew he would be and that's why he was the first person that I came out to. I was pretty much coming out to my friends one by one.

I didn't care who found out at school anymore, but I still hadn't come out to my family back at home. At the time, I wasn't in a position where I felt like they needed to know that I was

gay. I met a guy about a year ago and things started to move fast. I realized that I wanted him to be a big part of my life. For that to happen, I knew that I had to tell my family.

I came out to my mom first because I figured it would be important to do that. I also knew that my mom was going to have a lot of questions. I asked my boyfriend for advice on how to do it and he explained that he wrote his parents a letter. I thought it was a great idea. So, I wrote a letter to my mom and told her that I was gay, and I was going to continue my life by living as a gay man. I wrote down as many questions as I could think of and answered each of them.

I got a wonderful response back. My mom said that she was proud of me. She even said that she was happy for me. She was excited to meet my boyfriend. She asked if she could show the letter to my father. He took about a week to get back to me. I wasn't sure about it. I liked the idea of the letter because it allowed them to be shocked on their own. They had time to settle with it.

I'm no longer going through a coming out process, I'm just living my life. It's nice. Most people know that there are going to be times when you are coming out every single day. I have to explain to people all the time that I have a boyfriend, not a girlfriend. I feel secure with myself and I'm happy with my boyfriend. The most important part is coming out to yourself; you have to know that it is okay to be gay.

Through the Window

It was a dark time in my life. My parents were just going through their divorce. I was drinking, throwing parties, and my grades were the lowest that they had ever been. I started talking to Sam when I was a sophomore in high school. At first, I just saw her as a close friend.

Two months went by and I went away for a week during the holidays. It was the longest I had been away from her since we got close. While I was on the trip, I got a call from her. She explained that she loved me and saw me as more than just a friend. It scared me. I was mad at her. It felt like she ruined our friendship.

After the call, the thought sat with me for a while. When February came around, I finally accepted my feelings and recognized that I felt the same way about her. We started dating. Our feelings grew deeper as time went on. In April, we were both playing for our high school's varsity softball team. We lived across the street from each other, so Sam would always drive me home after practice.

My mom was never home when I would get back from practice, but there was one day when I noticed that her car was in the driveway. I didn't think anything of it. Sam pulled into my driveway and we started to say our goodbyes. We kissed. Sam and I looked back at the house and I could see my mom. She was standing in her bedroom window staring out at us in the car. Sam asked me if my mom saw us kiss. She did. I knew what was going to come next. I knew that she was going to rage. I warned Sam that whatever was about to happen, she should stay calm and just ignore it.

I got out of the car and shut my door. Sam pulled out of the driveway. When I turned around, there was my mom, standing on the porch waiting for me with a furious face. I remember the first words that came out of her, "do you kiss all your fucking friends like that?"

At that moment, I was ready to face anything. That was it. I just didn't care anymore. At that point, I already had such a poor relationship with my mom. I knew that I had nothing left to lose. She was continuously yelling at me. She said that she was disgusted with me. She wanted me to leave and had already called my dad to come to pick me up. All I could do was ignore her and pack my bags.

That day I left with my dad. He didn't care at all. He didn't say much about it. I was kind of happy that my mom found out because it gave me an excuse to leave and live with my dad. I didn't live with my mom again until after I graduated college. I still visited her, but my home was at my dad's.

My mom thought it was a phase and blamed the fact that I was at such a low point in my life. She didn't acknowledge my relationship with Sam for years. Even with a few other girlfriends that I had, I never used the word "girlfriend" around her. It wasn't until she saw that I could still be successful that she understood it wasn't just a phase.

Now I'm three years out of college, I live with my mom again. She gets along with my current girlfriend, we even use the term "girlfriend" now. I've even kissed my girlfriend in front of her. If anything, my story proves that sometimes it takes time, even years, but if someone loves you then they will love you for who you are. I have a better relationship with my mom now and I'm free to be who I am and love who I want in front of her.

The Diagnosis

It wasn't just that feeling of wanting to change something about myself, it was a feeling of wanting to be a completely different person. I was at an appointment with my therapist and she told me to name one thing that I like about myself. I sat there in silence because I truly could not think of one thing. At that point I didn't know that I was trans, I just knew that I felt so wrong. This feeling of hatred, this feeling of overwhelming discomfort in my skin kept growing. Looking back, I was suffering from severe gender dysphoria.

When I was in elementary school, I remember the teachers telling us that we had to go wash our hands and I would get deathly afraid of leaving my friends, a group of girls, to go into the boy's bathroom. It wasn't just like an "Oh, I wish I could stay with my friends," it was an "I don't feel safe here, I don't fit in." I remember wishing that I was a girl.

One day I was lying in bed, unable to exist. I was on Tumblr and I saw a GIF of Arianna Grande wearing heels and dancing. Something in that moment told me "you need that to be you." I was jealous. I wanted to experience that freedom and liberation.

I knew that there were transgender people, but I didn't fully understand what it meant. I ended up going down a rabbit hole on YouTube. I was watching a lot of videos about transgender kids. I ended up finding Gigi Gorgeous. Here was this beautiful, happy, successful trans woman right in front of my eyes. She gave me the answers that I needed.

When it finally clicked, I went downstairs and looked for my mom. She was the only person home at the time. When I found her, I just awkwardly stood there in silence for a little bit. I don't even remember if I said anything, but she said, "Hey, what's wrong?"

I couldn't spit it out. She could tell that I was starting to tear up. It took a few seconds in between each word, but I said, "Sometimes... I feel like... I'm in the... wrong body." Then, I just started sobbing.

My mom sat there and was explaining to me that we would figure it out together. She kept repeating, "It's going to be okay. We'll figure it out. We'll figure it out."

She sat there reassuring me, but at the same time, she was hinting that she didn't think that I was transgender. However, I also want to note that parents can come a long way.

I grew up with a father who continuously made gay jokes and made jokes about transgender people. It never came off as a super serious thing, but he would say that if I were gay, I wouldn't be allowed to stay under his roof. He was laughing about it, but that kind of stuff sticks with you. When I came out to my mom, I was telling her that it wouldn't be okay because my dad would never accept me. I was sure that he was never going to be okay with this. I was afraid that I was going to hurt my family. I was afraid that I was going to hurt my parents' marriage.

For the next few months, my mom and I kept it to ourselves. I was trying to get all the answers and rush forward. I was ready to start something that would potentially make me happier. It felt like time was moving in slow motion. During those months, my mom and I spent some time looking for a good gender therapist. Once we found one, we started going to see her together. I was telling her about my history and how I was feeling. Eventually, we came to a diagnosis of gender dysphoria.

This was the turning point for my mom. It gave her that push that she needed to acknowledge that I am transgender, I do have gender dysphoria, and we were going to have to act on it if I was ever going to be happy.

My mom and I agreed that it was time to tell my father. I wasn't there when she told him. She told me that there was a lot of crying. From what I could tell, my father didn't believe that anything was going to come from it. I don't think he believed that anything was going to happen. He ended up going with us to see my gender therapist a few times. She went through the entire diagnosis with him and explained what it meant for me.

At first, my father was not a fan. He felt like my therapist was enabling me. Though, he quickly came around and realized that that's not what was happening. My therapist played an integral role in getting my father to accept what was going on.

Then came my freshman year of college and I was getting ready to move to Chicago. I wanted to get my father on the same page as me before I left and came back looking a lot different. My parents were both sitting downstairs one night, and I asked

if I could talk to them. I looked at my dad and said, "Listen, I know that you know that I'm transgender. I know that you know what's going on. Do you want to talk about it?"

It was a very hard conversation to have. He'd never met a transgender person before that he knew of. His only exposure to the trans community were people that he saw on Jerry Springer. I attempted to explain it to him as well as I could. I explained that I was just trying to be happy. I showed him other examples of transgender girls online. We went back and forth for a while, we didn't get too far in the conversation, but I will say that it was a very calm and lighthearted talk.

In the end, I told him that this is what I have to do. I said, "You can either be a dad that loves me and helps me through this, or you can not be." Those were the options and it upset me to have to say that, but at that point in my life, I had been struggling for so long that I couldn't let anybody stand in the way of it. That's where the conversation ended, and we said goodnight to each other.

I started taking hormones once I moved away for college. I started living full-time as a woman. When I came home for the holidays, my family did the best they could with my pronouns. It took a while, but they did all come around. Once I transitioned, once my father saw that I was still the same person, just a lot happier. I think he finally understood why I had to do it.

That was over five years ago. Now my father hardly ever gets my pronouns wrong and I don't think that we've ever been closer than we are now. It took a long time for everybody to adjust, but it didn't matter how long it took for them, it just mattered that they were trying and that they supported me.

The Haircut

Coming out for me was weird. Freshman year of high school, I met someone. I liked her. Her name was Colleen. We met at the library during study hall through a mutual friend and we decided to date. It was exciting and my first real relationship. She made me happy. Her parents already knew, and they were fantastic. I still say hi to her mom when I see her at the deli where I work.

One night, I decided I was ready to come out to my family. I got my dad, brought him upstairs, and woke up my mom—which I don't recommend when you're coming out to someone. I told them I had a girlfriend and I liked her. They already met her, I think. And instead of them being happy and supportive, they told me to break up with her. What would my Grammy think? Wouldn't people bully my sister? It wasn't good.

There was a long period when she didn't come over to my house. When she did, it wasn't comfortable. We broke up junior year. While trying to get through the break-up, I was trying to convince my mom to let me cut my hair. I knew that I wasn't comfortable in my body. My mom knew this. Every time we went to the hair salon, she would sit right next to the hairdresser and talk to her so that I couldn't ask her to cut my hair short. She reminded me that girls don't have short hair, girls wear form fitting clothing, and that I was a girl.

Finally, we came to a compromise. It was a bad one. An ugly ass haircut that I had for about two years was what defined me. It fucking sucked. I stood out even more than I already did, being one of about 4 gay kids at school. Right before I moved to college, I mailed myself the four pieces of men's clothing I had. My mom found the receipt, and we fought the day I moved to college.

A month later I cut my hair the way that I wanted to this time. But much to my dismay, that didn't automatically make me into a boy like I had hoped. I started being honest with the people that I was interested in. Telling them that down the line I wanted to transition.

Junior year before I left to go back to college, I wrote a note coming out to my family. I left it on my parents' bed. I thanked them for giving me the strength to not settle for my happiness and to take control of my own life. I wrote down what

my new name and pronouns were. Absolutely nothing changed. It was as if they never read the letter at all.

September of my senior year, I started seeing a therapist, and making things happen on my own. Fall of 2017 I had my letter approving me for testosterone, and I set up an appointment for mid-May, just in case softball went to NCAAs. I spoke with my coach a little bit. I was just getting things off my chest with her. I was clearing up my mental health and trying to decide if I should try and save my eggs. It would be the only way if I ever wanted a chance to have my own biological children. I truly value her friendship and just her as a person.

A month after I started testosterone, I posted on Instagram, publicly coming out. I feel like most people were starting to get an idea at that point, but it was something that I needed to do. My best friend that worked at the deli with me, spoke to the managers for me. They approached me and helped me feel more comfortable. Working at a small town mom and pop grocery store, I was afraid to lose my job. But it went better than I expected. I left a note by the time clock, letting the other employees know what was going on. Yeah, I still got misgendered and deadnamed, but generally it went over pretty well.

At home though, things weren't so great. My parents weren't even trying. In July, I decided it was time. I was going to make them change or make them look like dicks for not changing. I came out officially on Facebook, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. But my immediate family didn't comment. Things were weird. I slept at a lot of different places that summer. My college offered me a job in August, and I was thankful for that.

The worst was coming out to my Grammy, I was hoping my loudmouth cousin would do it for me. But she didn't. I went over there one afternoon and stopped by to talk to her and tell her the news. She cried, and said she was disappointed in me. She deadnamed me for a bit after that. It sucked, but she has come around and does great now which is very relieving.

In October 2019 I got top surgery, and that was one of the best feelings. It still is, knowing that I'm getting closer to being myself every day. Things still aren't perfect, people slip up now and again, but that's okay. Almost 3 years into my physical transition and I'm still not as far as I would have hoped to be, but I'm proud of my growth and my progress.

Breaking the Stereotype

It was only three years ago that I was living in the closet. My story begins during my junior year of high school. I knew for a while that I wasn't straight, but I wasn't completely sure of anything. I was a super masculine athlete in high school. I dated a lot of girls because that's what I thought I was supposed to do. I just didn't think at that time that I could belong to the gay community. I guess I thought that there was no one like me. I didn't have a lot of representation. I still kind of believe that there isn't a lot of LGBTQ+ representation in sports.

I wasn't sure where I fit in. I was in this position of not knowing whether I was gay, bisexual, or just not "normal." One day, I was standing in my kitchen with my sister, and she was listening to videos of this kid singing. I wasn't paying attention and then I heard her say, "I'm literally in love with him, but it's too bad that he's probably gay."

She caught my attention and I perked up. I was curious as to who she was talking about. She explained that it was a kid at our school that was super talented, but she thought he was probably gay. I ended up watching all his videos and he was very talented. I ever so subtly slid into his DMs. I also played piano and sang, so I messaged him, "Do you wanna piano and chill?"

He responded that he would love to. I got super nervous. I didn't know if I was going to hang out with this kid. I didn't know if he was actually gay.

Anyways, we set a date that we were going to hang out, let's just say it was Thursday. On Tuesday, I had my best friend over and I told her that I had something really important to tell her. For some reason, I couldn't get the words out of my mouth. I couldn't say the words, "I am gay."

She started to guess what I had to tell her. Her first guess was that I killed someone. It was a joke to lighten the mood. Then she got serious and asked if I got someone pregnant. I said no and that it was the opposite of that. She understood what I meant, and she was the first person that I came out to, but I couldn't even say the words for myself. I was so nervous and unsure of myself. We finally talked about it and I told her about the boy that I was messaging. She was super supportive and super sweet, but that was probably the hardest conversation that I ever had in my life and I barely even said anything.

Something that I didn't realize before that conversation was that you don't only come out once. Even if you come out very publicly, you're still going to have to come out over and over again throughout your life. I realized that I had to go about the business of telling all of the other important people in my life.

At that point, it didn't feel like I had taken a weight off of my shoulders. It felt like I had someone in on my secret. I decided to tell my sister next. I asked her to go on a drive with me. We went on a little drive until I asked her to pull over. Once we pulled over, I told her that I was gay. She got extremely excited because she was the only person that saw it coming. She was jumping around telling me about how she knew it. That was the moment when some weight was lifted off of my shoulders. I was already starting to feel more comfortable with the idea.

Thursday came around and I met with the boy that I was messaging. I still didn't know if he was gay. As it turned out, he was also in the closet. This meant that neither of us were comfortable enough to tell the other that we were gay because we were both in the closet. We still hung out and got to know each other. I introduced him to my friends. Soon enough we were hanging out all the time.

After my sister, the next person that I came out to was that boy and he came out to me. It was cute, but it was private so I'm not going to share exactly how that happened. It went really well, and we started dating in secret.

I wanted to tell all of my best friends, but the problem with that was that all my best friends were these very masculine, hyper-straight guys. I was extremely nervous about how that was going to go.

I came out to my friend Nathan and my dad at the same time. We were in the car and I turned the music down. I said that I had to tell them something while they were there with me. I told them that I was gay and that I had a boyfriend. My friend, Nathan, started laughing. I had to assure him that I wasn't joking. He said, "You can't be gay, you don't talk like that."

It took me off guard. I laughed. I realized in that moment how inexperienced Nathan was with all of it. He didn't have any gay friends. He had only seen gay people on TV who fit a

terrible stereotype that all gay people act one specific way. I explained to Nathan that you don't have to talk a certain way to be gay. He didn't care, he was just so foreign to the idea.

One-by-one I told all my best friends and they all had different reactions, but they were all positive. They were just all amazing people which is why they were already my friends. When people are nervous about coming out, I remind them that these people are already your friends for a reason. It's probably because they are good people, and they care about you. Your sexuality is not going to change either of those things.

Is That Possible?

I didn't know until I was 19. Being bisexual was very confusing for me. It was a confusing thing to figure out what I was because I've always been interested in men, probably a little bit over interested in my opinion. Throughout my teenage years, I never really sat down and thought that something was off for me because I did like men.

Even though I was always interested in boys, without realizing it, I was also interested in girls. I used to have this picture of Kristen Stewart on my wall. I didn't know who she was, but I saw her picture in a magazine and I cut it out and put it on my wall. Whenever my friends came over, I would show them this picture and I would talk about how beautiful Kristen Stewart was. I thought that everybody felt the same way that I did. My friends would say, "Yeah, she's pretty." I would reply, "No, she's literally so beautiful." I didn't understand that I had a thing for Kristen Stewart because on that same wall I had a picture of some guy that I had ripped out of a magazine. My friends had no problem gushing over that picture.

I'm from a small, religious town. Homosexuality was a huge topic of conversation at my church. I remember being in Youth and having them tell us over and over again how homosexuality was wrong, that it was a sin, and that it was an overall abomination. That was the first time I was ever educated that two people of the same gender being romantic together was possible.

I have this vivid memory of sitting with my mom around that time in my life and I asked her, "Mom, would you still love me if I was a lesbian?" I don't remember why I asked her that. I'll never forget what she replied, "Of course I would, but you're not, so we don't have to worry about that."

High school came around and I had my first experience with a girl, Kate, when I was in 10th grade. I was excited and I told my best friend about it. When I told her what happened, she got incredibly angry with me. She was disgusted with me, and it was awful. That's when I turned to Kate for comfort and our bond grew a lot stronger. We were in love with each other, but neither of us knew it. We didn't know that two girls could be in love.

After high school, I took a year off to travel. That's when I figured it out. I learned that you could be bisexual, and

everything started to make sense. When I got back from travelling, Kate was the first person that I came out to. We were sitting on my porch, and I said, "I think I might be bisexual."

It makes me smile to remember that because she was genuinely surprised when she shouldn't have been. That was the first positive response that I got. I needed that. I needed someone to accept me. It helped me accept myself. It took me two years after that to tell my parents. It's a scary and vulnerable thing to do. You have to be ready to do it. It took me two years to be ready, and that's okay.

Do I Have To Give Up My Dresses?

I knew that I was a lesbian at a pretty young age. I didn't acknowledge it until I was about 15. I grew up as a dancer and cheerleader. I was the definition of girly girl. In my head, I held onto the stigma that if you are a lesbian then you have to be masculine, but I didn't want to give up my make-up and dresses. This created a huge struggle for me with my identity because of my appearance. I felt as though if I were a lesbian on the inside then I had to look like a lesbian on the outside. I battled with that for a long time.

When I was in middle school, my mom would ask me if I had crushes on specific girls because of the way that I acted around them. I would ignore her questions and brush them off. I think it was because I was still trying to figure everything out. It didn't make sense to me because I didn't know any lesbians that were girly.

When I got to high school, I started going to parties. I made out with a lot of girls at the parties. I came home from school one day and my mom had my laptop out on the kitchen table with photos pulled up. They were my private pictures of me kissing other girls at parties. I was freaking out and yelling at her for going through my laptop. Her concern was that I was at parties when I was supposed to be having sleepovers with my friends. She grounded me for going to the parties. It was honestly relieving that I didn't have to admit anything yet. I was happy that she didn't get mad at me for making out with girls, but it was also strange to me.

A year went by and I went to another party. I was kissing a girl who wasn't sure how she identified, but I knew that she kind of felt the same way that I did. She ended up being my first girlfriend. It was actually a girl that my mom had questioned me about in middle school. My mom was always a step ahead of me.

I didn't want to come out to anybody in high school. I was captain of the cheer team and captain of the dance team and I didn't want anybody to treat me differently. I wasn't ready. It was after my senior year that I publicly came out on social media.

There were people that were mean to me on social media, but I blocked them. My mom came into my room and laid next to me. She asked, "Honey, are you and this girl dating?"

I started to hysterically laugh and cry. She hugged me and said, "I knew it. I love you. That's okay. I accept you."

I was shocked. I didn't even have to tell her, she just knew. I begged her not to tell my dad. I thought I was going to get in trouble if he found out because my dad was very strict. Of course, she ignored my wishes and told my dad because that's what moms do. My dad took me out to lunch, and he was surprisingly okay with it. He said, "I don't care. As long as you're happy and they treat you well."

At that point, all my mom's Facebook friends knew that I was gay. It was super cute that my mom was proud to post about it. I feel lucky to have such a positive coming out story because I know a lot of people that don't. I had so much support before I supported myself. Sometimes I feel guilty about it because I know how much other people have had to go through.