



First Person

When I Was a Boy

As a kid, the writer reveled in her androgyny. But when puberty threatened to declare a gender for her, she became mired in an identity crisis—until a stranger liberated her with a single word.

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Written by
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Even though it's been 20 years, I still have a strong memory of the knot that formed in my hair when I was 9. It was during the summer, and that knot hung down the middle of my back, and looked to me like a wasp's nest, a tornado, something small and curled-up and defiant. I didn't want it anymore.

Things were starting to change for me, and I was deeply unsettled. Tiny points had formed on my chest, and I was horrified and surprised, as though I'd thought I was somehow exempt from standard pre-adolescent development. The discovery of my impending breasts was a blow, but not nearly as big as losing my mother barely a year earlier. Grief was a constant ache then, and what made it worse was the melodramatic pity foisted upon me by others who saw me as a tragic figure—that poor child. Being me was a raw fucking deal all around. Yet there was something cooking inside me alongside the dreaded breasts: the antithesis to the dreaded breasts. I hadn't been able to articulate it, and it came to me in stages. Maybe it made more sense to be that than become what my body was attempting to form, the version of me I hadn't consented to. Maybe it would help wipe out all the wet-eyed looks and whispers, eliminate the head-petting and crying and gawking.

My father made an appointment for me at a tiny hair salon in the center town, a small community that was our home for the summers. The salon was a far cry from the one my mother used to take me in New York, where the proprietress took what felt like hours to give me a trim and spoke to me in a curt Caribbean accent when I squirmed under her scissors. But at the Hair Studio in rural Connecticut, a middle-aged mom snipped my ponytail into a neat, short, utilitarian 'do. This was decades before the pixie cut. Willow Smith with her Mohawk and side-shave was but a twinkle in her parents' eye. No, I got the same style as any other curly-headed fourth-grade boy. Which, starting that summer, I had become.

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me. I was a tall, burly kid and wore a baseball cap low over my eyes, but the ponytail was the giveaway. Still, there were those moments, the ones where strangers—adults—paused in my wake, unsure. Hanging in between girl and boy made 9-year-old me inexplicably nervous. I didn't want anyone to find out—find out what, I could not quite determine.

Being a boy could be scary, I soon discovered. This became clearest to me in Caleb's* front yard, where the grass had grown almost as tall as our heads. Caleb was a new friend, a freckled kid with a pointy, serious face. It was hot that afternoon, and we stood side by side, hidden from view by the sun-scorched brush. Caleb was telling me a story, as I remember it, though the details are murky now, but one section of it stands out. Caleb had met someone—maybe an adult, maybe a kid—and viciously attacked him. "I had a bat," Caleb said. We'd started to walk along the perimeter of the yard, and Caleb was trying to sound nonchalant. "A wooden bat. And I hit him on the head. He fell over and I hit him again. There was blood on my bat, and I hit him, and hit him." He glanced up at me, a weird little grin on his face. "I could hit anybody, Felix," he said. "I have a bat in case someone comes after me."

Even after Caleb switched topics, I couldn't stop thinking about what he'd said. The only bats I had I used exclusively for baseball or, if I was bored, smacking rocks down the driveway. Caleb's bloody tale didn't impress me. Even though I highly suspected he'd made it all up, the merciless violence was frightening. But I kept this to myself, following Caleb into the house for a drink of water, our faces both flushed from the heat. I never returned to his house again.

Boyhood also came with a new set of unspoken rules. People took note of every tear I shed, every wuss-out I negotiated, and every time I let my guard down. If I hesitated, even a little, to jump off the high dock or swing at a fastball or chime in with the next verse of "the Diarrhea Song" ("Some people think it's funny, but it's really wet and runny")—a favorite that summer—I stood out. Kids learn quickly, even with a nine-year delay. Boys were measured, turned over, and checked for "signs." Many signs, I think, contradictory signs: timidity and roughness; sensitivity and emotionlessness; hyperactivity and lethargy. Doing the right thing was sometimes as wrong as doing what was, ostensibly, more wrong in the first place.

Entering a boy's life was easy. No one questioned my belonging as I stood in my ball cap and cargo shorts. The sizable amount of anger I carried around with me helped code me as male, I realize now. Those summer months in Connecticut afforded me a certain freedom as I traded rookie cards with my friends, swam happily in trunks and a t-shirt, and used the men's restroom (if it had a single stall and my father could guard the door). Dad cut the tiny hint of a ruffle off of my underpants, and bought me a few packs of boxers to wear under my shorts. It was heaven.

But the season lasted only so long. School inevitably started, and with it came a slew of challenges I hadn't the foresight to expect. My teachers were concerned, my classmates and friends baffled—and sometimes hostile. "I am mad," I wrote, just after my 10th birthday six months later. "Tony [a boy in my class] has this new thing going on. "You don't have proof you're a boy," he says. In recess, he was clearly talking to Allison, a snob of the class, because Allison came up to our teacher, and said: "Why did Tony say you don't have proof that she's a boy?"

At first I didn't know who Allison was talking about. Then she said: "Why does she have the name —" and then she said my other name, [Rosa]. I was mad by then, but didn't do anything. Then Allison told me I looked like a girl, so I pulled down the brim of my baseball cap over my head." The connotations of the word proof in this case escaped me as a child; as an adult, I can't help but wonder what Tony meant. Was it the innocent query of a confused kid, or was I lucky to have escaped having my pants pulled down? Being a boy didn't work so well if no one believed you.

Out in the wider world, it was much simpler to slip back into boyhood; in fact, it happened by default. But it wasn't always comfortable, I found. Over the winter break



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year-old in stride. When she excused herself momentarily, one of her male companions smiled at me in approval, then turned to his friend. “He’s a young Casanova!” he said, patting me on the shoulder, and my stomach sank to the floor. I felt exposed and uneasy. Even as a boy, it made me cringe. I’m only 9, I thought.

I longed for summer all that year, but when it came around again, country boyhood was not as easy the second time. I still couldn’t avoid the questions: “Why do you look like a boy? Why do you think you’re a boy? Why do you want to be a boy?” and began to shut them out. “[An old family friend] says I am denying my girlhood,” I wrote in June of 1994. I was 10. “She thinks I’m trying not to be a girl—which is true—but, as she mentioned, I respond to the other name when addressed by close friends. And the pronoun ‘she.’ I just want unisex pronouns. I have to stand up for my rights. Show them I can be what I want.”

Turns out, I had more conviction at 10 than I could muster as a young adult. Somewhere along the way, I changed back to my given name. Photos of me at the time show an androgynous teenager with blond curls and an expression that ranged from wistful to surly. When I entered high school not long after, I said nothing about the Felix years. That was another person in the distant past, I told myself. Something had been wrong with me, but I’d fixed it, and that’s what I thought, for a very, very long time.

The first time I heard the term “genderqueer,” I was 19, riding a bus headed to Boston from New York. I was seated across from a guy about my age, a redheaded fellow reading a book. We smiled at each other once or twice, a young-person-in-transit greeting. At some point during the ride, he leaned across the aisle. “Excuse me,” he said, pitching his voice just above a whisper. “I hope you don’t mind my asking, but are you genderqueer?”

I had absolutely no idea what he meant, and so the fellow explained: “Someone who is genderqueer identifies as being on a spectrum between male and female, as both male and female, or as neither one,” he said. His name was Seth*, and he was dating someone who used the word genderqueer to describe themselves, but neither of them knew many other people who did so. “No, sorry,” I said. “That’s not me.”

I didn’t tell Seth about the time I’d spent as Felix. In fact, it took me many more years to open up about it. I had to shed the shame I carried for so long, but once I ditched most of it, the story came pouring out. New information surfaced, too; a former teacher, having run into my parents at an art event, told my father and stepmother that the principal of my private elementary school had forbidden all staff from addressing me as Felix – going against the wishes of my family. Hearing this, I remembered the sadness in the eyes of certain teachers when they told me they had to call me Rosa, the resigned flatness in their voices I’d found so odd, and finally understood.

These days, I’m thankful for my girl-boyhood and all the complexities that came with it. The photos of me from the Felix years, instead of sending me into a tailspin of depression, now fill me with a bittersweet pride. It was a tough thing to do, to stick to my guns and advocate for myself at only nine and ten years old. Hell, I was better at it then than I am now, that’s for sure. As far as gender goes, Seth was pretty much right on the money: currently I sit somewhere on the line between male and female, preferring to use the descriptor “gender-fluid” rather than “genderqueer.” To date, I have stuck with standard female pronouns for the ease of it if nothing else.

I will I never forget—nor deny—that part of myself ever again. To seal the deal, I recently attached my house keys to a keyring given to me by my stepmom ages ago. It’s a miniature Toronto Blue Jays vanity license plate with F-E-L-I-X embossed across it in red letters. I like having it there, right next to the keys that unlock my front door. It’s taken a lot of work, but finally, at least a little bit, I can really come home - to my apartment, sure, but also to myself, whomever and whatever that person may be.

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