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hurricane ethel

(late summer, 1968)

I was born in 1958, on June 22nd, the second day of summer. It was also the birthday of Kris Kristofferson and Meryl Streep, both of whom I later resembled, although not at the same time. One day when I was about three, I was sitting in a pool of sunlight cast onto the wooden floor beneath my mother's ironing board. She was watching *Art Linkletter's House Party* on TV. I saw her ironing my father's white shirt—a sprinkle of water from her blue plastic bottle, a short spurt of steam as it sizzled beneath the iron. "Some day you'll wear shirts like this," said Mom.

I just listened to her strange words, as if they were a language other than English. I didn't understand what she was getting at. *She* never wore shirts like that. Why would I ever be wearing shirts like my *fathers*?

Since then, the awareness that I was in the wrong body, living the wrong life, was never out of my conscious mind—*never*, although my understanding of what it meant to be a boy, or a girl, was something that changed over time. Still, this conviction was present during my piano lesson with Mr. Hockenberry and it was there when my father and I shot off model rockets and it was there years later when I took the SAT and it was there in the middle of the night when I

woke in my dormitory at Wesleyan. And at every moment as I lived my life I countered this awareness with an exasperated companion-thought, namely, Don't be an *idiot*. You're NOT a girl. Get over it.

But I never got over it.

Our house had been built in the middle of a tract of land that had been a failed Quaker settlement in the 1800s. In the 1960s the remains of the cobblestone road threaded through the thick forest, connecting the ruins of five or six stone houses. Most of the old mansions were missing their roofs. Trees grew through the living room floors. In the center of the forest—which was known as *Earl's Woods*—was the elaborate, destroyed mansion of Pennsylvania's former governor. The mansion, which had been gutted by fire, still had a lot of its old furniture in it. The burned-out house stood on the banks of a lake where sometimes I went fishing by myself. I had mixed feelings about fishing there, though, in spite of the giant brook trout that occasionally jumped out of the water and made a splash that echoed in the woods like a gunshot. It was scary, sitting there by the lake, the burned house on the bank behind me. I felt like I was being watched.

Sometimes I played a game in the woods called *Girl Planet*. In it, I was an astronaut who had crashed on an uninhabited world. There was a large fallen tree I used as the crashed-and-destroyed-rocket. The thing was, though, that anybody who breathed the air on this planet turned into a girl. There was nothing you could do about it, it just happened. My clothes turned into a girl's clothes too, which should give an indication of exactly how powerful the atmosphere was. *It changed your clothes!* Once female, I walked through the cobblestone woods, past the abandoned houses, until I arrived at Governor

Earles' mansion, which I started to try to fix up. It took years, but eventually I had a nice little place put together. By the time astronauts from Earth came to rescue me, I had grown into a mature woman, a college professor, occasionally playing piano in blues bands, kissing my children goodnight as they lay asleep in their beds. My rescuers would say, "We're looking for James Finney Boylan, the novelist. We found his rocket all smashed up back there in the woods. Do you know where he is, ma'am?"

"I'm sorry," I said. "He's gone now."

I did not know the word *transsexual* back then, and the word *transgendered* had not yet been invented. I had heard the word *transvestite*, of course, but it didn't seem to apply to me. It sounded kind of creepy, like some kind of centipede or grub. In my mind I sometimes confused it with the words that described cave formations: What was it again--*transves-tites* grew down from the top of the cave; *transves-mites* grew up from the bottom?

But even if I had known the right definitions for these words, I am not sure it would have made much difference to me. Even now, a discussion of transgendered people frequently resembles nothing so much as a conversation about *aliens*. Do you think there really *are* transgendered people? Has the government known about them for years, and is keeping the whole business secret? Where do they come from, and what do they want? Have they been secretly living among us for years?

Although my understanding of exactly how much trouble I was in grew more specific over time, as a child I surely knew enough about my condition to know it was something I'd better keep private. By intuition I was certain that the thing I knew to be true was something others would find both impossible

and hilarious. My conviction, by the way, had nothing to do with a desire to be *feminine*; but it had everything to do with being *female*. Which is an odd belief, for a person born male. It certainly had nothing to do with whether I was attracted to girls or boys. This last point was the one that, years later, would most frequently elude people, including the overeducated smarty-pants that constituted much of my inner circle. But being gay or lesbian is about sexual orientation. Being transgendered is about identity.

What it's emphatically *not* is a "lifestyle," any more than being male or female is a lifestyle. When I imagine a person with a *lifestyle*, I see a millionaire playboy named Chip who likes to race yachts to Bimini, or an accountant, perhaps, who dresses up in a suit of armor on the weekends.

Being transgendered isn't like that. Gender is many things, but one thing it is surely not is a *hobby*. Being female is not something you do because it's clever, or postmodern, or because you're a deluded, deranged narcissist.

In the end, what is, more than anything else, is a *fact*. It is the dilemma of the transsexual, though, that it is a fact that cannot possibly be understood without imagination.

After I grew up and became female, people would often ask me—how did you *know*, when you were a child? How is it possible that you could believe, with such heartbroken conviction, something which, on the surface of it, seems so stupid? This question always baffled me, as I could hardly imagine what it was like *not* to know what your gender was. It seemed obvious to me that this was something you understood intuitively, not on the basis of what was between your legs, but because of what you felt in your heart. Remember when you woke

up this morning--I'd say to my female friends—and you knew you were female? *That's* how I felt. *That's* how I knew.

Of course knowing with such absolute certainty something that appeared to be both absurd and untrue made me, as we said in Pennsylvania, kind of *mental*. It was an absurdity I carried everywhere, a crushing burden, which was, simultaneously, invisible. Trying to make the best of things, trying to *snap out of it*, didn't help either. As time went on, that burden only grew heavier, and heavier, and heavier.

The first time I remember trying to come up with some sort of solution to the *being-alive-problem* was about 1968, when I was staying in a summer house in Surf City, New Jersey. A hurricane was blowing up. My parents were away, watching my sister ride horses, and I was being tended by my dipsomaniac grandmother, Gammie, and her friend, Hilda Watson, a tiny woman from North Yorkshire who was as deaf as a blacksmith's anvil. Since it was nearly impossible for Hilda to hear even the loudest sounds, most of the time she sat in a chair wearing a startled expression; when she was aware she was being spoken to she made a soft whooping noise, similar to the squeals of a guinea pig. My eccentric Aunt Nora was there too, who liked to make sock puppets as a gesture of love. One time she made me, out of one of my father's black socks, an octopus with a mustache and a red top hat.

On the day the hurricane hit, I had taken a walk underneath the boardwalk. It was as close to infinity as I could imagine under there, the row of pylons and boardwalk stretching as far as I could see. All around me were the echoes of the ocean and the howling wind and the seagulls and the rain, the smells of creosote and tar.

I was “taking a big walk.” On the *big walk* I was going to try to *solve* whatever it was that was wrong with me. I walked down the dark tunnel of the place-beneath-the-boardwalk trying to figure out what the deal was with being alive. I knew I wasn’t a girl—by then it was clear that girls and I were different. And yet, clearly enough, I wasn’t a boy either. What was I? What was going to happen to me if I didn’t stop wanting to be a girl all the time?

That afternoon under the boardwalk, as the hurricane blew up, I tried to think about what I could do to solve the problem. This whole wanting-to-be-a-girl-all-the-time business was eating up a lot of my time. But what could a person do, if she wanted something impossible?

I got as far as a fishing pier and I left the tunnel of the below-the-boardwalk place and I climbed out on the jetty next to the pier. Waves were already crashing up angrily against the rocks, and rain was starting to fall. The wind whipped my hair around. I sat on the furthest rock and looked out at the sea and watched the ocean for a long time.

And then, I thought, *Maybe you could be cured by love.*

Even *then* I think I was aware of how corny this sounded. Still, I believed it to be true. If I were loved deeply enough by others, perhaps I would be content to stay a boy.

I walked back to the apartment with this newfound awareness surrounding me like a caul. I would start with my grandmother. I opened the door to find Gammie and Mrs. Watson playing gin, and drinking vodka. Gammie was describing the night of my father’s conception. “Best screwin’ I ever had!” she shouted. I stared at her.

“What’s with you?” Gammie said.

“Nothing,” I said. Mrs. Watson was listening to the Zombies on the AM radio.

Well, it's too late to say you're sorry/ How would I know, why should I care?

It was odd that Mrs. Watson—or any of these women—would be listening to the Zombies, as they were all classical music fans.

“Why is Hilda listening to WFIL?” I asked, curious.

“Sssh,” said Gammie. “She thinks it’s classical.”

The disc jockey, Jerry Blavettt—“the Geeter with the Heater” broke in. Surf City was being evacuated. Everyone was encouraged to get in their cars and head for higher ground. The hurricane would arrive by nightfall.

“We have to leave here,” Aunt Nora said.

“What?” said Gammie.

“They’re evacuating the island,” my aunt repeated.

“Oh, are you going to fall for *that*?” said Gammie. “Nora, *you* are like a scared *chicken!*”

“They say we’re in danger,” Aunt Nora said.

“Oh, shut *up*, Nora,” said Gammie. Outside the wind howled against the window panes.

“Whoop? Whoop? Whoop?” said Mrs. Watson and adjusted her hearing aids, which suddenly blasted with feedback. She looked like she’d just received an electric shock.

“Nora says we should LEAVE. Like SCARED CHICKENS.”

“We aren’t leaving?” Aunt Nora said, disappointed.

“Cluck cluck cluck,” said Gammie.

I just stood there, looking at my grandmother. I liked her enormous gaudy earrings, and wondered how old I'd have to be before my parents would allow me to get my ears pierced. Then I remembered. I wasn't going to be thinking that way anymore.

"What's with you?" said Gammie.

"Nothing," I said, and went to my room.

I had brought with me to the seashore a magic kit I had been given for my birthday. I sat crosslegged on the wooden floor and messed with it. There were all sorts of tricks to learn. There was the Disappearing Egg. Card tricks. A set of sponges that traveled through plastic cups.

I sat there for an hour or so trying to get the Disappearing Egg to disappear. It seemed easy enough. You put the egg in the holder, then you covered it with the lid, said a few magic words, and lifted the top. With the proper amount of pressure, the egg would adhere to the ovoid lid and become hidden in its depths.

But I couldn't get the egg to cooperate. I broke the first one I tried, and had to go out to the kitchen and get the carton of eggs out of the refrigerator, as well as paper towels to clean up the mess. I had to move stealthily in order not to be seen by Gammie, who, if she saw me stealing eggs, would insist that I come over and sit on her lap, where she would pinch my cheek and announce that I was "Gammie's little Apple."

I struggled with the disappearing egg for a long time. The problem was that the egg wouldn't stick to the lid; it kept falling out and smashing on the floor, calling the credence of its disappearance into question. I tried lining the lid

of the chamber with adhesive tape, in order to make it stick, but this didn't work either.

For a while I wondered if the problem was my magic words. I'd been using "Abracadabra." The instruction manual invited the apprentice sorcerer to make up one's own magic words, so I tried the trick with a variety of alternatives as well: Presto Change-o. Voila. And so on. I even tried being imperious with it. I COMMAND YOU TO DISAPPEAR.

But it didn't disappear.

By ten o'clock that night the wind was screaming outside. Rain hammered against the window. I lay on my back in bed. Gammie had forgotten dinner, which was fine with me, since when she did remember it would unquestionably be a big potful of chicken a la king. She loved to make chicken a la king, made it every time she babysat me. Since her full name was Ethel King Redding, I assumed they'd named it after her.

Gammie, Hilda, and Aunt Nora were out in the living room having this discussion:

Gammie: Hilda, do you know where you'd GET--- (*inhale, pause, exhale*--) --if you went—directly—EAST—from Surf City?

Mrs. Watson: Whoop? Whoop? Whoop?

Gammie: EAST!

Aunt Nora: I think we should leave. I think we're in danger!

Gammie: If you went EAST from Surf City, Hilda! Where do you think you'd get?

Mrs. Watson : Hm. Whoop? Mm. England? Whoop? Is it England you'd get to?

Gammie: SPAIN!
Mrs. Watson : Oh, no, I don't think it would be—
Gammie: SPAIN!
Mrs. Watson: Portugal? Perhaps Portugal? Whoop?
Gammie: SPAIN! That is where you would wind up. SPAIN!

I came out of my room and stood by the card table.

Aunt Nora said, "I think we should leave. I'm afraid!"

Gammie looked at her and rolled her eyes. "Don't listen to her, Jimmy.

She's just a chicken. A SCARED CHICKEN! *Cluck cluck cluck.*"

"I think we should leave too," I said.

"Oh, nonsense."

"I do," I said.

"If you think I'm driving back to Philadelphia in this pouring—"

Aunt Nora took a look at me. She saw something.

"I'll drive," she said.

"Oh you will not," Gammie said. "Don't be an imbecile."

"Whoop?" said Hilda.

"We're going to pack up and head home," Aunt Nora shouted at Mrs. Watson. Mrs. Watson adjusted her hearing aids. They squelched. "There's a hurricane."

Mrs. Watson nodded. "Entirely sensible," she said.

"You all go," said Gammie. "I'm staying here."

"We're all *going*," said Aunt Nora. "Either you go, or you die," she said.

For a long moment, Aunt Nora and Gammie stared at each other.

“Jimmy,” Gammie said at last. “Go get the vodka.”

Years later, Gammie announced that when she died, she wanted to be a cadaver. She donated her body to Jefferson Medical School. “When you’re dead, you’re dead,” she explained. She talked her friend Hilda into being a cadaver, too. It was something they did together. At the time, I was horrified by this, by the idea of my grandmother’s corpse being the private concern of a first-year medical student in Philadelphia, opening her up and holding her liver and her heart in his hands. Did he know, as he examined her innards, that this had been someone’s Gammie, someone who once danced on top of pianos, whose first husband nicknamed her “Stardust?”

Now I’m less bothered by all this, though. Maybe she’s right, when you’re dead, you’re dead. I don’t know.

I looked out the back of Gammie’s Dodge Seneca as Aunt Nora drove us out into the storm. The boardwalk was visible as a dark shadow against the threatening sea.

“You’re Gammie’s little apple,” Gammie said from the seat next to me, and pinched my cheek. The windshield wipers slapped against the storm. I looked at my grandmother’s earrings, and at Mrs. Waton’s wedding ring. Thirty-three years later, after I became a woman, my mother gave me Mrs. Watson’s ring. Hilda and Gammie had been dead for thirteen years at that point. The ring has two big diamonds and eight little ones.

“Whoop? Whoop? Whoop?”

Aunt Nora looked at me in her rear view mirror. “It’s all right, Jimmy,” she said. “We’re going to be safe now.”