

Growing Up Transgender & Lebanese in West Virginia

I only knew of one Transgender person in our town. She was a mentally ill woman that everyone called Miss Elizabeth. She would stomp around downtown by our church, her purse flying in the air like the constant shouts coming from her mouth.

Her lips were abundantly covered with pink lipstick that colored outside of her lines. Her flowing dresses looked cheap and dethreaded. She was the laughing stock of the town. And although I knew that I was her, I told myself that I never wanted to be her. I told myself to suck it up. That expressing the true me would also ruin me.

Every time I was forced to go to church, I would look for her by the bus stop outside of Saint George's where she hung out with all of the other outcasts of downtown Charleston. I hated Saint George's. I had listened to sermons that were against gay people, saying we were going to burn in a fiery Hell with Satan himself. So I started drawing pictures of the old Lebanese ladies instead. I got lost in their hoods, canes, droops, and wrinkles and I wore the same look every week, a lint covered dark blue velvet skirt and wet down bangs that my cousin made fun of me for; another failed attempt at femininity. I was so pissed I took my hairbrush and used it to stab a hole into the wall.

I was expected to attend church every Sunday while my Grandfather, Jiddee, was still on Earth. His mother, my Great-Grandmother, Lucy, had

immigrated to America from Lebanon with twelve kids. Lucy then went to West Virginia and worked as a peddler in a small hillbilly coal mining town. My Jiddee, Paul, was the youngest of eleven girls and the first to attend college. His older sisters, my Great-Aunts, were all a unique variety of characters and I watched them all die away with their culture one by one.

Annie and Lou lived together in a small house down the street from us and yelled at each other a lot. They cooked traditional Lebanese dishes and always had the TV on, blaring loud. We liked to ask Lou about her missing boyfriend and she told us that he was in jail.

Hunched over on their toilet one day, I looked down into my underwear to see the faint, dark blood of my first period. I stuffed a giant wad of toilet paper in my pants and pretended like the whole thing had never happened. Yet still it was in the back of my mind the whole time I sat in their living room watching Jeopardy and eating old people candy.

I ignored the period for as long as I could until I couldn't anymore because I didn't know how to properly deal with it. I caved in and told my mother so I could stop ruining all of my underwear. She was so happy that I was "*finally a woman*". She wanted to have a party and the idea horrified me. I had my own celebration, wallowing in self-pity, eating a whole pint of Baskin Robbins' mint chocolate chip ice cream and staying home from school the entire week.

We had family dinners out at Bob Evans Restaurant on MacCorkle Avenue next to the railroad tracks. The Lebanese table of 20 to everyone else's 4. Chunky, beer binging, trucker hat wearing men with their bible toting wives and children, all staring at us while they ate. And when Annie and Lou finished their American meal of mashed potatoes n gravy, corn, cornbread, and some slab of dark meat, they would say, "ANTA-FUH-HED!", which meant something to the extent of, "I am full" in Arabic.

My eleven cousins and I would shriek and shriek, begging them to say it again, because what we and the Appalachian people heard was, "FUCK IT!" Our parents darted their heads around to see who was watching our carnival even though when we got back home we would be making fun of them too for their backwoods ways.

Lou ended up with severe Alzheimer's disease in an old people's home. Her unit was locked in a hallway, the door to the outside kept bolted with a security code for the nurses. She thought I was Joe Johnson, her long lost lover. With her little feet shuffling her walker on the carpeted floor, she cornered me against the padlocked door.

"Joe," she sweetly called, her eyes wide, "that's my pretty boy."

The whole family awkwardly laughed as I tried to escape her vision. A couple years later I watched her brain and sagging skin melt into the mattress, turning to a gray, confused soup.

Shortly after Lou's death and getting my period, my expectations of an adolescence full of girlfriends and skateboards were shattered to pieces when my parents handed me over bras and bought me a whole new wardrobe of girl clothes. I have no recollection of shopping for bras, panties, skirts, or any other girly item of clothing. The white sports bras had just magically appeared in my drawers. Where did the boy clothes go?

The first day back from Christmas break I decided to wear my new Easter egg purple hoodie from The Gap. Out of all the girl clothes I owned, this was my favorite item in my wardrobe because it was oversized and hid my budding tits. All of the students had to write on a piece of paper our favorite thing we had gotten for Christmas that year and then the other students had to guess who got what.

The question was terrifying to me because I had asked and received things that were for "boys". I looked down at my favorite sweater and grudgingly wrote down "clothes" on the paper. But I was so nervous I spelled it, "cloths". When the teacher read my answer out loud, all of the kids laughed.

With my red face and my stomach shaking, I muttered, "I meant to write clothes."

"Did you get that sweater for Christmas?" she asked with a sweet smile.
Bullshit.

“Yes,” I replied back as some idiot kid in the back of the classroom yelled, “GAP! Gay And Proud!”

The crowd roared with laughter and it made me more hyper aware of the Maxi Pad that I had stuffed in my long sock that ran up the side of my leg. I knew at some point during the day I would need to ask for the bathroom key so that I could change it, but I also didn't want to cause any more attention to myself. My mind flooded with fear and humiliation. I sat at my desk all day without getting up, just in case the blood went through my pants.

Menstruation was ruining my life and I refused to wear tampons because to me it meant acknowledging my vagina. And now that I was a “girl”, the popular girls in the neighborhood took an interest in me. They took me down into their basement and told me to say, “Shit.” and “Fuck.” because they thought it was so cute when I did that.

We were getting ready for the Middle School dance and they applied slippery pink gel onto my lips and turned me into a pre-pubescent clown. I licked off all of the gel before the dance because it tasted like candy. They told me I needed to get a boyfriend and they wondered why I didn't have one if I was so pretty. They sold me to the captain of the basketball team and I said nothing during the transaction.

My new boyfriend's family went to my church, they were Lebanese too. That Sunday, I sat across from him at Sunday School disgusted. I stared at the

white eruptions of his volcanic pimples and I couldn't imagine kissing something so greasy. I walked out of the room without even acknowledging him and broke up with him over a passed note in class the next day. I began to wear gender neutral clothing again, and if someone gave me makeup, I would eat it.