

Somehow, I feel more lonely now than I did before I figured it all out.

Looking back now, I don't know how I or anyone else didn't see it coming. In retrospect, everything makes perfect sense. The days that I realized felt like I had found an answer to a question I had been asking my entire life, a missing puzzle piece finally falling into place. That doesn't mean the journey to these realizations, or even after the fact, was ever simple or easy. I did research, desperate to see if what I was feeling was what I thought it was. I had stages of denial and acceptance, and debated on whether or not I should share it. Because even though it was really only understanding the core aspects of my being, I was scared of the changes in how other people saw me. What they thought. What they would do. I've heard enough horror stories about what happens to people like me. And to top it all off, I've fallen into two distinct categories, both of which seem to break some people's minds when I tell them.

"Are you a boy or a girl?"

I wish people would ask me that, just so I could tell them I'm neither. I crave androgyny- I want so badly for this body to be free of the box society has built. But the person, unbound by the roles of man or woman, is hidden away, shoved behind a closed door too often. All it takes is a few words, and it's clawing at that door. A pair of innocent pronouns, a name my parents picked out so happily that doesn't fit, or what might have begun as a complement but only serves to sting me. But I'm a coward, and so I simply bite my tongue and force a bitter smile, a tense thanks, and try to quiet the screaming inside my brain that it's *wrong, wrong, wrong*. It got to a point where I couldn't take it anymore, and I told a few people. If I'm asked, I've started to tell the truth. And it feels amazing.

My mother tells me I should just accept my body. That no matter what, I can't change it, or people's perception of it. That I should "be who I am", even though she doesn't actually know anything about me. She still tries to tell me that certain clothes would look good on me, even though I've told her time and time again how those make me feel. All I want is for the outside to match the inside, to not feel trapped by the way others force me to be something I'm not. If I could just carry around a giant neon sign with flashing lights, telling the world I'm not a boy, or a girl, I'm just *me*. Not confined to the binaries we have created for ourselves. Even as a young child, I rejected the cookie-cutter templates laid before me. Boys like blue, girls like pink. Boys wear long uniform pants, the girls get plaid skirts and dresses. How cute-and how mortified I felt without reason when I was a mere eight years old. I pushed back against the guidance of adults in my life. I said that I hated things distinctly feminine or masculine. I played with kids of the opposite gender. The only one, for a while, until a few others began to join me. When we split into girls vs. boys for teams, I longed to go to the other side, or for there to be mixed teams, because I didn't feel like part of the group I was told to stand with. Years after those recess basketball games, I still feel the same.

I've come to terms with the fact that I don't have to live by binaries. I can like colors just because I like the damn colors, not because I'm supposed to. Wearing a dress or a suit just because I think I look good in it. Part of accepting and convincing myself has made things a little easier, at least from my perspective. I can just look how I want, because that is how I look nonbinary. I could dress completely masculine-and I'd still be nonbinary. It just happens that I love androgenous fashion the

most. It matches who I am-but I must also admit that a part of me feels the need to dress this way in order to convince other people of it without having to scream to the rooftops that I use they/them pronouns. As I walked through crowds, what once was a smile became a grimace. Arms crossed over my chest, feeling as though my hair was strangling me. Because I knew that other people were 'nt seeing the person I am when I'm dreaming, in the same way that someone who has become paralyzed can run inside their dreams.

I wish I could love who I wanted to love without fear. Of being ostracized or told to repent to some god who I don't even believe in. I wish I didn't somehow feel both compulsive heterosexuality or compulsive homosexuality and that I could just exist without the burden of the scorn of "normal" constantly screaming at me. I want to push past that. Live my life without simultaneously trying to fit in and express myself without being terrified all the time. My identity is one that I can't even define for myself; what gives other people the right to put me in a box? And while it's nice to feel like part of a niche in this community of beautiful, colorful people, I can't help but hate the fact that I have to label myself. Why can't I just simply exist, loving people without caring about their gender or orientation, without other people questioning me? Why, after admitting to myself that the straightest thing in my body is my decidedly crooked teeth, do I still hate the fact that I like girls, boys, and everything in between? Years of being told who I was supposed to marry has dug its claws into my back, making it hard to breathe sometimes. I thought that coming out was the scary part-that the weight that had been crushing my shoulders, the need to be open eating away at my insides, would all disappear after. I came out as pansexual first, then nonbinary. And to anyone reading this, it doesn't mean I'm attracted to kitchenware-all it means is that I don't care how you identify. Girl, boy, genderfluid, agender-it doesn't matter to me. But it doesn't change the fact that I'm still chained down by my shame, coming from years of religious schooling and a place I felt put a gag in my mouth.

In this day and age, acceptance is spreading. There are places for people like me, supportive systems to keep from drowning into those deep, dark waters that so many others have fallen victim to. But really-who is there to actually lift me onto land, or give me dry clothes and a blanket to warm myself? A guard-rail to keep me from falling in in the first place? The truth is, while most of the people I'm surrounded by are accepting and advocates, there's a crushing fear that holds a vice around my neck, keeping me from exploring what my being hungers for. There are people who use my correct pronouns, some who even use my preferred name. But if there's anything this world has taught me in recent months, years even, it's that ugly can be hidden well. That there are people who hate me without even knowing me, just because I go against what they think the world is structured by, and that the small pockets of community that I've found are rare and hard to find. So at the end of the day, all I feel is alone.