

WIG IN A BOX

A chapter from SINGLE PLAYER CO-OP

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COLOPHON

Wig in a Box is a publication of FREE PLAY Publishing, an independent publishing label. Set in Georgia and Helvetica. Designed and edited in Chicago.

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Excerpted from *Single Player Co-Op*, a memoir.

Set in Georgia, Helvetica, and Menlo. Designed for screen and trade format.

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Wig in a Box

by Austen Tucker



Put on some makeup
Turn on the eight-track
I'm pulling the wig down from the shelf
Suddenly I'm this punk rock star of stage and screen
And I ain't never
I'm never turning back!

Twì, 2024

One of the most annoying parts of our DID is also one of the more bizarre: we will rabidly deny we have the disorder.

Our system will twist itself into mental pretzels trying to doubt the existence of alters within the body. We spent the better part of a year trying to argue ourselves out of being a system, each of us choosing different arguments to make the case that this was something else—schizophrenia, bipolar, *anything* but DID.

Because our system worked best when it was hidden. It kept us alive when the worst things happened because nobody knew we were a lot of people in a single head. Our brain's not exactly pining to let go of its defense mechanism so easily. So each of us would step up to the plate, make our case for why we couldn't possibly exist as a "we," and then fight it out in hours-long conversations that dragged into the night.

Again, these conversations were about how we *couldn't* possibly *have alters*. This disorder, man.

Addie, 2024

“Goddamn it, I told you all that I wasn’t writing a trans memoir.”

The words echoed around the arcade inside. Not one single alter responded, of course. None of us particularly enjoyed being back in the aughts. It was a rough time and we put in so, so much work to delete the memory from our history. But I guess Twi wants to touch on it, so I’m stuck writing about it.

The year 2009 was, without a doubt, the worst year of my life. The cruelty of this year transformed me body and soul. My old life fell completely apart, and from its ashes I built who I am today.

...And I guess it’s the first year Tally and I truly saw each other, so that’s worth a chapter at least.

Zoe, 1988

I found out the difference between boys and girls when I was four years old and I didn't have a word big enough to describe how much I hated being on the wrong side. I tried trepidatious (my mom likes it) but that's not quite it. Dead? No. I wasn't really dead so that didn't work either. But... uh, what's the feeling you get when you get in trouble but it's not your fault and you know you're gonna have to take someone else's punishment?

Well, like that times a thousand for little me.

The first day of preschool I got to have recess with all my new friends. It was the 80s then: the playground was full of metal jungle gyms, a small dirt pit with a basketball hoop, and some toys piled near the shed which housed them. I tried to join the girls on the swings. I didn't know why but I liked them better and I didn't want to play with the gross boys in the basketball dirt pit. It was so messy there!

I sat at a swing and waited for the girls to say hi.

"What are you doing?" one girl said. She had curly blonde hair. I remembered that most of all: this little girl with curly blonde hair sneering at boy-me.

"I wanna play," I said. I smiled. People like when you smile at them. Mom taught me that. Maybe it would be enough to earn

their friendship—?

“You’re a boy,” she snapped, pointing to the mud pit where boys were currently roughhousing over a ball. I didn’t want to go over there, but I didn’t want to be alone, so I swallowed the lump in my throat and tried my best to blend in with the boys.

When I came back inside from recess I was filthy dirty and super sad, but I didn’t cry. Dad would be proud.

But I had a secret weapon for this kind of sadness: I can just forget it.

I was four and I know the best magic trick ever. I could just stop crying or being excited or anything if I tried hard enough. It was like, uh, like popping my knuckles but in my brain and when I do it I feel better. It helps when people yell at me.

So I thought really hard about it—like, really really hard!—until my brain popped. I didn’t care about the girls anymore, or that my clothes were filthy. It was easier when I tried to be what other people wanted anyways because then people didn’t figure out how weird I was.

I figured out how to be a good boy. Eventually. Mom and Dad would be proud.

Tally, 2008

This wasn't the first time Addie and I met. For that, you have to go back to a furry con in Michigan, where I dressed up as a girl, picked up a guy, and ruined a lot of my friends' nights in the process. I promise I can explain.

The con itself was a bit of a mess. It was in one of those old Holiday Inn resort hotels, where there was a pool and a hot tub and a sauna and a bunch of open space for loosely organized activities. Years after the fact we would discover that the con organizer was a Nazi, but at the time we were having fun with friends at a tiny con. There was always free beer on tap, and as a freshly minted, post-college adult I got into the sauce quite a bit.

But the drunker I got, the less I could hear the others and the more I could feel my heart buzzing with thoughts of Brandon.

My coming out at the con came in fits and starts from there. I told everyone that I was a girl at one point. Or at least that I wasn't a boy. After throwing on a skirt and top that I brought for the occasion, I convinced everyone to go to the dance with Brandon.

It was a mess of a dance. There were lasers, smoke machines, house music, and folks in fursuits swaying all around us. But I

was dancing with him, and honestly? In that dance, all I could see was Brandon.

He had the most beautiful eyes. Clean shaven. And there was this wonderful spot under his strong chin where I could tuck my head into the small of his chest and sway with him. We were enveloped in green lasers and fog that smelled like Lemon Pledge, and when he threw his arms around my tunic I just felt like... like me. Completely and totally me, in a way that had never happened before.

We tumbled to the floor together. He straddled me. (Look. Furry cons in the aughts were weird.) Our foreheads touched; his fingers caressed my cheek like a feather. I was... I knew that there, in that moment, I was his girl. And nobody in my head could tell me otherwise.

“I want you,” he said. His gentle smile filled my head with a pink haze, impossible to think through. I felt pressure at the back of my head and tried my best to tamp it back down.

His bright eyes shone like galaxies. His soft smile filled me with gentle confidence. It was then or never again. Even if I hurt people that day, you have to understand. I thought this was the one and only chance I’d ever have to be seen as, well, *me*.

“I want to sleep with him,” I told my girlfriend. Her face scrunched up with disgust. I know that Potts would have read between the scrunched-up lines of her shocked face, that I should have retracted the request, given Brandon a hug, and gone back to the hotel room with her. We would have lain in bed. Cuddled. Cried. I would have apologized for letting myself be a girl in front of everyone.

But it wasn't who I wanted to be in that moment, so I promptly ignored the warning signs. "Please."

"If it will get this out of your system," she said, lingering on system. Her fingers curled around mine with a weak grip, but I had what I wanted out of the conversation. I turned to Brandon with a smile that sparkled like a thousand suns.

I was his girl that night.

I was a girl.

Potts, 2008

I woke up that morning in my friend Brandon's bed, naked, his taste on my tongue. Panic set in. I got out of the bed, knowing I did something wrong, but not exactly knowing why. My phone had dozens and dozens of missed calls, missed texts, and pleas for me to pick up. Nobody else in my friend group slept that night; they stayed up in the laundry room comforting our girlfriend. My girlfriend.

Why couldn't I remember last night? Why did I sleep with this guy if I don't even like men?

"Everything okay?" Brandon asked.

I gathered my clothes.

"No."

He chuckled. "First time with a guy? I can smell the shame from here."

"No. Been with men before, no hangups there. Just... that was reckless."

He smiled at me. "You were beautiful last night, dear."

"Dear?"

The memories come flooding back. The skirt. The dancing. The... way I let him take care of me, like his girl. His *girl*.

"You got your girlfriend's permission. I heard it."

"I know. I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"It's fine."

I scrolled through the messages on my phone. "Gods, these texts. I ruined everything. This is their *hotel room*, and I locked them out all night to sleep with you. They're in the laundry room right now. Have been all night. God *damnit*, I'm not this asshole."

Brandon gathered the sheets around him as he sat up. "Look, it's an innocent mistake. And they could have come in at any time—we could always have gotten dressed."

The texts started up again. "I have to go," I said.

He looked to the bed, defeated. I put a hand on his shoulder. "This wasn't your fault. It's my fault for getting you into this."

"Thanks." I left him to pick up his clothes at his own pace.

It's *always my fault*, I repeated as I ran to the laundry room. I found my girlfriend there, staring out the window with a stern look on her face. I was about to get the shit scolded out of me.

"Why did you do it?" she asked.

I pleaded with her with my eyes. "I don't know."

"You're serious."

"Yes," I said. "I just... I don't know what came over me. I'm not a girl. I'm not into men. And I'm in love with you." Two truths, one lie, but at that point I'd say whatever it took to make this conversation end. Not knowing how it would end was making me feel queasy and deeply uncomfortable.

I couldn't remember any of it.

"I can't believe you'd do this to me."

"I can't either."

We dropped it and tried to enjoy our last night at the con, but I had to teach high school the next day and proceeded to have a

full-on panic attack about it in front of all my friends.

Misty got tail. I got panic attacks, a drama bomb in my friend group, and generally got the short end of the stick. Being plural is a bitch, sometimes.

Sam, 2006

I got ma'amed for the first time at a Halloween frat party.

To start with, we went to an all-male college. (We got better, though!) And every Halloween since our freshman year we made a point to dress up as a girl for a costume. The queer community where I live used to call Halloween "Trans Christmas," as it gave us genderweird folk an ironclad excuse to give new gender presentations a try. Either you got a laugh out of your friends, or you got genuine compliments about how nice you look as a girl.

I remember the dress so clearly: it was a salvage shop find from Lafayette, IN, where I would go out dressed to avoid getting clocked by anyone I knew. It was this red, yellow, and orange floral-print sundress, and I paired it with black Mary Janes to pull the look together.

(This was before the time of cell phone cameras, so nobody has photo evidence of this moment actually happening. Which is fantastic, because early transition pictures make me cringe.)

I was also zooted; a friend had just offered a gravity bong hit, and whatever was in the pipe had me moon-rocks high. Everyone else said getting high chilled their brain out, but for me, I could start talking to other people in my head. It was really weird, but the others were pretty cool with meeting up here and

there for a party, as long as I forgot about talking to them afterward.

A friend—we'll call him Matt—called me over to the beer pong table and I obliged him. We were halfway through a game when I felt a tap at my shoulder.

"Where's your costume?" he said. When I turned I realized it was another friend—we'll call him Chad—who legit did not recognize me in a dress. Usually I'd have told him straight away, but I had a sudden impulse in the moment.

What if I just let him think I'm a girl?

I tried the voice one of the trans girls at the Blind Pig taught me. "I'm here with a friend."

"A friend?" His lips curled. "Not a boyfriend, I hope."

The words lit a blazing fire in my heart. I'd been seen before. Adored even. Victory parties? I've had 'em. Girlfriend? Yep, right there at the corner of the room, sulking while I wore the biggest smile. There should have been nothing different about this attention, but why was my heart pounding a million times a minute and my stomach covered in butterflies?

I was being pursued. Like a real girl.

"You're cute," he said. My heart took flight. Not for Chad, *per se*. But that, for the first time, someone *saw* me.

It was around that time Matt checked in on the conversation and blew it for me. "Oh hey, buddy. That's Austen in the dress!"

The spell broke. He pushed away from me. I tried to play it off as a joke. "Thanks for the kind words, sugar," I said, giving a curtsy for good measure. We laughed it off as a joke in the moment, but that blossoming, sweet feeling stuck with me for months. Being seen, pursued, adored.

I was hooked.

Samantha, 2007

The adults wanted to show our girlfriend how to play disc golf but I wanted to lay down in the grass so there we were, in the fairway of the disc golf course, staring at blades of grass and trying to keep the lid on the big secret.

The big secret would kill us. We know that because our family didn't like gay people and, well, they made us act manly. But lying on that grass, the blades tickling my arms, I just wanted the pain of living in the wrong body to be over.

I wanted to stop hiding.

I wanted to be a girl.

Yeah, I know we were in college, but I hated everything about my body and if I'd had my vote I'd have just started transition when we went to college. But Addie wanted to finish school first, which was dumb, but at least she let me get dressed on the weekends here and there as long as I did it in Lafayette where nobody could see me.

I stared at the grass and yelled at the other voices to go away. That helped sometimes—if I got really sad or really upset, they'd just go away because they were scared of the emotions. So I imagined going home to see Dad, and that got everyone to run away real quick.

“Are you okay?” my girlfriend asked. Well, she’s the system’s girlfriend, not my girlfriend. I was too young for that. She’s uh, well, we call our wife “big friend” when this happens so I guess the girlfriend was a big friend too.

“I want to be a girl.”

“Are you sure?”

“More than anything.”

“Then let’s get started,” she said, and I felt the system rumble and roar with rage. The world shrank to a pinpoint, popped out of existence, and I was back in the dark place while the adults undid everything I had done.

Addie, 2009

I was twenty-five years old and making twelve dollars an hour without health insurance. Of course I didn't go to a therapist when I started hearing the voices. Instead, I tried to talk them down on my own.

We were in a nondescript parking garage on the north side of Indianapolis, walking to our car after a shift at the call center. We worked for a skeezy life insurance company whose sales model looked very, shall we say, pyramid-shaped from my perspective as this low-level contracted tech. But they paid, and the job wasn't too hard, so there we stayed.

At that point in my history I was a regimented, terrified mess of a human being. Every morning at 10 I'd wake up, dress like a guy, and apply to jobs. Sometimes at home, sometimes at whatever job fair was going on at the time, hoping to be seen. Every night and weekend I'd dress up in comfortable women's clothes and marvel at how my body was changing.

When I wasn't doing that I was either drunk or talking to the people in my head and trying to make sense of what was happening.

Back in the parking garage I was talking to myself: "So if I were to think of a number—"

"It doesn't work that way," Tally said. "I have no clue what number you're thinking of. That's the whole point of amnesia barriers."

"So we can hold a conversation, and I don't have to dream up what you're saying. It just pops into my head."

She slid into our car and pulled the mirror so that we could look at our own reflection: the closest thing to a face-to-face meeting we could muster. "We are two separate people, Addie. Of course you can't fill in the blanks for me."

"Am I like, possessed or something?"

"Maybe." Tally made the body shrug. "Look, I'm not a theologian or anything. Just a voice in your head that wants to help."

I wanted to fight her on this, but I knew better. When you've gone from white-collar professional with career aspirations to hourly tech support, there's sort of nowhere to go but up. I was laid low and Tally knew it.

She finished the thought for me. "I've been waiting for you to hit rock bottom, yes. It's the only way you'd believe me."

"That's not true."

She started the car. "Girl, I live in this body with you. Don't lie."

"So what do we do now?"

"New job, to start with. We keep hustling and hoping."

"I'm tired, though."

"We can be tired once we have a good-paying job," Tally responded, using my mouth, my lips, my voice to chide me. I can't emphasize enough how strange and puppet-like I felt when the body started moving on its own.

“Maybe I can talk to mom and dad,” I offered. “Try to smooth things over, get some networking help—”

“Fuck them,” Tally said. “I know you can’t remember why, but fuck them. We’re better off leaving them in our dust.”

Misty, 2001

I hid a bag of girls' clothes in my car trunk that would only come out in my basement room at Mom's.

I didn't bother with it at Dad's because it was far, far too dangerous to try. But here at Mom's, it got eerily quiet at night and everyone slept super sound. If I kept the lights low and didn't make much noise I could try things on and see how I felt.

I was seventeen years old and trying on girls' clothes for the first time.

The look was a disaster, of course. I paired an off-the-shoulder, dingy heather top with a maroon, salvage-shop skater skirt. But it was the closest I'd ever come to building a full outfit instead of stealing my sister's clothes, and I wanted to see what it would look like. So I slung a borrowed bra onto my chest, pulled on the shirt and skirt, and—just as the look became impossible to take off quickly—heard the toilet flush above me.

I lay in bed for half an hour with the lights out, wrapped tightly in the covers, terrified that if someone heard me while using the bathroom they'd check in on me. Then I stood—slowly, quietly!—and flipped on the lights next to the mirror.

I was a mess.

Let me make my point clear: the word “travesty” doesn’t even begin to cover this look, and that’s before we get into the family resemblance between *travesty* and the French *travesti*. It was ugly, hung weird off my well-muscled body, and I wouldn’t have been found dead outside of my room in this getup.

But the potential was *there*.

I stuffed the bra and threw on a snapback to cover up my haircut. The figure in the mirror softened as I spun the skirt to hide my lack of hips. Then, in the blink of an eye, I saw myself, visibly female.

I felt as if someone had dropped a rock in the still pond that was my mind, and those ripples picked up speed until they were full-on tidal waves pounding on the edges of my heart.

“My body is *wrong*.” I said it to the reflection in the mirror. “I’m a girl.”

Then: “I can’t let anybody know about this.”

The next morning, while taking out the trash, I slipped the skirt and shirt into the garbage while no one was looking and popped my brain so I didn’t get hurt missing the outfit.

Turns out being able to voluntarily forget things can come in handy, sometimes.

Misty, 2008

I got my first shot of estrogen in a clandestine clinic in Indianapolis. It took up the second floor of a greystone just north of downtown, placed in a residential district. The sign was hidden, too; the only way in was to know someone who knew someone. (Protests would have shut that place down if they knew about it.) But there I was, looking out the window and trying to calm the terror in my heart as a needle full of yellowish oil hovered above my thigh.

I knew that starting hormones would kick off a shitstorm at home. I knew that I'd lose my entire family for daring to do this. But I had to. There was no choice; only gravity invariably leading to the conclusion that I was a woman.

Estelle, the nurse, calmed me with a hand on my knee. "It's just a shot," she offered. "You're going to be okay."

"I know." I looked outside. What would Mom do when she found out I'd done this behind her back? Sure, I was 23 and she couldn't do anything about it, but she always got angry when I did something without running it by her first. Maybe I could refuse the shot and run it by her, just in case—

Estelle almost had to snap her fingers to get my attention, but when she did, she took my hand into hers. "This moment is for

you. Not for anybody else. Do you still want this?"

I nodded.

"Let's do it," I said. Momma Estelle plunged the needle that started this whole journey.

In time, Estelle would become known as my Mother, the kind of setup that you'd see in '80s drag balls. She and Aunt Vicky and Aunt Asia would spend the next few years making sure I could function in the world as a woman, offering makeup tips, hand-me-downs, and a shoulder to cry on when needed.

In that moment, though, she was another villager helping to raise this idiot. And honestly, this is all I ever wanted when I came out as trans. Not to defend myself, not to haggle over how much of the new me someone would accept. I just needed someone to hold my hand and tell me it was okay.

When I left the office my heart felt like it could burst with joy. I turned on the loudest, girliest summer pop I could and sang at the top of my lungs for fear that holding in this emotion would actually kill me. And to this day, I'm still angry that one of the happiest moments of my life had to happen alone because I didn't trust my family enough to be a part of it.

Lilith, 2024

It was never about respect with my parents. I'm still not even sure what they wanted out of me.

All I ever wanted out of them was an "I love you" or an "I support you." That's it. Instead, I had to claw every little bit of interaction out of them because being queer made me icky to them, and because I had been angry when I initially came out fourteen years ago.

I could dress up the facts all I wanted, but the bare fact remains: "You are trans, and we hate that about you."

It's not who you eventually become that proves your love. I've seen my fair share of people be transphobic and eventually come around and become girls themselves. (I'm mostly joking. Mostly.) People change, and we all become better along the way. That's normal.

Maybe they chose rejection out of fear. Maybe their religion was against it. Maybe they worried what the town would think. But in that moment, in that split second between listening to their child bare their heart and opening their mouth, they chose rejection.

Once you've been rejected like that, there is no reconciliation. And for folks like us, the second you show that hand, we can no

longer trust you. You become dangerous. Radioactive, even, to our chances of survival. Either we can trust someone entirely or we can't trust them at all, and our parents proved over and over again that they were not to be trusted.

The others may disagree about airing this part out loud but you know what? Good fucking riddance to my parents. My heart is lighter and brighter for letting them go.

Addie, 2008

We spent our first Christmas alone at the age of 24. I'd recently lost my job, my girlfriend, and my stable living situation, all in a matter of weeks. I'd scraped up enough to lease an apartment in a crimey part of town, and if I didn't find a job in the next fourteen days I wouldn't be able to make rent.

I also had my tonsils out a week ago, so that's fun.

I was about three months into hormone replacement therapy, and I wasn't sure if the constant crying was my hormones being off or things being just that bad.

We didn't remember much about the day other than that we were drunk on cheap vodka, full of Kraft Dinner, and stalking Facebook, flipping through photos of my mother's third wedding.

I had not been invited this time around. Reason: I'm a girl now. I think she said something to the tune of "I can't bear to hear your voice or see your face." Christmas was cancelled too, and I felt afraid to show up at my dad's family's thing for some unknown reason, so there I was. Alone on Christmas, with a belly full of hyperprocessed mac and cheese, crying over all the people in those pictures that I could never see again.

To this day, I do not celebrate Christmas because of this moment. No joke. Over the course of the last three months I'd been ridiculed, rejected, insulted, and generally treated as a pariah and a bother by my family. A switch flipped in me, and for the first time in my life I learned how to say no.

"No, Mother, I won't go to another therapist to prove this to you."

"No, I'm not stopping this treatment."

"No. I don't care what the town thinks."

"No, it's not negotiable."

And then, from her: "No, you're not welcome here anymore."

I heard a voice echoing from the bedroom of my apartment.

"Was it worth it?"

"You bet your ass," I replied.

To nobody.

In a one-bedroom apartment I didn't share.

"Wait, what the fuck was that?"

Tally, 2009

For the first time, Addie and I met each other. Like, really truly saw each other. It's hard to explain with words, but most times, when you're a system you have big mood swings and don't know how to react to them, right? But you can't remember being emotional because that's dangerous, so you forget that you're sad or mad or whatever, and poof! The emotion's just gone.

Problem was, we didn't know where all the wayward emotions go. Turns out, you can only stuff emotions down so far before things start breaking. Your brain is very, very capable of forgetting, but the garbage is still there, festering in some far-off corner of your brain.

I walked to the mirror to look at myself. I still had the masculine jawline, still had stubble, and still felt like I was making a huge mistake.

And because of my gender I was spending Christmas alone. Or at least I thought so.

"That's my face?"

We weren't sure who said it but when we got to the mirror the world felt unreal and strange.

"Who are you?" Addie asked aloud.

My face scrunched for a moment. I yawned. The world went fuzzy, and then I was back in control of the body.

“I’m Tally. I’m here to help.”

“Help with what?”

“Confidence.” My lips curled into a gentle smile. “You made a good decision, starting transition. You *feel* better. Now I want us to live like it.”

“Okay, so I’m officially crazy.”

“As a loon. But there’s good news too: you are a girl! And you get to meet me!”

I laughed. What else are you supposed to do when the reflection in the mirror talks back to you? I thought about trying to sleep, or recalling the day to make sure I wasn’t drunk or something, but my body was no longer my own. I felt like a puppet on strings, controlled by an invisible hand that was somehow my own and a complete stranger’s at once.

So yeah. I started transition at 23. By my first Christmas alone at 24, I’d lost my family and nearly lost my apartment, 2 months into the Great Recession. How’d that go? Let’s just leave it at “we didn’t handle it well.”

Tally, 2014

All our lives we've made ourselves small to avoid being seen.

First it was to avoid being bullied at school. I'd watch my own body language like a hawk to make sure I didn't make myself a target. Then at home I kept busy with quiet, lonely activities to keep from exposing too much of my personal self to people who could hurt us—stuff like painting, or listening to music, or writing.

Oh, writing! We loved to write precisely because many folks in our family hated reading. I could write thinly veiled pieces of fiction that told people the truth about how I was being treated, and nobody was the wiser. Once I started getting older I pushed harder into the writing, choosing to skip dinners out, movies, and other activities to have the most serene moments of calm and clarity that came alongside an empty, quiet home.

I spent my entire high school career hiding and my college career trying to peek out from under the fear. But transition? That wasn't something you could do "small." Certainly not back in the year of our Lord 2008! After five years of an abusive relationship and a lifetime of hiding myself for fear of reprisal, I was mighty tired of the dance by the time my mom invited me over to talk about "the trans thing." And of course, I said yes.

In the five years between my coming out and this conversation we'd barely been in contact. I kept up with monthly emails updating her on how life had been. In return, I got emails about how she "couldn't bear to see my face" and that my "voice makes her cry." But suddenly she was sweet as honey, all smiles and nostalgia as we went through the kayfabe of a normal family dinner. As long as you ignored the tension, you could squint your eyes and see a normal conversation.

At least I get to see my dog again. Silver linings have been worse before.

Addie didn't attend this meeting. She has a bad habit of, well, rolling over for our family, for lack of a better word. This wasn't a day for surrender. So as we sat in the living room, rum and cokes in hand, I poked the elephant in the room:

"Okay. You dropped me like a bad habit for five years. What changed?"

"Oh, it's not that big a thing!" she said. My mom had that tone to her voice. I don't have a good word for it, but it felt cloying, desperate. Weak, in some ways, but the message was delivered with confidence. "I just wanted to check in with you."

"That's not why we are here," I said. There was silence. I sipped at my drink. My dog did her level-headed best to merge with my lap; after so many years apart I was going to have to pry this dog off with a crowbar.

"Stop. Tell me what you want from me, or I walk."

Addie would *never* say that. It's why this fight had to be mine; I had the spine for it.

"You don't have to be touchy about it!" she said, half joking. My stern face told her otherwise. (Somewhere deep inside I felt

anger, hatred, and rage boiling up—food for thought later, after I was out of the house. For now, focus on the prize. Nail down her ask.)

“I heard you’re going to Thailand for surgery.”

It’s true; in a week I’d be boarding a plane to Thailand to visit Dr. Suporn for bottom surgery. I had already paid a five-figure deposit to secure my surgery date.

Of course. The fight was always about my gender.

“He’s the best in the world,” I said with a shrug. “Wasn’t going to trust it to anyone else. I fly out next week and am very excited —”

“It seems so dangerous,” she said. “Maybe you should get a second opinion.”

“Mom, I’m already in for twelve thousand dollars. You’re a little late to stop me.”

“Still, what if something happens?”

I should have been surprised. It would have been so much easier if I had been; I could have been impressed by the sheer balls of my mother ignoring me for five years only to reach out and try to ask me to stop my transition. Like I owed her a favor or something. I couldn’t help laughing.

“Oh my god, mom.”

“Hear me out!”

“You have no right to ask that.”

“It just seems dangerous. Maybe you and I could, I don’t know, sit together and figure this out?”

I was full-on laughing at that point. What else do you do when someone’s suckered you in with a home-cooked meal only to sell you on some pipe dream of a reality where I was not trans and

everything went back to the place where I was miserable and small, but loved by the family?

“That’s what this was about? Butter me up so you can talk me out of the surgery?”

“I just don’t think you’ve given this enough thought—”

“You’re too late. And furthermore, you’re *way* out of line, pretending you have enough of my respect to ask me to throw my dream away. How dare you!”

“I never said that.”

“You did. ‘What will the neighbors think?’ I believe you said it in February 2009.” I pointed to the kitchen table. “We sat right there when I came out as trans and you said those words. I’ll never forget them.”

The smile gave way to a sneer. It always gave way to the sneer once you said no to whatever she asked. That’s just how Mom was. And here, cornered and now exposed, she went to the only thing she knew: blame. “You didn’t even get a second opinion, and you tore the family apart by how meanly you came out as trans—”

I stood from the living room chair. “If this is your plan, there’s no reason for the conversation to continue. I’m going to Thailand, and I’m leaving right now.”

“Don’t be like this.”

“Don’t call me.” I walked out of the house and my dog, ever faithful, tried to follow me home. Looking back, I wish I’d taken the pooch up on it. She was the only thing I ever wanted from that house, in retrospect.

Misty, 2021

Mom would make a point to reach out a few times over the years that followed.

Like the time during the pandemic when we had a relationship for about six months. She started calling because her father was dying, and I guess that got her thinking about me?

And me, being the sucker I am, I took her at her word: it was just talking, after all. Nothing bad could come from that.

First red flag I should have seen was that there was never reconciliation. Or even an apology. Just “how’s life,” like I’d been off on a European vacation for the past few years. We must never talk about the conflict directly, after all!

“I just wish you hadn’t been so harsh at the start,” she said. It had been thirteen years since 2008 and we were still talking about three months in that year like it was the worst thing I’d ever done.

“I was in a rough spot,” I said, shrugging. Looking back always got me apologetic. There was always something to look back on and apologize for, something I did wrong that I still couldn’t atone for. But at least I had a mom again. “You abandoned me.”

“You were too harsh,” she replied.

I even *visited Indiana* at this time, and she had the gall to pretend the past didn't exist at all. That she was always an ally, that she had never thrown me out into the cold, that she and I had been buds for a long, long time. It was exhausting!

I told her that I had DID. Her response: "Oh, okay."

Thing was, it wasn't about the disagreement. Not about me being a trans woman. It wasn't even about the abuse! It was how I had embarrassed her in front of the town, how I had grown past her.

Her favorite response was silence. Oh, my mom was a master of the silent treatment! Never discussed, never directly said, she'd send family members to try and talk me out of transition, sometimes. She'd freeze you out of a family for saying a single bad word of her, I swear to you. And Lord help you if you are queer and want to be in her good graces!

Fast forward to November 2021. It was my birthday and we'd just recently rediscovered the system. We were a mess, but at least we were trying to heal. I was still heady from the whole "my mom loves me again" arc of my relationship with mom, so when my birthday came around all I wanted was a phone call and a check-in.

I waited. Nothing.

I called. Answering machine.

I texted: "Are you okay? Just wanted to check in."

An hour went by. I tried not to think about it, but the silence was starting to eat at me. Was she okay? Maybe I'd said something to upset her again. Maybe she was in the hospital for another surgery—she had a lot of surgeries when I was growing up.

Three hours later I got a response: “This is your sister. Mom isn’t talking to you because you told someone in town you weren’t talking to her, and that hurt her feelings. She’ll reach out when she’s ready.”

I’m not too proud to say this made me fall out. Hard. Turns out giving a system the silent treatment is a guaranteed way to get the kids in the system whipped into a crying spree. Of course I’d screwed this up again. Of course I’d say something to push her away again; that’s all I’m good at!

The thoughts swirled in my head as D and I considered our options over champagne and somber music.

“I’m so sorry,” D said. “I had a feeling this would happen sooner or later.”

“I know. I just wish—”

Silence.

“What?”

“I wish I could do something,” I said, smiling. “And actually, I think we can.”

I pulled out my phone and opened up our system chat. It was an app grafted onto a platform called Discord that allowed me to “converse” with proxied avatars of my alters. Other systems turned me on to it and we’d been living with the system server as a constant companion for months at that point. We ran every decision through it, big or small, so that everyone inside could have equal say in decisions that affected our life.

I typed out a message:

“What do we do about mom?”

My fingers sped across the keys without my prompting.

“Dump her.”

“She’s fucked around for the last time. Time she finds out.”

“She’s a meanie!”

I looked to D. “I... I think we’re in agreement on this one. That’s weird.”

“Weird?”

“For years, when she’d do this I’d shut down. Felt like I made a mistake, and that I had to make it right. I’d write her letters, or sit with her while she sulked. Something, anything to make things better.”

“What changed?”

“For the first time in a long time? We know she’s in the wrong.”

“Yeah?”

“And we can vote on taking our next action,” I finished with a smile. “We’re done with her.”

Addie, 2021

I kept it short and sweet when I texted my mom back:

“I’ve spent 14 years waiting for you to see that I’m good enough for you and every time you break my heart. I’m done. Lose my fucking number.”

It was then I learned a new rule in my relationship with my mother: if you need a call from her, call her out. My phone started ringing off the hook.

I refused the first call. Immediate callback. Then two. Then three. Each call made me crumple even further into a ball, children inside howling with the terror that we had made Mom angry, and that her anger meant we were the bad kid, and the only way to make things better was to do exactly what she wanted—

“I’m taking this,” D said as they grabbed my phone and, bless their heart, tanked my sister’s angry phone call for me. I heard them howling on the phone downstairs as I tried to calm down all the parts inside terrified that we did it wrong again, and everyone was going to blame us when it went bad. Just breathe. In. Three, two, one. Out.



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