

Chapter 8

NOBODY MUST KNOW

NOWHERE LEFT TO RUN

There was nothing I could do. It was the summer of 2001 and I was trapped in the car as Mum took the turning into the King's car park next to the Harlequin Shopping Centre. She had just spoken those few dreaded words that had me feeling as if I'd been rammed through with a spear, 'We're going to Marks and Spencer to get you properly fitted for a bra.' It was always going to come to this, but I had pushed it violently out of my conscious thoughts, clinging to the desperate hope that they wouldn't grow large enough to make it necessary.

Why was it even necessary? For health? For function? It certainly wasn't for the tribeswomen I'd seen in the *National Geographic* in many a doctor and dentist's waiting room. Clearly it hadn't been for the thousands of years human and other female hominids had existed back in the archives of time. No, this was about the obsession with aesthetics. In this world you've got to look a certain way or you will be judged. If your breasts move freely on their own, even a little bit, you will be judged. If they are allowed to be a natural teardrop shape and not perfectly spherical mounds shoved right up next to your armpits, then you will be judged. Some people may say it's a free choice, but that could not be further from the truth. Ask yourself, how many people assigned female at birth are given it as a free choice? No, they will be told they must wear them, for fear in this patriarchal world, of inciting sexual advances

and to prevent sagging. They will not be told there is no good justification for that assertion whatsoever and will become among the huge majority of people who still believe that bras prevent this natural consequence of aging.

‘No! I don’t want to!’ I begged, I pleaded as Mum locked the car and began marching me towards the shops. ‘You don’t want them to sag!’ she said. ‘And it’s not nice for *other people* if you don’t wear one! This is not a negotiation!’ I stood in the little fitting room cubicle engulfed in anger and humiliation. I’d just been measured by a brisk but professional lady with half-moon spectacles and a tape measure around her shoulders who’d duly gone off to fetch some try-outs. Rooted to the spot, I folded my arms firmly across my chest, defensive until the last. At least I had won the argument about underwire. There was no way in a thousand hells that was going to happen and Mum was shrewdly aware of how far she should push her front line. Perhaps sensing what she was up against, the lady returned with a selection of fairly utilitarian looking bras. They were not ‘training bras’ as I had seen some frilly triangles labelled in the rows we passed on the way in. Training bras; what an odd phrase, training for what? To cope with the mild to extreme discomfort you are going to have to put up with for the rest of your life? But I’d successfully staved off this moment for so long I was deemed to be past those sizes already. I put on a white contraption as the lady told me it should be clasped on the second rungs, not the first.

The mental and physical reaction was quick and violent. The cage in the back of my mind felt like it was on fire, like it was being burnt at the stake and the pain sent out a shockwave down my body that tensed every muscle. This was visceral anger and I could not make myself relax. My shoulders screamed under the burden of being so painfully tensed underneath the straps that lay on top of them, every bit aware of the weight they were suddenly holding up. My torso felt as though it had just been caught in a vice and I could feel the line digging into my skin all the way around from front to back. ‘Are you sure this is right?’ I asked as I became overwhelmed with a BURNING,

PASSIONATE RAGE to rip it from my body like I was Bruce Banner turning into The Hulk. 'Yes', the lady said. I could feel myself collapsing internally, my happiness, my self-esteem, all of it crumbling into nothing. Tears formed at the sides of my eyes. So *this* was to be my fate, this unbelievable level of discomfort, every day, for the rest of my life. 'It's important to wear ones fitted correctly, it's about comfort,' Mum said. '*It bloody is not,*' I thought venomously.

Yes, I am aware my aversion to bras is largely a product of gender dysphoria for their obvious association with breasts and mine isn't the typical response of a person who finds themselves growing breasts, but I genuinely think there are more than a few people who have simply learned to put up with the irritation, the discomfort, put it down to 'one of those things women have to deal with'. I think it is an unspoken truth which you sometimes see snippets of in memes, articles and stand-up comedy routines: '*Ladies, the best time of the day is when you can get home and unclasp that bra, am I right?*' *cackle* *chortle* *laugh*. I wasn't laughing.

How was I going to cope with this parental and social requirement? How was I going to concentrate at school or even function from moment to moment in daily life whilst combating The Rage caused by this discomfort? I could barely stand it. This was a level of dysphoria I did not think was possible, although of course, I had no word to attach to the feelings I believed no one else in the whole world had ever experienced. The bare truth of my changing body was now glaring at me from three differently angled mirrors and it was so completely *wrong*. How could this be happening to *my* body? And now this wrongness was to be further highlighted; not only was the bra so disgustingly uncomfortable, it made them more visible, put them up front and centre for everybody's viewing pleasure, the absolute opposite of what I wanted. But I was persuaded to try several others, Mum hovering about interjecting how, 'Sometimes you just need to find the right one,' but every one the same response; the same shockwaves of primal agony at the discomfort of bra and breasts upon my body. '*I can't do this, I*

can't do this, I can't do this, ran unceasingly through my panicked mind. But I wasn't getting out of there without at least one, that I knew. So I picked two at random, one white, one light purple, and left the shop feeling like my life might as well be over.

That night I locked myself in the bathroom and pulled out a bandage from the medical supplies in the cupboard under the sink. I wrapped it around my chest and pulled the ends tight. The flattening effect was somewhat effective but the discomfort from the bandage could not be ignored and I knew this was never going to work. It also made it harder to breathe in and out completely and I felt The Rage mounting again at the reason why I was trying to do this. I knew I could not get away forever with not conforming to the requirement of bra wearing, the social pressure was far too strong. But I couldn't wear one, I just couldn't, the dysphoria brought on from the discomfort and the way it made me confront the presence of these breasts upon me, made it utterly impossible to function. With every fibre of my being I wanted these illegitimate breasts gone, removed right that very second and in that moment I didn't care if it meant hacking them off with a kitchen knife.

The seriousness with which I had that thought unnerved me deeply. It felt like my mind was spiralling down into a well of darkness and I was conscious that if I fell in, I might never get out. I hurriedly took the bandage off and stuffed it back into the cupboard and then ran into my room where I stood and gave into the urge to beat myself repeatedly in the chest until I cried out in pain. The emotional release felt good, as did the thought that maybe if I damaged the tissue then they wouldn't be able to grow any bigger. The worst day of my life up to that point ended with me crying myself to sleep curled up in a ball of despair.

BRA BATTLES

The next few months were hell on Earth. Every day I'd wake up to a mind already swimming with worry of getting through the day ahead without having to wear that contraption of

torture, constantly thinking through what deceits I would have to commit this day and just how many layers of clothing I would have to keep on to prevent these lumps from being seen. Mum would try to make sure I was wearing it before I left the house for school, by looking or even running her hand down my back. But I quickly got into a routine of passing inspection and dashing to take it off in the bathroom before running out the door to the bus stop. I was glad of my school uniform, the comfortable royal blue polo shirt and thick jumper made it a lot easier to get away with this social taboo, so long as I kept the jumper on. However, after school, at weekends and events I would find myself cornered and it quickly became a constant battleground characterised by shouted demands and screamed refusals, anger and crying. I'd be sent to my room and not let out without it on. All the while James sat downstairs watching TV or playing a video game, making me seethe with jealousy and overflow with embarrassment. I hated him knowing I had breasts; I hated him knowing I hated them and the bras that went with them. I would lock myself in my room, crying out the pain and anger until I was nothing but an empty shell. These were some of my darkest days, in which I was consumed by the fog of despair. I have often wondered how or if I would have been able to go on like that for much longer than I did if I hadn't made a desperate and very important stand, or if my parents had been harder, more ruthless on this matter. In this regard I was lucky.

Things came to a head on our second big foreign holiday to Canada. After the death of Nan and Grandad, Dad had been the sole inheritor and, as well as splashing out on a sports car, had decided to take us all on a 'caravanners-at-large' holiday in a campervan around Canada. The first stop was Vancouver and the hospitality of some of Dad's old Christian friends from years gone by, a sweet old couple called Tom and Cynthia. Whilst we were there Tom was extremely excited about taking us to visit his church. Mum cornered me in my makeshift room as everyone was getting ready, 'You are wearing a bra to this service,' she said. Mum is a small and bubbly person, but there

is steel in her too and I knew it as she pointed her finger and narrowed her eyes at me that I would have to at least have it on my person in some way. I had learned during earlier fights that I could lessen the dysphoria if I had it unclasped as much as possible or, when it was done up, pulled at the back or the front of it with my hand under my shirt. But that was hard to do surreptitiously and the service was long. I was emotionally spent by the end from trying to keep a lid on The Rage that began as soon as that clasp was closed around my back and which manifested as severe irritability that soon made me snap and project an attitude easily interpreted as rudeness. I took it off in the toilets as the service segued into coffee and cake but it was barely a minute before Mum took me aside and told me to put it back on. I flat out refused. I had reached the absolute end of my emotional overdraft. This was a battle I simply had to win for the sake of my mental health, which was now straining under the burden of the constant worry of forced bra wearing events. Mum relented. At the end of the day, she wasn't a sadist. This was our big holiday and she wasn't up to spending it locked in combat with me. As wilful and steely as she was, on this issue, upon which my happiness well and truly depended, I could not and would not back down.

It was a serious relief to know I could have respite from that particular struggle, but these breasts were on me every minute of every day. There was no respite from that relentless mental ache and anguish, the constant stress of having to deal with the searing dysphoria and trying to exist successfully in a world hostile to my predicament. It was hot in Canada, very hot, too hot to wear a jumper, and I began to devote a lot of mental energy to developing strategies to get through what were, for other people, basic life situations. For everyone else they were simply daily deliberations on what to wear, what outfit suits the day or looks the best, but, for me, every choice now solely centred on how I'd be able to hide these breasts, how best I'd be able to simply get through the day without people knowing I (a) had breasts at all and (b) wasn't wearing a bra. For example, to combat not being able to wear a jumper in

the heat, I took to pulling at the bottom of my t-shirt, walking around holding it stretched taut slightly outwards from my body to give the illusion there was nothing there. This was reasonably successful but would take away one of my hands from other uses and made my arm ache after a while, building up frustration and sadness within my inner emotional cavern. As did the sight of James, ambling along, arms freely by his side, experiencing not one single iota of this misery. Bitterness and jealousy flowed in too.

This calculating shame behaviour continued as we returned home and time and physical development went marching on. Under the blessing of the coldish English climate, for which I gave thanks every morning, I encased myself within layers of material. So great was my need to hide, I would push myself to the absolute limits of endurance, refusing to take off my jumper even as the mercury soared. I would walk around central London in high summer done up to my eyeballs and would take family trips on the glasshouse pods of the London Eye in a zip-up fleece with fur-lined hood. If I did remove an outer layer to narrowly avoid fainting from heat exhaustion, instead of tying it around my waist or draping it around my shoulders, I would fold it up and hold it against the front of my chest to act as a visual barrier. I grew used to having the use of only one arm as well as the horrible feeling of the sweat caused by the jumper obstruction, which would collect under the breasts and run down my stomach as I walked.

I began to seriously hate summer and dreaded its arrival. It meant an enormous increase in my mental load and the possibility of not being able to properly enjoy situations and events I otherwise loved; in some cases it meant having to pull out of participating altogether. I would be invited to go on days out, such as to Thorpe Park on a glorious summer's day, and would have to turn them down, knowing full well it would be an event in which I would not be able to apply my coping strategies effectively. But, worse, in order to get out of going I'd have to either fake a family commitment or fake an illness, which made me feel awful, a deceitful, cheating liar.

Even hanging out just generally with Kat 'n' Dave became difficult. I would consciously try to steer our decisions on what to do to be an activity that involved staying indoors and not moving very much, such as watching a movie, which was one of my favourite activities given that it allowed me to sit hugging a cushion to my chest. A sad departure from the outdoors adventure-loving child I had once been.

I felt so ashamed, but I couldn't tell anyone. This issue was so personal it was well beyond anything I could share even with my closest friends. My hopes about Kat being like me had increased as she too had seemed to struggle with her physical development and the wearing of bras. But I couldn't even begin to broach the subject and, at any rate, it wasn't too long before she managed to figure out what I seemingly could not and took to wearing bras and being, if not proud, at least comfortable with this aspect of her body. I remember how crestfallen I was the moment I realised this. It meant I really was alone with feeling this certain knowledge that my body should not be doing this and thus, even among other gender variant people I knew, I was different, an outcast from literally all of society. I was at least glad that Kat's breasts were becoming as sizable as mine, which meant I was spared suffering the concern that hers would be small and I would be consumed with that particular painful jealousy. Interestingly, my jealousy towards Dave remained quite mild; I never developed the same level of burning inner vitriol towards him as I did towards James or boys in my class. I'm not quite sure why, perhaps it was because I was aware he wasn't having the best adolescence himself at his own school, which meant my jealousy at his body developments was overridden by concern and anger on his behalf.

My body's developing continued unabated. It was now moving beyond the point where it was possible to hide their existence, even in a jumper, and I worked hard to build supporting walls in my mind to deal with this threat to my stability. Something was going to have to be done, as time began to run out on even my most cunning strategies and I took to devoting all of my free mental time to the solving of this

escalating problem. I had already established that bandaging was a no go (a fact I'm very glad of given what I now know of the dangers of binding with bandages), but one day I hit upon the idea of wearing my swimming costume under my t-shirt to stop them from moving around – a sensation I hated deeply for it reminded me they were there, and to create something of the socially acceptable chest shape.

This had a chance, I thought, because I could still bear to wear my swimming costume, although only when under the water; any time out of the water required an immediate covering towel or top or else the use of my forearms drawn right across my chest so that my fists rested under my chin. I would stand for ages like that as we waited on the winding stairs for a go on the flumes in the fake tropical paradise that was Aqua Splash in Hemel Hempstead. I went out wearing my swimming costume as an undergarment a few times with Kat 'n' Dave, skateboarding down a very steep red brick lane we called 'Jordan's Hill' around the back of the local leisure centre up by the playing fields, revelling in the recovery of a small part of the joy and freedom I once had at the comfort in and use of my own body. I hoped they wouldn't notice I was wearing a swimming costume, but of course they did, in hindsight it was ridiculous to think they wouldn't, and the wind blowing up the bottom of my t-shirt as I rode my skateboard down the hill certainly made it very clear. It was a reasonably successful strategy in terms of managing the mental anguish, but overheating from the skin-tight nylon soon reared itself as a problem and after Kat 'n' Dave had teased me as 'swimming costume girl', I abandoned the practice in panic.

THE CROP TOPS OF SHAME

The single greatest thing Mum has ever given me in the whole of my life was a navy blue Nike sports half-length crop top. She had bought it for herself, but had given it to me as a possible solution. It extended half way down my torso and had no tight elastic band on the bottom, nor any specific 'cup' areas, it was

merely a tight tank-type top. I was severely dubious, but the situation was getting extremely desperate. It was early May 2002 and I could feel the brain-melting burden of summer drawing ever closer once again. It was now at the point where there was absolutely no chance of taking off my jumper at all. If it came to it I was simply going to have to faint. But when I put that Nike top on in the bathroom, The Rage rumbled, but did not erupt. I put on my t-shirt and found that not only did it stop the movement, it also created a passable 'socially acceptable' shape. The relief that flowed throughout my body was extraordinary and burst out of me in waves of tears and laughter befitting the fact a massive mental cloud had just been removed and I could see the blue sky again. It wasn't the ultimate solution, I knew, but it was enough to allow me to function in the world for the foreseeable future at least. I asked Mum to get me another so that I could have one to wear when the other was in the wash. I could now go out in a t-shirt again and give the appearance of a normal bra-wearing adolescent who wasn't consumed with hatred towards their secondary sex characteristics.

The first time I tried it out was at the cadet weekend of the St John Ambulance division, of which I would rise to become Sergeant Leader. During this weekend, we would sleep over at the hall and work towards a 'proficiency' in a first aid-related subject. We were called in for the exam one by one on the sweltering Sunday afternoon, while everyone else engaged in a game of volleyball in the yard. I stood for a long time in front of the long mirror in the toilets, staring at my front and side profile; would it pass the test? There was only one way to find out. To my utter relief, no one looked at me funny or made any comment as I stepped out in my red England away kit shirt. The relief and joy of simply being able to take part in a game like that was unreal. It gave me a piece of vital hope that there was indeed a way forward. Even so, I felt a severe need to keep them a secret; I was ashamed of them as I was of having these breasts and, if people had to know about the latter, I was desperate to make sure the former remained for my knowledge only.

Despite this breakthrough, trying to play sport was a different situation and required a different solution. It was now a completely horrific experience, which was a serious issue given that I was a member of Watford Girls Football Club and had been press-ganged by my school Physical Education (PE) teachers to try out for the Hertfordshire county team, for whom, quite to my shock, I was selected to play as left back. I still loved football and had been persuaded a year before to join Watford by Dad. My friend Sarah, who had also gone from St Peter's to Westfield, was already there and so I felt somewhat comfortable trying to fit in with the team. But now it had come to the point where I could not go on without exposing myself to serious ridicule. To my pain, the navy crop top proved to be no good for serious sport and anyhow I was terrified of breaking it lest it be impossible to find another replacement. However, my deep aversion to engaging with this problem meant I was left in a massive panic the night before my first county game, desperately trying to find a solution. I found it the form of Mum's bright orange sports bra, which I took out of her gym bag in the back of her wardrobe. I tried it on briefly to make sure it fit and then threw into my own kit bag in relief and disgust. The whole way to the match I was moody and stressed, trying and failing to contain the pain and anger I felt at being in this situation, at having the enjoyment of this game sucked out of me.

Wearing the sports bra in the match was every bit as mentally straining as I had expected, especially since it wasn't wholly successful at stopping the movement and my anger at their presence upon me overwhelmed my ability to concentrate, which led to a number of anger-relieving fouls, one of which earned me a yellow card. As a coping strategy to the hideous irritation, I also began to purposefully stop running around as much as possible, doing the absolute bare minimum of work. I gave a poor performance, which unsurprisingly marked the only game I would play for the county team. Playing football had now become a thoroughly miserable experience and would continue to be so for the rest of my playing days as I

moved with Sarah to Garston Ladies Football Club. It would have been easier to stop playing, but I didn't feel like I could do that, I didn't think I could just say I didn't want to play anymore and I had got it in my head it would be letting the team down, as a naturally left-footed defensive player, I knew I was fairly valued.

So the horror continued as I grew out of Mum's sports bra and was forced to take myself shopping for a replacement in the form of a white Nike sports crop top that I made sure was too big so that the band was as loose as possible. This was so that I could bear to wear it on the journey to the pitch, which was often just in a field, and thus the chances of finding somewhere to put it on were I not already wearing it were slim and I didn't dare risk being caught out. I couldn't play with it so loose however and so I stuck a large safety pin in the band, which I used to hold it at the back where I had pulled it together. Just before the game started, I would have to scramble about at my back under my shirt and brace my mental defences to fight against the rage of dysphoria. I could have played better, I could have been so much better than I was. Breast dysphoria well and truly took football and indeed most sports from me in the end and I was glad when I eventually managed to use the excuse of mounting A-level workload to extricate myself from it. I wished so much it didn't have to be that way.

VICIOUS CYCLES

So distressed was I at the development of breasts, I had forgotten almost entirely about the concept of menstruation and was caught off guard when it arrived shortly after I turned 12. It was easy to forget; it's not something that is seen or even talked about in 'polite society' no doubt because a lot of men can't deal with it or don't want to hear about it. Mum had kept her sanitary items well out of sight in the bathroom and the discussions and anatomical diagrams used to broach the subject in my late primary/early secondary sex education lessons were easy to keep at a mental remove. The dysphoria during these

times was unsurprisingly high; it made me confront, for the first time, the nature of the *inside* of my body, reminding me with every cramp-ache that I was filled with such structures. And further, I was forced to confront the fact they were now active and that I was capable of *being pregnant* and *giving birth*. The idea of those things was terrifying to me because they represented states about as far away as was physically possible from that which I wanted my body to become. The idea that I was capable of reaching those states was met with violent opposition from the back of my mind and I snatched those thoughts from my consciousness and banished them away into the darkness. Such things did not and would never apply to me! And that was final. I couldn't be grouped with those girls in my class who were excited and proud to have achieved this ability. I felt happy for them in their joy, but it was a joy completely alien to me and I could not attach it to myself.

It was harder to get away from the realities of menstruation and the days preceding it where the peaks and troughs of hormones caused chaos to my emotional stability, as if I was a marionette being made to dance by an unseen force. I had already studied and duly memorised the classic diagram showing the changes in the levels of the four hormones throughout the menstrual cycle in relation to the state of the womb lining and it made me angry to think of it going on inside my body for the fact it meant my bloodstream was overflowing with that most hated of all hormones, oestrogen, knowledge which only further ratcheted my anger at the exact time my emotional threshold had been lowered. I knew my reaction was different, others just got on with it. And though no girls I knew enjoyed these symptoms of premenstrual syndrome (PMS) or the way it was made fun of by boys and men, I knew none who appeared to attach the same type of hatred to the underlying causes as me. They were angry at the inconvenience of it all; I was beyond angry at the fact it meant I had a womb.

That's not to say I wasn't also angry at the inconvenience it caused as it intruded into my life. Following on from our 2001 carvanners-at-large holiday in Canada, the next summer

I found myself tenting on a holiday park in France. The heat on the continent was unreal, the type of dry and unrelenting heat that makes you want to submerge yourself in a large body of cool water for the entire day. But, alas, the cycle had decided now was the moment to puncture my carefully constructed equilibrium. I sat on the edge of a sun lounger watching James belly flop into the pristine turquoise water, which glistened enticingly in the glaring sun, anger burning a hole in my heart. He kept asking me why I didn't want to come in. I couldn't bear him knowing why I *couldn't* go in, I couldn't bear him knowing this was occurring to me. He splashed around, lying in a blissful starfish on the surface as I sat with the heat bearing down on my neck, sweat accumulating under the carefully hidden breasts.

I boiled over. As fast as I could I bolted from the pool and back to our tent where Dad, after some quiet time, was sat reading in the shade. As soon as he asked me what was wrong I collapsed into a fit of uncontrollable tears. He picked me up and held me in his arms on the chair as I tried to say through racks of sobs how I hated not being able to go in. He seemed to know why; I suspected Mum had told him. I cried and cried and cried tears that signified a deep, long held pain, the type of tears that come because there is no more space inside for them to stay, the type of tears that mean you have finally come face to face with a searing grief. I needed to cry those tears. I needed to grieve for my lost body, for my once dysphoria unburdened mind.

I suspected he thought it was my first one as he rubbed my back soothingly and told me gently how it was all part of growing up and how that wasn't always easy. Indeed it was not. He had always been able to fix everything; it had always been safe in his arms, but he couldn't save me from *this* pain. Not this time, not anymore. I was alone with this heartache and I always would be. At least the emotional release had spared me a mental breakdown and I clung to his shoulder exhausted, trying to shut the floodgates once more.

ROUND PEG, SQUARE HOLE

I was 14 when I last openly wore a t-shirt in public. To my continual horror, the breasts had now grown beyond a D cup and were still growing and every day I burned with jealousy towards those girls who moaned in the changing room that theirs weren't as big as they wanted. The navy crop tops of shame, as I called them, had stretched to adapt and to my complete relief, still operated well enough to keep the movement to a minimum, but to my deep sadness, the passable 'socially acceptable' shape I'd had was lost and in a t-shirt it was completely obvious I was flouting this cultural norm. The crop tops were now only a half solution and I was back to being unable to walk around freely in a t-shirt. Once again I enveloped myself in layers of material, like my denim jacket, which I wore almost every day for three years, its heaviness proving to have a pleasing flattening effect on the front of my chest. Back again came the tests of endurance as I pushed my body as far towards heat exhaustion as I could go without collapsing. Back again came the holding of coats and bags in front of my chest and the frustration of having the freedom of my arms so curtailed. Back again came the resort to the devious deceits of fake illnesses, fake commitments and how I'd 'forget' to put on sun cream, which, as a very fair individual, meant I couldn't possibly risk taking off my jumper.

As I grew older, the pain of having this secret, that I was not conforming to this social standard like everyone else and the underlying reason why – that I hated what was happening to my body, that I had locked a critical aspect of my entire being away in the back of my mind, which now felt as though it was rotting into a foul and dangerous mess inside its prison walls, began to grate on me harder and harder every day. As teenagers, people are always a paradox; desperate to stand out as individuals, but also desperate to fit in with the crowd. I was no different, I wanted so badly to fit in, life would be inordinately simpler if I could just be like everybody else. I wanted to be free as I had been before and not be weighed down by this burden of dysphoria *all the time*. It's like having

to wade through sludge while trying to keep up with everyone else as they skip along merrily on a clear path. You burn with pain from the effort and cry and cry with the never-ending exhaustion of it all.

I also wanted to fit in because of the rising social preoccupation of everyone around me with dating and the exploration of romance, which form a huge part of most people's lives. I wanted it to be a part of mine too, I wanted to experience the highs and the lows and learn the lessons your teenage years are meant to teach you about relationships and love. But whenever I thought about it, my secrets and underlying dysphoria would grab hold of those thoughts and squeeze the life out of them. Though I had been able to think about it enough to know with certainty that I was attracted to boys, which of course I had expected, given that it was the early 2000s and we were still under the spectre of Section 28 and years away from the Equality Act. I was taught absolutely nothing about gay people in school or out and my knowledge of it was limited to a 'rare deviation' that you could and should laugh at. It was still acceptable to have a serious debate on whether being gay was a lifestyle, newspapers still outed people on the front page and I couldn't name a single singer or actor or sportsperson who was willingly open about this part of who they were. It's quite shocking to think back, just a few years really, to that time when there was such a lack of visibility in mainstream culture and at how normal we thought it was to consider homosexuality as a joke, as an insult. I include myself in that. The messaging was all around us all the time; it permeates into you as an unconscious bias and the phrase 'that's so gay' became a part of my vocabulary as it did with everyone else I knew. Thus one was not primed to entertain the notion that the heterosexual expectation would not be fulfilled.

So I was a girl and therefore I would like boys and, right on schedule, I found this to be so. But I discovered within the fleeting moments of imagining a relationship with these boys that I could not stomach the idea of being thought of as a 'girlfriend' in any of the ways that that manifested. This was

hardly surprising, but, as always, I did not allow myself to probe into it any further. I should have, but I had not anticipated the fight I would have on my hands to engage in the arena of attraction without slamming repeatedly into the bars of the cage in that forbidden mental place. I could not deal with it, the anger and mental danger it caused was too much and so I withdrew myself very forcefully from the arena. But the pain of this action would not go away, nor did it dull with time. I didn't want to spend my life alone, the thought terrified me deeply; to become an adult that was, at best, naive and unpractised in these matters, or, at worst, genuinely unable to love in this way – to create or maintain a functional relationship. You are meant to go through trials and tribulations in your teen and early adult years for a reason and, if everybody else did and I did not, would that leave me on an unequal footing, dangerously unprepared in my later adult years when the stakes are arguably higher? The fear of this, perhaps more than any other, made me desperate to try harder than I ever had before to fit in as the world told me I should.

SECOND TIME LUCKY?

I had had enough. One day in May of 2004, as I struggled through yet another sex-segregated PE class filled with 'who's dating who' gossip, whilst refusing to take off my red PE jumper, despite the river of sweat, I snapped. *'I can't do this anymore,'* I thought with anguish. *'I can't do any of it.'* Puberty and its irreversible, powerful hormones, which were seeping into my bloodstream every day had my body at their mercy. I had clung desperately to the few things still in my control: my hair and my clothes. But, to my body, the damage was done; the fork in the road had long disappeared out of sight behind me and it was time to stop hanging on to the past, I needed to face the future, prepare for it so that I stood any sort of chance of a fulfilled life. And so in the changing rooms, as I hurriedly engulfed my torso in my purposely too large blue school shirt and jumper and contorted my arms painfully to remove the red jumper and white

t-shirt I was still wearing underneath, I knew it had come to this. I had to try and conform to expectation, and the small vent of gender expression that relieved the pressure from the cage in my mind, would have to be closed. I must completely cut off the route into that cage, there must be no more life, however feeble, breathed into the notion of this other way I ought to be. I told myself forcefully that I was a girl, I didn't have to be a 'girly' one, but I did have to completely accept that. Maybe then I'd be able to successfully overcome this terrible dysphoria. To do this, I decided it was time to go back to the bra shop and it was time to regrow my hair.

Mum was demonstrably happy that I had agreed at last to her desire to take me back to the Marks and Spencer store to try again. She had hit upon the idea of sports bras, having realised I was stealing her orange sports top, but I had fiercely resisted for months. We made the trip after a school day which saw me learn absolutely nothing from dread and worry. I had built a fortress out of bricks made of loneliness and fear around the back of my mind and I spent the whole time hoping that it would hold and I could do this. Standing in the cubicle, The Rage was rumbling, but the walls held as my conviction to conform burned harder than the The Rage. The sports bra was never going to be completely comfortable, but I could see a way of functioning in day-to-day life with it on and that's all that mattered. It made me feel relieved and uncharacteristically relaxed to think my life was about to become incredibly simplified to a degree I could barely remember.

I also had another very pressing reason for being deeply relieved it could work this time; I was to go on holiday to Tenerife with a friend from school. She was an only child and her parents had said she could bring someone on the family holiday to share the experience with her. I was flattered to be asked and excited to go on a holiday without my parents, one that was intriguingly hotel based instead of caravanning, but I was also terrified of the hot conditions and of being in the company of adults I didn't know very well, who would not be expecting me to display odd coping behaviours. I maintained

my conformity conviction strongly throughout the holiday, ignoring with every fibre of my being the moments of pain as The Rage beat down upon the walls of my mental fortress, instead focusing all my energy onto those moments of unbridled joy at experiencing, for the first time in years, the simple act of walking around in heat in only a t-shirt with arms free, to walk around not caring what others thought about how I looked, to have some semblance of comfortableness in my own skin.

It wasn't to last. Almost as soon as we were home, I saw the cracks in the fortress walls as I exhausted all my strength to hold back the feelings beating upon them. It was never going to hold up, built on a foundation of lies as it was, and, like all things thus created, it came tumbling down. My feelings of bodily hatred were now stronger than ever for having been so constrained and more than ever I couldn't bear to look at myself in the mirror, at what my body had become. For all my strength and determination, I had failed in my quest to make myself be a regular girl, to make myself believe that it was so. I was once again plunged into the festering pit of coping mechanisms as summer swept in. Back I went to hiding from the sun like I was a vampire, shutting myself away in my room to ferment in my own moodiness. There, I tried to come to terms with the likely nature of my future.

I was going to be stuck with this half-life, this pained existence, these burdening coping mechanisms for rest of my life. And further, it was overwhelmingly likely, it seemed to me, that relationships and love were not going to be an option for me and it would be best if I did not dwell on the idea any longer. I could not be a girl who was loved by a boy, I could see no type of straight boy who would be interested in what I was: someone who flew into an internal and sometimes external rage every time they heard 'she' and 'her' and exhibited every refusal to be placed in that category for reasons they could not articulate. Nor could I be a girl who was loved by a girl, for the same reasoning and of course because I simply wasn't attracted to them, despite the assumptions of everyone around me based on the common conflation of sexuality and gender

expression. But nor was I a boy who could be loved by a boy, as my understanding of homosexuality began to be thankfully reshaped by the growing education of society. What did I have to offer a boy thus attracted? The situation as I understood it then was hopeless. Sadly, I did not have the luxury of awareness of the concept of wider sexual diversity and of the surprising nature of love. From the options I knew were available to me then, I could see no hope and so I made a diversionary route for those feelings that led straight into the emotional cavern in the back of my mind into which they would enter and never return.

A* IN SELF-LOATHING

My self-esteem was now incredibly low. I hated almost everything about myself and had no sense of hope for a happy and fulfilled future. The only thing in which I had genuine pride was my academic ability and achievement. Whilst everyone else was out having fun in the sun, going on dates and getting ‘fake drunk’ on bottles of cheap cider in the local park, I sat in my room and read widely on many subjects, devouring textbooks and revision guides alike. This became my principle defence mechanism against the maddening body and life-hating thought cycles: drown them out in attempts to understand quantum teleportation and in the memorisation of the entire periodic table.

Up until this point I had been reasonably academically successful, always in the top quarter of the class for every subject but never really at the top. However, in time for the lead up to my GCSE exams I became an academic obsessive, caring little for the notion of work–life balance, which I decided didn’t apply to me as it was reserved for people for whom it was actually an option. Clearly, the easiest way to become a perfectionist is to achieve perfection and, once I had done so, assimilating knowledge and skills and acing every test became my life and the more it happened, the more I needed it. I hung my entire self-worth upon it and anything less than perfection

in this area wounded me deeply. In this way I grew a reputation for being super smart, which went some way to plugging the gaping hole inside me left by my failures in the areas of love and physical confidence. Crucially, it was an area in which I could have something that I didn't wish to swop with James, who, even in the year above, paled to my knowledge in many areas. I was going to decimate him and others with my exam results and I would live off the self-worth-saving feelings of academic superiority for many months.

Despite my failure to make myself believe in the idea I was a regular girl, I kept to the plan to grow my hair out and in fact did so longer than it had ever been, right down to my shoulders, in some kind of attempt at overcompensation. I did not enjoy the way it made me look or the way it laid to rest the very last of the possibility I had to be presumed a boy. Though I had to admit the new found safety I had gained from the clutches of the Toilet Police was a relief. I was no longer a prime target for bullying and made it out of secondary school without any further incidence, but it had taken hiding myself in conformity to do so. Looking back at the photos of my sweet sixteen birthday party, the last I would enjoy at the ice rink in Hemel Hempstead, I was about as far away from the young adult I wished to become as it was possible to be.



The teenage years are the hardest time for most people, but mine were filled with a type of exquisite pain that cannot really be known by anyone who has not experienced it – though I have done my best to give a flavour of the daily struggles that, unlike other teen problems, had no end in sight, no future adult time when things would be different, be better. To be clear, I do not and have never thought that there is anything inherently wrong or nasty about female secondary sex characteristics and I can and do appreciate the beauty of the feminine form. It is just that they were not meant to be happening to me. Everything

about seeing them on my body was wrong, the breasts, the hips, all of it just didn't belong.

The slow torture of being a helpless bystander to my wrongly changing body and juggling the mental and emotional burden of the shame it invoked took a terrible toll on the quality of my life. I was no longer free to run and jump and play. The dysphoria from the breasts and the coping behaviours I had to implement left me feeling as though I had become disabled in some way. The mental burden was extraordinary, just to get through the most mundane of average days. Further, I am left with a profound sense of sadness for what dysphoria did to the development of my personality. I became shy, introverted, shrouded in melancholy and deeply concerned with my inner state, which was as fragile as a candle in the wind and forced constantly to lie and deceive. I am a fantastic liar, but I was not born with that skill, it developed in the years I spent faking illnesses, making up family engagements, encasing myself in jackets and jumpers, pretending I had forgotten to put on sun cream. These are the twisted, deceitful and conniving things I had to engage in to survive gender dysphoria. It felt awful having to lie to my friends and family but I had no choice, I could not bear the alternative.

I feel incredibly fortunate to have made it through this time, a time when many have fallen, but as I settled into my melancholic shadow existence, observing but never fully participating in the ordinary rites of youthful life, I could not see clearly how my life would unfold from here in any way that made it something to look forward to.