

# Beyond the Bluffs

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I WANT TO TELL YOU ABOUT A TRIP I TOOK. Not a travelogue like you'd find in a travel magazine, because it was no ordinary trip. No. This trip covered unquantifiable distances, lasted decades, and traversed some seriously perilous terrain. What I want to tell you is how I bluffed my way from one pole of the gender binary to the other and back, with no small amount of meandering in between.

Before I go on, you may be wondering if it's possible that I'm just confusing—or at least conflating—gender fluidity with bluffing. Let me explain. I came of age in a time and place devoid of concepts like gender questioning, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, genderqueer, nonbinary, transgender, or two-spirit. In this same time and place, homosexuality—now more aptly called same-gender attraction—was shrouded in shame and brought up only in gossipy murmurs or, conversely, jarring salvos of verbal violence. Wearing clothes intended for the “opposite” gender was derisively labeled “cross-dressing” and tolerated only on Halloween or on the stage. Put simply, we were all lashed onto the side of the gender binary that aligned with our assigned birth sex. And if we weren't willing to couple with someone on the opposite side of the binary, we were lumped into a category of either “old maid” or “confirmed bachelor” and assumed to be gay.

As a young child I experienced myself as a boy, so that's how I presented and acted. I reveled in collections of Matchbox cars and baseball cards. I eagerly invited new acquaintances to squeeze my miniature biceps as I flexed mightily through my prized Miami Dolphins football jersey. I emulated my dad by slicking my hair with his Brylcreem and traipsing through the house shirtless with a towel circling my waist. My family made sense of me and my behavior by declaring it a “tomboy phase” that would run its course. Even so, there were plenty of occasions requiring me to flip—more like a flop, really—into girl mode for a few hours: Sunday School and church; school picture day; unexpected visits from family friends bearing gifts of baby dolls or pink, flowery coloring books. These moments were loathsome but survivable

once I learned to rearrange just the top layers of my skin like a chameleon changing its colors to outsmart a predator.

Then came puberty and with it horrifying changes to my body's topography and stringent unwritten rules about not straying from one's assigned side of the gender binary. Stifling societal expectations of the time, cosigned by my family, sounded a buzzer of tomboy intolerance. Game over. The choice was clear: flip forever to the side of the binary marked “female” and stand on the *terra firma* of widespread approval or cling to the “male” side and face exile to a wasteland of loneliness and rejection. So flip to female it was.

I felt a door slam behind my decision. Life collapsed into a flat monochrome where things sounded tinny and tasted bland, where I was clad in an ill-fitting woolen skin, and where my heart smoldered amidst a pile of charred authenticity. The cognitive dissonance I felt was unbearable; I needed to find some way to bear it. So I bluffed. I bluffed with clumsy, clownish blush and eyeshadow and with gaudy earrings from Claire's and with boyfriends I secretly both despised and envied for their broadening shoulders and darkening peach fuzz. My bluff broadcasted a deceptively simple declarative question to myself and the world: I'm a girl?

Once up and running, my bluffing apparatus operated smoothly enough, flying me under the gender radar most of the time. But sometimes it malfunctioned. Like during my late teens when I briefly returned to a shorter hairstyle and took to wearing vintage men's shirts. Out at a family dinner, a waiter referred to me as “Sir.” Horrified, I reacted with immediate and vehement bluffing. *I am NOT a SIR*, I hissed righteously; *I am a MA'AM*. My family chortled at the exchange while my paper-thin self-esteem shriveled in the heat of shame. I would, I vowed, grow my hair back, jettison the shirts, and carry a purse.

In adulthood, the stakes mounted with each successive bluff. My fear of being caught proliferated like fungus in the dark, clammy interior space where the bluffs incubated and hatched. I bluffed my way through interviews

into jobs, through courtship into marriage, through pregnancy into childbirth. I wore my wedding band confidently, like it was a Kevlar vest that would protect me from potential bluff-calling snipers. Alcohol, with its ability to simultaneously fuel and anesthetize me, became a frequent coconspirator.

But marriage and motherhood couldn't bullet-proof me in the way I hoped, whether I drank or not. Holding my infant son out in the world, I could sense people looking at me quizzically, perhaps wondering if I was his nanny. He didn't look like me, and despite tremendous effort on my part, my wife-and-mother costume was chronically askew, my long hair heavy and shapeless, like a bad wig. I couldn't get it right because I couldn't fake the essence of who I was.

Over time I bluffed so desperately that I began to hemorrhage self-hatred. But even as it oozed out of every pore, some long-buried sense of true self began to stir deep within, undetected. With what seemed hardly any warning at all, survival instincts rose from my depths, surging with the might of a tsunami and sweeping me from one shore of the gender binary to the other. I surfaced waterlogged and disoriented. Unsure of where I had landed or where I wanted to head, I took my bluff by the hand and squished forward with a cautious plan. First, leave my husband and shed the homemaker guise. Next, stick a toe into the waters of bisexuality, then wade tentatively into lesbianism. But not too fast. I didn't want to strip my bluff naked and plunge it into the bracing waters of an inconvenient truth I wasn't prepared to navigate. My husband and family were already calling my bluff at a level that I could barely withstand. *Have you been lying this WHOLE time?? Surely you must just be confused—you said you enjoyed breastfeeding!* I felt trapped inside an echo chamber.

I believe that when one survives for so long by using a maladaptive strategy, it changes the cellular structure that holds the survivor together, like a mutation. The maladaptation cannot, therefore, be pulled out like a power chord; it must be weaned, titrated slowly so the survivor remains a survivor.

Four years postdivorce, I began cutting my hair, which I had grown down my back to prove

that, even though I was a lesbian, I was female, as evidenced by every inch of my exceedingly long hair. First, I pruned it into bouncy shoulder length layers. Then a chin-length shag. Then I marched into an old-school barber shop and emerged with a high and tight. Each stage of the experiment had gone so well that I started to believe that cutting my hair was the solution and that the next phase of my progression, a quarter-inch crewcut, would quite literally be the crowning moment in my return to masculinity. Newly shorn and walking on air, I strode into work. A male coworker took one look and pronounced me "GI Jane," calling my bluff and bursting my bubble in one fell swoop.

Knee-jerking again, I threw myself headlong into a campaign to purge anything I'd ever purchased in the women's section, save for very tight sports bras that squelched any sign of my breasts. With my new wardrobe, a crew cut, naturally narrow hips, and a lot of work at the gym, people began assuming me to be a prepubescent boy. That is, until I exposed my own bluff by introducing myself or otherwise speaking in a female-sounding adult voice.

Even when my bluff succeeded, it didn't. At thirty-eight years old, being mistaken for a prepubescent boy was irritating at best and abjectly humiliating at worst, especially because my son was now an actual prepubescent boy. I had naively hoped that getting sober and consistently presenting my gender in the way that felt most natural for me would, as it had during childhood, provide me with a "good enough" level of comfort in my own skin. But I was starting to hemorrhage self-loathing again, and I needed to stem the bleeding, quickly.

By this time, trans people—both those in the larger world and those in my small corner of it—were showing me possibilities I hadn't ever imagined for myself. Possibilities that could, theoretically, put an end to my dependency on bluffing. But I struggled with the question of whether any amount of transitioning would put an end to it. Would I be able to dial back the inner critic who constantly wagged its finger in my face, castigating me for being a pitiful impostor while at the same time haranguing me

that my only chance at safety and acceptance hinged on bluffing? Would hormones and surgery really remove any of the self-doubt and self-loathing that surrounded my every cell like interstitial fluid?

I ruminated. Cogitated. Therapized. Agonized. For years.

Then, for the first time, someone called my truth, rather than my bluff. An unwitting stranger living five hundred miles away in my mother's Alzheimer's unit recognized me as "Keith," a friend from some past chapter of his life. A thrill reverberated through me, vital and true, setting wheels into motion. It was as though his recognition was the permission I'd been waiting for. In a matter of weeks, I began hormone replacement therapy and changed my name at the county courthouse—to Keith.

My first testosterone injection felt laced with exhilaration. With each of those early doses, I felt affirmed. Empowered. Indomitable. I spent inordinate amounts of time in the mirror, searching for my long lost self in signs of thickening facial hair or muscle. But the mirror disappointed. I still looked boyish and soft. Even more disappointing, I continued to be "ma'amed" by strangers and misgendered and deadnamed by all but the most supportive familiars. Collectively, it felt like a negating referendum on my legitimacy. Like I was still bluffing.

After six months of testosterone, my hopes were reignited by thickening vocal cords, fledgling sideburns, expanding muscle mass, and some promising, if patchy, stubble. During those months, I also punched my ticket by successfully slogging through the tedious and vulnerable work of changing my name everywhere and obtaining new identification documents. The horizon gleamed brightly ahead.

A car accident on a moonless December night in Virginia snuffed my anticipatory glow with an icy blast. In a whirl of blue lights, my male name, sideburns, and deep voice were rendered invisible—or at least insignificant—by the microscopically small "F" on my driver's license. Two hypermasculine cops, blinded by the speck of a gender marker, were calling my bluff, politely addressing me as "ma'am" in front of several

onlookers. Words echoing across decades yearned for rearrangement and release but remained a frozen knot in my throat. *I am NOT a MA'AM, I am a SIR!*

The following day I returned to Massachusetts in my broken car with an equally broken sense of self. The car was beyond reasonable repair. Was I?

The local car dealership required my driver's license to complete the trade-in on the remnants of my car. Begrudgingly, I fished it out of my wallet and handed it over, a stain of shame from the recent scene with the police spreading hot between my shoulder blades. A few minutes later, I overheard the sales manager refer to me as "she" and "her" while talking to the sales rep about my transaction. Two men calling my bluff again. I stiffened, teetering on a tightwire of choice. Would I speak up or would I continue to lurk, small and shadowed, in the spidery cellar of my fear?

I took a breath and cleared my throat. *Hey, fellas, I use male pronouns.* That was the truth, even if it felt like a bluff. They replied simply, *Oh. Okay.*

The following week, I waited in a serpentine line at the RMV to change the "F" to "M" on my driver's license.

A year later, I had chest reconstruction surgery and changed the gender marker on my birth certificate.

Two years later, I grew a beard and applied for a new passport with the correct name and gender marker.



Six years later I continue to grow new hair on my body and lose it on my head. I haven't gotten a single "ma'am" in quite a while.

Through these and other incremental turns of a few degrees, I've finally rounded the bend from bluff into truth. But occasionally, I still call my own bluff if something diverts my gaze from life's windshield to its rearview mirror for too long. Like when I'm jolted by the receipt of mail addressed to my deadname or when I sit in the parking lot of the turnpike rest stop, debating with my bladder about whether I really need to use the bathroom that I just saw the guy wearing





a Trump hat go into. Or when someone calls me “Sir,” and it takes a few seconds to realize they’re talking to me.

When something conjures the phantom of the old gender bluff, I wonder: How is it that as a child, I knew the truth, knew who I was and could mostly disregard the Greek chorus telling me I was wrong? And how did I get so far away from that for so long that I could scarcely find my way back? And how, even now that I have returned like a prodigal son, can I still sometimes wander off, momentarily forgetting myself?

Searching for an answer, I consult one of my favorite books—the dictionary. In it, I find not so much an answer as an idea for reframing my bluff. Bluff. Not as a lie, but as a geographic feature. A cliff or a hill with a tall face on one side, shaped by erosion from the natural flow of water on the outside bend of a meander. Maybe, I think, I am that kind of bluff. Shaped by erosion from the natural flow of my long struggle for identity that has alternately meandered and raged with a swollen turbulence. I let it sink in. I feel its truth. I raise my weathered face, proud that I am still flowing, grateful for the view provided by the erosion, and no longer convinced that phantom pain is a threat to my identity—or my existence. ❁