

## A Kid's Guide to Coming Out

**2003:** Play catch with your brother and the babysitter who sometimes teaches you addition and sometimes watches TV. Your brother keeps dropping the ball and tries to redeem himself by showing off his new vocabulary. Scrunch up your face when he calls you a lesbian. Neither of you know what it means. Look to your babysitter whose flushed cheeks betray her embarrassment. Try to understand her definition: *That's not a good word to use. I mean, it's not a bad thing, but you don't call people that... it's a girl who marries other girls. Just don't say it again, ok?* Think of your friends who are girls. There aren't too many to think of. Think of Alexandra and the way she stacks her blocks during free time, organizing the colors: red, green, yellow, blue; red, green, yellow, blue. Decide that you could spend your life stacking blocks with her. Come out as a lesbian on the spot. No one takes you seriously and your parents sit you down the next day to explain that you're too young to understand these things, just like you're too young to appreciate your vegetables.

**2006:** Jog around the gym, hoping today is a dodgeball day. Cheer with your friends as the teacher announces the game. Stare impatiently at your teacher's nose as he explains the rules for the hundredth time. Count the freckles. *No headshots allowed.* The teacher is feeling generous: *girls versus boys.* Grin goofily and scamper over to the boys' side where you always go. No one has ever thought twice about this, but there's a new boy in class today. Prepare your excuses. *The girls don't try hard enough. All of my friends are on this team.* Those should do. Get a couple of people out before you peg someone in the head. Sit out for the rest of the round.

**2009:** Push open the door to the girls' locker room, your sweaty palms leaving marks on the wood. Your friends revel in having beat you in scooter hockey in the way that only sixth graders can. At least no one ran over your fingers today. Fidget with your lock, too flustered by the gloating to open it properly. Three turns to the right; two to the left; one to the right. As you reach for your school clothes, remember that you forgot to wear the bra you don't actually need. Fumble with your shoes as you take them off, trying to kill enough time that everyone else will leave. People are especially chatty today, trying to decide if the substitute math teacher was cute; he wasn't, but keep that opinion to yourself. Worry that you'll be late to history class for the second time this week. Pull off your shirt as fast as you can, getting it stuck around your head in the rush. One of the older girls comments that she wishes she was as skinny as you. According to her you have the perfect body apart from your flat chest. She points out that "you probably like it that way, don't you, so you can play with the boys at recess." She is oblivious to how uncomfortable you are. Mutter that yeah, you don't mind. You've never let yourself think about it before. Wonder if this means that at some point you won't get to play tackle football with the boys. Slam your locker door because it's not fair.

**2011:** Tap your pencil to the beat of your high school teacher droning on about statistics. Today you're learning about the probability of events. Drawing two aces in a row has a probability of  $(4/52) * (3/51) = 0.45\%$ . Drawing the ace of spades is more likely than drawing two aces in a row. The teacher yet again tries to convince you that you'll use this in real life; she thinks you care about the probability of a storm tomorrow given that it's raining today. Apply the lesson to something you actually care about. Think about the conversation with your brother last night. If 5% of people are gay and your brother has a boyfriend now, then the chance of both of you being

gay is  $(0.05) * (0.05) = 0.25\%$ . Your mom might be unlucky enough to drop her cell phone straight down the crack in an elevator door, but there's no way she's unlucky enough to have two gay kids. Decide you don't like math.

**2013:** Bike to the new trailhead with your best friend Brandon. Swerve in front of him and laugh as he cusses. Bail out when he slams on his brakes in front of you. Reach the top of the course and survey the jumps below. Pump your brakes nervously. Brandon bumps your wheel and tells you to man up. Bite your cheek to keep from giving him the satisfaction of a smirk, and defiantly kick off the start. By the time the two of you reach the bottom, your nervousness is replaced by a pulsing calm. Push your bikes back up the hill, listening to the persistent crunch of twigs and your own heavy breathing. The quietness suddenly feels oppressive, a vacuum closing in around you. Start talking; you aren't able to hear what you're saying over the ringing in your ears. "I've been meaning to tell you something." That's not it. "I know you probably won't care." Start over. "This isn't something I'm sure about." The conversation isn't going as you'd planned all the times you rehearsed it in your mind. Brandon jokes uneasily, "you sound like you're trying to filibuster in Congress." This snaps you out of it. Say, "I'm gay" and stare forward, your vision blanking as the ringing returns. Notice he stopped a few steps ago. Look back, afraid to see his reaction, and find him squinting at you like you've just asked how to add 2 and 3. "No shit," he'll respond. Laugh; roll your eyes; feel the anxiety melt away.

**2015:** Fumble with your new keys, the straps of your bags digging into your shoulders. Run your hand through your freshly buzzed hair and take a deep breath. Think, *I hope my roommate's not weird*; think, *I hope my roommate doesn't think I'm weird*. Swing the door open and step in.

No one's there, but her side of the room is set up already. Hope she doesn't expect your side to be this organized. Dump your bags on the bed, the frame groaning under their weight. Rub your shoulders and look around. There's a movie poster by the window from an old black and white film you've never heard of; a statue of a blue cow sits on her desk, the remnants of some inside joke; a small pride flag is taped to the wall by her bed. Do a double take. Relax because that's one less conversation you need to have. Decide college won't be so bad. Keep scanning the room and see a poster on her closet door that says "All the cool girls are lesbian." Cringe because you hate that word. Feel stupid because it makes no sense that you do. Laugh as you remember the time you punched Brandon for calling you a lesbian. Start unpacking your first bag. Pull out your crumpled t-shirts and fold them neatly so the logos are face up. As you do this, run through all the roommate horror stories you've heard. Your favorite is the guy who put itching powder in his roommate's bed every night. Snap out of your daydream as the door creaks open. Your roommate walks in and offers a shy smile, glancing briefly at her grey shoes. Say you like her decorations and nod at the pride flag. Her eyebrows raise in surprise, the corners of her mouth sneaking up in understanding as she asks, "you too? What are the odds?" Grin because you know the answer, "point two-five percent." Notice that when she laughs she squints her eyes like your mother.

**2016:** Grab your skateboard and race out the door. Pause to plug in your headphones and start your rock playlist. Make sure to put it on shuffle, and try to guess what song is coming on. "Sk8er Boi;" that's it. Weave back and forth, discreetly mouthing the words. Hear a drunk man shouting racial slurs. You're startled, but not enough to stop stalling in your music video. Wonder how the black lady at the bus stop is feeling. Notice the man looking at you; avoid eye

contact. Hear him screaming that you're a faggot. You're startled, but not enough to fall off your board. Focus on your music and the cracks in the sidewalk, but notice his height and the size of his hands. Skate away quickly, imagining having stopped and confronted him. You would've innocently looked him in the eye, asking him to repeat himself; you didn't hear him the first time. Fantasize about having gotten in a fight. Maybe you could've missed your midterm.

**2017:** Climb the ladder to the small platform at the top of Parking Structure B, marveling that no one else has found this hideout. Sit at the edge and lean forward against the railing, a dull blue in the moonlight. Look down at your dangling feet and the dim, toy-like figures below, trudging to the library, rushing to parties. Light your joint because it'll be easier this way. Exhale and watch the smoke braid itself into the crisp night air. Dial Brandon's number and let it ring once before you hang up. Tell yourself to man up and dial again. The ringing cuts off abruptly. As you hear his voice everything slows down, "Hey fag." This has been his favorite joke since you recounted last year's incident. Respond, "About that." The air feels stagnant; a song on his end that you can't quite make out distends the pause, and you know he's frantically hashing his memory for clues that you've found his joke offensive the whole time. Put him at ease. Tell him wryly that the guy from the street made some convincing arguments against being gay. A wave of guilt washes over you and just as quickly recedes. Come out as straight; come out as trans. Brandon responds as you'd expected; he asks the right questions and avoids the rest. Tell him you appreciate him. Tell him you hate him when he agrees that, "yeah, there's a lot to appreciate." After you hang up, notice the last light blink off in the office building across the street. Finish your joint as you watch the cars drive by below, turning left, stopping, fading into the night.