

WO(MAN)HOOD

By

Melissa A. Bartell

Scene 1

Lights come up on a stage that's empty except for a wing chair on a carpet with a small side table. The table holds a bottle of water – a blue bottle like Tyr Nant – and a glass. There's a throw-pillow on the chair and two more on the floor.

KELLY enters. She is wearing a black t-shirt, jeans, and black rubber flip-flops. The flat kind. Her hair is in a simple ponytail. She takes a seat in the chair and crosses one leg over the other.

Before she begins to speak, she opens the bottle of water, pours it into the glass, and takes a sip. She will continue to hold the glass.

KELLY

So, here's the thing. I was always a worrier. I worried that my grades weren't good enough, that I wasn't as pretty as the other girls, that I couldn't run as fast as the boys when we played 'tag' at recess. I worried I wasn't smart enough. I worried I was *too* smart.

As I got older, I started worrying about other things. Like, why didn't my chest look like the women in all the anime I was watching? Was there something wrong with me, that I wasn't all proud and perky? And was there something wrong with me, that I didn't see why I had to stop going topless outside, when half my pictures – up to a certain age – were of me in a hat and a diaper – or sometimes *just* a hat?

Every so often, the worry would start to overwhelm me, and I'd shut down, hiding in my room, listening to angry music, avoiding people. Eventually someone would check on me, remind me to breathe, remind me to eat. Mostly it was my mother. When I was young she was a support system.

Kelly drains the glass of water and then sets it back on the table. She tries to get comfortable in the chair again, but she's edgy, antsy. She kicks off her shoes.

KELLY

You don't mind me being barefoot do you? (beat) Good.

She slides off the chair, and sits cross-legged on the carpet in front of it, leaning forward and arranging the pillows to help support her back.

KELLY

That's much better. So... when I was twelve, I got my first period. For some girls, for some young woman, that event is a milestone to be celebrated. That mythical crossing from child to woman. For me? It was horrible. Not just the

pain from cramps, not just the mess of a heavy flow. But the nagging feeling that there was something wrong, that my body was not supposed to be doing this.

My mother told me it was just something I had to adjust to. I knew, of course, that her 'time of the month' came with a lot of pain, also, but I hadn't realized how much.

It was one of the last times I felt like she was truly on my side.

Years went by; I got older. My friends began to pair off. Most of the girls were into guys. I was into guys. I mean... to a point... but I realized that most of the time when I thought about being with a guy, the concept of sex made me really uncomfortable. But sometimes, rarely, when I fantasized about being with a guy, I was a guy too.

I didn't know where that came from. Was it normal? Was I trans? I didn't know anyone I could ask, but I knew the word 'lesbian' didn't fit me – I wasn't then, and am not now, attracted to other girls or women. But... the word 'gay' wasn't accurate either.

By the time I was seventeen, my parents were in the middle of divorce and worries had morphed into full-blown anxiety. I was struggling in school, turning into both a perfectionist and a procrastinator at once. I broke up with my boyfriend. I had panic attacks whenever I had to make any but the easiest decision.

I'd always loved music and theatre, so I tried to lose myself in that. Pretending to be other people gave me a way to figure out who I was, who I wasn't. And it also gave me a constructive way to burn off the energy that anxiety caused. On stage, even in our tiny community theatre, I was the newsboy or the lady-in-waiting, or the firebird, or the brat, or... whatever.

KELLY is restless. She gets up and paces around the stage during this next section.

KELLY

At the beginning of my last semester of my senior year of high school, I finally broke. I would go to school in a dress and something would shift in the middle of the day – I'd see my reflection in the glass window of a classroom door – and think *I'm in the wrong clothes. I'm not supposed to have breasts.* But then there were other days when I would go to school with no makeup, in a t-shirt that was baggy enough to hide my breasts, and in jeans I'd stolen from my brother, and I'd feel really good, until I'd catch some other guy staring at my chest.

I was confused. I felt alone, isolated, broken. I couldn't function.

I asked for help, and it came in the form of Prozac.

I was worried, at first. I'd heard anti-depressants can stifle your creativity, but while that may be true for some people, it wasn't true for me. With my moods evened out, I could focus on the real work: figuring out why I felt like a guy some of the time, and the girl I biologically was at other times.

Kelly pours and drinks another glass of water, then returns to the chair, but this time she sits across it, her legs dangling over one arm, her head leaning against the opposite wing.

KELLY

College is often described as a time of experimentation. You taste different disciplines, different classes. You reinvent yourself, decide that incarnation was wrong, and reinvent yourself again. You try out different relationships. Maybe you're mostly straight, but you kiss someone the same gender as you at a party. Maybe you sleep with the wrong people.

I did a lot of intellectual experimentation, but I didn't sleep with many people. Actually, I didn't sleep with *any* people. Even though there was a guy I really liked I just couldn't get past the idea that sex was squicky.

In desperation, I did what so many other young people do: I turned to the internet. Now, we all know the net is a series of rabbit holes, and some suck you in farther than others. Sometimes, you don't find anything useful, but sometimes you hit gold.

In an LGBTQ+ forum, I saw a word I'd never heard of before: *bi-gender*. I also learned about terms like dysphoria, and specifically *gender dysphoria*.

That knowledge was the second "click" moment of my entire life. I am not a label. No one is. But having words for what I was experiencing meant that I was not alone. That I wasn't somehow *wrong*. That I'm just wired differently than what most people consider to be normal.

Now, not everyone has the same experience with everything. I might love dark chocolate, while you only like milk. Lemon yellow may seem like a horrible color for you, but I might want it painted all over my walls.

The same is true of my anxiety.

And the same is true of my gender dysphoria.

Labels aren't meant to divide us. They're communication tools. They're ways we express who and what we are so that we can talk to others and find solidarity and commonalities – well, that's what we *hope* will happen.

Kelly stands up and walks to the downstage edge of the carpet.

KELLY

Look, I can't tell you if you're gay or straight or cis or trans, or something else, or none of those. I can't advise you on which path is best for you. I *can*

tell you that even when you have a label, you aren't stuck in a cookie-cutter existence. Everyone's experience is completely unique.

For *me*, being bi-gender means that most of the time (at least recently) I'm on the trans-masculine end of the gender spectrum. I dress in clothes that make my gender less obvious, and certain kinds of clothing – like anything that defines my waistline – feels like a costume, at best, and just horribly, uncomfortable at worst. On my most masculine days, I even bind my breasts, so my chest looks flatter.

But there are days when I lean more feminine. I wear long dresses and leave my hair loose. I wear makeup (I actually really enjoy experimenting with makeup.) Every time I consider having top surgery, I remember that I have girl days in between the guy days and decide against it.

When I can't cope, when even Prozac isn't enough, I have friends to distract me with jokes and music. People who listen to me talk about everything from geeky fandom things to art and philosophy.

And of course, there's always the theatre, the ultimate house of 'come as you aren't' or 'come as you wish you were.'

Here's my wish for you: may you learn your own label, and embrace it without ever letting it own you. Because while labels help us talk about things, you are not your label.

You're just you.

Kelly returns to the chair.

BLACKOUT.