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LIVING LIFE TWICE

COEN CRISP CHANGES MORE THAN PRONOUNS

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"I can tell you this..." Coen Crisp confides, folding his hands on the table before him, "I didn't recognize myself in the mirror until I was 31."

Coen is 34; short, big-boned and broad shouldered, given to dark t-shirts and shorts. He thinks of himself as 'fluffy.' His hair and beard are dark, his arms tattooed, his earlobes gauged. His eyes are sharp and his smile is quick, accentuating his cheekbones and creasing his face into laugh lines. He recognized himself in the mirror after he began hormone therapy and his beard began to come in, after he began to wear a binder. He recognized himself as he began to pass as a man.

Coen was born Brooke in Gaston County. Brooke realized she was different early on. She was attracted to girls but wanted to look and act like a guy. "I've walked like a linebacker since I was small. I'd sing in the church choir but my Mom would freak because I'd be man-spreading on the pew in front of everyone. I could wear a dress... but it was like playing dress up." Once away from home and in college, Brooke

came out as lesbian. "I couldn't think about being trans. Not then. I didn't know what it was. There was no language for it."

There's a language for being transgender now and that language is developing. It's supplied by the transgendered themselves and the LGBTQ community. It's also supplied by some members of the religious and conservative right, who use words like 'pervert' and 'predator'. This language has entered the national debate as Governor Pat McCrory trumpets that HB2 will 'protect our children'. Suddenly, members of the LGBTQ community, and especially the transgendered, find themselves in a spotlight they never wanted, forced to politicize their gender and sexuality in ways they are not necessarily comfortable with. Three weeks ago, a young trans man was beaten to death in New Orleans and his car was torched with his body inside. Three weeks ago, Omar Mateen walked into the Pulse nightclub with an assault rifle. The language of dehumanization has real consequences, affecting real lives.

These are dangerous days for the transgendered. Given that, why would Coen want his picture on the cover of an alt-weekly?

"It's time," he replies, quietly. "I've always written about my journey; it's one of the ways I process what's happening. I've written for online sites. I have a book of haiku. [*The section dividers in this story are haiku from Coen's collection, 575.*] But, in the current political climate, we're kind of forced to step out and stand up. I can pass. You'd never know I was a trans man unless I told you. But others aren't so lucky. Others don't want to---or can't---pass. Those are the really brave people. We have to stand together."

There's a strong network of support within the transgender community, much of it made possible by the Internet. Coen is achingly aware of those struggling with their sexuality without support; without family, friends, without good information. He knows there are people out there growing up the same way he did: terrified, confused, secretive.

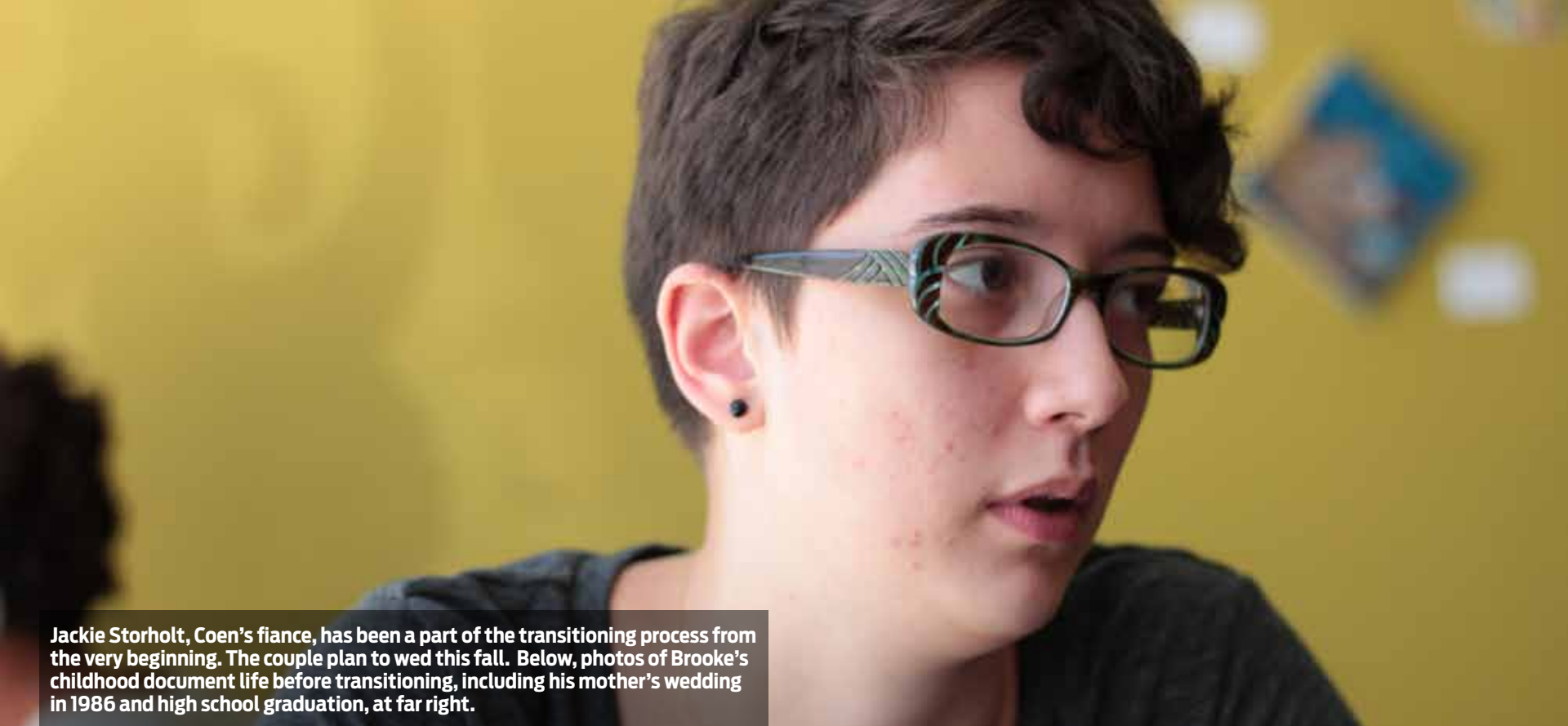
"There was no one even out as gay in my high school. No one. And I didn't know what trans was. I had to go away to college to meet anyone like me. I couldn't talk about it. I had to protect myself. And my family. I know what it's like to be out there. By yourself."

*if i could say it
if i could say it out loud
would you still be here*

We often think of identity as a set thing with hard boundaries. We believe that when we look in the mirror we always see the same self. But that self can change. We can become more, or less, ourselves from one day to the next.

Identity is a slippery business. We get antsy when we feel we're losing a grip on who we are. We get antsy when we don't quite know who someone else is. Somehow, one seems to affect the other. The more disoriented we are, the more likely we are to act out of fear.

The confusion and disorientation we



Jackie Storholt, Coen's fiancé, has been a part of the transitioning process from the very beginning. The couple plan to wed this fall. Below, photos of Brooke's childhood document life before transitioning, including his mother's wedding in 1986 and high school graduation, at far right.

might feel when confronted with someone whose gender or sexuality is ambiguous is the disorientation Coen has felt most of his life. It took a long time for him to be able to articulate who he was and who he wasn't, to begin to reach toward a true image of himself. It took years before he began to recognize himself.

"A friend gave me this orange *Titleist* ball cap when I was in middle school and I clung to that cap. I'd come home from school and go to my room, change my clothes. That cap would come on and I'd turn it back and I sorta felt like I could breathe."

Brooke never felt comfortable in her skin. It was a vague, gnawing feeling she didn't have the words for. As she grew older and picked her own clothes, she gravitated toward cargo shorts, pant suits, sweater vests.

"Let me tell you, no one in Gaston County was rocking a sweater vest like I was," Coen laughs.

Brooke isolated herself in high school. She worked the night of her Junior Prom; she didn't go to the Senior Prom because she couldn't take the girl she was dating at the time. Her family was heavily invested in the Southern Baptist church and she was too. For a long time she dreamed of being a missionary, inspired by a minister who had worked in Kenya. She seriously considered it throughout high school and college before finally realizing she would be forced to live a lie.



"There's a feeling of terror that I can't really describe: to constantly be looking at yourself and not recognize who you are. Or not being able to present fully a clear image of who you are. You feel like a liar."

And when Brooke finally came out as gay in college, her family did feel she had lied to them, kept secrets. "I think I broke their heart, and that broke my heart. It took me stepping away for a couple of years and, in that time, we all did a lot of really hard work, had a lot of painful conversations. I mean, presenting as a butch lesbian gets you noticed. And I couldn't protect them."

Years later, it will be Brooke's mom who asks her what she thinks about being transgendered and Brooke will be resistant, arguing that just because she dresses in a masculine way, that doesn't make her trans. She's not yet ready to come out for a second time.

*if the time will come
when I can just be myself
promise not to leave*

Coen's is not a typical trans story. There are no typical trans stories; every one is different. Coen knew from an early age, some people don't. For some, dressing as the other gender is enough. Some consider hormone therapy or surgery, others don't. For some the process of coming out is very long; they might be out in some parts of their life and not in others. For



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others, things can happen more quickly. The more support available from family, friends, and the workplace, the easier the transition can be.

When Coen finally came out as transgendered in 2012, it was easier than the first time; easier for his family and friends.

“It just made sense,” explains Jackie Storholt, Coen’s fiancé, who had known him for years through her brother. “I was like, ‘Duh!’ And I was happy for him.” Jackie and Coen have been together since 2014. She’s been a part of the process almost from the beginning. They’re engaged and plan to be married in October.

“I was living in Charlotte in 2010,” Coen says, “and I met this guy, Jordan, who’d just started his hormone injections. I wasn’t really thinking about being trans at the time. Jordan went away for a few months and when he came back his voice was deeper, his beard was starting to grow.

“Where did your boobs go?” I asked him. “Dude,” he said, “let me tell you about binders.”

“I was like ‘Whoa!’ And I knew, I knew that was what I wanted...but it was more than wanting.”

It took Brooke a number of months to wrap her head around the idea but in mid 2012 she came out as trans to her friends. A few months later to her family, then on social media. Nothing changed immediately. She still appeared as the butch lesbian she had been, but changes were



starting to happen and in January 2013 Brooke gave herself the first testosterone injection.

“Maybe it was just adrenalin, I don’t know. But I could feel myself standing taller. I was a little less afraid.” Brooke’s body began to change; she lost weight, muscle mass began to appear. Her voice grew deeper; it sometimes cracked like an adolescent’s. She made recordings of herself singing the same Adele song month to month to track the changes.

“All that time looking in the mirror and not recognizing myself---I never knew what I needed. Sometimes I could almost see it. I tried really hard.”

“What I needed,” Coen chuckles, “was a beard. I’m proud of my beard. I still squeal in the shower sometimes at new chest hair. It’s all pretty exciting.”

Brooke started to wear a binder which flattens out the breasts and gives the appearance of a flat chest. Some can wear partials, which just cover the chest, but she wore one that extended to her waist. “It’s like wearing ten sports bras at once. It’s hot, it chafes. It makes it hard to breathe. You’re only supposed to wear one for 6-8 hours but no one does that; we wear them all day.”

As Brooke’s appearance began to change, more every day, it was time to consider changing her name. She was working at the Iron Hen at the time and Lee Comer, the owner, called her one morning. “Let’s just do this. What would





you like your name to be?"

Brooke knew she wanted to keep the same initials; this limited her to names that began with B or C. Also, she wanted to take the last name of her stepfather, who she loved. She went through books of names with her friends and they came up with Coen, which means 'wise advisor'. "Coen, it is then."

The name was a validation. Every day he was called Coen, and every co-worker or customer who addressed him with the name, strengthened his new identity, which wasn't actually new at all.

It was bracing and exciting. Coen was becoming who he'd always thought he was.

In the meantime, he was still struggling through the transition with his family. His mother and stepfather were working on it between themselves. They were reading, doing their own research. They were all talking with each other.

On one visit, Coen and his mother sat on the couch and she read a letter stating all of her fears about his transition.

"She read about every fear she had. She asked me, Was it because you were big, because you were fat, that you didn't feel like a woman? She was brave enough to ask me that question and I can't tell you how much I respect her for it. I knew right away that the answer was no. We had a lot of difficult conversations but that's how we worked through it. We're not finished yet."

When Coen's book, *575*, was published, he saw it at his full coming out to his

parents. He drove the book down to his mother; he wanted to put it in her hand himself. She was excited. She asked for a few days to read it and promised to call.

"The phone rings and she says, there are things I have to think about. But here's my favorite one."

Coen leans back in his chair, beaming. "That's when you realize how lucky you are."

*she says I love you
she says that she can see me
her love must be blind*

In order to legally change your name, you're advised to meet with a lawyer who can shepherd through the paperwork. You are fingerprinted. You must submit affidavits of character. You must be investigated by both the SBI and the FBI. You must meet with a judge. Then they post your photo and personal information on a wall in the courthouse for a period when anyone can show cause to contest the change.

The rules for changing your gender marker vary state to state. In North Carolina, you must have gender reassignment surgery in order to legally change your gender. For a trans male this means either a total mastectomy with nipple reconstruction (top), penis construction (bottom), or both. In order to have testosterone prescribed, you must meet with a psychiatrist, then be monitored every six months by a gynecologist. The psychiatrist is necessary for surgery as

well. Insurance companies consider both cosmetic surgery, so they are not covered. Changing your gender marker is a significant investment.

Coen wants to have top surgery, but not bottom. "I can't wait to get rid of the funbags."

He's been saving money both for the name change and the surgery. Without insurance, the surgery is around \$8000. That sum is out of reach for many, if not most, in the trans community. Bottom surgery is significantly more expensive.

"I can't really change my gender until I also have a hysterectomy. If I ever had any feminine problems and my gender was male, the insurance company could refuse to cover them. There's a lot to think about. We go one step at a time."

Coen is in the process of changing his name now. Having a woman's name on your driver's license can be problematic when buying airline tickets or writing a check. His current driver's license has his birth name and a picture from his lesbian days; this can cause some awkwardness. Even the lawyer, filing Coen's paperwork, didn't understand he was trans until he explained it. The lawyer simply thought he had strange parents who'd given him a girl's name.

"Initials are your saviour," Coen explains. "With initials, all things are possible." Initials on your checks or prescription are gender neutral; they don't cause a problem.

*Mr. Coen Crisp
right there for the world to see
send me more junk mail*

It's comfortable for most people to call Coen 'he', because that's how he presents. Most of his friends adjusted quickly but it's been more difficult for his mother and step-father. Every visit was a struggle with pronouns, made easier when he and Jackie got together.

"I didn't correct anyone." Jackie says, "I just kept constantly using 'he' and they started to catch on and become more comfortable with it. It's a process; it takes patience."

"I think my parents relaxed once I started bringing Jackie around. It helped them to know I was with someone, that I was in a good relationship."

"It's funny, after she'd been visiting for a while I started to notice my childhood pictures coming down. I came home one weekend and they had disappeared. I said to my Mom, if you need to do that for yourself, that's okay. But I'm not embarrassed. You don't need to do it for me. We need to honor the journey." Coen smiles: "Suddenly, the pictures come back up."

It can sometimes be confusing to others. Coen identifies as heterosexual because Coen identifies as a male. In the early part of the transition, in the time before the beard, customers at the restaurants where he worked would sometimes be baffled.

"I've found the Southern Way is to ask someone else. So customers would ap-



“If my experience is enough to make someone think of gay and trans people as humans,”—there’s a slight nod—“then okay, I’m political.”

proach a co-worker, slightly awkward or embarrassed usually, and say I don’t know what to call that person. I’ve worked at the best places. Iron Hen and The Green Bean. Amelie’s in Charlotte. Every co-worker was great, because the people who own these restaurants make it safe and comfortable. For me, for everyone. It’s such an amazing support, that kind of workplace. The best strategy, though, is to ask. Most trans folks have no problem talking about it.”

*this binded breathing
these blissfully shallow gasps
give rise to my depth*

Jackie Storholt has ‘always danced to the beat of her own unicorn.’ She grew up in the South, in the Lutheran Church, so she’s knows what it’s like to feel outside the pale of societal norms. She knew Brooke when she was a lesbian and fell in love with Coen as he transitioned. She sees no reason to label herself as gay, queer, or anything else.

“I’m just a person,” she says, “in love with another person.”

Jackie sits quietly throughout much of the interview but she is by no means passive. She’s completely engaged in the conversation and offers a remark and a story now and then. She is there to support Coen, to be his anchor. Occasionally, in the conversation, her eyes spark in anger or concern. She would leap to his defense in an instant.

Even though, Coen is doing more public

speaking, at rallies and panels, he is by no means comfortable with it. Often, he is shaking just before he goes on. Jackie likes to be in the audience for him; so he can focus on her and know he has support.

Jackie is a massage therapist. She worries about the toll the binder takes on his upper body, compressing his chest and his breathing. When he’ll let her, she works the tension out of his neck and shoulders.

Coen proposed last year. “I’m marrying a massage therapist,” Coen says with a wink. “What could be better?”

“Last week, we’re sitting on the beach, talking about our honeymoon,” Coen tells me, “and she says she wants to put off the honeymoon. Do the wedding, but put off the honeymoon so that money can go toward my top surgery. Can you believe she’d do that for me?”

“I just couldn’t imagine being in Key West,” Jackie responds, “and being comfortable when he has to wear all these layers just to be himself. He’s going to feel so free, once it’s done.”

*will she notice it
the honest space in my pants
i wish i could lie*

Transitioning is one part losing identity, one part finding it. Brooke had made connections in the lesbian community, she had a network of support there; people who loved her and understood her. She worried she would lose those as she became Coen, as she transitioned.

“In a way, I think I underestimated my

friends and family,” Coen admits. “They love me and they have a spine and they will stand up for me. It doesn’t mean it’s not difficult and we don’t have some dark days, but we love each other and we work through it.”

Some days are still hard. Getting dressed in the morning can be a challenge. Coen wants to be sure no one can see the binder. He wants to be sure he can pass.

“Sometimes I change five times, just to go to the store. Sometimes it’s overwhelming. I have to buy certain kinds of clothes, certain fabrics, that I can stand on my skin with the binder. Now that I present as a male, shopping is easier, but before...I’m just amazed what people will say out loud in public. People would be with their children and I’d hear, Look at that freak.

You lose parts of yourself as the changes occur. You have to be working to find yourself all the time. I’m always thinking, Where do I go from here? It’s a constant reassessment. And coming out? We come out every day. I just had to come out to a new kitchen manager at work. At least I get a lot of practice.”

Coen grins: “But hey, look. I’m fortunate to be coming out into a privileged position as a white male and let me tell you, male privilege is alive and well. If you don’t believe that, ask a trans man or a trans woman, ‘cause who would know better?”

What’s the biggest difference?

“I don’t have to explain myself. No one asks me to. I just say a thing, and okay. When I find myself starting to explain,

people look at me like, Dude, really? I’m listened to more; there’s less of a glaze. It is so weird.”

*this is my grandson
i had never been so proud
four words a life raft*

“I don’t see myself as political,” Coen explains. “But I think we have to be out now, those of us who can be. We can’t hide, not with all that’s going in the country. We can’t afford to be quiet.

I see myself as a member of my community. These horrible things that have happened have spurred a more open dialogue between us. We have to think about what we can do for those who really have it hard. Those who are queer, trans, and people of color.

It’s important to be visible. I’m grateful for the opportunity to speak but it terrifies me. I want to do it more, at businesses, at churches. It’s my way of giving back. I’ve struggled with whether I was queer enough, or trans enough; all those things you shouldn’t think about. In the end, I can only tell my story. It’s not everyone’s. It’s just mine.”

Coen strokes his beard.

“If my experience is enough to make someone think of gay and trans people as humans,”—there’s a slight nod—“then okay, I’m political.”