

## Transangelic: The Idols of a Transgender Existence

The best nights of my life have all begun with The Rocky Horror Picture Show. Fifteen years old and crammed knee to knee in the back of a friend's mother's jeep; all of us bubbling with sharp-edged giggles and throwing our heads back in sheer, tooth bared delight. The streets of Monterey have already darkened with heavy post-Halloween gloom fog. There's a blackbox theater on Lighthouse St, over the *Cat's Meow Vintage & Thrift* store. We park, and join the line trailing down the sidewalk. Light spills from the doorway ahead, the tinkling sounds of music and laughter spill out into the street.

Dressed in a disintegrating leather jacket and brown school shoes, Kohl crushed into the rims of my eyes. I pretend I'm tough. A punk. I spit wild-eyed words and huddle into my group of skinny jean clad friends. Inside the theater, we sit on the floor at the very front, with little baggies of rice, newspaper pages, cigarette lighters, dollar store squirt guns. The thrumming of the *Time Warp* sings us out of our seats. The memory fractures here, I remember seeing Frank N Furter done up in fishnets and a banana hammock. I remember the glitter over his eyes like glass under the hotlights. I remember the quiet and gently stirring thought on the car ride home that, for reasons I did not yet understand, looking at Frank N Furter spraked. A small voice that said, "*I want to be that.*"

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In a (retrospectively highly insensitive) *Rolling Stone* article Laura Jane Grace, the lead singer of the Florida-grown punk band *Against Me!*, looks back on her childhood and the early feelings that would later lead her to come out as a transgender woman. The festering urge to numb miserable feelings with cocaine and alcohol, the soothing effect that cross-dressing had for her and the way she would shoplift women's clothing. She remembers lying awake at night in her grandmother's home, praying to God, "*Dear God, please when I wake up, I want a female*

body". Or on darker nights when she suspected God was not listening, she would try the devil himself.

*"I promise to spend the rest of my life as a serial killer if you make me a woman."*

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Inside the chapel after hours, the stained glass windows are murky. We do not dare turn on the lights. I'm laying at the foot of the altar, jeans eased off my hips, underwear shoved out of the way. Carefully, an upperclassmen draws the design of my first tattoo onto my ilium bone with a dull eyeliner pencil. It is a school night. I'm sixteen, holding another girl's hand as a needle is dipped into india ink and deftly pricked into the first few layers of my skin. As she works, slowly the transgender symbol begins to realize on my hip: an amalgamation of the the gender symbols for male and female. I grit my teeth against the visceral *pop* of my skin giving way to the needle.

Out of all my homedone, amatuer tattoos this one remains my favorite. It was an act of agency. My body was, fleetingly, mine. I think of the *My Chemical Romance* lyrics that spoke to me at that time from their hit single *Welcome to the Black Parade*.

*"I won't explain or say I'm sorry,  
I'm unashamed, I'm gonna show my scar".*

My body, scarred from years self-harm and deemed unacceptable by polite society, was something I finally felt allowed to have pride in, to maybe (maybe) someday love in a small and begrudging way.

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In two thousand fourteen, *Against Me!* released their sixth studio album under the Total Treble label. The album was titled *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*. In an interview with *SPIN*, Laura Jane Grace speaks on the struggle to get the album made in rural south Georgia: *"I'm being*

*told I'm going to hell by bagboys in grocery stores; Lee the engineer records with a fucking gun on his hip...And it got to the point where I just had a fucking nervous breakdown".*

She talks about how bleak it was after losing key members of the band soon after she publicly came out as trans two years prior. She felt certain that the next record would kill the band.

Grace noted that everyone who worked with them seemed to feel that *Against Me!* would finish *Dysphoria Blues* and be done.

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I listened to *Dysphoria Blues* end to end, over and over. Had it not been a digital copy, I am certain I would have worn out the CD into a scratched mess. It was my first taste of finding kinship with art created by trans artists. I plucked along to the song *True Trans Soul Rebel* on an old electric guitar. I sang the lyrics in a voice that did not sound like it was mine. "*Does God bless your transexual heart? True Trans Soul Rebel.*" Sweet, feminine. Alien. I turned the volume up on my amp to drown myself out and thrashed wavering power chords until my body forgot it was wrong.

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The spring of my freshman year in boarding school, I stole scissors and attacked my long, blonde hair until it barely brushed my cheeks in choppy, shorn cowlicks. My father now looks back at that time and laughs. "*It was the worst haircut I'd ever seen. It was not good.*"

I laugh with him at the memory. There are pictures of me with my hair sticking out of my brother's baseball cap as I shoot cans with a hunting rifle in the woods. That haircut was the first time I'd looked in the mirror and recognized myself, as shoddy as it was. It made me feel real, made me feel like maybe I could really become a boy on the outside, the way I knew I was on the inside.

*“I know, it really was awful,” I say to my dad. “But I loved it so much. It was awesome.”*

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I love wearing a mask. I bless COVID-safety protocols each time I go outside. It is so much easier to navigate the world as a trans man knowing the majority of my face is hidden behind black cotton. I found that I am much more likely to pass as male with a mask on and a heavy coat muddying the lines of my body. Before leaving the house, I find a mask that matches my clothing (printed with vampire fangs, cherubin devils, classic horror monsters) and smear red eyeshadow and kohl under my eyes. The red makes me look strung out and tired. Sick. I used the word *illin'* more in these days than ever before, meaning it both in a literal sense and a slick, cool kind of way. I'm doing myself up like (revenge era) Gerard Way: a tortured mop of greasy black hair seeking violent exorcism. I finally have found a gender presentation that feels authentic: mirroring the bombastic aesthetic of the men I looked up to as a child. Punk and queerness have always been inextricable to me.

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I'd become enamored with the band, *My Chemical Romance* (fronted by lead singer Gerard Way) as a fourteen year old. It felt like rageful purification, this music I'd found seemed to speak directly to me. I was a depressed, melodramatic child looking for relief from my volatile sadness and suburban life. I slammed doors, snarled at my parents, and sang along to *Thank You For The Venom*:

*“So give me all your poison, and give me all your pills  
And give me all your hopeless hearts and make me ill”.*

I was a queer, trans kid finding understanding in the form of men in makeup and fake blood.

Every Friday night, I sat at the kitchen computer, sometimes still in my school uniform, watching *My Chem* music videos over and over, eyes wide and idolizing. Hearing their music growling from my tinny headphones made me feel as though I had been forgiven and my insides were acceptable. That maybe I wasn't the oozing, caustic monster I thought I was. I wore all black, stopped hanging out with the other kids at school. I found myself unable to connect with the girls my age. They were in the early stages of young, frothy adolescence. They wanted to experiment with makeup and talk to boys. I felt alienated by it all. I was looking for something that made me feel like a real person inside my body. When people asked why I loved them so much, I would answer earnestly "*They saved my life*". But I watched their music videos with the devastating thought that never seemed to go away: *I need to look like them*. ....

I was in the cast of my last Rocky Horror production before COVID-19. I was wearing a new binder under my shirt. My hair was shaved on the sides, slicked back real cool. I wore a suit jacket and a party hat, dancing the drunkest *Time Warp* of my life onstage. Every in this cast called me Carson, called me "he". I lived with two girls who also referred to me this way, one of whom always joked that her boyfriend and I were just like brothers. My own partner referred to me as her boyfriend. I sent a photo of me in my Transylvanian costume to my father. I'm grinning big, wet teeth into the camera flash. My father responds, "*I'm so proud of you, Carson*." My parents had started using my preferred name, consistently and without quietly muffled mourning. It felt like new skin breaking through a sunburn: sometimes embarrassing or uncomfortable, often painful but *I was so glad it is happening*.

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Sometimes, I look back on that small punk body with love and sadness. I cannot bring myself to

see that young child as unacceptable, as inherently evil, and unloveable the way I felt when I was young. I am currently in the process of getting my surgery date for gender-affirming Top Surgery. I wear clothes that feel like clothes, instead of a prickly and uncomfortable second skin. I walked to the corner 7/11 in town, for taquitos and Nyquil. The man at the register calls me *sir*. My heart leaps, like it does every time. It is these moments, the small joy of someone affirming that what they see is the same as how I feel. I have transgender friends who I have the privilege of loving and learning from. Laura Jane Grace is releasing solo work and *My Chemical Romance* still acts as a soundtrack for my day. I want to take the child version of myself into my arms and say, "*You will be loved, you will be accepted.*" I never imagined I would one day find myself in the hard, back-breaking process of creating happiness for myself. It sucks; everyday is a struggle. But, I'm still here. I am so glad I'm here.