

My whole life, I've never been much of a stranger to needles. We were first introduced, needles and I, when I was just two years old. My parents went on a trip to Hawaii for their anniversary, leaving me with my aunt, Jenny. A few days into my parents' vacation, my aunt called them to express her concern for my health:

"I don't know what's wrong with [him]," My aunt told them. "[He] keeps coughing and sneezing. It only seems to get better whenever we go outside."

The culprit, we later found out, was Brock, my aunt's eighty pound golden lab. More specifically, the blankets of wiry blond hair that Brock seemed to track through every inch of the house, but it took numerous doctor visits and a full examination to ultimately confirm that I was severely allergic to animal fur. Part of the examination was an allergy test, which involved getting pricked a grand total of 48 individual times by needles containing a variety of potential allergens. Out of the 48 different allergens they tested, I was allergic to 47. The one thing I wasn't allergic to, you ask? Feathers. Which I always found ironic considering that once my father found out I had allergies, his first reaction was to throw out all of our feather-stuffed pillows.

From then on, every few years or so, I would return to the allergist for another exam. And every year, the same thing happened. I'd get pricked those 48 times, and 47 of them would make my arms swell up and itch horribly. But I got used to it after a while, just in time for my doctor to suggest I start getting allergy shots. As a method of attempting to build up an immunity to these allergies—or just a method of torture, depending on who you ask—allergy shots involved being injected every couple of weeks with a concoction containing a liquid combination of the allergens. The doctors would monitor my response to the shots and, over the next few years, track my progress. I did this for about five years, and I will admit that I did eventually see some

notable improvement in my tolerance to furry friends, but my doctor still strongly advised me against ever having a dog as a pet. This advice was disregarded almost immediately, however, as this was the same year my family and I decided to adopt a puppy.

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It's been several years since my last allergy shot, and yet my relationship with needles is far from over. One could venture to say it's only gotten more intense. However, in this particular moment, as I sit at my desk wearing only my boxers, a handful of my stomach fat in one hand and a loaded syringe in the other, I want nothing more than to never have to see a needle again. I've done this hundreds of times at this point, but I always stall here, right at the end. I stare at the needle as it hovers over my flesh, my hand trembling slightly.

*3... 2... 1... Now. Nuh uh.*

One would think it'd be easier, this injection as opposed to the allergy shot, but having to administer this one myself makes it feel almost like my own special brand of psychological torture. Psychological torture for trannies, as if the gender dysphoria alone just wasn't enough. I can feel the sweat dripping down my side as I grit my teeth and try again.

*3... 2... 1... Now. Not a chance.*

I can almost hear the agonizing screams coming from the half a decade worth of scar tissue built up in my abdomen. It's at this point that I begin to wonder why I'm even doing this in the first place. Which is ridiculous, of course. I know exactly why I'm doing this. Why I *keep* doing this. But the thought persists and eventually evolves into the weekly debate I have with myself about whether or not I should stop taking testosterone altogether:

On the one hand, stopping hormone therapy would put an end to some of the less desirable effects that I've acquired from testosterone over the past few years (e.g. raging teenage boy acne, musty body odor, and the accumulation of thick, dark hair in every possible crevice). Not to mention the pre-injection anxiety that plagues me every week on Shot Day™. But, despite all of testosterone's adverse effects, I remind myself how it felt to exist without any of them. How it felt to exist as a girl. Living in a body that's a little extra hairy pales in comparison to having to live in a body that doesn't feel like mine. Even if that extra body hair can get *pretty* uncomfortable at times. That's right folks, you guessed it, I'm talking about asscrack hair.

Once I realize that this internal digression is nothing more than another distraction set up by my psyche, I go in with a surprise attack.

*3... 2... Now!*

A slight pinch, the same as always. The testosterone, so thick it moves like molasses out of an overturned jar, makes its way into my body. Sometimes I swear I can feel it under my skin, seeping into my bloodstream.

And then it's over. I remove the empty syringe and toss the needle in the sharps bin. It always makes me feel stupid, this part, because it reminds me how fast it really is. And how easy. I scold myself as I pull my shirt over my head:

*Why do you always have to be such a pussy?*

I stop, letting that thought simmer in my mind. The irony of the situation hits me in the face like a cast-iron skillet; a man with a pussy using that word as a sort of derogatory term. An insult. Like a cis person would. I've had moments like this before, where it's as if my subconscious forgets what I am, and what I was. As if those thirteen years of my life that I spent being perceived and socialized as a girl never happened. Or that they happened, but to somebody

who wasn't me. Which, I suppose, is true, in a way. The person I was living as was not my genuine, authentic self, by any means, but it was still me. And my experience living and growing up female has certainly shaped how I interpret and interact with the world. But the hormone currently pumping through my veins seems to want to challenge all that. To erase it. Or set it on fire—which is fitting, as pyromania tends to be more common in men. And every week, in this moment, I am reminded of the changes I've undergone that aren't visible from the outside. The effect that testosterone has had on my mind.

One of the more drastic and, therefore, more disturbing byproducts of my initiating hormone therapy was the almost immediate increase in libido. I received my first testosterone injection when I was sixteen, and before that day I had never been particularly interested in sex. That isn't to say I didn't find people attractive, but that attraction came from a much more innocent, Hallmark movie-esque place. I also hadn't gotten much satisfaction from masturbation up to this point, which undoubtedly was only exacerbated by the severe disassociation I experienced from my own genitalia. After those first .125 milliliters of testosterone, however, it felt like someone had flipped a switch in my brain. All of the sudden, everything was arousing. And I mean *everything*—I remember being about three months into hormone therapy and needing an especially shameful moment alone after watching *Happy Feet*.

It was like my body had been kickstarted into puberty and was now trying to make up for lost time. It made me feel gross and embarrassed, so naturally, I didn't tell anyone about what was happening to me. I didn't feel like I could reach out to either of my parents, supportive as they were. I'm not sure they would've been entirely helpful when it came to dealing with queer sexuality. Instead, I found two, admittedly problematic, sources of refuge: the Internet and the company of other teenage boys.

Two of my closest friends in high school were cisgender guys. One of them, we'll call him Ted, was the only person that I could say, without a shred of doubt, thought about sex more than I did. Every other sentence out of Ted's mouth seemed to have sexual connotations, and he was constantly trying to find a way to fit his penis into any conversation. Ironically, Ted never managed to fit his penis into much else, as he graduated high school a virgin.

As uncomfortable as it was to be around Ted at times, his vulgar nature made me feel better about my own suggestive thoughts and feelings. It was validating, in a weird way, like I was just another one of the guys. But, at some point, this voice in the back of my mind would always start interjecting, telling me that what I was doing was wrong. I started to catch myself looking at girls the way Ted did. I tried my best not to do it, not to let my eyes and mind wander without restriction, but it seemed like the harder I tried to repress it, the worse it became. I could feel myself molding and contorting into this kind of sick creature. This drooling, ogling, objectifying, repulsive, salacious thing. Pretty soon, it was difficult to focus on anything other than sex. I was watching porn constantly, excusing myself from class if a girl so much as dropped a pencil in front of me, and all the while experiencing this massive tsunami of guilt and shame. I remember sitting in my high school's single-stall bathroom in the middle of fourth period with a spicy scene from *Orange is the New Black* pulled up on my phone and thinking to myself: *This is it. I'm becoming a pervert.*

And then it stopped. Well, not completely. More like, slowly dissipated as my hormone levels began to plateau around the five-hundreds (the normal range for someone assigned male at birth is anywhere between 300 and 900 ng/dL. For people assigned female at birth, that range is about 15-50). What I realized, however, after several years of therapy and multiple conversations with men and women (trans and cisgender alike), was that nothing I went through was very far

off from the norm. The act of injecting myself with testosterone was simply a catalyst for my own unique journey through puberty, and while the result most likely would've been a bit less extreme without the introduction of hormone therapy, it would've happened at some point, in some fashion, regardless.

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Sometimes, after getting an allergy shot, the muscles in my arm would twitch and spasm, independent of my control. The nurses always said it was normal, and would go away with time. I would think of it as my body's way of rejecting the allergens; a foreign entity that wasn't supposed to be there. Like a battle was unfolding under my skin, the allergens and my cells caught in an epic altercation. From then on, I made the association that anything from a needle was bad news, and developed this mental block which made my brain want to fight back against anything that could potentially invade my territory.

That being said, every week, around the same time, I end up here. At my desk, in my boxers, and a fresh dose of testosterone in my system. This part never feels like a struggle. There's no twitching or spasming. No itchy rash or swollen red bumps. My body accepts the hormone willingly, almost with anticipation. It's like I'm receiving something that's been missing for a long time, something distantly familiar. Like an old friend. An old friend who, for some odd reason, always leaves you sprouting totally unnecessary amounts of asscrack hair.