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~~Heleen Doyle~~  
4-21-2005

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## Chapter One ... Cracking the Shell

**I**t's a cold February morning and the yard is full of crows, caw cawing. I've been in labor over 51 hours; my belly so full of baby. I am ready for the end. Who on earth is this kid inside of me? Soon enough I will know.

20 minutes later, I'm holding a naked wet baby and hearing myself say "oh good lord, it's ALIVE!" Giving birth is pretty freaky amazing. Here I was with this little creature in my arms, pink and perfect, those big eyes looking up at me for the first time, both of us full of wonder, and with such different perspectives. What have I gotten myself into? Little did I know.

I'd been certain I was pregnant with a boy, so my surprise was great when I saw her. "Well, so much for mother's intuition" I joked. I didn't have a girls name picked out, but 3 days later, I was the proud young mother of my little Helen.

Life with baby crept along. I started midwifery school later that year with Helen in tow. I did the attachment parenting thing....family bed, sling, nursing 'til she could say "I want boobies right NOW mother, please." We moved around a lot in those first couple of years....an internship in Jamaica, a rainbow gathering, a tipi on an organic garlic farm in Montana, a cabin in the woods of upstate NY, etc. etc. Chicago has always been home base.

## Chapter Two... A Birthday Tale

**H**ere is a story that has become a bit of personal Helen/Asher folklore. He asks me to tell it every chance we get, so I'll share it here with you. It's a true story too, honest.

It's Helen's first birthday! My aunt had given her the most beautiful party dress. I'd been saving it for just this day. It is white with puffy sleeves and pastel embroidered flowers; a gathered waist, lacy collar, so lovely! My pride radiates out from my body like rays of green and golden light on a neon sign. I'm bragging shamelessly to our party guests, and when I'm done with that, I pick up the phone, call my best friend and begin the thousand word description of my beautiful, amazing, sweet, intelligent, charming, genius one year old in her adorable birthday party dress.

Well meanwhile, Helen decides she's had quite enough of this shameless display. She is sitting in her bouncy chair playing with her toes and trying to figure out how the heck she is going to get out of this dreadful dress. Then she spots them....across the room, in a heap of wrapping paper, scotch tape and bows lie the perfect tools for her salvation. She unbuckles the strap on her bouncy seat, climbs out and begins creepy crawling toward her destination. Luckily, mother is too busy bragging to notice her slow turtle trek across the kitchen.

By the time I do look down, it is too late. Helen is sitting on the floor, beaming mischievously, holding a large pair of scissors in her chubby hands and calmly opening and closing, opening and closing the blades. The beautiful party dress has been cut to shreds. I let out a horrified yelp. Little Helen just looks up at me with a satisfied grin, delighted with her handiwork.

## Chapter Three ... Casting Off

**T**he years pass. When Helen was 3, she began taking various boys names. First it was Blake, then Jack, then Mighty Jack (and if you left out the 'Mighty' you'd certainly be corrected). She tried on Brandon, Henry, Vinny and others.

One evening while she was in the tub, she asked me "mom, when is my penis going to grow in?" This was the first of many such questions that I had no idea how to answer. Nor did Dr. Spock or those Sears people. I stuttered through my first attempt to explain the physical differences between boys and girls, keeping it as simple as possible. She was not satisfied with my answer, but at least a conversation had begun. It would be put on the shelf for a month or two here and there, but never dropped.




Over the next couple of years, she became more and more assertive with this male gender expression. She never talked about wanting to be a boy, and never discussed what she would be *someday*, but rather: "mom, I'm really a boy". At first, he spoke these words only to me, in whispers or at home, being careful not to attract too much attention. But bit by bit, he became more bold. By 5 years old he'd correct me in public when I introduced him as my daughter, and began talking about being a boy with other members of my family.

In all honesty, I admit: it didn't bother me much that my little girl baby was growing up to be a handsome young lad, but other people did mind, a whole lot in fact, and by five years old, it was getting harder to hide behind excuses like "it's just a phase" and "isn't that cute?".

By now he had asked me plenty of times to refer to him as my son, buy him briefs, and cut his hair. In hindsight, it was not with his best interest in mind that I resisted. My

gut said just let the kid be! Don't interfere with his/her self-expression. I stayed silent because I was afraid of the repercussions of being seen as supportive, or worse...

'encouraging'. Eventually, protecting my family, friends and acquaintances from my kid's gender identity was not worth it. I had to choose. I chose to believe him.



## Chapter 4 ... Mama Up Against

When Helen was four, he entered a Waldorf preschool. We both loved his teacher very much. She was intelligent, perceptive, kind and firm, as any good Waldorf teacher worth their oats must be. I'll never forget that parent/teacher conference in Helen's kindergarten year.

We were sitting on the couch in the pink lazure early childhood/kindergarten room, surrounded by elves and barley and baskets of lambs wool. She was careful with her words as she began. She told me that Helen was showing some behavior that she found very concerning.

Helen had been playing the prince/ father/ knight/ brother/ stallion for some time now, which was fine as fantasy play, but now this male identity was spilling over and out of the land of make believe. She was telling the other children that she was a boy and the other children were using male pronouns for her in the classroom. The other children were confused and fascinated by this and it was creating some commotion in the Sunflower Garden. She was doing her best to remedy the situation by clearly reminding the class that Helen was indeed a girl whenever it came up. Unfortunately, this was not working, and the more she said girl, the more Helen said boy, the hotter the whole issue got.

She asked what I was doing at home to intervene and correct this confusion in her identity. I told her that I do not (nor am I willing to) contradict my child regarding his self identity, as I see this as harmful to him. I said that I believe my child.

She did not know how to respond to this. I did not know how to elaborate. In all our wisdom and compassion, we did not find the language to bridge Waldorf ideology with gender theory. We reached a wall, and never found our way around it. There was only a month or so left in the school year, and we roughed it out as best we could and never discussed the 'gender issue' again.

I often wish I might have done a better job advocating for him in those early years, but

I was freaked out. I didn't want to take on the world, or the school, or my family, or even my friends. I often felt under attack. In the search for an explanation, our lives were under scrutiny.... this must be the

result of some trauma or abuse, maybe she doesn't have a proper father figure, or for that matter, a proper mother figure either. Maybe she's not being set straight at home, it's the haircut, it's the trucks, the travel, the TV, etc. etc. Hardly ever, in those years, did someone respond with "maybe the kid is alright".

It was always an issue. I got sick of talking about it pretty quick. Out in the world, I was doing my best to hide in the shadows and avoid attention around this issue, but at home, my message remained simple: whoever you are is fine. Just be yourself and be proud of who you are. You know yourself better than others know you. Trust your heart.

## *Chapter 5 ... Girls Rule!*

Sometime during Helen's Kindergarten, however, I did go on what I call the Girls Rock! Campaign, complete with a Girls Rock! button. I was thinking maybe I could sell her on the tomboy idea and make both of our lives a hell of a lot easier. We played soccer, I found a really cool dress at a thrift store that I said was a boy/girl dress, and I talked a lot about how girls can do anything they want and when they grow, they can be anything they want. We listened to 'free to be you and me' all the time and read lots of fairy tales with powerful women characters. She was on board for a month and a half or

so...wearing the boy/girl dress and the button, soaking up the stories, and kicking around a soccer ball with me every chance she got. Then one night, sitting on her bed with her pjs on after story time, she said to me in a calm, soft voice "hey mom, I know girls rock and everything but I'm still a boy". I hugged him and said ok, I love you just as much.

Now and then I'd still prod a little. Like a year and a half ago, in Portland, we were reading this lovely fairy tale with a warrior woman, tall, strong and beautiful of course. I said "look at her. You can grow up to be strong and powerful like her." And Helen replied, "yes, I know, but I want to grow up to be like him" and pointed to the big fat king beside the warrior princess.

My little guy....bless 'im.

## Chapter Six ... Taking Flight

Chicago winters are long and cold.

Winter blues have got me down many a Chicago March, but the spring of 2004 found me at rock bottom. Because parental achievement awards are not typically handed out to depressed mothers suffering frequent panic attacks, and because I realize that spending a winter cooped up in an apartment with a very stressed out, creatively malnourished, isolated single mother is hard on a kid, I decided to swallow my pride and ask for help.

Helen's dad had recently married a woman with a kid Helen's age, and then they'd had a baby together. The four of them were living in a cabin by a river on a mountain near Portland, OR with two kittens and a



fireplace. They drew pictures and made lots of cookies and had three hot meals a day sitting around a table together. What could be better? Helen desperately needed some cheerfulness and a stable routine and this little cabin in the woods with dad seemed as close to a perfect situation as one could ask for. I asked them if they were willing to host Helen for the summer and they were delighted.

I didn't go into the gender issue in great depth (which I'd come to regret later, of course, but I'll get to that). They were the sort of hippies that are very content with the way they see the world and are not eager to change their understanding of healthy utopian lifestyle in any way.

We flew out to Portland in late June and spent one last day together. Tears were shed on both ends, but he was exited about a summer of forest frolic and I was ready to be alone. He was going to be with them for

2 months. Step mother arrived in the late morning, we loaded him up in one of the two car seats, I kissed him goodbye, and they drove off peacefully together. I cried a lot that afternoon.

I flew back to Chicago and began the two long months of being with myself. I missed him terribly but took advantage of my time alone as best I could. The two months passed quickly and I was getting ready to welcome him home when I got a letter from the Waldorf school saying that they did not have enough students to carry a 1<sup>st</sup> grade class. This was less than a month before the school year was supposed to start.

I was living in the city and was not eager to enroll my gender variant 6 year old in a Chicago public school. There was another Waldorf school nearby, but based on our

prior Waldorf experience, this didn't feel right either. I told Helen's dad what was going on, and within a week they called and offered to let her start 1<sup>st</sup> grade there, at a small public school in their working class

logging town. I was feeling stuck and was ready for a change, so after a couple short days of consideration, I decided to let Helen stay with them for now. I began packing up our lives and preparing to head west.

## *Chapter Seven ... No place to go*

A couple weeks later, I get a call from step mom. There has been 'an incident' at school. Bathroom troubles. The story per step mom goes like this: She'd been coming home from school every day with wet pants and no explanation. Finally the social worker had a talk with her and was told that she had been using the girls bathroom until a couple of girls in her class, 'mistaking her for a boy', told her she was in the wrong bathroom. She started using the boys bathroom until the teacher caught her in there and told her she was in the wrong bathroom. No place left to go except in her pants at her desk.

This about broke my heart. The thought of him struggling through this stuff alone was unbearable. Step mother's solution was for all of us, including me, to tell her as often as possible that she is a wonderful, beautiful, intelligent little girl and that we love her unconditionally, as a girl. I said no way, I'll love him or her unconditionally no matter what. I believe him and it would be against my conscience to tell her she is not what he says he is. She responded by calling me abusive and crazy and told me she couldn't continue having this conversation and hung up. This was the beginning of a long and bitter battle.

## *Chapter Eight ... Under my Wing*

I moved to Portland. They (Baby daddy and step mother) held on tight to their position. They told me more than once that

they considered me to be an abusive, manipulative parent that was constructing this gender crap for my own sick selfish reasons and that the less time she spent with me the better and that they did not wish or intend to return her to my primary custody and that they were prepared to take action and had friends, family and school administration that would be eager to speak on their behalf in order to protect her from me. It really sucked.

I spent my 3 months in Portland talking to lawyers, therapists and all the queer advocates I could find. What I discovered was bleak: if a custody case went to court in their very conservative county and if accusations of emotional abuse were made and Asher's teacher or school principal or janitor or the drunk next door were to testify against me, saying simply that Helen is this way because her mom messes with her head, that would be that. I wouldn't stand a chance.

I cried and cried and thought and thought and cried and thought some more, and then I decided the best thing to do would be to take my kid and get the hell out of there as fast as possible. It was easier said than

done, as they were doing all they could to keep him under their charges.

This was one of the hardest decisions I've ever had to make. Now it seems obvious, but at the time it was unclear. He was, after all, enjoying his life on the mountain in the woods. He had a 3 legged kitten who he loved dearly, he was quite fond of his rugged backyard turf and he like living with his sisters. He was with me only on the weekends and would tell me how he missed his baby sister after a day and a half.

He'd also confide in me often about the struggle of living as a girl. I asked him if he'd told them how he feels, and he

responded with a sad sigh and 'yes, but they don't believe me'. If I had known for sure that I would be able to have him back before puberty, I may have let him stay. The way things stood, it wasn't going to risk it. I wouldn't gamble with his life.

I waited until Christmas. My mom came to help me pack my stuff and get my kid. His dad insisted that I sign and notarize a letter saying that I would be back with Helen in no more than one week (I learned it was illegal for him to ask this of me), and that I show him two round trip tickets with our names on them. We gave him the tickets and the piece of paper. I drove straight to their house, picked up my kid and was back in Chicago the next morning. 3 days later, I filed sole custody.

This transition was rough on Asher, and it took a good long time for him to begin to understand why I did what I did. Soon after we left, his dad and step mom split up. That's when it first began making sense to him. Now he thanks me for kidnapping (rescuing) him back.

I was granted sole custody in May of 2005. I'd rather have cooperation than authority, but after all we'd been through, I sleep better at night knowing I'll be able to be there for him. I love him too much and am not naive enough to expect him to walk this path alone.

## *Chapter Nine ... Landing Home*

**W**e moved back in with the folks for a bit, and Asher started school at the local public elementary. I went in the day before he started and told the principal that my child, Helen, would be telling all the kids in her class that she was a boy and I did not want her to be contradicted. Plus we'd have to work out the bathroom issue. The principal was no nonsense about the business of running a school, and he had no interest in making a big issue of this. He asked me what we needed, granted all requests and sent me on my way. My next stop was the school social worker.



The social worker was also very cool about the our situation. She met with Helen's new teacher right away, and then they met with the principal and school nurse after that. His main teacher decided to wait and see how Helen introduced himself to the class and not interfere. The students began using male pronouns (to Helen's delight), so the teacher was consistent with this. He was still going by Helen, which created confusion and drew more attention than he cared for. He finished the year there, and on the last day the social worker who I liked, told me she was going to another school. Bummer. Who knows what next year will bring?

## Chapter 10 ...



Summer camp was rough. I didn't do much in the way of advocacy or meetings before camp started, and on the first day,

we walked up to the counselor, who pulled out a clipboard and said "who's this little guy?" "He's Helen" I replied. The counselor looked back down at clipboard with a bewildered expression and then said "Oh! Well she's all set." Helen came to the conclusion last summer that the birth name would have to go. "Mom, they think I'm a girl because I have a girls name. I need a new name before school starts." We made a list of our favorite boys/neutral names and Asher was the lucky winner.

## *Chapter 11 ... Birds of a Feather...*

Asher returned to school with his new name. Plus his new teacher, new room and new social worker. The social worker and teacher were fine enough people, but by now I was beginning to realize how important it was for him to have strong advocates working with and for him. He needed more than mom on his side and I did not feel confident that the new teacher and social worker would be there for him.

We were in the process of moving down the street at the time, which put us in another school district. I decided to go and talk to the social worker at that school, just to see, though the idea of transplanting him once again made me uneasy.

I'd gotten a bit bolder over the last 8 months, but this still wasn't my favorite conversation. I explained to the social worker that my son, Asher, is biologically female and that this has presented complications at school and I want to find the best possible environment for him to learn and live. Her response amazed me. She did not get stuck on an endless list of when, how, what and whys, nor did she try to brush it under the rug, but instead focused on assessing Asher's needs, seeking to understand her role in supporting him and connecting me to resources that might be helpful. She gave me the name and number of a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade teacher who she thought might be a good fit.

I left him a message when I got home and he called me back that night. We talked for an hour and a half. Again, he was not nosy and did not ask intrusive questions, but stayed focused on what he might do to provide a learning environment where Asher might thrive if I chose to transfer him. He claimed no expertise, despite 11 years working with kids as a social worker before becoming a teacher, and was very encouraging and supportive.

We came over the next night so Asher could meet him and they got along very well. Asher still had some resistance to another change, but decided to go for it, and joined his new class the following Monday. Another decision neither of us has ever regretted.

## Chapter Twelve ... Doing Their Job

Both his teacher and the social worker have been amazing advocates for us. When the reading teacher from his old school called the office at his new school to make a little announcement about his 'hidden identity', they were both on it immediately. We discussed the idea of bringing in a panel to do a workshop, and when that idea got tangled up in red tape, they called an emergency meeting with those directly involved in Asher's education to discuss protocol regarding confidentiality and professional conduct. In attendance was Asher's main teacher, the social worker, the principal, the reading teacher, gym teacher, art teacher, music teacher and librarian. It went something like this "Here are the fact, mind your own business, or else. If you need to gossip, do it with your therapist". I was told it was well received by all in attendance. We have not had any problems with leaks since then.

A couple months ago I was called in for a conference with the voice therapist (Asher has a horse voice due to repeat surgeries, but that's another story), his main teacher, and the social worker. At one point the therapist was crossing out Helen and writing Asher, and she got that "I wonder...." look on her face, like she was about to offer me some brand new revelation. "So I'm wondering" she begins, "do you think Asher's identity issues have anything to do with his voice?" Well, could be, who knows, I dodge. "When did he first start telling you he wanted to be a boy" she continues. He never did, I respond. He doesn't talk about wanting *to be* a boy, nor has he ever. He thinks of himself as a boy. "Has his father been around much?" I open my mouth to respond, but by now I'm feeling annoyed and frustrated as my attempts to get her back on track have not been successful, so teacher interrupts with "Asher's gender identity does not concern you or the work you will be doing with


him.” When she continues with ‘yes, but don’t you think...’ the social worker steps in with “again, Asher’s gender identity is not your business. We are here to discuss voice therapy”.

It was the first time I’d had someone step up like that. They had my back. It was hard to conceal how touched I was, as this felt like no small miracle. When the meeting ended, I tried to thank them over and over for being so supportive, but in the process of doing so, I realized it wasn’t necessary. They were acting on Asher’s behalf because it was the right thing to do and because it was their job to do so. Never have the words ‘just doing my job’ sounded so good.

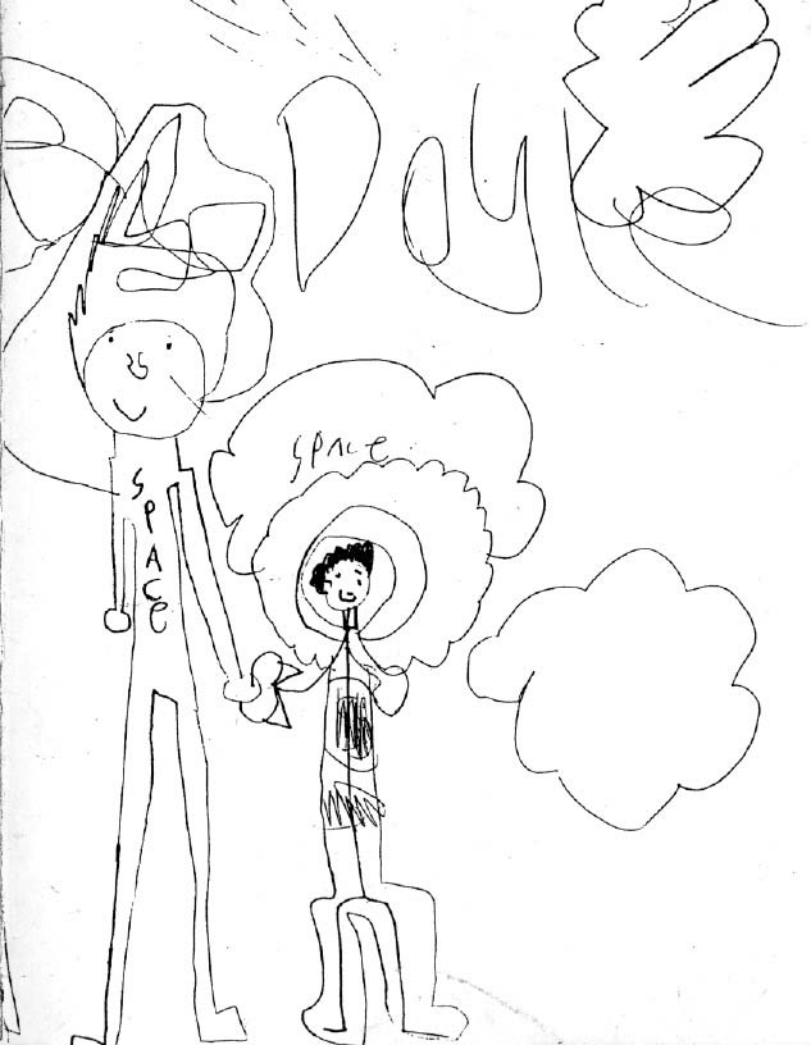
## Chapter 13 ... Accepting the Position

I'm proud of my son for finding the strength to cry when he's hurt, even as he tell me that "boys are not supposed to" and I'm proud of him for having the courage to be himself in a world that tells him it's impossible or forbidden for him to do so. He makes me laugh too. I feel pretty lucky.

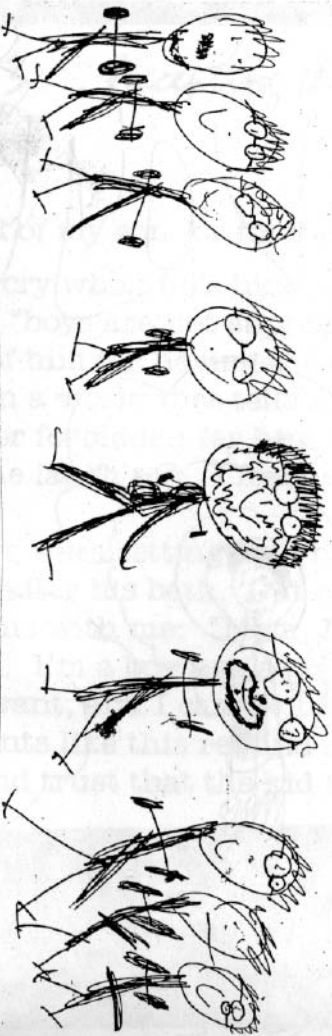
Last week we were setting up a board game in my room after his bath. Out of the blue, he shared this with me: "Mom, I'm not a boy *or* a girl. I'm a boy *and* a girl. I can be anything I want, and I can switch someday too." Moments like this remind me to keep breathing and trust that the kid is alright.







# 9 MUNKS



Many's Ashes live in Chicago.

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