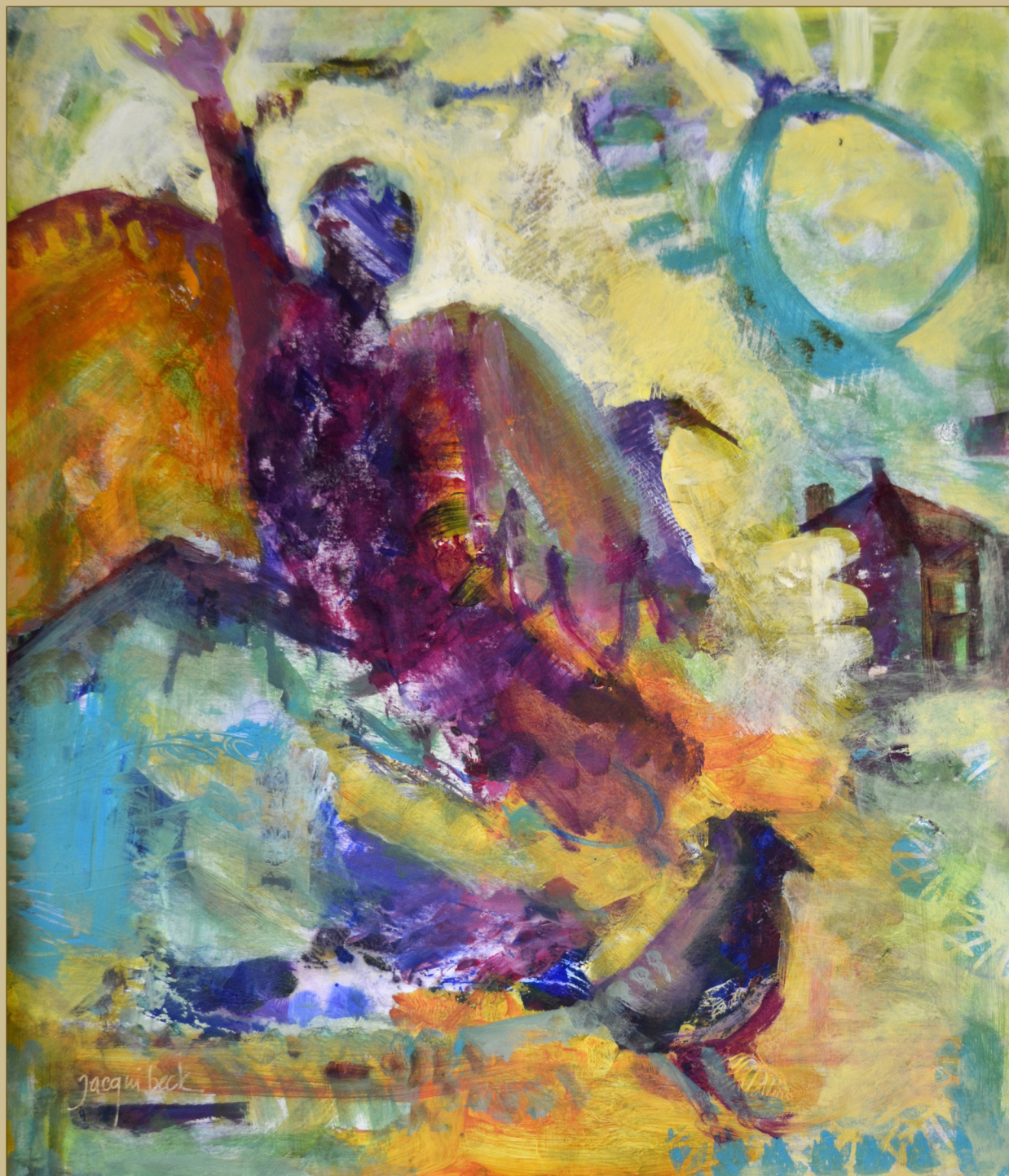


# GENDER PERSONAL

EXPLORING GENDER VARIANCE THROUGH ART



# Johnnie

Gender Personal  
Interview

## **Acknowledgement:**

# **Understanding Grows, Views Change**

This interview is part of the Gender Personal project (2013-2014) created by Jacqui Beck. For an overview of the project, including its origin, visit [www.genderpersonal.org](http://www.genderpersonal.org).

The following is a transcript of two of the nine interviews done for the Gender Personal project. Seven people were interviewed once each, and Jacqui's son, Finnbar, was interviewed twice.

Since that time, the people who were interviewed have grown in their understanding of themselves and their gender. Please take this into consideration as you read.

## **Appreciation**

A huge thank you to everyone who participated in this project, especially to those I interviewed. A more detailed list of thanks may be found at <http://genderpersonal.org/project-origin/#gratitude> (this link will open in your web browser).

**Copyright and Licensing Information:** © Jacqui Beck 2014-2018. This document is the work of Jacqui Beck. You are free to copy and redistribute it in any medium or format, provided you follow these license terms: You must include this copyright and licensing statement, and indicate if changes were made. You may distribute the document in any reasonable manner, but not in a way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use; You may not use the material for commercial purposes; If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material; You may not apply legal terms or technological measures that legally restrict others from doing anything the license permits. The legal language of these terms is set forth at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode>. Compliance with these terms constitutes permission to use the material—you are not required or encouraged to seek permission from the licensor. [Rev. 10/01/2018]

## Gender Personal: Interview with Johnnie

### 1. How old were you when you started to experience your gender as different from what the world seemed to expect?

**Johnnie:** I was probably eighteen months old. I have memory that far back. And how it came about for me was . . . it was around Easter . . . I'm assuming it was Easter because I had this lovely blue velvet dress on and I was wearing these beautiful patent leather shoes with these little socks with frills around the bottom, and we lived in a trailer and I was in the trailer with a male cousin and he was pretty aggressive and he was trying to take my jack-in-the-box.

And he was successful and [then] he ran for cover because I guess he felt the energy of who I was, and I—in front of everybody who was there for Easter, all these people—I was like, “give me my jack-in-the-box back,” and he refused, and so I whipped him [laughs] down, and everybody in the room stopped and watched this “little girl” beat this slightly older boy up and take my jack-in-the-box back.

And I remember looking around at all the people and their faces . . . I mean, I had consciousness of who I felt like but I don't think I had any language to talk about it but I knew the feeling deep inside. And in that moment when I looked around at that room I realized that this was about that feeling that I had deep inside, and it wasn't going over well with the people in the room.

And my mother—God bless her—she was amazing. She, too, knew who I was, and recognized what was going on, and quickly came over and very quietly said to me, “do you have your jack-in-the-box?” Basically, “are you satisfied in everything?” and I was like “yes!” and she said, “Okay, take it and go play in the other room.” So she kind of steered me away from the wrath of these people based on . . . I was not supposed to behave like this because I was the little girl all daintily dressed up and I *beat this kid down*.

I was very clear. And I remember that like it was this moment because it was such . . . the feeling was so clearly connected to who I thought I was in the corner of myself, with no language. And I realized: “Oh, God, this is not a good thing.” And so it's always stuck with me.

And then the next incident I had was . . . my mother and I had a really intense relationship. I'm the first-born of her and my father, and so she talked to me a lot about her life and things that were going on with her . . . we just had this—probably abnormal—but nevertheless it just made me very verbal and in my head very early.

My mom was this really intense black woman who was brilliant but definitely affected by the circumstances of her life in terms of being a black woman in this country . . .

**Jacqui:** Where did you live?

**Johnnie:** My dad was in the military but my parents are from the south. My father's from a little town called Bessemer, Alabama, outside of Birmingham . . . actually, it's called “Hueytown.”

And my mother is Gullah—she’s from Beaufort, South Carolina. And so, very “village” people. Culturally it’s very . . . right where it came from transplanted to this little place in Beaufort, South Carolina. So I grew up a lot in the South . . . I grew up in a lot of places because my dad was in the military but my roots are very Southern, and culturally it’s very village-southern, and Africa-village-southern, an island-village kind of thing.

And my mother spoke Gullah. We didn’t—typical “next generation,” they don’t want you to be labeled . . . Because I would love to be able to speak Gullah. My older brother does . . . he’s eight or nine years older than me.

So our relationship—and it was a lot based in a belief system that a lot of people didn’t have . . . My mother was very clairvoyant and clairaudient, and her initials are E.S.P. So, you know, she had all of this stuff going on and had a really hard life and so there was the trauma of life [as well] and it all made her an interesting person. She was really mean on one hand, but she was also just . . . *thinking* in a way that I don’t think a lot of parents think. What she gave me . . . I tell people what she gave me has enabled me to live this life that I have.

**Jacqui:** It sounds like she saw you.

**Johnnie:** In a big way.

**Jacqui:** Who you are . . . in a way that many people wouldn’t be able to do.

**Johnnie:** Our relationship [was really] based on how she saw me. Because I always felt like I had to tell my truth to her—we had this relationship where it was all about our truth. And sometimes telling my truth would get me beaten within an inch of my life, but she always encouraged me to say what was going on and she preferred that to . . . I mean, she had to be the mom and she had to be in control and I understood that.

And I was very forward. People would tell you, “Johnnie will do whatever. As long as it feels right to him, that’s where he’ll go with it.” And even as “she” I was like that. I didn’t have any problem with just being on the edge of my personhood.

And so I was five years old and we lived in a trailer and my mother was outside hanging sheets—she had just done a little wash and she was out hanging sheets—and I don’t know what led up to this but I remember thinking—I was sitting on the couch and I remember thinking at five, “I need to tell my mother who I am.” And I was like, “Whoa, that’s gonna be intense. Because I need to tell her I’m not a girl.” And I was just like, “But I’ve got to. I have to tell her. It’s the truth.”

**Jacqui:** Were you in school at this point?

**Johnnie:** Kindergarten didn’t exist for me back in the day . . . at that time, so, no, I wasn’t. And it was close to mid-afternoon and I remember I was in the front of the trailer and the back door led to where the clothesline was, and I remember opening the door first and just looking at her, and closing the door going, “Oh God, Oh God,” and then I was like, “No! You gotta go there!” I

opened the door again—and we would call my mother “Mommy” and by her first name, Eloise—and I opened the door again and I said, “Eloise!” No, I said, “Mommy!” and she didn’t look back, and I was like “Eloise!” because I knew she would look back, and I was like, “I have something to tell you! I am not a girl!” And she turned back to the clothesline and I was like “Do you hear me? I am not a girl!”

And she was like “Awwmm,” you know, she had that surly black woman face, and turned back to me and looked at me and said “What are you saying?” and I was like “I’m not a girl” and she gave it a moment’s thought and said “Look here little nigga, I have something to say. I’m a black woman in an America that would rather you not be living right now, or me not raise you the way that I know you should be raised to live in this world as a regular person without all this other shit,” and she said “That’s where I am.”

“I don’t know anything about what you’re talking about—you “not being a girl.” That’s your reality. Get in line. Let me raise you. And when and if this question comes up again for you, you will be in a position to answer it for yourself.” That was the biggest gift I got in my life. Because I never had any problem with who I was — because, one: she didn’t tell me I was wrong; two: she said “That’s *yours*. *You* have to deal with that. I’m your mother, and here’s what *I’m* gonna deal with so that you can deal with that when and if it ever comes up again.” And we never spoke about it again from that moment.

She let me be whoever I was, whatever I was feeling . . . and I wasn’t so much—I was a tomboy but I was also—you know, I didn’t play with dolls or anything—but I was a drama queen, you know? I loved dress-up and singing into hairbrushes and all that kind of craziness. And she encouraged that. She let that be because I think she knew deep down inside that that was an expression—that that was the truest expression of me.

And I was a tomboy in the sense that I loved to be outside doing these big explorations. The first time I ever saw an alligator I was alone with three other boys. We were riding our bikes all around and I came across a creek and there was the alligator and, you know, I was in there. We climbed into this alligator den trying to see it! I remember telling my father that, and he was like “Are you out of your mind?! I’ll kill you if you ever do that again!”

But that’s who I was. I was that adventure spirit, and she always let that be. She never stopped it. And you know what? I never felt the need . . . I was who I was, I wore whatever I wanted, if I wanted to dress-up—it was all “dress-up” to me; it was like “I can dress up like a girl, or I can dress like a boy. I can do whatever and it’s all cool and I got this place and this space to play.” And I really did and my mother was the leader in that space for me. She really let me be. I mean, she did it with everybody, but nobody else expressed this place, and she never freaked out about it or nothing.

**Jacqui:** She didn’t try to turn you into somebody else.

**Johnnie:** She was awesome like that. When I was living in New York City I started to come out . . . I was about thirty-one. So, I was living in New York, and I remember I was just kind of coming into this identity of being a lesbian. And it was freaking me out because I was, like, “God, I don’t feel like this but . . . I like women!” And I was, like, “Oh, God, this is one more

thing I gotta tell my mother. Jesus Christ.” And I’ll never forget—I was standing on the corner of 96<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. and there was a payphone and I called her from the street.

And I had been liking this girl but her parents were very religious, right wing, and they were telling her I was Satan and all this other stuff, and I was like “You don’t even get it—I’m not even a girl.” You know? So, whatever! And so I call my mother because I always talk to her—good, bad, or indifferent—and it was our typical Sunday morning conversation that I was scheduled to have and I decided to have it on the street at a payphone. And so I called her collect, and she always accepted, and I said, “Mom, I have to tell you something.”

And she was like “Yeah, what?” and I was like, “I don’t know if you’re going to really like this, but I’ve gotta tell you and I really need to let you know . . . I’m gay. They call it a ‘lesbian.’ And I don’t really understand it but I just wanted you to know. I’m sorry.” And I was crying and she was like “What are you crying about?” and I was like, “Well, you know, I don’t want you to be disappointed,” and she was like “Oh my God, I’m so grateful that you can live your life now. Live your life! I’ve been waiting for this moment for you.”

And I was like, “Really? When were you going to tell me?” and she said: “It’s not my place to tell you and this is yours to own . . .” and I was like, “Okay.” And I was so relieved, and I said, “Thanks so much.” And just before I hung up the phone she goes “And that’s not all.” And I was like, “What do you mean ‘that’s not all’?” and she was like, “You’ll figure that out. Like you did before . . . again.” So she was a little ahead of the game. And I—for years—kept thinking *what does she mean?*

That was in the backdrop. And then I went into a bookstore, and by this time I’m thirty-eight. I had that conversation when I was about thirty-two, so it took me about six years to realize. So I went into a bookstore and there was this book by Lauren Cameron— *Body Alchemy*. I don’t know what brought me to this book, but I found it and I opened it, and as serendipity would be, I opened to this page with a black trans guy.

And I was like, *Oh my God, I CAN do this. There is a place, and there are other people who have done this.* And I just remember looking at this book, and I started to seriously cry. And I went back three days in a row and read this book from front to back. And on the third day I showed up and the guy said to me: “The book’s in the back open to the page that you marked, and there’s a box of Kleenex.” And basically what he was saying was: “I’ve put you in a safe space to finish doing what you need to do.” And I finished reading that book and I thought . . . even if I feel like I don’t understand all of this, I don’t want to die and wonder what it would have been like to actualize that. I wasn’t *unhappy*, but I was unsettled.

And I knew that *this was the piece*, and I needed to move forward and accept this piece. I didn’t know what to do, and I spent about nine months going around in circles trying to figure out what to do, and then I remember that everybody in that book was from the West Coast and San Francisco. And I thought, *How am I going to get to San Francisco? What am I going to do, just quit my job?*

Well, as serendipity would have it, I was working for a company that produced the AIDS Rides. So, I was working for the New York office, and there was a California AIDS Ride, and it was in San Francisco. And I had worked for this company for three months, and they told me there was an opening in San Francisco.

So, there were no obstacles. I had a job, the door opened, and I came out there and it took me about six months. I met Michele [my partner] first. But it did take me six years after that to cross all the “t”s and dot all the “i”s.

And then I did all my research, I felt like I understood what the physical part of it would be—I mean, you can’t know the emotional and psychological part until you’re in it—but I felt like I had a general idea.

I had been in therapy just around my *life* for six years, three times a week, intensively. So I felt pretty psychologically able to deal with whatever was coming. And I now had some emotional help through Michele, and I told her right away: “I’m not butch. I’m not *that*. You know? You should really know who I am.” And she was cool with it. And I thought, *Okay, that’s another place of comfort and safety for me*. And in 2004, January 16<sup>th</sup>, I started hormones, and I haven’t really looked back since that. So, that was nine years ago. . It’s been a blast. I haven’t had a bad moment, really [in relation to that]. And I feel really comfortable.

During the first year of transition, the people that I transitioned with, my community—which I basically had to make because there were no men of color . . . there was really a dearth—and so, I realized that in order to have a place to check in with about being a black man I needed to have more black people or people of color who were experiencing some of the same things.

So I basically created my own community. I created this group called “Other Brothers” which was a performance art group that did all these little vignettes of our lives and wrote plays and did poetry and performed in San Francisco. And at the end of our performances we had these discussions . . . I wanted people to be able to talk about it. And now that is so commonplace: people go to a performance and at the end talk about what they just saw. Well, it wasn’t when I started. So these people would come in—anybody, everybody—see our performances and sit down afterwards and begin to talk about what was going on.

And that was pretty, pretty amazing for me: to be able to be involved in that. It gave me room to really grow. A lot of the bumps in the road I’ve dealt with through that kind of processing. Recently, everybody that I came up with during that time has started to consider . . . the big piece, like: my genitalia. What do I do about that? You know, my thinking was: *I’m a black man, I want to live the black man myth and they can’t give that to me. So, I can’t be bothered. I’m happy, everything I own works*. But then when all your friends start to wiggle in their seat and they’re going to see doctors, you go, *Is that really going on for me, and should I be entertaining that question?* So this past year I sat with that question—silently; I didn’t even let Michele know that I was dealing with it. I’d been very vocal about it in the past, through writing poems about it.

But I was really checking in deep and it was really interesting: I finally thought: *Okay, in order to really check in I have to sit in these rooms at the conference in Seattle with people who have*

*done this, who are thinking about doing it. And I did. And at the end of it I thought, I don't want this, I don't need this. And so, I've always had a place where I can really see where I am with that. But those were probably the three biggest [times [when I noticed my gender diversity]]: When I was eighteen months old, when I was five, and when I was thirty-eight. Those were the three milestones of: "Life goes on, this is who I am, and I'm coming into a new level of consciousness about what this means for me."*

[Transition to discussing being a transgender man of color and challenges in this community]:

When I first started thinking about physically transitioning, I wanted to meet some people in the community who were black men who had transitioned, who I felt held something for me. I [was planning to] meet the first one, [but] within a week or two of trying to hook up, I find out that this person had committed suicide.

And I'm going, *What? What's that about?* I go to meet the second one, and he [had] hung himself. I'm starting to think, *What's going on?* So, I don't meet those two people, [but] I begin my transition. The third person that I'm trying to talk to—connect with—kills himself too. So that made me go even deeper inside myself and say, *You need to answer these questions for you. You better make sure you know what time of day it is, and what time of night, and everything in between because it doesn't look good based on what you've seen.*

It [suicide in the trans\* community] is an epidemic. I look at my friends— I've got two or three friends who right now are hanging by a thread . . . there's still *a lot* [to deal with]. But a large part of our problem is us...accepting ourselves. It's hard to step out and say "this is my reality, this is what I'm going to live." We have to allow ourselves to be, to make direct connections based on our truth.

I overheard at [my friend] Christopher's memorial that the attending psychiatrist said that Christopher's problem was that he was not out *enough*. And I started thinking about this, I was like, "Here's this flamboyant guy I know who became Grand Marshal of the LGBT parade, started the Trannie Fest...and he's not out enough?" What could that mean? And here's what I think...I think this persona that he lived was him but it wasn't all of him. So he wasn't able to make direct connections based on all of his truth. And he lived through those filters; and it wasn't enough.

And people were mad at the psychiatrist, but I thought he spoke volumes. He said Christopher wasn't out enough, but he didn't mean big in persona; I took it to mean Chris wasn't able to be just Chris without all the other filters. I took that so hard. And really, truthfully, that was one of the reasons I left San Francisco: because I knew; I had already pushed myself, you know: "I'm going to advocate for everything...you know: blah, blah, blah..." And people were trying to create the pedestal for me to be on. But I was like, "You know what? I'm going to get out of here. Because my life is bigger than this. It's bigger and it's smaller. You know? I don't need all this. I'm ok." *I ran.*

That's my message in the community: That our problem is us, and not believing in ourselves. I mean, think about it, people! And I say this every time I get the opportunity to stand in front of a



group: The problem is us. It's not people accepting us, it's us accepting ourselves. And I want to clue you in: You are the reason why you are standing here right now. You have made some choices that have been outside of what everybody else believed about who you were or what people said you were supposed to be like. You have made some choices to be standing here right now. *Get with that.* People told me: "You can't be a boy. You can't have those feelings. You can't do that." But I chose to, in my own little way, hold onto who I believed I was. That speaks volumes about courage and strength and who we are.

Sex—i.e., gender identity—is, in our world, *fixed*. You can't change it. No one's supposed to be able to change it, and the people who do change it . . . they've made them into freaks. We've got a lot of shit coming at us, and yet some of us choose to keep making the choices about our identity despite what people are telling us. That speaks *volumes*.

## **2. Tell me about your experience of yourself regarding your gender. How do you identify regarding gender?**

**Johnnie:** That waxes and wanes. Some days I feel totally male, and I'm in this male body that I've created in a fierce and fabulous way. And some days I feel the beauty and the gentleness of my female self, comingled in this body, but nevertheless I feel distinctly female. And I relish in those moments because—like I tell you—testosterone is way different than estrogen in my experience—and sometimes that softness is removed by the testosterone . . . and I try to think, *Oh, that's not true, it's just me listening to the psychiatrists, and that there's no difference in the way that men think*, but I'm sorry: my experience with testosterone tells me that there is a different way that men think than women. And I know and I feel that difference when I have those moments.

And I'm in a state of flux right now, just so you know. In August, I ran out of testosterone. I went to the Country Doctor clinic in Seattle, and they were not user-friendly—at least the practitioner that I got was rather hostile. But in the process, I didn't get testosterone until October. And so, as a result, my period came back. Since October until just two days ago, I've menstruated every month. It was by choice, because I was just very curious about that part of me.

And this [question is about] what do I think of myself gender-wise . . . and I was physically a woman. Although I hated my period and all those other things, and you're just like, *Okay, can I just be normal?* But clearly, I was curious enough to allow my period to come back, and I just have made a decision that I'm gonna ride it out until it shuts itself off.

**Jacqui:** So, I'm confused. You got back on testosterone in October?

**Johnnie:** No, I got the prescription in October, but I thought, *Why don't I just ride it out?* So I didn't start it again. And now I feel like—and this is just me—I feel like I want to see my woman-self through to the end. I want to see my periods stop. And I don't know *what* that is, but I want to let it be.

So, just three days ago, actually, I made the decision that until my period stops on its own I'm not going to take testosterone. I'm not worried about what it means physically—after nine years of taking it, I'm not going to lose . . . and I've never taken a full dose.

And now that my female side is slowly being phased out, I really feel less worried about my voice changing or whatever . . .

### **3. How long did you know you were trans\* before you came out/told other people?**

**Johnnie:** I was forty-five when I started taking testosterone. I like to tell people I was like “big mamma” in the making. At thirty-eight, it was scary, because I had lived what people would presume in this day and age as half my life as a female. And I thought: *I only know what it is to kind of “play at” being male. What’s it going to be like if I actually put this hormone in my body and physically show up as male?* It was scary.

By the time I was thirty-eight there were times I was presenting as a teenage boy. I had a baby face, and I could look like a teenage boy. For the most part, though, I was a girl. I was totally presenting as a woman for the most part. And I liked it, you know—I was a fierce girl.

And I was in a relationship at the time, and I remember saying to the woman I was in a relationship with: “Would you like me if I was more male?” And she just kind of looked at me like, “What are you talking about?” There wasn't a lot of feedback. I don't think she ever thought about it, and I think she had her own issues around stuff like that—she was very . . . I won't say gender fluid, but she definitely had some things going on around her own gender. But opening up to her . . . she didn't become engaged in conversation about it, so that made it a bit like, *Okay, I'm not gonna talk about that.*

And then I left New York City to take that job in San Francisco, and she was gonna come out and be with me, and that didn't work out. We never got an opportunity to talk about it, so this is just my perspective on the thing: I think it [gender] brought up too much of her own issues, and so it was easier for her not to come out and us to separate. And then, soon after that—in December—I met Michele. She was involved in the Butch/Femme community in a big way. And of course looking very femme, no one ever thought she was a lesbian.

But all of her lovers and people she dated were a lot like me—not quite to the extreme I was—but they had some elements. And so she was so relaxed with the idea, and we could actually talk about it. You know, like: *What would that mean?* and *How would she feel?* And once I got into a partnership that provided that I became less scared. And I think that's a huge thing: knowing that you can have a life partner that is accepting, because everybody wants someone to love them. I mean, who doesn't want to be loved? And so, once that happened, my fear really dissipated in a big way, and I got free to kind of circle around things, get involved, you know. And at one point, I thought I was gonna be a gay guy.

Because that's where I cut my gay teeth—my LGBT teeth—was in the men's community in New York. Because I just didn't identify with women enough to be a lesbian, per se, I was really

confused. I've always done what I wanted to do as a girl. I was a fierce girl. So I was really lost in the lesbian community, and I spent a lot of time in the gay man's community.

And I didn't have many women friends, and the one woman friend I did have . . . when I met her she was straight—it wasn't until later that her bisexuality came out. And so I had no frame of reference for this community that I was so ensconced in. I even danced for women at this place called The Clit Club. And I did it, and it was great and I had a great time, but when it really came down to it I was like, *I'm not a lesbian. I like women, I love women, I want to marry one one day, but . . .* So when I met Michelle, it was awesome.

#### **4. Did you have an experience of being afraid to come out?**

**Johnnie:** Yeah. You know, I used to say no about that. It's a lot to tell somebody you want to change your sex. It's a *lot*.

It kind of happened after I saw the book and I knew that it was possible. It was no longer just this idea in my mind. I was like, *Oh, God, am I nuts?* I was sort of like you, you know? I thought there were about three Trans\* people in the world!

#### **5. How has your view of gender or your relationship to gender changed over time?**

**Johnnie:** You know, I probably never in my whole life felt like it was fixed. From a very young age I've recognized that something was going on. But now, I'm like, *It's so all over the map for so many people.* I just accept wherever somebody is. Wherever somebody is in terms of gender, I believe it.

**Jacqui:** The people who are very committed to binary are stuck and kind of not seeing it all, and...

**Johnnie:** Yes! People who are binary, they are stuck, and they're short-sighted, and they're afraid because they have viewed this [gender variance] in themselves, and they're like, "Oh, no. *Hell* no. I'm lockin' up the door and throwin' away the key."

I don't have that anymore. I'm like: "Whoever you say you are, I believe you. And I will govern myself accordingly. And I too might have issues with pronouns because of what my vision is showing me. Give me a little break—I'm human just like everyone. But I genuinely believe you are who you feel like you are and are saying you are."

That's exactly how I feel, and that's how I feel about gender: whatever/however you are and show up, I'm gonna honor that. I mean, come on, even in nature . . . you know those goats back there? I have watched some *crazy* stuff! There's transgender in goats. I've seen it with my own eyes. Everything that's in us I've seen in those animals who don't have the language or the social cultural blah blah blah that we have . . . you know what I'm saying? It's present. It's part of our DNA.

And that's the best thing about this farm for my life: I get to see myself represented everywhere. It doesn't matter the species. I have seen plants that have the female part and the male part. And that's not how they're supposed to be. It's happening here, kind of what they call a freak of nature. And I've seen it, and I'm like, *Look at that!* So maybe it's *not* a freak of nature. It's real. And it exists in the DNA of *everything* living.

**Jacqui:** It's a variety of nature, maybe, rather than a freak of nature.

**Johnnie:** Yes. And that has been amazing for me. To walk back there and see . . . and we've got a female goat, and she don't got a thing to do with loving and nurturing. She thinks she is a male goat! When the other goats go in heat, she's trying to, you know, make a baby. And you're like, *Okay, this isn't just in my species.*

## 6. How have writers and other people affected you or helped you?

**Johnnie:** Loren Cameron, he was my saving grace. He did a book called *Body Alchemy*. He's a photographer in San Francisco who transitioned, and began to document other people and talk about it. And it was one of the very first books. It's an old book now, it came out in the late '80s, and I have to say, everything else came after that book.

As a kid I read about Christine Jorgensen, and watched Renee Richards—they're all trans women who came out in the public. Renee Richards played tennis, and I don't know if she was a doctor or whatever in transition, and she was very much in the public eye. And I was watching that and was like, *Whoa!*

**Jacqui:** And when was that? Around what year?

**Johnnie:** Renee Richards was mid '70s, and Christine Jorgensen was . . . no, Renee Richards was when I was around fifteen and Christine Jorgensen was when I was like, I don't know . . . very young. And I remember just being transfixed.

They were male to female. Like, why would I be watching that? That has nothing to do with my reality, but I knew what it was about, and I was watching it with full eyes wide open. And I remember saying something to my mother about it, and her not being shocked, but silent, and not quite sure how to talk about it, and probably going back to that day, you know, when we had that discussion, and her probably thinking: *Let me give space for you to think about that question for yourself.*

**Jacqui:** Any other books?

**Johnnie:** You know, I read *Transgender Warriors* but I don't think I, it didn't have the same impact as that . . . oh, God, that one book.

## 7. What is gender?

**Johnnie:** Oh man, that's hard. Well, I don't know how to say that in words, because a lot of it, for me, is just a feeling that I can't really . . . and mine is so many feelings. Like, I wouldn't want anyone to call me a woman, but that's a large part of who I am. Right now, it outweighs the maleness of me in terms of experience, in terms of living, everything like that. It informs. It really has been an information point for my maleness because it's what brought it in and entertained it, and nurtured it.

So I don't feel like both, but I know that both exist in me. But, like I said, I have those moments where I know—this is my femaleness. And even without the hormone estrogen. It's like roots in my brain that are just female, that were placed there when I was a female, and they still exist, maybe not as deeply, but they're still there, and I know that exists in me.

**Jacqui:** Most of us are picking one or the other. Not all of us are doing that. But when we do pick one or the other, aren't we saying that within that we also have the other? Like you were talking about, maybe when you were around thirty-eight, you would dress as a man, you would dress as a woman, maybe some days you would come home and change clothes . . .

**Johnnie:** I had those days! Like, go out in the morning one way, come home, and go out later the next way.

**Jacqui:** Imagine if that's just who we were. If there was no “Are you a man, or a woman?”

**Johnnie:** Right!

**Jacqui:** But does it take away from your maleness to know that you have femaleness or feminineness, or . . .

**Johnnie:** Not for me. But for people who have to choose, it does take away for them. Like, I told a friend of mine that I've had my period for the last . . . whatever. And they're trans\*, and they freaked out. And I watched it. I didn't have any reaction, I just watched it. That's something I'm really trying to practice in my life right now— just watch.

**Jacqui:** Your mom does that.

**Johnnie:** Yeah. And I watched him freak out, and I thought: *Whoa! Why are you so vested?*

## 8. What have you learned about gender and gender expression?

**Johnnie:** That it can be whatever the person decides it will be, hormones or no hormones. That's the thing I know: there's something deeper than a hormone. The hormone gives you the physical expression, and it *does* give you the emotional and psychological place too, but the biggest thing it gave me was a physical expression. And that's important to me, for whatever reason, wherever I'm lining up, that's important. But I think it's really whatever people say.

**Jacqui:** I'm wearing a dress and I say I'm a man?

**Johnnie:** Go for it! I can honor that. And I don't even find it hard to believe . . . I celebrate that. Because to me that shows freedom, and it's not constraint.

**Jacqui:** What you said is: "Tell me who you are, and I will honor that."

**Johnnie:** Yeah!

**Jacqui:** So maybe that's the deal: it's an inner experience.

**Johnnie:** It's nothing about the outside. I mean, it is, but deeper. It's about who you feel you are.

**Jacqui:** 'Cause Finnbar sure felt like a guy before he started taking testosterone.

**Johnnie:** I had the same thing. I made the choice about pronouns long before I physically [transitioned]. As a matter of fact, if I thought I could have gotten away with . . . well, it's not "gotten away with." If I felt like I could be treated like I wanted to be treated without going through the physical transition . . . I was really down with that, and tried it, but I found that it wasn't satisfying.

So that meant: *Are you going to continue to be unsatisfied, or are you going to produce something in your life that's satisfying?* And that's just a matter of making a choice, you know? Yes, there are consequences, good, bad, and indifferent about that choice, but would you rather have those, or would you rather be in a place where you're totally uncomfortable. And I was like: It's time to move on. I'm ready. And that's how the questioning went for me.

And that's how I recognize, even if you aren't thinking about physically transitioning, when you get up, and you put on a dress, and you go out in the world and you say: "I'm a man," that's the same process. It's not any different. And so I want people to honor my process, and so that's a mirror. That's a reflection of my process. Maybe not as involved, or *more* involved, I think, because to hold a place of: "I'm a man with a dress on" . . . that's huge. It's easy to do or be where I am now.

Very few people ever question who I am now. As a matter of fact, some people, when I tell them are like: "No, you're lying." And I'm like: "No, I wish I was." Why would I lie about that? Isn't that a little weird that I'd walk around and talk about that? And I'm like, "Well, if you really want to see, I'll drop my pants, and then you'll be like: 'Oh, God, this is real!'"

**Jacqui:** If you got misgendered, how would that feel, or before you transitioned . . .

**Johnnie:** There are two [groups of] people who totally see all of me (and it's been a consistent experience)—little children, and old black women. I can't tell you the times I've been standing in the grocery store with an old black woman, and she will say: "Hey, daughter."

**Jacqui:** Beard?

**Johnnie:** Everything. And she will recognize me. From my former body. Not in a mean way. In a knowing, a knowing way. And the first time it happened, I was like: *Do I know you?* Because I thought that was the only way you could . . . nobody now ever thinks anything else about me, except I look like who I am. Old black women and children? They're too much in their truth. Children are so funny.

I was working at a farm in Puyallup, and we used to do educational tours, and I was taking this group of kids on this little tractor hay ride. I was talking to them, eating vegetables, whatever, and this little boy goes: "You're a girl!" And he probably had been looking at me and looking at me, and he finally was like: *Ah! That's what it is!* And I freaked out, 'cause I was in a group, and parents were there. And I did the wrong thing. I tried to humiliate him.

And that was the wrong thing. I'll admit that. But I corrected that. I went to his mother, and I said: "Your son figured out something about me today that I tried to make him ashamed he had the intuition to know. And I'm too embarrassed to go back to him right now, and I don't think, as the authority figure in his life I can go back at this moment and it would mean anything to him. But if you would say to him: 'you know today, honey . . .' and however you want to handle it, I would really appreciate that."

Because that's a valuable thing, to be able to see the truth. And what happens to us in our lives is people say to us: "That's not the truth, that's not the truth," and we end up with a lot of shit. And I told her that, and I said: "Listen, he saw me." And I told her who I was, and she was freaking out, but she got it, for her kid's sake, and I'm hoping that she did tell him . . . but little kids? They see me. They don't have any issue with seeing me, and saying it. And I don't even get freaked out about that, like if a little kid sees me I'm like: "Yes, that's who I am, too." And they don't go: "What do you mean?" They go: "Oh, okay," and they keep walking.

## 9. Why do you think people are afraid of gender variance?

**Johnnie:** 'Cause it means they might be gender variant. If they have to look at it happening to other people and they believe gender is fixed and can't be changed, that brings up the question. It makes them go: *Could that be me?* It makes them start having an identity crisis. And that's what's so frightening about it. Because people really believe that you have to be either/or. There's no movement. And for some people there's very little movement, but they swing more this way, but they don't hit that mark. But there's still a swing, and people are like: *Oh God. I got to see that swing in you and I got to recognize that swing in me.*

**Jacqui:** And why is that scary? Why is it scary to have my gender be, or your gender be, not here or here.

**Johnnie:** Because in the world that's not acceptable. And we live in a world where a majority of the people believe that you're one or the other. And you can't be anything else but that. And they won't allow it.

**Jacqui:** And it leads to some people committing murder! That's enough. Just that shake-up of identity, of wondering who I am. That looking at you makes me that shaken up that I want to annihilate . . .

**Jacqui:** One of the other people I interviewed said that she . . . the biggest anti-trans\* thing is toward trans women because if a man finds himself attracted to a transgender woman and realizes she has a penis or had a penis—*What does that mean about me?* So, on some level, you're explaining that same homophobic fear towards trans\* men.

**Johnnie:** I saw a lot of gay people as a kid . . . As a matter of fact, I saw a trans\* couple. They weren't living that; there was no language for it, but when I used to go visit my grandma there was a couple that lived down the street, two women and one showed up as a man and nobody in the community cared . . . they were like, *Oh, that's just them.* They were respectful, they were churchgoing, they participated in the community in a way that people were like: *Who cares?* So I grew up with that.

**Jacqui:** But then, you know how we're talking about transgender or gender is a spectrum not binary. Sexual orientation: who you're attracted to, who you want to have sex with... it's also a spectrum.

**Johnnie:** I think you're very right about that.

**Jacqui:** And that means that most of us are somewhere in here [indicates the spectrum]. Except most of us are shut down enough that we don't know that or don't act on it.

## **10. How do you *wish* people would respond to you? [Do you still get misgendered?]**

**Johnnie:** That did happen in the very beginning. And if I could think of where those pictures are I'd show them to you, and you could see how it happened. I was very much a girl, and actually a very, kind of, beautiful girl. And did a little print modeling, did some other kinds of modeling. I have all the little accolades, as small as the little blips are, they're there, that say I wasn't an ugly girl.

But when I was ready to shine forth with this man that I was thinking and still think that I am, there would be times when I didn't have a deep enough voice . . . I did have hair under here [his chin], though, that I let grow. I used to pluck it out, but then I was like, *I'm going to let it grow,* but people still called me "she," and I was like (and this is totally my mother's influence in my life) you have two choices: you can be sad about this, or you can accept it and move on. And I was like, *I really don't want to spend a lot of time sad about this, because I know that it's a process and gradually it will become less.*

I think that it was hardest when I was with my friends who were already passing, or I had a friend who wasn't gonna do it, but everyone thought she was a man [laughs]. And I'd be with her and they'd call her "sir" and call me "ma'am," and I'd be like, *Oh God, why is this happening?*



And it'd be a little disappointing, but then I'd think: *It's a process, and this is what it is, and this is who I'm showing up as today. Doesn't mean I'm going to be this tomorrow, and I'm just going to come into my own and just be okay with it.*

**Jacqui:** So, let me ask one more thing. I'm going to narrow it a bit: What attitude would you like people to have once you've asked them to call you "sir," to call you "he"? What are you asking for people who are new to this?

**Johnnie:** You know, the first thing that came to my mind is that I've never asked anybody. I haven't. I'm lying—once. And it just happened this past September. You know, when I came out to my sisters and brothers—which wasn't really a big come-out because they were like: You're a freak anyway so we aren't shocked by this—you know, they were like: "Oh, really? Okay, no surprises here." You know, when we went to live out "I'm a boy" in the country with a truck and a dog in North Carolina, and I helped my sister run a business, Michele and I were the face of the company. We were going out, getting a place where we could make the bids, and once we got the bids we'd meet with the people and sign the contracts.

And my sister would come, but she would sit in the background, and people would engage, and once people realized what was going on they would realize that she was really the owner of the company, and so they would just engage her, right? And she would call me "she." And thank God at that time I had a beard, and was really presenting male, and so people would look at her, and then look at me, and then they'd just turn to Michele, 'cause they assumed that she was just talking about Michele, right? And then Michele was calling me "he" and everything. And you've got that whole race thing, you know, and as much as my family isn't racist there's shit that happens. We've got our shit too, like everybody else.

So we were at my sister's house and I guess Michele had called me "he" one too many times in front of her, and she snapped, and she was like: "I hate that! I'm so tired of it! I don't know what to do with it!" She was like: "You are not a *he*! You are a *she*! You are my sister!" And she went off, and I was like: "Oh God, okay." And it made me go to this place of: *what must that feel like?* For forty-five years I've been her sister.

And now I come home, and she hadn't seen me in a while, so I come home, and her sister's face is still somewhere in there, but now she's seeing this man, or this young boy, 'cause that's probably what I looked like more than anything, and I'd be a little freaked out too. And I looked at her and I said: "You know what, Jocelyn? (And she goes: "I'm never calling you *he*.") And I said, "I don't think I would know how to behave if you called me *he*. I am not your brother. I have lived most of my life as your sister, and I'm okay with that relationship, because I don't know if I would really know how to be your brother, whatever that means."

"So you don't have to freak out or anything like that. Just know this: the more I progress along this path and this male me comes out, it's going to be a little crazy-making for you and the people you're talking to still be calling me *she*. But, you know, you'll work that out. I probably won't even be around when you're trying to work that out, but you'll work it out. So don't feel like you have to call me anything different than you ever have. I'm really okay about acknowledging who I am and in the places I need to do that.

“And here's what I do want to tell you: in some places it's dangerous because some people aren't my sister, and they don't care about me like that. And the fact that I changed my sex on a physical level is frightening to them. And they want to kill people like me because it presents some kind of identity crisis for them. So you don't have to call me your brother, or whatever. Just call me by my name, and people will get with that. And you'll be okay.” So, in that sense, I did ask somebody to call me something.

But the one person I have asked is Michele's mother. And the reason I asked is because Michele's mother is conscious, but she's still not as conscious as she'd like to think. And so she met me, but then saw *Oprah* and did all this work, or whatever, and totally expressed to me that she got me. Now, when you do something like that I feel like you need to stand up.

You need to understand the importance of me being called *he* by you. Because if you say you recognize the courage and everything it took me, give me the honor and call me what you know I want to be now. And she came here in September, and she said, a couple of times she said: “We have a lovely relationship. You are my girls.” And I didn't say anything, and I thought: *Johnnie, is this really that important to you? Because you really need to think about that. Because do you really care? Really?*

And I cared. I did. It was the first time I was like: *Okay, I care. In this instance, in this moment I care.* And I didn't say it to her. I said to Michele: “You know, I care. And I want to talk to your mother, but I think she would do better if it came from you and then I came in on the conversation. I don't want to attack her, but I think she might feel like that—‘cause I never said anything, or whatever, I've just been going with it.”

And so Michele talked to her, and she's not called me *she* since then. But that's the first time, and only time, I've said: “I need to be called *he*. I really do.” With everybody else . . . no one calls me *she* now, like I said, except for old black women and young children.

I did have an experience, with my older sister: We were in San Diego just this past three weeks. And she drums. She does Afro-Cuban drumming, and drummed a class for this dance class, and we went to hang out. And I thought, *Wow! My sister has really evolved, and I want to experience this! I want to feel her joy in this drumming thing.* And so we went.

And we walked in, and she goes: “This is my sister.” And everybody looked at me, but what makes it even crazier is that my sister, her mother was white and our dad was black, so she looks mixed, and she looks more black, but you can see a bit of something going on there, and so when she said, “This is my sister,” people [looked at Michele and] were like: *Okay, she can't mean him . . . So, whoa, look at that, her sister's full on white with blue eyes and blonde hair.*

And that's where they took it. They were just like: *Wow! That's interesting!* And that's what they did with it. And Michele was like: “Oh God, I wanted to tell her . . .” And I was like: “Well, now it's even more interesting for them. They're like, *here's this black woman who looks decidedly black*—unless you really know her you don't know that her mother was white—and she's calling this blue-eyed, blonde-haired woman her sister, so now they're really talking about it!” And I was laughing so hard and I was like: *If they only knew what the real deal was!* That would be

even funnier, but no one's any the wiser cause there's no indication that I could ever have been her sister. So . . . It was funny.

## **11. What are the hardest things you deal with or have dealt with around gender?**

**Johnnie:** How people are killed because of their choices around their gender. Or how people kill themselves. Because . . . there are a lot of worse things people can be in the world. And then you bash transgender people and you kill them.

I was in San Francisco when Gwen Araujo, a young trans woman that was like eighteen years old, got brutally murdered in the Bay Area, and there is a huge transgender population there. And we had a memorial and a candlelight vigil. It was what really took transgender day of remembrance to the height that it was—that whole incident. So communally I got to experience the emotions and everything behind that, and I realized then that everything else was hard, but to see people killed for their choices—that's the hardest thing I deal with.

And to see people kill themselves because they feel so unconnected and isolated. That's hard because I have like three friends right now. My friend Christopher was a shock. I should have probably known he was gonna . . . and I'm not going to put that on myself. I was there. He knew he could reach out, and he chose not to. It has nothing to do with me. That was his choice, and I need to honor his choice.

**Jacqui:** You need to not blame yourself.

**Johnnie:** Exactly. And I'm clear about that. The rest of it, I don't know . . . I need to not blame myself. But I have three friends right now that I . . . I'm not going to blame myself because I bluntly said to them: "You feel suicidal. You feel on the edge. I'm here. I can hear anything you have to say to me. I don't care what it is. I'm here."

**Jacqui:** Are you saying people that are still living? Three people you're seriously concerned about?

**Johnnie:** Yeah.

**Jacqui:** Fuck...

**Johnnie:** Yeah. And one is like my brother.

**Jacqui:** Is he connected? Is he getting . . .

**Johnnie:** No. He's out there. He walked away from . . . he basically walked away from me. Because I think he felt . . . he didn't want to be involved in the trans\* community, and I think he felt like because of who I was in the San Francisco trans\* community, that was going to be my life, so he didn't want any association with that. But he's figured it out . . . but now the issue is: I have my life in a way that he wants his life, but he doesn't know how to facilitate that for

himself. Because I think he just doesn't believe that he could just walk away and create it. And maybe he doesn't have that in him. I don't know. But I'm really worried.

**Jacqui:** Is he in the Seattle area?

**Johnnie:** No, he's in San Francisco. And I saw him while I was there, and it was really weird.

**Jacqui:** He's way pulled in?

**Johnnie:** Yeah. And then we had lunch together and that was the extent of it. And I mean, this is somebody that I feel really close to.

And I knew there was an issue when . . . He's not had top surgery. And I'm cool with that, like, whatever! But his conversations with me lead me to believe he doesn't want his breasts. But there's something going on emotionally that he can't do it, because he's insured. It would cost him a five-dollar co-payment, you know what I'm saying?

I, however, paid \$8,000 because we didn't have insurance and had to save the money and pay it. And I'm going: "Dude. It's five dollars. And I get it, but on some level you're saying you want this, but you need to get into a place where you can talk about what is going on. And you won't do it. You won't do it." And it feels like it's dragging him down. And I'm just like: "Okay, so you don't want to do it. If that's really the case that you don't want to do it then you find a woman or you find a partner who's cool with that, and you just do that." Nothing . . . And I saw him for two hours, and that was the extent of it. And I'm frightened out of my mind.

And then I have another friend who had bottom surgery and we didn't talk about it the last time we were together. It's been a nightmare. He went to a foreign country where he couldn't speak the language, had somebody fuck with him down there . . . He paid a lot of money. *A lot of money.*

And it's not the way he imagined it, and he's freaked out. And his partner is freaked out because she didn't have time to think. They didn't do it together. They didn't process anything together. She was over here trying to be like: "Really? But you've been so hostile towards these kinds of people in the past and now you're telling me . . ." But that's how it goes! Until you can accept in yourself, you send that shit out to whoever else can take it, or not.

And that's where he is now. And it hurts me so bad and I don't know how to help.

**Jacqui:** So are you getting support? You can talk to Michele, but are you talking to people about it?

**Johnnie:** No. And I know that's a problem. And one of the things I was thinking about is that maybe I would do short-term therapy, where I can have a place to talk about it. 'Cause I can't keep talking to her. She can't . . . She shouldn't . . .

## 12. What is unique about you?

**Johnnie:** That I believe in me. And maybe that's not so unique, but that's what I believe is my uniqueness, that I believe in me and I believe in the power to be. I believe in the power of being, and so that's what I do, in all facets of who I am. I try to maintain a belief in me that leads me to the power of sustaining me. And I think that's unique about me. I mean, everybody has that, but I think that for me, I think that's what I see as my saving grace.

**Jacqui:** It seems that you're walking it.

**Johnnie:** Yeah. And I like that about me. It's fun. I have a really fun life. I really do. Michele and I call this our "happily ever after." When people ask us, "What do you do?" We go, "We're living our happily ever after now."

**Jacqui:** It's not off there somewhere.

**Johnnie:** Yeah. It's here. And every day we both look at each other and there are two questions we constantly ask each other: "Who *are* we?" and the other thing is, "What next?" Because, if I were to tell you the relationship I have with things like rainbows, and like things that people look at with disregard, but I know that they have distinct meaning in my life, and then how it always leads me to another place in my life, it's satisfying.

It's crazy. Clearly I must have thought this life existed because I'm pursuing it, but on some levels I had no idea. And all I can figure is a few things that have brought me to a place where I entertain the idea of it, but . . . I am like a pig in shit, on a lot of levels. I love my life. And not because it has all been easy or whatever, but because it has a deep, rich texture. And then when I look at the tapestry in my life . . . I see things. I see things that are satisfying. I see things that bring wisdom.

I see things that bring joy. I see things that bring surprise or beauty or whatever, and that feels good. That feels good. It does. It feels really good.

When I first transitioned, people were, "Oh, my God! Oh, my God! You look so great!" and I would go, "Yeah, and I feel amazing." And a couple of my friends would go, "You never acknowledge that I say you look great." And I would say, "Well, it's not because I don't want to acknowledge it, but it's not just looking great. I feel alive, and I feel great, and I really want you to know that."

Yeah, and I do. I feel alive. I feel great. And I'm living my happily ever after, with someone who feels the same way, and that adds tremendously.

**Jacqui:** She's pretty great.

**Johnnie:** Yeah, she is. She's amazing. She's smart and beautiful, and so kind. Oh, my God, I've learned so much about kindness. I don't come from a very kind place. I come from a very "direct hit, tell the truth, keep moving" . . . You know, that's how my mother was. And there wasn't much kindness. I mean, there was love, but there wasn't a lot of gentleness and stuff in who I

was. You know, the apple don't fall far from the tree, and so . . . I've learned how to temper it with humor and different things, but I've learned a lot of kindness and gentleness from her.

### **13. What are some of your favorite books or movies?**

**Johnnie:** My favorite movie is a gender movie. It has Al Pacino in it, *Dog Day Afternoon*. And it's about this guy who is in love with a trans\* woman who wants to have an operation to complete her physical self, and they rob a bank. But they're not successful. I saw that movie when I was young, like really young. And I've seen it many, many times. And as a young kid, I was like, "Why am I attracted to this?" And I was like, "Am I a freak?" I was like, "What's going on with me?"

But over the years, before I started on this journey—well I've never not been on this journey—I would watch this movie and cry and cry. And I would just be like, "What's going on? Why do I love this movie?" And then I figured it out.

And then my other favorite thing is a book, *Charlotte's Web*. And it's about a compassionate spider loving a pig and his relationship with all those little animals on the farm, even the rat. And the rat's like an old bothersome curmudgeon, but they get along, and they make relationship. And I still don't know why I'm so attracted to this book. I still don't know why.

And the second runner-up is *The Velveteen Rabbit*. But we understand why that is.

**Jacqui:** But, why the Velveteen Rabbit for you?

**Johnnie:** I think it's the concept of being loved ragged.

**Jacqui:** Yeah, his fur's rubbed off.

**Johnnie:** Rubbed off . . . And it's all about how this kid really loves this rabbit. And it's a velveteen rabbit, and it came all beautiful and pristine and everything, and now it's all, like you said, its fur is all rubbed off [laughs], and it's bald in spots and all this stuff. And I really love this book. But I love *Charlotte's Web* more.

**Jacqui:** So, which character do you identify with in *Charlotte's Web*?

**Johnnie:** All of 'em. Yeah, I feel like Charlotte. I feel like the pig. I feel like the rat, you know. I even feel like the little girl, and the father. I feel like all those characters. I know all those places. And then I think . . . it's the same with the *Velveteen Rabbit*. I feel like the rabbit. I feel like the kid that loves the rabbit. But I think I feel more like the rabbit that I would want to be something that someone would love so much that they would love my fur off.

#### 14. What are a few of your favorite pieces of music?

**Johnnie:** Otto Respighi, *Ancient Airs and Dances*. And the recording of it I like is by this guy, he's an Asian conductor, Seiji Ozawa, and he did it with, I think it was the Boston Symphony. He conducted this *Ancient Airs and Dances*, and it's, oh, my God, it's beautiful, uplifting, and it has these runs . . . And it's got gorgeous, gorgeous music, and I really, really, really, really love that. I've had several copies of it. And somebody comes along and I feel like they need it, and I always give it away. But I always get it back, and yeah, that's my favorite, favorite, favorite piece of music.

There's a lot of music, but that's my favorite. My mother and father were both big music people. Sunday morning was all gospel. And Sunday afternoon, after my mother had her chance, it was all jazz and blues. And like *old school*. My dad, the newest person he listened to was B.B. King, but everybody else was like people like . . . I'd be like, "Really? Who is this?" and he'd start talking about it, and I'd be like, "Oh, wow."

And they weren't educated people. My dad didn't get his high school diploma until the year I graduated from high school. He did a GED. My mother got pregnant with my brother and had to drop out of school, and then went back (you know, she was fifteen) and then she didn't go back until she was nineteen, and got her high school diploma. And neither of them went to college. But they were really smart . . . My father was more technically, whatever. But my mother was really, really, really smart.

My parents loved, loved, loved music. They're both gone. My mother died when I was thirty-two and my father died in 2004.

My grandfather's passing in 2003 was the impetus for me to start testosterone. I felt like his leaving opened the door for my maleness to walk through. He *saw* me. He called me "he." He addressed me in that way, and my aunt did, too. And this was like, way back.

**Jacqui:** That's amazing.

**Johnnie:** Yeah, it is. I don't have a hard luck story in that way. I feel very fortunate . . . I mean, there's shit that happened to me, but overall, the people who are part of my life have really been a huge support. Yeah.

Here's a story:

My little nephew, we were sitting in a car in front of my sister's house, and he was over at the neighbor's house. He's a pretty precocious kid, so I could see him hanging out with the grownups and whatever. And so I guess he was having some kind of conversation with her, and he came running up to the car, and he goes, "Johnnie, that woman wants to know, are you a man or a woman?"

And I looked at him and I said, "Well, you know, Christopher, I don't really have a relationship with that woman, so it doesn't really matter to me what you tell her. But you have a relationship with her, so you need to think about that first, and then tell her, based on what's going to work

for you, in that relationship with her.” And he was like, “Okay.” And he ran away, and he went back to the woman.

And he came running back to the car, and he didn’t say a word. And I was chomping at the bit. I was like, *Come on! What was the conversation?* And I said, “So, Christopher, what did you tell her?” He said, “I told her, he’s my aunt.” And she said, “Okay.” And I said, “Okay, if that works for you, it works for me.”

Then he went to school, right? And it was Show and Tell, and he was saying, “My aunt is a man,” and he was talking, talking, talking. You know, he’s six. He doesn’t think anything’s wrong with that. And the teacher says, “Um, Christopher, if your aunt is your aunt, she is a woman.” He said, “No he’s not! My aunt is a man, and in my house, that’s okay.” And he got in trouble. But that’s been my luck of the draw.

**Jacqui:** He got in trouble?

**Johnnie:** Yeah, you know, very closed-minded. My brother argued with the teacher and said, “This is unfair because you can’t dictate to him the reality of his household because you have another idea.” That says my brother’s a good guy, but there are other places he stops in that I don’t understand. He said, “Listen, I’m not with this punishment you’re giving my son based on your own bias.” He said, “No.” And she was like, “Oh, okay.” But he did get in trouble for that.

## 15. What’s the best part of being transgender?

**Johnnie:** I get to make it up. Whatever I call it, that’s what it is. You know what I mean? It’s like, however I live my life, there are no rules for me. Whatever I want to do, like I can have a period as a man. Most people are like, “What?” But I can see the value of that for myself and it helps me understand more about me. And it gives me strength and wisdom, a place of compassion. As somebody who has been testosterone-driven for almost nine years, to all of a sudden be like, *I’m gonna let estrogen, the little bit that’s left in me, kinda rule.* That makes for an interesting life. And that’s kind of fun. I get to be out of the pocket and that’s what I really like about it. I get to be creative.

Sometimes this world doesn’t let you be creative, if you don’t live in the binary. You know, there’s only one way if you’re a woman, and there’s only . . . I mean hopefully me and your son are changing that.

**Jacqui:** And your nephew.

**Johnnie:** Yes! Yes. And my nieces, and my great nieces and nephews. You know, my oldest niece knows me as Johnnie, the woman. And so, when we were at her house, that’s who I was, her aunt. But her kids, only two of them know me, at the very tail end of me being a woman, and for the most part, they were young, and they kind of have a memory of it, but they’re like, “Uh, okay, you just look like a guy, so I’m going to call you ‘uncle.’” And they call me “uncle.”



But the older three say . . . “But, I remember when you were a girl.” And I go, “Yeah, I was.” But the three youngest ones, they only know me this way. But they know something’s different about me. Like I told you, kids know. They know something’s different, so they’re kind of going with it. But I know there’s going to come a time when I’m able to talk to them and to disclose, and it’s very exciting to be able to think about that.

It’s really exciting because I’m changing the world as we know it. That’s where my activism is now. I don’t need to carry a banner and be in a protest or whatever. I’m just living my life. I tell people, “I’m just living.” That’s activism for me because there’s so much. And it’s exciting. It’s creative. I get to be really creative, and I love that part.

## **16. What do you wish I had asked you, and what have I left out?**

**Johnnie:** Nothing. No. I think that we’ve talked about, for me, the most important things. There are a lot of questions you could ask me, and there are a lot of questions people do ask. And I’m like, “You know, that has nothing to do with me. That’s you being curious, and you wanting to know for your own curiosity, and you couldn’t care less about me in that question, i.e., those questions about your genitalia and all that other stuff, or ‘what was it like when you took hormones for the first time?’”

Those are important questions, I think, if you want to get to more than just what’s behind the answer that you would give to a question like that, like, what’s the thought, or like where your heart is or where your courage is in that, or whatever. So in that sense I’m really glad those questions can come up.

And I don’t know if you remember that when you first called me, and you started to talk about it, and I thought: *I’m interested in this project because it’s not just you taking a picture of me and going, “Look, here’s the trans\* person, and blah blah blah.”* You actually are asking me questions and then going to create from the place of my answers and our interaction together. Do you know how unique that is? I mean seriously. I told Michele, “I’m doing this.” Because everything else I’ve done has been “look and see” . . . like voyeurism.

And I can do that, too. But that’s not what I want to do. So to have a project where it’s going to be a co-creation, where you’re actually interacting with me and want to know what I think and then you’re going to represent that in whatever way. I wouldn’t pass it up. I told Michele, “I’m doing this.” You know, even though I had pretty much said, “No more trans\* things for me.”

**Jacqui:** You are not the first person who is burned out that I have talked to.

**Johnnie:** I believe you, because it’s about burnout time for us who have been at this for a little bit. Because, like I said, I’ve been in three or four documentaries. And every one of them has been the same, like “what’s it like to have. . .?” One of them was about singing, and they wanted to know what I felt about my new voice, and I was like, “First of all, I’m trying to distinguish whether I even have a new voice, except that it’s lower,” but they want to know. And I’m like, “Oh, you don’t even care what the process is behind that, or whatever.”

**Jacqui:** It's sort of like . . . sensationalism, or something like that . . . ?

**Johnnie:** It is.

**Jacqui:** One reason Michele is so wonderful for you is because she cares about you. She cares about you. She loves you. She doesn't care about any of that. It's about what you need.

**Johnnie:** Yeah, and as a result, I've been able to mirror that back to her. I mean, I cared about her from the beginning, but that caring has grown deeply. And I'm able to hold that space for her, like, "What is it you need? And where do you want to be?"

**Jacqui:** And you guys celebrate that.

**Johnnie:** Yes. We do.

**Jacqui:** You live it. It is just a blessing for me to be here.

**Johnnie:** Oh, I'm glad, and I hope in some ways it helps you with your kid, Finnbar. I can only hold that space and hold the portal for that to come and be part of your reality because, I understand, his friend killed himself, but his life is not his friend's life. And that's hard to . . . I mean, I understand that . . . I mean, when Christopher died I was like, "Oh, God, how'd he die?" Holding the space sometimes takes you to the edge.

You know, I'm not on the edge of killing myself, but sometimes I feel like I'm spinning a little faster than the needle can hold the record playing, and it's like "whooooo."

**Jacqui:** You're a human being.

**Johnnie:** Thank you. But then, that's what I know. It's human. It's not about trans\*. Yeah . . . Yeah, and Michele loves me, and I love her, and we love each other. We say all the time to each other, "I love who we are." We say that all the time. We look at each other, and we go, "I love who we are."

**Jacqui:** You are so fortunate.

**Johnnie:** I am.

**Jacqui:** But you . . . you said something like, "I'm really lucky about this . . . or something." And I think, *Yeah. Yes. You are lucky, but also, you have made this. Both of you have made what...*

**Johnnie:** And I agree with you.

**Jacqui:** Both are true. You found her. Yeah, lucky, she was there. But from that point on, you've made it.