

# *The future pastor's wife*

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## **Introduction:**

One early January morning in 2003, two young parents found themselves anxiously waiting to learn the sex of me, their very first child. When my parents learned that I would be a girl, they both reacted strongly. My father was excited, and he was looking forward to having a little girl to dote upon. My mother, however, was immediately anxious and horrified. She was thinking of angry men, boyfriends who don't like to hear no, and shielding a little girl from men who don't belong near children's parks.

Growing up as the firstborn daughter of a fundamentalist Christian military couple, I was taught a lot about how I was to view gender. The gender binary was strict, the expectations for being a woman were difficult to comprehend, and I felt a deep sense of confusion for why the traditionally feminine traits I had been taught didn't feel like me. I had an extreme lack of vocabulary for these feelings as a child, but I was beginning to feel very androgynous as a response to my inability to "fit in" to the expectations of me. As I became older, these feelings got worse. I was expected to be girly. I had to braid my hair, wear pretty dresses, paint my nails, brush my hair in just the right way, and I had to just know how to do it. However, my mom never taught me how to do these things

As previously stated, we were a military family. Because of that, we moved often, and my dad sometimes would be away from home for months at a time. My parents decided to homeschool for all of us, and so I didn't really make friends like girls my age typically would. The only regular social example I had for my own

gender was my mom. While this was fine when I was younger, her anxieties she felt when she first learned my gender soon became apparent. My mother's anxieties did not just show up out of nowhere, but instead were the result of her having been sexually assaulted as a child. However, it directly led me to intense feelings of self-doubt as her anxiety began to manifest.

Starting from when I was eight years old, and increasing with frequency as I got older, she began to make comments on my body and clothing. She would tell me to change because my butt poked out of my pants too much, or I couldn't wear a shirt because my boobs were too big for it. Just a trip to the store became a frustrating back and forth of me trying clothes until she was satisfied. As I got older, experienced puberty, and my body literally became more feminine my mother became even more irrationally protective. Even a simple T-shirt was too much for her sometimes, so I would have to wear baggy hoodies to hide my body. I was told by my mom that I didn't do enough feminine things, but she didn't teach me them. I was also told that my body was *too* feminine, and I needed to hide it. I was simultaneously "not trying hard enough to be feminine" while "dressing like a slut" for wearing a T-shirt and jeans that she didn't "check" before I went out. These confusing and complex expectations led to my body representing a battlefield of ideas, a tug of war between femininity and masculinity.

## Gender Construction:

The year 2003 was characterized by a resurgence of traditional family values in the wake of 9/11, and American cultural patriotism was flaring in support. As more men joined the military, it left women around them to “try to find their own place in the madness” (as said by my mother Charlotte Busenbark in an interview.) Women found themselves at the crossroads of burgeoning gender equality and following the gender roles expected of them at the time.

The top three movies released in 2003 were *Finding Nemo*, *Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*, and *The Matrix: Reloaded*. It is worth noting that none of these movies pass the Bechdel test, a test popularized as a means of measuring female agency within a story. All three movies frame women as an accessory to the men in the story.

Beauty standards were also strict, and there was severe fatphobia in the early 2000s celebrity scene. Even among some of the most popular women in 2003 such as Nicole Kidman, Jennifer Anniston, and Britany Spears, there would be intense criticism over their bodies in the media (although this was noticeably absent among male celebrities). This was damaging to many young women’s self-esteem, including myself, as they were watching the women who were considered to be the most beautiful be insulted. It inspired thoughts such as “I’m way heavier than her, but they’re calling her a whale. What does that mean about me?” and “Wow, if they say things like that about her, what must they think of me?” Young girls engaged in body surveillance and developed many body image issues. This resulted in an entire

generation of young women who felt uncomfortable in their bodies and constantly strived to reach an ideal body that is not healthy, or achievable. I myself, am one of these girls. Growing up with such strict beauty standards and such open degradation, I felt that I could never achieve true beauty or femininity. I felt that even if I were to achieve such goals to the detriment of my body, I would still experience cruelty. Due to the treatment of the idealized women, I saw, I believed that the gender performance of femininity was intrinsically linked to not only one's physical attractiveness, but to the resulting criticism and abuse one would receive regarding their body.

### **Gendered Language:**

In an interview with my father, I asked him how he defines the female gender. His response was “being caring, loving, and kind. I think of pi  nurturing, gentle, and beautiful.” These key words followed me throughout my childhood. My brothers could be loud and rambunctious while I was expected to be gentle and demure. This was damaging to my gender development as I assumed that being a woman was simply about being quiet, small, and beautiful. I developed a sense of internalized misogyny as a child because I hated the idea of just being quiet and gentle, and that I had to be that. I genuinely thought lesser of women, and of women’s role in society. As I got older, I started rejecting femininity as a whole and even began having confusing feelings of wanting to be a boy, not realizing that what I *actually* wanted was freedom. This led to even more confusion regarding my own gender. I associated being a boy with getting to do what you want, so I desired the status of being a boy as a means to an end.

It was not until adulthood that I realized that this was simply a response to the language I had seen connected to either gender. Since everyone around me had described women as flighty, small, quiet creatures, that’s how I had believed them to be, even though as a woman, I was not like that. While men had been described as big, strong, loud, and free, that’s what I had assumed the male experience was.

Due to a lack of vocabulary, I did not know that there were other ways to be. The only terms I knew to describe one’s sex or gender performance were female/feminine and male/masculine. I had so many complex and confusing feelings simply because I did not have the terms to describe how I felt. I did not have happy

emotions connected with my gender experience, as when I thought of the concept of femininity I associated it with weakness danger, and smallness. I had no examples of strong or masculine women and simply believed that I was the exception to the rule. I was an intruder. Because I did not align with the gender performance that was expected of me, I must be an imposter. I was something *else* – not female but also not male. These feelings, and the words associated with them, would follow me long into adulthood.



### **Gendered bodies:**

Both of my parents, being heavily religious, were believers in “purity culture.” On the surface, it seems like your run-of-the-mill Christian practices of telling kids that sex before marriage is a sin and things of that nature, but it has more disturbing elements. For example, when I was nine years old, my parents took me to a restaurant together without my siblings, that was a big deal for me at the time since that almost never happened. I was very disappointed to learn that it was not a nice dinner with my parents, but a gross and outdated ceremony called a “purity contract proposal.” Basically, my parents made me sign what they called a “legal document” between myself, my father, and d. This contract stated that I would never “seek my own selfish pleasure” and “remain pure for my future husband.” Additionally, I was made to believe that this document was legally binding, something which I genuinely believed as I was nine years old. Finally, the “ceremony” ended with my father giving me a “purity ring” which I would be expected to wear until my marriage day. It should be known that much to my parent’s chagrin; I lost that purity ring at the park two weeks later.

From infancy, my body has represented a battlefield between sexuality and celibacy. Simultaneously, I was viewed by the adults in my life as a sex figure (“you have really nice boobs, be careful that the boys don’t see” or “your butt looks too good in those pants, go change”) while also being expected to be innocent and sexless (“you shouldn’t sit on his lap like that”, “your boobs are too big to be braless”, and my personal favorite “those shorts are above your knees; you look like you charge by the hour”). I lacked agency in my own body, it was not something that

I could control or regulate, but something that others could enact on for me. As a young child I was sat upon a pendulum that swung back and forth between being constantly sexualized and being punished for my sexuality.

My own mother would constantly objectify me and force me to dress more masculine and unrevealing when we went out in public as a young child. As I got older however, this habit (that she established) became something she loathed as she believed that my preference for loose, masculine clothing was a statement of my gender identity rather than a modesty habit she started. Essentially, she expected me to look pretty and act womanly, but not so much that it made men desire me too much. Simply due to my gender my body was not perceived as to be my own, rather it belonged to my parents and God.

### **Familial and Interpersonal Dynamics:**

When I was around eight or nine, my mother began to delegate all of the house chores to my younger sister Ainsley and I. My parents expected myself and Ainsley to accomplish these chores. I was to clean the house; watch my younger siblings and care for any needs my mother may have. These chores would be handed out to the other children once they were old enough to understand with the exception of the boys who had no chores except for mowing the lawn or similar outside activities. Again, my parents would enforce these extremely strict and outdated gender norms such as cleaning the house being “woman’s work” and mowing the lawn being “man’s work.” My father exhibited many traits of hegemonic masculinity; being a military man and supporting his family were his biggest prides in life. My mom was a stay-at-home mom, and between the two they were the perfect example of a nuclear family. This is what my parents desired for me in my future as well. From a very young age my sisters and I were taught how to be a “god fearing wife” with lessons on how to do chores, respect men, and submit ourselves. My mother took this idea even further with me as she claimed I was “called by god to serve as a pastor’s wife.” This always bothered me as I felt that the idea that I was put on this earth simply to please a man was incredibly demeaning.

This experience within my family led me to resent my gender, as I was made to work harder than my brothers for no other reason than that I was a girl. I was jealous that the boys in my life were afforded privileges that I was not, and this

caused further confusion and resentment of that gender. As a young girl I had many confusing feelings regarding my gender. It was difficult for me to comprehend the fact that while I was a girl, I did not dress, act, or talk the way I was told that little girls should. Additionally, I genuinely did not like being a girl. Not only did I not naturally fit into the expected gender performance for girls, but I really did not like most of the things that I thought were feminine. I hated wearing dresses, stockings, and bows. I hated princesses, towers, and waiting for heroes. finally, I hated being quiet, being gentle, and being small. Because of this I was perplexed as it led to feelings of gender dysphoria and led to me thinking, deep down, that I was actually a boy in a girl's body. Eventually I was able to realize that I was not in fact, a boy, but a girl who is not very "girly." And that there is no one way to be a girl. I did not have to be a princess waiting to be saved, but a brave knight with a sword and her blonde hair whipping behind her from underneath her knight's helm.

### **Institutional Influences:**

Gender is influenced by institutions, and while the previous sections revolve mostly around my immediate family due to my sheltered upbringing, my gender formation was also affected by two categories of institutions I was within when I was younger. The first category consists of the various churches my family attended while I was growing up, and the second category is that of Civil Air Patrol, which I was a member of from ages 13-17.

In over a half-dozen different churches, I heard the same message told the same way: do not tempt men into sin.  It didn't matter that we were young girls who barely understood the concept of sexual desire, but it mattered that we take preemptive responsibility for trying to "help our brothers in Christ not to stray." There were many cruel "examples" of this given to myself and the other little girls at church. These examples included things such as "little girls are sticks of gum and every time you kiss or touch a boy it's like giving that stick of gum for someone to chew on. Then when you get married all you'll be is a gross, chewed up stick of gum." This rhetoric is incredibly dangerous for young women as it leads to thoughts of self-hatred and self-objectification.

In the Civil Air Patrol, I got to experience a large body of peers for the first time. However, this body of peers was primarily male, and primarily from military families. As such, my limited socialization meant in order to fit in, I adopted some of the mannerisms of the group at large. In class we took the BEM sex role inventory,

and I scored largely in the male category. As we learned from Deborah Tannen's book, *You Just Don't Understand*, we learned of the two communication styles, rapport and report. I have always used a report-oriented communication style which is more typical with men. This, my typically masculine behaviors, and a general lack of women around me, led to me fitting in more with the boys my age. On the surface-level I did not think of this as a problem, until they began making comments such as "are you sure you're actually a girl?", or "I thought you were a guy this whole time", and "you must be a boy because you fit in too well." While I tended to laugh those comments off, they truly did hurt and confuse me. Those comments just reinforced my belief that women were to act in one way, and men in the other. It was really hard for me as I was largely considered too girly to be a boy, but too masculine for them to consider me a girl. I felt like something *other*. I was a third thing, something that simply did not belong.

## **Conclusion:**

Due to my upbringing, my gender was a severe source of confusion and guilt for me for a myriad of reasons. Everything about being a girl was either unobtainable, not who I was, or completely loathsome. Whenever I tried to decode my feelings towards my gender expression it felt almost like a game of tug of war between femininity (what was expected of me) and androgyny (my escape from what was expected of me). It felt like those were the only ways to be and that there was no other choice. I could fulfill the feminine expectations or, ignore them completely. To be clear, I do identify as a she/her woman, I considered myself androgynes as less of an identity but more as an escape from expectations. I wanted to escape because I was very scared. Scared because my parents were very homophobic and made clear to me their stance on the queer community. This terrified me as deep down, I struggled so much with my femininity and bisexuality, two things they would never learn about.

I had no concept of the fact that the traits of womanhood are not some preordained, premeditated qualities but they are whatever I wanted them to be. It took many years, but I am finally at the point where I know that my gender performance can be whatever I want it to be! I can enjoy wearing mascara, and love superhero and action movies (DC over Marvel always!). I can enjoy Sabrina Carpenter while also maintaining my disdain for wearing dresses. I can be my own perfect mix of feminine and masculine, while still being the woman I feel I am

inside. As an adult, I still struggle with my body and how I display my gender identity. Throughout my upbringing I saw the idea of being the ideal feminine woman as unattainable, not only physically as I was not very good at being feminine, but mentally as I did not want to perform my gender in that way. As an adult I have been working hard on learning to love and appreciate not only my body, but my own gender performance. I have learned to leave behind the gender ideals expected for me and begin to develop my own concept of womanhood.

I have been able to pursue my own way of showing my gender expression and learn to love and appreciate my body for all it has done for . I have finally begun to truly believe that it doesn't have to conform to whatever society's mass decree is for current beauty standards, so long as I love how I look and feel confident with my gender performance.

Throughout my adult life I have been able to deconstruct my internal gender normative beliefs by finally being able to dress and behave in whatever way I would like while maintaining my sense of femininity. I have even begun to feel pride in the gender variation that I enact by being the "head of my household" as well as being a loud, confident woman who loves what she loves and feels feminine while she does it. I am so excited to have my own children in the future that will not grow up with such misconstrued, confusing feelings regarding their identities. My children will grow up free, with the ability to dress and behave however they would like, regardless of their gender performance or identity.