

Early In My Transition, Two Teenagers Helped Me Embrace My Identity

Carter Sickels

I walk past vendors selling rainbow everything and feel the first warm drizzle of rain on my face. Today, thousands have congregated on Duke's East Lawn for North Carolina's Pride Festival. Middle-aged lesbians in baseball hats carry plastic bags stuffed with free merch. Guys with softball-size biceps check each other out. It's all couples and friend groups.

Someone from behind me says, "I like your jeans," and I just keep on walking. Even here among my people, I don't know how I'm being seen, or if I'm being seen at all. The crowd — all this pride and love — just makes me feel more invisible.

"Hey, I like your jeans. They're cool."

Curiosity wins, and I turn around. Two young white boys, maybe 13 or 14, wave. At me? I glance down. I'm wearing faded gray skinny jeans, sagging in the butt and tight everywhere else.

"Thanks," I say, and the boys smile. They are the only ones who've spoken to me, who've noticed me — and for a second, the loneliness lifts. But when I turn to go, it comes back, as it always does: a dull thudding under my bound, flattened chest.

This was six years ago, in 2009. I'd been living in North Carolina for a year, and, at 36, I was just beginning to take the first steps toward transitioning. For years, even as I dressed in men's clothes and dreamed up new names for myself, I told myself that I could never transition — that it just wasn't me. I tried to ignore my sadness and confusion, all the feelings I couldn't understand, let alone articulate. Living like that for so long had worn me down.

A couple of months before the Pride Festival, I'd chosen my name: Carter. When spoken aloud, the name sounded new and wonderful and strange. Officially, nothing had changed — my old name was printed on my driver's license, along with a clearly marked "F" — but I'd told all my friends. Whenever someone forgot and called me by my birth name, the disappointment — shame even — came quick, and lingered. At this point, I'd told only my closest friends that I preferred male pronouns, and I was afraid to correct people when they referred to me as "she." But whenever I heard myself called "he" or "him" by friends or strangers, I felt buoyed, a wave lifting me up — combined with a split second of terror that I would be carried out to sea.

I longed for validation every time I stepped out the door, but I never knew what I was going to get: Sometimes it was "sir," sometimes "ma'am." Who I was or wanted to be seemed out of reach, impossible. The immense weight of my family, my friends, my history, my body, pressed down on me with a steadiness and certainty that I didn't know how to shake off. The self-doubt never stopped ticking in my head. I didn't know how to be gentle with myself.

"So, like, where'd you get your jeans?"

The boys have followed me, and we stop in front of a table stocked with pamphlets for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and gay-friendly churches. I'm not a fan of teenagers — they make me anxious, edgy. They're standing here, cornering me. The rain is a fine, cool mist, the September sky faded to gristly gray. Down the hill, a local politician takes the stage to cheers and applause.

"I think I got them in New York," I say.

The boys stand with their arms over each other's shoulders. The one who has done all the talking is gangly, with choppy hair and smudged black eyeliner. High-tops, a hoodie, and skinny jeans falling off his hips — we're dressed the same, me and this kid. The other boy, the silent one, is pale and chubby, with dark, flattened hair and beautiful hazel eyes.

"Where'd you get yours?" I ask.

"Hot Topic. You been there?"

I know it's a mall store where teenage girls shop, but I say, I don't think so, no.

He rattles off a list of other stores he thinks I might like, places I'm too old to be shopping at. I may have been to a few of them.

"Sometimes I have to buy girl jeans to get them skinny enough," he says. I feel the corners of my mouth turn up, remembering the last time I was in New York shopping, and I told the clerk — a sexy, basketball player-tall man in tight, low-slung jeans — that I wanted a pair like his. "Honey, these are girl jeans," he said, which threw me into another moment of gender confusion — I hadn't bought girl jeans in years.

"Yeah, I have that problem too," I say.

"Honestly," the boy says with such earnestness, "I just don't have the hips for guys' jeans. My ass doesn't look good."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I say, giving in and laughing — here I am, at 36, exchanging fashion concerns with a

teenage boy. Relaxed, he leans over and gives his boyfriend a quick kiss on the lips. I'm in awe, really, of gay teens, and can't imagine possessing that kind of courage when I was their age. I wonder if their parents know. Do they get bullied at school? Did they have to walk by those hateful Christians on the corner, holding signs that read *Homosexuals Will Burn in Hell*?

The boys look at me, their eyes glassy and still. Maybe they're stoned.

"So," the chubby one says. It's the first time he's spoken. He looks me over, crosses his arms like maybe he's seen a parent do, or a cop.

"So," he continues, "what's your sexuality, anyway?"

It's a simple question, maybe, but I don't know how to answer because I don't know if they are seeing me as male or female. I should have just kept walking. Even around these two gay kids I can't be myself, not without explanation, not without all the self-analyzing and worry. I want them to let me go, but they don't look away from me. Nothing distracts them — not the people walking around us with umbrellas, or the applause coming from the stage. Sprinkles of rain patter against the rubber toes of my Converse.

I don't know why, but I think the word "queer" might confuse them. They're just babies, I think.

"I guess," I say, "well, I guess I'm bi."

I've never described myself as bi before, and the word is not big enough to explain my desires, or my queer history — how I lived for years as a lesbian and now feel, maybe always felt, like a gay man. Calling myself bi feels coy, but their eyes light up.

"Me too, I'm bi! Us too! That's so cool!" The talkative one has hand on his hip. "How many guys have you been with?"

"I, uh—"

"I've only been with one," he interrupts. "Him. We're boyfriends."

They tell me more about themselves, talking fast, finishing each other's sentences, and I'm relieved their focus has shifted away from me. The chatty one is Tommy, and his boyfriend is Matt. They are 14. They go to school in Raleigh. They've been dating for three weeks. They are in love.

"What's your name?" Tommy asks me.

Do I hesitate, just for a moment? I'm still nervous saying my name aloud, worried people will ask, *No, what's your real name?*

"Carter," I say.

"Carter," Tommy says. "Carter what?"

I tell him my last name.

"Carter Sickels," he says thoughtfully. "That sounds good. That's a good name."

I'd been thinking about this name for years, held it close. Now I hear it the way it sounds to them — the same way, in the quietest of moments, I also hear it: a single, clear, enduring note. He is right; it sounds good. My name sounds like me.

They want to know more about me, my age (36, "no way!"), and where I live. They ask how old I was when I came out, and when I tell them 22, they can't believe it — so old! It's a good feeling, these two kids wanting to know me, paying attention, but I can't let my guard down because I still don't know if they think I'm a boy or girl, woman or man.

As the rain continues, people open umbrellas or move under tarps. Gray clouds sink lower in the sky. The three of us stay where we are, rain falling on our faces.

"Let's see," Tommy says. "What else can we ask you..."

"I know," Matt says, and scratches his head like he's trying to come up with a question, but he knows exactly what he wants to ask. He zeroes in on me with his stoned, pretty eyes.

"Well. What *are* you?"

Trying to smile the question away, I squeeze my hands into fists, certain they're twitching. During these early days of my transition, every single interaction, no matter how minor, feels tense and potentially violent: Words can break me.

"What do you mean?" I ask. My voice comes out hoarse, scared.

Tommy, embarrassed, smacks Matt lightly on the arm, but Matt sees that he's snagged me and he's not letting go.

"I mean, like, what's your sex?"

The boys look at me with curious faces. I have been asked "What are you?" before, but not like this — without judgment or malice or presumption. They are holding out their hands to me, giving me the chance to define myself, to claim what is

mine. Asking not only "Who are you?" but "Who do you want to be?"

I push my fingers through my hair, wipe the rain out of my eyes, and look at these boys with their damp hair and wet cheeks and open faces. My mirrors.

"Well," I say, "I've been going more by 'he.'"

They are quiet for just a beat, and I feel my heart pounding. Thousands are here at this festival, but right now, it's just the three of us, standing in the rain.

"Yeah, 'he.' You should go with that," Tommy says. "You're definitely a 'he.'"

The joy, the sudden adrenalin of that sweet and unexpected encounter. I did not know then how to let go of what the world wanted me to be, but I knew, somewhere inside, who I was, and these boys did too. Gently, they coaxed me into the light.

This journey of mine has never followed a clear-cut path. It's a complicated, winding, untended trail that often leads astray or to dead ends. But I've also trekked through swamps of doubt and denial and fear to occasionally reach startling places of recognition, like spending days — years — in a dark forest, and then stepping out into a sun-blasted field of wildflowers.

Sometimes I think of those boys and where they are now — if they're still so brave and insightful. They'd spoken so easily and with such conviction. Although the rain started to fall harder and we had to tell each other good-bye, I knew even then that something had changed. That it was OK to step forward and cross into the exposed field of light.