

Don't ask permission
for how you live your
life... what are they
going to do, get you
in more trouble?

You're trans, honey;
you're already in
trouble. Just don't
get caught.

NEVER ASK PERMISSION:

*how two trans women ran
a legendary underground
surgical clinic in a rural
tractor barn*

&

SOME NOTES ON A RURAL TRANS LIFE

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Never Ask Permission... retrieved from <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trans-history-underground-surgical-clinic-b2114777.html>

Interview with Pidge retrieved from <https://www.transrurallives.org/transcript-pidge>

‘Never ask permission’: How two trans women ran a legendary underground surgical clinic in a rural tractor barn

By Io Dodds - 2022

Somewhere in the boondocks of America's Pacific Northwest, near the city of Olympia in Washington state, there is a long gravel logging track leading off the main road between a field and a forest.

If you follow that track for about a kilometre, you will find a rustic-looking wooden house that has stood there for about a century, with an old tractor barn converted into a small outbuilding. There might be chickens, sheep, and geese honking raucously at your arrival.

And, if you had entered that tractor barn between 2004 and 2006, you would have found a secret underground transgender surgical clinic run by two trans women with an autoclave and a cauterisation machine bought on eBay.

In an era when trans people were routinely blocked from life-saving healthcare, and often discriminated against or abused by medical staff, this clinic aimed to treat its patients with respect and never charged more than \$500 for a procedure that usually cost thousands.

Yet despite its clandestine nature, it operated legally – and according to one of the women behind it, it was even inspected and approved by Washington state health officials.

"No one was going to take care of us. We had to take care of ourselves," says Eilís Ní Fhlannagáin, a software developer and veteran protest medic who helped set up and run the clinic.

"We wanted to make sure that folks would never get a bill in their old name – simple things like that. They would be able to wake up and be surrounded by trans folks who knew how to take care of them, how to treat them. Never have to worry about getting misgendered. Never have to worry about 'what's your real name?' Never have to worry about any of that." Now 50, Ní Fhlannagáin spoke to The Independent about her role in an almost forgotten moment in LGBT+ history, which until the pandemic had only been passed on through zines and word of mouth within the trans community.

This Pride Month, with transgender healthcare in the US and Europe

under renewed political attack, she believes it still holds important lessons for both trans and non-trans people fighting for control over their bodies. "We [can't be] sitting here looking for, 'oh, please, please give us things!' No, we're going to fucking take them," says Ní Fhlannagáin. "This is the thing folks don't realise about trans folks: if you make it so that I can't get access to the things I need to survive, I'm going to find a way to do it. We are a clever people. We will figure out a fucking way to do it."

'Only rich girls went to gender clinics'

It started in Philadelphia in the early Noughties, when Ní Fhlannagáin persuaded her doctor friend Willow that she could totally perform life-changing surgery on Ní Fhlannagáin in her adopted trans mother's living room.

Ní Fhlannagáin grew up in a working-class Irish-American community in New Jersey, in an abusive household. "When I transitioned, I basically lost everything," she says. She dropped out of university after a year and taught herself to code, riding the dotcom bubble of the late 1990s. Today she lives in Connacht in the Republic of Ireland, still coding and spinning yarns, voice gritty from smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. She rarely talked about the clinic until 2020, when she first told her story in a Twitter thread and on the podcast Totally Trans.

"I don't know, I always downplay this," she laughs now. "It embarrasses me when people go 'oh my God, you're so cool'... I don't trust role models. You put people up on pedestals, they're gonna fail you. I am imperfect, trust me."

When Ní Fhlannagáin transitioned, around 1993-4, most cisgender people were barely aware trans people existed and would never expect to see one in real life. For those who lived openly, or were outed against their will, tremendous discrimination was the norm. Few countries had formal legal protections, and the world wide web had not yet given isolated trans people a lifeline to each other.

For trans women, the game plan was to get hormones any way you could, stay on them for a year or so without coming out, burn away your facial hair with electrolysis, then disappear from your old life and go "stealth" – meaning no one, except perhaps other trans people, knew you were trans. "You came up through certain ways," Ní Fhlannagáin explains. "You came up through the clubs, came up through drag shows, you came up through the support groups – I kind of knew some of those folks – or you came up through gender clinics."

did, we're moving in the right direction." You know, and they are. I'm fucking, like, hey, Gen Z, I have so much fucking hope for. I have so much fucking hope for. Because they don't take any shit. It's fucking beautiful.

Vignette 35: Hope

Interviewer: You talked earlier about the gift of time. When you think about the next five, 10, 15 years, what makes you hopeful? What do you think about moving forward?

Pidge: I'm going to read a quote. It's one of my favorite quotes. And Max Brod was the biographer of Franz Kafka. I forget the context of the quote. So, "Outside this world manifestation, which we know, would there be a world that knows hope?" And Kafka said, Oh Hoffnung genug, unendlich viel Hoffnung, — nur nicht für uns." "Oh, there's hope enough, infinite hope, — just not for us." You're hitting this point in the states where so many people are fucked. That it's not just trans people that are on the pointy end of the stick. It's not just black people that are on the pointy end of the stick. It's middle class people that are on pointy end of the stick. A lot of these folks, they're just not buying this anymore. They're just not buying this fucking lie where if we just vote the right guys in, they'll take care of us instead of exploit the fuck out of us, you know. And I think that a lot of the trans kids don't buy it anymore. They do not believe it, and I think that's fucking wonderful. I think that they're learning not to have fucking heroes, and that's a good thing. I think they're learning that if we want to stop shit, we need to just fucking stop shit. Because the adults in the room are idiots. And I'm really hopeful for the next generation kind of learning that. And they're learning a real fucking soon because the generation before them... I mean, how many millennials do you know that can afford a fucking house? They're in their 40s now, for fuck's sake, and they can't afford a fucking house. And Gen Z doesn't have a fucking hope. There's no fucking hope for them, so I am praying that they just tear it the fuck down. I think if there's any hope for fucking humanity, I think Gen Z is it, and especially the trans kids fucking getting it. Like, they're getting it more than my generation got, more than the generation after me got. They are fucking getting it. Like, yeah, okay, sometimes they get lost in the weeds in the fucking discourse and shit. I sit there, and I watch, and I go, "Okay. Okay. Not gonna step in. They need to figure this shit out for themselves." But they are fucking getting it. I am so proud of them. Like, I had no hope whatsoever until I started seeing these kids come around and I'm just like, "Yes. Yes." And like, yeah, if I have hope, it's because of them. I don't have hope for much else. Those kids, I think got it. I think they got it. You know, them, I have a lot of fucking faith in. So, I have some hope there.

"I knew no one from there. That was the rich girl shit. Rich girls got sent to gender clinics; I didn't get into a gender clinic."

The first step in a medical transition is usually gender-affirming hormone replacement therapy (HRT), which slowly reshapes a person's body and emotions by adjusting their balance of estrogen and testosterone. For many the impact is life-saving, not only making them happier with their appearance or more able to "pass" as a cis man or woman but connecting them to their body in a profound new way. Some compare it to seeing the world in colour for the first time, or coming up from underwater and breathing air.

Yet before Barack Obama's flagship Affordable Healthcare Act in 2010, few US health insurers covered such treatments, and in the Nineties few clinics even offered them. Hence, Ní Fhlannagáin says many trans people were forced into the care of "sketchy doctors" who often mistreated them. "It was calling up the physician that got his licence taken away because he was prescribing one too many narcotics," she recalls. "It was online pharmacies, because online pharmacies became a thing. Or if you weren't online, that friend of yours who went to Mexico and brought back a suitcase."

This was the time of "Butcher Brown", alias John Ronald Brown, a San Francisco surgeon who specialised in trans women but was forced to set up shop in Mexico after his US medical licence was suspended. "The quality of his results was generally considered unacceptable," writes Andrea James on her widely consulted Transgender Map website.

In 1999 Brown was jailed for murder after one of his patients — a man who was psychologically fixated on amputation, and whose healthy leg Brown agreed to remove — died of gangrene.

Nor were you safe with above-board medics. In 1995, a Black trans woman named Tyra Hunter was injured in a car accident in Washington DC. When ambulance staff realised she was trans, they jumped back, stopped treating her, and stood there mocking her while she bled to death. A jury awarded her mother \$2.9m; the city appealed, then settled for \$1.75m.

"The medical profession is just flat out abusive to us," says Ní Fhlannagáin. "It has traumatised multiple generations of trans women. We don't go to doctors. My tit'll be falling off, I'm not going to a fucking doctor." Indeed, her own trans mother — a mentor role common among trans people, who are often estranged from their birth parents — died of a stroke at the age of 62 after years of sickness because she did not trust doctors.

By the turn of the millennium, though, Ní Fhlannagáin was running in

punk anarchist circles, absorbing riot grrrl feminism and radical environmentalism and transgender separatism. It was a scene that shaped a generation of North American trans women.

"We're not going to ask for permission for something that we should be able to just do," says Ní Fhlannagáin, summarising their attitude. "It's my fucking body. If I want to go get my ears pierced, no one's going to say, 'oh, you can't do that, you need two letters from psychiatrists'."

All of which helps explain how Ní Fhlannagáin convinced Willow to perform an orchiectomy on her – that is, remove her testicles – in a reclining chair, working from photocopied pages of a medical textbook, while her trans mom was sleeping off her night shift upstairs.

The procedure almost went smoothly. But the instructions for bandaging afterwards were written for cis men, whose genitals function very differently than trans women's after a year or two on HRT. Six hours later the bandages fell apart, and Ní Fhlannagáin was rushed to hospital. On her first try, she was thrown out for "drug-seeking behaviour" ("yeah," she recalls, "I needed antibiotics"), and only got treatment days later after nearly dying.

This experience evidently did not deter Willow, because afterwards – when both women coincidentally found themselves living in Washington state – she made a proposal to Ní Fhlannagáin: why not start their own orchiectomy clinic?

'We were just dumb punk kids, man'

"Overall the DIY orch is very simple and teachable," wrote the trans novelist Sybil Lamb in 2010. Sure enough, orchiectomies – under the more traditional name of castration – were performed without modern surgical equipment or anaesthetic around the world for millennia, with all manner of religious and political purposes.

For trans women, an "orchi" can relieve gender dysphoria and allow them to stop taking testosterone blocking drugs, which often come with unpleasant side effects.

"It's just not a complicated surgery – mine took like 40 minutes," says Jules Gill-Peterson, a professor at Johns Hopkins University who is writing a book about the history of DIY trans medicine. Her research has found evidence of underground trans orchis going back to the 1950s, as well as hormone sharing and smuggling, making the Washington clinic part of a "hallowed tradition".

believe in heroes, like, look, if you're looking for heroes, just don't because everyone's fucking imperfect, and you're all gonna get your fucking hearts broken. And it's, like, all that radical history gets lost and I'm like, "Alright, you know what? I'm going to tell this story for Trans Day of Visibility on Twitter because it's kind of fucking hysterical in a way." And I went, and I talked to my sister, and I'm like, "Do you mind if I tweet about this?" She's like, "No. Just don't mention my name." She doesn't give interviews about it. There was this uncomfortability to it because we didn't want it to be about us. Like, it's not about us. I don't care if no one ever knows my fucking name ever, ever. Like, there's activism shit I've done that I don't talk about because it's not associated with my name. Because it's about the fucking work. If you're doing this for fucking head pats, and kudos, and thank you notes, then you're fucking doing it for the wrong fucking reasons. If you're doing it because you're morally fucking outraged, there you go, you're doing it for the right fucking reason. Wonderful. Good. Grand. Go pick a fake name and do it under that because no one should ever fucking know.

A friend of mine had just died, one of the people I had transitioned with, and I'm like, "We're going to start dying soon." And then this is lost. This is gone. And we have all these kids who are kind of coming up going like, "Oh, the older generation was a lot more conservative." I'm like, "Honey, I will tell you all the stories about all the fucked-up shit that a group of trans women that generation older than you fucking did." Because we did some fucked up shit. Like, I used the fucking pressure cooker as an autoclave for surgery, so. Let me tell you stories. So we had this conversation and it's like, "You know, this history is gonna get lost." And, like, a lot of it already has. A lot of it already has been lost. And, you know, the kids need to kind of know this.

Vignette 34: Inspiration to Do Better

And the thing is, is that our idea wasn't even our idea. We stole that directly from the Jane Collective. That was direct from the Jane Collective. Like literally, they were the ones that kind of inspired us. And now you see like trans kids fucking brewing their own fucking estrogen. Which I'm just like, "Go, you. Get that chemistry degree," you know. And they're literally doing this in the UK now. They're brewing their own fucking estrogen and it's like, "Fuck you guys." You know, and it's... in a way, it's nice to see that they're getting inspiration from it. Like people have told me that, like, Yeah, no. I'm doing this thing because this thing." And I'm like, "Great. Just no fucking hero worship. No, no, no. None of that shit. No, no, no. Don't do that crap. Just get the inspiration and fucking do better than I did. That's the only rule: do better than I did. If you can do better than I

across the street even though he doesn't speak English." That's who our own was. That's your fucking take away.

Vignette 31: Liberation

It's always been this thing that, you know, when it comes from as fucked up as the Catholic Church is how you treat the least among you. Look, my liberation is not going to be won by treating people who have it worse than me like shit. It's a thing that you see over and over again in politics. Like, you know, I remember when Sylvia was throwing an absolute fit over New York Pride going, "Oh, yeah. We're going to drop trans people out." Now, you don't work from the top down. You work from the bottom up. You know that joke that, "Oh, the black midget, lesbian, trans." No. You work for her fucking liberation first. Because if you get her liberated, everyone else is fucking liberated. Right? So, like, to me it's all come from, you know, growing up in that environment and seeing how people who are different than me were fucking treated. And realizing that, you know, like we're all in this fucking together. And the rich motherfuckers in the fancy houses, with the nice cars would kill every single one of us if it meant that they can make a little bit more money.

Vignette 32: Mainstay Support

My friends are my mainstay of support and it's mostly cis queers at this point because, like, Ireland is weird because trans people left. Like, we didn't have the AIDS crisis that New York had, or London had because all the Irish queers left because they just couldn't breathe here. Now, that's changed quite a bit in recent years. But, like, I don't know of many trans women in Ireland who are pushing 30 years. You know, we've actually asked around. I think I may be the longest transitioned person in Ireland, which is terrifying. There is one person that we know of who's slightly longer than me. But outside of her, you know, there's a few pushing 20. There's a lot pushing 10, but none with that number of years under. And that's just another fucked up thing that, you know, I don't have trans elders. I don't get to have trans elders. I get to have a few trans peers that I talk, like, once every two years to and that's about it.

Vignette 33: Publicly Discussing the Clinic

So, me and my sister never talked about this. Like, publicly we didn't talk about it. And I always am uncomfortable talking about the clinic. It's funny but it's whatever. Part of the reason why we started talking about it is that there is this hidden trans lady history. Like, God, so much of our radical history has been lost. So much of it has been lost. And you know, I don't

"It's really slow-going research, because you find these little pockets –this group of people did it for this short amount of time," Gill-Peterson says. "It tends to be people with fewer resources, who are poor and aren't going to be leaving behind records... but there is this interesting history of trans women figuring out how to do the one surgical procedure that you could reasonably do without going to a surgeon."

There are even stories from the Fifties of people asking doctors how to do it, under the guise of curiosity, and doctors explaining and then knowingly leaving the room so they could help themselves to spare medical supplies. Willow was not only a doctor but, rarely for the time, an out trans woman. Ní Fhlannagáin declined to provide Willow's real name because she now works as an abortion doctor facing threats of violence, and told The Independent that Willow does not wish to speak to journalists.

By 2004, Ní Fhlannagáin had burned out on anarchist activism and moved to Washington with her girlfriend Chrissy, where Willow was doing a residency. Ní Fhlannagáin needed money, and Willow had an "eBay addiction" where she would buy old medical equipment and fix it up. They hatched a plan.

"I don't want this to come off as like, there was this mission," says Ní Fhlannagáin. "People get this idea that I was anything other than a low bagger who needed to make money... we were dumb punk kids, man!"

Still, both women had been involved in abortion activism, and they drew political inspiration from an underground women's abortion service called the Jane Collective. Operating in Chicago between 1969 and 1973, it was founded as an antidote to unsafe illegal abortions often done by unqualified men.

While the Jane women's actions were criminal at the time, legal compliance for a rural orchi clinic turned out to be surprisingly simple. "What's a doctor's clinic?" asks Ní Fhlannagáin. "A doctor's clinic is a clean room that's up to a certain standard, with clean instrumentation that's up to a certain standard, that has records up to a certain standard, drug supplies and how it's stored up to a certain standard, and a licensed doctor and all your taxes and your business stuff up to a certain standard. "We just met those standards, and the standards are not difficult to meet... we've just grown up with western medicine and basically surrendered ourselves to their whims."

Although they couldn't afford medical malpractice insurance, they also wouldn't make enough to need a business licence, and nor would they store opiates or narcotics on site. Ní Fhlannagáin went through medical privacy law training and put out the word.

They didn't tell the neighbours, nor the landlord. Nobody out there knew that Willow, Ní Fhlannagáin, or Chrissy were trans – rural women weren't expected to be feminine in the same way as city women – and they intended to keep it that way.

One week before the first surgery, on the 256-acre farm that Ní Fhlannagáin and Chrissy were renting, they built a front and sides onto one of the bays in the tractor barn; put in a door and a window, ran in electricity, and tiled and sealed the floor.

That tiling, Ní Fhlannagáin adds, is still there today, though the room is now used as an organic chicken processing factory. "They still don't know what I did in that room," she says, "which I plan on never fucking telling them, ever."

Surgery, assault rifles, and dad jokes – all for \$500

If, one day in 2005, you had driven down that logging road for your appointment at the clinic, the geese would have heralded your arrival. The room inside the tractor barn would be about eight by twelve feet. As you walk in, there'd be a chair and a coat rack on your right, a locked cabinet on your left ("Willow built [it] herself, so it was of course overbuilt," recalls Ní Fhlannagáin).

Beyond is a long desk with an autoclave – a specialised furnace for sterilising medical tools – and an electric cautery machine. In the middle of the room is a chair with stirrups, where the patient sits.

The two women explain what will happen and how it will work. You get a prescription for vicodin and pre-emptive antibiotics, which you have to fill at the nearest town 20 miles away. You take the vicodin in front of the medics, and then begin the surgery.

Ní Fhlannagáin's job in all of this was basically to tell "really bad dad jokes", talking in a low, rhythmic, faintly hypnotic voice. For instance: two mushrooms walk into a bar. The bartender says they can't be in here. One mushroom says, "why? I'm a fun guy."

"See, you chuckled but you didn't laugh," says Ní Fhlannagáin after the punchline. "Laughing while we're working down there is bad. Doing a 'heh' is good. It means you're paying attention to something else."

Afterwards, they'd apply tight bandages and drainage tubes, following new

'Cause I could go in, everyone will leave me the fuck alone because they knew if they fucked with me and made just a peep above silence the librarian would be like, "Shh." That's where I started reading, a lot of lefty books.

Vignette 30: Understanding Intersectionality

I grew up around, like, people of color. My dad's best man was black, my Uncle Butch. My dad's business partner was black. That was my Uncle Carl. I didn't know that many white people until I was 16. Because there's a difference between lowercase white and capital white. You know, we had to kind of learn what cap "W" whiteness was. Where it wasn't this thing that was instilled in us.

You know, I grew up in a multiethnic neighborhood. And I like joking that intersectionalites or anti-oppressionese is this very nice language that middle class white kids learn to talk about oppression in university that they've never actually experienced. Like, first time someone explained intersectionality to me I'm like, "Oh, it's like my family and the Owens down the street." I knew that there were certain neighborhoods that my Uncle Butch couldn't go into because he was black. If he did, he'd get fucked with. I knew that. Didn't need that fucking explained to me.

But my neighborhood, it was kind of this transitional neighborhood. I was Irish. As far as I knew, I was Irish. There were the Italian kids, the Jewish kids, the German kid, the Portuguese kids, the Ecuadorian kids, the El Salvadorian kids, Brazilian kids, and then the black kid. So, like, you know, it was this kind of weird tribal thing because we were all fucking Catholics. Right? Like, I didn't realize until I was 16 that, like, the rest of the world wasn't full of Catholics. There were Catholics, there were Jews, and there were the few weird guys that had a church with a red door on it, and there were some Muslims, and that was it. White Anglo-Saxon Protestants were things that lived down South and they didn't make sense to us.

So, like it was this weird fucking post-60s where, like, racism was a thing but we all kind of fucking hung out with each other. Because we were what a friend of mine calls the lesser whites, the ones with vowels at the beginnings of our names or at the ends of our names. You know, we didn't give a fuck what race you were just as long as you weren't a fucking cunt. If you were a dick, fuck off. Part of this was I had a Catholic upbringing. You were judged by how you treat those least among you. Like, you know the whole Irish slave myth thing, right? Like, the takeaway when I was a kid was, "Yes, we were slaves once and this is why we don't side with slave owners. We don't side with these people, ever, ever. We take care of our own and our own is your Uncle Butch, your uncle Chuck Carlton, the lad

in school. Like, the principal told me, "People wouldn't beat you up if you didn't act like such a faggot." Hey, this would have been 1982. And I got the shit kicked out of me continuously and all the people in authority, over me, who were supposed to protect me didn't. Not a one. And at that point, I'm just like, "Oh, these people have power because they gave themselves power." And I would see the hypocrisy of it because I was raised Catholic. It's like oh, "You'll be judged how you treat the least among us." Motherfucker, I'm the least among you, and I know how you're fucking treating me. And on top of that, I hear what you're saying about black people. I hear what you're saying about gay people.

And especially, this came really into focus during the AIDS crisis because, you know, I was a little, very obviously queer kid. So, if you're a Catholic in that neighborhood with a very obviously queer kid, you send them to the all-boys school, straighten them out along with everyone else who has a slightly swishy son. All the parents decided, Oh yeah, we're going to straighten our kids out, yeah." They sent all the queer kids to one school, lads. Did you not maybe fucking think this through a little bit? Good, good on you. Good on you.

But I graduated right at the height of the AIDS crisis. I knew what I was when I was nine and I knew that the people that I was kind of in community with were all dying. And I was like, hopping the fucking subway to the city, and I was seeing these guys die, you know. There were people that I would hang out on park benches smoking weed with and one week that he'd be there, and the next week he wasn't there anymore. And it'd be like another two weeks and then I find out, "Oh, he's dead." So, you know at that point, that fucks you up. That fucks you up. And you're like, "Well, all the people who are supposed to be protecting these people are fucking letting them die." So, why should I give a shit about authority? I'm getting my ass kicked by the cops. I'm getting my ass kicked at home by my parents. I'm getting my ass kicked in the school. The people who are supposed to be protecting me in school are doing fuck all. So, why should I give a shit about what any of these people fucking say?

Vignette 29: The Library

You know, I started reading a lot. I spent a lot of time in library. Why? Because the librarians were the only ones that protected me. Because librarians are going to put up with no fucking rough housing in the fucking library. "No, you leave that kid alone. You get the fuck out of my library." Librarians are fucking hard ass motherfuckers. I learned at a very young age, if I wanted to be safe, I made my way to the fucking library as fast as fucking possible. Because librarian is going to put up with nothing, nothing. The only adults I ever trusted were fucking librarians as a kid.

procedure designed specifically for trans women after Ní Fhlannagáin's near-death experience. You were required to stay in the area for seven days in case of complications, but Ní Fhlannagáin says they never had one. Most people simply crashed on her couch.

The clinic charged a sliding scale, depending on circumstances, never charging more than \$500. For another \$400, you also got 40 hours of electrolysis, which Ní Fhlannagáin had learned by practising on her own arm.

The amount was based on the cost of materials and the minimum amount needed to pay for Ní Fhlannagáin's daily Amy's Mac and Cheese and tobacco bought in bulk. Usually, an orchi alone would cost \$2,000 to \$5,000 – about \$3,000 to \$7,500 in today's money.

The clinic also catered to people who had HIV, who Ní Fhlannagáin says many doctors at the time refuse to treat. "We did surgeries for folks that no one would touch," says Ní Fhlannagáin. "The only good thing that I took from Catholicism was that you're judged by how you treat the least among you. And we were dealing with people who were in the same boat as us." However, patients did have to get a letter from a social worker or other authority figure testifying that they were trans and needed the surgery. Ní Fhlannagáin didn't like that, but says it was necessary to protect the clinic from lawsuits or government investigations.

The policy meant sometimes having to turn down patients who had their documents in different names and couldn't show a link between them, or being more cautious about non-binary patients whose situation was complex.

It also meant they had to ask for patients' old names – often called "deadnames" in the trans community, and generally taboo unless absolutely necessary – if they hadn't been able to navigate the bureaucracy to get a legal name change. For Ní Fhlannagáin, who opposed the intrusive and sometimes prurient psychological interrogations that had traditionally regulated access to trans healthcare, it was a painful situation.

"We had to make some really fucked up, tough calls," says Ní Fhlannagáin. "I have no training in this, and I have to evaluate, 'is this person trans'? I shouldn't have to do that, but the system is set up such that I need to... we weren't given a choice."

Then there were the occasional weirdos, like the man who emailed the clinic claiming he had cheated with his brother's wife and needed to be castrated urgently (Ní Fhlannagáin did not respond). There was also culture clash between the medics and some patients, including one woman

who filmed the experience for an artwork.

One time, the landlord unexpectedly came by to paint the house while a girl was having surgery. Ní Fhlannagáin asked her girlfriend to keep him occupied and locked the door. "My guess is, he thought we were doing porn," she says. Largely, neighbours left them; rural people didn't poke too much into each other's business.

After your surgery, if you wanted, Ní Fhlannagáin and Willow would take you further up the logging road, set up some cans, and teach you how to load, aim and fire an AR-15.

A knock from the health inspectors

One day, while Ní Fhlannagáin was drinking her first cup of coffee, the geese began honking because a big dark blue car with government plates was coming down the track.

In the wake of the huge protests at the World Trade Organisation conference in 1999, and the shadow of 9/11, many of her peers in the anarchist movement had received visits from law enforcement. But these people didn't look like cops; they looked like bureaucrats.

The officials said they were from the state Board of Health, and they were looking for Willow. Ní Fhlannagáin sent her a pager message saying "911" – meaning 'call me right away' – and waited. Then paged, then waited, then paged.

"Finally she calls, and she's like 'this better be good, I'm at work'," recalls Ní Fhlannagáin. "I'm like, 'well, the Board of Health is here and they would like to see the surgery'. [She says,] 'stop fucking around! What is it?' [I say,] 'well, the Board of Health is here...'"

Ní Fhlannagáin says she would later trace this visit to one of her stranger patients. Although she and Willow would always advise patients to come in practical clothes and shoes for the gravel and dirt, this woman – "let's call her Julie", says Ní Fhlannagáin – turned up in a mini-skirt and four-inch heels.

After the procedure, Julie asked when her voice was going to get higher. Ní Fhlannagáin explained, as she had beforehand, that orchis don't change your voice and she would need to practise like any other girl. Julie was also dissatisfied with the stumps of skin left by the surgery, though Ní Fhlannagáin says this too had been explained in advance.

The whole affair made them tighten their patient checks, but in the

like shit. And it's like, "Okay, yeah. This is kind of fucking depressing." And like, you have your queen bee, trans lady there, and I'm just like, "Yeah. I'm not... I don't want to be here." I would go to those things and be like, "Yeah. I've got a punk show I'm going to go to. You guys..." But sometimes I would go meet people there, and the last time I was there, I was like... I was 28. Because a friend of mine was in town, and she's like, "We can meet at Renaissance." And I'm like, "Fuck. Sure, let's meet at Renaissance. This will be gas." And I showed up there and some fucking crossdresser walks up to me. And I'm like, "Where's the toilet?" And he asked me, "Post-op or pre-op?" And I went, "Not that it's any of your business, but let's just say pre-op. Just because I want to hear what you got to say." "Oh, then you gotta use the men's." And I'm like, "The fuck. The fuck. Get to fuck. That's not going to be happening." And I walked right into the women's rooms. Like, I haven't seen the fucking inside of a men's room in fucking years. And I got kicked out, and I was just like, "Yeah, go fuck yourself, dude."

Vignette 27: Medicalization

I feel bad for a lot of the women who got medicalized because they didn't know anything better. Right? It's one of the things that annoys me about, like, sometimes the kids use the word "truscum" and I hate that. I hate that. Because, man, these women are fucking victims. Fucking victims. And if you can't... Like, I get it, I get it. You got your fucking estrogen from Planned Parenthood. You're in a nice liberal city, but these women had nowhere. They got told by their psychiatrists, "This is what you need to be to be trans," and yeah, they believed it. Yeah, you know what? If I was in their position too and didn't have, like, whatever it is in me that makes me hate authority, I would have fucking believed it too. I would have fucking believed it too, and I would have grasped onto it, too. Because the entire medical profession has been playing Tranny Highlander can only be one true transsexual. They've been playing this since the DSM fucking 3. Right? DSM-3 had it, you know, primary transsexual, secondary transsexual. And then DSM-4 had it with the different fucking things. Now DSM-5. And then Bailey Blanchard Lawrence with homosexual, transsexual, and autogynephilia. It's the same fucking Tranny Highlander they've been playing since DSM-3. And yeah, some women are going to believe it because the one person in their life that they can talk to all their shit has told her, "This is the way it is to be."

Vignette 28: Rejecting Authority

I was talking to a friend of mine who I have known since I was six. We were talking about how, like, I was treated in school, and I was treated like shit

day has been bonus time. So I basically say, you know, "That's the day I should have been dead." And every day since then has been a gift. And life becomes a lot different when you're just like, "Yeah, I shouldn't have this time. This is time I'm stealing. I'm stealing this fucking time." And you become a lot less scared of things, you know. There's not a whole lot of things I'm afraid of anymore because, you know, shit. What's the worst they can do to me? Can't take the last 20 some odd fucking years of my transition away from me, you know. What are they gonna do? They've taken everything else. Like, all my friends are dead. Right? You know, my family's gone. What are they gonna take from me? There's nothing lot more you can fucking take, you know. So, at that point I was about to take my own life. I had a choice. I chose not to. And you know, not every day has been fucking perfect since. But, boy, man, I'm sure glad I made that fucking choice.

Vignette 25: Resistance

Right, this is this thing that I keep reminding cis people. If you make us illegal, we're going to do illegal things. And when you put us up against the wall, we don't have a reason to give a shit anymore, you know. And that's a dangerous position to put people in. Right? So, it's like how many trans people do we know who are getting their fucking medication by hook or by crook, you know? I know where my estrogen comes from. A nice lady who used to live in the Ukraine but no longer does. Mixes it up on her fucking table in her kitchen. Why? Because trans healthcare system is a piece of shit.

Vignette 26: Support Groups

So, I tried transitioning in college. First off was the student health service, and they're like, "We don't deal with this. You need to go to the big city for this." And I went there, and they made me go to a support group, and I freaked out. Absolutely freaked out. There's a support group in, like, the Philly area called Renaissance, and someone was like, "Oh, you should go to that meeting." So, let me paint a picture for you. I'm going to use dated terminology. Forgive me for this. So, here's little me who's like, 20, walking into a room with 40 or 50 crossdressers. All dressed like they're about to have a night out on the town. Some of them got their wives there. And there's racks of clothes, and me dressed down in a hoodie. They're like, "Oh, yeah. You're in the back." And I go back there, and there's this wee room with like 12 transsexuals smoking. We're all smoking like crazy and like, being the absolute sad sacks. And like, the joke is, when you go to a mixed support group, how do you tell the transsexuals? We're all dressed

meantime Julie later went to her GP and explained her situation. "[The GP] says, 'this is really well done work. Who did it?'" recounts Ní Fhlannagáin.

"Now, while entirely true, what she said absolutely positively misrepresented what the situation was. She said: 'two trans girls up a logging road in a barn'." The GP duly called the authorities.

Ní Fhlannagáin remembers telling the bureaucrats to wipe their feet. They didn't, and tracked mud into the clinic. They asked to see autoclave logs, business licences, narcotics stores, all of which Ní Fhlannagáin was prepared for. Then she spotted something catastrophic: a little cup, with two testicles in it, left just behind the cautery machine.

Normally, patients were supposed to bring their balls with them after surgery. But Dana, last night's patient, was "an absolute lightweight" and was zonked out on vicodin. Ní Fhlannagáin and Willow had to haul her into the house, then give the clinic a quick wipe down and focus on looking after her, intending to clean up fully tomorrow. (Ní Fhlannagáin asked Dana's permission to tell The Independent her name.)

Luckily for Ní Fhlannagáin, she had learned a "cheat code" for situations like this. "When a cis bureaucrat is getting in your face, and you want them to disappear, say the words 'transgender' and 'transsexual' as loud as possible and as many times as possible," she says. "They get very uncomfortable and they back away."

The clinic had been trying to get Medicaid coverage for another trans girl, so Ní Fhlannagáin began loudly berating the officials for their agency's obstruction. "I just start going off, and the entire time I'm going off I'm thinking 'please don't look behind the electrocautery'."

They scrambled, allowing Ní Fhlannagáin to grab the organs, stick them in her pocket, dart into the house, and tell her patient: "Dana, you left these." Four or five months later, the Board of Health passed its judgement. Ní Fhlannagáin says it gave the clinic an almost clean bill of health, but rapped it for the mud on the floor – which Willow still has to explain today. "Twenty years later, I'm still mad about that," says Ní Fhlannagáin. "I'm like, you guys literally didn't wipe your feet like I told you."

The rise and fall of the 'ball barn'

Ní Fhlannagáin says that the clinic ultimately treated 14-16 patients, with no infections or complications. Each one signed the door jamb, which Willow took away and then lost.

The Independent was not able to speak to any patients, and privacy law prevents Ní Fhlannagáin from revealing their identities without their permission.

She is proud of the work she did, saying: "I don't regret helping a bunch of girls that wouldn't have been helped." But the clinic did not last long. In 2006, Willow's residency ended, taking her out of the Pacific Northwest, while Ní Fhlannagáin herself was burned out.

"Trans healthcare is a drag," she says. "I fucking hate doing trans healthcare. I'd never do it again. It's one of the most rewarding things and one of the worst things that I ever had to do.

"Part of that is that you were seeing folks at their most vulnerable. And trans girls? A lot of the time we don't do vulnerable real well. Because if you do vulnerable a lot, you don't last long. Anyone who does trans healthcare, God bless 'em. God bless 'em."

Worse, Chrissy was suffering from slowly worsening mental health problems, including alcohol and substance abuse, leaving Ní Fhlannagáin straining to keep her away from patients as much as possible. About three years after the clinic closed, they broke up, and four years after that, Chrissy killed herself.

"It's the same story, right?" says Ní Fhlannagáin. "This is a world not built for us. And how do you live in it? It's 35 people now, queer folks, and about two thirds of them trans, that I've lost over the years."

They did their last surgery three days before the clinic shut down. Willow and Ní Fhlannagáin went their separate ways, and largely kept quiet about the experience. Then something strange started to happen.

Ní Fhlannagáin's Irish friend Nóirín, who had been in Germany when the clinic was operating, told her they'd heard about it through a friend. Sybil Lamb described it in her essay about orchis, though she changed some of the details. The legend of the "ball barn", as some dubbed it, was spreading through the global trans community by word of mouth.

"Absolutely – I've heard of it several times from different people," says Gill-Peterson. "Especially other trans women, in the kind of conversations we have with one another, where we're talking about what we really know, and how our lives really are... it's like the trans version of six degrees of separation."

Trans history, she argues, has been "over-narrated" by medical institutions, which often defined mainstream discussion about trans

And when I did get deer, like, that was like a whole process because I would tan hides, make my own leather. And like, when I hunted everything got fucking used, everything got fucking used from intestines on up. Like, and it wasn't just deer either. There's a number of raccoons that met their end at the end of my bow and arrow. And I love me some raccoon. Raccoon's tasty. I used to do squirrel dead falls to. Those were fun, but yeah.

Vignette 23: Never Eat Badger

I think for like four or five years, I didn't buy any meat ever. I just went and shot it or picked it up from the side of the road. There was a lot of roadkill I ate. Like, I actually prefer a roadkill more than I do regular hunted deer. Roadkill's like eating meat that's been soaked in meth because when a deer gets hit by a car, it runs off and then all the adrenaline starts pumping in. Because the thing... the poor thing didn't die immediately. It just got hit by a car, broke its leg, laid down in a ditch, and took like four hours to die. So, like, whenever I've eaten roadkill, I'm like wide fucking awake, you know.

So, I've eaten, like, weird shit, too. Never eat badger. Trust me on this. Now, one of my exes found a badger. She knew that I like tanning hides. I did a lot of brain tanning, and she brought me a badger home. It was frozen. And I'm like, "I've never had badger before." There is a reason no one eats badger. It is not tasty. My dog wouldn't even eat it, and that dog ate from the cat box. The fur's nice and soft, but no, no, no, no, no. There's nothing to be doing with that meat, nothing to be done with that. That goes right in the trash can.

Vignette 24: Choosing to Transition

Pidge: I was living south of Philadelphia. Well, I came out when I was like 20. Twenty, yeah. I came out at 20 and I transitioned, like, it's hard to fucking tell. Like, what's the date that you count on that? Let's say 23. Let's say 23. Twenty-three is the safe bet.

Interviewer: And how did you get to that point?

Pidge: Well, I sat in a bathtub with a razor blade up against my wrists, and I'm like, "I have a choice." And this was right after Rita. Was it Rita Hester? The one who started Trans Day of Remembrance. Well, her murder, her death. She was the one that was in a car accident and the ambulance driver just basically laughed. And I'm just like, "Well, I have a choice." Either I kill myself, in which case, you know, all is over. Or I say, "Fuck it. They're probably gonna kill me anyway." So, basically, like, every day since that

"Alright, fine. We're going to move into the middle of fuck all nowhere, like the middle of the Siuslaw." So, like, we were moving. My sister ended up moving to Montana for a few years to run the abortion clinic. And honestly, I was burnt. I was burnt. Like, I never want to hang over someone's face again. One of my clients used chewing tobacco, and if you've ever done an electrolysis on the face of someone with chewing tobacco, it's not fun. I never want to hang over someone's face, inserting probes up in their face, no. No, no, no, no, no. My back's wrecked from it. My wrists got wrecked from it. And honestly, it's like, no. No, that means interacting with people, and, like, having to be close to... Eww, no. And like, it's not that I'm not empathetic, it's just I can only hear the same "My life sucks" story over, and over, and over again before I'm like, "Yeah, I just don't care. I just want to zap hair off your skin. I just... I just can't. Because you're saying the same shit that I've said. Right? And you know, at some point it's just like, 'Yeah. What are you going to do man?'" And especially because, like, a lot of my regular electrolysis clients were rural trans folks who hadn't transitioned yet. And you know, there's no fucking therapy. You're not getting fucking therapy when you live in fucking Grays Harbor. You're just not. It's not like you're going to find a decent therapist, and I may be the only trans person you fucking know, and that's great and all. But when I'm sitting there trying to solve the problems of a 55-year-old and I'm 32, Fuck if I know, man. Why you asking me? Oh, you have so much more experience. Yeah. I'm just kind of making this shit up as I go along. I don't fucking know," you know. And once I got to that point, I'm... was like, "No, I need to find something else to do with my life."

Vignette 22: Unwind Time

So, the majority of my unwinding time was less clinic related and more getting the fuck out of the house. So, I would literally go to the seed and feed, just to hang out at the seed and feed, you know. I'd go there and see the chicks that they got in that week, and I'd pick up chicken food. I would sit in the forest a lot because we were on 255 acres, part of it was forest. Sit right next to the creek and smoke weed, and just sit there and go, "I don't need to be in the house right now. I'm not going to be in the house right now." I had, like, a little, little stump by the thing that they would sit out there and smoke and read a book. I must have read Lord of the Rings about five times, like, in a two-year period. Because a) it's not the easiest book to get through sometimes, and b) it just takes for fucking ever. And there was one video game I used to play, and I forget the name of the video game. Halo, I used to play Halo. I played a lot of Halo, played a lot of Halo. I would go hunting a lot, which basically meant me sitting in the forest with my gun, not doing a whole lot. I'd be like, "Yeah, I'm going hunting. Oh no, I didn't get anything done today. No, no, no, no, no deer. No deer."

people from within its own narrow worldview. She believes that researching and remembering DIY healthcare can challenge that, restoring the diversity of the many trans communities – from "black and brown trans-fems who came up through the ballroom scene" to mostly white punks in the Pacific Northwest – that have carried knowledge through the generations.

The story also reached Nicki Green, an internationally exhibited sculptor and lecturer in ceramics at the University of California, Berkeley. She contacted Ní Fhlannagáin and gained information about the clinic, making an artwork about it called Operating in Bright Sunlight, featuring paintings of the old farmhouse, the trees, and the procedure itself.

"I think I was particularly excited by the idea of not having much information, or the information I had being all word of mouth. There's something that feels very fluid, very trans about that way of working," Green tells The Independent.

"The spread of info as it becomes mythologised, evolves and changes... feels subversive and mirroring the finding and accumulating of info that was so central to my experience of coming into my transness."

But, she adds, she was also excited about being able to record this "amazing" piece of history in a more durable way. "Fired ceramic is a permanent material, so recording history on ceramic forms allows for a means of archiving that is very physical, material and elemental," she says. "[It's] immortalising a history that feels very significant to the evolution of trans care and particularly trans women supporting each other."

‘Abortion and trans healthcare are the same fight’

Today, Republican politicians in states across the US are seeking to ban or restrict access to transition healthcare for trans children, while stoking panic and revulsion about trans people in general. Some GOP politicians have signalled that adult transition care could be next.

In the UK, gender critical feminists have also campaigned to ban all trans healthcare for under-18s and are increasingly arguing for restrictions on adult care. The activist group Transgender Trend has said transition care for adults under 25 is "the next big scandal", while Kathleen Stock, a leading gender critical thinker who was awarded the Order of the British Empire last year, told the Spanish newspaper El Mundo that "if it were up to me, no one should undergo a sex change until they are 25".

In fact, waiting lists for NHS gender clinics in Great Britain now range

from around seven months to nearly six years for a first appointment, according to volunteer reports (two appointments are needed before HRT can be prescribed). London's gender clinic is seeing people who were first referred in January 2018. Although Ireland's waiting lists are officially around 2-3 years, FOI requests from a trans rights non-profit reportedly suggests some people could wait nearly a decade.

Meanwhile, the US Supreme Court has revoked the nationwide right to abortion after nearly 50 years, causing abortions to instantly become illegal in states with so-called "trigger laws" on the books, with other states likely to follow.

To Ní Fhlannagáin, this shows that the days of Butcher Brown are not just history – and makes the clinic's relevance crystal clear.

"Abortion issues and trans healthcare issues, they're the exact same fight," she says. "It's, do people have the right to do with their bodies as they see fit? Does the government have the right to tell medical providers what they can or can't do to a person who has given informed consent?"

She believes that cis LGB people who win their civil rights, as well as trans people who achieve healthcare and security, must not "pull up the ladder" behind them as some in her generation did – not least because what they have can still be taken away.

"Working on trans healthcare is working on cis people's healthcare," she says. "How many cis women have come to me and said, 'oh, I'm starting to hit menopause, the doctor doesn't want to give me [HRT]'. All right, honey, here's what you do."

The next Jane-like group, she adds, may be spreading insulin – a drug that people with diabetes cannot live without, priced so high in America's broken healthcare market that people die because they can't afford it. Beyond that, she hopes that telling her story will weave ties between younger and older LGBT+ people, helping the former see that they are not alone and that they have models to draw from.

She describes how, on the back of the clinic door, there was a quote from Jean Liedloff's book *The Continuum Concept*, based on its author's time among the indigenous Yequana people of Venezuela.

"A sure sign that something is seriously missing in a society is a generation gap. If the younger generation does not take pride in becoming like its elders, then the society has lost its own continuum, its own stability, and probably does not have a culture worth calling one..."

Ní Fhlannagáin believes that applies to trans people too. "I'm 50 and an

Vignette 19: Clinic Duties

Trans health care is like one of those things where it's the most rewarding job, and it's most shit job because you're seeing people at their best and at their worst. And I burnt out of it real fucking quick, man. It was just like, man. Anyone who does this is a fucking saint. I don't want to fucking do this. Hey, I'm an engineer, man, and I do not want to do this.

My job at the clinic was during surgery to hold people's hands, and talk like this, and tell longest, most boring dad jokes that you're not going to laugh about because laughing would hurt right now. But you're gonna go, "Huh, that was funny." And because I'm talking like this and telling you literally an hour and a half worth of dad jokes, you're not paying attention to the fact that you're getting your testicles removed through a wee hole in your sack in a barn, in the middle of fucking rural Washington because I don't want you to think about that right now. I just want you to think about this really bad knock, knock joke I'm telling you. That was my job, and to run an autoclave, and fix anything that broke, and answer emails, and keep the doctor on time, and yeah, that was what my job was.

Vignette 20: Medical Equipment

My adopted sister is an abortion doctor, and she was starting a clinic. Her plan was to start a clinic in rural Montana. So, she was slowly collecting equipment off of eBay and it was all in her storage unit. She's like look, "I can get rid of my fucking storage unit, and just store it here, and you can use it for the electrolysis, and then twice a month I'll come down and do surgery." And I'm just like, "Sounds good to me."

The electric cautery pad, this thing was like from the '80s. It worked great, but it was from the fucking '80s. This thing was huge. It was this huge, old electric cautery pen machine, and we learned from my surgery don't use the battery-operated ones because they run out real quick because there's a lot of little bleeders down there. So, you don't want to use the battery-operated ones, you want to use a good old fashioned chunky one. I swear to God, this thing had vacuum tubes in it. It was old, it was really old.

Vignette 21: Closing the Clinic

Interviewer: So, did the clinic come to a close because of burnout?

Pidge: So, my sister was kind of ending her residency at around the same time where my ex-girlfriend was going crazier and crazier, and I was like,

the clinic." And I'm like, "Alright. Wipe your feet. Don't come in here with muddy feet." It just rained the night before. And they come in, they track mud into the damn place. They're like, "Where's your autoclave?" "Well, it's here." "Where do you keep the narcotics?" "We don't." "What do you mean you don't keep narcotics?" "Well, they get a prescription. They go into town. They get all their prescriptions filled. They take the prescription in front of us." "And where's your business license?" "Ah, in order to get a business license in Washington, you need to make more than 14 thousand" - I forget what the number was- it was like 14,000 a year, "But my business license for the electrology studio is here. But I don't even make that much."

And, like, they were on my ass. They were like... So, they ended up dinging the doctor. Even to this day, she has to explain why that little thing is on her record. Because they tracked mud into the clinic and they said, "Yeah, the floor was dirty." I had bleached the floor that morning, so I knew the floor wasn't dirty. They dirtied the floor, and that's what they dinged it. And they dinged it just because they were pricks.

Now, here's the funny thing. That room is still in existence. I snooped my old landlord's farm, and it is now used as an organic chicken processing room, which I find hysterical. It is FDA approved.

Vignette 18: Finding and Choosing Patients

Interviewer: How did folks find out about the clinic?

Pidge: They found out about it from Aunt Jenny's website. It was all word of mouth, and, like, my big failure there, it's like look, I'm a white working-class punk girl. So, a lot of white working-class punk girls got their shit, and a lot of communities that it wasn't necessarily associated with didn't. And like, that's I think my biggest failure with that. And, you know, to give me a break, you know, 33-year-old trans girls don't necessarily make really great life decisions. So anyhow, we weren't really like, "Oh, my God. What about all these other communities?"

I had to answer all the email. We got some fucked-up e-mail. So, I'm trying to judge people based on these emails that they're sending me and I'm like, "Nope. Nope." Hey. There were folks we had to turn down and I feel really bad about it.

There was this one person who sent us an email. He was like, "I have cheated with my brother's wife, and he will not forgive me unless I get my testicles removed. Can you please do this? If you will not do this, I will do it myself." And I'm like, "Sorry, man. can't fucking help you. Cannot fucking help you. Just... Just, I can't. I'm sorry."

'elder'. How the fuck does that happen? Well, because the previous generation, a lot of them died – in the Aids crisis, or for the many, many reasons we died early – and no one gave a shit except us. Or you went stealth, and you never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever talked about it.

"That's by design. If you don't have continuity of culture, you have no ability to stand up and say, 'this is wrong, stop treating me like shit'. So how do you unfuck a people? How do you create a culture of resistance?" To younger trans people seeking that goal, she offers this advice: "Don't ask permission for how you live your life... what are they going to do, get you in more trouble? You're trans, honey; you're already in trouble. Just don't get caught."

Some Notes on Rural Trans Life

Vignette 1: Identity

Pidge: My name is Pidge and I am 51 years old.

Interviewer: And what is your gender identity?

Pidge: I use the word transsexual because I like that it annoys people and I politically organized under that for years, and I know other people ruined it and I don't care.

Interviewer: Okay.

Pidge: And I'm too old to... I like... I use trans, I use trans woman, I use transsexual. I don't... I am too old for the discourse.

Vignette 2: PNW Locations

Pidge: I live in the West of Ireland. I have been here for 10 years. I was in the Pacific Northwest from 2002 to 2013. I have lived in Seattle. I've lived in Olympia. I've lived in Shelton, WA. I've lived in this rural town in like Central Oregon, near Eugene called Elsie. I've lived in Portland. Portland was my last stop. Yeah. So, like, it's pretty much half city, half rural. I'm originally from Jersey.

Interviewer: How did you make your way out to the West Coast in the Pacific Northwest?

Pidge: My adopted sister moved out there, and the girl I was dating lived out there, and I was like, "Fuck it." I was looking for work. I had just gotten laid off, and I had a job interview out there and I'm like, "Oh, I can find a tech job out here," which I couldn't. So, yeah. I moved out there right after the dot com bubble. Went and popped in 2002, right after 9/11, right after 9/11, actually. So, my first stop was the girlfriend's house in Seattle for a few months, and then we moved to Olympia, and then we were in Olympia for about a year, and then we moved to Shelton, and we were in Shelton for about, I'm gonna say two years. Then we moved out to Elsie for about four, I'm gonna say four. Then after me and her broke up, I moved to Portland. Despised every minute.

Now, there was fucked-up things we had to do. We had to require a letter. Why? Because we didn't have malpractice insurance. Right? In Washington state, it was a requirement to have malpractice insurance. So, we just didn't have it. We're like, "Yeah, we can just do this. It's not like any of our people are gonna sue us or anything." We did people all over the country. Like, people would fly out to us. And, like, there was this one girl I turned down and I said, "I feel fucking horrible doing it," because her ID didn't match the letter I got. Her ID was female, the letter was not. And I'm like, "I can't. I can't do anything with this." I need the letter and the shrink refused to put the letter in. I'm like... I felt horrible. I felt fucking horrible about it, but it was, like, I couldn't do anything, right?

How we would do this, is initially we just required the letter, and then we had one person who was, like, asking weird questions on the table. Like, "When is my voice gonna raise?" Like, "I don't know. When you go to voice therapy."

And I was like, "Okay, this is weirding me out a little bit." So, what we used to do... Or what we... We change our procedure a little bit. Me and the doc would go in. We would have a conversation with the person. We'd say, "Okay, we need you to take these, get undressed," and then me and the doc will go for a walk, and I'd be, "How you feel about this?" "I feel alright with this." You know, there was no one we turned down after we did that but we kind of had to cover our bases, and it pissed me off that we had to. Right? Like, but my job was in part to protect her medical license. And it sucks. But you know, trans doctors aren't allowed to fuck-up things that cis doctors are allowed to get away with and do. A trans doctor, one fuck-up, they're drummed out. And it's like this in a lot of professions. You see this a lot. One fuck-up, you're gone. So, my job was in part to protect her medical license, and I wasn't going to risk, you know, rando, who may sue us later. You know, doing that. And it's terrible that I had to think like that, but I have to. I didn't have a choice.

Vignette 17: Board of Health

So, my landlord had a tractor barn. It's an open space barn. So, we just closed one face of it up, and built the room, and tiled the room, put electricity in. It was grand. It worked fine.

The Board of Health even ended up showing at the damn place. One of the women who showed up went to her doctor, doctor said, "Oh, this was really good work. Who did it?" And she said, "Two trans ladies up Logging Road." While technically true, it misrepresented. It was an actual clinic.

So, the Board of Health people show up one day and they're like, "Let's see

little white box away from, like, anything that would... So, we moved to the farm. Problem with moving to a farm in Shelton is there's no fucking work. And she sure as fuck wasn't going to work. So, I kind of had to. And I was talking to my adopted sister. Now my sister... My adopted sister's a doctor. She's the actual physician. And she's like, "Well, you know? We could just do a clinic here." And she... And I was like, "Really?" And she's like, "Yeah. You want to learn electrolysis? You could do electrolysis here."

So, I learned... I taught myself how to do electrolysis. Got myself an electrolysis machine and zapped all the hair off the arm. And "Yeah. No, I got this." And I'm like, "Alright, if we're doing this, we're going to do this so that it's affordable for my people."

So, one of the things that was really like this before Obamacare and stuff, is like trans healthcare before all this, that was out of pocket, man. You paid your \$45.00 for your fucking estrogen shot once a month, and, you know, your \$50.00 an hour for electrolysis because laser wasn't a thing, and then your 17,000 for surgery and all that. And it pissed me off because I come from a working-class background. None of the girls I knew could afford this shit. Like, they were all kind of... They were on maxi-mones. They were. Like, kind of hobbling it together. And my sister's from a very similar working-class background. And she's like, "Yeah, yeah, no."

So, we looked and found the cheapest orchiectomies that were available at the time, and it was Cayenne, Lake Oswego, who was doing them for two grand. We're like, "Fine. \$500." Sliding scale. So, there were girls that showed up that didn't pay shit. We were just like, "Yeah, yeah, no. You're staying for electrolysis." So, we're not going to... You come for 20 hours of electro, you get a free orchiectomy out of it. We didn't do... We did, like, 13 of them. It wasn't like that much. It was enough to kind of keep the lights on in the house, enough to kind of justify doing it.

Vignette 15: Perfecting the Procedure

Now the cool thing is, is that our infection rate was zero. Zero. We learned a lot from my infection. We learned that the orchiectomy procedure is written for cis guys with testicular cancer. So, like, things are different down there than they are for trans women. So, we did an entirely different bandaging procedure. We had drains. We even did prophylactic antibiotics just to make sure 'cause, like, I was talking to a urologist. He's like, "Oh, yeah, my infection rate's 30%." Like for fuck's sake.

Vignette 16: Patient Letters

Vignette 3: Rural vs City

Pidge: Given a choice, you know, I'm always gonna live rurally. Cities, I've only lived in when, like, I needed employment, and, like, nowadays I work from home, so I don't need to actually live in a city because no one wants me to come into work anymore, they want me to sit at home and work, which is awesome. I'm like, "Great. Fine. Do I have to be in a city and go into an office for that?" "No." "Alright, grand."

Interviewer: What is it about the rural context that is appealing to you?

Pidge: Time moves different, time moves different. That's part of it. Also, I spent 25 years of my life in cities. And Jesus, the amount of transphobia you get in cities is way different than the amount of rural just based on number of fucking people you have. Right? I haven't left my road in like a month. And there's like five houses on my damn road over a kilometer. No one gives me any shit because I'm a neighbor. Right? And like I don't know if they know, I don't care if they know. Whereas in a city, you're always interacting with someone, always interacting with someone. And it's just tiring.

And also, how do I put it? And I've talked to like a lot of butch dyke friends of mine. Right? 'Cause there is a difference with women in rural areas that they're allowed to be a little harder. Right? So, like when I go into the shops, into the village, and I wear my wellies, no one looks at me twice. Right? 'Cause everyone else is wearing their fucking wellies. Right? 'Cause I live on a balk. You know, where in like rural areas, especially if you're on a farm, if you're doing any amount of farm work, yeah, you know you don't need to be put together as much. So, there's a certain leeway with the way that women present in rural areas that you don't get in cities. In cities it's very stringent or your othered. And if you're othered, that's fine. But you're going to be putting up with shit because especially in, like, certain cities people just want to put their nose in everyone's fucking business, and I'm really, really a , "Keep your nose out of my fucking business kind of girl." You know, I was joking with one of my neighbors that I come from the land of "shoot, shovel, and shut the fuck up," because you know people... If you wanted people up your ass, you'd live in a city.

Like, I lived out in St John's, which is like, you know, the arse-end of Portland versus, like, New York City where I used to live. It's like everyone's up your ass, and it's like... And I don't want to fucking deal with that shit. You know, people live out there for the privacy for a reason. So, you know, they take... Whether people knew I was trans or not, I don't know. I have no idea. But if they did, they didn't bug me about it because they're like, "None of our fucking business," whereas, like, in the city it

seems like it's everyone's fucking business.

Vignette 4: Social Life

Interviewer: How did you build, like, relationships or friendships?

Pidge: Down at the seed and feed. You know, and... how do I describe this? I'm not going to find a lot of people in a lot of those rural areas that were going to be buds. Right? We're not going to go out, and go out drinking. And that's okay because, you know, my social life is very small and I don't need it very big. My adopted sister would come over to the house. We'd hang out, we'd go shoot guns, we'd do projects around my place, you know. And like I don't have... I didn't have a lot of social life, you know, having a lot of queer social life in Shelton. I knew one dyke in town, and me and her were joking that we were going to have a pride parade, which was walk from one pub to the next.

Vignette 5: Trans Visibility

I think also, and this has changed in recent years- thank you transgender tipping point- and I'm just going to say this: trans visibility... Visibility is only good if you have agency. If you don't, it's exploitation. And the nice thing about rural areas is that... and I'm going to quote A Safe Girl to Love by Casey Plett. She talks about this... in this one of her short stories about the Mennonite going to go visit Grandpa up in Canada. We are... in rural areas- until recently- we are so far out of the realm of experience. It's like, "Trans what? No," or "What's that?" Where it's like San Francisco, "Yeah. Bam, bam. Absolutely." Like cis girls don't even pass in San Francisco. Whereas like, you know, Shelton fucking Washington no one. "Trans what? What?" You know, to them a tranny is the thing that's in a fucking car that you fix. Anyhow, they don't know that fucking word. So, like we're so far out of the realm of experience in those places, and even when we're not, most of the time people just... you know, at least years ago, 10 years ago, 15 years ago, people would mind their own fucking businesses. Now, it's different. It's different now. It's different.

Vignette 6: Rural Comparisons

I live in Ireland now, and I live in a real rural place. And it's interesting because here everyone's up your ass. Everyone's up your ass, but they're in it in a very nice way. It kind of feels like... have you ever had this very comfortable like, you know, the fluffy blankets that's really comfortable, but you know, you eat Doritos in it, and every now and then, like, a Dorito chip kind of rubs you the wrong way? That's what Ireland rural's like. It's like... perfect example: I had meetings today, but one of the lads I know

syndrome, you know. So, all those women that I knew, like, I joked, and it's not even a joke, that, like, all the trans women I knew for my 20s, that I was friends with, are dead. Right? And when my mom died, I was talking to some people who knew her. So, some women my age who knew her, and one of them lives in Canada, and she lives there undocumented because the United States traumatized her so bad she'd rather live undocumented than go back to the States. She just can't. Can't do it. And she was like, "Well, when do we get to live? When do we get to thrive?" because she's seeing, like, all these trans kids, and I'm like, "Look, how many women Jenny's age did you know coming up?" And she's like, "Oh, none." And I'm like, "You know why? 'Cause they all died." We get to survive. We don't necessarily get to thrive. We get to survive. The next generation, hopefully, will get to thrive. We're not going to see that.

Vignette 13: Coming Out

I came out when HBIGDA... Like, it was HBIGDA still. There was no WPATH, and there were still therapists who were doing the old HBIGDA model, which is you go South, you tell no one. And I did that for 16 fucking years. Like, I only came out at work because I was having a publicly facing job and I knew some fucking shady bitch was gonna fucking out me. And I'm like, "You know what? If I out myself, no one's gonna fucking out me." You know, if you're a software developer, if you're an open-source software developer, everyone knows you now because, you know, you're a public figure, and I'm like giving presentations now in front of like a few 100 people. Someone's gonna put two and two together. Or someone's going to see me and out me or do whatever. I'm just going to out myself. And then this way, there's no talk behind my back. I can deal with it for now. I control the narrative at that point, and no one can hold anything over my head. I mean, I was out in, like, the rural areas and it wasn't like... How do I describe this? Someone asked me. I'm like, "Yeah." I'm not gonna sit there and go, "Hi. My name is Pidge, the transsexual down the road." Right? 'Cause no one gives a shit. I don't care to provide that information, but if someone came out, up and asked me, I'm like, "Yeah, what about it?" You know?

Vignette 14: Starting the Clinic

My ex was this woman named Chrissy. She's the one who shot herself in the head. She was going to school for environmental science. And she had it rough, which is why we moved further and further out from the, like, cities and stuff. Whether she had multiple chemical sensitivity or not, I don't know. I'm not a doctor. I'm not qualified. But she wanted her nice

"You don't know the community. You literally just came out." Like, say what you want about Lana Wachowski. She shut her fucking mouth for 10 years. Like, that I respected about her. She shut her fucking mouth. She didn't say shit. Not a damn thing. And then she started talking.

Vignette 11: Trans Intersectionality

I got in an argument with some kid. She's like, "Do you think I'm a trans elder?" I'm like, "No, I can still see the eggshell on your head." She got really mad at me and I'm like, "Look, you don't want to be a trans fucking elder. Number one, the dental sucks. The pay is nonexistent, and I have to listen to you lot gripe all the fucking time. And look, not to be, 'I walked uphill both ways for my fucking estrogen shot,' but my trauma and fucked-upness is very different from your trauma and fucked-upness. And you know, there's things that I'm going to say that you're not going to understand. Like there's language that we have that like... I can sit there with a woman that I transitioned with- and out of the six I transitioned with, only one's still alive other than me- and she will understand exactly what I mean, exactly what I mean. And you know the other ones... And this is what we fought for." I don't want them to understand this. I don't want them to understand this. I don't want them to be hard like we had to be hard. Right? Like working class trans, like trans women of color, anyone who before they transitioned had a backpack with a rock in it. You know, this is this joke I make. She's like, "They kill us." And I'm like, "Honey, they don't kill you. You lot, you kill yourself." Like, "They kill girls who talk like me. They kill girls who are darker than me. They don't kill you." Because, like, a lot of them, it's like, there's a backpack that they have, and never had a rock, and now it has a rock in it, and "Oh my God, it's so heavy." Where it's, like, a lot of the working-class girls, a lot of the girls of color, it's like, "Yeah, it's just another fucking rock. Yeah, whatever. I'm just going to get a little harder."

Vignette 12: Survive or Thrive

Aunt Jenny was this old trans lady. Way back in the early '90s, we used to joke that she was the cause of transsexuality on the Internet because she was the only one dealing with trans kids. The only one dealing with trans kids, and she transitioned back in the early '80s, and she was kind of my adopted mom. And there were, like, a little group of us who lived in the Philly area who hung out together. And of us, one died of lung cancer. She just died. Julie jumped off a bridge. Chrissy shot herself in the head. The other Chrissy is still alive and up in Canada. Melody died of some diabetic heart thing. Oh, and my mom died of basically trans broken arms

popped over, which means that right there, like one meeting's gone because he's going to come in and we're going to sit there and chat for 45 minutes. And then the farmer up the road popped in, and we chatted for 30 minutes. And it's just like, people will talk. Like, the coal shed fire. My shed caught on fire, and I didn't tell anyone about it. I put it out, fire department came, they put it out. And I live in a real rural area, like, I can't see another house from my, like... I walk out to the road, I can't see another house. People in the village knew about it, like, immediately, and the village is 12 miles away. Like, people were calling me up, like, within three hours going, "Are you okay?" "What do you mean, 'Are you okay?'" "Oh, we heard about the fire." "How the fire did you hear about the fire?" "Oh, Joel, from up the road, was passing by, saw the fire trucks. We just want to make sure you're okay." And it's the weirdest thing because it's, like, they're up your ass, but for very different reasons. Mainly out of boredom because, like, you know, you're the biggest news on the... because, like, nothing happens here. Right? It's like, "Oh, my God, a blow in." And I'm not even the most interesting person on the road, you know. So, it's this really weird, like, very different experience. Where like in the states, folks leave you alone 'cause they wanna be left alone. Here, they leave you alone a little bit, mostly, but they're always gonna check in on you, see how you're going.

Vignette 7: Cultural Differences

There's a difference between guess cultures and ask cultures. Like, America is an ask culture. You ask, "Can I do this?" And you're told, "Yes," or, "no." Ireland is an absolute guess culture. You need to kind of know the rules, and if you break the rules, no one's going to tell you, you broke the rules, they're just going to talk about it behind your back. So, you know, I'm lucky that my family's from here, so all this insanity is very well understood. But like, you know, if you break the rules here, it's like, you get to talking to. Like someone will go, "Can we go for a pint?" And you know when someone says, "Can we go for a pint?" you're in trouble, you did something fucked up. And it's like... Tidy Towns is this organization that all the wee villages in Ireland have that Tidy Towns, and they all get judged every year on who has, like, the prettiest village. And if you live near the village and you don't cut your grass before the Tidy Towns lads show up, oh, oh, you're in trouble, you're in trouble. So, like, I actually ended up getting a talking to because I didn't... my lawnmower wasn't working, and I lived just literally right outside the village, right next to the sign, "Now Entering." And, like, someone took me to the side and said, "Hey, can you cut your lawn?" I was like, "Oh, why?" "Oh, the Tiny Town judges are coming." It's like, "Oh, alright, grand. Yeah, not a bother." And there's nothing they can... it's not like they can fine you or anything. You're just going to get

talked about in the village. And the worst thing is to be talked about in the village.

Vignette 8: Why Ireland

Interviewer: How did you decide to move to Ireland?

Pidge: So, I had to speak the language. So, that was the German speaking countries. the French speaking countries, and the English-speaking countries. Like Belgium, I love fucking Belgium, love Belgium. It would drive me mad living there. Germany would drive me nuts. When you're a New Yorker or a New Jersey-er, jaywalking's the thing, it's a thing. And in Germany you get yelled at. And I'm not a rule follower, I'm not very good at following rules. I lived in London for a bit, hated it. And it turned out, like, when I was living in London, I was spending over all my weekends hopping on Ryanair flights to go to Dublin to hang out with friends. And I'm like, "Well, this is stupid. Why am I not moving- just moving to there?" And I... initially I didn't want to move there because I didn't want to be a stereotype. The Yank that moves back to Ireland. But I was like, "Fuck it, might as well." You know, so, out of all the countries, this one annoys me the least.

Vignette 9: Creating Community

Pidge: Anyhow, I'm not a social creature. Like... Anyhow, I... Folks here know that I throw a party once a year. It's a four-day party. There's no start or stop times. You come, you pitch a tent, you hang out, you eat food, and then you fuck off. And I'll see you next year. I make a joke about it, but it's actually true. Like, I live in Leitrim, and I have left my county five times this entire year. I don't need to leave, right? I used to joke when I lived in St. John's that, like, if they blew up the St. John's bridge, I'd be perfectly fine because everything I need is in that, like, couple square miles, and I don't need to go to the rest of Portland, and the rest of Portland won't come here. So, you know it's like... For me it's like I don't need a lot of people. I need a few people. I need my people. And once I have my people, the entire world can fuck off.

Interviewer: Who are your people?

Pidge: Bunch of fucking weirdos. Let's see. I have the work friends who are all the technology people who are all open-source weirdos. I have the gamer friends who are all weirdos. I have the queer friends who are all weirdos. I have a few of the trans friends, which is... I'm having less and less trans friends as I get older because everyone my age is dead. It's kind

of fucked up. I'm 50 and I'm like, "Oh yeah, all the people I know are dead. Great." And, like, I'm trying to not make, like, a lot of the young trans girlfriends 'cause I don't want my trauma to rub off on them 'cause like my trauma is not their trauma. You know, my trauma is very different than their trauma. Like, I had this one friend in Ireland who was like, "Oh yeah, being trans in Ireland so tough." And I'm like, "Oh, really? How many women do you know who've been dismembered? Because I knew three. How many... How many trans women in Ireland do you know who've been murdered? Because I know a bunch and none of them are from Ireland." So, I'm trying to avoid making, like, a lot of connections there because it's, like, man, a lot of times people like the idea of elders. They don't like the reality.

Vignette 10: Defining Trans Elder

I like trans women community that's from, like, an outlaw biker gang as opposed to, like, you know, an ethnic community. Within ethnic groups, and racial groups, or whatever groups you have elders who are old, and you have young people who are young, and, like, there's an age thing that happens there. I joke about, like, trans girl community is from, like, an outlaw biker gang. Bitch, who put her motorcycle together at age 18, has been riding day in, day out. At 35, she's the fucking president. And the bitch who bought a Harley at 50 and has been riding for a year gets that other bitch a beer because it's time, it's time on the bike. Right? So, I have a friend of mine. I love her dearly; I love her dearly. She's kind of my age, transitioned about 2-3 years ago. And I joke about this, but I'm kind of serious. And she... I was bitching about the trans flag because I hate the fucking trans flag. Pink and baby blue, really? Who the fuck thought that was a good idea? And I was bitching about it at Derry Pride, actually. And she's like, "But I like that." And I was like, "No." And she's like, "What?" And I'm like, "Don't make me get the spark gun out." She's like, "What?" And I'm like, "You don't get to get opinion for 10 years." "Why?" And I'm like, "Because the narrative... the trans girl narrative is #1: focus on those... just fucking transition. And honestly, none of you bitches have nothing interesting to say, absolutely nothing interesting to say. Unless, like, you come from a different demographic that is the normal demographic, right? You can have your opinion about the trans flag all you want. Keep it to your fucking self." And I was joking about it, but I'm not. And it's this problem with communities where there's a coming out process that happens.

Everyone's interested in the person who literally has been out for a year, who probably is in their most vulnerable stage, her most exploitable stage. And who honestly doesn't know the community. I mean, this was the thing that drove me nuts about watching Caitlyn Jenner because I'm just like,