

Baring His Chest

Category: Trans

written by Susan Mack | July 2, 2024

As the shower water heats up, I help my eighteen-year-old trans son remove the post-surgical compression vest he'll be wearing for the next six months. I unzip the front, unhook each of three hooks, and unstrap the velcro from each shoulder and take it off.

Underneath, I see bruising, two drains just under his armpits, and an angry surgical incision with suture after suture after suture. I move to set the vest on the counter, and turn back around to find him staring at himself in mirror. I stand behind him and look too – at the scar tissue already forming, the blooming bruises above his armpits, the blood in his drains, and the flat area which recently had full breasts.

This is the first time I've seen my son's bare chest since he started wearing a binder five years ago. He'd surprised me with gender questions that seemed sudden and perhaps trendy, but settled into answers that have stayed consistent. In those years, he's only showered in the daytime a handful of times – usually forced, sometimes wearing a binder – because he didn't want to expose his bare breasts even to his own view.

Last summer, we travelled to Portugal. Walking up a hill to a bakery in Porto, my son began gasping. The constriction from his binder combined with the heat of the day and the grade of the hill to rob him of breath. We had to walk slowly, step by step, back to the car. I asked if he'd be willing to wear a sports bra instead of the binder when we walked the next day. He said that would be okay in the mountains, but in cities the anxiety about constantly being thought of as a girl was high enough to also make breathing difficult.

When we got home, I began looking for surgeons. It took a year for him to turn eighteen, for us to find the right provider, and to get off the waiting list.

Today, in the bathroom, I watch his bare chest move up and down freely. Mine moves more freely, too.

I move my eyes from his chest to his face. He's smiling. I smile back.

Susan Mack