[Gender Reveal theme music plays]

**Tuck:** Welcome to Gender Reveal, a podcast where we hopefully get a little bit closer to understanding what the hell gender is. I’m your host, and resident gender detective, Tuck Woodstock.

[Gender Revealtheme music continues, then ends]

**Tuck:** Hey everyone, hope you’re all hanging in there. Welcome to the season 10 finale of Gender Reveal. I very intentionally saved this conversation for last because I love it so much and I really think that you will too. This week on the show we speak with Ryan Ken. You might know Ryan from TikTok, but they are also an actor, a writer, a professional violin player, an Emmy winner, and so, so much more. In this episode, Ryan talks about how fragile masculinity felt to them growing up, and who they might have been if they had not been interrupted…

**Ryan:** [voice clip] I’ve spent a lot of my life wondering who would I have been if a feminine gesture or way of speaking wasn’t frightened out of me.

**Tuck:** We also talk about Ryan’s iconic Emmy fashion moments, and how astrology talk can sometimes feel a little bit similar to evangelical Christianity…

**Ryan:** [voice clip] I thought that the star folks were gonna be a whole lot nicer and more chill than everybody else!

**Tuck:** But before we get to that, a few super quick housekeeping notes before we leave for the season break – I’m gonna try to do these rapid-fire. First and foremost, next month is Trans Day Of Staying In And Having A Nice Snack, and we do not have any episodes planned and so I cannot really promote it then so I am just mentioning now, it is coming up. We will be doing some kind of mutual aid thing and if you want to get ahead of that and chip in, especially if you are not trans, you can donate anytime to our mutual aid fund including *right now*. The best way to do that is either on Venmo @tuck-woodstock or PayPal.me/twoodstock; please put ‘gender reveal mutual aid’ in the memo line somewhere so I know why you’re sending me money, and keep an eye out on social media for us to announce what our mutual aid event will be this year.

Speaking of sending us money, if you need even more Gender Reveal content in your life, particularly during the break between seasons, you can head to patreon.com/gender and sign up to receive our behind-the-scenes newsletter every single week and at least one bonus episode every month. For example, this month’s bonus episode is actually a multimedia experience, it is audio plus a PowerPoint, and when you combine them you can experience Sabrina Imbler and I playing a game called Duck Duck Gay live at the Bell House earlier this month. You can’t get that anywhere else, folks! We will also be sharing our annual Patreon survey soon, so if you join our Patreon now you can weigh in on what the hell we’re doing over here.

And speaking of multimedia experiences and also what the hell I am doing over here, I’ve decided that I am editing an all-trans collection of Fast and Furious content, and I would love for *you* to submit something short and fun and weird. You don’t have to know a lot about Fast and Furious, you just have to be able to put a page together. You can learn all about this project at genderpodcast.com/fast-zine. Link in the show notes.

Last but not least, if you are new to this show and you are not sure where to go after this episode, one option is to go to genderpodcast.com/starter-packs, where we have curated a bunch of little lists based on your hypothetical interests. We also have transcripts of every single episode on our website, that is genderpodcast.com. And then we also have a Slack community, which is great if you need some folks to talk to about gender – that link for the Slack community changes all the time, I’ll put a current one in the show notes and then if that one doesn’t work then just… hit me up somewhere directly. And now… it is finally time for This Week in Gender.

[Short tune with low, metallic chimes and hi-hats plays]

**Tuck:** Okay, this week we are speaking with Ryan as you know, and to get us prepared for that conversation I want to play you two of their most iconic videos. This first video is one that we talk about directly in the interview; it is entitled, “The townspeople talking to Beast after the curse is broken.”

**Ryan:** [video clip] [in a French accent] Bonjour beast! [gasps] oh *putain*, Adam? Adam. You should be patient with me, I’ve known you a long time as Beast, this is all very new, so… Adam. Adam, Adam, Adam. You look amazing, so good. I’d never know. You look normal! I was saying to her, you don’t have too much hair here, but… what? It’s just a question! It’s ok, it’s ok! Eh? Is it the, wax? Or laser? For me, I think I could have sex with someone who is, um, *comment est-en*, a… formerly enchanted person. Yes! When they look so good, so normal!

**Tuck:** The second video is especially timely because it is about the New York Times’ trans coverage, which we have talked about at length in this segment in the past, as recently as last week. To be totally honest, this video is why I originally reached out to Ryan to invite them on to the show back in December. I did not even realize that they were a total genius full of fun and wisdom, I just liked this one video and then everything else worked out from there – so, here’s the video.

**Ryan:** [video clip] Look, you cannot say that trans people are gross! Not anymore! But shouldn’t we be saying it? I don’t know, I’m just asking questions. It is the job of journalists to ask the difficult questions! Like ugh, why? Ugh! I’m *just asking questions*! Do trans people even deserve rights? We asked thirteen Klan members at this Denny’s in Sundown Town, Ohio. We think their answers are worth listening to. Yale freshman Heath T. Plantationmoney says that college campuses have become so hostile to the gender question that he often finds himself *silenced*. Read more at the newyorktimes.com, because it’s not a frightening manifesto as long as it’s published in the New York Times. *Just! Asking! Questions!* There are so many lingering questions around the trans issue. We speak to the Chief Policy Expert at the Centre for Family, Freedom, Faith, and Missionary Sex. *Just need to know what someone’s genitals look like so you know how to treat them*, it’s not weird!!! You’re weird!!!

**Tuck:** And that’s it! Those videos and all of Ryan’s other videos are available on TikTok @ryan\_ken\_acts. This has been This Week in Gender.

[short tune with low, metallic chimes and hi-hats plays]

**Tuck:** We have a Theymail message for you this week. Theymails are little messages from listeners that we read on the show. This message is from the Queer Liberation Library, and it says: “Do you love queer books? Do you wish more people had access to queer books? Same! That’s why we’re building Queer Liberation Library, a digital library where anyone across the United States will be able to access queer and trans literature, information, and resources for free. Follow us @queerliblib on Twitter and Instagram for more.”

[Upbeat electro-pop music plays]

**Tuck:** Ryan Ken is a writer and actor who uses an unconventional comedic perspective to comment on social issues, film, television, politics, race, and pop culture. They joined the writer’s room for Last Week Tonight with John Oliver in 2022.

[Background music ends]

**Tuck:** The way we always start the show is by asking, in terms of gender, how do you describe yourself?

**Ryan:** [Sighs] Queer sigh. So, I’ve listened to a few episodes of the podcast, and everybody does the queer sigh, which I love. [Tuck laughs] Cause, it’s the kind of relief but also the thing of probably getting to give a more complicated answer than you normally get to give. But, I identify as nonbinary, and what I will say that I like about being nonbinary first is… it, to me, feels like a call to action for how I want to engage not just with my gender but how I want to engage with the world, to move outside of nonbinary thinking on a multiplicity of fronts. I think, growing up super religious at first, I am very used to binaries and dichotomies—good and evil, heaven and hell—and I think that I have to work against that actively my entire life. My inclination toward binaries.

And what I also like about it is that it can be hard to define something by what it’s not, but it does feel reflective of like… I don’t quite feel a part of that. I’m not… I don’t know that nonbinary is the terminology that I’ll use for the entirety of my life, but I do like some of what it calls. I find myself sometimes longing for a term that feels a little more communal and familiar, like the way when black folks get so close to each other we call each other cousin. I want, like, a gender version of “hey cousin!” Like, I want, I long for something like that, something a little more intra-communal that feels sometimes to me a little less clinical than a term like nonbinary, but I think that is the closest, most succinct, way [laughs] that I think I can answer that question.

**Tuck:** Yeah, I mean, so much I think of being nonbinary in some way is just waiting for people to come up with better words for what you are, right, and so we’re all just in like a little holding pattern where we’re like, “It’s this one for now, we’ll get back to you later.”

**Ryan:** Exactly.

**Tuck:** Yeah. Well, you describe yourself in your bio as a writer and actor who uses an “unconventional comedic perspective to comment on social issues from television….” How would you describe your unconventional comedic perspective?

**Ryan:** [Laughs] I feel like some of what is unconventional is that it is… well, maybe it’s not as unconventional as I thought, but…. [Both laugh] It’s super nerdy, it’s very, like, for as silly as it is, I spend a lot of time thinking very deeply and analyzing something that in the end I want to be delivered sometimes in a very silly way or fashion, and what has been most important to me, as I’ve explored this new form of writing through comedy, is to be very clear about who my targets are, and what to me feels unconventional is a commitment to making sure that the people who are getting to laugh are the marginalized people. So often I think as queer people, trans folks, your very existence is sometimes offered up as humor, it can sell out stadium tours, like, it’s put a lot of money in people’s pockets, just the idea that you exist. And so, some of the things that I’m most proud of in my life is that I’ve made jokes that trans people laugh at, that disabled people laugh at, that Black folks laugh at, a lot of folks whose existence has been mocked.

Because I think, in my experience, the funniest people are people who understand intimately how power works, and some of the edgiest, wildest shit I’ve ever heard comes from queer people, the people who like say stuff that makes *me* blush, like everything I’ve learned that’s valuable about humor has come from folks who are at those margins. And I think a commitment for that being my goalpost is what sometimes to me feels unconventional. And the fact that, like, *I* have always felt kinda strange, my videos are all over the place, they’re all the variety of things that interest me. I never really anticipated that anybody would give a fuck beyond the first one that went off—and so I just kind of had this commitment to following what intrigues me, and it’s been this really incredible gift that other folks have found those things to be interesting too. So, unconventional is the polite way I say weird, I guess. [Both laugh]

**Tuck:** I mean, you’ve talked a lot about how you are a classically trained violinist, and how in violin performance you practice like a zillion times before you perform, you’re like something gets really perfect before you’re showing it to the world. But in comedy world and TikTok world you’re just trying stuff out, you’re seeing what works, you’re seeing what flops—you really have to do all that learning in public. And I’m sorry if this sounds like a stretch to you, but when I heard you say that, I was like, “That’s gender, baby!” [Ryan laughs] So, I guess the true gender binary is, would you say that your gender journey is more TikTok or more violin?

**Ryan:** Ooooooh, oof, that is such a good question, I see why you have a podcast! [Tuck laughs] Um… I would say the healing has come from it being more TikTok. I think there are a lot of valuable things that I learned from violin, but it was also like getting a degree in perfectionism. And I think a lot of that actually hindered the part of creative expression that’s most interesting to me as an artist, and probably also to other people. And being a violinist, practicing something a zillion times, every note has to be perfect—it was incredibly vulnerable to make something that I knew at the time was not perfect. That I knew was like, I hadn’t quite learned this, I hadn’t quite figured this out. And so the experience was kind of like showing people your scales and études publicly, which you don’t do, you perform the piece as it’s polished.

And I think the only reason why I was able to confidently do that was because I desperately *needed* to do that. To kind of save myself in a way, in a way of restoring my relationship with myself as a creative person believing that, like, it doesn’t have to perfect to matter, it doesn’t have to be perfect to be worthy, it can be incomplete, it can be messy, it can be, like, not fully polished, but it mattered because I wanted to do it and I wanted to say it. And so, I think when I’m at my best, my gender journey is reflective of the TikTok, and when anxiety and things build up, it is most often violin. You are dancing all up and through my therapy journey, right? [Tuck laughs] Right now with that question. [Both laugh]

**Tuck:** That is really real, and I think that there’s such a value to doing that learning in public, not just for you but for other people, and I have to believe that because I have like 150 episodes of a gender podcast out in the world that I don’t take back… [Ryan laughs] But I think there is a lot of value, because when all you see is a violinist who’s not missing a note, and you’re an aspiring violinist but you miss notes sometimes, like the message you’re getting from that is “Oh, I’ll never be perfect so I’ll never be good enough.” And when you see people messing up, you know, it gives them that space too to try things and play around and make mistakes, and so much of our advice for people who write in to this show is, like, just fuck around and find out, and you can’t do that if you’re, if you’re scared of messing up, you know? So…. That’s not a question. [Both laugh] Sorry!

**Ryan:** No, but, it makes me think about a lot, because, part of what sort of resonates with me is even the understanding of violin as an art of just perfection is a distortion of what it actually meant to me, like as a little kid who had an emotional response to something, who felt moved by a particular performance. And I think sometimes if things are trained to you a certain kind of way, you can be incredibly distant from the part of you that wanted to do it because you loved it or you found some mode of expression in it. And so, I’ve had this convo with a lot of friends around, “Oh, acting and writing has been so healing, it’s been so transformative for me.” And I had a friend who’s a playwright, she was flat out, she was like, “You know, I appreciate that this has been a healthy healing journey for you pursuing it. But acting for a lot of people was what violin was to you. That that wasn’t necessarily, it’s not necessarily the art form, it was about *you* and your journey of healing and whatever you were gonna wind up doing, you would have been doing this in some form or fashion.” And I found that to be really helpful and a lot of exploring acting, a lot of exploring writing, has actually allowed me to heal a lot of the trauma that I had and also—this is not unique, I feel like every music kid who did any, like has a lot of baggage and stuff that they spend a lot of their time unlearning. And so, I feel like some of what I’ve gotten to explore through being messy and making mistakes publicly might eventually one day bring me back to music in a more healed place.

**Tuck:** Yeah, as someone who grew up taking a lot of different performing arts classes, and then took a big break and then circled back to them, it is much more fun when you’re in charge and you’re doing something because there’s a joy in it, as opposed to doing something because you want adults in your life to tell you that you did a great job in it. [Ryan groans] Or because they’re telling you that you have to do it or whatever it is, you know? So…

**Ryan:** Yes.

**Tuck:** Yeah. Well, since we’re already talking about sort of childhood era, you were on this podcast called Let’s Talk Bruh, and on that podcast you said, “My perception of what masculinity was as a child was that it was this very fragile, delicate thing that I was always at risk of dropping. It wasn’t actually powerful like everybody said it was, because it could be undone so easily.” And I was really struck by you describing masculinity as this fragile, delicate thing because that’s exactly how a lot of people describe femininity, right? And you’re describing masculinity that way, so I was wondering if you could say more about that.

**Ryan:** I loved that episode and I loved getting to talk about that, and I wanna be very clear that that was sort of *my* relationship to masculinity, I don’t wanna be prescriptive for other folks. But for me, it always felt as though it was an expectation of performance that I was not able to meet, but also nobody was, like, telling me how to do it correctly? And I had this experience of, just kind of being as a child, and having these interventions from peers, from adults, who were telling me that I was doing something wrong, and that I wanted—I needed to aspire to a certain type of performance of masculinity *because* it was tough, *because* it was going to keep me safe, *because* it was so strong. But here I was like, having this interest meant that masculinity was threatened, this color of fabric meant that masculinity was threatened, picking up a doll meant that masculinity was threatened, and I was like, “Well this shit doesn’t seem very strong at all.” And so it was this very strange kind of contradiction, and I don’t know that I ever moved through life feeling as though I performed any form of masculinity or gender to a way that met cis people’s satisfaction? [Laughs] Uh, they always had notes, there were always a lot of notes. [Both laugh] But I think what a lot of my life was about, was about trying to find some performance that was going to keep me safe.

And so, rather than cultivating masculinity, I cultivated talents. I cultivated hobbies and activities and things that were going to be outward sort of markers of success that would create a little bit of distance and safety, and it created a dynamic for me where I placed a lot of my value external to me, related to an ability to do something impressive. And so, a lot of gender learning and healing for me has been about learning how to just *be*. And, I don’t know that I’ve completely figured it out, but every moment that I get deeper interrogating it, I feel like I get closer to who I might have been if I hadn’t been interrupted. I’ve spent a lot of my life wondering, who would I have been if a feminine gesture or way of speaking wasn’t frightened out of me, who would I have been if I hadn’t built a personality or way of walking, way of talking or being that was around just trying to be okay? And a lot of that connects with, like, my learning about my own neurodivergence, all of this stuff, I’m not trying to unpack all of my therapy shit on you I promise—but, um, for me, that feeling of “I could always get it wrong at any moment” never felt to me like it was something I could reliably count on for strength, for the strength that people told me that it was.

**Tuck:** Yeah. Well, when you were talking about gender, famously as a performance, I was thinking about when you’re performing your TikToks, a lot of your characters are, like, homophobic comedian, transphobic New York times editor, transphobic French peasant in the Beauty and the Beast Cinematic Universe…. Do you feel like by performing those sketches and writing them, you’ve learned anything about what’s going on in those people’s brains? When you have to, like, get into those characters?

**Ryan:** Yes. But I also don’t—how do I put this…. I think for a lot of people who are marginalized, you have to become incredibly intimately knowledgeable about the people who are oppressing you. We have to know these forces intimately because our survival is contingent on them, not necessarily because we love them, not necessarily because we like them, but they’ve hoarded all the resources, oftentimes by force, and we have to encounter them. And so even thinking about in professional settings, like, how you work with white folks you have to become a white whisperer, you have to know when they’re hungry, you have to know when they’re upset, you have to know all of these things in order to sort of like keep yourself safe. And so, a lot of what I’ve found in playing those characters was just being honest about what we all see, but are not allowed to say, because it’s this really weird balance of: you have to know them to survive, but one of the most dangerous things you could do is let them know that you know them. There’s this requirement of, like, your silence about that, and so what I’ve found to be really freeing is like, “Well this is what it is.”

And I have learned, I think, through playing some of those characters, what I’ve enjoyed about it is it actually is a deeper invitation to empathy than I even realized at the time? So I think about the Beauty and the Beast scene where I’m playing the kind of transphobic character, writing it, doing it, and I’m like “Ooh, I got em good with this one, ooh I got—” I, my imagination is that I’m, like, taking them down. But when your body is your instrument, and you do it well, it’s kind of a magic trick? People can project onto you things, and they can maybe even see things about themselves. So that character, I’m like patting myself on the back being like, “I dragged em, I absolutely dragged em.” And there were people in my comments who were like, “I never saw it this way, but I’ve done this. And I didn’t see until it was extracted into a literal cartoon that that’s what I was doing, and so thank you for showing how I was harming people.” And so this thing that I thought was just, like, “get em,” was actually this deeper invitation beyond what I saw. And that always, like, really stuck with me, I don’t know that it’s a thing that I always wanna do or always wanna pursue. Often those videos are coming out of a sense of deep frustration with something too, it often starts as, like—my friends wish they could just get the TikToks, because they get the angry ranting before it’s distilled to sixty seconds. But I’ve found that often once I’ve gotten from the phase of just anger or frustration, that something else can kind of show up that surprises me. And often because it is humor, people are distracted by why they’re laughing, and then they get to kind of, like, analyze it and think about *why* it was funny to them and *why* it resonated with them. And sometimes to my surprise, that has actually been an invitation to reflection.

**Tuck:** Yeah, it’s so interesting cause I read in GQ—fancy— [Ryan laughs] that you were pursuing DEI work before you fell into this comedy career. And in some ways like this work that you’re doing now, both TikToks and Last Week Tonight, which we can get to later, is almost doing that same work in an arguably more effective way? Or instead of being like, “Here’s a two-hour presentation on don’t be racist or transphobic,” it’s like, you know, feeding them, I think you talk about, like, peanut-butter-pilling people with this stuff. Anyways, so do you think about that at all? How these two interests are intersecting for you?

**Ryan:** Yes, a lot. In part because, I often found some of the most frustrating parts around doing DEI was the inability to speak freely about dynamics and all of the couching and calculation you have to do to be like, “Excuse me, maybe, if you have a moment, possibly, if you could please get your foot off my neck?” Like, all of the sort of very delicate ways you would have to go about that, there’s so much strategy. And I don’t wanna disparage that work or say that there’s absolutely no value in it, but there was such a sense, in the environments I was feeling, such a stifling of honesty and directness about this. Even directness about what is possible under the scope of DEI, that a lot of times there’s DEI stuff that gets branded as *way* more radical than what it is or what it can be, and those things were harder to talk about. And I found something incredibly freeing in approaching them artistically, because you got to have all of these complicated nonbinary answers, where sometimes something can mean more than one thing more than once, or shared again in different contexts it could mean something else. And so, strangely, the format I was using to express myself in form got a whole lot shorter, but I was able to say more sometimes in sixty seconds, ninety seconds, than I was in, like, three-hour trainings.

**Tuck:** Yeah, absolutely! Well, you also had your own podcast for what, six episodes, and there was an episode on allies and allyship, and regarding allies and allyship you said, quote, “I don’t believe in it and I don’t like it.” [Both laugh] Yes, yes, yes! But I feel like this relates to DEI—I’d love to hear more about “I don’t believe in it and I don’t like it.”

**Ryan:** If I remember correctly, in that conversation part of what I was talking about was, I was not interested in allies in part because it seems like a very fickle, precarious relationship. And what has always, I felt like, had potential to move more toward meaningful action, was people who actually were invested in undoing systems of oppression because they saw a personal stake in it. Because there was something in it for them. I don’t necessarily need white people to believe they’re doing *me* a personal favor by engaging in anti-racism work. I want them to understand that yes, racism has done a number on communities of color, but it’s also got *y’all* fucked up, it’s also doing a number on all of you, and that our fates are linked, rather than you necessarily feeling like you’re doing something benevolent to me. I think it’s a call to action, and I would just be more interested in people who are like, “Look, this whole arrangement that we’ve got has got us all fucked up,” and so I’m interested, yes, in helping my neighbor but also saving me.

It’s not necessarily an abstract intellectual exercise, it’s not this detached thing you’re doing for somebody else’s benefit, you’re realizing the house is on fire, we all need to get out. Because I think sometimes what happens is, we’ll see some form of harm happening to a community, and even with best intentions be like, “Oh, it’s so sad for them.” But part of what you’re saying is like, a country that has one rule of law for one group of people and a different… has no rule of law at all. And you’re also in danger. That’s why so many true crime podcasts are like, “Can you believe the police *lied* and *fabricated* *evidence*?” [Tuck laughs] And I’m always like, uh, yeah, I can, I really fucking can. But how there seems to be this incredible disconnect of, like, where do you think those tactics were perfected? Where do you think they learned to do that? Maybe, if you saw it as not just, like, some unfortunate thing happening over there, you would also understand that you’re in danger.

**Tuck:** We have been talking about many somewhat heavy things and I have a very frivolous question for you, which is, you are best known as a TikTok phenomenon. I’m overwhelmed by TikTok, it feels like it’s for the youth? And you and I are roughly the same age so can you just tell me, like, what’s going on there? What are the kids up to? [Ryan laughs] How do you feel about TikTok as a platform? What’s the report?

**Ryan:** I do very much feel like an elder TikTok user. [Tuck laughs] Although there’s people of all varying ages who’ve made it work. I initially was very averse to TikTok, and it was my friend Jenny who I did the podcast with, who works in tech who was like, “I think this could be a tool for you, I think this app might have some benefit to you.” We had had these conversations about like, what it does to Black creators, so going in very clear-headed about, it needs to be something that I can use for my benefit, which I think it was. And when I first logged on, it was just… it yells at you right at the beginning! [Tuck laughs] It’s too loud, too much, too fast, and it took a minute to get familiar and acquainted with the platform. There are people on TikTok doing incredible work, funny things, like, really insightful things, I think I’ve curated it well, but I don’t think that I’m a good TikTok user. [Both laugh] I don’t think that I’m doing it right, in part because, my goal is not to be an influencer, this was always something else for me, this was a creative outlet that I could also see, like, potentially having some benefit. But I don’t post very often, and a lot of times there’s certain ways you have to post to get engagement, there’s certain hacks people know to get the algorithm to work—that has never been particularly of interest to me, so I don’t know that I’m often using it correctly, and I don’t go viral very often on TikTok. So recently, I made a TikTok about my opinions about milkshakes?

**Tuck:** Oh yeah, uh huh.

**Ryan:** And that went more viral than the TikTok of me accepting an Emmy, so I don’t know. [Tuck laughs] I don’t know that I’m necessarily doing it right! [Both laugh]

**Tuck:** I mean, it’s more relatable, Ryan, we all have opinions about milkshakes, we haven’t all won Emmys! [Both laugh]

**Ryan:** That’s true, I’m hearing it now…. [Laughs] That, that resonates, but it was—I enjoy it a lot of the time, but it’s also really fraught. I have experienced like a high degree of censorship on it, I know queer folks do, sex workers do, disabled folks do a lot. So it’s fraught with all of some of the same issues—it’s not this utopic device, it’s…. I don’t think any of these platforms are the public square in the way that we like to imagine they are, they are private companies. But you know, I’m trying my best to keep up with the youths, and learn what they’re doing, and honestly I have learned a lot from people who are younger than me. I feel like my politic has improved because of often some of the challenges folks who are younger than me. And so, I’m also not on the side of TikTok where it’s all the generations arguing with each other, I just, that isn’t in my algorithm. People get so mad that people had the audacity to keep making people after, like, 1990. [Tuck laughs] People are *furious* with people who have the audacity to continue to be born. [Tuck continues laughing] They thought they were gonna close production on all people after a certain period of time, and they just weren’t! They just weren’t gonna do that.

**Tuck:** Messed up of them. Uh, well, speaking of being an *Emmy winner*, actually, can you just talk about your Emmy outfits and your, like, approach to that? Approach to fashion? They were such incredible outfits, I can’t show people on the podcast but, you can describe them.

**Ryan:** Thank you! Oh my god, I’m so happy about this. So I was an incredible procrastinator when it came to the Emmys, and I had a really good friend who was just like, “Sis, I’m gonna need you to get your clothes together, I have a contact, there’s someone I want you to talk to.” So it was a stylist in Detroit, Jonnelle Boyd, who my friend Dana put me in contact with, who does a lot of styling of, like, plus-size folks. I have a lot of clothing baggage as a fat person, as a queer person, as someone who was only, like, baby nonbinary at the time, like hadn’t really had a lot of experience even in being in clothing that I felt to be affirming to my gender. But I was—the support of my friend, the support of the stylist, I got to try on a lot of different things, I got to see what I felt comfortable with. I was really nervous about being observed in this, like, cause I know there’s like a whole industry that exists are around mocking people, especially people who are seen as deviating from the beauty norm. But I went in with strategy, which was—so like, I know a lot of, especially Black folks in the industry have done this, like using fashion very strategically as a way to kind of keep themselves in conversations. But also to, like, having your clothing being a conversation starter, especially at a place like the Emmys was, like, something that was a real goal of mine.

And so, for the Creative Arts Emmys—so there are two ceremonies, we went to the Creative Arts Emmys where the writers were nominated—I wore this, like, yellowish gold, butter-yellow suit, and this fun pink floral blue shirt, had like fun jewelry on, yellow nails that matched the look, I was serving, I’m—I ate everybody up at the Emmys, I’m not gonna lie, I ate it up. [Tuck laughs] And I had these, like, pink heeled boots, and just felt really confident in a situation where I was incredibly nervous, had never been to anything like that, and being loved into the clothes, being more adventurous in clothes, really felt like it helped, it kind of felt like an armor there. And then for the Primetime Emmys, there was a local clothing maker who I had worked with who designed this beautiful kind of sheer, floral top with literal flowers on it, it had a cape and it had these magenta pants, and wore these heels and stuff, and just felt…. It was everything childhood Ryan wanted to wear growing up and was not allowed to. It was, so much of it, I got my makeup done in this really fun way, it was everything I was not allowed to touch, everything I was not allowed to have, and here I was wearing it to this type of event with one of my closest friends, my partner was there too, I just—I, like, it was the most joy I felt in clothes in my entire life. I had *so* much clothing baggage, oh my god, the number of times I had been dragged to that Tall and Husky section of the store, [Tuck laughs] and like, pick out the most, ugly bootcut whatever, and I’d never had that much joy. And I think as a fat person too, I often felt as though style was something that was reserved for me when I was at my thinnest, so to be in a fat body and more glamorous than I’ve ever been, I just, like, I will live on that high *forever*.

**Tuck:** [Sighs happily] I love that so much, I’m so excited for you! What a treat and a joy to have your, like, best clothing moment be at *the Emmys*, like you really crushed the timing on that.

**Ryan:** That’s the place to do it!

**Tuck:** Truly. [Ryan laughs] I mean, well, talking about that, and, you know, your experience of clothing as a fat person, and how also being Black was brought into that, and you were talking ways that Black people specifically use fashion…. Actually just, this is such a huge question, and please just grab any part of it that you want, but I was interested if you could talk more about how both being Black and fat affects your gender. Cause we’ve talked about, on the show—I mean, maybe you don’t think of it this way, but there are people that we’ve talked to who talk about both Blackness and fatness influencing the way that people gender them and the way that they experience their gender.

**Ryan:** It absolutely is all tied up, and so, it really has depended on the context. When I was identifying as male, there were moments in my life where my fatness rendered me non-threatening, or rendered me safer, and then there were other times my size was something that, like, was intimidating. I think as I have embraced more of my, how I see myself gender-wise, it’s a complicated, fraught thing, because there are all of these ways that we’re inclined to render these people invisible, but when all these identities intersect you are rendered hyper-visible? And so, I love to go for walks, it’s how I clear my head, and sometimes walking around in my neighborhood in gender-affirming clothes is like the most terrifying thing that I can do because I feel like there’s this spotlight on me, because “big, Black, dark-skinned, feminine clothes,” like there’s all this stuff. Like you become this kind of confessional altar where everybody’s stuff, everybody’s baggage about all of those things, they come to you and they confess them. But they confess them in the most violent, threatening ways you could possibly think of! And, I think for me, it is an ongoing conversation around, like, how I embrace style and, [Sighs] how I reconcile these ideas of race and body. I don’t know that I have complete answers. I’ve found a lot of freedom and joy in clothes that also have, like, a sense of humor?

**Tuck:** Yeah, I mean like, are you wearing like a boobs shirt right now? Calculator boobs?

**Ryan:** I am wearing a sweater vest [Tuck laughs] that is a calculator that spells boobs at the top. [Both laugh] It’s, uh, it’s a Fashion Brand Company—but what I love about it is, like, because I have so much anxiety about clothes, and the number one reason why I’m late anywhere is because I spend about thirty minutes staring in a closet having a dysphoria episode, [Laughs] that’s why I’m late everywhere I go. But with something that is both stylish and funny, I feel sort of confident and I also feel like there’s something that breaks the tension, and it’s interesting in that way. And so, that was something I told the stylist for the Emmys was like, I want something that’s fun, I want something that’s kind of playful—so, even when I was wearing the yellow suit at the Emmys, I had these, like, boots with this really fun zipper on it, my earring was a zipper, like I….

**Tuck:** [whispers] That’s what it was! [normal voice] I could, like, see something going on, that’s really cool.

**Ryan:** So there was something about, like, having a little bit of a joke, I think takes a little bit of some of the anxiety out about it. And I think what I’ve also sort of embraced is, like, I no longer feel any sort of anxiety or guilt about being the most interestingly dressed person in the room, too. I like that, it’s kind of a powerful feeling sometimes too.

**Tuck:** Yeah. I’m definitely not brave enough to be the most interestingly dressed person in the room, so I really admire everyone that is and I thank you for your service [Ryan laughs] so we can all look at your outfits and be impressed, like, truly. The other day I went to a party where everyone else was wearing a black shirt and I had done something really wild, which was wear a white shirt, and I was like “oh *no.”* [Both laugh] So good for all of y’all, pushing those boundaries. But, um, I mean, speaking of, like, humor to sort of diffuse a situation, I have a question about Last Week Tonight. In October, Last Week Tonight put out an episode called Transgender Rights 2, which I understand as a naming convention but is *very funny* to me cause it’s like, this isn’t your granddaddy’s trans rights, this is 2 Rights 2 Transgender, you know, [Ryan laughs] like, Trans Rights 2, here we go, the sequel. But all that aside, I was just curious what it was like to contribute to that episode because I was just struck by the fact that it was really good, and that’s not normal, you know? [Both laugh] But I loved it! So, yeah, I was just curious what it was like.

**Ryan:** What’s most important to me, not just in the show but any type of comedy I’m doing that’s about that, is: are the trans people going to laugh? Are trans people gonna find it funny? That’s the goal post. And, it is very challenging to stare at so much of this media that is aimed at the destruction of trans and queer people, and that targets children in particular. It is honestly overwhelming. And the process of turning that into humor is probably some of the most challenging stuff that I have done. Part of how you find humor in a story like that is by trying to find the light which is in the hope which is in the complexity that is also the joy, and how much more breadth there is to trans life than just the harm that people want to inflict on us. But it was incredibly challenging, and it’s very easy for a story about people who have made an enemy of children to be unwatchable. It’s sometimes one of those things that kind of overwhelms me when I think about people who want to harm kids, I can’t really wrap my head around that.

**Tuck:** Right. When I was watching it, I was noticing that it was a lot of information and then a joke that really did not have that much to do with trans people, it would be a sort of, like, a side joke to get the humor going before getting back into the information, and I was thinking that that was such a good strategy because not only do you have to write jokes that work for this subject matter, but a cis person has to be able to say them! And a lot of jokes that I get away with, and I’m sure that you get away with, about coping with all of this horrible shit, is, like, because we get to make the edgy jokes that John Oliver and co. are simply *not allowed to make in public* [Ryan laughs] or really at all! And so, I just, I’m sure that was extra challenging and I just wanted to say that y’all did that really well. But we will talk about something else that you can talk more about, I was wondering… you went so quickly from not in the comedy industry to *winning the Emmy* and *giving the speech*, uh, what else you got cooking? What are your hopes and dreams beyond this?

**Ryan:** I’ve been figuring some of this out in real time. I’ve been very interested in writing a book and using that as, like, a tool for some self-reflection about a life that changed kind of tremendously in a short period of time. I’m interested in continuing to write for television, I’m interested in writing plays. I have found a lot of freedom in this more sort of artistic, comedic space, or this, like, having a different mode to interrogate things that I’ve always interrogated my entire life. And I’m kind of being open to life surprising me, because—let me tell you what is a fucking surprise, working a job, posting a couple silly videos, and then winding up to here! [Laughs] Like, I’m open to life kind of surprising me, and I think that for a while, I have seen what I’m doing now as somehow really incredibly disconnected from all the other stuff, but I think the truth is, life has made me uniquely prepared to do what I’m doing now. All of the disparate parts of myself, I had—I was a classical violinist, and then I’m going to grad school for arts administration, and then I’m working in higher ed, and then I’m doing this. And so, a lot of job interviews would be like, “Ok, so we’ve got your resume… what?” [Both laugh] And, part of how I think I was able to work and was able to pivot was because I was able to write and tell a story about, “this is how I got here.” And so, storytelling, writing, that kind of exploration has actually kind of always been the through-line, and so much of what I’ve experienced has, like, uniquely prepared me for what I’m doing. And so, I have tried to see what’s happened less as some strange, anomalous lightning strike, but actually something I was really ready for. I didn’t know that I was ready for it in that way, I didn’t know that these things I was doing were preparing me in this way, but I think some of embracing that has allowed me to have less of, oh, I don’t know if I deserve to be in this room, because I do! I firmly believe that now!

**Tuck:** Good! Good. Okay, so, before we start wrapping up, this is apropos of absolutely nothing, but I have to ask you about this tweet from October when you wrote, “One of these days I’m gonna write about the similarities between evangelical Christianity and the ways people talk about astrology, especially assumptions we make about a stranger’s comfort, but I know in the end people will just say that’s such a Scorpio thing to do.” [Ryan laughs] *Please* say more about this!

**Ryan:** Whew, okay, so this is, come on research, [Tuck laughs] come on investigative reporting! I have had so many stress dreams about someone being like, “You remember when you tweeted this,” and I’m like “NO I DON’T!” [Tuck laughs] Um, but I think that was in a thread where I was talking about the fact that I don’t know much about astrology, I have some knowledge of astrology, but I know that when I tell people that I have, like, I’m of a certain sign that is in November [Tuck laughs], there is this intense reaction! And especially as somebody who’s not familiar with it, that I often find really really jarring. And for me, I don’t hold any judgment for whatever type of practices people use as a tool or mode of self-reflection, I have friends who have tarot decks, I have friends who are very involved with this, I have friends who are witches, and I have found them to be very helpful tools sometimes for self-reflection. What sometimes kind of brings me back to my evangelical upbringing is when, it can come across as sort of like a predestination type of thing, an assumption about who you are without having to interrogate or ask you further, or an assessment of your comfort level about talking about something that is, if not explicitly religious, religious-adjacent, and a lot of sort of the authority with which people will tell you, is not that much different from prophecy.

Sometimes I think what is also happening, if I may get myself in full trouble with the astrology folks, [Tuck laughs] is, I—cause, and let me speak about myself, because, let me do that, that’s the safest way to do it. Having come from a strict evangelical background, I have to question and fight against the tendency to bring evangelical modes of communication and orientation to everything else that I do afterward. That I still find, I have an inclination toward sinner-saint binaries, and so what I often, as somebody who’s like, was distancing myself from that in particular, I thought that the star folks were gonna be a whole lot nicer and more chill, [Tuck laughs] than everybody else! And so, when you are talking to someone and like, you might be having an interaction and all of a sudden they’ve got an intense judgment about you cause they asked you your birthday, I’m like “What is—you asked me my birthday, do you want my social security number too?” Like, I don’t know what’s going on. [Laughs] And so, I think, as long as the tool is a mode of self-reflection that allows you to have a deeper connection with yourself and others, great. The moment that it’s about proselytizing and condemnation, it rings a little familiar to me, and I am not interested. And so, sometimes I think what’s happening is that in a lot of spaces, some folks who are approaching these new theologies, I can clock as former evangelicals.

**Tuck:** Well, thank you for being so vulnerable on the gender podcast to talk about your true feelings about astrology [Ryan laughs] and Scorpio experience, I really appreciate that. All right, the way we always end the show is by asking, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like?

**Ryan:** I thought about this, and so I should… be more prepared than I am. [Tuck laughs] Um, but, I think the best that I kind of landed on to distill this: if we are continuing to live in a future where gender exists, I hope that the way we experience and live through and embody gender, we are less inclined to interrupt people. Where I talk about the idea, of, like, struggling to find out who I would be not interrupted, I hope that gender is one of many aspects that we use to feel more authentically ourselves, and we’re less inclined to step on how somebody else needs to show up in the world. Or does show up in the world. And I want that! I really do want that, and I hope that whatever it is that I’m doing contributes to a world where we get closer to that.

[Gender Reveal theme music begins]

**Tuck:** That’s gonna do it for this season of Gender Reveal! Thank you so, so much for listening, we literally could not do it without you, you are the reason we are here making the show. If you enjoyed this episode or learned something, please share it with your friends and community. And hey, I almost never say this, but leave us a review on your podcast app if you want, why not! You can find Ryan across platforms at ryan\_ken\_acts. We are on Instagram and Twitter @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com, and look, this season may be over but our Patreon never stops, baby! So if you would like to keep in touch with us over the season break, head to patreon.com/gender for all sorts of fun perks including a newsletter, bonus episodes, and more. Our merch shop is at bit.ly/gendermerch, there’s a rotating collection of stuff in there, and you can actually send us ideas for future designs at gendereveal@gmail.com. If you have questions about our merch shop or anything else, head to genderpodcast.com/faq.

This episode was produced and edited by Ozzy Llinas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Look, I say Ozzy’s name every week but I literally could not make this show without them, they are a transsexual angel from heaven, and I just wanted to give them one big end-of-season thank you for repeatedly saving my ass—Ozzy, thank you. Our logo is by Ira M Leigh. Our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Additional music this week by Blue Dot Sessions. Thank you so much for listening and supporting the show; we’ll be back real soon with more feelings about gender.

[Gender Revealtheme music ends]

**Ryan:** Sometimes, my brain is like an Etch-a-Sketch in these podcasts, I’ll say something and I won’t remember what I said ten minutes later, so I’m like, “Ooh that sounded kinda smart!” [Both laugh]

**Tuck:** Oh, absolutely, no every time I edit one of these podcasts I go into it not knowing anything that happened in the episode and then I find out along the way as I’m editing, so. [Both laugh]

**Ryan:** It’s a fun surprise!