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Passing Realities

Allie Lie

CAMBRIDGE—SUMMER 1998

We leave the café on Massachusetts Avenue, my young sons, "J" and "A," and I. It's seasonably hot and humid. I wear flip-flops, khaki shorts, a sleeveless T-shirt, and a wide-brimmed straw hat. I am not "presenting." I've promised the boys I won't embarrass them. (Children are defenseless against attacks aimed at nonconformity. Adults—their mother, for instance—just have to deal with it.)

As we cross Mass Ave., we come to a small park-cum-island in the middle of the intersection. Two men sit on one of the benches, and their small dog, tethered to a red nylon leash, sits beneath the bench. A, my oldest, who has a fondness for animals that way surpasses any he'd have for humans, goes up and asks if he can pet the dog. J and I have walked past them and are on the other side of the park. I hear the man saying, "Sure"—I see him nod in my direction—"but you'd better ask your mother first."

After work she stops at a grocery store a block from her apartment. She has been here many times, both *en femme* and not. Today, as with every working day, she is *en femme*. She goes to the freezer section, pulls out a frozen yogurt and takes it up to the checkout counter. The middle-aged man behind the counter is not particularly friendly. No one who works at the store is. Once she pays for the yogurt, she asks the checkout man where she can find a plastic spoon. He gestures over his shoulder with a thumb, "Over there . . . pal."

She finds the spoons, then walks over to one of the luncheon tables in the front of the store and sits. She begins slowly eating the yogurt, carving out small, hard-frozen spoonfuls from the top layer, working around the edges first. She holds the spoon upside down, puts it in her mouth, and sucks on it meditatively. As she does this, she overhears the sotto voce reprimand of the store manager behind her. Words like harassment, trouble, careful . . .

I am with the boys again, this time buying ice cream. The line at the counter has unwound itself into an amorphous crowd. No one seems to know who's next or who's helping whom. Someone has been summoned from the back of the store. A man appears and begins scanning the crowd. Our eyes meet. "Ma'am, what would you like?" J and A and I squeeze up to the counter. J takes my hand. "Dad, he called you . . ." "Shush, I know."

I order two vanilla cones for J and myself. As usual, A takes more time deciding. J gets his cone, then I get mine. The cashier motions to A (who wears his hair long because he's terrified of change and, despite his adolescent male misogyny, appears enviably androgynous). "What kind of cone would she like?" A looks at the floor.

"He'll have a sugar cone, please."

At a different grocery store . . .

"I'd like to write a check. How much over the amount can I write it for?"

Shrug. "Do you have a card?" "Yes."

Shrug again. "Fifty . . .?"

She writes the check and hands it to the cashier. The cash register jams—seems not to like what it's been told. The cashier looks at her apologetically, then summons help. A manager appears.

"Her total came to——." "And she wrote a check?" "Yes. But he wrote it for $30 over the amount." "Does he have a card?" "Yes, she does." "Well, she can only write it for 25 over the amount . . ." "That's no problem," she says. "I'll just write another check."

The cashier is again apologetic. "Do you mind?" "No," she says. "Not at all."

I am in the men's room of a restaurant. I have just washed my hands and looked in the mirror. This mirror is particularly unforgiving—thus I trust it. I am seldom happy with what I see. Reflective surfaces are to be avoided at all costs. The disparity between what I want to see and what actually greets me is too great. What I want to see: someone who could be Michelle Pfeiffer's female second cousin. What I see: longish, thinning hair; age lines (a.k.a. nasal labial folds); the faint, plucked remnants of beard; the wrong cheeks; the wrong lips. At times like this I think the course my life has taken is evidence of a delusional personality. I'm reminded of Nabokov's *Despair*, the story of a man who imagines that a stranger who looks not even remotely like him is his virtual twin.

This is why I am surprised when I turn to leave the restroom and see another man entering, noticing me, halting, then looking back to double-check the sign on the door.

CAMBRIDGE—LATE FALL 1998

She leaves the elevator at the sixth floor and heads for the door marked "The Ass. of Tedium, Drudgery, and Objectified Labor." She is here for a job interview—a job she already knows she doesn't want, but after three months of uncompensated unemployment, a job that she needs like nobody's business. She is dressed in her only polyester power suit, in burgundy with matching jacket and skirt. She opens the door and walks to the receptionist's desk. "I'm here to see Mrs. Z." "Take a seat, she'll be right with you."

She's had to pee for the last half hour. "Excuse me, may I please use the restroom first?"

The receptionist takes a key from her desk drawer and hands it to her. "Down at the end of the hall." She thanks the receptionist, exits the office and hurries to the room marked "W." She tries the lock. The door doesn't budge. She tries again. Still no success. The key ring is attached to a plastic badge. She turns the badge over and reads the words written in black indelible marking pen: "Men's Room."

CAMBRIDGE—WINTER 1998–99

E and I have been separated for more than six months now. We'd been through couples counseling eight months before the separation. Eight months slogging through the muck of my midlife journey back and forth across the gender boundaries; eight months of soul searching (for both of us); dredging up all our fears, our needs; establishing who we are and what we are about. I volunteered everything I knew about myself and about the *condition* mental health practitioners choose to call *gender identity disorder*. I offered texts, testimonials, contacts for spouse and significant other support groups. She heard, but chose not to listen. The work failed. It was finally determined that (1) I couldn't live unless I established permanent residence in the land of the feminine, and (2) she couldn't live with me if I did.

Shortly after our separation, I transitioned to three-quarter time living as Allie. Very shortly after that I was fired from my job. I assured E that I'd continue to support her and the boys in any way I could; I borrowed money from my family and engaged in exhausting legal battles for unemployment benefits and for financial damages as the result of my unlawful firing. Through all this I remained committed to my newly found state of mental health, determined that I could face anything as Allie. I was also amply aware of the irony that, as hormones inexorably reduced Robert's potency, shrinking his gonads to the size of unripe May apples, Allie had more *balls* than Robert ever did.

Soon there were many people who knew me only as Allie, people who had never seen the vestiges of my past. The boys were introduced to her: J actually liked her; A would take some time. E, whenever we met, appeared as if she'd seen a ghost.

So now E and I are standing in her kitchen (formerly known as "ours"). We are discussing logistics: She will be going through a routine exam at a local hospital—nothing serious, but it will leave her groggy and in need of transportation home. Would I mind picking her up from the hospital? No, of course not. I want to do anything to help. Good. E wants to say something else . . . What . . . ? When you pick me up . . . ? Yes . . . ? Will you be wearing women's clothes?

The snow leaves only a small path on the sidewalk. I am heading back to my apartment after visiting the boys. I'm wearing clogs and a big wool hat but still not technically "presenting." I'm right behind a family of out-of-town parents and their college-age kids. The father is holding up the rear of the caravan. He senses me walking up behind him. The caravan is moving slowly, a herd of contented cows. The father turns to look at me, smiles, then moves to the side of the walkway. He yells to the others in front of him, "Wait, let this woman pass."

WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA—CIRCA WINTER 1961: ONE PASSING RETROGRADE FANTASY

"My daughter would like to play basketball."
"Sorry, the team isn't coed."
"Excuse me?"
"No girls. Only boys."
"My daughter is a boy."
A look of confusion . . .
"Go ahead, dear, show the man your penis."
"Well, ah . . . yes . . . But he can't play looking the way he does."
"How do you mean?"
"His hair. The pigtails. He can't play like that."
"Why not?"
"It'll affect his playing."
"Go ahead, dear, show the man . . ."
She dribbles the basketball a few times, then shoots from mid court. The ball whooshes through the net.
"That's fine . . . but . . . she still looks like a girl."
"Well, naturally . . . . He *is* a girl."

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Look! No, Don't! The Invisibility Dilemma for Transsexual Men

Jamison Green

. . .

Walking down the street in San Francisco or New York City, Boston, Atlanta, Portland, Seattle, London, Paris, Rome, no one seems to take any special interest in me. I am just another man, invisible, no one special. I remember what it was first like to feel that anonymity as testosterone gradually obliterated the androgyny that for most of my life made others uncomfortable in my presence. It was a great relief . . .

Now . . . people are quite comfortable with my male presentation. My psyche seems to fit nicely into male packaging: I feel better; people around me are less confused, and so am I. So why tell anyone about my past? Why not just live the life of a normal man? Perhaps I could if I were a normal man, but I am not. I am a man, and I am a man who lived for 40 years in a female body. But I was not a woman. I am not a woman who became a man. I am not a woman who lives as a man. I am not, nor was I ever a woman, though I lived in a female body, and certainly tried, whenever I felt up to it, to be a woman. But it was never in me to be a woman. Likewise, I am not a man in the same sense as my younger brother is a man, having been treated as such all his life. I was treated as other than a man most of the time, as a man part of the time, and as a woman only rarely. Certainly I was treated as a little girl when I was young, but even then people occasionally assumed I was a little boy. I always felt like something "other." Can I be just a man now, or must I always be "other"?

. . .

Seeking acceptance within the system of "normal" and denying our transsexual status is an acquiescence to the prevailing binary gender paradigm that will never let us fit in, and will never accept us as equal members of society. Our transsexual status will always be used to threaten and shame us. We will always wear a scarlet T that marks us for treatment as a pretender, as other, as not normal, as trans. But wearing that T proudly—owning the label and carrying it with dignity—can twist that paradigm and free us from our subordinate prison. By using our own bodies and experience as references for our standards, rather than the bodies and experience of non-transsexuals (and non-transgendered people), we can grant our own legitimacy, as have all other groups that have been oppressed because of personal characteristics.

Transgendered people who choose transsexual treatment, who allow themselves to be medicalized, depend on a system of approval that grants them access to treatment. That approval may be seen as relieving them of their responsibility—or guilt—for being outside the norm. They then become either the justification for the treatment by embodying the successful application of "normal" standards; or they become the victims of the treatment when they realize they are still very different in form and substance from non-transsexual people, and they still suffer from the oppression they wished to escape by looking to doctors to make them "normal." By standing up and claiming our identity as men (or women) who are also transpeople, by asserting that our different bodies are just as normal for us as anyone else's is for them, by insisting that our right to modify our bodies and shape our own identities is as inalienable as our right to choose our religion (though not nearly as