

## HQ 77

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So you want to be a girl. Congratulations. Oh—you've actually *always* been a girl, in spite of what your body looks like? I know the feeling. However you view yourself, you've got a long road ahead before the rest of the world figures it out. It's twisty and scary and not without its share of robbers and pitfalls and pianos falling from planes, but not impossible, either.

I'm proceeding under the assumption that you want to pass, which means to be interpreted as and treated like a genetic girl by the straight world. For some, passing is a dirty word. Why should you *have* to "pass," to conform to the binary gender system? And what if you *don't* "pass?" Does that mean you've "failed?" Says who?

Those are completely valid points. Perhaps I'm a counterrevolutionary assimilationist sellout. I don't know. What I do know is, if *I* can use the women's restroom at a Wal-Mart in rural Nebraska and not get a second look, then so can you.

(Syntax note: I prefer the word "girl" to "woman," and use it frequently. Some consider it demeaning. I do not.)

**Love Yourself.** I hate to lead off with a cliché, but it happens to be true. If you love yourself, it makes everything else a little easier to handle. If you don't love yourself, it *will* show, and it'll be that much harder for anyone else to see the beauty that is you. And you *are* fuckin' beautiful, kiddo. Believe it.

**Surgery is not necessary.** What's between your legs does *not* determine your gender. All it signifies is how you were born, and being born with a penis does not mean you aren't a girl. It just means you can't become pregnant. Gender identity is in your mind. That said, I'm all for permanently altering one's body to match one's mind, and have done so myself in the form of hormones and electrolysis. I may never go any further, and don't consider myself as any less of a girl for it.

If you need a surgically-constructed vagina to make life worth living, go for it. Just remember: if your goal is to be accepted as female by the world at large, it is not enough. The waiter who called you "sir" yesterday will not call you "ma'am" tomorrow just because of your neo-coochie.

**Go by the book, if you can afford it.** The book, such as it is, requires twelve weeks of therapy with a licensed psychologist (*mit* Ph.D.), who then writes you a letter of recommendation for the endocrinologist, who in turn writes you the actual prescription for hormones and monitors you during the process. (In theory. More on that below.) If you're for real—and you are, right? sure you are--it's a breeze. Yeah, it's like one of those irritating ocean breezes which blows sand into your eyes, but a breeze nonetheless.

None of this is cheap, of course. You *might* get lucky and your insurance will cover the hormones. But that's only helpful if you have insurance, which you probably don't. Nor are you likely to have a job which pays enough to cover the therapy and doctor visits—and if you did, you'd have insurance, too.

The system is more than a little controversial. Many people in the trans community think it's unfair, draconian and designed to profit straight rich Norms. Probably true, since that's the case with just about *everything* in the medical establishment. Three syllables: Viagra.

So why feed the Beast, then? For starters, unless you live in a place like San Francisco, there probably aren't any other options if you want to do it even halfway legally, not to mention safely. (If you *do* live in San Francisco, one of those other options would be the Waddell Clinic at 50 Lech Walesa, run by the Department of Public Health.)

Philosophically, it lends an air of credibility to the entire process. This can be helpful if well-meaning but fearful people are determined to poke holes in your transition, and there's always at least one. (Be prepared to hear the question "Have you thought this through?" more than once. Answering without gritting your teeth takes a bit of practice.) When I came out to my mother, I rather disingenuously said that I'd been officially diagnosed gender dysphoric by a licensed Ph.D. What I neglected to

mention was that I had self-diagnosed, and went to the shrink for confirmation. She didn't need to know that at time, however.

**Research.** Read as much as you possibly can on the subject. A lot of people are going to ask you a lot of questions, so the more you know, the better prepared you'll be. It can also help lessen the sense of being a solitary freak. Indeed, you're one of many freaks.

Be mindful of when the material was written. Many universities and major metropolitan libraries still have sexuality books from the mid-to-late twentieth century, and they can be a fascinating read. They may not be helpful if you're trying to figure out what your deal is as soon as possible, but they can provide a fascinating, sometimes depressing look at how things used to be. In the Library of Congress classification system, the Transgendered section is HQ 77.

**Respect other queers.** Maybe you don't consider yourself queer. Perhaps your fondest wish is to find a man to take you as his wife. To be a normal, average woman, the kind you would be if you hadn't been born with the wrong body. I can respect that.

Here's the thing: you're still queer. I hate to have to break it to you like this, but it's true. You're ultimately participating in the same struggle as all the fags and dykes, and yes, even the cross-dressers and drag queens. No, you aren't a cross-dresser or a drag queen. You may bristle at the thought of being lumped in with them. *But the gender-slash-sexuality of others is not a threat to you.* Cross-dressers and drag queens do not lessen who you are, any more than your existence is an insult to genetic women.

They have as much of a right to be themselves as you do. We're all in this together.

**Female-to-male transsexuals are your brethren.** At first you might think you have nothing in common. After all, what could be more counterintuitive, more of a *waste*, than a girl who wants to be a boy? In truth, you're more alike than different, and both sides can learn a lot from each other. You may be heading in different directions, but you spend the majority of your trip in the same place.

It can also be less damaging to your self-esteem, since you're unlikely to be distracted by how much prettier or more real you perceive them to be. When you're starting out and you see another tranny girl who's been at it for a while and coming along nicely, it can be inspiration, but it's can also be disheartening. That's far less likely to happen with someone who *wants* to grow a beard. They had to come out to their parents, just like you.

One theory suggests transsexuality is so hardwired that even if you *had* been born a girl, you'd still be a tranny—just a tranny boy. It bears repeating: we're all in this together.

**It's okay to feel a little...you know...down there.** There's a hell of a lot of debate in the tranny community about the concept of "autogynephilia," being aroused by the thought of changing one's gender. Many deny that such a thing even exists, claiming that it reduces gender dysphoria to a sexual fetish. This is a valid concern, since sexuality is very much a separate issue from gender. (For example, I've changed my outward gender to match my mind, but my sexuality hasn't changed; I remain as attracted to girls as ever.)

What's more, autogynephilia has been used by some Norms to conclude that we're little more than men wanking off in dresses.

That's not what I am, and it isn't what you are, either. Not even if you *are* turned on by the thought of being a girl, and chances are that's happened at least once in your

lifetime. That's nothing to be ashamed of. Also, however distasteful you may consider it to be, your penis is ultimately a neutral organ. There's no reason not to continue to receive pleasure from it while you can.

**Savor this time.** As uncomfortable it gets, it can be wonderful, too. It's a remarkable experience that precious few other people will ever share, and, as hard as this may be to believe, there WILL come a time in which everything is...normal. You may even become nostalgic for your transition, for all its trauma and heartache.

**Get in shape.** You're going to put a lot of stress on your body, both physically and emotionally. Eat healthy and get plenty of exercise. (If you want to lose weight, it's really quite simple: burn off more calories than you ingest. Carbohydrates don't enter into it.) If you've already been tossing around the idea of detoxing, now is the perfect time to start. The competing hormones will be overworking your liver as it is, and the poor embattled organ shouldn't have to contend with alcohol. Smoking does your skin no favors, and it doesn't help your voice, either.

**Go at your own pace, but don't wait too long.** This is the most personal and internal of decisions, and nobody else can know when you should start. When the time has come, when you can no longer deny and sublimate those feelings you've had for as long as you can remember...you'll know. But keep this in mind: the longer your body produces testosterone, the more masculine you will become. If you don't like your body now, imagine how you'll feel about it in five, ten, or twenty years. What's more, you'll be that much more entrenched in the male role.

Speaking of which--joining the military and/or becoming a father or being a sexist, misogynistic prick or any of the other things some men do to show the world they've got a pair will **not** make the feelings go away. Many have tried, and they failed. All it will do is make your inevitable coming out that much more difficult and traumatic.

**Have a sense of humor, within reason.** It's good to be able to laugh at yourself, to keep things in perspective. You're also allowed to take yourself and what you're going through seriously. There will be times which other people, either out of nervousness or malice, say "funny" things and crack jokes which make you feel uncomfortable. Say so, and ask that they not do it again. Don't ever let anyone tell you to lighten up. If you think you're being made fun of, you probably are.

Queers in general and the transgendered in particular have long been the subject of the some of the lowest, cruelest jokes. You probably grew up watching the same movies and teevee as I did, so you know there's nothing funnier than a man wearing a dress--or, even better, a man who gets a "sex change!" Pure hilarity, huh? Don't forget that you're a cultural punchline—and don't settle for it. If someone treats you or another tranny as the butt of a joke, call them on it. You deserve as much respect as anyone else.

**Give people time to adjust.** Allow a grace period of six months for people to start using your new name. After that, correct them as strongly as necessary--without being rude, of course, because that WILL be held against you. Never mind the utter rudeness of someone who knows better using your boy name, whether intentionally or out of carelessness; *you* are the one on trial. If you're obviously trying to defend yourself, you'll be accused of being "defensive." (Why is it a bad thing to be "defensive" when you're being attacked and thus forced to, well, *defend* yourself?) Be gentle, but firm.

Although you'll have made it clear to people that both your name *and* your gender have changed, and that should be glaringly obvious to anyone who looks at you, allow another six months or so for the pronouns. At least. In truth, the pronouns will take a lot longer. Some may never quite get it, even if they use the correct name. Gender-specific pronouns are just too fundamental to how English-speakers interact with the world right now. Everyone knows someone who's changed their name; very few know someone who has changed their gender.

**Get used to pronoun mistakes.** There may come a day when the majority of your friends never knew you as a boy, and yet the occasional "him" and "his" will slip out. Not often, and it's nothing personal, but it'll still hurt every time. That's the price you pay for being out. It beats the alternative.

**It's okay to piddle standing up if nobody's looking.** Not so much when you're using a women's restroom with others. But if you're at home, or it's a public single-seater with a door you can lock, why not? One's urinary position does not determine gender, and you are *not* indulging in male privilege. Just remember to clean up after yourself if need be, and put the seat down when you leave.

**Women do not have high voices.** You should not, either. See a vocal therapist.

**Go light on the plastic surgery. Really, really light.** If hormones and electrolysis have done their job, facial feminization surgery shouldn't be necessary—depending on genetics. Maybe you have a big square jaw which gets you clocked as a genetic male no matter what, or your hairline is just all wrong.

*Get only as much done as is absolutely necessary.* A reconstructed face looks just like what it is. Even moreso than with genetic girls, facial feminization surgery can result in a generic, kewpie doll-ish countenance, an unnerving *sameness*. Put a few trannies who've had the surgery next to one another, and you'd swear you're looking at identical siblings from a family descended from European royalty. Individuality and personality is lost under unnaturally high cheekbones and big scary lips. If facial feminization grows more popular, which seems likely given this culture's obsession with plastic surgery, it could become a serious giveaway. Ironically, a tranny with some slightly masculine features who hasn't had any work done--I offer myself as a modest example--may be *more* passable, since she looks comparatively natural and is less likely to attract unwanted attention.

Unless you lost the majority of your lip tissue in a buzzsaw accident, there's no need for collagen. Above all else, though, in the name of all that is good and right--**NO**

**BOTOX.** Please, I'm begging you. Love yourself enough *not* to turn your face into a death mask.

Transitioning is all about becoming the girl you know yourself to be. Too much surgery, and the face you see in the mirror will not be yours.

**Hydrate.** Early and often. Whether you've had electro yet or not. Keep a bottle of lotion near your bathroom sink, and apply liberally in the morning and in the evening. It really will make a difference—and, let's face it, you need all the help you can get. (As do I. We all do.) Drink water. Lots of water. Hydration is your friend.

**Now is the time to experiment.** This is a second adolescence. (Or an extended one, depending on your age.) It's very much a time of trial and error, and there's no way to know what works and what doesn't aside from just *doing* it. There's really no other way. You may look back at pictures from this time period with a degree of embarrassment, but it'll be a hell of a lot better than pictures of you in boy mode. All that matters is that what you're doing in the moment makes sense to you.

For much of my first year out of the closet, I wore Manic Panic's violet foundation, usually in tandem with white face powder. I was quite a sight, I know. *But it felt right.* The people close to me, a remarkably tolerant lot, breathed a collective sigh of relief when I stopped wearing it. When I think back on it or I see the pictures, however, I have no regrets. Sometimes I'm even nostalgic for those days, that borderline innocence.

**There's no telling where you'll end up.** And it'll take a long time to get there. Seriously. Don't fret too much about it. *Que sera sera* and all that. You can sorta guess from looking at your testosterone and hair-ravaged skin how you'll look on the

other end of the tunnel (if I may use the controversial tunnel metaphor--oh, I may? thank you!), but there's no point in either getting excited OR despondent. You have to give it time.

**If the existing definitions don't fit you, create your own.** If you don't consider yourself "a man trapped in a woman's body" (a phrase I loathe with a passion), then don't call yourself that. Don't let anyone else, either.

**You don't have to be girly or high-femme.** Look at the girls you know. Are they shirking violets, or flouncey belles? Even the femmey ones? Probably not. If you exaggerate things, you'll just make yourself less like them, a caricature, and downright insulting.

Yes, you've been a boy all your life and it really sucked. Believe me, I was there. The trick is to avoid overcompensation. I understand how much you hated wearing a tux to your high school prom—show me your picture and I'll show you mine—but wearing high heels and miniskirts every day is *not* going to help you recover lost time.

You don't even have to wear dresses; it's okay to wear jeans and t-shirts. Many girls do. In fact, just about anything you might consider to be (casual) boy clothes is available in a girl version. I don't mean pink and frilly, but cut to emphasize or flatter the female body. Even if your body isn't particularly female yet

**Electrolysis.** Quite possibly the key to passing. If you have to choose between surgery and electrolysis, I would suggest electrolysis. When you're out in the world, facial hair is a much bigger giveaway than your groin. No matter how close you shave (your face), there's always that hint, that shadow. Wearing enough to

makeup to cover the shadow can result in unwanted attention, seeing as how you'll obviously be wearing a lot of makeup, and only works for a few hours. Lose out the shadow entirely, and your face will change in significant ways, even without hormones. (The hormones help, though!)

It's best to begin electrolysis *before* going on hormones, for both practical and psychological reasons. When the estrogen starts kicking into your brain, the sense of awkwardness and alienation from your body can become even stronger than before, making growing out your facial hair all the more of a mindfuck. Even if you haven't had much electro done yet, there's some solace in having started.

Besides, electro takes *forever*. Seriously. Don't be fooled by talk of that first "clearing," which required about forty hours for me. I thought I was in the home stretch. Bzzzz! Wrong. It took another *two hundred* hours before I reached a point where I was really comfortable with my face. I could still use another fifty to a hundred, at least.

Ideally, you'd begin before coming out, and certainly before going fulltime. For efficiency's sake, electro requires a few days' worth of beard growth, and that's a lot easier to get away with if everyone still thinks you're a boy. It's hard enough for Norms to wrap their brains around the concept of changing gender, and you being all stubbly doesn't help matters.

Traditional electrolysis is painful. It hurts a *lot*, seeing as how an electrified needle is being stuck into your skin. The pain only occurs during the session, though, and manageable. Even though it'll be in someone's office, control your environment as much as possible. Bring your own music along, something comforting. (I discovered early on that, for as much as I love it, *further down the spiral* by Nine Inch Nails was a really bad idea.) Assuming you won't be driving afterwards, self-medication is also helpful. Vicodin and NyQuil can help you disassociate from the pain and drift away.

As tempting as it is, avoid laser electrolysis. It's simply isn't reliable enough. Much like taking off and nuking the site from orbit, the poke-and-zap of old-fashioned electrolysis is the *only* way to be sure.

Like doctors, electrologists need to earn your trust. If you don't think they're doing a good job, find another one. Easier said than done, certainly, but it reduces the chances of being scarred and pitted around your mouth because of their carelessness. (If there *is* scarring, use Aqua Glycolic Face Cream. Be patient. As with everything else related to transitioning, it takes a long time.)

**Hormones.** The most commonly prescribed estrogen pill for both trannies *and* genetic girls is premarin. Usually it's taken in conjunction with an androgen blocker such as spironactalone. Premarin's name is uncomfortably descriptive of its source: the urine of pregnant mares. Altogether now: ewwww. I have no idea how they go about collecting the urine (ew!), or about the living conditions of the horses in question. I like to pretend the horses live happy lives doing happy things, and when they go to sleep, someone puts a hoof in a bowl of warm water to make them piddle. If that *isn't* the case, I don't know want to know.

If you want to take hormones and the choice is between premarin and nothing at all, go for the premarin. I've ingested it daily, and willingly, for the last six years. Simply be aware of its unpleasant origin ahead of time, so it won't come as a shock when someone inevitably attempts to, well, shock you with it. There *are* organic (or, at least, non-urine-based) alternatives, though their availability is limited at best. Ethical questions aside, premarin has worked for me.

**Trust your endocrinologist.** That is to say, find one you can trust. Demand quality care. If they don't check your hormone levels a bare minimum of once a year, take your business elsewhere. Thank you, drive through.

Be prepared to travel. I chose my first endocrinologist based on the fact that we shared a zip code. It was nice to have them five minutes away, considering that both my shrink and my electrologist required a trip across a bridge. Unfortunately, she was...um...not very good. She was more obsessed with my weight than hormone levels, and the *only* time she had bloodwork done was for my thyroid levels, to figure out why I'm so jumpy. Turns out they were fine; I just have a lot of nervous energy. Hell, I already knew *that*.

What I *didn't* know was that because she didn't give a damn, after two years on estrogen, my testosterone levels had not budged. I only discovered this when I started going to a different endocrinologist, one whose office was over an hour away. It shouldn't have taken two years for me to discover this, but, well, I'm an overly trusting sort. Don't make the same mistake I did.

They should also prescribe vicodin for electrolysis, assuming they aren't a sadist. (And if they *are* a sadist, they're in the wrong line of work--they should be an electrologist.) Doctors in public health clinics have to be more careful, since vicodin IS a controlled substance; even if they trust you implicitly, they have to be careful how much gets out.

**Express doubt as required.** It's weird and it counterintuitive, but when I was starting out, I discovered it was the best way to put skeptics at ease. If I said I was 100% certain about what I was doing, they were *extremely* worried and convinced I was making big huge mistake. If I notched it down to, say, 95%--*well, you know, I still have my doubts occasionally, which is why I'm taking it slow*--they seemed okay with it. Maybe it was because as straights it was so far beyond their experience they

couldn't relate on any level and therefore couldn't condone what I was doing. (Was their approval necessary? No, not really, but you know how fragile psyches need to be coddled sometimes.) Then there would be the standard "Have you really thought this through?" line, because surely I hadn't. But if I expressed uncertainty, I suppose they could at least relate a little, because it's not something *they* would consider in a million years. It meant I hadn't gone completely insane.

Saying you haven't made up your mind about surgery is a good tactic as well. Ours is a phallogentric society which places undue emphasis on the genitals as the deciding factor of gender, and to a lot of people, surgery is the "point of no return." I couldn't possibly go back to how I was, and no knives have gone anywhere near my genitals, thank you very much.

**It's okay to be selfish.** By definition, this time is all about *me me i i*. If it was about what the people around you wanted, you'd remain a boy. Don't ever let anyone guilt you into thinking you're betraying your loved ones, that if you really cared about them you'd stay the way they want you to be. Um, no. This is another reason why it's good to start early: transitioning is much less destructive—and rest assured, it *is* destructive--if you're in your teens or twenties and single than if you're in your forties or fifties with a wife, children and a mortgage.

Be prepared for severe pushback. Those who can't talk you out of it may give up on you entirely. You will probably lose at least one friend, someone dear to you who decides they just can't handle it. Their loss. When the dust finally settles, you'll have a much better sense of who your friends really are. You may be surprised.

**Stealth.** Whether or not to be open about your past is almost as personal a decision as surgery. It's easy to understand why one would want to be stealth. If nobody knows your little secret, many more options are available.

Except that it is simply not possible to go into complete stealth. Period. Unless you go on a killing spree, *somebody always knows your secret*. That gives them power over you, and the potential for blackmail. Of course, blackmail only works if something is considered shameful or embarrassing.

Unless you started on hormones as a teenager--and even that's no guarantee--you won't pass completely. Nobody does. You *will* get clocked now and again. It sucks and it's unfair and how you were born shouldn't be anybody's damn business.

But it's reality, so get used to it. Being open and comfortable with your identity as a tranny girl is, perhaps, the only way to reduce the sting. The ability to say "Yeah, I was born a boy, so the hell what?" is your best defense.

As for the killing spree? More of a headache than it's worth. Trust me.

**Your name.** Even if you haven't come out to anyone, you probably already know your name. Your *real* name, not the temporary one on your birth certificate. It's one of the most satisfying aspects of transitioning, and one of the most personal. It's also one of the only things you can really control; when I started out, all I knew was that, whatever else happened, my name would be Sherilyn Connelly.

Remember, though: less is more. Three words is plenty for a name. Two words works, too; middle names are not necessary. (I happily lack a middle name.) Four, five or even six is just overkill. You may want to steer away from crunchy New Age names, too. Ravenswood Hecate Fullmoon Artemis Wolfsbane Summerisle doesn't exactly scream "natural born girl." Won't quite fit on a driver license, either. If you decide to go the diva route and use only one word, don't get too upset when people ask, "Is that your first or last name?"

Finally, and perhaps most importantly: **Don't believe half of what you see and none of what you hear**, whether it's from me or anyone else. Ultimately, only you know what's right for you. Make it up as you go along, and don't be afraid to follow your own path. That's the best advice there is.



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