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# A New Life for Dan

## A tattooed heart and the facial hair he now proudly sported

by Pip Rasmussen

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He recalled another memory of sitting under the 'forty-four home tree' in year three, blurring out that he was a boy to his best girl friends.

**T**he table was set. The cake was iced. The candles were ready to be lit and wished on. But the birthday girl was crying.

Dan tried to bring the memory to the surface, but it wavered like a mirage. He thought he was younger than ten but older than four. He remembered the floods of tears rolling down his cheeks as his father tried to make him wear a red dress for the family who would be coming for the party.

He certainly remembered that he was won over with bribery. His favourite toy, a grotesquely muscular action figure, was the deal breaker. He would be allowed to hold it despite the fact that it was more of a boy's toy than a girl's. He remembered his knuckles were white from clutching the toy while his overbearing relatives doted on how cute he looked in the little dress. "It was kind of ironic", he chuckled.

The early childhood memory of that party was one of many small details that led Dan to believe he was not really a girl. I watched him as he relaxed into the couch at his Stanmore house, with isosceles-eared Oreo the mutt, cradled in his lean arms.

A tattooed heart peeked out from under his sleeve and a geometric flower folded into his elbow. The once ebony ink had settled into his skin casting blue-grey lines that looked as if they had lived with him for years. Silver rings wrapped around his nostril and bottom lip, drawing my eyes to the facial hair he now proudly sported.

***To not transition would mean the body would forever betray the mind and heart.***

"You know, I think you're supposed to say something like 'You know your real gender when you're young'. You know it's a 'thing' but you don't know what it means, and then it ends up getting taught out of you", Dan said. He recalled another memory of sitting under the 'forty-four home tree' in year three, blurring out that he was a boy to his best girl friends.

There was no burning embarrassment when they said they weren't boys. But there was a sinking feeling of disappointment, and a dull ache in his rib cage, as if no one in the world was like him. "I just thought it wasn't possible".

Dan and I met at an all-girls high school in year seven. The totem pole was just being established - classes were being streamed by intellect and students sorted by colour. All the while, the teachers insisted that "it's not a competition". We were underdeveloped and wide-eyed. Our pale blue dresses brushed our ankles. I could still hear one girl mimic her mother's screech "I'm not going to pay a fortune on a new dress every year, you'll just have to grow into it!". When I saw Dan on that first day, she was surrounded by what appeared to be the misfits of our cohort. I was drawn to this group. We grew up together, learning our bodies and eccentric styles. Like any decent gang of misfits we challenged authority with hair colours and piercings.

Dan would wear a fringe to her eyelashes, with streaks of colour bleached in school holidays. If it wasn't for her height, she might have been intimidating. She was slight, craning her neck to meet the eyes of the rest of us. I could grip her wrist with my hand and my fingers would overlap. The corners of her mouth would crease revealing a broad cheeky smile. And there was the way that she unintentionally made others feel like a protector as they wrapped their arms around her. Cute was an understatement. There was no way Dan could avoid wearing dresses throughout his school years so, for a long time, during his teenage years, Dan suppressed his inner self and ignored the body he was forced to inhabit. For a long time during his teenage years, Dan distanced himself from his body and selfhood.

"I kind of just stopped thinking about myself as who I am," he stared at the moving images of the television in front of us, unaware of the low whisper of M.T.V.'s 'Eighties Countdown. "I disregarded it because it was uncomfortable. I never thought of myself as a girl. In my head, I was either neutral or masculine." While he identified as gay during school, he loathed the word 'lesbian'. It had the ability to leave a searing red mark, branding a female gender onto the soul. He told me about how his gaming characters would always reflect his inner self, which was male. He even admits his frustration with the character building game, The Sims. After the long wait for his pregnant Sims character to give birth, a baby girl was delivered.

He thought about using a simple cheat to 'delete' her, but he couldn't bring himself to murder a defenceless CGI baby. When I asked about life before transitioning, Dan recalled moments of confusion, passing thoughts and a disturbing sense of dissociation from his

self.

"It's a bunch of things that build up that show that there's this ... " His eyes stared down, thick eyebrows furrowed. He was silent but I could sense his mind struggling to find the words to make me understand. "There's this mismatch ... It's not 'I want to be more boyish'. It's like 'something's not right.'"

Dan is now twenty, and had been on testosterone for seven months when we talked. He referred to his situation as a 'condition'.

Transgender, formerly known as transsexuality and misinterpreted by many, is a phenomenon that has inconclusive answers, and little understanding or social awareness.

The term 'transsexuality' had led me into a mistaken view on the subject. I had always believed it was some kind of sexuality associated with homosexuality, but had no reason to investigate further until I received a private message addressed to myself and fifty others.

"Hi people! As some of you may or may not know I am currently transitioning female to male (F.T.M.). I am documenting this transition through You Tube videos and later on will do comparison pics."

"If I have sent you this message it could be for a few reasons ... maybe you have told me you want to see the videos when I make them, maybe you have asked me about my transition, or maybe I think you'd be interested ... or maybe we have never ever talked about it before and this is me coming out to you. ha-ha."

"If you have any questions or 'whatevas' I'm open to anything, I'm doing this for others to understand as well as for myself to observe."

Katherine Cummings, a male-to-female transgender I interviewed as part of this project also sent an email notifying her colleagues of her transition from male to female (M.T.F.). While Dan wanted to pave the new pronoun of 'he' to his friends, Katherine did it because she 'detested gossip'.

Between visits to Dan, I met up with Katherine who is the Information Worker and Librarian at the N.S.W. Gender Centre in Petersham. The Centre was set up almost thirty years ago to provide services to people with gender issues, particularly intersex, cross-dressing and transgender. It grew out of weekly support meetings for transgendered people at the Wayside Chapel who were recognised as vulnerable to abuse and discrimination during the 1980s.

Today, transgender people still suffer the same problems. The cold sting of rejection when a wife can't understand why her husband cross-dresses, and his bags are sitting by the front door the next morning. The skin prickling when looking in the mirror and seeing a stranger stare back. The taste of blood, as a skull is cracked against the ground.

Katherine knew too well the circumstances transgender people find themselves in, often falling through the cracks of society. Without hesitation she told me about her life, how she struggled to be 'normal', married, raised a family and finally transitioned at the age of fifty-one. Her secrets were not frantic scribbles of thought in a notebook, wrapped in clothes and pushed to the furthest corner of a drawer at home. They grew out of a series of talks she gave on the A.B.C.s 'Health Report' and later published as *Katherine's Diary; the story of a transsexual*, a book that won the Australian Human Rights Award for Non-Fiction in 1992. "Humans are infinitely variable." Katherine sat straight backed. "And gatekeeping is tight." Without a doubt, society had a way of promoting 'normal' notions of sexuality and gender and filtering out the 'abnormal'. My mind instantly took me to my local movie rental shop. Pink and blue divided the children's section - movies for girls and movies for boys. I asked Katherine about how many transgender people live in Australia. Nobody knows. There are some statistics thrown around, but they were outdated years ago. Often the statistics quoted a prevalence of 1:30,000 for M.T.F. transitions, but Professor Lynn Conway's debunked this figure. She estimated that M.T.F. ranged from 1:2500 to 1:2000 in the world.

These figures were only based on Gender Reassignment Surgery. Many transgendered people, however, don't feel the need to have surgery, or can't afford it. The lack of hard information about transgender created prejudice based on ignorance. Was it any wonder people were unwilling to identify as transgender?

When Dan and I sat in Hyde Park ... As Dan and I sat in Hyde Park listening to the cacophony of hissing bus brakes and rustling trees, I asked him the question that had been niggling in the back of my head all morning - were transgender people ashamed of themselves? "I think a large majority of people who transition feel ashamed of it. Many people don't like to acknowledge it, because they see it as something to fix, you know what I mean? They see it as being in the wrong body." He took a breath. "They don't like focusing on the fact that they weren't born the way they felt they should've been."

Cross-legged, he picked at the grass. He explained that the root of the discomfort and shame was the body. For him, bottom dysphoria was worse than top. From the day he began injecting testosterone, his body had become a moving image, constantly developing and simultaneously fading. Under the sun, I could take in how much his body had changed through the shadows that defined him - some were new and some old shadows were gone. His thin arms were wired with fresh muscle. His neck was wider, with hair creeping up to his grin in a five o'clock shadow.

His binder denied any shadow as it flattened his chest entirely. The first few months of video documentation showed a softer boyish face, a voice dropping up and down as if it were unsure of itself. Seven months on and his voice had lowered, dropping into husky undertones. I was even more intrigued by his genuine laughter.

Laughter is a reaction that is an integral part of human behaviour, unique to each individual. When Dan laughed, his voice dropped even deeper into a warm sound that rose from his chest. It sounded so naturally male that I was momentarily stunned, unaware of the bustling city around us. Reading paperwork, signing dotted lines and paying various professionals was the only way Dan could get to where he was today.

Back at his place in the inner west, scrawled on the bottom of my lined notebook were the costs of his transition to date.

Changing his name, hormone injections, appointments with psychiatrists and endocrinologists, packers (prosthetic genitalia) and binders formed a mind map on the paper. Underlined and circled was roughly \$2020. My jaw dropped. Dan continued to pet Oreo, unsurprised. It was simply a cost he had accepted months ago, and now had to live with for the rest of his life.

Reflecting on everything I had learnt about transgender, I remembered the positive responses from people my age to Dan's original Facebook message. But I was interested to hear another generation's view. I told my grandma about Dan's situation, and she fell silent. "How dreadful for him. It must be so difficult." Her quiet words stayed with me from the moment Dan and I met in Hyde Park, to when I left his place through the broken front gate creaking on its rusty hinge. I believe now it is important for us to be open-minded, especially in areas we don't understand.

But my grandma, with her eighty-six years of wisdom, spoke a startling truth. There are financial, physical, emotional, social and legal costs for people who transition from one gender to the other, but they have no other choice. To not transition would mean the body would forever betray the mind and heart.

**Pip Rasmussen is a Media student at Macquarie University. She carried out this project as part of her degree and achieved a High Distinction.**

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