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Like it or not, She's Still Dad

A Wife, a Family, and a Town Accept Denise's Transition

by Ruth Padawar, first appearing in *The Record* on 20th November 2005. Reprinted with the kind permission of Ruth Padawar, *The Record* and the North Jersey Media Group.

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On a hot Saturday night last June, Don Brunner arrived home with his wife and took off the last suit and tie he'd ever wear, knowing that the life he had always led was about to end. The next morning, the New Milford plumber glanced one last time in the mirror and emerged from their split level - still very much a father and husband, but no longer a man. This is a story about a family that could have spun apart, but instead pulled together. It's a story about a stunned New Jersey town that could have spurned a man but instead accepted - at times grudgingly - his transformation. And it's about three kids at that stage of life when conformity is everything, who found themselves in the last place they wanted to be: the centre of a small-town drama.

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Most men who become women leave one town as Michael and re-surface in another as Melissa. They start over far away from everyone they once loved, cleaving themselves from family, neighbours, co-workers and friends. Don Brunner - the man whose life revolved around his beloved wife and kids - was not willing to do that.

One year ago Thanksgiving weekend, the forty-seven-year-old dad announced to his three children that his masculine exterior had never fitted and that someday he would become a woman. His oldest child, by then in college, wanted reassurance that her parents would stay together. The middle one, fifteen, said he was "cool" with the news, though his nonchalance would later unravel. The youngest, at twelve, buried her head in her mom's lap and sobbed. "I hate you!" she wailed. "Why are you ruining my life? What happens when everyone else finds out?" Don Brunner worried about the same thing.

For as long as Don Brunner could remember, he wondered why God had mistakenly poured his soul into a male body. Even in elementary school, Don felt his place was with the girls, but they, like the teacher, disagreed. By tenth grade, when his parents discovered he had stolen his sister's bras and blouses and shoved them in his toolbox, they wordlessly took the clothes away. Don secretly cut a hole in his bedroom wall behind the bulletin board and began hiding his stash there instead.

All through high school, Don Brunner tried to wedge himself into a man's place. He played left tackle for Dwight Morrow High, joined the wrestling team and repaired air conditioners each summer for his uncle's heating and cooling business.

One evening after trying on women's clothes in the privacy of his bedroom, sixteen-year-old Don came down for a glass of milk and his parents - whose dinner guests were in the other room - noticed what Don had on: He was still wearing clip-on earrings. They sent him to a psychiatrist.

In their few visits, the doctor asked about his career plans. Don said he wanted to be an engineer or a doctor. Neither ever mentioned Don's odd habits.

In twelfth grade, at a football game between Englewood and Englewood Cliffs, Don met Fran Gottschalk, a senior at St. Cecilia's High School in Englewood. He followed her to Wittenberg, a small private college in Ohio, so they could be together, and on a day neither clearly remembers, told her his secret. She giggled.

Together, they picked out his first wig from a catalogue and his first bra at an Ohio mall. It was, Fran thought, all in good fun. In 1980, they married and soon after, migrated to New Milford, a town where police get more calls for loose dogs, lost cats and broken water pipes than for break-ins or vandalism.

By then, Fran was no longer amused by Don's tendencies. She resented the money he paid for skirts and high heels, thinking it better spent on the mortgage and diapers. As the kids got older, she didn't want to have to explain why their dad was wearing women's silk pyjamas. Besides, life in the suburbs was all about conformity, and a husband wearing eyeliner and mascara was hardly normal.

Don battled his instincts, but not always successfully. Whenever Fran discovered that he had caved, she'd throw out his purchases, seething. As the years wore on, the kids sometimes wondered if their tense parents were close to divorce.

As he had in high school, Don surrounded himself with symbols of masculinity. In the early 1990s, Don took a job with a plumbing friend, training as his apprentice and eventually becoming a licensed master plumber. He coached pee-wee football when his son Scott was in elementary school. He helped Jessie, the oldest, build a telescope for her science project. He promised Scott they could take apart an old car and put it back together.

Together, Don and Fran built a family that was known in town for being strikingly close, one that attended each of the kids' sports games together. Don and Scott became so close that Scott, even as a teenager, accompanied his dad to every plumbing job he could.

In mid 2003, Don secretly began taking eight milligrams of oestrogen every day. Under his drab, oversized plumber's uniform, his thick, black chest hair disappeared, his leg and arm hair softened, his chest rounded. In August of last year, when Don came out of the Typhoon Lagoon at Disney World, his unsuspecting youngest child Alyssa yelled, - Dad, you've got man boobs!- Somehow, Don convinced himself Fran hadn't noticed.

Two months later, waiting in the car for Alyssa's soccer practice to end, Don broke down and told Fran about the hormones. Warily, she said, "I already know." Don confessed that he yearned for a sex change operation but conceded that it would be years before they could save the thousands of dollars needed. Fran recoiled at the idea of the operation.

As Don's new shape became more apparent, he and Fran wondered if the drama privately unfolding in their marriage was somehow affecting the kids, the younger two of whom had long seen therapists for depression and low self-esteem. Both therapists, concerned that the kids sensed a family secret, urged the parents to come clean.

On Thanksgiving weekend, Don and Fran rounded up the kids, who flopped down on the bed like they always did for family chats. After the initial shock - and the reassurances that Don was staying in the family and would always be their dad - Jessie and Scott relaxed. But Alyssa ran into her room, hurled herself onto her bed and screamed that she would never talk to her father again. For more than an hour, Don sat beside her, telling her that even though his clothing and body would be different, he was still the same person. Eventually, Alyssa thawed enough to roll over and sob: "Why can't you be a normal dad? Why do you have to give the boys at school something else to bully me about?" Later that night, Alyssa called her best friend. "Everybody has weird parents," she groaned, "but mine beat them all."

Acceptance came in fits and starts. On Christmas morning, Alyssa gave her father a black Guess purse, similar to one she owned. Don saw it as a peace offering, but Alyssa, at twelve, said she bought it only because she could think of nothing else.

Meanwhile, all through that winter and spring, Scott had been telling the football coach, Bill Wilde, he couldn't wait for the next season to begin. Daily, they would chat about neighbouring teams, effective plays and Scott's performance the previous fall. Off-season training began in March. Each morning, Scott told Wilde he would see him at practice. Each afternoon, as Scott's team-mates hoisted weights and panted around the track, Wilde would see, through the gym window, Scott walking home. He got more and more annoyed; Scott was big, strong and fast, and the defence needed him. Wilde had no clue that Scott's father was slowly becoming a woman, and no idea of how scared Scott was that one of his team-mates would find out.

Don started dressing as a woman on family excursions out of town - to the Grand Street Cafe in Dumont, the Friendly's in Tenafly, Charlie Brown's in Oradell. He asked the kids to call him Denise instead of Dad when they were out in public. Scott diligently followed the rules. Alyssa hated her brother's complicity. "He's not Denise!" she would shout, as onlookers turned their heads. "He's Daddy!" One house at a time, Fran and Don began knocking on neighbours' doors to tell them that the man who had coached their children, hosted neighbourhood barbecues and designed and built the town's best haunted house at Halloween would soon become a woman.

One man blurted, "Does that mean you're going to parade up and down the street in a skirt?" But most reacted in the usual neighbourly way, asking how the kids were managing and offering to help in any way possible.

What was said behind Don's back was another matter. On the deli line, in the school parking lot and on the athletic field, tongues wagged: How could he do this to his kids? How could Fran put up with it? Why couldn't he wait until the children were grown? Fran and Don met with the principals of the middle and high schools to ask that they help protect the kids. Both were supportive. The high school principal even asked Scott to stop by his office every Tuesday, just to assure him all was well.

In July, after Don had hauled the last of his male clothes to Goodwill and legally changed his name to Denise, gossip intensified. Sometimes, the comments were crude.

Word spread that a couple of high school kids had tried to snap a photo of Denise sunning in a woman's bathing suit in the Brunners' back yard. Scott heard that some kids on the football team were laughing about his dad, and wound up in a shouting match.

Another time, a boy in Alyssa's grade insisted that her father was weird. Alyssa flew into a rage and slapped him. In town, some men turned away whenever Denise appeared. The plumbing customers were less fazed. One gave Denise a hug when she arrived, then whispered, "Welcome to the other team." Another, in her seventies asked Denise for her bra size. "Maybe I can give you some of mine," she said.

Remarkably, life at home for every one of them became far easier. Denise was more relaxed and happy than Don had been, and to Fran's surprise, she found herself preferring Denise. Outsiders' predictions aside, the kids felt more confident that their parents' marriage would last than they had through all the years their dad was a man.

As the summer wore on, Coach Wilde started calling Scott at home, urging him to show up for pre-season conditioning. Scott dodged the calls at first, but finally asked Wilde to come to the Brunners' house. When Wilde arrived, Scott introduced his family: "This is my mom, this is my kid sister, and this is my father. You've probably heard the rumours. He's transsexual."

"How ya doin', coach?" Denise said.

"I'm doin' good, Mr. Brunner," Wilde said, taken aback by Denise's nonchalance. "How are you?"

Scott told Wilde about his run-in with a team-mate and explained how leery he was of facing more bullying. Wilde assured him he

would talk with the boys, and would kick anyone who harassed him off the team. When Wilde left, he had Scott's promise that he would report to practice. But Scott still didn't show up. When the team lost its first game in a 35-32 heartbreaker, short of subs and desperately in need of a spare defensive end, Wilde and his assistants decided on a new tack. The following Monday, one coach manoeuvred Scott to the locker room handed him his equipment and suited him up.

The first few days, Scott hung back, hovering by the coaches. But once convinced that no one would taunt him, he threw himself back into the game he loved. At the final game before the playoffs, Fran went off to sell hot dogs for the P.T.O. Alyssa - who had earlier rummaged through Denise's closet to borrow a belt and earrings - ran off with friends. Wearing rhinestone studded jeans, small silver earrings and a soft-curved bob that was dyed strawberry blonde, Denise headed for the bleachers. She nodded to passers-by, most of whom by now nodded back.

Nearby, teenagers flirted, parents hawked raffle tickets, toddlers climbed up and down the bleachers. Friends of Alyssa and Jessie, seeing Denise, waved and called out hellos.

The maples in the distance were wrapped in brilliant red and yellow. Underneath, they were the same trees that had provided deep green shade all summer long. Behind Denise sat a dad whose daughter once played soccer with Alyssa, a man who hadn't seen Don in a long time. Denise took a deep breath, then turned around and asked with forced casualness, "Hey, how ya doing?"

The man hesitated. "Oh!" he chortled, eyes widening. "Hey! How are you?!" He threw out his hand for Denise to shake.

"Good," said Denise. "A lot better now." They laughed.

"I guess you heard."

"Nah," said the man softly. "Nah, I didn't hear nothin'."

The man smiled. "I see your kids all over town," he said. "They're big now. ... They're okay?"

"Yeah," said Denise. "Yeah, they're okay."

By the time the buzzer sounded, the New Milford Knights had trounced Leonia/Pal Park, 28-12.

Fifteen minutes later, Scott trotted over in his street clothes.

"Good game," Denise said, throwing an arm around her son.

"Thanks, Dad," he said.

Scott glanced at the almost empty bleachers and left the field, his kid sister, mother and father by his side.

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