A Different Stripe

For eight years, **RENEE SULLIVAN** identified as transgender. Then it got more complicated.

FULL CIRCLE: Renee Sullivan, 30, struggled with her gender identity beginning at 17.

SHUNTANG

ONE SATURDAY EVENING, when I was 26, I got dressed for a night out on the town. I cinched a binder around my chest to flatten my breasts and slipped on a black unisex T-shirt and straight-cut blue jeans. I put on a pair of men's shoes that I'd bought specifically for their chunky soles, which boosted my height a couple of inches, and stood in front of a full-length mirror. I felt pleased with my appearance. I could imagine people seeing me as a man rather than as a woman—and that was the point. But was that what I really wanted? I was no longer sure.

As a child in the rural South, I'd always been a bit of a tomboy who moved easily between boyish and girlish clothes. My mother lovingly kept my wardrobe stocked with both so that I could dress myself according to whim. Even so, I never thought of myself as anything other than a girl—until I was a teenager.

Of course, almost no adolescents feel comfortable with their body. I'd started experiencing a vague unease when topics related to male and female physicality or sexuality came up. I felt as if I were somehow different from my peers, but I couldn't articulate why. In a biology class, I learned about intersex conditions—when a person's body doesn't fit the norms of either male or female anatomy—and thought perhaps the label applied to me. But, in fact, my body was strictly female.

I came out as bisexual and joined my school's LGBT group. At a meeting one day, I picked up a pamphlet that for the first time gave me a detailed definition of what the *T* in LGBT stood for: people who feel discomfort with their biological sex and its

associated gender role and who resolve the situation by presenting as a member of the opposite sex. It hit me: *That's what I am. That's why I feel different. I'm supposed to be a man.*

The revelation sparked an eight-year odyssey that stretched well into my 20s. Once I started to watch myself for the symptoms of gender dysphoria, I felt them distinctly. I would sometimes catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror and be surprised to see a female face. Other times, I felt as if I were taller and more broad-shouldered than I really was, or as if I were flat-chested. I would occasionally have a tactile awareness of male genitals that weren't there, accompanied by an overwhelming feeling of wrongness in my own female genitals. I felt a knee-jerk anger when others addressed me as "miss" or referred to me as "she."

But it wasn't always like that. While my sense of being male was sometimes immediate and urgent, at other times it seemed to fade into the background or go away completely. For a lot of young people who realize they're transgender, the journey is extremely challenging, but the goal is more or less clear. Mine wasn't.

I saw two different therapists to talk through my confusion. I spent hundreds of hours in online forums, chewing over the nuances of gender identity and learning terms like *bigender* and *nonbinary*, searching for the right fit. Perhaps the most influential part of my exploration was a transgender support group I attended for a couple of years at the LGBT center in the town where I lived after college.

The weekly meetings were held in the center's basement. When I first sat down among the dozen or so trans men and women seated on worn couches, I explained that I wasn't sure what I needed; I was just looking for advice. The older people in the group made space for my questions and didn't seem to think that any one path was preferable to another. One of the group's main organizers was a warm, welcoming trans woman in her 40s who came to feel like an aunt to me. "Take your time," she would advise me. "These things are complicated. Don't rush it."

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The younger people in the support group were noticeably different; they were enthusiastic about medical transition and encouraged me to pursue it. One of them, a trans woman in her early 30s whom I'll call Cindy, became my friend. Quiet and thoughtful, she was thrilled with the changes that female hormones had provoked in her body, and she had little patience for my own apprehension about beginning testosterone therapy. "Have you decided to start taking T yet?" she regularly prodded me, reacting with mild disapproval when I confessed that I hadn't. It was clear that transitioning had healed something deeply painful in her. Like many people who experience a miracle cure, she seemed convinced that those of us who were still evaluating whether it was the best choice for them just needed a nudge in the right direction.

It had started to feel as if being a man was the only path to wholeness I could pursue—and that I should give up my nagging doubts and accept it. Then came that Saturday night when I was getting dressed to go out. Appraising myself in the mirror, I suddenly saw a woman—just stripped of the femininity normally expected of women. What's more, I liked it. I knew other women who dressed and acted however they pleased, including in masculine ways, but I'd unconsciously written off that option for myself. I was afraid of standing out or of being stereotyped as a butch dyke. Now I felt that I could boldly embody a full-on masculine presentation and identify as a woman at the same time.

When I told Cindy, she looked a bit shocked. "I don't think that's real," she said. "Women who like to wear men's clothes are just transgender men who are afraid of surgery." But I knew otherwise. I realized I could engage with womanhood on my own terms, ditching all the rules and expectations that surround it.

I embraced a new identity as an androgynous woman, and it gave me the same feeling of joy that I'd previously felt when people saw me as a man. I developed an adult version of my childhood wardrobe, with masculine and feminine clothing that I chose from at whim. I felt powerful and loved the way I looked. I had been

shy all my life, but suddenly I was outgoing and confident.

To my surprise, my physical symptoms faded. My "phantom penis" was gone; my breasts seemed to belong to me. It was a welcome change, but I felt a lack of closure. For eight years I had thought I was transgender, before coming full circle to calling myself a woman again, and I had no one to relate to about this experience. Then I discovered an online group of women who'd had similar trajectories. They referred to themselves as "detransitioned," meaning that they had undergone a gender transition and then returned to living as their birth sex, or as "reidentified," meaning that they had never taken hormones or had surgery but had previously considered themselves to be transgender.

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The group became a kind of successor to my earlier transgender support group. On a weekend camping retreat, we sat around a bonfire, shared our stories, and read pieces we'd written about our struggles with gender dysphoria—poems, essays, excerpts from our journals. With firelight reflected on their faces, the women spoke of all the negative messages about being female that they'd gleaned while growing up. Many had learned from a young age—some as a result of sexual abuse or assault—that having a vagina meant being a target. They'd realized that having breasts meant being leered at in public, or that having a womb meant that their worth would be measured by the children they bore.

In these women's revelations, I heard thoughts that I'd held privately for years. Like them, the only way I had known to process the frightening, uncomfortable, or disempowering aspects of being a woman had been to escape womanhood and see myself as something else. That had meant a male identity for some and a nonbinary or genderfluid identity for others. The idea of being in a body that was not a target for objectification and abuse once seemed to affirm us as transgender. And like many of them, once I started presenting myself to the world as female in a way that made me feel safe and powerful, the internal dissonance diminished.

It's been four years since I reidentified as a woman. My gender dysphoria was real and often painful, but the way for me to resolve it wasn't by becoming a man. It was by questioning and rejecting the stories society had told me about what it means to be a woman. When I rewrote those stories for myself, I was left with a sense of pride in my body and in my gender. I understand and respect the path that my transgender friends embarked on, and I hope that they understand mine. Both were part of the journey that led me to discover my womanhood, in my own way, and in my own time.

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