TAMMY RUGGLES

Guardian Angel, 2015
Silver gelatin print, 24 x 36 in

COURTESY: THE ARTIST

ALYSON LIE

Her Boyhood

Realizing the Transgender Identity

A year before she was born, the man who would participate in her conception—a Navy veteran of fifteen years—was nearly killed in a car accident. He was given a medical discharge and sent home to his wife and two children: a daughter seven years old, and a son, ten. Father had been away at sea when the two older children were born, had learned of their births via telegram, and was only able to get to know them during short furloughs or from their mother's letters, including scrawled notes in pencil: *Hi, Daddy. Love you.*

This time around he would be there for the birth, was handed the swaddled bundle of neurons soon after the event. She appeared to be an ordinary boy, squirming and frowning as new life forms will, adjusting to the garish lights and loud noises on the outside. This child was unplanned—a mistake, an example, as her mother would tell her ten years later, of how the rhythm method didn't work. Mistake or no, father and newborn bonded immediately and became inseparable. Everywhere Daddy went, his little boy followed. Father took son on trips to town, to the grocery store, to the hardware store, tiny hand clutching father's finger, his pants leg. On Sunday mornings, father and son would dress in matching suits, overcoats, and caps and go to the Methodist church in town. They would play catch, fly kites, plant trees and flowers together in the acre-sized front lawn of their ranch home situated in the middle of subsistence farms three miles outside their little town.

In photos, the handsome family stand, mother behind the two older children, father beaming, hugging the chubby baby to his chest, first in a blanket, then sleepers, then little color-coordinated jumpsuits.

Though reportedly a happy child, she never seemed to lose the frown. In photos of her at ten months, two years, and on into toddlerhood, the scowl is ever present. In one photo the happy father stands alone, towering above a circle of five toddling cousins, all of them little girls in ruffled bloomers except for the boy, not interacting with the others, but sitting in his own little world, supremely pissed off about something. Then at three, a solo photo of her standing in a vacant lot, wearing gray flannel slacks and a wool sweater, her pinky fingers pulling the corners of her mouth into a false, defiant grin. She remembers when this photo was taken, the delirious feeling of rebellion and

irreverence, the disappointed chorus of her mother, sister, and female cousins, "Oh, Bobby." Then laughter.

She always interpreted the little boy's perpetual pout to be the manifestation of his knowing from the start that something was seriously wrong. She remembers the first eight years of her life as unremarkable—save the early sense of being different from anyone else, of being a boy who wished she'd been born a girl, who watched Shirley Temple on television tap-dancing in her pinafores and ruffles, wanting like mad to be just like her. Of course, she never shared this with anyone, fearing that she'd be ridiculed, punished, ostracized, sent to an orphanage somewhere for odd children.

The only time she ever acted on this impulse was one fateful Saturday morning when, in the interest of exploration, she sneaked into her parents' bedroom while they were asleep, moved the bamboo curtain aside, and sat down on the floor of the closet. She had been planning this for some time, and this morning finally gave in to the urge for experimentation. She first took one of her father's shoes, a dark brown oxford, and put it on. Nothing. Just an ugly blob of leather and gum soles dangling off her little foot. She took the oxford off then picked up one of her mother's high-heeled shoes, two-tone, tan and white, and slipped it over her foot. She felt an immediate charge. A powerful electric shock coursed through her body. It was true. It was this kind of shoe that she wanted someday to grow into. She took her mother's shoe off and ran back into her bedroom, jumped into bed, and pulled the covers over her head. It was confirmed—she was a strange little boy. She could not explain it but knew she coveted these shoes and all things feminine. No one must ever know. It would be her secret. From that point on, a fetish was born. These were things to be revered and deeply feared, transformative objects of desire that could shake the foundation of her little world.

* * *

When this confused inkling of a boy was born, the family lived in the town of West Middlesex, Pennsylvania (population 1,218)—a fitting birthplace given her condition. There was, of course, no East Middlesex, nor North nor South—only West.

A year after the boy was born, the family moved to a five-acre lot three miles from town in the middle of a farming settlement. Her family would live on one half of the acreage, and cousins (on her mother's side) would live on the other half. Her mother came from a large family of thirteen (ten girls, three boys) of Scottish descent. It was the sort of large family demographic that produced aunts and uncles who were actually younger than their nieces and nephews, where young kids would address their older relatives by first name rather than familial rank. Her playmates were second cousins, their mother, her first cousin. Her playmates were her peers, but she ranked above them in the family tree and had the authority to address their parents as "Barb" and "Hap," conveying no deference to their age differences, while they would address her parents as "Aunt" and "Uncle." A hierarchical arrangement that she was prone, at times, to lord over her second cousins. She was not above pulling rank.

There was that, and the subtle sense that her cousins were of a different class, wilder, less polished, more countrified. She didn't care for the older cousin, a year older than she, who had a mean streak and would abuse his younger brother and sister. She liked the younger boy, a year her junior, who had a goofy, sweet nature about him.

They engaged in the usual rural boy sort of play: baseball in the front yard, exploring the woods at the back of the property, digging for worms and bugs, pestering the crayfish in the creek. They had several areas of the forest and creek bed that they'd return to time and again, power spots in the wilderness that had a particular numinous quality in which they could lose themselves. One winter, there was an old Model T Ford parked out in the weeds behind her cousins' house. They spent the whole frigid winter out there "driving" off to somewhere. They would play pretend games involving war and daring rescues on the swing set in the backyard. She once volunteered to play the princess of somewhere who was trapped in a tower for some reason. It was a poor performance, a pantomime, just like any boy would do. She knew she was not convincing. She was conflicted throughout, playing the role of someone she secretly wanted to be.

If she wasn't playing with her cousins, she was at home lip-synching to Disney records with her sock puppets; dressing up in tight-fitting uniforms and often mixing her military signals, a sailor's hat with an army jacket; or simply standing on the periphery and watching her brother and sister live their 1950s teenaged American lives.

Her sister was a shy, pretty girl who would grow into a baton-twirling homecoming queen. Her brother, also gorgeous, with a near-genius IQ and an attitude without a cause, was known to show up drunk at basketball games, skulking around the perimeter of the grandstand, leering at everyone with his buddies; he was even involved in a public brawl or two.

Her sister played the piano; her brother, the Pennsylvania state instrument, the accordion. The house was full of Debussy, polkas, the Everly Brothers, Elvis Presley, the Platters, Patti Page. There was romance, courtships, and the wonder of television: Ozzie and Harriet, Sid Caesar, Ernie Kovacs, and Milton Berle, whose drag routines scared the living hell out of her.

Their tiny branch of the family tree would take trips to New Castle and New Kensington, where they'd be swallowed up by an endless succession of aunts, uncles, and cousins. She remembers hiding underneath the kitchen table at her aunt Betty's house, listening to the constant chatter of the "Thompson Girls," her mother and a half dozen of her aunts drinking pot after pot of coffee, smoking cigarettes, and reliving stories of the proud (and large, by Protestant standards) Scottish family's life in Pottstown, PA, where their father, James Thompson, a coal miner from the age of thirteen, was involved in the early days of the United Mine Workers of America and more than once met with John L. Lewis in their home for strategy sessions.

She fell passionately in love with her aunt Polly's daughter, Lenora (her mother's namesake), an insurmountable number of years older than she was—a sweet, bubbly girl with a uniquely captivating face. She would fantasize of one day surmounting those years and eventually courting her.

She has little memory of her uncles at these gatherings, so eclipsed were they by their strong-willed, sharp-witted wives and their sisterly cohesion. She has to rely on a photograph of seven men standing in line under the shade of a sycamore, wearing khakis, white shirts, and sheepish grins, hands in pockets, as evidence of their actually being there.

The ride back to West Middlesex would seem terribly quiet by comparison. Arrival at their small, exurban ranch house—the eerie quiet, the air redolent of mown hay and cow manure—was always a letdown.

The fact was, no one in the family except her father actually *liked* living where they were. Before she was born, the family had lived in coastal areas of Connecticut, New York, and California, depending on where the US fleet was stationed. Her mother had been a secretary, worked for an attorney in Pittsburgh, and enjoyed the hustle and bustle of city life.

She imagines that after her father was discharged from the Navy, a career that he'd deeply loved and identified with, it was only the flat expanse of western Pennsylvania, the limitless horizons, the featureless topography of rural life that could approximate floating mid-ocean somewhere in the Atlantic or the Pacific.

The summers were hot and muggy, the winters long and bleak. She remembers once during a blizzard when the school closed early, getting off the bus at the edge of their property, her father waiting there to carry her back up the long driveway through waist-high snowdrifts to the house. Then there were summer nights waking up in a tangle of sweat-moistened bedsheets, the constant buzz of June bugs, Japanese beetles, and mosquitoes.

Life in the "snow belt" was harsh and getting harsher. The postwar economy hit hard in what would later also be known as the "rust belt." Factories and steel mills throughout Pennsylvania began closing. Her father lost his job working nights at the steel mill in Sharon and had to scramble for work: installing television antennas, delivering the morning newspaper, doing odd home repairs, whatever and wherever he could find the work. Her sister took a job at the delicatessen in town to help out. Her brother, who'd joined the Navy right out of high school, sent home what he could.

She remembers one Saturday afternoon helping her mother and sister clean house, then puddling up and crying: "Where is Dad? I miss him. I never see him anymore." Nothing her mother or sister could say would console her. Her father was her lodestar, her connection to the rest of the family, her champion. He was gentle, soft-spoken, ruggedly handsome with a sweet smile; she saw him in famous actors' faces; the sort of man everyone loved, her mother told her. He never raised a hand to any of his children. Once, when she'd thrown a roller skate across her bedroom

in a fit of anger because she'd been told by her mother to go clean her room, she heard her mother say to her father that he should spank her. She froze and waited for him. He came into her room, smiled at her, and offered to help her clean up; no spanking, no harsh words, no lecture, just unconditional acceptance.

Her father grew up in New Castle, the youngest of four children. One of his three sisters was an even-tempered, sweet-natured sort; another she barely remembers meeting; and the third was an overly sensitive woman, a devout Christian, prone to tears over others' lost souls. She remembers her aunt crying nonstop in their kitchen, wringing a lace handkerchief in her hands as she fretted over one person or another and their inevitable dispatch to hell for some small transgression. His mother, a Canadian-English woman, was a strict disciplinarian; his father, of Welsh extraction, worked as an accountant and was known, by contrast, for his engaging sense of humor.

She never met any of her grandparents—they'd passed away years before her birth—but of the four, she felt a tender affinity for her paternal grandfather, who, after losing his job during the Depression, had a nervous breakdown and spent his last years in a psychiatric hospital.

Darkness Falls

On a cold, snowy, February evening she was in the kitchen watching her mother cook dinner, waiting for her father to come home. She heard the car pull into the driveway and eyed the back door, waiting for him to come in. She heard him tamp his boots off, the door opening, and when he walked in she looked up at him and yelled, "Dad!" She didn't know why. It was a cry of concern without an explanation. Her mother was startled, turned and asked, "What's the matter?" Her father shook his head, said, "Nothing. Just a pain in my chest. I'm going to lie down a minute."

They followed him to her parents' bedroom. He sat on the edge of the bed, then fell backward. She saw her mother leaning over him and heard her ask him if he was all right. Her sister came out of her bedroom. Her mother said, "Call an ambulance. Tell Bobby to go to the Joneses'."

She didn't want to go, but put her boots and overcoat on and left the house. She walked through the snow to her cousins' house and waited there with them, watching, while their father ran down to see what he could do. Her cousins asked what the matter was. She said she didn't know, just that her father was sick. They went back and forth from the window to their fireplace to warm themselves. Eventually they saw an ambulance come up the drive. All was white, the ambulance, the medics' coats, the snowdrifts, and eventually the stretcher carrying her father out of the house.

It seemed like hours before her cousins' father returned. He walked in, went up to her, and knelt down. "Bobby," he said, "your father's dead."

* * *

She doesn't remember grieving after her father's death, not openly the way others around her were grieving. She felt terrible about that, but she was only eight years old and simply didn't know how to grieve, what she should say, how she should respond when there was nothing inside to respond with. There was only darkness, a void, her world coming to a halting stop.

The last time she saw his body was the evening before the burial. Her mother walked her up to the casket; she saw him in his blue Navy uniform, so unfamiliar, not the father she knew in his usual white shirt and khakis. Her mother took her hand and placed it on her father's, and she was shocked that anything other than ice could feel so cold.

Struck dumb by the loss, she would attend school and spend time with her cousins, but it was all just going through the motions, the shadow play of a lonely childhood in the rural backwoods of western Pennsylvania.

One day in early summer her cousin David came to her house and coaxed her out to play. She tried to engage in an imaginary game of war with him but was unable to do it. "I can't, David," she said. "I can't pretend anymore." She remembers the look of disappointment on his face, remembers feeling sorry for him. Together they walked back up the yard to the house and sat under the catalpa tree, staring off into the distance. She remembers thinking that at nine years old her childhood was over. She would try to join in games, to do her best in school, but she had difficulty understanding the dynamics of the simplest interactions, the reasons why anyone did anything, why they cared.

The following year in November, the rest of the world would join her in grieving over the assassination of President Kennedy. She would watch the news—the static image of his body lying in state at the Capitol; John Jr. saluting his father's casket—and it would trigger memories of her father's passing, the solemn burial, the playing of "Taps," the gun salute over his grave on the snowy hillside of the town cemetery, the ceremonial folding of the flag and handing it over to the widow.

On the Farm

The farm across the road from where they lived belonged to the Valentines, a Slovenian family of six: father, mother, and four boys, two younger boys, one boy her age, and another a year older.

During the school year, she and her cousins and the Valentine boys would wait for the rural route bus at the end of their driveway and join in tossing stones at the wires overhead that, when struck, would send a pinging sound reverberating down the line. This was the only real interaction between them, since she and her cousins were given strict orders not to associate with the Valentines, who were, her mother said, "ignorant farmers."

She had a young kid's instinctual sense that there was something not right about this. The boys were polite enough, fun to goof around with. Bob, the boy her age, the dominant one of the two older boys, was wild, with a silly sense of humor. John, the oldest boy, was sweet, shy, with blond hair, pale blue eyes, and freckles.

This prohibition of her mother's fed into what she was beginning to understand as an odd disconnect from reality: here they were, living in the midst of this farming community of Amish, Slovenian, Polish, and Irish families, yet these people were to be shunned—these hardworking folk who were the embodiment of the countryside, who provided the food, the color, and richness of what it meant to live in Pennsylvania—were somehow less deserving.

She would eventually pay an illicit visit to the Valentines' farm. She returned home afterward and made a forthright argument that her mother had it all wrong—they were nice people, hardworking people, resourceful, and she intended to continue associating with them. Détente was reached.

She began to spend all her extra time with the Valentines. She became a regular fixture on the farm, helping with chores: splitting wood, repairing fence posts, baling hay in the late summers, canning vegetables, and making blood sausage in the fall—a process that involved the killing and butchering of several formerly adorable animals. She learned to drive the tractor, ride horseback, and hunt—though she never felt comfortable with the carnage involved and always missed her target. She would tag along with the family to the Slovenian Club in Sharon, and had been publicly introduced as an "honorary Slovenian" at a children's' pageant, where she stood onstage and sang in the chorus and recited something Slovenian from a small, crumpled piece of paper. She finally found out why people cared and what was worth caring about.

Boy in a Bra

While she was busy becoming a Slovenian farm boy, her sister was busy trying to support their small family. At seventeen, the poor girl who'd once planned to study nutrition at Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York had instead found work as a secretary at a loan company in Sharon.

Their mother, who'd never learned how to drive a car, was left to take care of the home. A self-admitted lousy cook (a point never argued by her children), she would make up for this by being a meticulous housekeeper, paying the bills, washing and ironing even their bedsheets, and staying up nights sewing clothes—pants for her rapidly growing son and tailored suits and dresses for their young breadwinner.

Like a visiting celestial object, the older son would make brief appearances when on leave—magnifying their world with stories of his life under the sea, submarines having become the supreme tactical weapon of the Cold War. He would sometimes bring shipmates home with him, and together they would recount their drunken exploits in ports of call around the world. She idolized her brother and his friends, had young boy crushes on these remarkably handsome, carousing seafarers, and each time they would leave, she began grieving days before their departure, cried at the airport when sending them off, and returned home to the stultifying quiet where she would sink into long periods of moodiness and depression.

The perpetual dilation and contraction of her world was beginning to wear on her. She would identify as an

outsider, the one who was always left behind. Within their immediate family, though she had siblings, she felt like an only child. Within the larger family, her family unit was isolated, alienated from the Pittsburgh nucleus. She was left behind, first by her brother when he joined the Navy, then by her father, and now her brother again.

Like many solitary children, she fantasized having a twin—someone to sleep next to, to share clothes and cryptic secrets with, to engage in perpetual play with, even to argue with. As a solitary, gender-questioning child, she would have mixed fantasies of one day becoming a sailor, wearing those wonderful tailored blue uniforms, standing on deck, buffeted by the wind, nothing but blue horizon around her; yet she also fantasized about miraculously transforming into a young girl, of being pampered and adored just because she was a girl and not a boy. She would try to program her dreams before bedtime so that at least her subconscious mind could enjoy a congruent life, the sort of life she wished for all day long.

Her second foray into the world of cross-dressing occurred one dark winter morning while her mother and sister were still asleep. She'd closely observed her mother's laundry routine and knew that there were still clothes in the dryer, including underthings. She got out of bed in the darkness, crept into the pantry, and opened the dryer door. She searched for and found one of her mother's bras and tried it on. She remembers feeling deeply disappointed that by doing so she didn't sprout breasts, and she was poignantly aware of the absurdity of a ten-year-old boy wearing a contraption he had no anatomical use for. She quickly removed the bra and put it back in the dryer, returned to bed, and meditated on the futility of ever being able to bridge the divide between anatomy and desire.

To spend one's life either avoiding mirrors or peering into them with a sense of profound disappointment is a kind of hell. So much of one's time and thoughts wasted on critical self-assessment. For her, it was all about the face: her lips not plump enough; the smile not pretty enough; her teeth not prominent enough. As a child, she had an obsession with pronounced overbites, envied others with this trait, and chose her friends based purely on their orthodonture: Marsha Adams, Joey Fong, Stephen Padnich, her best friends in grade school, were bucktoothed, goofy kids, not popular, but true friends to her. There was just something about that ever-inviting, open-faced look of prominent incisors that floored her, made her knees wobble, and filled her with envy.

When she was ten she was hit in the face with a line-drive baseball at close range. She fell and blacked out a few seconds. Then her cousins picked her up and escorted her home, staggering, bleeding from the mouth and nose. Her mother and sister applied ice and assured her that she was all right. The next day, when she looked in the mirror, she was horrified: the right side of her face was grotesquely distorted, her nose misshapen, her eyes blackened. It was only then that she broke down and cried. For more than a week she refused to leave the house. She would never shake that first image of herself as hideous, a monster out of a *Twilight Zone* episode.

A Man in the House

Her sister eventually met and fell in love with a loveable young man who worked with her in the office. In the Army Reserve, he was a sports nut. He played ball with her, grooming her to be a professional baseball pitcher. He bought her subscriptions to *Sporting News* and *Sportsweek*, magazines that she never looked at, not understanding what all the fuss was about—all the trades and deals and statistics bored the hell out of her. But rather than hurt his feelings, she feigned interest.

He was handsome, vibrant, playful, funny—just what their dreary lives needed. He lived with his parents and younger brother two towns to the north in Sharpsville. He would visit them Friday and Saturday evenings, bring pizza or subs, and stay up late watching B-movie science fiction on television. She loved him and felt perfectly comfortable with him around.

The two families would meet at his parents' house in Sharpsville. His father was a sweet, unassuming man; his mother, a big blustery, loud woman and a member of the Baptist church. She urged her son's fiancée to bring her young brother with her to church on Sundays. Shy younger brother complied, never appreciating any of it, though pretending to care. She was even baptized in the church, though all she remembers of the event was what she wore: a pair of white, tight-fitting stretch jeans that she favored because of their girlish look and a white button-down shirt.

After the requisite months of courtship, the young couple would marry, then cart mother and younger brother off with them on their honeymoon to Massachusetts. When they returned home, the couple would settle in their house in West Middlesex, sharing the bedroom once shared by her mother and father.

It was during her brother-in-law's tenancy at their home that she would flirt once more with cross-dressing. She'd taken a long bath one evening and afterward stood in front of the bathroom cabinet mirror. She opened the cabinet door—had fantasized numerous occasions about doing this—and took out her mother's lipstick and uncapped it, her heart pounding. She was about to put a little dab on her upper lip when she heard a hand on the bathroom door. She quickly hid the lipstick in her hand, slammed the cabinet, and pretended to be doing something in the sink. "What are you doing?" "Nothing." "Your mother wondered why you were taking so long." "I'm done, just finishing." She nearly fainted. What would have happened if she'd been caught? The humiliation at the thought was so intense that she didn't try something like that again for several years.

This family arrangement didn't last long. What appeared to the rest of the world a perfect match would eventually unravel. For inexplicable reasons, these two, who got along so marvelously, would never consummate their union, and the marriage was eventually annulled. The breakup was a total surprise to her. One day he was there, the next he was gone. Eventually it was determined that her brother-in-law would have preferred consummation with another man. This news meant nothing to her. She cried and ached at the thought of losing yet another person. Why, she wondered, was she always being left behind?

California Dreams

It was around the time of her sister's annulment that the topic of California was introduced. Her mother would describe to her what life had been like during the mid-forties in Santa Clara Valley. One of the richest agricultural and food-processing areas in the world, the valley was replete with peach, pear, plum, apricot, and almond orchards. Her mother described standing on the street corner of San Jose in the warmth of a seventy-degree winter sun and seeing the snowcapped peaks of Mount Hamilton twenty-five miles due east; riding with a friend over Highway 17, known then as "Dead Man's Alley," to the beaches and harbor of Santa Cruz; and finally, the most potent image of all for her, going up to San Francisco, to North Beach, and visiting the nightclub called Finocchio's where all the beautiful women would sing, dance, and perform Bette Davis impersonations. Then, for the finale, they would toss their wigs, revealing that they were actually men.

After hearing this story, she came one halting second away from revealing to her mother that she wanted to be a girl just like that. She can remember the moment, sitting in their living room, taking a deep breath, her heart pounding, and then saying nothing, or perhaps a calculatedly casual, "Oh."

At first, these stories her mother shared seemed ad hoc reminiscences. Later, the prospect was gingerly introduced that she and her sister and mother would pack up and move to California. Her mother was careful to let her know that it was—for the time being—just a thought, a possibility.

Regardless of that caution, she immediately began to imagine leaving for California. For once in her life, she would be the one saying good-bye, *adios*, *auf wiedersehen*, *sayonara*. She saw them in a Cleaveresque, suburban California home, sun drenched, living a life of nonchalant ease. As much as she loved working on the farm and being adopted by the Valentines, she relished the idea of saying good-bye to it all for the excitement of the West Coast.

The dream would eventually become reality: her sister arranged for a transfer to the San Jose branch of the loan company where she worked; their home was sold, and the contents shipped to California. The three of them would be joined by her brother's girlfriend, a lounge singer he'd met in New London, Connecticut, who'd been raised in Los Banos, California. In August 1966 they would drive across the states to San Jose—four people and one small terrier dog named Tippi.

The Summer of Love

It was pure coincidence that this family from small-town Pennsylvania—land of subsistence farms, tractors, and horse-drawn Amish carriages—would arrive in the Bay Area in the mid-sixties just when it was on the cusp of

becoming the alternative culture capital of America, if not the world. Unbeknownst to them, they were just a small part of a massive stream of wayward teens, college dropouts, groovy seekers of all kinds flooding into California. A year before, the Free Speech Movement had taken over the University of California, Berkeley; the Mamas and the Papas' *California Dreamin'* was still in the Top 40 play charts; Owsley Stanley was mass-producing LSD and hosting "acid test" orgies in the Santa Cruz Mountains; the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Janis Joplin, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and hosts of other California rock bands were taking off in San Francisco, where the Beats had set up camp ten years before. There was also the immigration of a more rarefied sort—brainy, semiconductor engineers who would trigger the eventual conversion of Santa Clara Valley from a carbon-based economy to one based almost entirely on silicon. All this, of course, was something this little family from the backwoods of Pennsylvania would discover eventually.

When they landed in San Jose, the family stayed with a friend of her mother's and the woman's daughter in Willow Glen, a tony section of town that retained some charm from the past—sycamore-lined streets, manicured lawns, stately Victorians. The daughter, a brusque woman who wore mannish suits and short bobbed hair, owned a print shop on San Carlos Street on the west side in the Burbank district. They would soon find a small, three-bedroom house not far from the print shop on Boston Avenue in this older, low-income section of town amid the mind-blowing suburban sprawl that San Jose had become. What was once cherry, apricot, and almond orchards had become street after street of single-story stucco homes with postage-stamp dichondra lawns—an odd, close-cropped, dark-green vegetation that required little upkeep, save the occasional watering—an organic predecessor of AstroTurf.

She remembers the pervasive smell of lawn fertilizers and the near-perpetual brownish haze overhead that burned her eyes, her first introduction to Santa Clara Valley smog.

For months she would be in a state of culture shock: not only was this the West Coast, but she was in a big city (by her standards), with avenues and boulevards, cars and trucks and people everywhere. Shortly after they moved to the home on Boston Avenue, her mother was hired at a clothing consignment shop on the other side of San Carlos Street—a four-lane boulevard replete with "Walk" and "Don't Walk" signals.

One day her mother called and invited her to come to the shop for a visit. She walked to the corner of Wabash and San Carlos Streets. She pushed the signal button, saw the "Walk" signal, and began to cross the street until the sign switched to "Don't Walk," at which point she panicked, returned to the corner, walked back home, and called her mother. "Where are you?" "Home." "Why?" "I couldn't cross the street in time." Her mother had to explain the procedure to her and assure her that she wouldn't be killed crossing the street before she would make another attempt.

She would make other visits to the clothing shop to run an errand or to walk her mother home at night. The shop always smelled of mothballs and mildew. She would sit in the chair at the front counter positioned right next to the women's shoe rack, and when her mother stepped away from the counter, she would study the shoes furtively, trying to imagine if any of them would fit her. She would never touch them, just look, had no idea how women's shoe sizes worked anyway, though she would often dream of one day being alone in the store—able to dive into the clothes racks, to twirl around in gowns and heels, a queer little boy in ladies' wear heaven.

Coming Out Step by Step

It would be more than ten years before she would actually "come out" to anyone. By then, she had gone to college, dropped out, and moved to Santa Cruz. She joined an acting troupe, where she met a young woman whom she would marry ten years later. They moved in together, and one evening a few nights before Halloween, she confessed her lifelong desire to dress fully. To her surprise, her lover was accepting. Her dark secret was now revealed and the sense of relief was intoxicating.

The process of coming out in those days was very slow for most. Cross-dressing, as it was known then, was hidden from all but a few. So her secret was kept between them—the practice limited to moments home alone and Halloween parties where she'd show up disguised and unrecognized by those who knew her otherwise.

Eventually she would try to reach out to others via classifieds in cross-dressing magazines. She sent photos and an ad expressing her desire to meet others who would like to correspond. She received many letters, most from admirers whom she had no interest in meeting.

The desire to live and express her gender identity would ebb and flow, a seesaw experience of immersion bordering on obsession, followed by denial and repression. When she and her lover decided to move from Santa Cruz to San Francisco, the hub of gender ambiguity, she was in the denial phase. She returned to college and majored in English with an emphasis in creative writing at San Francisco State University.

Slowly, like a stalking predator, the desire to experience the cross-dressing scene, even if vicariously, led her to adult bookstores—the only place in the 1980s where one could find classified listings from other cross-dressers. One day, while checking out the gay section of an adult bookstore on Market Street, she had the bizarre experience of looking up and seeing herself staring back at her from the glossy cover of a magazine. The shock took her breath away—she was both flattered and frightened that the publishers had chosen her image for the cover. She bought a copy, took it home, and stored it in a box with miscellaneous papers.

* * *

It would be another twenty years before she decided to end the tawdry secrecy and "come out" to all, including her two young sons. In the nineties, the Internet boom sparked what became the transgender movement. Until then there were only two options for gender-variant people: transsexual surgery and living a life of stealth, or staying in the closet. Now, the options began to blur the limits of the gender binary. Transgender activists were speaking out in favor of including all modes of gender expression, and she wasn't about to stand by and miss all the fun. She and her wife would go through an amicable divorce, she would move a few blocks away, and she would share custody of their children. On May 4, 1998, she began living her life as an out and proud gender queer. Four years later, her work "Passing Realities" was published in an anthology on gender issues, *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond the Sexual Binary*.

In the fifty years since the frightening realization that she was different, parts of the world have begun to welcome gender-variant people. Now, in 2015, Caitlyn Jenner appears on the cover of *Vanity Fair*, and young transgender children, if they are lucky, have accepting parents who support them on their journey to gender congruity. At last, transgender youth can be assured they are not alone.

Alyson Lie suffers from bicoastal disorder and has flitted from east to west and back again several times. She currently lives in Massachusetts, where she can be near her two sons.