A New Son Begets A New Mother
by Kim Morrow

Having grown up in California with a mom who was lesbian, I thought I was one of the most open-minded people around. I was liberal, well-educated, informed on social justice issues and accepting of all people. I had helped fight the long fight for gay marriage. Naturally, I raised my daughter, Claire, to listen to her true self. She was an odd kid, unusually intelligent from a young age and socially awkward, sometimes lacking empathy and always coming at things from a different way than her peers. I had made it my practice as her mother to allow and defend her unique way of being in the world.

But when she announced she was a man at age 15, she had gone too far even for this open-minded mom: this I could not support. Convinced that this was an impulsive teenage phase with no regard for the long and serious fight for the rights of her LGBT predecessors, I greeted her announcement with denial, anger, stonewalling and scorn. Before I even had a chance to catch my breath, she flagrantly announced her new identity to the world on social media, receiving heart emojis and congratulations from her friends, to my utter and panicked consternation.

She discarded the name I had given her at birth like she stuffed the dresses from her closet into garbage bags. She told me her new name was “Luca,” the Italian version of “Luke.” And she insisted that she was to be referred to, without fail, as “he” or “him.” Suddenly the words and nicknames that had lovingly slipped off my tongue so easily in our home for years were contraband: “Clairabelle,” “supergirl,” “girls,” “daughters,” “she,” “her.” I had been slapped in the face by something I never thought was possible. As she repeatedly rebuked me for using the wrong vocabulary, I became the “mom who didn’t get it,” and Luca, the pioneering vanguard. It felt as if a UFO had landed in our backyard. My unusual child was now embarking on a process that was mind-bendingly alien. I wasn’t sure I was capable of accommodating this one.

Our household filled with strangeness, tension, humor, and tears as Luca and his sister and I strained to grow together. Gender identity was thrown up into the air like a deck of cards spattering all over the place. Luca started wearing flower prints at the same time he started visiting a barber shop. My daughter Marielle, a budding actor and decidedly feminine twelve-year-old, serendipitously got the lead role of Tevye—the bearded, grumpy patriarch—in a production of Fiddler on the Roof, sending our household into a maelstrom of pronouns for two months. My relationship with my new boyfriend, a broad-shouldered outdoorsman, gave me new eyes to see my own relationship to masculinity and femininity, including the twists of having been raised by a lesbian mother. Ironically, my mother, who had entered the LGBT world decades earlier, was the one who had the hardest time of all understanding Luca’s transition. She took it as a deeply personal rejection of female-ness, and prodded me with anxiously impatient phone calls.

Luca begged his dad and me to let him start testosterone therapy so that his body
would begin to match the gender he felt himself to be. At first, we refused to even have the conversation. He could figure that stuff out when he became an adult. But he wouldn’t take no for an answer. The therapist we tried had proven to be of no help. I had no professionals to talk with about how to handle this. I decided my strategy was to wait and watch: if it was a phase, Luca would move on to something else; if not, well, then, we had a big challenge on our plates.

As I reluctantly began to call “him” Luca, surprises fluttered in. Almost immediately, Luca started enjoying the way he looked. Gone was the long, untouched hair of a non-hairstyle; gone were the sobbing sessions in clothing store dressing rooms, curled up in a fetal position on the floor; gone were the hundreds of Friday nights spent at home with his parents instead of with friends. Instead, he waltzed out of a dressing room wearing a tuxedo when it was time for prom. He went to hear bands or hang out around backyard fire pits with friends. He started dating for the first time in his life. Always an extraordinary student, he began to approach his college-prep coursework with unparalleled focus and determination. To top it all off, he also started training for a marathon. One night, watching from the balcony of a theater as he performed at the piano on stage, I glimpsed an unusually gifted, disciplined, kind and funny young man – and realized that he was my son.

My resolve to let Luca deal with the medical aspects of his transition as an adult and on his own was eventually eroded by my maternal desire for him to have the best medical care possible—which meant that I, as his mother, should be in the driver’s seat. I found a new therapist for him and he started seeing her weekly. I reluctantly started researching and making phone calls, taking stock of the options in front of us. I still wanted to buy time, to delay the unbearable choice of whether to consent to irreversible medical intervention on a teenager whose brain was not yet fully formed. But when an unusual condition was discovered in “his” uterus, and the doctor calmly told us that the best treatment was actually the precise thing that Luca had been insistently lobbying us for months—testosterone—I finally raised the white flag of surrender. We stood on our driveway after the doctor’s appointment that day as the anguish of losing my daughter’s sweet voice and smooth cheeks erupted in my body in sobs. I held “him” in my arms—the curve of his feminine body that was so intimately connected to me as my daughter, Claire— and told him it felt like he was boarding a steamship to another country. How could I possibly bear this transmogrification?

A few months later he plunged the first syringe full of testosterone into his belly while I watched, and each week he documented his changing voice by recording himself singing “Georgia” at the piano, for YouTube. I got through dozens of awkward conversations with family members, coworkers and friends, announcing the change in our family. He was delighted. He continued to excel. Much to my amazement, it became clear that by every measure of human health, he was thriving. I started to exhale. We had climbed this mountain. The rest could wait.

But while he submitted his college applications like a judo master, one afternoon at the dining room table he explained to me the shame he would feel if he had to start college as a man who was hiding breasts. In the privacy-deprived close quarters of dorm life, there would be no hiding the DD breasts that he now compressed under a binder for eight hours a day; no way to shave at the communal sink next to the other guys with towels around their waists; no way to simply be perceived as all he wanted to be: just another guy. When the child who had always been intellectually gifted said that he would rather not even go to college than endure such secrecy and shame, I finally understood that the “top surgery” he wanted was essential to his mental health. It was time to climb another
mountain, this one even higher than the first. And as much as I grieved losing my daughter, it was I who had to facilitate her erasure. I had to arrange for Luca to have a double-mastectomy.

Luca found a plastic surgeon in San Francisco who was a hero with the transgender community. I looked at his web site in pieces, digesting only so much as I could handle at one time, until I finally realized the care and compassion that this doctor’s practice was offering to a marginalized and often suffering population. We set up a phone consultation. We found out, incredibly, that Luca’s health insurance would cover 90% of the surgery costs. We rented a house nearby for a week, where Luca would convalesce. We made travel plans for Luca, his sister and me. My mom, who, thanks to a visit to Luca’s therapist, had finally had a 180-degree conversion about Luca’s gender transition and was now and ardent supporter, would accompany us. My brother and his family would be only a few miles away, close enough to come over for dinner. We would do this as a family.

Four months before the surgery, as Luca’s voice dropped an octave and hair began to grow on his chest, he called me one night with a giggle in his voice: he had been accepted at Harvard University. Waves of awe and gratitude made me teary for weeks: by a hair’s breadth of genius, hard work and chance, my unusual, now transgender child would have access to a world of privilege and opportunity that would change the course of his life forever. He would finally have the chance for his unusual mind to soar in a way that I had dreamt of his entire life. The contrast between this newly evident, seemingly glittering path and the suffering that so many transgender youth experience—the mental health issues, homelessness, addiction issues, family rejections—left me breathless with humility.

Weeks before leaving for college, he had surgery in San Francisco, surrounded by his grandmother, his sister, and me. In the recovery room, his newly flat chest wrapped in bandages, he sobbed tears of gratitude and relief that he was finally free of the body that had held him back. “I get to be myself now,” he cried. I kissed his head, blinked tears out of my own eyes, and sat back to gaze at him, enveloped in a kind of quiet holiness that had descended upon us as the IV machines whirred. Suddenly I saw him not as my child, but as a person who had persistently taken a singular and difficult course to achieve the cohesion of his selfhood. To be so young and to know so certainly who he was—to have the fearlessness to have parts of his body literally cut away—was to express a kind of personal power and determination that left me awash in awe. For eighteen years, I had witnessed the development of this unique, and often odd, person with an incredible mind; I had stood by as he mastered music, chemistry, French and nearly anything he set his mind to with a kind of aptitude that was uniquely his. Now his future at Harvard and beyond stretched out before him, holding singular opportunities for him to make his contribution to the world. It was as if I finally beheld all the facets of a rare crystal. The utter uniqueness and power of Luca being Luca took my breath away. I felt that I was sitting at the feet of a legend.

I saw now that it was I who had needed to make my own transition. I was the one who had to break open my understanding of gender. I was the one who had to embrace a fuller understanding of my child than I ever expected. I was the one who had to humbly accept how much I didn’t know, and I was the one who had to embrace the joy and delight of turning the tables on societal expectations.

The birth of my son, I saw now, had been a sacred path. It had made me a new mother—a wiser, more open-hearted, more joyful and more loving one. And finally, I realized that it was not at all about what I had lost, but all about what I had gained.
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