

Just Another Girl (Who Used to Be a Boy)

Yes, that's right—happy 26-year-old Amy was once shy, insecure Brendan. And she remade her life—and her body—with the unconditional support of her friends. How would you react if a pal said he was becoming a she? Read on and find your answer.

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by Genevieve Field



Amy with her other “family,” best friends Allison, left, and Valerie. Inset: Amy, as Brendan, a young boy in Missouri.

A striking blue-eyed blond deftly navigates Los Angeles’ Melrose Avenue in her blue convertible Beetle. Her name is Amy Karn, and she could be any 26-year-old girl headed to Friday after-work drinks with the top up, windows down and her hair blowing in the breeze. Perma-glued to her cell, she’s usually talking to Valerie Reynolds, her best friend. This time Valerie’s calling to ask: Did Amy bring the halter bra she needs to borrow? Check. “We share everything,” says Amy. “I don’t know where I’d be without her.” Every woman needs close friends to lean on, but for Amy, this has never been truer. Over the past two-plus years, between settling into her first “grown-up” apartment, getting her career off the ground and trying to find love, Amy has made one mind-blowing transition her friends have not: She’s changed from a man into a woman.

Amy is transgender, meaning she does not identify with the sex she was born as. She came into the world as Brendan,* a boy, but for as long as she can remember, she's felt deeply, inherently female. How many people share Amy's sense of gender dysphoria? A 2008 study estimated that about one in every 500 people worldwide intends to change his or her sex (they're often called transsexual). And that number could be rising; according to Jeffrey Spiegel, M.D., the chief of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery at Boston University School of Medicine, "Every week I perform multiple surgeries on transgender women. There's a growing awareness of this issue."

Why the uptick? One factor may be a blossoming cultural acceptance, particularly among young people: In a recent poll, 80 percent of *glamour.com* readers said they would be supportive of a friend who wanted to change their sex. As Casey Weitzman, a psychotherapist who has counseled Amy, says, "It's a more tolerant world now. Never before have young people been so prepared to help friends through a transition like Amy's." No one knows this better than Amy herself: "This whole process nearly brought me to my knees a few times," she says. "And my friends were able to carry me when my family was too shocked or sad to bear it. I'm grateful to have learned just how deep friendship can go."

"You Don't Need to Hide"

Growing up as Brendan in an affluent, tight-knit Missouri suburb, Amy and her twin sister led what seemed to be a picture-perfect life. But from the age of six, Amy felt different. "It wasn't that I hated my male body," says Amy, "it was that I didn't relate to the cultural expectations that went with it." Instead of playing hockey with the boys on the block, Amy preferred playing dolls with her sister (who does not wish to be named in this story). At 15 she came out as a gay male. "The kids at school accepted it, but I felt like my sister and parents had a harder time," says Amy. "As I remember it, my mom said, 'I already knew that. What's the problem?' And that was the end of the conversation. We'd never been a very open family, but it startled me to think that she'd known about my struggles and hadn't acknowledged them. I felt our relationship, and myself, close down after that."

Three years later, as a freshman studying architecture at the University of Southern California, Amy realized that she was still harboring a deeper secret. "At that point, I had admitted to myself that I wasn't gay; I was transgender," she says. "I would lock myself in my bedroom and try on makeup, like a teenage girl experimenting for the first time. I thought no one knew until my junior year when one of my housemates, Allison Doyle, started knocking on my door. She'd say, 'I know what you're doing in there, and you don't need to hide.'"

"To me it made sense," says Allison now. Even as Brendan, "Amy's personality was feminine, she was more fashionable than me, and she could act like a bitch—ha!" And so Allison made a point to never pass her roommate's locked bedroom door without a knock and a friendly razzing.

“Thanks to her relentless nosiness,” jokes Amy, “I got up the courage to go out publicly as a woman. I went to a ‘celebrity drag’ party as Britney Spears—pre-meltdown. I was terrified, but it ended up being fun, cathartic...and kind of addictive. I began dressing in drag for parties whenever I could. But I still wasn’t ready to say, ‘This is closer to the real me than you think.’”

That changed the following year, on a semester abroad in Italy. “After all the beauty I’d seen, there was no way I could put myself back into what I saw as an ugly box; I was going to become a woman,” Amy says. But talking to her friend Valerie is what made it real. “One snowy night we were walking through a piazza,” says Amy, “and I started sobbing. Finally, I turned to Valerie and said, ‘I have to tell you something.’ And I’ll never forget what she said: ‘Whatever you think is going to be shocking to me is not going to be shocking.’” Just like that, a best-friendship was born.

“My Friend Was the Same Person”

Back at USC, Valerie had to accept that the cute, sardonic gay guy she’d grown so close to in Italy wasn’t going to be around much longer. “Briefly, I admit, I was concerned for her well-being,” says Valerie now. “When you know a person one way and they dramatically change, it can change the relationship.” It wasn’t long, though, before Valerie says she came to understand that “my friend would always be the same person, even if the package was different. She would still inspire me and teach me weird facts about her favorite buildings and make me laugh, no matter what her name was. Besides, what she’d shared with me had created a bond that you don’t get with everyone in your life.”

Valerie takes friendship seriously,” says Amy. “When we got back from Italy and I thought I might lose my nerve about coming out as trans, she encouraged me to talk to my parents.” That difficult conversation ended with Amy’s father in tears, saying, “I’m sorry I haven’t been there for you, but I don’t know how.” Ultimately, Amy’s parents did find a way to help out, by agreeing to contribute money for therapy to explore her reasons for wanting to change her sex.

“I think my parents thought I could work through this and be cured,” says Amy. “That certainly wasn’t why I sought out help. I knew I wanted to transition, but I was scared—scared of whether or not I would ‘pass’ as a woman, scared that I would lose my parents’ love, scared that I’d never get a decent job.... I had so many questions: What kind of person makes this kind of decision? Does it make you weak, sick, wrong? There was a lot to wade through before I got to the point of being ready to start changing my body through hormones.”

After nine months of counseling, Amy was ready. She started an extensive regime of hormone therapy that would shrink her muscles to more feminine proportions and redistribute body fat from her shoulders, neck and arms to her breasts, hips and thighs. (Amy says she may get genital reconstruction surgery, but she isn’t in a hurry. “It’s \$15,000 to \$30,000 I don’t have,” says Amy. “By the time I save that much, maybe I’ll be emotionally

prepared.”)

Her parents had attended her college graduation the previous spring, but come the following fall and winter, Amy didn't go home to spend the holidays with her family. “My parents and I had pretty much stopped talking at that point,” she says. “Thankfully, I had grown closer than ever with Valerie and Allison.” As her body continued to transform itself from male to female over the next year, says Amy, “My best friends really stepped up. I was starting to present regularly as a woman when I went out with them in the evenings, and if I got so much as a funny look, Allison would say, ‘Listen to me, it just doesn't matter. The people who really count will be OK with this.’”

Valerie was even more fiercely protective. Once, she and Amy went to lunch with a male colleague of Amy's who didn't know she was transitioning. (She was still binding her chest at the architecture firm where she worked and was presenting herself as Brendan.) A transgender woman walked into the restaurant, clearly disconcerting their male friend. “That is a man,” he kept repeating, shaking his head again and again. “That is a man!”

“That is a person,” snapped Valerie. “That is a human being, and you are being disrespectful.”

Looking back, Amy says, “I was wowed by Valerie, but it actually scared me that she had to do that. I was like, What's he going to say when I come out at work?”

“I Wore the Tallest Shoes I Had”

Two months later, despite her anxiety, Amy did come out as transgender at work. “I told them I'd been taking hormones and that soon I'd be presenting as a woman,” she says. Everyone, even the guy Valerie chewed out, was respectful. Amy picked her twenty-fifth birthday, October 6, 2008, as the day she'd let go of Brendan forever.

On October 5, Amy went to a stylist and got her uneven chin-length hair highlighted and cut in a soft bob. The next morning, on her birthday, she performed what was by now a fairly normal weekend routine: She shaved her underarms, legs and face (hormones had lessened but not eliminated her facial hair), applied light makeup and ran a flatiron (an essential gift from Valerie) through her bangs. The outfit she'd picked out for that day—slacks, an oxford over a tank, and pumps—was “basically the female version of what I'd worn every single day as a guy,” she says. “I didn't want to overwhelm everyone on the first day.” If her coworkers registered any shock, however, Amy was in too much pain to notice. “I wore the tallest shoes I had that day because I wanted to look cute,” she says. “But I didn't know that wearing heels for an entire day is hard! By the time I got to the office I could barely walk. All I could focus on was getting to my desk and sitting down. So, in a way, maybe those shoes were a blessing.”

Within a month, in spite of her friends' entreaties not to rush herself, Amy felt anxious to embark on her next rite of passage: dating as a woman. She started on a dating site that

matches men with transgender women. Amy's first real date went well—so well that she went out several more times with the guy, but when things started to get more serious, he disappeared. "It hurt a lot," says Amy. "Having only dated as a guy, I hadn't experienced that kind of vulnerability. It was awful!"

As always, Valerie and Allison were there to commiserate. Remembers Allison:
"At first Amy was like, 'I'm female now! I'm going to get a boyfriend and go ride off in my pumpkin!' And I said, 'No, you're going to be here with the rest of us, bitching about how Mr. Right is out there somewhere but we can't find him!'"

True to Allison's prediction, Amy is still looking for a man to fall in love with, but she's had some promising short relationships. "I met a cute, smart guy on OKCupid," Amy says. "I told him before we met that I was transgender, and he thought about it and said, 'Are you planning on having surgery?' And I said, 'I think so.' And he said, 'So it's a temporary problem.'" Her anatomy wasn't a deal breaker and didn't prevent them from being physically intimate. Ultimately Amy was the one who ended their relationship. "Having experienced plenty of rejection, it was empowering. I was like, Hey, I have as much power as he does."

"I Wondered If Our Family Could Ever Be Repaired"

For all the little victories in Amy's new life, one thing haunted her: It had been months since she had talked to her parents, and with each passing day, Amy fell deeper into depression. "At one point, being alienated from my parents really sunk me into despair," says Amy. "I was pretending to take it all in stride. But when I was home alone, I'd crash. I didn't want to lean on my friends more than I already had, so I told them I was just grumpy from work stress or the hormones." Sometimes it takes a true friend to recognize the very thing we're hiding from the world. "Valerie saw it," says Amy. "She insisted I check in to a hospital for an evaluation. The reprieve was enough to make it all seem bearable again."

After a very difficult year, one phone call from the hospital brought Amy's parents to her side. It was their first time meeting her as a woman, and, says Amy, "we were all in tears. My mom didn't take her eyes off me. I could tell she was trying to understand, Who is this person? There was so much pain in the room that I wondered if our family could ever be repaired."

Then, last fall, Amy's dad called her and asked if she'd like to take a wine tasting trip with him and her mom. Amy met her parents at the Los Angeles airport and drove them in her Beetle to Santa Barbara. "They acted like everything was fine that weekend," recalls Amy. "My dad just said, 'I haven't seen you this happy in a long time.'" While there were no cathartic conversations over glasses of cabernet, Amy says, "I could feel them start relaxing into an attitude, like, 'OK, this is our kid. And that is all that matters.'"

The Amy of today is more optimistic than ever. She is strengthening her connection to her parents and sister, and is overwhelmingly grateful to the friends who insisted on helping her find her true self. "One of my goals," she says, "is to give back as much as my friends have given me. Never again will I tease Valerie for complaining about how hard it is to be a curvy-bodied woman in L.A. A friend does not say, 'My issues are bigger than yours.' A friend listens as long as they can and then says, 'You're beautiful, I love you—now shut up and I'll buy you a drink.'"

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*Name has been changed.

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COMMENTS:

I want to thank you for publishing this article. As a transsexual woman in the beginning stages of my transition, I can identify with exactly what Amy is going through, and I can see so much of my own experience in her story.

It is important that people understand that we are people, just like anyone else. We simply were born with an unusual birth defect. And like some birth defects, while we can never be complete free of it, with support from others and medical treatment we can live as full and rich a life as anyone else.

Posted 04/12/2010 11:39:32am by nekoali

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As lovely as this story is, what impresses and pleases me even more is that you published it. Society needs more articles showing acceptance of those who are different. They promote understanding and tolerance, qualities in short-supply at this time. Good work, Glamour!!

Posted 4/10/2010 8:38:45am by shybiker

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How great is it that Glamour is so open about this issue? Even though I'm not transsexual and don't have transsexual friends, I really appreciate the time this issue took to tell a story of openness and acceptance. I can say I'm honestly happy for Amy and am so amazed at how accepting a society we have become :) Posted 04/09/2010 1:06:01pm by arinkle

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I had my surgery a few weeks ago, and the emotional difference it has had on me has been amazing, i can never imagine being as pretty as Amy, and my family will accept me but I am me, a newly born woman. Amy i wish you well with your journey.

Posted 04/09/2010 3:01:37amby glamourpuss2010

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I was very emotionally happy to see such a beautiful article as this one. I am also a spouse of a transsexual woman, and nothing can be as hard as to trying to get people to understand what we are going through. I hope this article opens up the readers eyes that their just as human as they are.

Posted 04/09/2010 12:27:12amby ominasser88

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A friend of mine, who actually knows one of Amy's friends, reminded me of what a small world it is when she sent me the link to this article. This story touched me deeply because four weeks ago I reached the two-year mark in my own transition. I'm pretty sure I've never met Amy, but her story is one I'm all too familiar with. I broke into tears reading about her journey, relating to many of the struggles that she has gone through. Having only come out to my family and friends about this in the last year, it is still a painful road. I have to deal with each person and their reaction to my transition individually. For some of my friends, it's still a difficult concept. For my family, not having ever felt comfortable to be myself around them in the past, I can only imagine after 26 years, how difficult this is for them. Losing the respect and adoration of my parents over this has been crushing for me personally, and I am still hoping with time, that will improve. If it wasn't for the support of a few of my closest friends, I don't know if I could have made it to this point. I am so happy for Amy and all of her successes, and I am encouraged that things may get better for myself as well. It takes a lot of courage to be true to yourself and face the countless fears, both imagined and real, that such a great change embodies. But it is the choice to face each one of those fears individually that makes someone like Amy strong. My heart goes out to you Amy and your wonderful friends. Thank you for sharing your heartwarming story.

Posted 04/08/2010 11:25:22pmby alyssacornett

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This is a lovely story that I read on a support board I am part of (<http://www.angelsforum.co.uk/phpforum/>). It has made me cry with joy. I too have a close friend (called Annie) who has given a lot of support and shared clothes with her, and I am now beginning to reap the rewards of my journey, I am now the woman I felt I was aged 7, now age 37. I am due to see the surgeon for the first time in a couple of weeks and hopefully the op will happen this summer. Congrats Amy, you have some wonderful friends! Andrea
Posted 04/08/2010 11:40:57am by DevonBowgirl

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Awww, this is a sweet story.
Posted 04/08/2010 10:13:37am by p4ttythep3rf3ct

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A lovely written article. As someone who understands the issues involved only too well and the unfortunate breakdowns of family bonds I found it a welcome, heartwarming read. Like Amy, my family took their time coming round and for my mum that's a step still to be made. Good friends are everything and often all we have. Thanks for the understanding and knowledgeable way you told Amy's story. Rachel
Posted 04/07/2010 8:41:47pm by RachelMoore

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As the spouse of a transsexual woman, I would like to thank you for the wonderful article. Being trans is very real, and very painful. I can only hope that people continue to educate themselves and treat transsexuals as what they really are - normal people with a misunderstood birth defect. To Amy's friends, BLESS YOU!! Annie
Posted 04/07/2010 8:12:26pm by arushden

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