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# ‘You’re not your mother’s little boy anymore’

By Rosa Ramirez

## The Church

One rainy Sunday in November, Lucia Pérez walked across the parking lot of the First Baptist Church in Concord. She closed her rainbow umbrella, and shook the hand of the man who greeted her in the house of God.

“*Que Dios la bendiga, hermana.*” May God bless you, sister.

She had arrived with two people. One was her spouse of 11 years. The other was a family friend. The friend had dropped off Lucia’s children to bible classes.

Lucia took a seat near the exit. Her spouse didn’t make an effort to talk or sit next to Lucia, which only mildly bothered her. Lucia’s eyes were fixed on the gospel singers.

A large sweaty man led the congregation in the hymns. Lucia sang, following from the lyrics on a giant screen. Throughout the service, people shouted *amén*, *Gloria a Dios*, and *bendito sea su nombre*. Blessed be his name.

On this Sunday, Latino men, women, teens and older couples filled every bench, bibles in hand. One woman, who looked to be 60, told the church, “*Hoy cumpla quince años de haber nacido de nuevo.*” Today is the 15th anniversary since I was born again.

This acknowledgement of spiritual rebirth, a standard practice in Baptist ceremony, prompted a crescendo of claps, more *améns* and songs. Some raised their palms toward the sky, their heads tipped back. They had calm expressions.

Sitting next to Lucia was the family friend, Victor Camacho. A 10-inch bible lay between them. The bible, which cost Lucia \$24.95 plus tax more than two decades ago, has been Lucia’s constant companion—the only investment she’s ever made, she likes to say.

At Victor’s opposite sat Yadira Pérez. She is the woman Lucia Pérez married in 2000, in Guadalajara, Mexico—nearly a decade before Lucia announced she was transgender, and began the process of transitioning from male to female.

Lucia is at the start of the physical transformation from a man to a woman through hormone therapy. People at the church don’t know about her gender transition, and Yadira wants to keep it that way. Yadira is afraid that church members won’t understand, let alone accept, her unconventional family

structure. So what if her family doesn't reflect the traditional Latino family unit, where the father is the head of the household. The *valores de familia* are strong: the children are loved and disciplined, extended family is central, and Yadira and the children feel a moral responsibility to be there for one another, especially for Lucia. They have a strong family bond, Yadira tells herself.

Going to church and her faith in Scriptures, Lucia has said, is what has helped Lucia get through the rocky parts of her journey.

"Jesus was really sent down for men from God," Lucia likes to say.

During this church service, the sermon touched Lucia. With her eyes still shut, as if to absorb every word, she nodded her head up and down. The pastor, who is from Costa Rica, spoke to this congregation about salvation.

"There are no psychologists out there who can help you, brothers and sisters. If you have a problem, bring it to God," the pastor said in Spanish. People shouted *alleluia*.

For many years, Lucia preferred speaking with her therapist over talking to God. She could tell her therapist things she would never tell God—that she tried to commit suicide on more than one occasion, for example. Or that her very first sexual experience, back when Lucia was Javier, was with a man.

It was difficult for her to accept that God had given her a male body when she felt she should have been born in a female's. But while she struggled for three decades to understand how this could have occurred, she was never angry with God.

"It's a birth defect...just like when babies are born blind or born [attached] together," Lucia said recently. "I was born with a defect."

Lucia believes it's part of God's plan—one that she still doesn't understand.

"Nothing happens without God letting it," she likes to say. "And God doesn't make mistakes. He does everything for a purpose."

Many of the people Lucia knows best, her friends and her own relatives, don't share her beliefs about this part of the infallibility and infinite mercy of God. Some come from traditional homes with strict religious upbringings. They were taught that being gay is a sin, and being transgender unfathomable. The Latino community generally understands that sexuality and gender identification are not one and the same, but families with limited education don't necessarily know that. The social stigma attached to homosexuality, or out-of-the norm gender orientation, can carry grave consequences.

The mother of one Mexican transgender woman called the priest to bless the

house with holy water. She wanted to get rid of evil spirits. Another trans Latina said the pastor of a church in San Francisco called her to the altar and put his hand on her head. "*Fuera los espíritus de demonio*," the pastor said. Demonic spirits be gone!

Now, on this Sunday, Lucia—who has accepted Jesus, she says, as her Lord and savior—asked God to help in the next part of her struggle to become fully who she is supposed to be.

"I don't tell God about my condition," Lucia said. "God knows my condition more than I'll ever know. I ask Him to help me live with it, because it's not easy...when you live in a homophobic world."

There was something else, too.

"I've also asked Him to help me look more feminine," she said.

When the service was over, Lucia walked out alone. She twirled her rainbow umbrella all the way to Victor's car. There, her wife Yadira waited in the front seat—out of the congregants' sight, with her bible on her lap.

### **A little boy was born**

Javier Pérez was born in Nicaragua in 1966. In the mid 70s, when rumors of a looming civil unrest permeated Nicaragua, Lucia's mother brought her five sons to California. The young Javier was among them. That was in 1976. Like many Central American families fleeing political turmoil, his family sought refuge in San Francisco's Mission District. Three years later, when Nicaragua's President Anastasio Somoza Debayle regime was deposed, hundreds more joined them.

By then Javier was 13, and starting to feel different. He had begun to question his own gender, although he was too young to understand why. He secretly wished he could be a girl, and that he could dress like one. He wanted desperately to feel comfortable in his skin.

"I was attracted to feminine stuff," Lucia recalls, of her adolescence as the young Javier.

Her family—*his* family, back then—lived in a two-bedroom apartment with another family from Nicaragua. The tight quarters didn't give Javier much privacy, except when he showered. Then, finally, he had several hours to himself. Javier would take off his clothes and lather his neck, his arm, and his legs. He would wash his short hair with the shampoo his mother bought just for him.

"It was translucent green," Lucia remembers. "And it smelled—oh, so good."

Javier would wrap a towel on his head. He would pretend it was hair—that it was long and dark. He could see himself, how he was supposed to look. "Smooth skin and a curvy body," Lucia says. "Having breasts." He would twist another towel around his waist. In his mind, it was a long skirt. The little boy with piercing dark eyes would pucker his lips and glide on lip-gloss he had found in school.

"I wanted to feel beautiful," Lucia says.

His boy parts began to disgust him. He learned to hide them from his sight. "It would just look odd to me," Lucia once told me. "I would pull it from behind, with my left hand. I'd close my legs so I wouldn't see it."

The showers almost always ended the same way. Javier's mother would bang on the door, demanding that he get out.

"What are you doing in there?" his mother would ask.

The pressure to behave like a boy was strong. Javier didn't want to disappoint his mother. If it's hard for Latinos to speak openly to their families about their sexual orientation, it's harder still for a Latino youth, with three older brothers and a younger one, to try questioning aloud his own his gender identity. No young male wants his brother to be perceived as weak.

So when he had his first sexual experience with a man in his early teens, Javier went days avoiding his brothers' eyes. He retreated inward. He carried a weak smile. He thought of himself as gay, but not "out of the closet."

Coming out is supposed to be part of the road to self-empowerment for gays and lesbians, Lucia knows now. For Javier, hiding his secret was making him miserable. He did everything he could to fit in. He had girlfriends. He wore steel-toe boots. He decided he wanted to be a cop. He studied moves starring Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger. He began lifting weights. In general maleness, every way he could think of, Javier outdid his buddies.

"I tried to make my mark," Lucia recalls. "*Hey, here I come. Look at me. I'm macho.*"

It amuses Lucia now, how hard Javier tried to be manly.

"I drank more," Lucia says. "If they yelled, I would yell louder. If they thought they were cool drivers, then when I drove I was wild. I did a good job imitating guys."

But Javier felt lonely, depressed and unhappy. He felt confused.

"I felt attraction to transgender women," Lucia says. "I don't know why. It was not all sexual. It was an attraction to them...as if it sparked an interest in me

because I was that way. I liked the way they dressed. I liked to look like a woman.”

### Child Sexual Abuse

Late last year, Lucia agreed to meet me at City College of San Francisco’s Mission Campus. The campus, on Valencia Street, is the epicenter where the city’s Spanish-speaking folks go to learn English. Lucia glanced around the cafeteria. Her gaze was distant, as if she were looking for answers.

She took a deep breath. A group of Latinas entered the eatery. It was lunchtime. She turned to face a bare wall. She is 47 now, and she didn’t want the women to see her weep.

One day, she said, when she was nine—she was still Javier then, and they still living in Nicaragua— her mother took her to the family doctor. The doctor was well known and respected, in their town of Granada, and Lucia’s mother didn’t think twice about leaving them alone. That day, the doctor sexually assaulted Javier. It was the first of several such assaults. She has never told her mother.

Lucia’s eyes swelled with tears as she recalled the abuse. Her voice quivered. How could this man have done that to a child? Lucia and Yadira now keep an hawk-like eye on their boys, vowing to protect their children from child predators.

“That never left me,” she said. “Never left me. It made me feel that I was homosexual because of what happened.”

Lucia wiped her tears with her shirtsleeve. She had only revealed the sexual assault to Yadira, she said, and to her therapist. She was afraid that if she told other people, they might misunderstand. Would they blame her? Or would they dismiss her whole identity is nothing more than the product of this trauma?

“In our culture, Hispanic people believe that if you were sexually abused, that’s probably the cause of being transgender,” Lucia said.

But she is sure that is not what happened to her—that for some reason she was made this way, from the beginning, and that one pedophile doctor just made things worse. For years, Javier repressed his attraction toward men. He repressed his desire to physically transform into a woman. He remembered the assault and was deeply confused by it. What did it mean? He “fought it all the time,” Lucia says. The assault traumatized Javier so much that he stayed quiet about his true gender for more than 30 years.

“That’s why I took so long to come out,” Lucia said. “I told myself, ‘If I had not gone through the sexual abuse, I would have found me.’”

Dealing with feelings of guilt and shame, Javier tried desperately to be a family man, the ideal provider, the ideal father. In his mid 20s, Javier met an Italian woman through a co-worker. The two lived in Milan for three months. They got married and moved to San Francisco. Soon their daughter Vivian was born.

But the desires to be with men didn't cease. When the marriage didn't work, Javier trolled bars, movie theaters, and sex shops in the Castro—away from places frequented by his friends and family—hoping men would approach him. And they did.

“I was afraid people would see me, that somehow the word got around,” Lucia says.

### **Facing the truth**

Years later, in 2000, Javier married again. He would have two children—Daniel, 5, and Jonathan, 9—with Yadira, his second wife.

They had met online. She lived in Guadalajara, Mexico. Javier lived in San Francisco. After months of romantic e-mails, phone calls, pictures and greeting cards, they decided to meet face to face. He visited her in Guadalajara and took her out to eat. She was enamored with this man, 15 years her senior. He loved her beautiful personality. The two spent the night together. Jonathan was conceived.

When Jonathan was a year old, they married and moved to San Francisco. Yadira's mother argued against her immigrating to the U.S. A woman's role was near her family, the older woman said. “You're going to regret it,” Yadira's mother warned.

Javier loved his wife, he told himself. And it was true—he did. But he had become increasingly unhappy because he could not be the person he was supposed to be.

Sometime after his 45th birthday, Javier began spending a lot of time on websites about people who felt they were born in the wrong gender. He learned about men who felt like girls at a young age, and about men who made the transition early in life. He also read about men who had hidden it all their lives. He didn't want to be one of them.

Javier's desires to feel and look outwardly feminine were strong. His desire to become a woman led him to feel anxious. He was depressed. “I concluded”—this is Lucia, remembering— “that I would never become a woman. That I would never be able to express myself the way I wanted to. That I was not a woman because I was not born with female genitalia.”

One evening, in the fall of 2008 Javier sat in the lobby at work. He was working as a security guard in an office building. He became anxious. He was desperate to

tell people that he felt like a woman, that he had felt this way since he was a teen. If he could only talk to a doctor, a therapist, or a psychologist, he thought, he could get some guidance. Feelings of despair and shame consumed him. He believed people would judge and reject him.

“I realized that this had been happening for most of my life and that it was not good, or healthy for me. I asked myself, 'why does it have to be this way? Isn't there something I can do to stop it?' Then, I thought, this has got to stop. I'm either going to be a man or a woman.”

Then the night came. And it was time for him to lock down all the doors of the downtown San Francisco building where he worked. He went around the building. He locked the doors. He set the alarms. He turned off the lights.

Unable to concentrate, he locked himself out of the building. He had to call his boss to open the door for him.

Weeks passed. His mind raced. Could he continue lying to himself or to Yadira? He thought about the pain his family would feel if he made transition. He thought about the pain he would feel if he didn't. He felt torn.

“I didn't know if I was a homosexual or if I was transgender,” Lucia now recalls. “I was confused.”

On another occasion at work, Javier walked into the back of the building. He forgot to lock the door. He was thinking about his future as a trans woman.

What would Yadira do? Would she take the kids and never let the new female version of Javier see them? Would he turn out like some trans women, selling sex for money? Would he—she, eventually— turn to drugs and alcohol to deal with family and society's rejections? Would she commit suicide?

Although the number of trans women resorting to prostitution is small, advocates say, Javier's other fears were real. A 2010 national survey found that nearly 30 percent of transgender participants said they had abused alcohol or drugs to cope with discrimination. And 41 percent reported having attempted suicide, compared to 1.6 percent of the population, according to the National Transgender Discrimination Survey Report on Health and Health Care. The study was done by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Javier's boss came. It was late. The main door was unlocked. Javier was nowhere in sight. His job was over—the next day, he was going to be fired.

That night, slumped over in half and sobbing uncontrollably, Javier told his wife.

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It was Christmas Eve 2008. Javier walked to the bedroom and asked Yadira to come and sit by his side in the living room couch. There was something important he needed to tell her.

Javier was breathless. His hands were trembling. Yadira held his sweaty palms.

“She was trying to comfort me, making it easier. She was caressing my shoulders,” Lucia recalls. “It took me a while to tell her.”

He tried to control himself.

“*Se llama transexualismo. Sabes que es eso?*” Lucia recalls telling Yadira. It’s called transsexualism. Do you know what that is?

Yadira had many questions.

“How do you know?”

“Are you sure?”

“Does anyone else know about this?”

“How come you never said anything like that before?”

“Why did you marry me?”

Yadira remembers it differently.

Yes, it was Christmas Eve. Yes, her husband got home from work at 9 a.m. Yes, he had something to tell her.

This is where things blur in Yadira’s mind. Javier had brought her a piece of Mexican sweet bread. She made him instant coffee. They sat at the kitchen table.

He was hesitant. “*Al grano!*” she cried. Get to the point!

Javier told her he felt different.

“*Diferente? Cómo?*”

“He told me he felt like a woman,” Yadira recalls, in Spanish. “I felt like a bucket of water had fallen on me. I said, ‘Oh, he’s just joking. The Internet is making him crazy.’”

She was hearing the words, but the message wasn’t sinking in. She cried that night and tried to forget the conversation. To her this was not really happening.

The following morning, on Christmas Day, Javier went to work. Yadira took her boys to the Mission District to buy a plush teddy bear for Javier. She spent the evening with her close friend Miriam.

“In my mind, I would tell myself, ‘It’s not true,’” Yadira says. “I didn’t give it much importance, to tell you the truth.”

Javier asked her a few days later why she had not brought up the topic.

“*Porque yo no se que decirte.*” Yadira replied. Because I don’t know what to tell you. “To me, it wasn’t true,” she says.

The weeks that followed were terrible. Javier stopped playing with his sons. He stopped shaving. He stopped bathing. He would only come out of the living room to eat and use the bathroom. He wanted to die.

Yadira’s heart broke.

Inside Yadira and Lucia’s tidy apartment, pictures of the family hang on the walls. There’s an 8x10 photo of a heavysset man holding a child. It is a picture of Javier.

The two sat in the living room one day not long ago—Lucia on a chair, Yadira on the couch. Although they live in the same household, they are no longer a couple. The moment Yadira found out about Lucia’s gender orientation, they stopped sleeping together.

They were able to openly talk about what they call Lucia’s “condition.” The chats now are far from what they were during the first days.

Yadira didn’t know whom to turn to back then. She wanted to find help for her husband, but how? She didn’t speak any English. Whenever she needed something, Javier was the one to get it for her. But Yadira felt helpless now that Javier was so depressed.

Javier moved out, to a shelter. He began to open up to a therapist. He started to lose weight.

“I saw that he took care of his appearance. And he began to tell me, ‘I’m going to take hormones,’” Yadira recalls.

He moved back home with Yadira and their boys. Months later, he changed his name legally to Lucia. Lucia was the name of Javier’s great-grandmother’s.

It was around this time that Victor Camacho, a friend who they met at a San Francisco church, came into their lives. He took Yadira to the church in Concord.

They sought peace and community—except that to feel they are welcomed at this church, they told the pastor that Lucia is a hermaphrodite, and a virgin.

Victor offered them his friendship. Yadira accepted, in part, because her own family was not supportive. She lost many friends.

Yadira wanted to help Javier. And that touched him deeply.

“She wanted to be part of this. And she wanted to help me look for help,” Lucia says. “It was great. But I knew she was hurt.”

For the next two years, as Javier slowly became Lucia, Yadira shared her home and her family with the person she loved, but refused to believe what was happening. She tried to ignore the changes in Javier: he let his hair grow, and he began to buy women’s blouses. He started running. He watched what he ate. He went to a therapist. Javier found several support groups.

Yadira’s eyes fill with tears as she talks about this. She wipes them with a tissue. It’s painful. She believes there’s no support group or therapist she can afford in order to help their sons deal with the change.

Having Victor’s friendship, Yadira says, has helped her tremendously. Victor is a beefy guy from Mexico. He describes himself as deeply religious and somewhat traditional. On weekends, he lets Yadira, the children and Lucia stay at his small Concord studio—making space on the couch, on the floor, or wherever they can find a place. On Sundays, he drives them to church. Victor says he believes Lucia’s gender transition is part of a plan only God can understand.

Since Lucia’s transition, Victor has become the man of the house. He fixes the women’s broken doors, paints peeled walls, and takes Yadira to the supermarket. After church, he takes the entire family, including Lucia, to eat *carnitas*.

Victor says he shares a platonic friendship with Yadira. Yadira says she’s not interested in men right now. Lucia’s experience has made her resentful at the entire opposite sex.

But the children love Victor.

One day, the oldest, 9-year-old Jonathan, asked Victor, “Can you be my dad?”

Lucia hopes that Yadira can one day find love with a caring man like Victor. But there is no replacing a father, Lucia says. Describing this feeling, this complicated emotion she now carries toward Victor and her children, she brings her fist to her chest. Her eyes are focused and unblinking. “A father’s love will never change,” she says.

### **Complicated terrain**

If there's a category for the complicated terrain Lucia occupies today, it is "transgender Latina." An organization in San Francisco's Mission District, El-La Para TransLatinas, advances their cause.

"There's a language barrier," says Alexandra Byerly, the organization's health coordinator. "And a lack of cultural sensitivity."

There are special challenges involving documentation, Latino culture, black market hormones, drug and alcohol abuse, HIV and AIDS, and even bashing from the greater gay community. There are barriers to receiving quality health care. There's discrimination on the job and housing.

And there's also religion. Traditionally, spiritual institutions have played a major role in Latino traditional family structure, where the man is the head of the household and there's little room for gender variance.

El-La Para TransLatinas helps people like Lucia learn about their rights through weekly workshops on topics from health to spirituality, faith and *espiritismo*—the belief that good and evil spirits have an effect on health, luck and love.

And so here she was, on a recent Friday at El-La Para TransLatinas—Latina, immigrant, married to a woman, transitioning from one gender to another, and Baptists.

Like a devoted mother, Yadira worries about Lucia.

"I love her very much. And I will always love her," Yadira once said.

*"Me preocupo mas por ella. Estoy constante en el telefono,"* Yadira says. I worry about her. I'm constantly on the phone. Yadira worries the most that Lucia may get beat up for being transgender.

Statistics of violence against trans people don't help her calm her nerves.

*"Si no me llama, me da mucho miedo de que le vayan hacer daño,"* Yadira says. If she doesn't call me, I fear that someone may hurt her.

Lucia goes to weekly support meetings for transgender Latinas. The talks are in Spanish, and the group provides one of the few sanctuaries in which the women feel safe to talk about their dreams, hopes and fears. Most of the members are male to female transgender women; nearly all of them are Latinas.

One evening in November, Alexandra Byerly, the health coordinator of El-La Para TransLatinas, spoke to Lucia's support group about violence against transgender people.

"Girls," Byerly said in Spanish, "tomorrow we are going to remember our sisters."

The women had been jesting about stories from back home, and Mexican superstitions—a maiden who gets her feet swept with a broom, for example, won't marry. But now the jovial chatter stopped. Their smiling faces turned somber.

"I don't want our sisters to be ignored or forgotten," Byerly told the women.

The room has an image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. She's looking over the entire room. Her brown skin is the color of chocolate. Blood-red roses made out of fabric were sewn on top of yellow rays of light. Against a green backdrop is a simple plea: *Somos sus hijos e hijas, no nos olvide*. We are your sons and daughters, don't forget us.

Nearly every woman in the room—transgender Latinas in different stages of the physical transition—said they knew someone who was a victim of violence.

One woman said she was threatened during a short elevator ride. She was told, "You're gonna die, man." Another said strangers have shouted insults at her when she walked down the street. Another said, "There's a lot of violence against trans women."

The International Transgender Day of Remembrance was the next day. People around the world light candles and say prayers for loved ones who've been killed.

The women have their own altar. The *Virgencita de Guadalupe* is positioned at the helm. The altar has a pink bouquet of roses; a rosary resting on a book with a *padre nuestro*, a large glass candle with an emblem of Jesus Christ on the cross; Christmas lights interlaced throughout.

Byerly, who is herself a transgender immigrant from Mexico, has never forgotten the pain of losing a close friend to a drug overdose. Since coming to El-La Para TransLatinas, she has met women who have died violent deaths, and some from HIV-related complications. She erected a wall with photographs of them.

Funds for programs for transgender people are scarce. So when one nonprofit organization, Transgender Europe, launched a Trans Murder Monitoring Project in 2009, advocates were thankful.

The monitoring project, the first of its kind, collects and analyzes reports of murdered transgender people worldwide. Each November, to coincide with the Transgender Day of Remembrance, the project releases the number of people who have been killed. Its participants hope people will start caring about the men and women dying.

The crimes are identified in detail.

Name: Graziivaldo Martins  
Age: 47  
Date of death: Nov. 23, 2009  
Location: Salvador da Bahia, Brazil  
Cause of death: Hanged.

Name: Ingrid Huayaba Gonzales  
Age: 23  
Date of death: Jan. 10, 2010  
Location: Lima, Peru  
Cause of death: Pushed out of a second-floor window.

Name: Mariah Malina Qualls  
Age: 23  
Date of death: Sept. 2, 2009  
Location: San Francisco, California  
Cause of death: Beaten. Found dead in a residential hotel.

The number of reported murders of transgender people has increased, according to the project's data. For the 2009-2010 year, there were 179 homicides, compared to 160 reported cases for the previous fiscal year. The numbers are collected from print and online publications, which means that if the murders are not reported in news outlets, they're not tallied. Leading researchers have said it's impossible to collect the number of unreported deaths. Preliminary numbers, nonetheless, show that Latin America has the highest reported cases, with Brazil having the most.

The killings are violent. Stabbed 14 times, strangled, mutilated in the face and genitals, shot several times in the head, tortured, thrown off a building then run over by a car, shot in front of her entire class, beaten to death and dumped in the garbage, struck in the head with a brick, raped and thrown out of a moving vehicle, shot by a policeman, and shot by a security guard in the heart.

At El-La Para TransLatinas, dozens of photos of men and women cover a wall near the permanent altar. Some are homicide victims. There's a picture of a woman with feathered chestnut hair. Her pale cheeks have a tone of peach blush. She looks like a character from the original Charlie's Angels.

The women in the group know that walking alone at night is not safe, even in San Francisco. At the end of the workshop, the women make plans to walk into the night in groups. Lucia, on her part, avoids walking home alone, especially when she's wearing feminine clothing.

Despite the challenges, transgender Latinas in San Francisco are moving forward.

Juanita Martínez and her friend Andrea Flóres started a group at the Mission campus to fight homophobia that exists in the Latino community. The group is

called TransLatinas Club of City College of San Francisco. The weekly meetings have an average of 30 members. Their talks are about self-esteem, about HIV prevention, and about the resources that are available to them.

And they have one objective: to get more transgender Latinas into college.

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The tiny estrogen pills Lucia has been taking are having a huge effect. Her sense of smell has sharpened. Her attention to details has grown acute. She's developed appreciation for crochet doilies.

Lucia has broad shoulders. She has a strong jaw line, which women found sexy when she lived as Javier. She's got a thick coat of hair on her arms. And a five o'clock shadow.

Her demeanor is gentle.

"I cry when I'm watching a sad movie," she says.

On Saturdays, Lucia goes to Martínez's group.

But to avoid being stared at in the street, now that she's becoming a woman, she doesn't wear sundresses, blouses, hip hugger polyester pants, high heels, miniskirts, long skirts, clingy dresses, hoop earrings, fake eyelashes, mascara, or deep red lipstick, like some of her transgender friends.

Lucia happens to like those things. Yadira won't let her wear them.

One day, Lucia wore a white body-fitting women's sports pants with a matching top. When Lucia and Yadira climbed onto a bus in the Mission District, the Spanish-speaking women on the *autobus* turned their heads. The women snickered. Lucia never wore those pants again.

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No one wants Lucia to be happy more than Yadira, even if that means putting up with the insults. Yadira's mother has pressured her to leave. Lucia's own relatives have called her names. Couples who knew them before Lucia's transition don't visit anymore. One time, a group of women at her son's school snickered while Yadira walked by. She learned to carry headphones, blasting Spanish music to drown their voices. She refuses to listen to them.

They say, what type of woman would stay with a man like that?

"I ask myself that same question. I don't know what to say," Yadira said. "You don't understand what I'm going through unless you're in my shoes."

Yadira and Lucia sat in the small tidy living room they decorated together when they got married. Yadira talked about Javier.

"He will always be a special person to me," Yadira said. "A person who is the father of my children. I shared many beautiful moments with him.

She often thinks about their history together. Her husband would call her "baby," and she loved it. He would spend his paycheck on her. He would buy her clothes. "*El me dejaba salir a donde yo quisiera.*" Yadira said. He would let me go wherever I wanted to go.

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Lucia's stomach was in knots. She pushed her hand against her belly as she walked into Sephora a few months ago. The butterflies in her stomach were out of control.

"How are you? Can I help you find something?" a makeup artist asked Lucia. The makeup artist, looking at Lucia, likely saw the face of a 40 something year-old biological man who hadn't shaved that morning. A shy man, with broad shoulders.

"I'd like to get some makeup to cover," Lucia had begun to speak. She rubbed her chin without finishing the sentence. Her voice was breathy and barely audible.

The young woman studied her kindly.

"Are you planning to shave every day?" the woman asked Lucia.

Lucia stared right back at her. "Yes. I will if I have to."

It was 10:30 a.m. on a Wednesday. The high-end makeup store on Powell Street in downtown San Francisco had a handful of customers. A group of women strolled along the aisle of eye shadows and lipsticks with names like Tarina Tarantino Gem Gloss in Disco Nap and Nars Orgasm Illuminator. They chatted back and forth. One of them put her face inches from the mirror to inspect the wrinkles around her eyes.

Lucia froze. She watched how the women picked up and put things down with ease, and then the young saleswoman brought out a male makeup artist. He introduced himself as Patrick.

"Do you have sensitive skin?" Patrick asked.

"I don't think so," Lucia said. "I don't know."



Patrick squinted at her skin. “Do you want to look natural?”

“Yes,” Lucia said.

“Do you want to cover your shadow?” Patrick was all business. He evidently handles these transactions regularly.

“I definitely want to hide it,” Lucia said. Aware that Patrick was inspecting her face, Lucia grew self-conscious. She interlaced her hands.

“Oh, then you’ll want full coverage,” Patrick said.

It had been more than two decades since Lucia—Javier or Lucia—had worn any makeup. The first time was in the privacy of her bathroom when she was a confused apparently male child. And one time later, when she was a confused apparently male young adult, a then-girlfriend, out of nowhere, started applying eyeliner and red lipstick just to see what a good-looking guy would look like in makeup. The girlfriend snapped a picture. The girlfriend didn’t think much about it. Lucia still has that picture.

But this felt different.

It was the first time she was going to wear makeup in public. It was the first time her wife Yadira was going to see her in makeup. It was the first time Lucia didn’t feel shame for wanting to wear it.

“It’s a big deal.” Lucia said. “It means a lot to me.”

Patrick pulled a picture from a little black bag hanging across his chest.

“This is what I look like with makeup on,” Patrick said.

In the photo was Patrick in a tight dress. Patrick was wearing red lipstick, eye shadow and long dark eyelashes. His complexion was flawless.

“Oh, wow. That’s you?” Lucia said. “You look real nice.”

Patrick led Lucia to the makeup counter. It was fully stocked with Q-tips, sponges, triangle-shape makeup wedges, and brushes of all sizes. The large mirror and a shiny black counter top gave the place a glamorous feel.

Lucia was perched on a high black chair. Her head was titled up. Her eyes were shut. Patrick grabbed a makeup applicator and wet it with liquid cover up. The corner of the sponge touched Lucia’s serene face.

In that quiet moment, Lucia thought about the challenges she has faced in her

journey.

She thought about the roadblocks that lie ahead.

She had never suspected it would be this hard. That her oldest son Jonathan would be hit and teased in school by other little boys for having a transgender parent. Or that her wife would eventually stop going to church—the pressure of lying about their family didn't feel right. Or that one day, Yadira would sit on the couch where they spent many nights together as a married couple, and say that she doesn't love her anymore—that Lucia would end up sleeping alone, in the living room, while Yadira slept in the bedroom with the children.

But on this day, Lucia was just excited to take the next step toward becoming the woman she was meant to be.

“I'm claiming my life and my freedom to be myself so I can be happy,” Lucia said.

Patrick inspected Lucia's skin. She must use moisturizer, he said—one with serum, for her overly dry skin.

“The moisturizer will pull everything back,” Patrick said.

Patrick applied the liquid cover up as he spoke, stopping only to replenish the applicator with more makeup. Lucia wanted very badly to look in the mirror. She wanted the liquid makeup to conceal the shadow around her beard. Her doctor had told her that while her hair may lighten, she may need electrolysis or laser hair removal. That treatment can cost hundreds of dollars.

For now, makeup is the only option that's within her budget.

Patrick began to apply powder makeup with a brush.

“You're definitely transforming,” Patrick said, stepping back for perspective. “You're not your mother's little boy anymore.”

Patrick stepped back. He swiveled Lucia's chair toward the giant mirror.

Lucia looked straight at herself. She smiled. She was staring at the face of the woman she desired to be for a long time.