



MyLife



Asa **TM** Man

WE SAY IT'S
GOOD TO BE
A MAN. OUR
FEARLESS FEMALE,
**ELIZABETH
GILBERT**, DECIDED
TO SEE FOR
HERSELF AND
DISCOVERED
THAT MANHOOD
IS JUST SO
MUCH...BIRDSEED

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
MARY ELLEN MARK

My penis is made of birdseed. Allow me to be more precise. My penis is a common unlubricated, unribbed, latex Trojan condom, stuffed with birdseed. I could have stuffed it with cotton balls, or I could have been lazy and just shoved a sock down my pants, but I was advised by a famous drag king that a condom stuffed with birdseed really makes your best penis. And the drag king, it turns out, was absolutely correct in her advice.

My birdseed penis is indeed dense, pliant and reassuringly solid. And it's always semierect, which is probably more than you can say for yours.

Admittedly, my penis is not the biggest in the world. Believe me, I've seen some penises in my day, and I know what's out there. My penis is modest, just under six inches long. Sure, I could have made it bigger—birdseed is cheap, after all—but I don't need to define my masculinity in this manner. I don't need to attach my entire self-identity to my penis. Because I know who I am, goddamn it.

I am Luke Gilbert. I am a man. Hear me roar.

■ HOW TO BECOME A MAN. STEP ONE: LOOK THE PART The author has her breasts bound with Ace bandages and her "Dixie Chick" hair chopped off and darkened.

THE FIRST TIME I WAS EVER mistaken for a boy, I was 6 years old. I was at the county fair with my beautiful older sister, who had the long blond tresses one typically associates with storybook princesses. I had short messy hair, and I had scabs all over my body from falling out of trees. My beautiful sister ordered a snow cone. The lady at the booth asked, "Doesn't your little brother want one, too?"

I was mortified. I cried all day.

The last time I was mistaken for a boy was only a few weeks ago. I was eating in a Denny's with my husband, and the waitress said, "You fellas want some more coffee?"

This time I didn't cry. It didn't even bother me, because I've grown accustomed to people making the mistake. Frankly, I can understand why they do. I'm afraid I'm not the most feminine creature on the planet. I don't exactly wish to hint that Janet Reno and I were separated at birth, but I do wear my hair short, I am tall, I have broad shoulders and a strong jaw, and I have never really understood the principles of cosmetics. In many cultures, this would make me a man already. In some very primitive cultures, this would actually make me a king.

But sometime after the Denny's incident, I decided, *Ah, to hell with it. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.* What would it take, I began to wonder, for me to actually transform into a man? To live that way for an entire week? To try to fool everyone?

It could be amusing. I've always been a little titillated

by the fantasy of transformation. (I hope to God I'm not the only person who daydreams about how I would change my identity to escape the FBI should there ever be a nationwide manhunt for me due to, say, a bum murder rap.)

Spending a week trying to pass as a man could also be the most intimate way yet for me to explore my lifelong fascination with men. I've always been fixated by men. I spend a lot of time in their company, very comfortable and happy there. And one of my favorite feelings is the fleeting sense I get when I'm with a group of guys who have become so relaxed around me that they've forgotten I am not one of them: They have permitted me to slip invisibly inside their most secret world. And what

better way to explore that feeling (and push it) than by actually becoming a man, if only for a moment?

Fortunately, I have plenty of male friends who rally to my assistance, all eager to see me become the best man I can possibly be. And they all have wise counsel to offer about exactly How to Be a Guy:

"Interrupt people with impunity from now on," says Reggie. "Curse recklessly. And never apologize."

"Never talk about your feelings," says Scott. "Only talk about your accomplishments."

"The minute the conversation turns from something that directly involves you," says Bill, "let your mind wander and start looking around the room to see if there's anything nearby you can have sex with."

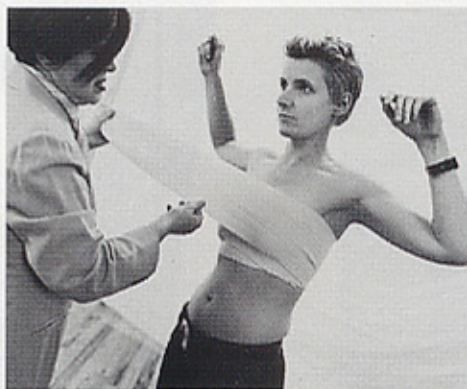
"If you need to win an argument," says David, "just repeat the

last thing the guy you're fighting with said to you, but say it much louder."

So I'm thinking about all this, and I'm realizing that I already do all this stuff. I always win arguments, I'm shamefully slow to apologize, I can't imagine how I could possibly curse any more than I already goddamn do, I've spent the better part of my life looking around to see what's available to have sex with, I can't shut up about my accomplishments, and I'm probably interrupting you right this moment.

Another one of my friends warns, "You do this story, people are gonna talk. People might think you're gay." Aside from honestly not caring what people think, I'm not worried about this possibility at all. I'm worried about something else entirely: that this transformation thing might be too easy for me to pull off.

What I'm afraid I'll learn is that I'm *already* a man.



MY REAL COACH IN THIS ENDEAVOR, THOUGH, IS A WOMAN. HER name is Diane Torr. Diane is a performance artist who has made her life's work the exploration of gender transformation. As a famous drag king, she has been turning herself into a man for twenty years. She is also known for running workshops wherein groups of women gather and become men for a day.

I call Diane and explain my goal, which is not merely to dress up in some silly costume but to genuinely pass as male and to stay in character for a week.

"That's a tough goal," Diane says, sounding dubious. "It's one thing to play with gender for the afternoon, but really putting yourself out there in the world as a man takes a lot of balls, so to speak...."

Diane agrees to give me a private workshop on Monday. She tells me to spend the weekend preparing for my male life and buying new clothes. Before hanging up, I ask Diane a question I never thought I would ever have to ask anybody:

"What should I bring in terms of genitalia?"

This is when she informs me of the ingredients for my penis.

"Of course," I say calmly.

I write *birdseed* on my hand, underline it twice and make a mental note to stay away from the aviary next week.

I SPEND THE WEEKEND INVENTING MY CHARACTER.

One thing is immediately clear: I will have to be younger. I'm 31 years old, and I look it, but with my smooth skin, I will look boyish as a man. So I decide I will be 21 years old for the first time in a decade.

As for my character, I decide to keep it simple and become Luke Gilbert—a midwestern kid new to the city, whose entire background is cribbed from my husband, whose life I know as well as my own.

Luke is bright but a slacker. He really doesn't give a damn about his clothes, for instance. Believe me, I know—I'm the one who shopped for Luke all weekend. By Sunday night, Luke owns several pairs of boring Dockers in various shades of khaki, which he wears baggy. He has Adidas sneakers. He has some boxy short-sleeve button-down shirts in brown plaids. He has a corduroy jacket, a hike messenger's bag, a few baseball caps and clean underwear. He also has, I'm sorry to report, a really skinny neck.

I haven't even met Luke yet, but I'm beginning to get the feeling he's a real friggin' geek.

THE TRANSFORMATION BEGINS PAINLESSLY ENOUGH.

It starts with my hair. Rayya, my regular hairdresser, spends the morning undoing all her work of the past months—darkening out my brightest blond highlights; making me drab, brownish, inconsequential; chopping off

my sassy Dixie Chick pixie locks and leaving me with a blunt cut.

"Don't wash it all week," Rayya advises. "Get good and greasy; you'll look more like a guy."

Once the hair is done, Diane Torr gets to work on me. She moves like a pro, quick and competent. Together we stuff my condom ("This is the arts-and-crafts portion of the workshop!"), and Diane helps me insert it into my Calvins. She asks if I want my penis to favor the left or right side. Being a traditionalist, I select the right. Diane



**STEP TWO:
ASSUME THE
ATTITUDE**
The author
poses as Luke,
no girly crossing
of the legs.

adjusts me and backs away; I look down and there it is—my semierect penis, bulging slightly against my briefs. I cannot stop staring at it and don't mind saying that it freaks me out to no end. Then she tries to hide my breasts. To be perfectly honest, my breasts are embarrassingly easy to make disappear. Diane expertly binds them down with wide Ace bandages. Breathing isn't easy, but my chest looks pretty flat now—in fact, with a men's undershirt on, I almost look as if I have well-developed pectoral muscles.

But my ass? Ah, here we encounter a more troublesome situation. I don't want to boast, but I have a big, fat, round ass. You could pop off huge chunks of my ass, make a nice osso buco out of it, serve it up to a family of four and still eat the leftovers for a week. This is a woman's ass, unmistakably. But once I'm fully in costume, I turn around before the mirror and see that I'm going to be OK. The baggy, low-slung pants are good ass camouflage, and the boxy plaid shirt completely eliminates any sign of my waist, so I don't have that girly hourglass thing happening. I'm a little pear-shaped, perhaps, but let us not kid ourselves, people. There are pear-shaped men out there, walking among us every day.

Then Diane starts on my facial transformation. She has brought crepe hair—thin ropes of artificial hair in various colors, which she trims down to a pile of golden brown stubble. I elect, in homage to Tom Waits, to go with just a small soul patch, a minigoatee, right under my bottom lip. Diane dabs my face with spirit gum—a kind of skin-friendly rubber cement—and presses the hair onto me. It makes for a shockingly good effect. I suggest sideburns, too, and we apply these, making me look like every 21-year-old male art student I've ever seen. Then we muss up and darken my eyebrows. A light shadow of brown under my nose gives me a hint of a mustache. When I look in the mirror, I can't stop laughing. *I am a goddamn man, man!*

Well, more or less.

Diane looks me over critically. "Your jaw is good. Your height is good. But you should stop laughing. It makes you look too friendly, too accessible, too feminine." I stop

laughing. She stares at me. "Let's see your walk."

I head across the floor, hands in my pockets.

"Not bad," Diane says, impressed.

Well, I've been practicing. I'm borrowing my walk from Tim Goodwin, a guy I went to high school with. Tim was short and slight but an amazing basketball player (we all called him "Tim Godwin"), and he had an athletic, knee-knocking strut that was very cool. There's also a slouch involved in this walk. But it's—and this is hard to explain—a stiff slouch. Years of yoga have made me really limber, but as Luke, I need to drop that ease of motion with my body, because men are not nearly as physically free as women. Watch the way a man turns his head: His whole upper torso turns with it. Unless he's a dancer or a baseball pitcher, he's probably operating his entire body on a ramrod, unyielding axis. On the other hand, watch the way a woman drinks from a bottle. She'll probably tilt her whole head back to accommodate the object, whereas a man would probably hold his neck stiff, tilting the bottle at a

budge emotionally. I feel as if I'm closing down a factory, silencing all the humming machines of my character, pulling shut the gates, sending home the workers. All my most animated and familiar facial expressions have to go, and with them go all my most animated and familiar emotions. Ultimately, I am left with only two options for expression—boredom and aggression. Only with boredom and aggression do I truly feel male. It's not a feeling I like at all, by the way. In fact, I am amazed by how much I don't like it. We've been laughing and joking and relating all morning, but slowly now, as I turn into Luke, I feel the whole room chill.

Toward the end of the afternoon, Diane gives me her best and most disturbing piece of advice.

"Don't look at the world from the surface of your eyeballs," she says. "All your feminine availability emanates from there. Set your gaze back in your head. Try to get the feeling that your gaze originates from two inches behind the surface of your eyeballs, from where your optic nerves

A FIVE-FOOT-NINE-INCH, 140-POUND WOMAN CAN BE A PRETTY TOUGH CHARACTER, AFTER ALL. BUT A FIVE-FOOT-NINE-INCH, 140-POUND MAN? KINDA SMALL, KINDA WUSSY....

sharp angle, making the bottle accommodate *him*. Being a man, it seems, is sometimes just about not budging.

Diane goes on to coach my voice, telling me to lower the timbre and narrow the range. She warns me against making statements that come out as questions, which women do constantly (such as when you ask a woman where she grew up and she replies, "Just outside Cleveland?"). But I don't do that begging-for-approval voice anyway, so this is no problem. As I'd suspected, in fact, all this turning-male stuff is coming too easily to me.

But then Diane says, "Your eyes are going to be the real problem. They're too animated, too bright. When you look at people, you're still too engaged and interested. You need to lose that sparkle, because it's giving you away."

The rest of the afternoon, she's on me about my eyes. She says I'm too flirtatious with my eyes, too encouraging, too appreciative, too attentive, too *available*. I need to intercept all those behaviors, Diane says, and erase them. Because all that stuff is "shorthand for girl." Girls typically flirt and engage and appreciate and attend; men typically don't. It's too generous for men to give themselves away in such a manner. Too dangerous, even. Granted, there are men in this world who are engaging, attentive and sparkly eyed, but Luke Gilbert cannot be one of them. Luke Gilbert's looks are so on the border of being feminine already that I can't afford to express any behavior that is "shorthand for girl," or my cover is blown. I can only emit the most stereotypical masculine code, not wanting to offer people even the faintest hint that I'm anything but a man.

Which means that gradually throughout Monday afternoon, I find myself shutting down my entire personality, one degree at a time. It's very similar to the way I had to shut down my range of physical expression, pulling in my gestures and stiffening up my body. Similarly, I must not

begin in your brain. Keep it right there."

Immediately, I get what she's saying. I pull my gaze back. I don't know how I appear from the outside, but the internal effect is appalling. I feel—for the first time in my life—a dense barrier rise before my vision, keeping me at a palpable distance from the world, roping me off from the people in the room. I feel dead eyed. I feel like a reptile. I feel my whole face change, settling into a hard mask.

Everyone in the room steps back. Rayya, my hairdresser, whistles under her breath and says, "Whoaaa...you got the guy vibe happenin' now, Luke."

Slouching and bored, I mutter a stony thanks.

DIANE FINALLY TAKES ME OUTSIDE, AND WE STROLL DOWN THE street together. She has dressed in drag, too. She's now Danny King—a pompous little man who works in a Pittsburgh department store. She seems perfectly at ease on the street, but I feel cagey and nervous out here in the broad daylight, certain that everyone in the world can see that my face is covered with fake hair and rubber cement and discomfort. The only thing that helps me feel even remotely relaxed is the basketball I'm loosely carrying under my arm—a prop so familiar to me in real life that it helps put me at ease in disguise. We head to a nearby basketball court. We have a small crowd following us—my hairdresser, the makeup artist, a photographer. Diane and I pose for photos under the hoop. I set my basketball down, and almost immediately, a young and muscular black guy comes over and scoops it off the pavement.

"Hey," he says to the crowd. "Whose basketball is this?"

Now, if you want to learn how to define your personal space as a man, you could do worse than take lessons from this guy. His every motion is offense and aggression. He leads with his chest and chin, and he's got a

hard and cold set of eyes.

"I said, whose basketball is this?" he repeats, warning with his tone that he doesn't want to have to ask again.

"It's hers," says my hairdresser, pointing at me.

"Hers?" The young man looks at me and snorts in disgust. "What are you talkin' about, *hers*? That ain't no *her*. That's a guy."

My first gender victory!

But there's no time to celebrate this moment, because this aggressive and intimidating person needs to be dealt with. Now, here's the thing. Everyone on the court is intimidated by this guy, but I am not. In this tense moment, mind you, I have stopped thinking like Luke Gilbert; I'm back to thinking like Liz Gilbert. And Liz Gilbert always thinks she can manage men. I don't know if it's from years of tending bar, or if it's from living in lunatic-filled New York City, or if it's just a ridiculous (and dangerously naive) sense of personal safety, but I have always believed in my heart that I can disarm any man's aggression. I do it by paying close attention to the aggressive man's face and finding the right blend of flirtation, friendliness and confidence to put on my face to set him at ease, to remind him:

You don't wanna hurt me; you wanna like me. I've done this a million times before. Which is why I'm looking at this scary guy and I'm thinking, Give me thirty seconds with him and he'll be on my side.

I step forward. I open up my whole face in a big smile and say teasingly, "Yeah, that's my basketball, man. Why, you wanna play? You think you can take me?"

"You don't know nothin' about this game," he says.

In my flirtiest possible voice, I say, "Oh, I know a *little* somethin' about this game...."

The guy takes a menacing step forward, narrows his eyes and growls, "You don't know *shit* about this game."

This is when I snap to attention. This is when I realize I'm on the verge of getting my face punched. What the hell am I doing? This guy honestly thinks I'm a man! Therefore, my whole cute, tomboyish, I'm-just-one-of-the-guys act is not working. One-of-the-guys doesn't work when you actually *are* one of the guys. I have forgotten that I am Luke Gilbert—a little white loser on a basketball court who has just challenged and pissed off and *flirted* with an already volatile large black man. I have made a very bad choice here. I've only been on the job as a male for a few minutes, but it appears as though I'm about to earn myself a good old-fashioned New York City ass-kicking.

He takes another step forward and repeats, "You don't know shit about nothin'."

"You're right, man," I say. I drop my eyes from his. I lower my voice, collapse my posture, show my submission. I am a stray dog, backing away from a fight, head down, tail tucked. "Sorry, man. I was just kidding. I don't know anything about basketball."

"Yeah, that's right," says the guy, satisfied now that he has dominated me. "You don't know shit."

He drops the ball and walks away. My heart is slamming. I'm angry at my own carelessness and frightened by

my newfound helplessness. Luke didn't know how to handle that guy on the court, and Luke almost got thrown a beating as a result (and would have deserved it, too—the moron). Realizing this makes me feel suddenly vulnerable, suddenly aware of how small I've become.

My hands, for instance, which have always seemed big and capable to me, suddenly appear rather dainty when I think of them as a man's hands. My arms, so sturdy only hours before, are now the thin arms of a

weenie-boy. I've lost this comfortable feeling I've always carried through the world of being strong and brave. A five-foot-nine-inch, 140-pound woman can be a pretty tough character, after all. But a five-foot-nine-inch, 140-pound man? Kinda small, kinda wussy....

■ STEP THREE: GROW A PENIS

The author positions her faux member, crafted from a condom filled with birdseed.



I TAKE MYSELF OUT TO DINNER THAT NIGHT AND EAT MY FIRST steak of the week. The waitress gives me little notice until I ask where the men's room is. Then she hesitates. She looks at me hard for a fast moment. I might be paranoid, but it certainly seems that she's wondering what the hell I am. And then she makes a quick decision, the way we all make decisions about weird people we meet from time to time. She decides: OK, *if you say so*. If I claim to be a man, then she'll let me be one. She points me to the men's room.

I use the bathroom in the stall without incident. But I'm not happy about her reaction. I decide that tomorrow morning I'll add more facial hair, give myself a thicker goatee. Maybe even get glasses.

On the walk home, I'm so distracted by thoughts of how to improve my chances of passing that I don't even notice when my penis comes loose. Before I know it, the thing has slipped out of my briefs, tumbled down my pant leg and fallen onto the sidewalk at my feet. I pick up my penis and stuff it into my pocket, trying hard not to make eye contact with anyone.

MY WORLD-FAMOUSLY TOLERANT HUSBAND SEEMS TO HAVE NO trouble with my transformation at first. He unwinds my breast bandages every night before bed and listens with patience to my complaints about my itching beard. In the mornings before work, he binds up my breasts again and lends me his spice-scented deodorant so I can smell more masculine. We vie for mirror space in the bathroom as he shaves off his daily stubble and I apply mine. We eat our cereal together, I take my birth control pills, I pack my penis back into my slacks....

It's all very domestic.

Still, by Wednesday morning, my husband confesses that he doesn't want to hang around with me in public anymore. Not as long as I'm Luke. It's not that he's grossed out by my physical transformation, or threatened by the sexual politics at play, or embarrassed by the possibility of exposure. It's simply this: He is deeply, emotionally unsettled by my new personality.

"I miss you," he says. "It's seriously depressing for me to

Only, this week I'm not a girl at all. I'm Luke Gilbert. And poor Luke, I must say, is completely cut off from the human experience. The guy is looking at the world from a place two inches behind his eyeballs. No wonder my husband hates being around him. I'm not crazy about him myself.

ON WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, MY FRIEND CREE AGREES TO POSE as my fiancée so we can shop for an engagement ring. The jeweler, recognizing that I'm the guy and therefore the one with the cash, is completely attentive to me, completely ignoring the lady. This is fine with me. The lady keeps asking about sizing and number of carats and quality, anyhow, when all I care about is price. The lady and I actually have a little tiff about this subject, right there in the store ("All you ever care about is money!" she accuses me), and we decide to not to buy a ring that day. The jeweler shoots me a sympathetic look on our way out.

I get the same sympathetic look from the waiter that night at the vegetarian restaurant where I have taken my

I REALIZE I HAVE REACHED A GREAT MILESTONE IN MY LIFE. IT IS TIME TO GO TO THE BATHROOM. LET ME CLARIFY—IT IS TIME TO GO TO THE BATHROOM IN THE MEN'S ROOM AT SHEA STADIUM.

be around you this way."

What's upsetting to Michael is that as a man, I can't give him what he has become accustomed to getting from me as a woman. And I'm not talking about sex. Sex can always be arranged, even this week. (Although I do make a point now of falling asleep immediately after it's over, just to stay in character.) What Michael hates is that I don't engage him anymore. As Luke, I don't laugh at my husband's jokes or ask him about his day. Hell, as Luke, I don't even have a husband—just another drinking buddy whose jokes and workday concerns I don't really care about. Michael, still seeing his wife under her goatee, keeps thinking I'm mad at him, or—worse—bored by him. But I can't attend to him on this, can't reassure him, or I risk coming across like a girl.

The thing is, I don't like Luke's personality any more than Michael does. As Luke, I feel completely and totally bound—and not just because of the tight bandage wrapped around my chest. I keep thinking back to my drag-king workshop, when Diane Torr talked about "intercepting learned feminine habits." She spoke of those learned feminine habits in slightly disparaging terms. Women, she said, are too attentive, too concerned about the feelings of others, too *available*. This idea of women as lost in empathy is certainly a standard tenet of feminism (Oprah calls it the Disease to Please), and, yes, there are many women who drown in their own overavailability. But I've never personally felt that attentiveness and engagement are liabilities. As a writer—indeed, as a *human being*—I think the most exciting way you can interact with this fantastic and capricious world is by being completely available to it. Peel me wide open; availability is my power. I would so much rather be vulnerable and experience existence than be strong and defend myself from it. And if that makes me a girlie-girl, then so be it—I'll be a goddamn girlie-girl.

"girlfriend" Jana for a date. Jana does all the ordering while I banter with the guy, saying, "I don't know anything about this kind of rabbit food. Before I started dating her, it was nothing but burritos and beer for me."

The waiter replies, "Well, sir, that's who keeps us in business—women. I mean, look around. Practically everyone in this restaurant is female."

Yes, I notice, practically everyone in this restaurant is female.

"That's good for me and you, though, right?" I say to the waiter, and he gives me a sly wink when my girlfriend isn't looking.

Later that night, I'm walking home alone. Just ahead of me, a blond woman steps out of a bar, alone. She's screamingly sexy. She's got all the props—the long hair, the tiny skirt, the skimpy top, the wobbly stiletto heels, the eternal legs. I walk right behind this woman for several blocks and observe the tsunami she causes on 23rd Street in every man she passes—everyone has to react to her somehow. What amazes me, though, is how many of the men end up interacting with *me* after passing *her*. What happens is this: She saunters by, the guy stares at her in astonishment and then makes a comment about her to me because I'm the next man on the scene. So we have a little moment together, the guy and me, in which we share an experience. We get to bond. It's an icebreaker for us.

The best is the older construction worker who checks out the babe, then raises his eyebrows at me and declares: "Fandango!"

"You said it!" I say, but when I walk on by, he seems a little disappointed that I haven't stuck around to talk more about it with him.

This kind of interaction happens more than a dozen times within three blocks. Until I start wondering whether

this is actually the game. Until I start suspecting that these guys maybe don't want to talk to the girl at all, that maybe they just desperately want to talk to *one another*.

Suddenly, I see this sexy woman in front of me as being just like sports; she's an excuse for men to try to talk to one another. She's like the Knicks, only prettier—a connection for people who otherwise cannot connect at all. It's a very big job, but I don't know if she even realizes she's doing it.

THE NEXT DAY, FEELING CONFIDENT IN MY MANHOOD NOW, I wander into the most famous Armed Forces Recruiting center in the country—the one located right in the heart of Times Square, where decades of young men and runaways have enlisted in moments of desperation after having spent all their money on whores and booze. I'm wearing my baseball cap backward, and I am carrying my brilliant new prop of young manhood: a sixteen-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew. I am greeted by a trim, serious staff sergeant, who does not give so much as a blink of indication that he thinks I'm anything but what I say I am—namely, Luke Gilbert, a slackabout guy who is absolutely clueless as to what to do with the rest of his life.

"I dunno, dude," I say. My posture is appalling. My disrespect in calling this NCO "dude" is appalling. I am the very picture of a kid who needs his wussy ass whipped into manhood by the United States Armed Services. "My dad thinks maybe I should enlist. You guys pay for college, right?"

"What branch of the military are you interested in, son?" asks the sergeant.

"I dunno..." I gaze around at the posters on the walls as though this is the first I've heard there were different branches in the military. My eyes alight on the image of a soaring fighter plane, and I point to that. "That looks cool, dude. Airplanes..."

"It is cool," says the sergeant, who is smiling now, too. Turns out he's an air-force officer himself. He tells me I made the right choice. "You into driving fast, man?"

"Yeah," I shrug. "I guess..."

"You'll love flying fast, then, man. You wanna punch holes in the sky?"

"Yeah," I shrug again. "I guess..."

"You into that Rambo stuff, man?"

Am I into that Rambo stuff? Did he just say that? Is this line actually part of the official United States Armed Services recruiting pitch? Do they say this to girls, too? *Am I into that Rambo stuff?*

"Yeah," I say. I take a long swig of my Mountain Dew

without tilting my head back to accommodate the bottle. "Rambo stuff is pretty excellent."

"We can get you there, Luke," says the staff sergeant. "You can do anything you want in the air force."

We talk for a while about basic training and military housing and college-tuition programs. He gives me a bunch of brochures. This is going so well and so smoothly now that I can't help messing with the man.

"You know what I'm really into, though?" I say.

"What's that, Luke?"

"Musical theater." I offer this for no reason I will ever be able to understand.

His facial expression does not change, but his eyes go a little dead on me. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," I continue. "I was in a bunch of plays in high school. Singing, dancing. We did *Gypsy*. I like that stuff a lot. Can I do stuff like that in the air force?"

I have to give this man his full credit. He doesn't choke. He takes out a pen and writes something down on a business card for me.

"Tops in Blue," he says. "That's the name of the air-force performing troupe. They travel all over the world, singing and dancing. All that stuff you like. They're very good. Better than anything you'll see on Broadway. Maybe you could

join up with them."

"Tops in Blue," I repeat, really enthusiastic now. "That's awesome! You mean, I could sing and dance but still be in the air force? Still do that Rambo stuff?"

"You can do anything you want in the air force, Luke."

"This is wicked awesome," I say.

Finished with our business now, we shake hands. But as I'm walking out the door and back into the bustle of Times Square, the staff sergeant has one last thing to say.

"Hey, Luke! Promise me you won't chill out on enlisting! Make it happen, man! Don't lose the fire!"

"I won't lose the fire!" I yell back at him. "I promise!"

MY BUDDY PETER RICHMOND TAKES ME OUT TO A BALL GAME that evening. Peter knows a lot about sports (happening, in fact, to have spent the past decade writing about that subject for this very magazine), and he determines that we must go see the Mets play, because Shea Stadium is ten times more macho than Yankee Stadium. Indeed, the game is a great celebration of masculinity. Everywhere around me, I see and smell masculinity, pure and obvious.

A few rows away from us, a fight (continued on page 189)



**■ STEP FOUR:
DON'T BACK DOWN**
Once he's outfitted in the requisite baggy clothes and sporting equipment, Luke brings his game to the neighborhood courts.

breaks out between two enormous guys who relentlessly pound the living hell out of each other until even more enormous security guards drag them apart. When I ask Peter if he has any idea what this violent tussle was all about, he replies, "My guess is they were disagreeing with each other about something."

Behind me are three boys all under the age of 11, brothers who are studying classic guy behavior under the masterful care of their dad. The boys keep screaming down to the field that Atlanta Braves slugger Chipper Jones is a fuckin' faggot, a fuckin' homo, a fuckin' pussy, etc. All the while, their sage father nods and beams at his boys with approval.

Yes, my grasshoppers, you have learned well. Chipper Jones is a fuckin' pussy, and soon you will be men....

After watching Glendon Rusch pitch seven innings of shutout ball, I realize I have reached a great milestone in my life. It is time to go to the bathroom. Let me clarify—it is time to go to the bathroom in the men's room at Shea Stadium.

"Pete," I say, "I'm going in there."

He reads my face and knows immediately what I'm talking about. Gravely, he asks, "Do you need me to come with you, Luke?"

"No. This is something I need to do on my own."

Peter understands. "Sometimes a girl's gotta do what a guy's gotta do," he says.

It is a long walk to the men's room at Shea Stadium when you're just a nervous girl with a dream and a crotch full of birdseed. My knees are rickety with real fear, but I decide to approach this task as if it were a bank holdup: I'll hit it quick, do the job in a flash, then bolt for the exit before anyone gets a good look at me. I figure I'll be back at my seat in forty-eight seconds.

What I do not count on, though, is the line. There is, it turns out, a massive line in which I must wait for ten minutes with dozens of other men. I have never seen a line for a men's room in my life (isn't that the whole goddamn point of being a guy?), and then I realize—of course, of course, I'm at a baseball game; it's nothing but men here. I look longingly over to the women's bathroom across the hall, which for the first time in human history stands vacant and welcoming. Finally, my line pushes forward and I enter the inner sanctum. I am verily overwhelmed by what I see. This is not some hygienic genderless rest

room of some kindly New York bistro; this is the piss trench of Satan himself. The place reeks, the floor is soaked, and the air is filthy. *There are men everywhere, and they are urinating on everything.*

At last a stall opens up and I make my move. There's no lock. The door remains slightly ajar. I remain calm. I perform swiftly. I am buckling up my pants and readjusting my penis when I notice him. There is an 8-year-old boy watching me through the wide crack in the stall door. *How long has he been standing there? What has he seen? Or—a more troubling thought—what hasn't he seen?* Our eyes meet. I'm scared, but he's more scared. He's pale and panicked, like that Amish boy in *Witness* right after he sees the murder in the train-station toilet. I hold the kid's gaze as I finish adjusting my trousers. He can't look away from me. Nor I from him. I narrow my eyes at him and summon all my mighty powers of feminine communication to convey this simple

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message in my stare: *So help me God, kid, if you breathe a word of my secret to anyone, I will hunt you down, I will find out where you live, I will come to your house in the middle of the night, and I will dress your goddamn mother up like this.*

The boy backs away slowly. I exit the men's room fast. I don't even bother to wash my hands. Then again, neither does anyone else in here.

Final score: Mets 1, Braves 0.

FRIDAY AFTERNOON I HEAD UPTOWN TO CHECK out the auto show at the convention center. I mill around there for a couple of hours, talking to other men about the features of the new Lincoln SUVs. For some reason, I decide it is here at the auto show that I will commence my attempt to pick up girls—the ultimate test of my manhood. I spot two cute young ones standing in the lobby and make my first approach. My move is based completely on advice from a guidebook I have recently purchased called *How to Pick Up Girls!* This book has been most informative, filled with some of the most appallingly

bad advice I've ever encountered. According to the book, asking for information is a good way to break the ice with women. So when I finally make my move, I begin by asking, "Excuse me, do you young ladies know where the ticket booth is?"

"No," says the tall one.

We are standing thirteen feet away from the ticket booth.

"Do you maybe wanna go find the ticket booth with me?" I ask.

The short one speaks, arching her brows and saying icily: "Our husbands are buying us tickets, OK?"

I'm tempted to reply, "Hey, I have a husband, too, bitch, but that wouldn't keep me from showing a little common human politeness to a nervous girlie-man with patchy facial hair who approaches me at a friggin' auto show!"

But instead I shrug and say merely, "Well, enjoy the cars, girls...."

After a few more hours of similar encounters, it gradually dawns on me that an auto show is perhaps not the best place in the world to cruise for chicks. Any chick at an auto show is probably there with some guy. Or else she's the kind of chick who goes to auto shows alone, and that kind of chick probably doesn't go for wussy guys like me. Disappointed, I head for the men's room. I stare in the mirror above the sink.

Women hate you, the mirror tells me.

But I'm not such an unattractive guy, I protest inwardly, trying to get my confidence back up. A little nerdy but not unattractive. I just need to find the kind of girl who likes that sort of thing. But where?

THAT NIGHT, TAKING A FRIEND'S ADVICE, I GO out drinking in the East Village, where seven out of ten young men look just like Luke Gilbert. I end up at a bar that is crawling with really cute pierced-nosed girls. I'm wondering whom I should try to pick up when an opportunity falls into my lap. A pretty red-haired girl in a black camisole walks into the bar alone. She has cool tattoos all over her arms. The bouncer says to her, "Hey, Darcy, where's your crowd tonight?"

"Everyone copped out," Darcy says. "I'm flying solo."

"So lemme buy you a drink," I call over from the bar.

"Rum and Coke," she says, and comes over to sit next to me.

Fandangó!

We get to talking. Darcy's funny, friendly,

from Tennessee. She tells me all about her roommate problems. She asks me about myself, but I don't share—Luke Gilbert is not available for sharing. Instead, I compliment Darcy on her pretty starfish necklace, which Darcy tells me was a gift from a childhood neighbor who was like a grandmother to her. I ask Darcy about her job, and she tells me she works for a publishing house that prints obscure journals with titles like *Catfish Enthusiast Monthly*.

"Damn, and here I just let my subscription to *Catfish Enthusiast Monthly* run out," I say, and she laughs. Darcy actually does that flirty thing girls do sometimes where they laugh and touch your arm and move closer toward you all at the same time. I know this move. I've been doing this move my whole life. And it is with this move and this touch and this laugh that I lose my desire to play this game anymore, because Darcy, I can tell, actually likes Luke Gilbert. Which is incredible, considering that Luke is a sullen, detached, stiff guy who can't make eye contact with the world. But she still likes him. This should feel like a victory, but all I feel like is a complete shitheel. Darcy is nice. And here I'm lying to her already.

Now I really *am* a guy.

"You know what, Darcy?" I say. "I have to go. I'm supposed to hook up with some friends for dinner."

She looks a little hurt. But not as hurt as she would look if, say, we dated for a month and then she found out the truth about me.

I give her a little kiss good-bye on the cheek.

"You're great," I tell her.

And then I'm done.

UNDOING IT ALL TAKES A FEW DAYS.

Rubbing alcohol gets the last of the spirit gum and fake hair off my face. I pluck my eyebrows and put on my softest bra (my skin has become chafed from days of binding and taping). I scatter my penis across the sidewalk for the pigeons. I make an appointment to get my hair lightened again. I go to yoga class and reawaken the idea of movement in my body. I cannot wait to get rid of this gender, which I have not enjoyed. But it's a tricky process, because I'm still walking like Luke, still standing like Luke, still thinking like Luke.

In fact, I don't really get my inner Liz back until the next weekend. It's not until the next Saturday night, when I am sitting at a bar on my own big fat ass, wearing my own girlie jeans, talking to an off-duty New York City fireman, that I really come back into myself. The fireman and I are both out with big groups, but somehow we peel off into our own private conversation. Which quickly gets serious. I ask him to tell me about the crucifix around his neck, and he says he's been leaning on God pretty hard this year. I want to know why. The fireman starts telling me about how his beloved father died this winter, and then his fiancée left him, and now the pressures of his work are starting to kill him, and there are times

when he just wishes he could cry but he doesn't want people to see him like that. My guy friends are all playing darts in the corner, but I'm the one sitting here listening to this fireman tell me about how he never cries because his dad was such a hard-ass Irish cop, don'tcha know, because he was raised to hang so tough.

I'm looking right into this guy. I'm not touching him at all, but I'm giving him my entire self. He needs me right now, to tell all this to. He can have me. I've got my eyes locked on him, and I can feel how bad he wants to cry, and with my entire face I am telling this man: *Tell me everything*.

He says, "Maybe I was hard on her, maybe that's why she left me, but I was so worried about my father..."

The fireman digs at his eye with a fist. I hand him a bar napkin. He blows his nose. He keeps talking. I keep listening. He can talk to me all night because I am unbound and I am wide-open. I'm open around the clock, open twenty-four hours a day; I never close. I'm really concerned for this guy, but I'm smiling while he spills his story because it feels so good to catch it. It feels so good to be myself again, to be open for business again—open once more for the rewarding and honest human business of complete *availability*. ■

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