

**Jim and Jamie**  
*Living Transgender in the Bible Belt*

By Whitney Green

She looks different than I do. She is six feet two inches tall with broad shoulders and legs that go on forever. Her forearms are thick the way a mechanic's would be after years of working on cars and military aircraft. Her hands are twice the size of mine. Her large nose dips down just slightly and deep-set wrinkles crease her face. The faintest shadow traces her jawline beneath drooping earlobes.

She sounds different than I do. Her voice is deep with a roughness that tumbles between the lines of a sultry feminist to a life-long smoker. Every so often, she drops to a lower register, hinting at a different life.

Her name is Jamie Renae and today she is a girl just like me.

Tomorrow her dream life will end and she will return to reality. A reality she feels she wasn't made for.

Tomorrow when Jamie looks in the mirror she will see Jim—a transgender male.

Jim is 67 years old and a retired mechanic who loves to golf. Jim served in the military for nearly three decades.

"I was born a mechanic. A cross-dressing mechanic," Jim says. "I discovered the pleasures of female clothing somewhere between ten and twelve years old. It was a full slip that my mother left in the bathroom—all I had to do was slide it over my bare legs to discover the pleasures of nylon."

But right now, on a sunny Tuesday afternoon, she is Jamie—a redhead with sparkling blue eyes. And her mauve lipstick looks divine.

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It's my first time meeting Jamie.

Typically late, I make it a point to arrive at 12:40 – twenty minutes before our appointment. I wait a few minutes inside my car to reapply lipstick, slick on some eyeliner and brush my forever-tangled hair. I feel nervous—like I needed to impress a judging aunt or the popular girls in high school. I want to appeal to Jamie's feminine side.

At 12:45 I walk through the doors and spot her instantly. Even 15 minutes early I'm late. Without time to set up the tone of the interview—do I want to be professional

or friendly?— I saunter over to Jamie with open arms; nearly pushing her over with an abrasive hug. Apparently I have decided to be friendly, overly friendly.

Startled, she returns my hug and says she didn't know if she would recognize me, but I don't share her worry. That thought has never crossed my mind. She is instantly recognizable.

She doesn't drink coffee, but instead orders a tall, iced chai latte.

She wears a light grey form-fitting sweater with an open neckline plummeting to a hint of cleavage. A dark stone pendant hangs from her neck, barely matching her black plastic hoop earrings. Dark boot cut jeans skim the top of her size 12 brown boots. She wears a short springy auburn wig. It reminds me of Sharon Osbourne.

Jamie waits as I order. I sit my purse down at our table and excuse myself for a moment. As I walk off she tells me she will watch my bag. Even her mannerisms are like a woman's.

We chat at Starbucks like girlfriends catching up on lost memories. The conversation is smooth, easy, not forced. I ask how her day has been. She says busy. She has spent the day uploading a video of herself to Flickr, which is not as easy as you'd think, but she doesn't want to keep her fans waiting. She has nearly 500 views on her lip-syncing debut video, a cover of Fleetwood Mac's, "Say That You Love Me." She's working on a Norah Jones song next.

"Singing Norah Jones has helped my pitch and key come up with my speaking voice," Jamie says.

She shows me photos of her grandchildren, beaming just like any proud grandmother would.

As she scans through photos, I mention that I would like to visit her as Jim one day. She hesitates, but agrees and shows me a photo of the man I will meet.

Her hesitation does not come from a fear of being discovered—she is rarely uncomfortable. In fact, Jamie's goal in living as a cross-dresser is to educate people. She looks forward to people asking questions that give her an opportunity to explain who she is.

Six days of the week are for Jim, but on Tuesdays Jim presents as Jamie and spends the day as involved as she can be within the community. She calls it her "outreach day." She shops, goes to restaurants, talks to strangers, volunteers and does her best to help people in Northwest Arkansas—a place rich with both traditional and liberal mindsets—understand what transgender means.

Perhaps, the hesitation comes from someone else. Jamie's life stays separate from Jim's. Jim has been married to Shirley for 28 years. He sleeps in a nightgown. Still, Shirley wants Jim to be as separate from Jamie as possible. That's how Shirley likes it.

I look at the iPhone and see a photo of Jim and Jamie standing together.

"I did that with Photoshop," she tells me with a proud smile.

I have been anticipating this moment for weeks, imagining what Jim might look like. I'm familiar with Jamie, but Jim is elusive. She never talks about him. She barely makes reference to the man she sees in the mirror "80 percent of the week."

The photo is not what I had expected. It catches me off-guard and I feel my breath catch in my lungs. They almost looked like a married couple.

Jamie gazes lovingly at Jim as he peers straight into the camera. Both are smiling. They share the same prominent nose and height, but similarities end there. Jim stands tall and strong. He leans back against the railing, shoulders squared, chest forward. A cool masculine vibe shines through his demeanor. Wisps of salt and pepper hair sprinkle his head.

He has the face of a 68-year-old, but not the style to match. He wears a dark green graphic tee that might be more appropriate for a teenager who works out excessively. Khaki cargo shorts, three inches above the knee, reveal calves toned from a lifetime of walking in heels and tiptoeing on eggshells.

Two gold hoops—so small they are almost unnoticeable—embellish his ears. They match the gold band around his ring finger; representing a covenant to a life that could have been different.

Jamie is much softer. Her hips angle slightly towards him and right leg is crossed casually over the ankle. Though her posture seemed effortless, I can only imagine how much time she spent learning a feminine pose.

She wears a canary colored blouse belted tightly around her waist. It creates an illusion of womanly curves on a body designed for a man. Stark white linen pants mask her muscular calves. On her feet are black strappy heels.

Jamie wears jewelry too. Gold dangly earrings, a beaded necklace, rings and stacks of bracelets drip like honey from her skin.

I tell her she looks beautiful.

"That's what my mother says," Jamie replies. "She always says, 'I don't understand but you're a beautiful girl.'"

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Gender identity disorder is a conflict between a person's physical sex and the gender, a societal construct, he or she identifies with. An estimated four percent of adults in the United States identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and about one percent identify as transgender. This figures out to approximately nine million LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) Americans, roughly equivalent to the population of New Jersey.

Nationally, 1 in 30,000 biological males and 1 in 100,000 biological females seek gender reassignment surgery. A recent study suggests that worldwide it may be as common as 1 in 5,000 people.

"Transgender is a state of an individual's gender identity," says Katie Cougevan, a clinical psychologist in northern California who specializes in sexuality and gender issues. "Very simply, it means feeling that the assigned sex category does not encompass a true gender identity and they might disagree with the idea of a gender continuum all together."

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Most cross dressers wear skirts or dresses; Jamie prefers business casual. She does have some party dresses, but they come out for special occasions only. Today, she has coupons to her favorite stores, J.C. Penney and Gordmans—so we're going shopping.

Our afternoon to-do list is to pick up a Valentine's Day card, look for a lightweight sweater to compliment the warmer weather and continue the search for that perfect summer purse. She is picky and only shops during sales. She rattles off brand names like they are sports teams. This season, Kathy Van Zeeland is her favorite.

"I'm too logical for purses," she says. "It needs separate compartments for my cellphone, camera and keys. I put my makeup and crap on one side and billfold in the middle."

Jamie and I walk into Gordmans and instantly crash into the overwhelming smell of Christmas. They must sell potpourri in this store. Or crafts. It burns my nose.

We share a few moments of awkward silence, each waiting for the other to lead, then both fall easily into the rhythmic dance women call shopping.

She floats towards V-neck sweaters and brightly colored shirts while I lose myself in long, flowing dresses at insanely low prices. Gordmans is a store I had never considered, but Jamie knows shopping secrets I don't.

“I come here about every two weeks when they get new merchandise in,” she says as her fingers flutter between racks of cardigans marked down to \$9.99. “That’s the best way to do it.”

For a moment, I forget this is an interview. I forget we aren’t just two friends chatting over a casual afternoon of shopping. I forget my new girl friend is a man.

Jamie has progressed significantly in fashion since the first time she walked out of Jim’s apartment in women’s clothing—nearly 40 years ago.

“At first I only wore black and white,” she says. “But I’ve slowly worked into lots of colors.”

Seeing her standing among all the brightly colored shirts, it’s hard to imagine her in anything that doesn’t shine the way she does.

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“Transgender people don’t see sex and gender as being the same thing,” says Joanne Herman, author of “Transgender Explained”. “Let’s think of sex as what’s between your legs and gender as what’s between your ears.”

Jamie identifies with this explanation. Even though she only presents as a woman one day a week, Jamie is usually the voice in her head. Jim’s hands may be on the wheel, but Jamie drives the car.

“Most of the time I have Jamie in my head, but am still able to work as Jim,” she says. “But sometimes Jamie has to come out and play.”

Even among the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) community there is some confusion over the term transgender. Transsexual and transgender are not the same thing.

“Transsexuals don’t have a choice,” Jamie says. “They’ve got to do something to fix it because they are in a body that doesn’t match their brain. Cross dressers have more of a choice. We can choose when to express our feminine side and it’s not life threatening.”

Jamie has no desire to undergo surgery to become a female. Instead, she has blended Jim and Jamie together and found a new term to identity with.

“I call myself dual gendered,” she says. “I have both sides and put them together.”

It wasn’t always that simple.

As a teenager, Jim would stash his mother’s “give away” clothes and clothes his girlfriends would leave in his car.

“When the opportunity arose, I would lock the door and put on the dress or blouse, letting the fabric fall over my shoulders,” she says.

Eventually, stealing clothes wasn’t enough.

After high school, Jim entered the military and got married for the first time. He cross-dressed at home when his wife wasn’t around. He was secretive and believes she never knew about his habits.

“I am sure that my oldest son would know if he could remember that far back,” Jamie says. “He was less than two years old when his daddy would strut around the bedroom in a dress.”

After 7 years and another son, they divorced.

“She basically had my shit laying outside for me one day,” Jamie remembers. “I don’t have anything nice to say about my first wife other than she bore me two great sons.”

After meeting his second wife, Jim went on a purge, as many cross-dressers do, and got rid of everything feminine that he owned. But that did not last long. Within a couple of years he began slipping into his wife’s clothes while she was away.

She worked days and he worked nights so it was easy for Jim to fall back in love with the thrill of women’s clothes.

“I suspect my second wife knew about my habits,” Jim says. “She was a smart girl.”

Jim remembers coming home one night to find his wife waiting for him with an array of makeup and brushes.

“For whatever reason, she decided to put makeup on me,” Jim says. “I was ecstatic.”

Looking back, Jim assumes that was her way of questioning his sexuality. He told her that he was aroused from her makeup and clothes. Eventually, that conversation ended in divorce.

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As we walk into the women’s dressing room in Gordmans, I wait for everyone to notice that Jamie is a man. No one does.

She tells the short, balding salesman that she has two shirts to try on. Without hesitation or a passing glance he hands Jamie the keys to the ladies changing room.

She’s trying on a long-sleeved, nearly see-through shirt with brightly colored feather prints across the front. She has two sizes, large and extra-large.

I tell her to come out and show me.

She walks out of the dressing room and poses in front of the full-length mirror; trying to adjust the way the shirt fits her.

“It looks nice but probably won’t go home with me. It’s too tight,” she says about the extra-large shirt. “Well, I guess that’s that,” she says as she walks back into the dressing room with an exasperated look on her face.

As we walk towards the exit a lady pushing a full cart glances at Jamie, but continues shopping. She doesn’t seem to notice.

In JCPenney, Jamie takes a phone call and I hide behind a rack of clothes to see how people respond to her when she’s alone.

A lady stares as Jamie shops. She has short spiky hair and is wearing a light purple jumpsuit. Her mouth hangs open. The expression on her face does not hide what she’s thinking.

The woman catches me staring at her and immediately looks down with a guilty look on her face. I feel like I’ve just caught her shoving a couple shirts in her purse or switching full-price tags with sale tags.

Jamie takes two shirts into the dressing room. Both long sleeved, with a deep V-neck. One is maroon the other is aqua blue.

She steps out of the dressing room in her aqua blue shirt, but again it’s too tight.

She comes back out in the maroon shirt and it fits her body like a glove. I’m impressed. As Jamie poses in front of the full-length mirror a shopping attendant rushes past her saying, “That’s a good color on you, girl.” Jamie smiles.

An older white-haired woman is blocking the door to get out of the dressing room. She glares at Jamie. I wonder if she knows.

Jamie buys both the aqua and maroon blouse and a pair of jeans.

“Unfortunately now that I bought two shirts I’ll have to get rid of two from my closet,” she says. That’s her agreement with Shirley; buy one, get rid of one.

As we walk to the next store I ask Jamie if she notices people staring at her. She does. Like clockwork, we walk past a couple obviously staring.

“Like right there, her eyes followed me right up until we passed,” Jamie says.

She read a book once that changed her perspective called: “Get Over Getting Looked At.”

“They’re not looking at you because you’re transgender. They’re looking at you because you’re tall and dressed well,” is the motto she chants from the book when she needs a confidence boost against judgmental stares.

Jamie doesn’t let bewildered stares bother her and says that the importance of religion in her life plays a key part in how she responds to people.

She was raised in a church called Unity that preached “love everyone instead of hell and damnation” and taught her to “be who you are be the best you can be,” she says.

Jamie has carried that statement with her. She believes spreading awareness about transgender issues is her mission in life. It is an assignment she does not take lightly.

“I am dedicated to helping anyone that finds themselves in a closet trying on their mother’s, sister’s, wife’s, or whomever’s clothes,” she says. “I have been there and done that.”

Jamie needs to get home by 4:00 p.m. today and get undone by the time Shirley comes home. It takes her about 30 minutes to dress down to Jim. Creating Jamie is a much longer process. It used to take Jim about 2 hours to transform into Jamie, but now that time is down to an hour.

“If I’m showered and moisturized, I can put my makeup on in about 30 minutes,” she says proudly. “But Jim doesn’t always shave. He’s gotten pretty lazy.”

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I meet Jim on a Saturday at his house, just a few days after spending time with Jamie. When my car pulls up in his driveway, he walks out to meet me.

“Well, here you go. This is who I am the rest of the week,” a deep almost gruff voice says behind me. I’m almost scared to turn around. Since I first learned of Jamie, I had anticipated meeting Jim— the other side of Jamie. I slowly turn away from my car towards the voice, trying to maintain my composure.

This man is a stranger to me.

At first glance, he looks to be in his late 60’s with balding hair and deep wrinkles. Weathered spots a few shades darker than his skin sprinkle his face revealing the results of a lifetime of hard work.

After the initial shock, I see the familiar twinkle in Jim's eye that I know belongs to her. Upon closer inspection, I notice his eyebrows are shaped and fingernails are long and manicured. When he smiles, everything clicks. He is still Jamie.

Jim gives me a nervous hug and walks me into his house.

Jim and Shirley sit on opposite sides of the long couch and begin to tell me their story. They fit well together and appear to have a comfortable relationship. A tiny dog yips at their feet as they talk.

The pair will celebrate their 29<sup>th</sup> marriage anniversary soon. They have both been married before and do not have any children together. Like many retired married couples, they have developed hobbies and spend most of their time together golfing, volunteering with local nonprofit organizations, throwing pottery in their own home pottery studio and traveling across the country to sell their intricate pieces.

After two failed marriages, Jim decided to tell Shirley up front about his cross-dressing. They had been dating about a year when he told her his greatest secret—expecting that it would either end their relationship or prove the depth of their love.

He laid it all out for her on a night just like any other at their favorite club downtown.

It was loud and dark. People danced and a younger Jim and Shirley sat at the bar with a couple drinks.

"There's something I need to explain to you," Jim said. "I like to dress in women's clothes."

"Well, OK," Shirley replied coolly, and took a swig of beer like nothing had changed.

Jim remembers that Shirley was strangely calm about his potentially life-altering statement. It didn't seem to bother her, and certainly did not cause their relationship to crumble, as he expected.

"I really didn't know that much about it so I just blew it off basically," Shirley remembers. "I didn't worry about it until many years later when he decided to start going out of the house dressed that way."

At home, Jim and Shirley have separate closets. The clothes in Jim's closet are 20 percent Jim, 80 percent Jamie. Looking into Jim's closet you would never know it belonged to a man. Wings are stacked high on shelves, heels hang from the door, and brightly colored blouses line the walls. Jim's masculine clothes hang in a corner of the closet. They look sad compared to the others.

"It's so much more fun to go shopping for women's clothes," Jamie says.

Jim and Shirley rarely discuss his cross-dressing, as long as Jim follows the rules. He is allowed one day a week, Tuesdays, for a Jamie day and can maintain a closet of female clothes, but must get rid of an article of clothing every time he buys a new one. He is not allowed on television dressed as Jamie, but can help spread awareness in other ways as he sees fit.

“His cross-dressing doesn’t affect our relationship unless he get’s out of hand like wanting to dress up too often,” Shirley says. “Sometimes you have to rein him back in.”

There are a few trivial things that bother Shirley about her husband, but his love of sleeping in silk nightgowns isn’t one of them. Shirley’s main concern is that Jim seems to be more absent-minded than Jamie.

“If it has something to do with Jamie, he’ll remember it down to the finest degree,” Shirley says. “But, for example, if Jim and I have a commitment, he may forget about it.”

People often wonder if Jim is a gay man or even a lesbian. At one point in his life, Jim wondered too. When in junior high, he experimented with homosexuality. He realized he is not.

“I like girls. Everything about them, inside and out,” he says.

If you ask Jim about his sexual orientation he will tell you that he is a, “completely heterosexual male who just happens to like to dress in women’s clothes.”