

# Four Two Nine

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Ultimately, we offered her half a million to do the book, but she chickened out. Even her difficult agent, Sam Cohn—notorious for tearing up contracts and eating them—made no bones about the fact that he thought her decision was a mistake. (“It’s not the money. Her fucking family owns a goddamn muffin company!”) But she was scared. She didn’t want to use a ghost. She wasn’t interested in creating a piece of merchandise. She wanted her own voice on the page, but she didn’t think she could make the book good enough. Like all addicts and alcoholics, she lived with fear. It followed her everywhere. And it was that fear, that extra hurdle she had to leap to get herself up there on the stage, that made her performances so human.

That voice: she played it like a battered, scratched-up instrument no one had ever heard before. Every song was an occasion for truth telling, and she didn’t flinch if the mood required more than a smile. This was a woman who would never play Marian the librarian. There is a reason she

was not known for her renditions of Rodgers and Hammerstein. She was at her best when the truths were complicated enough to make us sad and sometimes quite uncomfortable. She was courageous enough to go beyond mere perfectionism. She let you see the mess; she brought it all onstage with her. The mess was part of the point. Maybe it *was* the point. And so she sang, and then she laughed—that late-night laugh, pretending that none of it mattered. She hinted at loneliness and the bravery it takes to live with it. The trouble, the melancholy, the hurt behind things: that was her territory. Although she was often celebrated, she knew what it was to be shamed, fired, turned away, down and out, and empty. And she didn’t pretend she didn’t know. The success of her last years was hard-won enough to be inspiring in a way far surpassing cheap Broadway uplift.

The Stritches of our time, a dying breed in a fallen world of tits and ass, can’t be put in a box with a neat selling label. They hate the box; they destroy the

box. They kick their way out and rip the thing to shreds, always rebelling against the conformists and cash registers who try to put them in their place. They’re always in trouble, and that hurts more than they will ever admit, but they keep on fighting, turning their wounds into scenes easy to play only under the lights

I think America is going to look around one day and turn on the marketers and formula makers who turn theater into a strip-tease and ruin art and everything else, and ask, “Where are the personalities? Where are the greats, the originals?” Elaine’s voice will undoubtedly fall from the heavens: “I told you so, assholes. You’ve really fucked this up.” The role of Elaine cannot be filled. No one will ever play an Elaine the way this one played herself.

*George Hodgman is a writer and editor, based in New York City. His memoir, Bettyville, will be published by Viking in March.*

## *How I Came to Tie a Tie on a Boy*

by Jenny Jedeikin

It was just a few weeks into our burgeoning relationship, when my new girlfriend, Erin, got the news. Her ex had rectal cancer.

She told me via text. “I guess I won’t take him to court next week, after all,” she reasoned, ever practical. She had been fighting him bitterly in family court because he refused to work, preferring to stay at home with their young kids, baking cookies and canning fruits, and leaving her with a big support bill.

Though they had been separated for a few years by then, Erin was still seething with a certain kind of deep-seated rage at Jay for the fact that after a thirteen-year relationship as a lesbian couple, which included the births of two children, he had announced one evening that he was having his breasts removed.

“But I can’t be with a man,” Erin found herself explaining to her mate—and to the chorus of parent onlookers at her kids’ politically correct preschool cooperative,

who, not being gay, couldn’t really understand Erin’s point, even if they wanted to.

But alas, Jay (formerly Julie) was the stay-at-home, mommy-turned-daddy type and had every mommy rallying to his fashionable transgender cause.

“C’mon, Erin! Why can’t you just love him as the man that he really is?” they demanded to know, first with words and later with belittling glares and stares whenever she had occasion to march her young children into the preschool.

“I can’t,” Erin would shrug. Painful as it was to separate with young children in the mix, Erin knew that it just wouldn’t work for her on an intimate level to stand by as her domestic lady partner morphed into a goatee-wearing stud. At forty-six, Erin had never even made love to a man, and she didn’t intend to start now.

Finally, when Jay had his breasts surgically discarded and started taking testosterone and sprouting a beard, Erin caught him having an affair with a hetero-

sexual woman and asked him to move out.

As a full-time videographer shooting the local news, Erin found herself scrambling through part-time custody of her kids with a work schedule that began at 2:00 a.m. every morning. She resented paying support to Jay, who never had much of a career and, apparently, wasn’t planning on “manning” up and starting one now.

That’s when Erin and I met. Me, another gay mom with two daughters of my own, with an ex-husband who had the distinction of having been born with a penis.

And that is how I came to know and suffer, by proxy, the painful, small indignities of being a lesbian mother with a transgender ex.

Imagine what it was like after having endured years of contempt from her Irish Catholic father, when Erin had to explain things to the principal at the kids’ new school: “No, you see, Jay . . . he, well, he



was never my husband, and I was never any man's wife." Or conjuring the appropriate reply to your four-year-old son, who only remembers his dad as a man, when he stumbles upon an old photo of the two of you and exclaims, "Huh . . . does this mean I used to have two moms?"

I remember suppressing my own squeals of laughter when Erin's daughter, who was six at the time of Jay's transition and will always remember her father's womanly past, announced casually during breakfast that her dad had told her the night before that "he got his period when he was eleven."

It sounds funny enough, but the truth is, even if she once wished him ill for creating such havoc in her life, she really couldn't anymore, because Erin's goatee-encrusted, R.E.M. T-shirt wearing, transgender ex with baking skills now had a fatal disease, and it broke her heart.

I met Jay only after his illness had metastasized, when I tasted one of his delicious homemade calzones. Only forty-two when diagnosed, Jay had grown up as Julie in small-town Oregon in a Mormon family with a father who spent forty-five years hitting cashier keys at the local Safeway. Tomboyish, with curly red hair, she had found some comfort in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and had even served on a Mormon mission before attending BYU, where she was expelled for "suspicion of homosexual behavior."

In long conversations over glasses of Syrah, Erin and I attempted to make sense of this person's short life. Maybe the testosterone contributed to the

cancer's rapidfire growth, we surmised. "Perhaps it was his Mormon upbringing that explained his refusal to work," I offered, showing Erin a recent newspaper article that explained in great detail the Mormon conviction that a mother should make every effort to stay at home with her children. Finally, we speculated that his Mormon roots had possibly fueled Jay's desire to legally become a man. Ironically, poignantly, as a man dating a woman, Jay had returned to the Mormon Church after becoming ill. He finally felt accepted, Erin told me.

In his confrontation with cancer, rather than crying defeat, Jay rallied and found his strength, writing a blog called *DeYoung Deconstructed: More Than Meets the Eye*. He offered stories from his dual life to his many followers, stories that underscored his basic conviction to always come out as yourself—even when that self is a good Mormon girl, a missionary, a lesbian, a dropout, or a stay-at-home dad with a colostomy bag dying of cancer.

In his last six months, Erin reconnected with Jay, whose facial-hair loss made him resemble the woman he once was. Together they had long conversations about their kids, who would miss the singular nurturing quality of their transgender parent. It was Jay the parent who took the time to read aloud the entirety of the Harry Potter series to them at bedtime; Jay the parent who prepared them for his death by delicately looking them in the eye and telling them what was likely going to happen "not tomorrow or the next day, but probably very soon." Then he held them while they

all cried.

Eventually, the kids stopped sleeping at his house because it was too scary to be that close to death all night long. But on one evening Erin took her son to visit, as Jay lay more or less unconscious on morphine, with an occasional outburst of disjointed muttering about cooking homemade pizza. Erin lay at the edge of his bed as their son climbed in between them and curled up around his departing parent, silently saying goodbye.

The depth of the boy's pain, I imagine, couldn't be put into words. The lack of vocabulary is understandable, for it accompanies the loss of a parent when the parent you are losing is by all appearances and common cultural associations your dad but, in reality, is the person who carried you within her womb for nine months. He is your birth mom—and that fact hasn't been made clear to you. There are no words for that.

And so it was that the world went dark on March 23, 2014, for Jay DeYoung who died a month shy of his forty-sixth birthday. That's how it came to be that I bent down to tie the necktie of a nine-year-old boy who was dressing for the memorial service for his dad.

"See how handsome you are!" I said, pulling the sky-blue silk knot tight to close the loop around his neck, underlining his soft young face in that masculine accent of blue.

*Jenny Jedeikin lives in Northern California, and her writing has appeared in Rolling Stone Magazine, the San Francisco Chronicle and The Advocate, among other publications.*

## Seven Reasons Why I'd Rather Have a Dog Than a Man

by Brendan Lemon

We've all heard the usual reasons why Fidos are superior to fellas: they're better at reading your emotions; they're more likely to eat what you give them; and once the puppy-pooing phase is over, they're easier to house-train. Even the noises they make are preferable. As Beatrice says in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*, "I would rather listen to my dog bark at a

crow than hear a man swear that he loves me."

But for a gay man, there are even more reasons to choose Max the dog (Max being, in some years, the most popular US dog name) over Max the man. Here are seven of them:

Dogs will happily wear a leash. Most gay men will wear a leash only during

Folsom Street Fair, and even then only if they are allowed to sport a sign on their chaps proclaiming, with dubious justification, "I'm really a top."

Dogs will eagerly allow you to bend over and kiss them in public. I once had a boyfriend who would allow me to buss him on the street only if it was 4:00 a.m., the streetlights weren't working, and he had