SON, SOLDIER, HUSBAND, FATHER, WIDOWER, ADMAN, INVENTOR, CEO, WOMAN: JESSICA SCHILLER’S LONG PATH TO EMANCIPATION.

“JUDAH IS GONE. NOW IT’S JESSICA.”
it feel like to wear those clothes? Or to have that hair? What would it look like to be a lady like that?" What would it mean to be a lady like that?"

"It was confusing, because I knew I identified as a woman, but I also was attracted to women, so I knew I wasn’t gay," Schiller says. "It was a dual identity—a male side of my brain and a female side. The female side would have those thoughts, and then we would disappear. The male side would be like, ‘What the fuck are you thinking?’"

This feeling of dual identity has a formal name: gender dysphoria. Psychologists describe it as a conflict between a person’s assigned gender and the gender with which they identify. Judah Schiller fit the profile perfectly. Unconsciously, Schiller overcompensated with masculinity on overdrive. She worked out aggressively. She always made sure to be the loudest person in the room—even if she didn’t have that much to say. She actively cultivated a exaggerated sense of self-worth. She par- doned herself for not being an alpha male…someone you definitely wanted on your side in a rumble.”

Schiller’s gender dysphoria abated and flourished, following her from finally putting on makeup in her early 20s. During visits at a kibbutz, Schiller and some friends dressed in drag for a party, and the evening demean- ors made her feel comfortable in a way she never had before. A few years later, Schiller was drafted into the Israeli Defense Force, where she became a fixture at the university’s toughness culture. One night, Schiller was assigned to stand watch in the desert with an M16, a grenade launcher, and six magazines of ammu- nition. "There in the darkness, beneath a sky brigh- th by the time I was 25, I pretty much knew I was trans, but I wasn’t even close to comfortable coming out. So I just put it aside. I tried to make the best of my life as Judah." Deep down, though, she knew she was living a lie.

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saw. “We started tossing around ideas.”

Isaac had just gotten back from a trip to London, where he’d seen cycle pubs—bars on wheels that up to a dozen people could pedal simultaneously. Schiller laughed and thought for a moment, then pulled an idea from thin air. “What if someone created a bike that let you ride across water?” In the moment, I was kind of like, ‘Oh, wow, that would be such a fantastic idea,” says Isaac, who is now a vice president at eBay. “But I figured it was one of those situations where you sit around and riff off each other. Jessica was much more serious. For her it was a mission.”

Schiller stayed up most of each night during that first week, jotting down ideas and sketches, hitting the Internet to find industry forecasts. The possibilities were intoxicating. Great works! Fun adventures! Sustainable! Potential game-changers for transportation! It was as if the idea had reinvigorated her creative processes and vibrated at a different frequency. For Schiller, it wasn’t a question of whether the water bike would happen; it was a matter of when.

Schiller incorporated as BayCycle in November 2013 and within a few months had changed the name to Schiller Bikes. She poured her own money into office space, hired a team of engineers, designers, and product developers, and scheduled serious fast. The relationship was different this time around. Judah still identified as Judah, but there was a lot more of Schiller in the mix. “I had seen the boom-and-mast construction of a catamaran. For Schiller, he’s seen cycle pubs—bars on wheels that up to a dozen people could pedal simultaneously. Schiller laughed and thought for a moment, then pulled an idea from thin air: What if someone

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rehearsed the lines so often in her head, she remembers every word. “Basically, since I was younger than you, Satya, I’ve always felt like I’ve been in the wrong body. That I’m transgender.”

The kids remained silent for what seemed like an eternity. The brown and green of the Central Valley whizzed by. Naomi, who was sitting next to Schiller in the front passenger seat, responded first. “Good for you,” the teenager said. Then, without missing a beat: “What do you want us to call you?”

Schiller guffawed. She had spent weeks imagining the kids’ reactions. She hadn’t prepared for this. “You can still call me Abba, if you want,” she said, citing the Hebrew word for father. “But from this point forward, I’m going to go by Jessica.”

The conversation continued for a while, with Schiller reassuring the kids that they were still a family and that nothing was changing except her. Satya remained mostly quiet until a few weeks later, when he pulled Schiller aside in the kitchen. “I had a father for 10 years but never had a mom,” the boy said. “Now I guess I finally get to have a mom.”

Later, after Schiller had come out to her eldest, Tomer, and the rest of her immediate family, she focused on revealing the news to everyone else. Except for a few phone calls and emails to close pals, she did this in one fell swoop, via LinkedIn. Responses ranged from congratulatory and supportive to downright gushing. Those whose reactions she feared most ended up shocking her anew, like Abdulla Hassan, an early Schiller Bikes adviser and the CEO and cofounder of Dhow Capital, an investment firm in Kuwait. Schiller didn’t know much about Hassan’s cultural background, but she was concerned that her transition might offend him. His email allayed that fear.

“Let me start by saying that I trusted you with my own money and the funds of my company, that trust and belief will continue,” he wrote. “Your personal life has obviously taken a new journey and our trust and belief in you will not change. Your honesty about the decision is appreciated and I am sure your zeal of doing business will always be the same.”

ONCE THE WAVE OF CATHARSIS subsided, Schiller was overwhelmed. Sure, she was living her truth, but she didn’t have any trans friends with whom she could connect to talk about her transition, her new life, and what it meant to now be operating in the business world as a female CEO. She felt she needed a mentor, someone who could give her a sense of the new challenges and opportunities that might arise. This led her to Vivienne Ming.

One weeknight, Schiller was in the kitchen of her Mill Valley home, making dinner for her kids, when she googled “transgender female executives.” The first to come up was Martine Rothblatt, the creator of SiriusXM radio and the founder of United Therapeutics. The second was Ming, a theoretical neuroscientist, an expert in artificial intelligence, and the founder of Berkeley-based think tank Socos Labs. Schiller watched Ming’s 2017 TEDx talk about the process of making a better person, during which she discussed her own transition. Schiller was blown away. She sent Ming a LinkedIn message that night.

The two women met for coffee in Berkeley about a month later. Schiller recalls the encounter as being like “sitting in the best college lecture of your life” and says that Ming did most of the talking. Ming’s recollections are slightly different. “I do a lot of these meet-ups with people undergoing transitions, and most of them involve me sitting there reassuring someone that everything is going to be OK,” she says. “Within minutes it became clear that this was not going to be one of those talks. Instead, Schiller wanted to know everything people don’t tell you about going through a transition—where to find new clothes, what kind of weight loss to expect, how people in the business world might treat you. She knew things would be OK. She just didn’t know what things to expect.”

And for Schiller, life since her transition...
has been more than OK. Even though she and Ryan split up, Schiller says she is happier than she ever thought possible—her contentedness amplified by the fact that she resisted it for so long. Most of her day-to-day interactions with strangers have been positive, not darkened by prejudice. Friends and acquaintances have asked lots of questions—mostly about what it means to be trans and which pronouns they should use.

Physically, the differences between Schiller and her former self are stark. She has noticed a new accumulation of fat at her hips, a loss of muscle mass, and reduced hair growth. While she has no plans for gender confirmation surgery, she did have rhinoplasty to "feminize" her nose, and her estrogen pills and testosterone blockers have enlarged her breasts.

Then, of course, there are differences of style: Bras, heels, dresses, and blouses have replaced the T-shirts and jeans that used to be her uniform. She also dons makeup—applying skills picked up from YouTube videos, Naomi, and Ryan. She has embraced manicures, preferring “holo-graphic mirror chrome” nail polish because it reminds her of the shimmer of the water. These new routines couldn’t be further from the ones Schiller had when she was Judah. “Last year at this time, I could roll out of bed and be ready for the day in five minutes,” she says. “Now I get up, I spend an hour getting ready, and I’m still lucky if I get my kids to school on time.”

Schiller’s personality is different too. Before her transition, she struggled to stay focused on a single task for any period of time. Now, she says, her mind is like a laser beam—she’ll be so intent on completing something that hours will go by before she realizes she hasn’t eaten or stood up. Stereotypical though it sounds, she also feels softer, more vulnerable, more empathetic, and more in touch with her emotions.

By and large, Schiller’s friends and family members see these things too. “One of the most incredibly fabulous things about Jessica was that she was always searching for something—for lots of things,” longtime friend Werbach says. “It was always very exciting to be around Jessica, because her searching was frantic. After her transition, it feels as if the edge of that franticness has come off. It feels like she’s arrived.”

Schiller’s brother Aaron sees a similar transformation; he says Jessica is “lighter” than her former self and more fun to hang out with. Aaron, a spiritual adviser and relationship coach, adds that while one must acknowledge who Schiller was before her transition, it’s important to see her as someone new and separate from her past. “Life is about continued growth and change,” he says. “Jessica’s journey gives everyone in our family an opportunity to see someone we know and love in new ways.”

This concept is one that Schiller is grappling with as well. She’s happy to offer perspective on what she’s experiencing, but she knows that what she believes to be true today could in fact be radically different from what she perceives six months from now. She still has a long way to go.

“It really is like when you’re on a boat, and you leave the dock and you go out at dusk and the coastline starts to get smaller and the lights start to get dimmer,” she says. “You’re out at sea, and you feel the water underneath you. You don’t know what the destination will look like. You don’t know what the coastline you’re heading toward will be like. That’s what being trans feels like for me right now.”

“The coast that I left has started fading,” she continues, “and I feel like I’m out at sea and I haven’t reached the destination yet. I’m enjoying the experience. It’s deep and wild. It’s expansive and vast. The lights of the coastline I left are dimmer and dimmer every day and week. That old identity isn’t me anymore. I can barely see it. And I guess that’s scary at times. But the place I’m headed is going to be great. I know I’m headed in the right direction.”