

THIS
IS
THE
GUY
YOU
WANTED
TO BE IN
HIGH
SCHOOL



Growing up, she was Paul, the smart, popular Golden Boy quarterback everyone envied.



THE PRODIGAL SON: Kimberly Reed, née Paul McKerrow, photographed in Brooklyn.

Now, as Kimberly Reed, she's something more. BY RICK MOODY PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK HEITHOFF

HIGH-SCHOOL QUARTERBACKS, IT'S REASONABLE TO ASSUME, LOOK UPON THEIR HIGH-SCHOOL REUNIONS AS MOMENTS OF TRIUMPH.

Oh, those romantic conquests! Oh, those hagiographic articles in the local press, those tailgate parties, those long-ago legends—let us now relive them! What could be more *Friday Night Lights*, therefore, than the 20th reunion of Helena, Montana's own Paul McKerrow, who was not only Helena High's starting quarterback and football co-captain but its class valedictorian and the student voted most likely to succeed? Those of us who languished on the sidelines of high-school life can only imagine such a return. But was the grand entrance we're imagining here really the stuff of local history? Or was it something else?

Because Paul McKerrow, it must be said, is no longer Paul McKerrow. He is, these days, Kimberly Reed, filmmaker, New Yorker, and transgender person. It was Kimberly who in 2005 strode into the 20th reunion for Paul, and who got light-headed enough to wear her name tag, which had her new name, and an old photo of her former self. It was Kimberly who in the months after the reunion made a very moving documentary about it, *Prodigal Sons*, to be released in theaters in late February by First Run Features and broadcast on the Sundance Channel in June.

Let's go back a little bit: Once, there was an upstanding ophthalmologist out West, who, with his wife, was unable to start a family. They adopted a bundle of joy, therefore, in 1966, and then, as is often the way with such things, they managed to conceive almost instantly, maybe even the very day their first child arrived home. When that second baby was born, at a nearby Army hospital, the doctors took one look and said, "Oh, it's a little baby girl!" And then, "Oh, wait a moment . . ." And thus began Paul's life of gender-related ironies. Just over a year later, a third son likewise arrived the old-fashioned biological way, and so the prodigal sons were assembled.

Marc, the adopted son, had problems almost immediately. Not given to concentrating, he was unable to settle down in preschool, and the educators encouraged the McKerrows to hold him back a year. Unfortunately for Marc, he then landed in the very same grade as his unadopted younger brother, Paul, *the Golden Boy*. "There was always this rivalry between us," Kimberly Reed says now, from the vantage point of her early forties, and this is understatement of the sort that only a woman could fashion to describe the behavior of men.

Since I am already committing the sin of journalism, let me pause to observe that by any barometer, Reed, despite being over six feet and having the lean physique of an athlete, is a stunning and beautiful woman, which is to say that she could pass, which is a political statement in certain redoubts of the transgender community. Kimberly Reed can pass, though the heroic journey of Paul McKerrow has made this less important to her, if relevant at all. She is blonde, modest; smiles easily. She has none of the stoic, determined, slightly overcalibrated femininity that I sometimes associate with women who have transitioned. On the contrary, Kim Reed is a little goofy, with a bit of the former straight-A student about her. If anything, she's what you would expect of a woman who grew up in Montana, whose grandparents

BOY, INTERRUPTED:

Paul (below, kneeling) with brothers Marc and Todd and their parents at home in Helena, Montana, just after his high-school graduation. Opposite: Paul, with Marc at their ninth-grade prom, and in his senior portrait. By his last year at Helena High, Paul was the school's starting quarterback—and had read every book on transition in the Helena library.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF KIMBERLY REED. PAGE 97: DRESS BY BANANA REPUBLIC; JEWELRY, HER OWN. STYLING BY MICAH JOHNSON; HAIR AND MAKEUP BY PATRICIA FOR HALLEY RESOURCES.

FACED WITH SO MUCH UNCERTAINTY, PAUL ASSUMED THE ONE KIND OF DRAG THAT WOULD



worked the land, and whose extended family still does.

I met Reed at one of those artists' colonies, the one called Yaddo, in Saratoga Springs, New York. She was there crafting a screenplay while I was finishing my fifth novel, and I remember well the night she strode into the Linoleum Room looking for mail, because I thought, *Extremely tall and very pretty and startlingly normal*. Not another art-colony head case! We had some friends in common. So I was interested and intrigued when Reed volunteered, a night or two later, that she was going to show a small group of us her film in the drawing room. I don't know what I was expecting from *Prodigal Sons*, but certainly not the harrowing family drama that ensued, in which Reed's transition from male to female is only the first and most obvious layer.

In high school, see, she would do anything to be taken for a boy, so much so that she says, "If someone had tortured me back then and asked me if I had these feelings about gender, I think I could have successfully resisted giving up the secret." Does this mean that Paul's confusion about gender dates to his earliest memory? According to Kim, that's exactly what it means, that when he looked in the mirror, he worried that he saw a girl, and when he made movies with his brothers—"The Mad Doctor" and "Rocky," for example—he made sure that he never played the ingenue parts (these roles, almost invariably called "Lady," were assigned to the youngest brother, Todd). Beneath the surface of Paul's seemingly placid Rocky Mountain life was the feeling that, though he was attracted to girls, he wasn't anything like a boy and had never been. In the rural West, this can't have been a frequently encountered complaint, this discomfort with one's sex, and Kim refers to Renée Richards, the 1970s transgender tennis pro (born Richard Raskind), as one of the few public examples of sexual reassignment that she knew anything about. Faced with so much uncertainty, so much discomfort, Paul did assume the one kind of drag, the one kind of masquerade that would loft him above scrutiny in the matter of gender. Paul joined the high-school football team.

True, it was not a very *good* team, and he wasn't even varsity until senior year. They had a losing record with Paul as quarterback, and yet he still represented much of what young men imagine they want to be, blond and considerably handsome, with a charming smile and a graceful determination, even as opposing linemen were bearing down on him. He was a good leader, on the field and off. "Quarterback is about marshaling all these burly guys and trying to get them to do your bidding," Reed says. "I think I was good at it. I think I was a good leader in high school." And yet Reed's recollection of the big

games is of "anxiety" and not much else—the anxiety of tossing the perfect spiral, the anxiety of confronting the crosstown rivals and their threats of violence, and the anxiety of losing yet again. Still, the one thing the high-school football team *did* indisputably bestow on Reed was the elusive masculine street cred. A credibility that, in this case, might have allowed Paul to lead something like a normal childhood, to the best of his ability, one with best friends, movies, records, driving downtown on a Saturday night prowling for girls, and so on. No one, not a soul, knew what was happening under the surface. When asked what sustained Kim while Paul was her daily performance, Reed is quiet for a while and then alludes to noncontroversial influences like Monty Python and Penelope Spheeris' *Decline of Western Civilization*. Not exactly girly, and probably more distracting than sustaining, but still decidedly out of step with the prevailing Mellencamp and country-and-western culture of Montana. Paul also found time "to read every book on transitioning in the Helena public library."

It was when Paul McKerrow went to UC Berkeley, to get far, far away from Montana, to study rhetoric, art history, and film, that he began to see that he could and *would* become Kimberly. It was not a transition without conflict—they never are—but Reed took it slowly ("In retrospect I now realize I was comparatively young, and it actually didn't take me inordinately long to transition, but it felt dreadfully slow at the time"). A year abroad in Norway in the late eighties, with a lot of time spent on his own, began the process. And by the time Paul matriculated at San Francisco State in 1990, in pursuit of an M.A. in film, he was in his mid-twenties and living part of the time as Paul and part as Kim. The Bay Area was a safe place to begin this daunting process. Even so, on one occasion, upon encountering an old friend, a guy, while wearing the outfits that were more Kim's than Paul's, she ran and hid behind a tree. Gradually, however, Kim began to let go of Paul. Eventually, she was done. Paul McKerrow checked into San Francisco as a former high-school quarterback, and Kim Reed checked out as a lesbian filmmaker.

THERE'S ANOTHER KIND OF HIGH-SCHOOL-REUNION EXPERIENCE—THE KIND IN which the infamous *party animal* returns to the site of the crime. Here the path is much less glamorous, if well-worn. Here there is, arguably, some regret, if there is also pride for an adolescence lived to the fullest. Something along these lines might well have been Marc McKerrow's experience at the Helena High reunion. To understand Marc McKerrow, you have to know a little about Thrill Hill, just outside downtown Helena, where you tried to crest the summit in your father's Buick Riviera, let's say, at the highest possible speed, before the road veered hard right at the underpass, the one with the cement pilings. Marc McKerrow holds the Thrill Hill speed record, according to Kim. He was also stopped by the authorities driving his father's car at 120 mph outside Helena once. And in his later teens he stole his dad's credit card, too, and rented a suite at the best hotel downtown, and invited everyone to come and *party*. He was used to wresting the limelight from his brother the quarterback ("He has an inability to be embarrassed," Reed says of Marc); if he wasn't good at school, he was *great* on the weekends. At least, that is, until the accident. He was driving his Chevy Blazer, with the tinted windows and the vanity plates (BLKBLZR). Paul was away, beginning the process of becoming Kim, when Marc totaled his SUV after his 21st-birthday celebration

LOFT HIM ABOVE SCRUTINY IN THE MATTER OF GENDER. PAUL JOINED THE FOOTBALL TEAM.

in Vegas and sustained a massive head injury.

Massive: meaning that part of his front brain eventually had to be removed. Meaning that he had a “personality change,” which is a polite way to describe significant brain damage, impulse-control problems, seizures. Of this last: Marc had multiple surgeries to relieve the seizures, but afterward he required even more medication, both for neurological symptoms and for emotional ones, and though he was able to marry (a startlingly patient woman) and to produce a daughter (quite sweet), he was never much able to work. Because of his persistent short-term-memory issues, Marc is preoccupied with the distant past, with the time he can remember, with the particulars of his adoptive family, the minutiae—family photos in great profusion, Paul’s skis, a baseball hat that Paul and Marc shared in high school—and of course with stories, all this material from the time *before* his accident. When Kim was Paul, when all three boys were in school together, and he, Marc, was “more popular” than either of his brothers. For Marc, events of the present—like family get-togethers, visits for the holidays—are furrowed under in this constant need to talk about those years, to talk about high school, the good times, to enumerate the rights and wrongs committed by family members, the moments of glory, the injustices, and the football-playing brother he seemed to both admire and dislike in equal measure (in the film he once calls Kim Paul in a fit of anger). And sometimes when Marc doesn’t get the response he wants, there are bouts of cruelty, tongue lashings that go on and on and on, or, worse, explosions (and some of these are depicted in *Prodigal Sons*, to gruesome and painful effect) in which things around the house, pictures and dishes, are busted up, knives brandished, threats leveled, and so on. The Marc McKerrow of youth was bad, but bad in a way that some people found likable and even amusing. The Marc McKerrow of adulthood is hurt, confused, broken, and besieged from all sides. He veers among arrogant, defeated, and paranoid.

This, then, was the McKerrow constituency for the 20th high-school reunion in Helena: not just Kimberly Reed, the transgender filmmaker from New York City, but Marc McKerrow, the fun-loving partier, now replaced by Marc McKerrow, the forgetful, slightly impaired, and heavily medicated guy occasionally given to violence. The reunion attendees, 200-odd, knew about Kim, because she had come home for her father’s funeral, knew to expect her to be a *her*, but most of them knew nothing about Marc. He had spent the decades suffering largely in silence, hadn’t even successfully graduated from high school in the first place, so his name tag had to be hand-lettered on the spot with no photo on it.

In the months before the reunion, Marc decided to learn more about his biological parents. There was information only on his biological mother. She too had lived something of a helter-skelter life, sometimes in squats, sometimes not in the best of shape. But there was a lot of information about Marc’s grandparents, because Marc’s mother, the free spirit, the hippie, was the daughter of two of the most famous entertainment figures of all time—the very biggest names in Hollywood. What if the couple was Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth? By the time Marc was in touch with his mother, by the time he was sure he wanted to meet with her, she was on her deathbed. No meeting ever took place. His grandparents were gone too. However, Marc McKerrow did, after the reunion, find himself in touch with Orson Welles’ last great love, Oja Kodar, the Croatian star of *F for Fake*. Soon he was off to the Balkans to meet her, having never before set foot outside the USA. Somehow, through the agency of a specifically American fate, from the great citadel of show business, Marc had fallen into the family of

an ophthalmologist out in Big Sky country. And all the while, despite the malevolent scar on his head, it was clear that he really was the spitting image of the director of *Citizen Kane* and *Touch of Evil*.

IF THIS ALL SOUNDS KIND OF FARCICAL, IT’S BECAUSE IT’S HARD TO DOCUMENT IN a mere recitation of the facts. You begin to get a sense of the darker shadows in the McKerrow clan when you see the video footage they shot of themselves, which culminates in *Prodigal Sons* itself. In one of Paul’s childhood films, “Mad Doctors,” for example, Marc plays the “Crazy Kid,” who is given to Incredible Hulk–like fits of acting-out, and Kim feels certain that even then she was trying to understand his “erratic behavior,” and then there’s Todd, who came out as gay while Kim was transitioning, cast in numerous cross-dressing roles. At the same time, the father also lugged around primitive video equipment, and filmed the big football games. He filmed the holidays. The McKerrows are nearly as film-addicted as the Friedmans of *Capturing the Friedmans*. And so perhaps it’s a matter of course that despite Kim’s inability to talk at length about her own hardships, she is completely willing to document Marc, as he is willing to be violent for all to see. I asked Kim why, in the scene in *Prodigal Sons* in which she is getting beaten by her brother, she didn’t hit back. Though she said that “not hitting him back may be a typically feminine response,” it’s not that she recoiled because she is given to typically feminine responses (“I feel like I’m making peace with both sides of myself”) but that she still cares about her brother, no matter his dire circumstances.

So instead of demonizing Marc, let’s situate him too at the reunion, dancing a bit to the classics from the eighties, or recounting, for the umpteenth time, that he has a brain injury and isn’t able to work. And maybe somewhere, in some back room at the hotel in question, Marc finds a piano, settles himself down to do some of his uncanny piano playing, which has a Windham Hill quality to it—all improvised, all very pretty, all completely untutored.

The *bad boy* has his part to play at the high-school reunion, and it’s less predictable and more mixed than the cocksure guy he once was. There’s a poetry there, a poetry of time literally lost. And what about the high-school quarterback? In the transgender community, Reed says, “it’s bad form to talk about your childhood”—your gender dysphoria—“unless you have to.” It’s all the more courageous, then, that this filmmaker did show up at her 20th high-school reunion wearing a name tag with the picture of Paul on it. And maybe in so doing, without ever getting falling-down drunk or hitting on her best friend’s wife, or tailgating, or stealing the crosstown rivals’ mascot, she was the life of the party. There was even a welcome from many of her classmates. She brought along her partner, Claire, and she wore a short skirt and smiled gracefully, and she danced some, and she was patient with her brother—and she did all this without ever denying her inner quarterback, the one who knew about the West Coast Offense and lionized Joe Montana. In fact, it was here that she began celebrating Paul. And in this way she embodied a cherished *masculine ideal*: She told the truth about herself without regret and without apology to whoever asked. “The numbers are off slightly,” says Reed, “but bear with me here: I spent the first third of my life pretending not to be a girl, and the second third of my life pretending not to have been a boy.” Not too many get to travel down this road, and here I’m not necessarily referring to Kimberly Reed’s knowing something true and important about both genders—though that is heroic. Here I’m referring to something equally rare: She had a good reunion. ■

