

THE STRENGTH WITHIN HER

WHEN WORLD CHAMPION POWERLIFTER **MATT KROCZALESKI** CAME OUT AS A TRANSGENDER WOMAN, **JANAE MARIE**, THE NEWS TURNED THE FITNESS WORLD UPSIDE DOWN. NOW LIVING IN THE OPEN, THE UNBREAKABLE IMAGE SHE FORGED AS AN ATHLETE WILL BE PUT TO THE ULTIMATE TEST.

By the time you find his custom

dumbbells, which can be loaded up

would drape across his shoulders for

walking lunges in deep snow-the

to 300 pounds, and a 250-pound

length of telephone pole that he

gear-the fabled "Kroc Row"

BY MATT TUTHILL | PHOTOGRAPHS BY PER BERNAL



ANY SMALL UNDERGROUND

gym gets the "dungeon" nickname by

Kroczaleski built in the basement of

between Ann Arbor and Detroit is the

his suburban Michigan home in a cookie-cutter subdivision of Ypsilanti

only one you might confuse for an

actual dungeon. The top half of the

poured-concrete walls is covered in

blood-red spray paint; the bottom half

in black. Dozens of heavy chains and

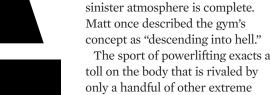
thick rubber bands hang from pegs on

the wall. All of it is standard power-

lifting gear, but the setting makes it

look designed for torture.

default, but the one that Matt



toll on the body that is rivaled by only a handful of other extreme sports, but Matt, who fans simply called "Kroc," had an uncommon obsession for shattering records that seemed to ignore all consequences. The price he paid came in the form of several muscle tears over the years: left calf, right quad, left lat, left pec, both biceps, and both triceps. The intracranial pressure accrued during his squat sessions twice caused severe hemorrhaging.

That was just the cost of training. His particular brand of contest prep would kill most men. When cutting weight before a powerlifting meet, he could lose 35 pounds in a 24-hour period; he'd wear several sweat suits, get into his car in the middle of the summer, roll up the windows, turn the heat on full blast, and drive around for hours. Any weight he didn't lose in the car came off in his bathroom, where, after stuffing all the vents with towels, he drove the temperature up to 150° by running a hot shower all night. He'd go in and out of his makeshift sauna for 30-minute bouts, forgoing sleep, until he hit his target. After the weigh-in, he could gain all the weight back by eating and drinking Gatorade nonstop until the meet.

He didn't just survive these bizarre rituals, he got on the lifting platform the next day and decimated the rest of the field. In 2009, he set the powerlifting world record in the 220-pound weight class, squatting 1,003 pounds, deadlifting 810, and benching 738 for a staggering three-lift total of 2,551. Suffice it to say the home gym was appropriate for the style of training Matt was known for. The monolift set against the wall saw some brutal, spine-crushing squat sessions. There's a Texas Power Bar, thicker and 10 pounds heavier than a standard bar, meant to withstand the rigors of pro powerlifting. It is bent

rigors of pro powerlifting. It is bent into a sharp, permanent parabola, useless, discarded in the corner. On



EVEN AT A YOUNG AGE, YOU KNOW THAT SOMETHING LIKE THAT ISN'T GOING TO BE RECEIVED WELL. I WAS TERRIFIED AT WHAT PEOPLE WOULD THINK.

the opposite side of the gym there is a jack to make it easier to load the bar with the amount of plates he needed for his deadlifting sessions; when you can pull more than 800 pounds, your rep work is in excess of 500. Neighbors didn't complain of noise but that their houses shook when he dropped the weight.

In one corner, there are shelves lined with old bodybuilding and powerlifting magazines, copies of Matt's book, *Insane Training*, and his DVD, *Intensity*, alongside boxes of "Kroc Row" T-shirts. There are also several copies of an old issue of *Power* magazine with Matt on the cover for what was, at that time, an amazing transition—his shift from powerlifter to bodybuilder.

Hidden under the stairs is another stack of old magazines: *Cosmopolitan, Elle, Marie Claire,* and *Glamour.* They were all saved for hair, makeup, and fashion ideas—for the day "Kroc" could fade away and Janae could reveal herself as the woman she always knew she was on the inside.

That day came sooner than expected. On July 27, 2015, YouTube

A MASCULINE IDEAL Known to fans as "Kroc," Matt was revered not just for his feats of strength but also for his incredible physique, which enabled him to get into competitive bodybuilding in the late 2000s.



user luimarco posted a video outing Matt as the Instagram user @janaemariekroc, a transgender woman whose profile describes her as "Transgender/genderfluid Alpha male/girly girl Lesbian in a male body Single at the moment."

By the time the news hit powerlifting forums, Janae was done hiding. She logged on as Matt and addressed her critics. She wasn't angry. She was ready to tell the world what only her family and closest friends had already known. Yes, she was transgender. She was born biologically male but identified as female for as far back as memory serves.

"I can remember being 5, 6 years old and already having these feelings of needing to be female," Janae says. "I would daydream about being a girl. I'd be doing the things I'd normally do, but doing them as a girl. There was a lot of shame. I didn't know why I felt that way."

On the day of her *M*&*F* photo shoot, Janae is sitting in a tall director's chair in the middle of her kitchen. A makeup artist is working on a brand-new look, and Janae is cooing throughout the process. At the moment, she still looks a lot like Matt. The 240 pounds of lean muscle she amassed during several decades of powerlifting and bodybuilding aren't going away overnight. The haircut is another factor. She still sports a uniform standard high-and-tight fade that dates back to Matt's days as a Marine working security for President Bill Clinton at Camp David.

She's wearing a black Nike Dri-Fit tank top, leopard-print capri length

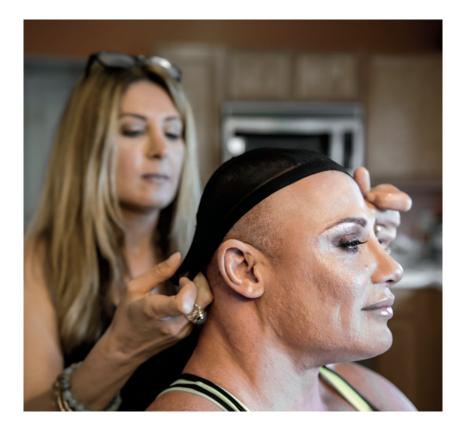
tights, and a pair of purple and turquoise Air Max sneakers. She's asking the makeup artist a question about where she bought her brushes. Her cat, Dawkins, a hairless Sphynx named after the famed atheist and author Richard Dawkins, darts around the kitchen, curious at the activity, protective of her owner.

When the foundation and eyeliner have been applied, it's time for the wig. Janae has several to choose from—curly wigs that would be better suited to glamour shots, and straight ones designed for everyday use. Janae chooses one of the latter, and the makeup artist puts it on. When everything is set, Janae walks into the bathroom to have a look and returns a few minutes later, somber.

"It's even better than I hoped," she says, taking a deep breath. She hugs the makeup artist, fighting back tears.

The makeup artist suggests that Janae try on a different outfit before the shoot begins, so they head upstairs with the photographer to review options.

In her bedroom, Janae pulls a pile of workout clothes out of the dresser and goes to the bathroom to change. On top of her dresser, there are two stacks of books. The stack on the left is a collection of texts on rebuilding classic Camaros that Janae has been referencing for her latest project. She's got a '67 in her garage; it's black with white racing stripes, and she's about to install a 555-cubic-inch custom big block engine that will give it more than 700 horsepower. The stack of books on the right is more varied; there are a few graphic novels, including Marvel's The Infinity Gauntlet, and on top, a medical text on facial feminization surgery. The last of these is weathered and shows signs of having been read several times. Janae recently underwent several such procedures: to narrow her nose and upturn the tip, make her cheekbones more pronounced, lift her eyebrows, and



CAMERA READY When she was known as Matt, Janae did countless photo shoots for bodybuilding and powerlifting magazines. Here, a makeup artist helps her prep for her first photo shoot as Janae.



shorten the distance between her upper lip and nose. Next to this stack of books sit three sets of breathtakingly lifelike prosthetic breasts.

She has yet to take any measures to lighten her voice, but today it is noticeably more feminine than the way she spoke in years past, a natural, subconscious affectation, she says, of dressing as Janae.

On a high shelf in the corner there is a collection of a dozen powerlifting trophies. Janae emerges with a more subtle, color-coordinated outfit and sees the photographer and makeup artist examining the hardware.

"This isn't all of them," she says.

"There's no room for all of them.

"But this one is the most important one," she adds, pulling up a wig to reveal a large statue of a man, rippling with muscle. "I got it when I set the world record." A sparkling necklace hangs around its neck.

"I guess that is ironic," Janae admits with a stifled laugh. "But I'm not covering these up. I honestly just don't have enough wig heads."

There's some debate with the photographer over what to shoot. He tells Janae he just wants her to be comfortable.

"Well, I won't be able to lift much," Janae says. "I mean, I can, but I've tried to train as Janae before and it just didn't feel right. I guess I could lift a little bit of light weight."

Light, of course, is still at least 315 pounds on any lift.

"I wish I had more time to diet for this," she adds, echoing a common bodybuilder's gripe. But she's not talking about "dialing in" her diet to look more ripped. She's talking about losing 80 pounds of muscle.

It's an unfathomable proposition for many of Matt's fans. Other champions in the world of strength sports might have had similar training stories, but Matt was the one guy in powerlifting whom men outside the sport idolized because they didn't just want to be able to do the things he could do, they wanted to look like him, too. Unless you caught him in a bulking or "bloat" phase, the square-jawed brute had a default look that was 250 pounds of muscle with six-pack abs. At 5'9" he was built like a cinder block, exuding a textbook masculine ideal.

When an athlete combines this many rare and coveted qualities, he's placed on a pedestal propped up with endless superlatives, none used more frequently, or affectionately, than the term *freak*.

Since coming out, the word *freak* has been used in Internet forums to describe Janae, though it is no longer a term of endearment.

In the media blitz that followed her admission, she answered a lot of the FAQs. Though she legally changed her name to Janae Marie Kroczaleski (it's what her mother would have named her had she been born biologically female) in April of this year, she still lives as both Matt and Janae, hence the term *gender fluid*. Since she still lifts, she'll meet with training partners as Matt, but she goes to work every day as a pharmacist in the Canton, MI, Walgreens as Janae. Yes, she thinks what Caitlyn Jenner is doing right now is wonderful, but no, it did not inspire her to come out. She had been waiting to come out—and has yet to undergo SRS, or sex reassignment surgery until her boys, aged 13, 15, and 17, could graduate high school. She rightly feared that a full transition could make their social lives much more difficult. But since the choice to come out has now been taken from her, she might make the full transition soon.

"I've worried a lot about how this would affect my boys, but if I postpone everything, what am I teaching them?" she asks. "That you should conform to society's expectations? That you should suppress who you are to make everyone else happy? I think that's the worst lesson I could teach them."

With estrogen therapy, she expects to drop from 240 pounds down to 160. At 42 years old, that would mean saying goodbye to powerlifting and bodybuilding forever, though she says she won't miss it. Once she's lost the weight, she'd like to compete in triathlons or mountain biking.

However, losing physical strength is a real, practical issue that has held her back. Janae has attempted five transitions in the past eight years. Each time, she underwent estrogen therapy, lost 40 to 50 pounds, then bailed on the process. She learned that when she's not as massive, men stop deferring to her and she loses the peace of mind of being fully capable of protecting herself. Anti-transgender violence is alarmingly common and a major concern

TOUGHNESS DOESN'T HAVE A GENDER. PEOPLE ASSOCIATE IT WITH MEN BECAUSE THAT'S WHAT WE'VE BEEN TAUGHT AS A SOCIETY. WOMEN ARE SUPPOSED TO BE MEEK AND FRAGILE, BUT THAT'S NOT THE TRUTH. THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION IS GRAY. for Janae or any other transgender person. According to the Human Rights Campaign, 17 transgender people have been murdered in 2015 in the U.S. as of this writing.

More than once, she's feared physical violence when she was out at night dressed as Janae.

"I was at a club a few months ago, and five guys followed me to my car," she says. "They slowed down when they got close. The only thing that stopped them was how big I was."

The double-edged sword is unique to her situation: The amount of muscle mass she carries makes her an anomaly even within the transgender community. Many transgender people struggle because they don't conform to societal norms of masculinity or femininity. Being a transgender woman as imposing as Janae makes conformity to either sex all but impossible at the moment.

"It's funny. Whenever I see pictures of Matt, I always thought he looked small," she says. "Whenever I see Janae, I think I look huge. I wish I had come to terms with this earlier in life. I'd look a lot better."

To understand how Janae pushed herself so far away from where she now wants to be, it's helpful to get a picture of her early life.

"I grew up feeling less than everyone else," she says. "I was poor, and we were white trash, and I knew it. I felt like I had to beat everybody. As a guy, the only way I'm comfortable is being top dog. Part of it was the chip on my shoulder. Part of it was compensating for the feelings I had inside."

Matt was born to conservative Catholic parents Jerry and Diane Kroczaleski and grew up in the woods outside Sterling, MI. Alongside his two brothers, Kurt and Chris, he lived in a mobile home so dilapidated that you had to watch your step in the hallway or risk hitting a rust patch and falling through the floor.

JANAE KROCZALESKI

Jerry heated the trailer with a homemade woodstove fashioned out of a 55-gallon oil drum. A few times when he couldn't afford firewood, he sent his boys into the woods to gather sticks. Five hours of gathering was worth about one night of heat.

Jerry drank heavily and worked a collection of odd jobs—with a business card for all of them except his most lucrative revenue stream: growing and selling marijuana. Oftentimes, he'd stumble home drunk, having abandoned his car on the side of the road with no recollection of where it was. He once tried to add wood to the stove when he was in this state, passed out midway through the process, and nearly burned down the house.

"He was a smart guy who wasted a lot of talent," Janae says. "Alcohol and pot were his self-medication. I couldn't tell you how many cars he wrecked. He's lucky to be alive."

Matt started lifting weights at the age of 9. When he picked up his first dumbbell, there was a thought, a faint hope that gaining muscle could change how he felt inside.

"Even at a young age, you know that something like that isn't going to be received well," she says. "I was terrified at what people would think. I hoped for a long time that this would go away, and so I ran with the whole lifting thing."

On the one hand, Matt hoped to change. On the other, he was fascinated by strength outside of what it meant to his transgender identity. Lifting weights was a pleasant escape. Dad was stringy and unathletic—and by nature, Matt was, too—but training changed all that, and every rep took him further away from Jerry. Matt excelled in sports, particularly wrestling and football, and wasn't tempted by Jerry's habits.

"I think he resented the fact that I was a jock," Janae says. "He told me that I was worthless, that the only things I was good for were eating,





THEN AND NOW At left, a collection of Matt's powerlifting and bodybuilding trophies, some of which Janae now uses to hang wigs. Above, Janae works on her '67 Camaro in her garage. "I'm still adventurous. I still love fast cars," Janae says. "I was an adrenaline junkie then, and I still am now."

sleeping, and shitting. He's sober now, and we're actually on good terms...I doubt he remembers much of what he said or did."

It's no surprise, then, that Matt joined the Marines as soon as he was old enough in 1991. Almost immediately, the muscular, intimidating "Kroc" became the drill sergeant's dream recruit at boot camp in San Diego. When other recruits fell out of line or lagged behind in PT drills, the drill sergeant would pit the weaklings against Matt in hand-to-hand combat. To embrace the role, Matt "greatly overcompensated."

"I was the first person to jump on

anyone else for being the least bit feminine," Janae admits. At the time, it was easy to rationalize the behavior because Marines are training for life-or-death situations. Still, there was more to it than that. "Deep down inside, it was me that I didn't like."

Scoring nearly perfect in all his reviews, Matt was selected for presidential security and for a time worked security at the United Nations. By this point, he was wellliked by the other Marines, and social settings made it harder to keep Janae repressed. The guys in his unit asked typical guy things—like how many women he had slept with. "I told them the truth, that I was a virgin," Janae says. "No one believed it. They thought it was my line."

At the UN, Matt and his unit had to work closely with the liaison to security, whose assistant turned out to be a blonde bombshell out of central casting. Every man in the unit hit on her aggressively, but she gravitated toward the quiet guy who was always in the back of the room.

"On the last night of the detail, she invited me up to her room," Janae says. Miffed at Matt's lack of advances, she joked that he could leave. "I got up and left," Janae says. "I had no idea what to do."

He craved intimacy and had no way to express it. He loved women but couldn't imagine "being a man" with them because he had always felt that his penis "didn't belong" on his body.



SNOWBOUND Back in 2011, Matt showed off his snow lunge workout in *M&F.*

By the time Matt married his first wife, Patty Stoll, in 1996, he figured out that to be with women sexually, he had to imagine himself as a woman. Before he came to that realization, frustrating scenes like the blonde in the hotel room played out over and over, taking a toll on his psyche. The gym was the only mainstay in his life that never let him down. He'd break into the on-base gym in the middle of the night and train for hours, attempting max lifts with no spotters.

"I'd put myself in do-or-die situations," Janae says. "I'd get a one-rep max on the bench that was an absolute grinder. One more pound and there's no way I would have made it...That saying that you'll never feel more alive than when you're close to death, that certainly holds true for me."

Patty knew about her husband's true identity as a transgender woman from the beginning. She tried to understand and be supportive but eventually asked him to stop talking about it. A born-again Christian, she believed transgender thoughts or feelings were sinful. Keeping everything repressed, Matt went back to school to become a pharmacist, had three boys with Patty, and threw every ounce of spare energy into powerlifting.

In 2004, Matt was diagnosed with testicular cancer, news that elicited new thoughts of wanting to transition. "I actually hoped the cancer would spread to the other testicle and even to my penis," Janae says. "That way they'd have to remove everything, and it wouldn't be my fault for changing. I knew better. I knew the cancer didn't work that way, but I still thought about it."

Initial blood work during cancer treatment yielded another surprise.

"All my hormone levels were in between male and female," she says. "I assumed that I had naturally high testosterone because of how far I had made it in the lifting world. But it turned out my levels were naturally low, and then even lower after surgery. My estrogen levels were high. My prolactin levels were three times what a male's are supposed to be. I also had an Continued on page 150



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JANAE KROCZALESKI

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undersized pituitary for a male. My body was in between both worlds." She points to this fact to help dispel a common misconception about transgender people—that trauma can create transgender feelings.

"I could talk about androgen receptor density in the hypothalamus gland and the studies that have been done there, but the simplest way to put it is that transgender people-the areas in our brains that dictate identity are analogous to the opposite gender," Janae says. "It's genetic. There's a lot more to it, of course, but if you boil it down, it's the same as having green eyes or black hair. It's not a psychological thing." After surgery to remove the cancerous right testicle (today she is cancer-free), Matt began taking anabolic steroids so he could continue competing. Contrary to popular belief, Janae says she had never taken any performanceenhancing drugs until that point. "Being a competitive lifter, obviously steroids are always a temptation," she says. "But I competed for a decade and had never touched a thing. I was 32 years old and qualified for the Arnold drug-free. I squatted 900. I was benching more than 500 and deadlifted 716. I was drug-tested I think five different times and of course passed all of them." Emboldened by her brush with death, Janae decided to reveal her true self to her sons when they were aged 2, 4, and 6. She went into her bedroom, changed into a dress, high heels, and a wig, then opened the

door to show her boys. "The 2- and the 4-year-old looked at me for, like, a second, then just kept playing," Janae says and laughs. "The 6-year-old said, 'Daddy, you look like a girl...A really *big* girl,' and then he kept playing, too. I think that's the thing that bothers me most when I hear people talk about transgender issues. It's always, 'What about the kids?' Kids don't have prejudice unless you hand it to them. I'm incredibly proud of my boys because they've been my biggest supporters, and they've taken that awareness with them to school. If anyone gets called gay or a fag, my eldest son is the first one to speak up and say, 'And what's wrong with that?'"

Around the same time, Matt told his mom, Diane, who was not dismissive but still prefers not to talk about it. Jerry proffered that it was just a phase. Matt's brothers took it the hardest.

"My brother Kurt said, 'It would have been easier for me if you had committed suicide," Janae recalls. "He didn't mean that he wanted me to. He was just trying to convey how hard it was for him to accept." Meanwhile, "Kroc" obliterated the Michigan powerlifting scene and made a name for himself at the national and world levels. Dave Tate, a legendary powerlifter in his own right and the CEO of EliteFTS, a training reference site and gear supplier based in London, OH, signed Matt to an endorsement deal in 2006 after he won the Arnold Classic championship.

The lifting team at EliteFTS became brothers. It wasn't long before Matt started to think he could tell the first people outside of his immediate family that he identified as a woman. In 2007, he took center stage at a powerlifting meet where he was expected to break the world record. Consumed by thoughts of transitioning, he missed every squat attempt. It was his worst bomb-out ever. Feeling a responsibility to explain to Tate why he had underperformed, Matt laid it on him.

To Matt's shock, Tate said he understood and didn't care about it. As long as Matt wanted to compete, Tate would be his sponsor. "He's been nothing but supportive," Janae says. "He's an amazing friend." With Janae fully out as a transgender woman, Tate remains unwavering in his support.

"In powerlifting, there are a lot of great guys, and then there are the guys who think they're the baddest motherfuckers on the planet, and they might be bigoted or prejudiced," Tate says. "All I could think when Matt told me was, 'How many of these guys have your poster on their wall right now? What would they do if we posted a picture of you as Janae?' We cracked up about it. It did not change how I felt about Matt. Matt was open about it with the team and not one of them had a problem with it. I'm proud to say we sponsored the guy. He's a great role model. Say he gets the surgery and becomes fully female now. How does that change the things he's done in the past? I never saw it as something that could hurt my company. If someone didn't like it, then I didn't want to do business with them." Not everyone shared Tate's

Not everyone shared Tate's viewpoint. Another one of Janae's sponsors told her they'd honor her contract through its expiration at the end of the year, but canceled her planned appearances.

"It's disappointing, but it's a business decision on their part," Janae says. "I'm not a victim. I refuse to think of myself that way. I don't even bring it up in interviews." Janae's Facebook inbox has also

been littered with lewd sexual propositions from men. "Always from the most repressed cultures," she says, "and some of them I'm sure are the same ones who are publicly saying I'm a freak."

Matt and Patty divorced in 2006. The strain of the transgender issue was ultimately too much to overcome. After the split, Matt considered suicide, but he was able to get through those dark days by thinking about his boys. Today, Patty and Janae maintain joint custody. Matt married his second wife, Lauren Starkey, in 2010. Though Janae says Lauren was the love of her life, the marriage fell apart after two years because Lauren felt like she was in a lesbian relationship. "She needed someone who was all

male, and I understand that," Janae says. "I hope I can find someone like her again someday."

Two marriages and as many divorces would complicate life for most, but Janae says she feels an immense sense of relief to be completely out. She's off anabolic steroids and ready to attempt another transition.

"It's been this burden I've carried that's been so heavy," she says. "Having to hide a huge part of who you are—that's a horrible thing for anyone to bear. I always describe it as feeling broken, like a freak or unlovable...I would drive to work with tears running down my face, then get to work like everything was OK. I did that for years."

If all lives ultimately demand balance, it's fair to say that Janae found it by summoning the energy to simultaneously feed the obsessions that lived in both sides of her. Today she studies fashion the way she once studied strength training. But to think of Matt and Janae as separate people or disparate halves of a split personality is to both ignore the complexity of Janae as an individual and to give close-minded skeptics an easy out to conflate transgender people with the mentally ill. And if there's one thing Janae is tired of, it's the idea that she's sick in the head "My first wife tried to get me into

"My first whe tried to get me into her church reparative therapy where they could 'cure me' and that kind of stuff," Janae recalls. "To humor her, I went and checked it out. I talked to people who had gone through it who claimed to be cured. It was a bunch of nonsense. I felt horrible for these people because all they were doing was repressing it, doing what I'd been doing my whole life."

In between media appearances and working full time as a pharmacist, Janae will hop onto powerlifting forums to interact with both supporters and critics. She doesn't call out former fans for hypocrisy. She merely tells her story in simple terms, trying to be an activist for the transgender community one message at a time.

"People have this idea of the whole 'Kroc Personality,' because I was this crazy ex-Marine," Janae says. "Like, 'Oh, this guy's just an animal.' And that's all true, but the thing is, toughness doesn't have a gender. People associate those things with men because that's what we've been taught as a society. Women are supposed to be meek and fragile, but that's not the truth. Look at the UFC. The women fighters are tenacious. But as a whole, that's been suppressed. For many years, a woman who exhibited those attributes was reprimanded for it and told that was wrong. Femininity in men, to this day, is treated the same way. Men are encouraged to be masculine; women are encouraged to be feminine. But the reality of the situation is gray."

In Janae's world of gray, at least one hard-line contradiction remains: Becoming a powerlifting world champion isn't a very complex goal to accomplish when compared with navigating the uncharted path before her. The spotlight of this moment will eventually fade, and the simplicity of dividing the people in her life into supporters and bigots will give way to the monotony of the everyday. Hate isn't always expressed in such clear terms as it is on the Internet. More often, it's a look of shock, a quick turn in the other direction, or seats next to you left conspicuously empty on a crowded train. Living in the open and dealing with these moments-moments she never had to experience as Matt-will require nothing less than her greatest feat of strength.