

# back in the .m. box<sup>2</sup>

A few years ago I started feeling some pride in my gender. It was when I woke up on a train to find a drunk guy pawing me. I said something predictable like "Fuck off!" and the response was, "You're a geezer!" as he ran off. We both got a shock. I'd paid my dues and surgery fees. I'd assimilated. I'd spent years learning how to blend in and make my way in life but after years of making an effort to simply be one of the girls, I realised that even if I could reject my past, perhaps I wouldn't want to. I wanted to learn. A late starter, I was making my way in the world, meeting all kinds of women. I'd begun to see that regardless of my origins, how I chose to live was what defined me. Me a geezer? Don't make me laugh!

I can remember the first time that a casual remark by a guy came across as patronising rather than as flattering. For the first year of my transition, I floated through life in a fuzzy pastel haze. Any reference to my femininity was affirmation. No remark was too crass not to be considered a compliment. "I AM a girl and they can see that!" But perceptions change. The insidious feeling of being trapped in someone else's skin was being replaced with foreboding about what life as a female entailed. People took gender so seriously and I felt strongly that I was still the same person.

I never wanted gender dysphoria, let alone gender, to be the focus of life. How boring. All I wanted was equilibrium. On the train that night I laughed as I realised how happy I was. I'd had the good fortune and the luxury of time to make a conscious and drastic decision about my future and then I'd acted on it. Did I need to pretend that gender reassignment

had never happened? Did I need to disappear into the mainstream? Was my identity contingent on denying my roots from now on? Was my identity and future happiness dependent on deception? Where's the joy in that?

These questions plagued me for a while. What do you do? Male-to-female transsexuals still equate to freaks for many poor souls. To your face, they say things like, "You're so brave," "Your story is inspiring," or more honestly, "I really don't understand," - but in private they don't want their children to turn out differently from the herd. We don't see transgender role-models in the media. We don't hear about individual contributions to society. We see the casualties. Not everyone gets burnt to death in the streets, like poor Hayder Faiek did in Bagdad in 2005, but to be transgender is portrayed as a curse. What if that's bullshit? What's an out-there trans woman do? I decided that I need to strike a careful balance between in-her-face pride and blending in with other women.

You're supposed to blend in. It's more convenient. The Australian Government only issues gender-amended passports when travelling for surgical reasons. I only discovered this after my first female passport had expired and I was re-issued with a male one. The fact that I was on a surgery waiting-list and had been living full-time as a woman for five years was irrelevant. There's no scope in society for globe-trotting pre-ops. Stay out of sight, then once you've transformed into a beautiful butterfly... Yeah, right. The irony is that now that I'm entitled to regain that big "F" for female in my passport I haven't bothered. I am not someone's paperwork.

I never expected to be fully accepted as a woman and I never take acceptance for granted. Of course there will always be those who count chromosomes and dig up birth certificates (good luck!) but for most people, how you appear is what you are and that seems to be enough. And there lies the irony.

Just when society seems comfortable with me ticking the right box, I'm finding it increasingly pointless to stay in it. Why NOT play with appearance, explore androgyny, and revisit my masculinity as you would revisit places from your childhood? Why shouldn't any person explore their boundaries? Transsexuals have less obligation than any to

preserve the status quo. The system doesn't respect us. Maybe it's our role to evolve it. Having learnt from scratch how to carry myself, dress myself and interact with others as female, is it any wonder that I question the baggage that comes with it? How many myths are we memorising? Are we buying into a construct or an essential truth?

"Why would you want to be a woman? It's awful!" Mum cried, not long after the drama of discovering her son was taking oestrogen. I expressed my sympathy. "You're just doing it to be trendy," she shot back. That hit a nerve. Was I just trying to distinguish myself from the crowd, create some notoriety and novelty where none existed? I did research. No, I decided. Being transsexual wasn't actually that trendy. I noted the lack of magazine covers and celebrity lifestyle. I discounted all the references to modern-day shamanism, mainly from transsexual literature and online communities. There seemed to be a distinct lack of respect and privilege associated with simply being. Hence the reason that many opted for subterfuge, letting their differences fade from view.

I needed a compromise. I didn't want transgender to define me but neither would I go to great lengths to hide it. It would have to be the elephant in the living room, and online. If people wanted to discuss it, they were welcome to. But they could bring up the subject. And so, nine years later, I still get amazed when people discover my "secret". I assume it's obvious. In many ways I've also moved on. Honey, I was a teenage testosterone addict and blogged my way through gender re-assignment surgery. Google knows it's all public but I don't want to shove it down your throat either. Different cultures must coexist if we are to evolve as a civilisation. And besides, discretion has its moments.

"Why do I keep getting emails from transsexuals?!" my assistant exclaimed after a month in the job. She seemed taken aback by the revelation about her boss. "But you ARE a woman, yes?" she demanded. I assured her that I was. "Cool," she responded and that was the end of the matter, until the very next day when a movie opened full-screen from her inbox, proclaiming, "THIS is a transsexual," over a photo of me. We laughed but I was so glad this hadn't arrived a day earlier. Optus had licensed my image for use in a staff diversity-awareness training programme. Apparently there is a



real shortage of "normal looking" transsexuals in stock image photo libraries.

I won't pretend that I'm completely comfortable in my skin. I'm as susceptible to insecurity as anyone. Take the other day when 60 female film directors were invited to pitch for a project sponsored by some cheap body spray. They crammed us into this tiny airless room decked out with "girly stuff" where we sweated for an hour checking out each other out and watched Gwyneth videos. As the creative brief about girlhood and romance was read out, I caught sight of my reflection in a pink balloon, looking as awkward and uncomfortable as when I first transitioned, and felt ridiculous. As the tallest person in the room I'd subconsciously tried to blend in by slouching down against the back wall at a weird angle, looking totally out of place with my mucked-up sweaty hair, nervously clutching my cycle helmet. It took a moment to remember who I was, how I got there, and what the hell I was doing. I straightened up to my full height, and though I towered over the others, I instantly felt better. Whether I'm capable of channelling the experience of 16-24 year old girls is another matter. What would I know? I entered puberty at 25.

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