MEN just wanna be *girls*

by Sarah Randolph • Photographs by Carlotta Junger

Clicking high heels, staccato against the piping of falsetto voices. Banners of perfume, making my nose itch. A sea of shining wigs bobbing above my head. I found myself at Fantasia Fair's "town and gown" supper.

Sitting down at a paper-covered table, I sawed away at the limp turkey with a plastic knife to cover my shyness. I needn't have worried. Right away a woman introduced herself, and, as if she heard all my unspoken questions, began talking. She told me she was a transsexual, postoperative and living as a woman.

"After the operation I went out and slept with a man, but I didn't like it. Now I have a vagina, but I've found that I don't enjoy vaginal sex. So we worked out other things to do." Her lover, sitting across the table, was a crossdresser who went to work as a man, but wore women's clothes at home.

I was awed by her candor. By now I had forgotten my turkey and was really looking at her. She was quite striking, blond hair in a flip, bright red dress, a feminine, if square-jawed, face. She sat back in her chair in a confident attitude, legs crossed.

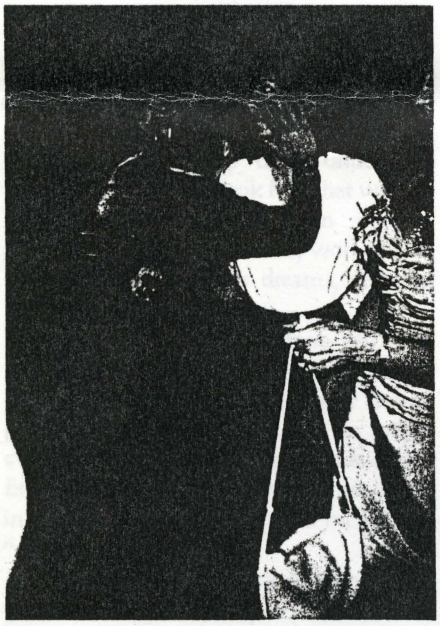
Then she leaned towards me and asked, "Are you a lesbian because you want to be a man?" I was shocked—in my post-radical feminist community, that kind of idea was unthinkable.

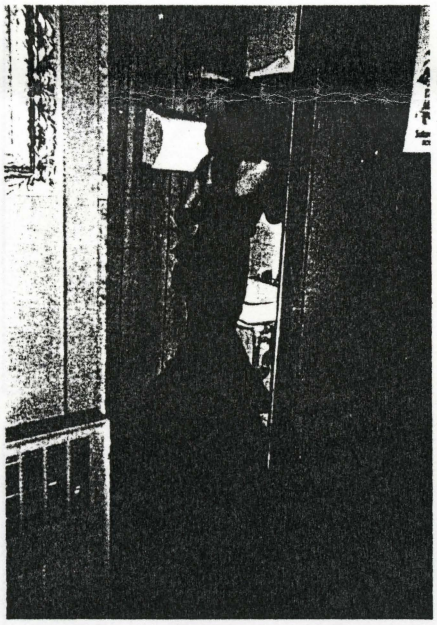
"No!" I said, amazed. "Do you know a lot of lesbians who want to be men?"

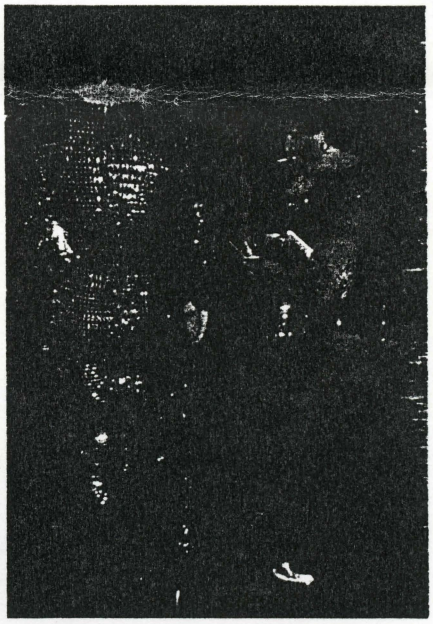
"Half the people at my trans-gender clinic are female to male," she said, "and most of those have been lesbians."

I blinked. In fact the two lesbians next to me, in the spirit of play or seriousness, were dressed as men.

The world in which there are two sexes, male and female, was drifting away. Suddenly I was in a realm where sex (biological) was detached from gender (cultural) and either subject to change. A world where sexual preference was completely unpredictable.







I helped clear away the paper plates, collecting the lipstick-marked plastic cups, looking down at my hands—small, plain, short-nailed—with curiosity. In this world of silky blouses, knotted scarves and big jewelry, my ordinary clothes, a loose fitting knit shirt and cotton pants, had begun to seem strange to me.

After dinner there was a panel discussion. When I heard the announced topic "What It Means to Be a Woman" I felt a shiver of trepidation. I wasn't sure I wanted a group of men to tell me what it meant to be a woman.

There were women on the panel too, though. A crossdresser's wife stood up in her shiny lady's dress, her brunette hair styled in short curls, like many of the wigs around the room. I was starting to get double vision—what was a woman, anyway? Me, her, or a man wearing her clothes? She said she looked at her husband's "dressing" as a hobby, that she didn't know how else to cope with it.

After her was a young gay man who worked as a female impersonator. He sat forward on the metal folding chair in a slinky sequined gown, occasionally bringing a hand up to touch his bouffant hairdo—it must have been a wig, but you wouldn't know it. He told us that he had been working at Bradlees as a girl for a few weeks, to see if he could get away with it. No problem, I thought, he'd probably have an easier time passing than me. I remembered the time when my hair was really short and shopkeepers called me "sir."

A crossdresser got up, tall even in his sensible pumps, smoothed his tweedy skirt and told us he had a good job in insurance, and that none of his friends knew he "dressed" —they all see him as a pillar of the community. Once a year he vacations at Fantasia Fair, then puts away his women's clothes and goes back to life in the Midwest. Even in his slightly skewed wig he spoke like someone used to society's privilege, a wealthy white man. I had to struggle to remember that just being here was a risk.

After the panel there was time for discussion. Several men rose and talked about why they "dressed." It seemed they underwent a personality change when they put on women's clothes, they were able to be more nurturing, more caring, more emotional.

A woman said, "When my husband puts on women's clothes he becomes my best friend. We talk, we go shopping, we have a wonderful time. If this is what I have to do to have my best friend for one week out of the year, well, I'll do it." *One week out of the year!* I thought.

One of the lesbians who had sat next to me at dinner stood up in her tuxedo and said, "Women have fought so they don't have to wear girdles and high heels like our mothers and grandmothers—why don't you dress like women dress today?"

There was a murmuring. Then an older crossdresser got to his feet, and he could have been my grandmother—the same powdery white makeup, penciled eyebrows,

grey and white curls. He replied that historically women have been constricted; kept at home and prevented from going into the world. Therefore women want to wear less restrictive clothing, to have more freedom. Men on the other hand have always had to act, to take care of things, to bring home the bacon. Men need constricting clothes like high heels and girdles to help them explore a different role, to be taken care of, to be passive.

It is easy for me to sympathize with deep, unnamable desires. That's why, I think, I found the transsexuals I met so moving, their immense and open yearning. It would be easy for me to sympathize with someone who told me they wore women's clothing because they felt moved to, because they had to, even because it turned them on.

It's when crossdressers say they want to be more like women that I find myself suspicious and angry. Wearing high heels may help men imagine themselves differently, but it won't help them understand women. The place to look for what women are isn't in fashion but in women themselves, in women's lives, women's art and literature, women's dreams, sorrows, and aspirations.

The people I met at Fantasia Fair have transformed the way I see gender. I don't think I'll be able to look at anyone as simply male or female again. I'm no longer even sure I know what those words mean. But I do know that much of what I love in women was not yet in the men I met "en femme."

I want to say: If there is a woman within you, think twice before you confine her to high heels, or make her simper and preen. Don't just take her shopping! She can't grow into a whole person until you let her have a full range of experience. Let that woman be strong, let her be angry sometimes, let her learn about the ways women have endured and what they have to give. Look at the women around you. Love them. Love *all* of the woman in yourself. ■

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