

'MY HUSBAND IS A TRANSVESTITE'

by Jenny Oram

SECRECY IS STILL THE KEY WORD

DESPITE growing public acceptance of male transvestism — even though the compulsion to cross-dress in women's clothes remains widely misunderstood — fear of victimisation at work or ostracism by their neighbours keeps most South African TVs "in the closet". And though our urban TVs are fairly easily able to share their compulsion with kindred spirits, more than half of the Republic's TVs — those on the platteland — have to satisfy their urges in secret. Often they have to travel hundreds of kilometres from their homes just to buy the lingerie and dresses they need.

These platteland TVs, many of them Afrikaans-speaking, live lonely, sometimes guilt-ridden secret lives.

"The small-town mentality with its veneer of strait-laced morality makes life — as far as transvestism is concerned — extremely difficult for more than half of our members," says Marlene, the Capetonian businessman who is chairman of Phoenix Society, South Africa's own organisation for TVs.

"Even my wife doesn't know about my transves-

tism — she is very Calvinistic in outlook and I know she wouldn't understand," admitted Rosanne, who telephoned from a platteland town in the Western Cape. "She is considerably plumper than I am so I can't wear her undies when she's out — anyway, they're not the sort of frilly things I prefer."

ROSANNE is one of the TVs who has to travel to the city to buy "frillies" and dresses — which he must wear in secret. "If I bought clothes locally the whole dorp would know within an hour," he said, adding that "much of the pleasure is lost because I have to be so secretive and no one can see me when I'm dressed to the nines."

At the other end of the scale Durban's transvestites "have it made", according to Marlene.

"The society in general doesn't have official meetings, though members are encouraged to get together from time to time. But in Durban they have social outings where TVs meet each other, accompanied by their wives or girl-friends.

"It must be wonderful," he added wistfully. "There are times when I seriously

consider moving to Durban. But we hope to get a similar scene going on the Peninsula."

MARLENE and other transvestites who telephoned me spoke openly and frankly about their compulsion. All stressed that there was nothing homosexual about their behaviour and claimed that apart from the urge to cross-dress they are "perfectly normal, heterosexual males".

Most first felt the urge to wear female clothing with the onset of puberty, admitting that it was sexually stimulating to wear their sister's or other girls' clothes.

"Obviously at that age there's a feeling of guilt — that there's something naughty but nice about it — so it comes as something of a relief to discover later that one is actually interested in girls, physically and sexually," a Johannesburg transvestite told me.

"A lot of TVs find that when they become interested in women sexually the urge to dress in female clothing diminishes or even seems to disappear. In such cases, though, it often re-

turns after they are married," Marlene adds.

In some cases the decision to tell can have unexpected consequences. In one instance, when a TV admitted his compulsion to his wife after two years of marriage, he was "amazed and delighted" when she confessed to having a similar desire to cross-dress as a man. Each had been wearing the other's clothes in secret without the other knowing!

IN most cases the children aren't told, not from any sense of shame but because it might embarrass them.

"Of course, it's much easier for women transvestites to dress openly as men — it happens all the time as women's styles are often so mannish anyway. But they run the risk of being labelled 'butch' or lesbian'."

Marlene reckons that most TVs' wives are understanding once their husbands' compulsion has been brought into the open. Johannesburg businessman Lynn, who is a grandfather and has been happily married for more than 30 years adds: "I was open about it with my wife from the start and it's made no real difference to our lives." ■

by Peter Schirmer

Writing under a pseudonym a South African wife reveals what it's like to have a husband who is frequently compelled to dress as a woman

THE most irritating thing about being married to a transvestite (or TV as they call themselves) is that you can't call your clothes your own. You go to put on your black silk evening dress only to find the neckline smeared with tan-coloured make-up. Or you see that he's been at your new pantihose — as yet unworn. On the other hand, I benefit from his buying the latest "femme" stuff. He hardly ever comes back from the shops without at least a pair of pantihose or a nail varnish that I'd never dare buy.

As far as shoes go he's quite useful too, since his feet are only a size bigger than mine, and if I have a pair that need a little stretching, he's only too willing to oblige. The trouble is, he doesn't fancy today's shoes: his have to have stiletto heels.

Sometimes he gets a kick out of coming to the cinema dressed as "his brother" (ie, himself — a bit of the TV jargon we wives have to learn), but underneath he's wearing a pair of lace panties. I can usually tell by a certain look on his face. I couldn't describe the look but there's no doubt when it's there.

In fact, I can usually tell when he's "in the mood for a dress" by physical changes in his appearance and even his smell. There's absolutely no doubt about this. When we kiss hullo after the day's work I can always sniff if there's TV in the air. One reason is that he sweats more, and this smells quite different from his normal sweat.

There's a character change too. He behaves in a sulky, petulant, babyish way. But when he's a girl my husband is much nicer than when he's a man. He'll do anything around the house and is sweet and loving. Another very feminine change is that while as a man he won't eat any sort of pudding or dessert, as a girl he laps them up.

All very interesting — but also very confusing, especially for the new wife.

IT can come as a ghastly shock to the average woman to discover that her husband has a hidden life which is difficult to comprehend. Another woman — even another *man* — she might understand, but the fact that he needs to dress up as a woman every now and then seems to defy all reason.

The shock can be particularly great for women brought up to think of a man as a *man* and who thus marry macho types. Yet such men can easily be TVs.

The accepting wife is likely to be a woman with a career of her own, someone who isn't dependent on a male figure. Still, she may not relish her husband's "dressing". I admit to finding something a *little* distasteful about it — but it hasn't changed my feelings for my husband or my response to his personality. I've learned

to accept it.

The couples with real problems are those with children. The big decision is: Do you tell them or don't you? I know some TVs who have the nerve to be completely open about the whole thing — with their children, their parents, their friends and even their business colleagues — and others who won't even tell their wives.

MY own husband told me a few months after our marriage. In spite of the fact that he *had* managed to "dress" that day, he worked himself into a fearful state, wept for hours, and refused to communicate until I dragged the story out of him.

After his confession I felt pretty shattered for a while but he clearly needed support and help and I tried to give it. Luckily, only a few weeks earlier I had come across an article in an overseas women's magazine about England's Beaumont Society for TVs. I suggested he write to them, affirmed that I accepted the situation, and did my best to rid him of his guilt feelings.

It wasn't long before he had a large circle of TV friends. The interesting thing about these men is that none could possibly be called "perverts": Some are hairy giants who play rugby; some are aggressive businessmen. There are also musicians, poets and artists. Some are as sane as they come and others mad as hatters. They are a very varied group, but there is one quality they appear to have in common: intelligence.

I've yet to meet a TV with less than a university level of education. I've known a chemical engineer, several doctors, an active army officer, a retired naval captain, lots of lecturers and teachers, and a journalist. And I've yet to meet one who wasn't married, or who had never been married.

Only one was in any way homosexually inclined. This is, of course, where most people go wrong: They associate TVs with homosexuality — and the two conditions are very different. My own husband is totally averse to homosexuals. He doesn't even enjoy going to drag parties; he just likes "dressing" in the privacy of his own home!

Why should a wife who thought she'd married a man be happy to find herself saddled with a woman for perhaps a third of the time? Why should a wife have to make her home out of bounds to friends and relatives without prior warning, just in case someone happens to call when he's "dressed"?

It's ours not to reason why but to cover up. We must learn new social skills, including how to lie. We may have to say that the lock in the bathroom door has stuck so he can't get out. We must learn to skip around the house hiding away tell-tale signs like

false nails and eyelashes and bosoms (often found stuffed behind cushions) or cigarette ends with lipstick on them (when we don't smoke), and so on.

If women can cover for other things they can learn to cover for transvestist husbands. It needs a degree of adjustment — but no more than most women are capable of.

THERE is, of course, much ignorance surrounding transvestism, together with a whole world of social stigma and rejection. This is why it causes social withdrawal and maladjustment among those TVs who see themselves as unacceptable.

My husband went to psychiatrists and even spent some time in mental hospitals. But it didn't change him in the least. He still needs to "dress" about once a week. And if he's prevented from doing so for more than two weeks he becomes very difficult to live with — in the end, almost suicidal. Even on tours overseas, time has to be found for a "quick dress-up". During a long holiday spent with my elderly mother in Australia we had to concoct some wild story, which I have now forgotten, in order to get away for a night so that he could indulge.

Why are some men like this? Psychology can't give us a complete answer — probably because each TV has a different motivation and no two ever seem to be identical.

Psychologists seem to agree, however, that TVs should be classed as fetishists whose particular hang-up is feminine clothing. And there's no doubt that female attire is their big turn-on. Most TVs get sexually excited by being all got up in wasp-waisties, silk stockings — preferably black-seamed — suspenders and what not. They love tight girdles and corsets. And it's noticeable that the TV stories in their magazines repeat the thrill of words like, "lovely lingerie", a "tight constricting corset", "a dainty petticoat", "a frilly frock" (TVs *never* use the word "dress" except as a verb), and "tippy-tappy high heels".

WHAT the TV needs is tolerance from society in general — and from wives or girl-friends in particular. It's like having red hair — *they don't do it purposely, and they can't help themselves.*

His wife's acceptance is essential for the mental health of any man who is a TV. She must understand what truly terrible restlessness and depression overcomes a TV prevented from "dressing". And it will make her own life easier in the long run because he'll be so much easier to live with — happy and even-tempered.

And she should know that his "dressing" is not going to affect his sexual functioning, or his behaviour as a husband or father.