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LIBERATING THE WOMAN INSIDE ME

One transexual discovered the joy, and drawbacks, of being a woman

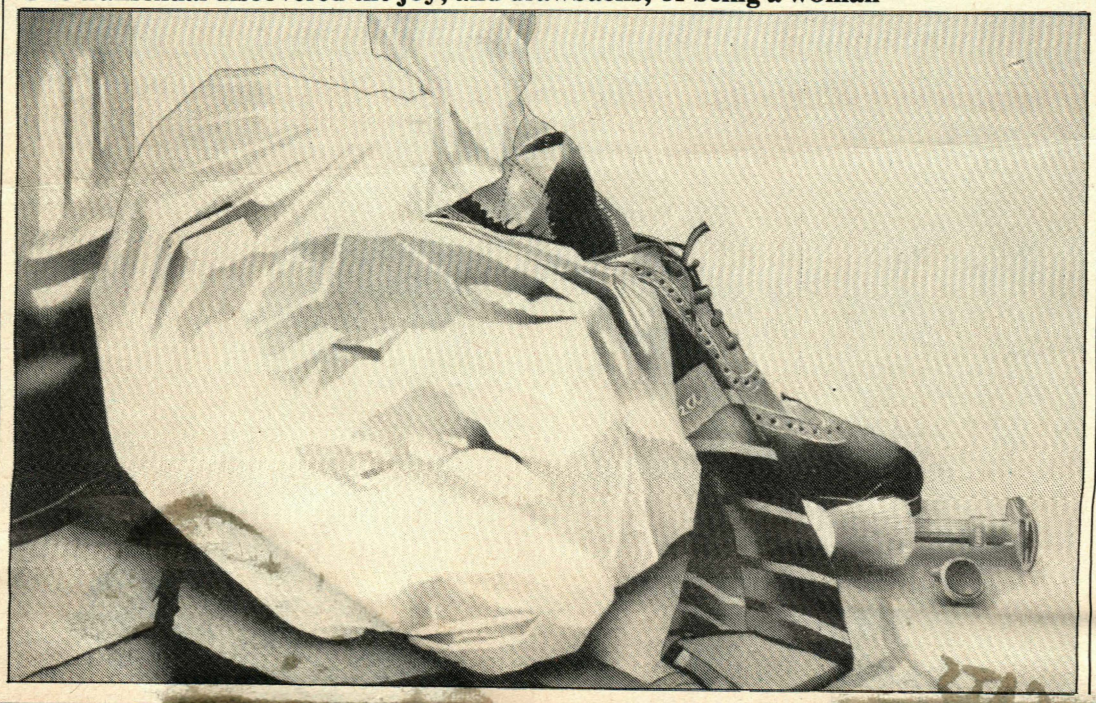

ILLUSTRATION BY ASHLEY LLOYD

SHE HAS wide green eyes and the faintest suggestion of moustache on the upper lip. Bleached hair pushed behind either ear and dark at the roots. Red polish peeled from the nails of one hand. "I haven't got it right yet have I?" she asked tentatively, wanting reassurance. "It's the little things I get wrong, things other women see. Funny, but since the operation it's other women I notice staring, not men."

That operation, a year ago, turned thirty-six-year-old Ian into Anne. "I feel emotionally, chemically, hormonely like a woman; someone just gave me the wrong bits." Wrong bits removed, right bits added, Anne looks like any other woman — but not quite. She totters a little in high heels, lipstick smears her mouth in an unsteady line, eyeshadow a little too prominent and it's true — women do notice.

It all started a long time ago. "I wanted to be a girl ever since I can remember. I wanted to wear dresses, ribbons in my hair, to talk gently. Fighting filled me with disgust. My mother thought I was joking but later on she got very keen that I play football, climb trees, play with guns. I couldn't understand why I was supposed to risk my neck trying to get a ball from someone prepared to kill me to keep it!

"Around sixteen I knew something was really wrong. I started stealing Mum's dresses, staring at myself for hours on end in the mirror. Who was I? What was I? I felt like Dr Jekyll, continually terrified that the monster (so I thought it) would betray me. People talk about sex change on TV these days but it wasn't heard of then. Who could I tell, 'Excuse me, I want to be a woman'? They were terribly lonely years.

"Then at twenty-three I started going out with girls in a desperate bid to turn myself into a man. I like girls, the few friends I had were girls so I didn't really mind. As for the other thing . . ." she grimaced, "I learnt to do that like a trick. Once it was over we could continue talking, which was the reward."

But a dance in a West End nightclub changed Anne's life. "I met a transvestite and it was the most blissful moment of my life. I suddenly realised other people felt like me; I wasn't abnormal." Still secret, still lonely, she became woman by night, man by day. "I had two sets of friends, two sets of attitudes, two lives. For years I commuted in a pinstripe, going to the West End in a dress in the evening. Fortunately, the two sets of friends never met."

Then Anne decided she wanted to go ahead with a sex change operation. She had to persuade doctors that she wasn't mentally disturbed, wasn't just going through a phase. She hasn't been officially female for long but already has found joy in her new life. "I've met a man I feel strongly about. We went out several times before I told him about the operation. I didn't see him then for three awful weeks but then he came back saying, 'What the hell'. Being older makes the sex thing easier. I can't have children but Harry has some from his first marriage and I hope to share them with him. This is the first natural relationship I've had in my life. The fact that life can be happy is hitting me like a revelation."

But, like any woman, Anne is finding that her sex has drawbacks. "Suddenly, since I started wearing a dress, my opinion is worth less. I have to shout to get myself heard at my new job and I'm not given the automatic respect I got as a man. If I get angry at work I'm 'having a period' — even though my colleague may be in the wrong. If I talk as much as the average man, I'm gossiping, aggressive. If I reject sexual advances, I'm stuck up.

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"When I go out on my own at night now I immediately feel more vulnerable. I'm big for a woman but because I know I'm regarded as easy prey, I feel that I am. It's amazing the power and authority you get just by putting on trousers and tie. I think many men regard women as second-class citizens though they won't admit it. Women don't play the same games, women's work is inferior to men's, men run the world, etc. They just don't give women the same respect.

"When I behaved as a man I'd call a strong woman an aggressive bitch and resent taking orders from her at work. Men are going to fight to hold on to their power. But it works both ways. As a man, women expected me to make decisions, take the lead. Why should I? Men have it tough too because they have to be leaders, whatever they feel like inside.

"I know it's changing, and the sooner the better but I'm only half-liberated. On the way here, someone called me sexy and I felt fantastic. I'm still pretty desperate for male approval but I hope that insecurity will pass. Being a woman isn't being a passive sex object is it?" she smiled. "It's being compassionate, wise, gentle, strong . . ."

Pat Evans