



Anne Willson's marriage was in deep trouble, and she didn't know why. Her husband John, a printer, seemed to be avoiding her and communication had virtually faded away.

"I'd ask, 'Is something wrong?'" she recalls, "and he'd say, 'Oh, no, I was just thinking about my job.' But I knew that wasn't it. He always seemed to be holding himself in, as though there was something he was biting his tongue to prevent himself saying."

Then one day in 1982, Anne discovered the truth . . .

John takes up the tale: "We'd had a flaming row and I thought: I've blown the marriage. So then I thought, well, then, I'll blow it completely to hell! And I said, I'm a transvestite!"

Anne was stunned. All she knew about transvestites was that they were men who liked to dress up as women. "I once read about a wife who'd found a suitcase of women's clothes and discovered her husband was a transvestite, and I'd thought, Oh my God, that poor woman. I wouldn't be able to face that.

"But when John said it, my reaction was one of relief! I thought, So *that's* what's been

upsetting him! And suddenly his behaviour clicked into place."

There are estimated to be up to 200,000 adult male transvestites in Britain today. The majority are not gay, but are attracted to women in a perfectly normal way, and they are usually married, with children. However, they are generally so ashamed of their transvestism that they hide it even from their families and closest friends.

That was how it was with John, a slim, dark, ex-engineer. He had known he was a transvestite since he was a boy, but had been completely unable to tell anybody it.

"I was 12 and I was dressing secretly in my mother's clothes," he recalls. "Obviously, at that age,

JOHN WILLSON

-the "other woman"

in his wife's life

Anne Willson's husband had a secret, and it was wrecking their marriage. Was it an affair, she wondered, or work worries? The truth came as a shock—John liked wearing women's clothes. By Jenny Woolf

you get disgusted with yourself and chuck them all in the dustbin. Then, some months later, you get the urge again."

He didn't know how to get in touch with anybody to help. "Eventually, I got so desperate I rang Gay Switchboard—even though I'm not gay. They put me in touch with the Transvestite/Transsexual Group's Helpline in London, and I went along for a year without telling Anne. I know I should have told her long ago—before we got married—but I was terrified of her reaction."

In fact after the initial revelation, Anne's next feeling was puzzlement. She phoned the group's Counsellor for a long chat the next day, and that night the two of them sat and talked into the small hours. "I'd been frightened that John had another woman," she says.

John admits there is a sexual element to his compulsion, but maintains its main advantage for him—and for most other transvestites who have been able to come to terms with their feelings—is the enormous psychological relaxation it brings.

"It's a sort of escape from being male," he says. "You're brought up to think, 'men are strong, men are tough' and you're not allowed to show affection."

"Men can't cry. All that stuff," chips in Anne.

"Nor can transvestites—it ruins the paint job," retorts John, and they smile at one another.

Now Anne has accepted John's transvestism, they can both joke about it, but Anne feels that a wife's ability to accept her husband's transvestism depends to some extent on how she finds out about it.

"For me, it was a relief, but I've talked to a number of other wives and if you can imagine trotting home a little earlier than expected, walking into your room and seeing a strange woman sitting in front of your television, there's an initial shock—strange person in the house. Second shock—Oh God, it isn't him!

"Now that is difficult to get over. It's not much better if the wife finds female clothes hidden away. The initial shock is so horrifying it

colours your reaction to what you find out: it has to.

"But you just have to realise that it's the same person underneath the clothes and try to imagine what torment he's been through.

"At that stage you've just got to sit down and talk. It doesn't have to be the end of the world.

"You should certainly see how your man's transvestism relates to his life. It won't be 100 per cent of his life, but is it 50 per cent? 25 per cent? Will he want to dress every day or every third Wednesday?

"The sexual side of your marriage appears in a different light, too. But your husband is still the same man he's been since you've known him, and if you've had a normal married life then you can consider transvestism as something separate. Some wives find it easier to tell him to dress in secret where they can't see—they don't want to know.

"Actually when I first saw John

for a while when she first found out.

"Initially, I couldn't come to terms with it because I didn't understand it," says Polly, who now lives with her self-employed husband and four children.

"But after we discussed it, I realised it wasn't the most important thing about him. He was still the same person. And we got back together again, and we've worked out a way of dealing with it. If things start to get on top of me we sit down and talk about it.

"Some women get very bothered that their husband may be trying to replace them as the woman of the house. They feel inadequate in some way, but that's not the case. In a roundabout way perhaps he's even modelled himself on her, because he admires her. Most transvestites really do admire women.

"Most women are going to be very protective towards their child-

“I didn't talk to anyone about it. I couldn't. That's where the agony came in. I just carried on, feeling guilty”

dressed," she smiles, "my reaction was, 'God, your make-up!' And that helped, to get busy fixing it up, making him look decent."

Anne now goes to the TV/TS regular weekend meetings with John. "The first time I went," she says, "he was dressed as a man, but I thought, it's going to be terrible talking to all these men dressed as women. But do you know it was *nothing!* I wouldn't guarantee that every wife would enjoy the group, but I'm glad I go—to me it's just a load of people having a good time."

The TV/TS Group gives help and counsel to relatives, and there is also a self-help group, BM WOBS (Women of the Beaumont Society) which is based in Surrey. Relatives of transvestites can contact one of these groups and talk with other people who understand.

While John and Anne appreciate their good fortune in having adjusted quickly and easily to the situation, other wives find it harder. Polly Robinson, who now runs BM WOBS, split up from her husband

ren—what do you tell them? And of course they also have to consider the neighbours. I've never seen transvestism as anything to be ashamed of, but it comes back to the same old thing: whatever your problem, talk about it and work it out together."

John Willson agrees. "I think transvestites are very fortunate if they have a wife who accepts them—but you'll get some who jam it down their wives' throats, and that can blow a marriage. Our group's attitude is, if your wife can't accept it, come to the group once or twice a week and get it out of your system."

He looks at Anne fondly. "The difference between my life before and now is that I had this constant thread of tension running through me—and now at last, after years and years, it's loosened, and it's a fantastic relief."

TV/TS Group, 274 Upper St, Islington, London N1 2UA. Helpline: 01-359 4868. BM WOBS, London WC1N 3XX. Helpline: 01-660 7224 (Mon to Fri, 9 a.m. to noon).

you do realise there's something wrong, but I didn't talk to anyone about it—I couldn't. That's where the agony came in. I just carried on for years and years feeling extremely guilty."

Like most other transvestites, John was in the grip of a compulsion he couldn't control. Nobody understands why some men have this compulsion to dress up as women, although there are plenty of theories, which range from hormonal imbalance to the psychological effects of childhood experiences.

"The need to do it comes in waves," he explains. "You go through a period when you collect a lot of women's clothes, and then