

The New Goddess

Transgender
Women in the
Twenty-First
Century



edited by Gypsey Teague

Down and Out at the Ross Fireproof Hotel: An Essay on Class in the Transgender Community

by Dallas Denny

It's 1968, and I'm living in the Ross Fireproof Hotel in downtown Nashville. The Ross is on the corner of Fourth and Union Avenues; the front door faces the Ryman Auditorium, the home of the Grand Ole Opry. World Famous Printer's Alley, as it is billed, runs past the back door. A psychedelic night spot called the Electric Circus is on the far side of the Alley; on Friday and Saturday nights, the parking lot of the Ross is illuminated by strobe lights and the country music from the Opry is overpowered by acid rock and British Invasion music.

One block up the hill is Church Street, with upscale downtown shopping. One block down the hill is Broadway, filled with tourists and the occasional awestruck Joe Buck cowboy, guitar case in hand, fresh from Oklahoma or Texas courtesy of Continental Trailways, confident he will make his fortune in the country music business. I wander into Ernest Tubb's Record Shop and the trinket shops, but at age nineteen, I'm too young to get into Tootsie's Orchid Lounge or any of the other Lower Broadway watering holes. Even though I look twenty-one when I'm in full face, I'm afraid someone will call the police when I can't produce ID. I know what will happen then. It's the South, after all. I'll go to jail, where I'll be raped, or maybe I'll be raped in transit by the police and will never get to the jail. And maybe I will "hang myself," maybe with the help of a half-dozen red-faced, donut-filled deputies. And who will care if I go to jail, or if I'm turned out as someone's sex toy, or if I'm made dead? Certainly not my parents, who have banned me from their home, and who won't even speak to me about my gender issue. Certainly not my employer – I'm but a busboy, after all, and will be easy to replace. Certainly not the management of the Ross, which is concerned only that I pay them seven dollars and sixty-four cents a week for my room and cause them no

trouble. Certainly not the burned-out old men who haunt the lobby of the Ross and watch me with unreadable eyes when I pass, and certainly not the younger men who whistle and call to me on the street and try to entice me into their cars, but don't know the secret I keep between my legs.

I know I'm not the only trannie in Nashville, but where could the others be hiding? They're nowhere to be seen on the seedy downtown streets. Maybe they're in the bars – but I can't get into the bars. Once, driven to desperation by the strains of the Kinks' "Lola" wafting through the night air and into my room at the Ross, I try to get into the psychedelic nightclub called The Circus, but the middle-aged lady in the cage out front says, "I'm sorry, dear, but you must prove you're twenty-one." I've tried the gay bars repeatedly, and I'm told each time, "No drag, honey. Put on your boy clothes and maybe we'll let you in." I know that if I'm dressed as a boy they'll be more likely to look the other way on the ID thing, but I've no interest in putting on my boy clothes. It's bad enough to have to wear them in order to go to work.

I'm in desperate need of meeting someone else like me, and particularly in finding someone who knows the drill, a drag mom, someone who can tell me what I need to do, someone who will say things like, "Girlfriend, we got to get you some hormones." Despite the ease with which I pass, the male hormones in my system are becoming manifest. I can feel my girlhood slipping away, and I don't know how to stop it, how to move from a part-time life at the Ross to a full-time existence as a girl. I don't know how to make the woman in me a reality. All I can do is to mark time at the Ross while testosterone marches on.

Ah, the Ross! Built in the early part of the century, four once-proud stories of red brick, designed not to burn, and now, like the old men in the lobby, just biding its time until the end. I live in a cubicle in the basement, where I piss in the sink rather than go to the filthy toilet down the hall. The maid gave up trying to clean the room months ago. There's a cot and a dresser and nothing else except a hanging space which is crammed with dresses and blouses and skirts and blue jeans and boys' shirts for work. Stacked under the bed and in the corners of the room are my reading materials – *Cycletoons* and *Galaxy* magazines, Ian Fleming's James Bond, Ross MacDonald's Lew Archer, science fiction by Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury and Fredric Brown, comic books, the sort of thing a young boy/girl reads.

To get to my room in the basement, I have to run the gauntlet of old men. They sit in the lobby all day, smoking and chewing tobacco and watching the black-and-white portable television which tilts drunkenly on an Ames chair. Having nothing better to do, they fix me with their watery eyes whenever I come in and go out.

No women are allowed in the Ross, so when I'm in girls' clothes, I exit by the back door, closing it so it looks locked, but isn't. Sometimes, when I return, the clerk has pulled the door to and I can't get in. If I'm lucky, I'll be able to enter through the side door and avoid the old men in the lobby, and sometimes I can get in by knocking on the window of the man who borrows money from me every Monday and pays it back every Friday. I know and he

knows I know that sooner or later there will come a Monday when I won't have the five dollars, and our relationship, such as it is, will be over. He opens the door for me, a look of resigned amusement on his face. If he's not in, I'll have to go in through the front door and sail by the desk clerk and the old men in my miniskirt and fall, wondering if they'll recognize me, and what the hell they'll do to me if they do.

Much of my life is spent at Shoney's, where I bus tables for \$1.10 an hour. From two to five in the afternoons I get to wash dishes, as if that were an honor and a privilege. Becoming a cook is a distant goal; anything else in male mode, and any job at all as a woman, is beyond my reach. I work six days, about sixty hours a week. On my day off, and often after work, I go, dressed, up the hill to Church Street, where I window shop and make occasional small purchases of cosmetics or jewelry or clothing at the big three department stores: Cain-Sloan, Castner-Knott, and Harveys. Even during the day, men stare at me, come on to me. It's worse at night, when they call to me from their cars as I walk along Union to the Greyhound station. I want to go with some of them, but I'm terrified of what will happen if I do. And so I don't – at least not yet.

I've gradually grown used to the idea that I pass easily as a girl, that the attention from men comes because I'm a good-looking young woman. The realization has come hard, for my mother, when she first saw me dressed at age 15, hissed, "You don't look like a woman! Get out of those clothes this minute!" Surely I'm fooling myself. I don't *really* look like a girl. But when I go into the wig salon at Harvey's and the saleslady helps me take off my fall so I can try on a wig and I start sweating and hyperventilating and feeling panicked because it's the first time anyone has seen me in face with my own hair – the hair I must keep shorn in order to keep my crummy job – she doesn't think for an instant I'm anything other than a seventeen-year-old girl with a boy's haircut. "Is something wrong, Honey? Do you want a drink of water?" I know she thinks I'm on drugs, but it's only adrenaline. The drugs won't come for a couple of years.

It's February, 1992. I'm in San Antonio for the Texas "T" Party. I've come at considerable personal expense, having flown in from Atlanta. I can't afford this; I'm able to be here only because a friend is allowing me to share his hotel room rent-free, and because Cynthia and Linda Phillips, the event's sponsors, have been good enough to waive the registration fee.

At the moment, I'm attending a banquet, eating standard hotel fare of rubber chicken and gummy vegetables. I'm in awe of my surrealistic surroundings. All around me are cross-dressers wearing designer knock-off gowns with pounds of sequins, tall heels, elaborate wigs, rumbling voices, thick makeup, jewelry that cost hundreds of dollars. I'm in a thirty-dollar outfit I picked up on sale at the mall, at the rack at the back of the store that's the last stop before the dumpster, in flat shoes down at the heel, wearing my own hair, no stockings, no bra, and very little makeup. I feel like someone's shabby cousin, plain in the middle of all this ostentation.

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I remind myself I'm present to publicize AEGIS, an organization I've formed to provide information about transsexualism, and steel myself to listen to speeches by people I'm in the same room with only because we both wear dresses. Under other circumstances, we wouldn't know each other, for we've little in common. I rent; they own. My car is twenty years old; theirs (both of them) are leased and have cellular phones. They have wives and maybe mistresses; I'm single and will probably remain so. They have IBMs and Macintoshes; I'm still using my Commodore 64. They have offspring; I decided to forego children because of my gender issue, and now, being post-op, am unable to either sire or bear offspring. They voted for Reagan and Bush; I refuse to vote because it fucking well doesn't matter which one of the sumbitches is elected. They work for great corporations and spend their days in masculine environments in which the goal is to screw over the competition and the customers; I have a low-paying civil service job, in which I'm challenged to think up ways to help my developmentally disabled clients. And most of all, they're men, and I'm a woman.

At least, that's what I assume at first – that these rough-looking, rough-sounding creatures in dresses are men. But as the dinner progresses, something strange happens. Despite typically male secondary sex characteristics – despite the big hands and feet, prominent noses, and booming voices, I slowly begin to realize that the others at my table are like I am. Inside most of them, there's a woman desperately trying to get out.

In terms of dealing with their gender issues, my tablemates are relative novices; in relation to them, I'm a grizzled pro. I listen as they talk about minor accomplishments in cross-dressing: their first time out, getting called "ma'am" in public – victories which have been behind me for twenty-five years. They speak in anguished tones about things I've not experienced: the effects of decades of testosterone on their bodies, making it difficult to pass; their feelings of powerlessness to change their situations; responsibilities to their children and wives; the golden handcuffs of their careers.

By the time dinner is over, I find myself surrounded by women, rather than cross-dressed men.

I stick my head out the door of my room at the Ross to see if the coast is clear. My hair is swept into a fall, my makeup perfect. I'm wearing a purple mini-skirt and something brand new on the market – pantyhose, freeing me forever from garters and girdles. Unfortunately, the desk clerk, who has become suspicious about finding the back door unlocked on Mondays, and who has come down to the basement to check it, sees me. "What are you doing here?" he asks threateningly.

"I live here," I tell him. He refuses to believe me, and scurries off to find a higher authority.

In a panic, I tear off my clothes and scrub my face with a wet washrag (yes, standing over *that* sink), kicking my drag under the bed. When there's a knock on my door three minutes later, I'm in boy mode, in jeans and pillover shirt. The desk clerk has the hotel manager in tow. "Where's the woman?"

"What woman?" I ask innocently.

"We know you had a woman in here." The clerk looks suspiciously about the sparsely furnished room to see where I might have hidden her.

I take a deep breath. It's my first coming out. "There was no woman. It was me."

They don't believe me, tell me I've broken the Ross' no-woman rule (as I suppose in a way I have) and must leave. In tears, I call my parents and beg them to let me come back home. They say no and hang up. I call them back. This time they say yes.

It's 1978, and, for the week, I'm just one of the girls at the Gunga Den on Bourbon Street in New Orleans. As I stand outside the doorway, talking, a tourist gawks at me. I grin and put my hands to my crotch and make jerking-off movements at him. Later, I blow a sailor for money and learn the first lesson of prostitution: money up front.

It's 1991. I listen to the blonde in the bar complain about not being able to afford sex reassignment surgery. She's wearing a leather outfit that must have cost hundreds of dollars. They're not working clothes, but trolling-for-men clothes, for she's a hairdresser, not a sex worker. She was *my* hairdresser until I found I could go to Great Clips and get for eight dollars the same cut for which she was charging me sixty; after all, as they say, the only difference between a good haircut and a bad one is about two weeks. She chain smokes cigarettes as she blames everyone but herself for her preoperative status. When she settles up before leaving in her shiny black Acura, her bar tab is twenty-seven dollars. I continue to nurse the seltzer water I've had since nine o'clock. When I leave, I slide tenderly behind the wheel of my 1977 Chevy Nova with the bashed-in right fender; I'm still more than a little tender from my own surgery.

It's 1979. Courtesy of an illicitly-obtained social security card, I'm working as a Kelly Girl. This time out, I'm in the English department at Fisk University, where I'm a pawn in a tug-of-war between a secretary and the Chair of the English department. The secretary claims she has requisitioned the Kelly Girl, and so owns my time; and the Chair, a frosty, humorless woman, claims I'm her own. I spend the morning arranging files and learning how to play the numbers with the secretary; in the afternoon, I type letters for the Chair, who glares at me whenever she walks by my desk. I wonder if she has read me or if she's just angry at me by association because she had her authority usurped.

My beard has come in thick and dark, and it's difficult to conceal. It's not at all like it was in the old days, when dressing took little time or effort. I've been checking my appearance in my hand mirror every few minutes. Surely she knows! If only there was someone to talk to, to compare experiences with... But the Nashville clubs are still not letting me in dressed, and I still have met no other transsexuals in town. Even The Circus is gone, evolved

into George Jones' Possum Holler. My face is raw from shaving, and the wig is hot on my head. I feel like an imposter, a fake, and in a way, I suppose, I am. I powder my nose approximately once every fifteen minutes. I feel my womanhood slipping away from me, like I felt it slipping away from me at the Ross.

It's now 1980, and my career as a Kelly Girl is over. I've gone to work, in male mode, as a protective services worker. I spend my days trying to help families who have been accused of abusing, neglecting, or exploiting children. It's a frustrating job, made worse by co-workers who refer to clients as "dirtlegs" and take delight in erecting barriers to prevent them from getting services rather than helping them as they are supposed to do. This morning, I stop by to visit a client with an IQ of perhaps sixty; she's on my caseload because her children were eating out of dumpsters. In tears, she tells me she had a friend read to her a letter from her welfare worker, about her welfare check being cut off. I ask her to show me the letter, which begins, "Pursuant to our conversation of March 14..." Pursuant, my ass! Her worker knows she's can't read. Translated to plain English, the letter says my client must see him in person in order to remain on welfare. I tell her that's all she needs to do and promise to pick her up on Tuesday and take her by to see him. Her face brightens.

Now it's afternoon, and I'm depressed because I was just told by Dr. Embree McKee of the Gender Identity Clinic at Vanderbilt University that the program will not help me to feminize myself. I will not, he tells me, be offered surgery or given hormones. The reasons: I'm not dysfunctional enough in the male role (I have an honest-to-God job, after all; what *real* transsexual could finish graduate school or hold down a professional position?), and I'm more sexually interested in females than in males. In other words, I'm not transsexual by their criteria: I'm simply not screwed up enough, or interested enough in men. Later, as I think about what he said, I realize he's told me exactly what I must do: if Vanderbilt won't give me hormones, then hormones must be what I need; perhaps they're the missing piece of the puzzle!

Within six months, still not knowing another transsexual person to ask for advice, I've studied up on hormones in the medical library, selected a brand and a dosage from the *Physician's Desk Reference*, and forged a prescription on a stolen blank from my doctor's office. I'm sitting in the car in front of a pharmacy, working up nerve to go inside for my first-ever hormones. I just know I've overlooked something and will get caught – but I get away with it.

I'm treating Miss Charlotte to a meal for her birthday. Looking fabulous, if artificial with her ridiculous, pumped-up cheekbones, and with two Cape Cods inside her, she's reading me for my stand against injected silicones. It's dangerous and disfiguring, according to the FDA, but from Miss Charlotte, I hear a litany of her friends who, she tells me, haven't experienced problems, who are beautiful because of being pumped, whose lives, like hers, have been

enhanced by silicone. She makes the valid point that she knew the risks before her first injection. Miss Charlotte makes it clear she's interested in the present and not what she will look like when she's fifty. She conveniently forgets those times she's called me at four a.m., drunk and in tears because her life is going nowhere. She also forgets, or maybe has never noticed, that I'm fast approaching the half-century mark.

Miss Charlotte's cheekbones are more prominent than even those of her contemporaries, for her boyfriend once hit her, shifting the silicone, and the trannie who injects her gave her more on both sides to even things out. She cannot suck dicks for very long, she tells me after her third Cape Cod, as it makes her jaw hurt. I wonder if this will qualify as a work-related disability. Her chin is unbelievably long, a silicone pumping gone awry. She got it, she once told me bitterly, to look more like Cher, not the Wicked Witch of the West. She wishes she hadn't done it, but she isn't mentioning that now.

Miss Charlotte has had no electrolysis, is on hormones only sporadically, and is perpetually unwilling to leave the gay mecca and trannie safe zone of Midtown Atlanta for unknown territory – even for a dinner at the nice restaurant in the 'burbs I offered her as a birthday present – for despite her cheekbones and plastic bosom, Miss Charlotte doesn't pass. She'll never pass, for she'll never do the work which would allow her to do so. But she looks great, which is of paramount importance to her. "When I went into this, my hope was to be pretty," she once told me. "Passing would be great, but it was pretty that was important." I tell her it's just the opposite with me. It's a class difference, I realize. I wouldn't do to my body what she has done to hers, but then I'm not in her shoes. My position in society is anchored by my mind, hers by her body. I can look sloppy or fat – and do – without undue consequence; for Miss Charlotte, it would mean ruination, loss of her meager income, which is derived from occasional drag shows and less infrequent tricks and from the kindness of strangers, specifically her boyfriends-of-the-moment who put her up. For Miss Charlotte, the benefits of instant curves from silicone more than outweigh the risks.

If Miss Charlotte has taught me an important lesson, she has a lesson yet to learn herself. Blessed with youth and a reasonably small skeleton, she disparages those less physically fortunate. In particular, she's on the case of Brenda, a middle-aged transsexual she met in the bars. Brenda works as a cabbie, cross-living full-time. Charlotte makes it clear she considers Brenda a man, a transvestite, whereas *she*, Miss Charlotte, like me, is a woman. She doesn't understand why Brenda has chosen to live as a woman, and listens, but doesn't really hear me, when I suggest that the same sorts of feelings which drive her might motivate Brenda as well.

If my life has been a balancing act between the male body I was born with and my need and desire to be a woman, it has also been a balancing act between lifestyles. I've never made enough money to live really comfortably. Where others have spent money on vacations, clothing, jewelry, homes,

automobiles, alcohol, drugs, their 401K accounts, and fine restaurants, I've been forced to be creative in order to get things which would ordinarily be out of reach to someone with my limited income. By working full-time at \$330 a month and taking advantage of a loan program which let me register for classes and pay back the loan at the end of the term, I managed to go to college, one shaky semester at a time. By getting an assistantship which paid \$150 a month, I was able to go to graduate school. By driving motorcycles or old cars and working on them myself, I've managed to maintain mobility (my vehicle at the time of this writing is a 32-year-old Dodge Polara with push button transmission and is quite fabulous, thank you very much). Through the years, I've lived at various times in garages, attics, unfinished basements, and mobile homes, with friends, with relatives, with roommates, and in group homes (as staff; shame on you for thinking otherwise). Because in the male role I was unable and unwilling to dress and wear my hair and otherwise behave in ways which were acceptable to North American corporate culture, I've missed out on, among other things, better paying jobs, retirement plans, marriage, children, a home in the suburbs with a spouse and 2.5 cars, trips to the Caribbean, and charge cards and other trappings of American urban middle-class life. But I've also been able to avoid having to rely on prostitution (although I once dabbled around the fringes), drug and alcohol dependency (although I've experimented with practically every drug known to science and drug enforcement agencies), and I've managed (sometimes just barely) to keep myself from being physically, mentally, or emotionally harmed or exploited by others, whether they be family, predators on the streets, lovers, or ignorant or malevolent medical professionals to whom I have turned for help with my gender issue.

My betwixt and between financial status has helped me see the full panorama of transgender behaviors, for I've commingled with the rich and the poor, cross-dressers and transsexuals, the passable and the impassable. I know transsexual people who have managed to hold onto their jobs during transition and those who have been fired, and transsexual people who have deliberately walked away from their old lives to forge new ones. I know those whose middle-class lives fell apart when they started to deal with their gender issues, and who now live in reduced circumstances. And I know those who, like Miss Charlotte, have never had and never will have a middle-class life, who have wound up on the streets because they were courageous enough to deal with their gender issues at an early age, and because, with their early experiences and upbringing, there was no other place to go other than the street.

In their youth, transgendered people have a terrible choice: they can be true to themselves, for which they will be at grave risk for winding up dead; or they can keep others happy by stifling their innermost selves. The choice they make will determine the path they walk through life: marginalized, rejected, harassed by others, forced into low-paying jobs or into sex work, but able to be themselves; or comfortably middle-class, with all the privileges pertaining thereto, but having to keep the closet door firmly closed as their

bodies become progressively more masculine – or, for FTMs, more feminine. Neither choice is satisfactory; either has grave consequences. Who could be blamed for walking either of these roads?

Yet I've seen arrogance and misunderstanding from both sides: on the one hand, the attempts made by middle-class cross-dressers and transsexuals to distance themselves from those less fortunate, and the willingness to ignore human misery while buying yet another designer outfit; and on the other hand, the tendency of many people on the street to lay all their troubles on a society which rejects them, while taking none of the blame for their indulgences and irresponsibilities. I've seen those who transition late envy the beauty and naturalness of those who transitioned early, and those who transitioned early envy the money and accomplishments of those who transitioned later in life.

When I was a protective services worker, I would see girls of thirteen or fourteen in the housing projects deliberately get pregnant so they could get out of their mothers' houses and get their own welfare check and so establish a home for themselves. It was an adaptive thing for them to do, although my co-workers never realized it, and would not have admitted it if they had. The young women in the projects had no other vision; their life experiences had not led them to realize or expect there are other ways to get through this vale of tears than living in the projects on AFDC. The middle-class upbringing of the social workers gave them a different perspective – one of empowerment and privilege, which left them unable to understand why, under the circumstances, pregnancy was a viable choice for those young women; these social workers were simply unable, and usually unwilling, to comprehend why the cycle of poverty perpetuated itself.

I also, I might add, saw people break the cycle of poverty by courage and sheer force of personality. I've no explanation for why this happens, except that sometimes exceptional people are able to grow beyond their upbringing and circumstances and construct their lives accordingly. This works for the downwardly mobile as well as the upwardly. Some people simply seem to be less constrained by their upbringing and social class than others.

But only a minority has this ability to take other perspectives. Few who have lived middle-class lives have any conception of how a lifetime of limited vistas can strangle initiative and creativity; how life in a public housing project can leave people unable to see beyond their meager horizons; how not snitching on others can hold more value than being honest; how it's difficult to be prompt to an appointment when you have no car and the bus may or may not go there and you may or may not have clothes to wear or facilities in which to make yourself presentable beforehand; how going on foot to the part of town where the interview is held may get you harassed or picked up by the police, or run over by a car as you make your way along highways off the bus routes with no provisions for pedestrians; how systematic repression from the authorities destroys self-image; how peer-pressure and a lack of sense of self-worth can lead to drug and alcohol abuse; how initiative can be punished, and apathy rewarded; how sexual or physical abuse can leave a person scarred and self-destructive; how depression can leave an individual unable to function. Those

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who transition late in life don't see that those who have confronted their gender issues at an early age can be punished for that decision, forced into lifestyles and circumstances they didn't necessarily choose and most likely didn't want, but have done their best to adjust to. And most unfortunately, they don't see that had they themselves been less dishonest about who they were, they would have most likely gone down a similar road.

On the other side, when one is young and on the street, it's easy to look with scorn at someone in their forties because they seem awkward in their clothes, because they've lost their hair and must wear a wig, because they're not "real!" It's a bit harder to see the pain that has been carried inside all those years, and the damage it has done – damage which, even if it is different in form, is ever bit as real as that suffered by people on the street. It's also easy to see those at gender conventions and think them fabulously wealthy, when in truth it may be their one big fling of a lifetime, a one-weekend excursion into femininity or masculinity which has been paid for by working as corporate drones in a presentation they despise. It's easy to forget that money squandered on alcohol and drugs can just as easily be spent to pay the cost of a gender convention, or saved toward electrolysis or surgery. It's easy to resent those who have homes and families, who have male privilege (or for that matter, female privilege, which is certainly more lucrative than transgender privilege), and not realize it's privilege that was never wanted but which was forced onto them because their lives and bodies trapped them in their present roles. It's easy to forget that those who have middle-class jobs pay enormous taxes which fund programs like food stamps, public housing, welfare, Medicaid and Medicare, and frequently give voluntarily to charities to boot. And it's easy to forget that the question of whether those with middle-class backgrounds owe anything to those without such backgrounds is not a given, but a matter of hot debate in this society.

I don't think there are two different types of transsexual people, as a number of clinicians have reported; I think there are only people who, at the fork in the road, have made different choices, and who have been shaped by those choices. Some face the risks and pains associated with transitioning early, and some delay their choice and inherit the risk and pain associated with transitioning later in life. Often, these choices are made out of consideration for others, by the circumstances of their lives and relationships, or by happenstance. I know my own life has been influenced by chance.

My first decision point came while I was living at the Ross. I was ready to transition, eager to, and I would have with even one word of encouragement. But the Nashville bar owners kept me out of their clubs, and I never saw another transsexual person on the street. When I was thrown out of the Ross, I had to choose between going on the street and returning home. I might have risked life on the street anyway, had I realized hormones would feminize my body, or had I met even one transgendered person – but that didn't happen. I had a vague notion that hormones were part of the process, but no idea of how essential they were, about what they could and would do. I wasn't savvy enough to figure it out on my own, and there was no one to tell me. I saw only

that my body was masculinizing, and that until I found the missing secret that would make my body become more feminine, life on the street would consist of battles slowly lost to male pattern baldness and increased facial hair. My sense of self-preservation moved me back into the male role.

My second decision point came a good ten years after I left the Ross, after I was turned down by the gender program at Vanderbilt University. I still wasn't allowed in the Nashville gay bars and still hadn't met other transgendered persons, but I had learned what I needed to do to alter my body; I changed my life when I put that first self-prescribed hormone pill in my mouth. This time, my sense of self-preservation moved me away from and eventually out of the male role, even at the price of making myself a lawbreaker by forging my own prescription for hormones.

But here's the rub – had I come from the projects instead of an upwardly-mobile lower middle-class background, I wouldn't have had the latitude to make the choices I did. I wouldn't have had to go in search of other queens on the downtown streets; I would have been raised with full knowledge of who and where they were. They would have been my relatives, friends, and neighbors. Had I been abused as a child, rather than loved, I wouldn't have had the instinct of self-preservation necessary to stop myself from climbing into the car of the first man who propositioned me, and I wouldn't have had a family which could or would have taken me back when I got thrown out of the Ross, or the fortune of having even a crummy job as a busboy. But on the other hand, had my middle-class upbringing "taken," I would have been an obedient little boy at home and would never have had the opportunity to explore my femininity as I did at the Ross; and, after being told by the doctors at Vanderbilt that I wasn't transsexual, I would have believed them and thrown myself into life as a man and wound up wearing beaded gowns and a ton of makeup with the rest of the "cross-dressers" at the "T" Party.

The Ross Hotel is long gone now, replaced by a tower of glass and steel. Along with it went a bit of my history, my days of being only one step away from having nowhere to go. I'll never know what life on the street is truly like, for I've always had either an eight-dollar-a-week room or a dollar twenty-five job to insulate me from the hard life, or the hopes that I could talk my parents into letting me come home when things turned sour. And I'll never know what it's like to grow to middle age as a man, since I didn't allow that to happen. But I've been close to having both outcomes, which explains why I'm writing this chapter.

I view the differences between the two sides of the community as due to class and upbringing rather than any difference in intensity or type of transgender feelings. It's senseless to claim we're more legitimate than those who don't pass well, or to claim those less fortunate than we are so because they're dysfunctional, when the real difference has to do with background, income, and class values; identification with heterosexual or gay/lesbian/bi communities; and racial issues, which, as we all well know, permeate every

aspect of our lives.

If you're hoping for a great ending to this chapter, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. I don't have a magical solution for bringing two separate communities together in harmony. It may not even be possible. People like Miss Charlotte have little interest in sitting in a circle of chairs at a support group meeting, and many middle-class people have little interest in hanging out in the bars paying for Miss Charlotte's Cape Cods. But certainly, members of both communities can stop attacking one another and begin to work on ridding themselves of their prejudices and misconceptions. We can develop forums which appeal to all of us; Atlanta's Southern Comfort conference, which turns no transgendered person away because of lack of money, comes to mind, as does the annual ball of TGSF, a San Francisco support group, and the Transgender and Transsexual Health Conference of New York City's Gay & Lesbian Community Center. And we must all work together on issues of common interest: fighting employment discrimination, hate crimes, HIV/AIDS, and transphobia and homophobia; working together to battle the unfortunately named Religious Right and to gain access to insurance coverage and quality medical care and freedom from job discrimination; helping each other overcome shame and guilt about being transgendered – and hopefully, partying together to celebrate the special gift with which we are all blessed – being transgressively gendered.

Dallas Denny has traded her 1964 Polara for a pickup truck, which she uses to haul materials between Home Depot and the home – her first – which she purchased in 1998.