

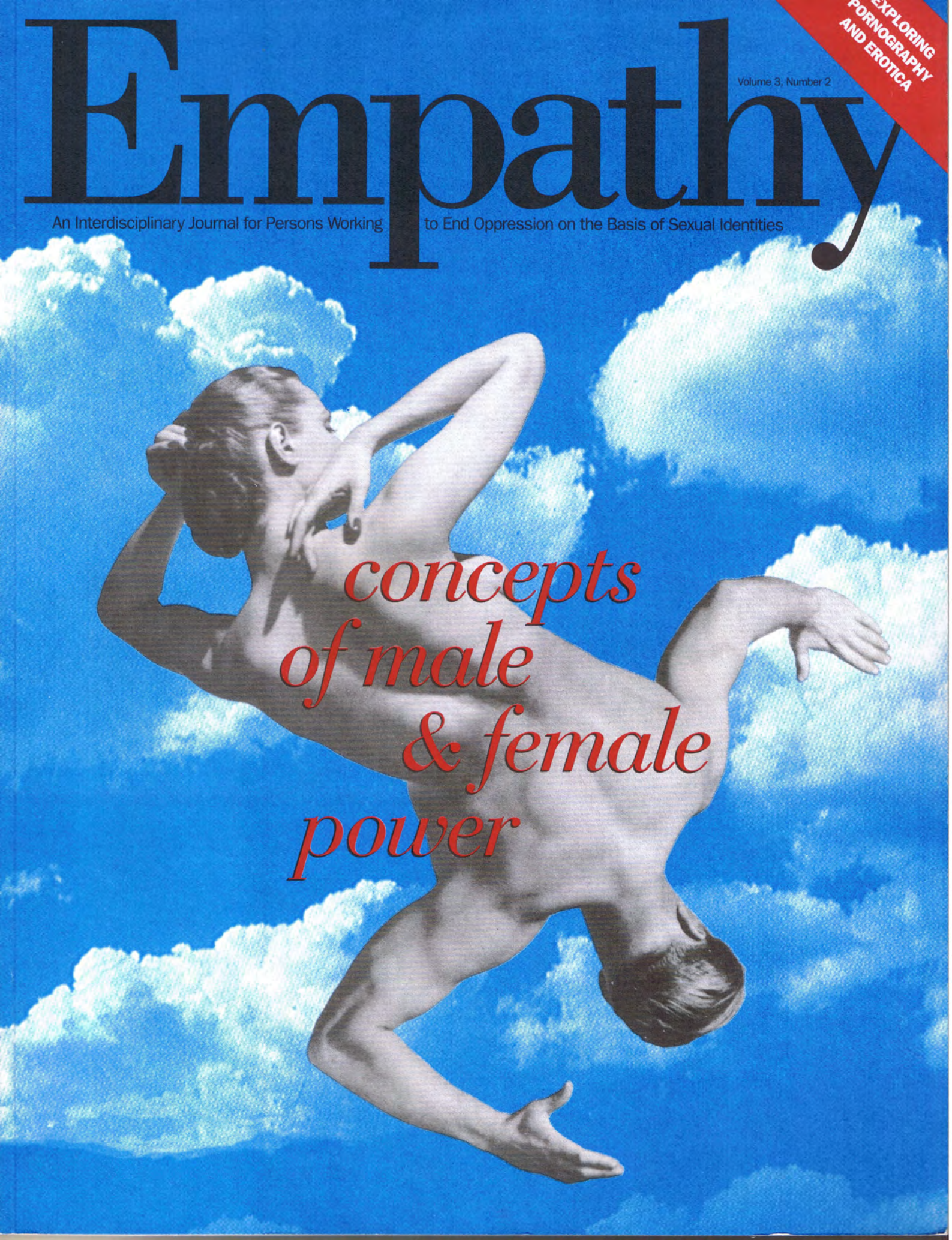
Empathy

An Interdisciplinary Journal for Persons Working to End Oppression on the Basis of Sexual Identities

Volume 3, Number 2

EXPLORING
PORNOGRAPHY
AND EROTICA

*concepts
of male
& female
power*



Empathy

AN INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL FOR PERSONS WORKING TO END OPPRESSION ON THE BASIS OF SEXUAL IDENTITIES

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The Girl-With-No-Name

Despite its prejudices, the Old South always had a toleration for, or even love of the unusual. Until the 1960s, when the proliferation of strip malls, supermarkets, limited access highways, and other triflings of postmodern American corporate culture replaced Mom-and-Pop groceries with supermarkets and killed downtowns as viable areas for shopping, most Southern towns had one or more "quare" characters — men and women out of touch with the rest of the society— male and female Delta Dawns who would wander around, doing whatever it was that they did so well. Wearing their faded roses of days gone by, they were only the outermost stratum of the onion. Peel back a layer, and you would find "queers" of another sort. Labeled and stigmatized as they might be, they were part and parcel of the social fabric — women who lived together in something that was not quite sisterhood, men who could always be visited at midnight by a carload of

surfeit of physical discipline and Cold War scare tactics. Gender variation was not only not allowed — it was unthinkable. Girls all wore skirts and boys were sent home for not wearing socks or for wearing (the big thing in my senior year) madras pants. As the Fab Four, with their scandalously long hair, yeah-yeah-yeah on television for Ed "Really Big Shew" Sullivan, the boys of the South watched on black-and-white sets, their hair cut burr-short at the back and sides.

And there was I, in the midst of all this Southern culture-in-flux, an iron filing in the electromagnetic field of life, with a very strong magnet only yards away, in my mother's room. When she was away, I would go through her lingerie drawer, silently memorizing the position of each guiltily borrowed garment so that I could fit it back in place like a piece from a nylon jigsaw puzzle. Why did I, a boy of the highest ideals and purest character, a boy who had always been strong of heart

my gender identity leapt for the first time out of the "M" zone and strayed defiantly into the "F" I was perhaps 15 years old. The rest of the family had gone on a ride, and I had begged off; the excuse is long forgotten. I was sitting in the floor of the living room, wearing a purple dress (I had my own by that time), experimenting with my face. And for the first time, I got it right. Looking in the mirror, with my mandatory burr-short-on-the-sides haircut, I would ordinarily see a boy, and only a boy. In that dress, With Cover Girl skin and Maybelline eyes, my hair blended into a fall, I saw a very pretty, an almost beautiful girl. I didn't — and this is important — see a boy dressed as a girl. I saw a girl. I remember thinking, "This is who I want to be. This is who I probably should have been." But I also remember thinking that it couldn't be. It wasn't possible. I was looking at a fiction, a fabrication, a creature created out of cosmetics and cloth. The girl in the mir-

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teenage boys with hard-ons and too much Carling Black Label in their bellies, women who dressed like men and didn't give a damn, and, most curiously of all, men who would dress up as women.

By the time of the British Invasion in 1963, such people were already receding into legend, at least in my part of the South. I remember hearing about someone called Martin Smith, who would (horrors!) pass himself off as a woman. The story, oft-repeated and never verified, was that a sergeant from the nearby air base had married him, only to have a rude awakening on their wedding night.

I never got to meet Martin, more's the pity. He was before my time, and the educational system was allowing no more like him. Somehow Martin Smith got through the educational system with his Martin Smith intact. I can't imagine how he would have made it alive through the cookie-cutter high school I attended in the late '60s.

The high schools I knew, which were usually principaled by ineffectual bald-headed overweight white men, invariably had coaches with yellow flat-tops who doubled as assistant principals, enforcing their McCarthyist ideas with a

and unlined of brow, suddenly find myself drawn so powerfully to women's apparel? A sleeping demon had somehow awakened in me, and it would have its way; to resist was madness. I considered very briefly trying to fight it, but I knew in my heart that it would destroy me if I didn't give in, and so I did. I must have struggled with myself all of 15 minutes before making this life-course-altering decision. I knew when I was licked.

I would slip on panties, tug into a girdle that was already too small, pull on nylons, and fasten them, in those pre-pantyhose days, to the girdle's dangling rubber thongs, struggle to snap a bra (the mechanics of which I did not understand), cover it all with a slip. Then madness — I slipped on a dress, pulled on a kerchief, and all was lost.

You see, unlike cross-dressers who are fetishistically attracted by the apparel itself, I very quickly discovered that women's clothing was but a means to an end: it was necessary in order to build the disguise of myself-as-woman. I remember well the day the gas gauge of

ror was a fantasy, and I could see no way to make her a reality. The girl had no name. In the end, she wound up in a paper sack which I hid under a loose board in the summer-hot attic.

There are few secrets in a small house with six people living in it, and the girl-with-no-name was soon discovered. In no uncertain terms, I was let to know how scandalous, how perverse, how ugly she was. Despite my decision to give in to my urges, I had been having real problems dealing with what I considered to be an unnatural need of an All-American boy, and the revulsion of my mother who caught me flat-footed (but not flat chested), did not help — nor did my father's disgust when he was told. This was the man who had once jumped on me with both feet (figuratively) for talking like Snaglepuss the lion. Heavens to Murgatroyd! I didn't understand what the problem was until later, when I realized that he thought it sounded effeminate. Now, his son revealed as a boy who dressed up like a girl, he threatened to make me walk the long five miles into

town in women's clothing, as he followed in the car.

Would that he had, for I would have been "out," like Martin Smith, and might have even found an airman for myself. Instead, the clothes were disposed of (not my choice; I never voluntarily purged), and the girl-with-no-name was dismembered as effectively as if we had cut her up and thrown her chunk by bleeding chunk from a speeding car on a moonless summer night.

My parents took me to a psychiatrist at the same air base which harbored Martin Smith's sergeant. In my shame and denial, I led him (the psychiatrist, not the sergeant) to think that the cross-dressing was not very important, had just been an experiment. And he went for it, telling my parents that I was "just going through a phase." It's a phase that's still going on, now, at age 46.

I had not been very successful in my quest for information about gender dysphoria — it was not, after all, something I felt comfortable approaching authority figures about, and the few books on the subject in the public library were often checked out or stolen by people much like me — but I did find out that Johns Hopkins University had a gender clinic where experts evaluated two people a month. Two people a month in a country with a population of millions! What chance would a girl-with-no-name have? She was, after all, a lie, a wraith, a sometimes creature. Surely Hopkins would take those boys who were lucky enough to naturally look like girls without having to work at it, those with ambiguous genitalia, those whose parents had more money than mine. And how would my parents take it, my father who thought that Snaglepuss was a faggot, and my mother who thought that Miss Jane on *The Beverly Hillbillies* was played by Christine Jorgensen? "I just thought I would try it," I told the shrink. "It's not that important." Lie, lie, lie.

Three or four years later the girl-with-no-name was back, spending most of her time hanging in a wardrobe in the Ross Fireproof Hotel in downtown Nashville. I had graduated from high school and been summarily ejected from my parents' house due to a combination of bad attitude and parental defiance — all appropriately masculine. I worked as a busboy at Shoney's restaurant #2 (the second Shoney's ever to be built) and

would ride the bus to work and back. In the evenings and on my day off, the girl-with-no-name would come out of the closet and wander around downtown, shopping at Belk's and Cain-Sloan and Harvey's (the big three department stores), going to the movies, visiting the library, eating in restaurants, hoping des-



perately to spot someone like herself so that she could at long last share her feelings with someone, but never managing to do so. Men in cars would whistle and slow down and try to convince me to get in, and I would ignore them, always. But then one day something happened. I — or rather, the girl-with-no-name, found herself in a lip-lock with a cab driver. I had never been kissed before, had never even touched my privates except to wash them, and here I was in an embrace that was growing more passionate by the moment. I was struggling to keep his hands out from under my skirt (a mini—it was the '60s, after all), struggling with my self-identity — here I was being kissed by a man, and I damn well knew that underneath the Charlie I was a boy, after all, and I knew that I couldn't be gay, for I had no interest in men as a man. Here I was, with a gender identity which had suddenly slammed itself firmly against the "F" peg and would never again wander into the "M" zone. Here I was with an awakening awareness of my genitals — genitals I was wholeheartedly

wishing were "innies" instead of "outies" so that I could go to bed with this man like any other woman. Here I was, wondering if I would be killed and decapitated if this heterosexual man were to discover that his girlfriend was really a boy.

I called a halt to the proceedings just shy of blastoff and a little short of discovery. The man pleaded with me to be his girlfriend and asked me to go with him to meet his friends — but I, no Martin Smith, refused. I did not see him again.

During those days at the Ross Fireproof Hotel, the girl-with-no-name would plot and scheme, trying to figure out how to find a job (short of prostitution) which would allow her to stay out of the closet forever. But she was fighting Mother Nature and she knew it. She, who had years earlier found a single hair on her face and shuddered, knowing that it was the first sign of an adolescence she did not want, had been only too correct. Every day, she found more hair on her face and less on her head. She could feel a masculine essence in her body. She hated it and the gonads which produced it — but she, who had never heard of hormone tablets, could think of nothing to do about it, short of self-castration, of which she was not capable.

I did consider becoming involved with the gay community, where I thought there might be a place for me, but I could never quite bring myself to do it. Nashville had a gay bar of legendary fame, Juanita's; but in my mind's eye it was a seedy little place where men cruised each other. I didn't go, yet there was nowhere else to go. And then an opportunity arose. A new bar opened — the Watch-Your-Hat-and-Coat Saloon — with a drag show. I went once, in drab (dressed as a boy), where I saw for the first time men dancing together, men holding hands. It assuaged my homophobia a bit; it wasn't so awful. It was also the first time I had seen anyone in drag (dressed as a girl). The female impersonators were stunning, full, I now know, of silicone and hormones.

I almost went back to the Hat-and-Coat as the girl-with-no-name but the bar's policy was no drag, and although I was quite convincing, I had no documentation to make my girlhood official. And then the Hat-and-Coat burned, and some people died jumping from upper stories to avoid the flames. It hasn't occurred to me until now, but perhaps it

was providence which kept me out of the Hat-and-Coat. Still, I've always wondered how my life would have turned out if I had sought shelter within the gay community, as many transgendered people do.

And so the testosterone marched on. I entered adulthood as a man instead of as a woman and the straight world instead of the gay. Married a woman, grew a beard, went to college. Got weak in the knees every time I saw a pretty girl because I wanted to be her so much. Got divorced (for unrelated reasons).

In 1978, and single again, I moved back to Nashville after completing my master's program at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. A beard of seven years was gone, and the girl-with-no-name was back, even if she was not passing so well because of testosterone poisoning. I was going to gay bars, making out with men in parking lots, facing a lifetime of looking increasingly more bizarre in a dress, becoming increasingly dysphoric about my body, and finding it more and more difficult to think of myself as the girl-with-no-name. For I was starting to see in the mirror not the girl, and not the woman she should have become, but a man-in-a-dress. I decided that it was time to come to terms with myself, to stop hiding the girl-with-no-name in the closet, to integrate her into my life.

I started by acknowledging that I was at the very least a cross-dresser. I quit worrying that my pumps or wig would be seen, or that I would be spotted wearing them. One by one, I told my friends and acquaintances. Step one.

Those were the days of Jan Morris and Renee Richards; gender reassignment, while still scandalous, was at least thinkable. Step two was to ask myself whether I wanted to be a woman. I already knew the answer to that one.

Step three was to take an honest look at myself, to determine if it would be possible, via surgery, electrolysis, and better living through chemistry, to ever pass convincingly as a woman. I refused to be a man-in-a-dress. I took careful stock of my body. I didn't at all like what I saw. My body had moved in undesirable directions since the day I found that single hair growing on my face. I was too hairy. Too big. Too this, not enough that. I made a list and then scratched off things that could be changed via hard work, hormones, electrolysis, surgery. I looked at what was left and thought "Just maybe..."

And so I took myself to the gender clinic at Vanderbilt University, where I gave them some money and told them about the girl-with-no-name. After a

time they got back to me, saying that they had made a decision about my gender. They had made the decision! And no, it wasn't the one I wanted. They would offer me counseling to help me in my life as a man. Thank you very much. Fuck you! I didn't go back.

The story of my change from a man to a woman is lengthy, full of pain and expense and loss and joy and strength and self-awareness, a story for another essay, as this one has already grown quite lengthy. Suffice it to say that I did an end-around the clinic and found some hormones (it was the clinic which made me realize I should be taking them when they told me that they would not give them to me!). I started electrolysis and eventually — very eventually (it took me 10 more years) — began successfully living as a woman.

It wasn't until 1989, when I was finally ready to make that big leap across genders, that I first got the chance to talk to a transsexual person — not that I was transsexual. Oh, no. I was just a man who had always wanted to be a woman, yup, yup. No t-words apply to me, thank you. It was wonderful to actually meet someone else with the same condition (curse? blessing?). I had realized early on that I was not the only one in the world (there were books in the libraries, after all, even if they were always checked out, so there had to be more who were like me). But where they were — that was the mystery. I supposed that many, like me, must be completely alone with feelings which have to be some of humankind's most difficult to cope with — but I also knew that there had to be a para-culture, a community, gatherings of people like me who would get together and talk trans, provide support, swap stories of girls within and marriages to airmen and trysts with cab drivers. I had just never been able to find that community. The libraries certainly hadn't pointed me in the right direction. Adult bookstores were no better. I would buy shrink-wrapped magazines with disgusting names like *She-Male Fantasies* and *Hung Horny in Skirts*, hoping to find some useful information inside. Inside I'd find chicks with dicks instead of magic keys to the gender community. Circulation time for a magazine, purchase to garbage can — five minutes. Did you hear that, *Guinness Book of Records*?

I finally found the community by joining a crossdressing club; it was the only thing I knew to do. I was a crossdresser who passed, a crossdresser who had had electrolysis, a cross-dresser with size C

breasts, a cross-dresser who people were calling ma'am even when I was at my masculine best with my girlfriend. I was no cross-dresser at all. I phased through the club like a knife through butter and emerged on the other side — in Wonderland. There were transsexual people everywhere. For the first time, I was not alone.

The girl-with-no-name now has a name. It is, in fact, the name she had all along, one of those names which turns out to work perfectly well as a woman's name, thank you. She is finally a creature of flesh-and-blood rather than a fantasy. She is not a notion of a woman, not an imitation of a woman, not a man's idea of what a woman should be, but a woman, with all the virtues and warts, the rights and privileges pertaining thereto — a woman who can be raped, who can be strong, who can bake a cake and change the spark plugs in her car. It is she who I see in the mirror every morning instead of the burr-headed boy I once was. Finally, at long last, thank God, it's over.

A Post-script: I have embraced the community I found on the other side of the mirror, and I have spent a considerable amount of my time, energy, and money leading other lost souls to the glass so that they can pass through if they so desire. Perhaps, as I am post-op now (i.e., I have a vagina), I should do the usual transsexual trick, blending into the woodwork. Maybe I will one day, but I can't yet, for there are too many people out there who are as lonely, frustrated, anguished, and angry as I once was. For the first time, the girl-who-now-has-a-name has a purpose beyond mere existence.

To those of you who are transgendered and have not found your way through the glass: know that you can, if it is your earnest and heart's desire. You can reach out by writing or calling AEGIS which is an information clearinghouse for transgendered persons.

To those of you who are gay: I think I can understand how lonely you must have been before you found the gay community. I hope you can understand that it is just as bad, and maybe even worse, for me and other trans-gendered persons.

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