MY TRANSSEXUAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Dallas Denny

Most book-length transsexual autobiographies—and I have read more than one hundred—conclude shortly after the completion of the authors’ gender transition, and in the case of male-to-female transsexuals, just after their genital surgery. In the last chapters, the authors assure us their problems and tribulations—which have cast gloom over their hundreds of previous pages—are now behind them, and their lives are wonderful, marvelous, glorious, fabulous. Everything is fine now. Really.

I've no doubt these authors are telling their stories as they recall and interpret them, but a book that on page 352 has the author sulking in the winter woods, contemplating suicide with a shotgun and on page 356 has her lying abed after surgery in a Snow White landscape, with sunbeams streaming through the window, flowers blooming, and songbirds twittering—well, that just sets off my bullshit detector.

I don’t wish to diminish the pain these and other transsexuals have reported or the positive effects of their transformations via hormones and genital surgery, but I somehow seem to have escaped both the crushing dysphoria and the magical relief reported by many of these authors. This is not to say that transition and surgery weren’t just as good for me—they certainly were—but I suspect most of the autobiographies have suffered from the ideologies of their authors. To me, the authors have seemed to be selling the pain of their early lives and the relief afforded them by transition and surgery. Many seem to be, more or less, infomercials to justify their decisions to transition.

Most transsexuals seem to suffer greatly from feelings of gender dys-
phoria. People I know—and I believe them—tell me they made the decision to transition with the barrel of a pistol between their teeth. I've seen transsexuals in great psychic agony, torn between their desire to achieve a gender presentation that is consistent with their self-image and their sense of responsibility toward their families, their fears of rejection or the unknown, or the knowledge that it's unlikely they will ever be able to pass undetected as a member of their new sex. Whether or not they choose to transition, I sympathize with, respect, and admire them for having the courage to do what they have to do. But their stories are not my story. This is my story.

First, let me say I could have made it more or less successfully through life without gender transition. It's not likely that I would have killed myself or even thought seriously about doing so. I would have been a productive member of society, and I would have had no major malfunctions. At worst, I might have suffered, like many and maybe even most adult Americans, from depression—which sometimes affects me anyway.

Does this mean I wish I had remained in my sex of original biology? No, it most certainly doesn't. I have absolutely no regrets about what I've done to my body or my life. I sometimes have one of those "what if" moments, when I think wistfully about the children I might have had, or the relationship that didn't endure because of my transsexualism, or about not being rejected for more than a decade by my parents, but everyone has these moments of melancholy speculation. I sometimes wonder, in the same way, what would have become of me if I had studied folklore instead of psychology, or how it would have been to have been raised in some small town instead of being dragged all over the world as an army brat. It's what if—not regret.

For me, gender dysphoria was rather less like a knife in my gut than like a pebble in my shoe. It was always there, always uncomfortable, usually irritating, and occasionally agonizing, making its presence known many times every day. I could ignore it for short or even long periods of time, but it never went away, never got any better. It made me frustrated at times, sad at other times, and furious at yet other times. Sometimes I could repress my feelings by becoming so involved with my life that they had little chance to assert themselves, but they were always there, ready to make me feel bad at even the happiest of times—when I would see a movie and wish I were the heroine instead of the hero, when I would be given male insignia like ties and wingtip shoes at Christmas, when I would be expected to "be the guy" and bring in the groceries, when I would be reminded in a thousand ways of my biology. It hurt—not at
every moment, and never more than I could endure, but constantly, without remittance. One can live with, but one never forgets, the pebble in one’s shoe.

**MY EARLY TRANSGENDER EXPERIENCE**

I didn’t want to be a girl from my earliest memory. I didn’t play with dolls. In fact, I was a fairly unremarkable boy. My transgender feelings did rise, however, at an early age, a year or two before puberty. As a child, I was fairly dense about matters relating to sex and gender; being a boy or girl seemed more a matter of haircut and dress than biology. It was only when I was confronted with impending manhood that I was struck with the immensity of what being a male human would mean. I remember discovering the first hair on my face. I was appalled. I wanted to pluck it out, but I didn’t because I knew it would only be replaced by two more. I had no sense that I could declare independence from my biology. I didn’t want a male puberty, but I didn’t see how I could avoid one, other than by rubbing my chest with my mother’s hormone cream in quantities calculated to be too small for her to notice. It didn’t work; adolescence came, right on schedule.

When I was in my teens, cross-dressing gave me some relief—and not sexual relief; I didn’t begin to masturbate until I was in my twenties. No, it was psychic relief; it just felt right. I was able to manifest the femininity I was otherwise keeping secret from the world. When I looked in the mirror I would see not a cross-dressed boy, but a young woman.

The cross-dressing was of necessity brief and episodic, for I had duties and obligations as a male to which I would inevitably have to return. Still, for a short time, I could experience another sort of “what if”—what if I had been born female. Cross-dressing gave me a compelling—if fragmentary—sense of what life would be like if I had been born with two X chromosomes, and it was infinitely more to my liking than the life I was having and would have as a male.

I was fortunate enough, with my baby face, to make a presentable, passable, and even attractive girl. It was frightening to go into public cross-dressed—it was the 1960s, after all, and I would have been in danger if were read—but I did it anyway. When I would dress and go out in public, I would be treated as best I could tell as if I had been born female—both by women, who would give me little woman-to-woman smiles and talk to me in ways they used only with other women, and by
men, who would treat me with great kindness and condescension and sometimes hit on me. This gave me a girlhood of sorts—a limited girlhood, certainly; I would never presume to claim the same sort of girlhood nontranssexual women have, but I do believe I had a taste, just a one-day-at-a-time taste, of being a young woman.

Paradoxically, cross-dressing reminded me I wasn’t really female. Putting on female garb meant that sooner or later I had to take it off. That was jarring, so much so that I soon found myself passing up opportunities to cross-dress. It was a too-painful reminder that all was not right with my world.

I desperately wanted to live full time as a woman, but it was a scary proposition. My body was continuing to masculinize, making an authoritarian statement that I was in fact male, and I had no documentation, no legal identity, as a female. I had no idea how to make the biology or identity problems go away, or even that it was possible to make them go away. Alas, I never realized that my birth name, Dallas, is one of those gender-ambiguous names that can work as well for a woman as it does for a man. Had that come to my awareness when I was fourteen instead of forty, and had I known hormones would have given me control over my biology, I rather think it would have given me the information I needed to transition at age fourteen instead of age forty.

Unfortunately, I have no physical mementos of this girlhood. I have only a strip of photo booth pictures taken in 1976, when I was twenty-seven years old—ten years after I began going out in public cross-dressed, and after testosterone had been masculinizing my body for some fifteen years. Still, when I look at these pictures, I see, as I did then, a young woman and not the young man I was the rest of the time.

Since both biology and social responsibilities dictated that I play the part of a man, I did, and I was good at it. I was never teased, never ridiculed, never questioned. Never. In adulthood, as in childhood, I felt safe, loved, and respected. I never felt threatened or in danger in my cunning masquerade as a man, nor did I ever feel I was endangered or significantly affected by discrimination at any time during or after my transition. I have no idea how or why I’ve been lucky enough not to experience the crushing discrimination, harassment, and violence reported by so many other transsexuals, but I have, and I am grateful for it. Life was pleasant. My body was for the most part to my liking, too. I was by no means in the “wrong” one—it was just that I lacked the means to mold it in ways I deemed critical.

Unlike many male-to-female transsexuals, I never overcompensated
for my feelings by trying to be hypermasculine; I performed manhood just enough to give a credible presentation. I never went one step beyond what I thought was needed to keep me safe, and I never valued either the performance or manhood itself. Not once.

Nor did I, like many other transsexuals, try to defeat my transsexualism. This, I believe, saved me from a great deal of psychic damage. I remember, at age thirteen, finding myself, without having made a conscious decision to do so, riffling through my mother's clothing drawers. The immensity of what I was doing, the terrible repercussions if I were to be caught, and the stigma that would be visited upon me—all of these things flashed through my mind. I knew my parents and society would consider what I was doing shameful and would react harshly. I considered for an instant—the thought arose, was debated, and was resolved in less than fifteen seconds—fighting this feeling that had come from nowhere and driven me into my parents' empty bedroom, but somehow, at my innermost level, I realized that whatever was driving me would not be curbed. It was too strong, rooted too deep. If I tried to deny it, to defeat it, to rid myself of it, it would destroy me. But I could hide it. It would stand for that.

And so I made the decision not to repress my transsexualism. This was a fortunate choice, I now know, for many transsexuals damage themselves and those around them by their attempts at denial. They overcompensate, becoming caricatures of their biological sex; they abuse alcohol and other substances; they enter dangerous occupations and take needless risks; they misuse others; they marry and have children not because they want to marry and have children, but because they hope it will kill this thing deep inside them that they hate and fear. Often, in their middle age, they implode. No longer able to fight themselves, they either kill themselves or tear their lives and families apart by declaring their intention to transition.

This was not to be my way, this denial. Instead, I would hide my feelings from the world. I would indulge them in secret, telling no one, or at least being circumspect. It was, I say again, a fortunate choice. Perhaps it was a wise one as well.

My early and midtwenties were a blur of work and college and graduate school and matrimony. I was married in 1971, at age twenty-two, separated in 1976, and divorced in 1977. I had little time or opportunity to cross-dress, and besides, it was not an activity my spouse found particularly comfortable.

After the breakup of the marriage, I began cross-dressing again, but
under the influence of testosterone, my body had changed. I still passed in public, but not all the time as before. I knew things would only grow worse as my body continued to masculinize. I was beginning to lose my hair on my head and sprout hair on my torso; both were abhorrent.

In 1979 I took myself to the gender identity clinic at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. After paying two hundred dollars for screening and three hundred dollars to take a battery of psychological tests that I myself was trained to administer, I was told by clinic director Dr. Embry McKee that the program would not offer me hormones or surgery or otherwise help me to feminize myself. Why? Because I was too functional in the male role. I had managed to earn an advanced degree, after all. I had a professional position as a child services protective worker, after all. I had functioned in a marriage for five years, after all.

I took myself to Vanderbilt’s medical library, where I rounded up and read everything I could find on transsexualism. The literature indicated Dr. McKee had been right in diagnosing me as nontranssexual. Transsexuals were profoundly dysfunctional persons with histories of sexual promiscuity, narcissistic and histrionic personalities, character disorder, sex work and substance abuse, and suicide attempts. Sex reassignment, or so the clinical wisdom dictated, was for only the worst cases, to be used as a last resort.

For the first time since the onset of my transgender feelings more than fifteen years earlier, I found myself wondering if it was possible I wasn’t transsexual after all. I concluded I must not be—at least so far as the medical literature was concerned—but then what about that always uncomfortable, usually irritating, and occasionally “agonizing pebble” in my shoe?

Sensing that I was at a junction in my life—one of those future “what if” jumping-off points—I made a decision that placed me at some legal risk but which would profoundly affect my life (for the better). Dr. McKee had told me Vanderbilt would not give me hormones; perhaps, then, hormones were a missing piece to the puzzle. At the Vanderbilt library I researched hormone regimens and, using a prescription blank I filched from the office of a doctor who had refused to give me estrogen, I wrote a prescription for Diethylstilbestrol (DES), a synthetic estrogen that is now off the market but was not then considered particularly dangerous. I popped my first illegal hormone pill in January 1980, when I was thirty years old. I took DES for ten years, eventually replacing it with Premarin in 1990.

Hormones were indeed a missing piece of the puzzle. Within six
months my thinning hair had grown back in—this isn’t supposed to happen; I can only guess that the follicles were dormant, but not yet dead. Within two years I had grown breasts, and my appearance was distinctly more feminine. Still, however, I continued to function socially as a male. I was still missing some pieces to the puzzle; I had no idea how to move forward.

Throughout the 1980s I was looking for a transgender community—I knew there had to be others like me—but found no sign of it. I knew only of gay bars with drag shows and the Society for the Second Self, an organization for heterosexual cross-dressers. I knew I didn’t fit their exclusionary (no transsexuals, no gays) membership policy, but I knew that through Tri-Ess I might find the larger community, if one even existed.

That community did, in fact, exist. I joined Tri-Ess in September 1988, lying, of necessity, about my transsexualism. In early 1989 I made contact with a transsexual support group in Atlanta. From the group I learned about the Standards of Care of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA).

The HBIGDA Standards provide guidelines for hormonal and surgical interventions in transsexualism. Here, for the first time in my life, was the game plan. Now I could see just what I needed to do.

In February 1989 I made the decision to do whatever was necessary to complete my transition. My body, feminized by ten years of estrogen, was as prepared as it was going to get. I began electrolysis. By the fall, my facial hair was mostly gone. In December I resigned from my position as a psychological examiner, loaded everything I owned into a U-Haul truck, and moved from Tennessee to Atlanta.

I should say that, despite my lifelong desire to live as a woman, I didn’t make the decision to transition lightly. I had no desire to back out of any responsibilities I had incurred as a man—but I had somehow managed to avoid most such obligations. I had no children, I wasn’t married, and the relationship that had consumed most of my thirties had failed. I had three siblings to comfort and look after my parents. I didn’t have a career I couldn’t bear to give up (I worked for the state of Tennessee as a psychological examiner; I would miss the position, but was willing to endure financial privations in pursuit of my transition). I still had much to lose—family, friends, employment—but I was free of obligations to spouse, or children, or society. The only person who would be singularly affected would be me—and although I was frightened at the prospect of joblessness, poverty, even homelessness, and even more
frightened at the thought that I would be likely to be mistreated by society, I went for it. Against these odds, after all, I had myself to gain.

After all that, transition was about as socially and physically challenging as falling off a log. I paid my price, certainly, in the loss of relationships. I had lost my soul mate, a woman I loved deeply and who loved me perhaps even more deeply. (Our relationship, which lasted throughout the 1990s, wasn’t able to endure the fact of my transsexualism. It didn’t matter that I chose not to act upon my feelings; the very fact that I felt as I did was enough to poison the well.)

I had already lost the most important person in my life. Now I lost my parents and two of my three siblings. I never spoke with my father again. I wasn’t allowed to visit or talk to my mother for thirteen years, until she called me some six months after my father’s death in 2001. I lost my friends. Only one was outright rejecting; the others wished me well but just drifted away, as friends sometimes do when life situations change.

I paid the price by losing everyone who was important to me—but otherwise, my new womanhood was a no-brainer. I didn’t have to disguise myself or “try to be” a woman in any way—I could wear greasy coveralls and no makeup and people would call me ma’am. I didn’t have to remove hair from my body, I didn’t have to resort to artifice, and I didn’t have to practice how to walk or talk or move. I was just myself, dropping all pretense at masculinity, and it somehow worked. I had no difficulties passing in public. I had no problem in finding a job equivalent to the one I had left. People treated me nicely—in fact, better than they had when I was doing my clever impersonation of manhood. I had gone immediately and perfectly from a comfortable and unambiguous life as a man to a comfortable and unambiguous life as a woman.

This was wonderful, of course, for I had never set out to make myself into a freak. I had feared ridicule, harassment, being viewed as a walking sex toy—all the usual things a transsexual woman can expect. Instead, I found myself living, as best I could determine, much like any other forty-year-old woman. It was—literally—my dream come true! I had achieved exactly what I had set out to achieve, yet it surpassed my grandest expectations. Life was simple, comfortable, and easy, and all this came to me organically. I had no psychic scars, no fears, no apprehensions, no areas of discomfort. I was just me, same as before, albeit without that annoying pebble in my shoe.

Many male-to-female transsexuals are shocked by the difference in the way they are treated after transition. Truth to tell, I saw little difference. Both men and women held doors open for me—but then, they
had always done that. Women gave me that woman-to-woman smile—that was different—and men sometimes seemed not to hear me when I spoke—that was different—and passengers in my car no longer trusted my driving skills—that was different—but those were small things. For the most part, I was treated pretty much the same as before.

In hindsight, I attribute this to my respective presentations as a man and a woman. As a man, I had a bohemian appearance. I wore jeans and pullover shirts, and my hair was long. Sometimes, I wore a beard. As the son of one of my posttransition friends said, when looking at a “before” picture, “Wow! You looked like a biker dude!” As a biker dude, people were a bit uncertain about me. They didn’t defer to me as they do to men in suits. (I wore a suit in public on only one occasion and was astonished at the way people behaved toward me; it startled and upset me so much I went home and took it off and never wore a suit or tie again.)

As a woman, I was more mainstream in my presentation, but just overweight enough and just old enough not to be viewed as a sex object. Somehow, things just seemed to even out, and people treated me as they always treated me. That was just fine by me.

Let me reiterate that, unlike my putative manhood, my womanhood hasn’t been about performance. I simply stopped performing as a man. I allowed myself to use gestures and vocal mannerisms I had always consciously blocked. I dressed more or less like women my age. In my early forties I took time to apply makeup and jewelry. As I passed my fiftieth birthday, like many other women, I stopped bothering. Nowadays I wear only a little lipstick, and I’ve not worn a dress in years. Lately I’ve lost some weight, and now, fifteen years after my gender transition and thirteen years after my genital sex reassignment surgery, I’ve found myself starting to bother again, at least on occasion.

I look, talk, and behave rather like other women my age, without having to work at presenting as a woman. I refuse, in fact, to work at it; people can think about me what they will. I’m just myself.

At five feet eight, I’m a bit on the tall side, but my appearance and demeanor, even without makeup or “women’s” clothes (I generally wear Birkenstocks, a pullover top, and slacks), result in others seeing me as a woman. I don’t “perform” femininity, at least not any more than any woman does; certainly I perform femininity much less and with less self-consciousness than I formerly performed masculinity. To the best of my knowledge, I’m my natural self, albeit with externally visible changes caused by hormones and electrolysis. I’ve had genital surgery, of course,
in the middle of Atlanta; if all goes according to schedule, it looks as if it will be paid for in another five years. After fourteen years, my family has reestablished relations with me. I’m a prolific writer, and most of what I produce manages to find its way into print. I’m in my fifth year as editor of *Transgender Tapestry*, the house magazine of the International Foundation for Gender Education. I’m on the board of two nonprofits and, after ten years of transgender activism that threatened to consume me (it was a burning the candle on both ends thing), I continue to do activism on a moderate level. I no longer work at it every waking minute, as I did throughout most of the 1990s.

After five and a half decades of eating whatever I’ve wanted, I recently had a health scare—an infected leg that resulted in a diagnosis of diabetes. I’ve turned much of my energy to getting my body back into proper shape. It’s a new challenge and one I’m starting to relish, as six months of effort have begun to translate into a difference in the way I look and feel.

My life is comfortable and safe and pleasant. I’m not wealthy—that was never my goal—but the bills are being paid. I’m beginning to plan for retirement, which will come between five and ten years from now.

I have no gender dysphoria these days. None. I don’t long to menstruate or become pregnant, or otherwise prove I’m a “real” woman. I’m happy with being a transsexual woman; in fact, I wouldn’t have it any other way. I’m content with my no-longer-new gender role, and with my body, and with the changes I was able to bring about through hormones, electrolysis, and surgery. I’m proud of the changes my activism, and that of others, has brought to our society.

Even though I still do daily work on gender issues, I rarely think about and never dwell on my own transsexualism. For me, gender and sexual reassignment were good and fulfilling things. They removed the pebble from my shoe. Life is good.