

The Third Time's the Charm

My Three Transitions

by Dallas Denny

I n the summer of 1968, I came very close to transitioning. I was living in the Ross Fireproof Hotel, a crumbling flophouse on the corner of 3rd Avenue and Union Street in downtown Nashville. I was eighteen years old.

I was working six days a week as a busboy at Shoneys restaurant. In the evenings, and on my day off, I would leave my eight-dollar-a-week basement room crossdressed and go out the back door of the Ross, emerging on Printer's Row in the heart of the city. Sometimes I would walk up the hill to Church Street and window shop at Cain Sloan, Castner Knott's, and Harvey's, the three big department stores; eat at one of the many restaurants; or go to the movies. At other times I would go down the hill to seedy Broadway. I was not of age to go into the taverns, but I would enjoy the come-ons of drugstore cowboys and other bar denizens as I strolled past on my way to the Ernest Tubb Record Store.

My hair was cut boy-short, but when blended into a fall, it reached to my back. My face was hairless and my features delicate; in miniskirt and makeup, I made an attractive and believable girl. Women smiled and were kind to me, and men wanted to make me; no one had any idea that I wasn't what I seemed to be. Sometimes I almost forgot so myself.

I was only eight dollars a week away from being able to live full-time as a woman, but without some sort of guidance, and especially without a job, the difficulties in making such a transition seemed insurmountable. Although my name (Dallas) was quite workable in either gender, there was no one to tell me so and I didn't realize it on my own. I would fantasize about finding (or even stealing) a feminine ID. In fact, once, on the street, I came across a female driver's license, but as the birth year of the legitimate owner was 1914, I was afraid to use it. I feared—probably quite rightly—what would happen if I were to find myself in the police station. But even more,

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I was disgusted and horrified by what was happening to my body. I was starting to find hair in the sink, and for the first time more than a few scattered dark whiskers on my face. I saw no way, short of self-emasculation, to stop the process—and although I seriously considered it, I wasn't quite ready to castrate myself in a hotel room.

My terror and my desire and my despair counterbalanced each other, and I never made that transition. Eventually, my fate was decided for me: I was spotted leaving my room by the hotel clerk, and promptly evicted for having a woman in the room. I tried later, in boy mode, to explain that it had been me, but he refused to believe it.

I wound up living back at home with my parents in the suburbs, my forays to Nashville limited to those times when I could save enough money to rent a motel room for a night or two. Eventually, my life and my changing body led me to adulthood, and not as the young woman I would rather have been. Certainly, I never got the chance to experience whichever job might have been waiting in 1968 for a trans girl named Dallas.

Ten years later, in 1978, I was newly divorced. A beard of nearly ten years was gone, and the long-buried feelings were stronger than ever after years of keeping myself too tightly scheduled to allow time to crossdress. As I unpacked after moving back to Nashville from Knoxville, where I had attended graduate school, I started to shove the secret box full of clothes and cosmetics under my bed, then stopped and did my first little bit of coming out. "Face it," I said to myself. "This is a big part and maybe the biggest part of who I am, and it's not going to go away. It's time to stop pretending it didn't exist and integrate it into my life."

And so I did. I put the clothes in the closet, the wigs on the dresser, and the makeup on my nightstand. I informed my friends that I crossdressed; they didn't seem to care much one way or another. And then I asked myself the Big Question: Did I want to be a woman?

The answer, of course, was yes. Those were the days of Renée Richards and Canary Cohn and Jan Morris and Wendy Carlos, and I had acquired a bit

of knowledge about how to go about making such a change. Looking in the mirror at the 28-year-old man I had somehow become, I asked myself the hard question: considering the limits of medical technology, would I, with the help of hormones and surgery, ever be able to achieve an appearance that would not get me instantly clocked everywhere I went? I decided that if the answer was no, I would not transition.

Ten years earlier, at age 18, the answer to the question "Will I someday pass?" would have been an unequivocal yes. Ten years later, at age 38, it would have been an unequivocal no. Looking at my thinning hair and hardening features, the best answer I could come up with was an unequivocal maybe.

Getting the medical technology I needed was not easy, but eventually I managed, starting hormones in January, 1980. But in 1978, successful crossdressing was becoming somewhat of a challenge. Now my hair was long, but even with teasing, it just wasn't thick enough to work; I no longer had even enough to blend into a fall. My beard had come in dark, and covering it required lots of makeup. I found that I passed casual inspection, but when I was around people for long periods, at least one of them would read me. Nevertheless, I ventured out with an illicitly obtained social security card and applied for—and got—a job as a Kelly girl.

The first placement was purely temporary, but at the second I came to realize that as a woman I might be able to have something that resembled a life. I had been called to fill in between semesters as secretary at the English department at Fisk University. No one questioned my identity, and in fact, everyone except the head of the department seemed to like me. Some of the professors flirted with me, and the other secretary taught me how to play the numbers and took me to lunch. The department head would stare holes in me, but others seemed to receive the same glare. I didn't think she had clocked me, but it nevertheless made me very nervous, and I spent a great deal of my considerable free time looking in the mirror and touching up my makeup and making sure that my wig was not awry. I felt insecure because I was so high-maintenance; I could make myself look like a

woman, but it no longer felt natural. Putting myself together in hopes that I would pass required a long time every morning. So when I learned that the position I was filling was open and that I stood a good chance of getting it, I didn't go to the administration building and apply. Nor did I accept a job as a key-punch operator when I got a call to tell me I had been hired. It wasn't that I didn't desperately want both jobs; it wasn't that there were any relationships or entanglements in my male life that would have made it difficult to transition; it was because something didn't feel right. I wasn't even sure what it was. With an opportunity to live full-time and make enough money to keep a roof over my head while doing it, I walked away from the very thing that I wanted most in the world. I didn't understand until years later that it had been because my body had not been prepared and I had felt at some level like an imposter.

Another ten years passed. It was 1988. Except for a couple of six-week drug holidays, I had been on estrogens for the entire decade. I had changed physically, profoundly so. Certainly, I was more comfortable in my own skin, for my hair had grown back, my body hair had diminished, and my sex drive had no key in the ignition. I was in an exasperating and unfulfilling relationship that had gone nowhere in eight years. My erstwhile transition had stalled, even if my feminization had not.

In January, I told my lover that we were wasting our lives, that if we were to remain together, we must start working on our relationship. I pleaded with her that we see a therapist. She refused. I told her that in that case there was no reason for me not to explore other life options, and that if things did not change for the better within six months, I was going to do just that. Things of course didn't change.

In September, I joined Tri-Ess, and in February of the next year, I made the decision to complete my transition and began taking steps (like electrolysis and coming out at work) to enable me to do so. Predictably, my lover said, "I knew you were going to do this!"

And so on 17 December, 1989, I found myself on the road in a U-Haul truck that contained everything I owned. I had changed out of my old

clothes (jeans and sweatshirt was about as "male" as I got) before leaving my apartment in Tennessee. I was bound for Georgia, and hopefully, a new life.

I had friends in Atlanta, and I had some savings and a place to stay for a while, and I possessed a variety of highly marketable skills, so I knew I wasn't likely to end up on the street. Although ten years of hormones had made me as passable as I had been in the old days at the Ross Hotel, I found myself wondering if I had consigned myself to a future of marginal jobs and temp work. Would I ever have another professional position, and if so, how long would it take me to work my way up to a paycheck that equalled the one from which I had just walked way?

By the time the truck was unloaded and my belongings were squared away, it was Christmas. I begin my job search just after the start of the new year. I surprised myself by being at perfect ease at interviews; it was the very opposite of my 1978 experience. This time I was for real; my femininity was bone deep, and not just an artifact of clothing and makeup.

The second job I interviewed for was perfect, the analog of my former position in Tennessee, with a salary close to what I had been making, and only three miles from the house. I wanted the position, and said so, and about ten days later the director of the facility called and told me it was mine. I started on the fifth of February, 1990, less than two months after leaving Tennessee. That was nearly seven years ago.

Having a professional position has done wonders for my self-confidence. From the beginning, I was conducting meetings, communicating with other professionals, and dealing with clients and their families. My transsexual status was and is neither known nor suspected, and that fact helps me keep my life in balance. As editor of this journal and Executive Director of AEGIS, my gender work is a major theme in my life—but not during the forty hours a week when I'm at my job. There, people make assumptions about my gender based on my appearance, dress, and behavior, and I do not disabuse them of their notions.

When I transitioned, I had been led to believe that I would be unsuccessful as a transsexual if I did not blend

anonymously into the greater society. That was, after all, the *zeitgeist* of the time. I quickly realized that being an activist and assimilation were mutually incompatible. I settled on a compromise: I would do my job as director of AEGIS, and if that led to the need to disclose, so be it; I would let matters take their natural course.

It's been amazing. Despite the frequent appearance of my name and photo in local and nationwide gay, lesbian, and transcommunity publications, despite having been interviewed for the local TV news on five separate occasions, despite having been quoted in the *Atlanta Journal/Constitution* and having my name mentioned on the Rush Limbaugh Show, despite articles and letters with my name appearing in popular magazines like *Esquire* and *Playboy* and *Utne Reader*, my transsexual status is not known at work. My supervisor found out in 1992 when I was outed by a phone call from someone in the community who was angry with me, but no one else has ever acted as if they might suspect. I'm quite sure they don't. One of my co-workers saw me on television in the 1995 Pride parade and awkwardly broached the subject. "Yep, that was me," I said. I imagine she thinks I'm a lesbian, although she might have figured out that I'm transsexual (I was, after all, marching with the trans contingent). She's somewhat less friendly than she was before (maybe she thinks that as a big old lesbian, I might jump her bones), but she has apparently decided (as did my supervisor) to keep the matter to herself.

Of course, the shoe might drop at any time. I'm prepared for it if and when it happens, and in fact, I'm quite blasé about it. My supervisor and her supervisor have officially known since 1992; it's unlikely that my transsexualism will suddenly become an issue after seven years on the job and five years after disclosure to my higher-ups. Perhaps my co-workers would be surprised, and perhaps they would say, "Oh, we've known all along." In either case, I can't imagine that things would change very much.

I've never tried to move away from transition, but I've tried to make wise decisions about moving toward it. At all

three of my transition points, I wanted to and was psychologically ready to make the big move, and employment played a major role in whether or not I decided to go forward. In 1968, I did not think I could get a job, as I had no credentials. In 1978, having the appropriate paperwork but a body which was not in my opinion ready for transition, I did not think that I could hold a job without my transsexualism becoming an issue. Ten years later, the porridge was just right, and I made the decision to go ahead.

Occasionally I resent the loss of twenty years in role, but most of the time I pat myself on the back for going with my gut feelings and not jumping into situations which did not feel right. I can't know intellectually what would have happened had I transitioned in 1968 or 1978, but in my heart, I know I would have been physically or psychologically damaged (or both) by transitioning at either of those times. But the third time was the charm; it's been marvelous since 1989, and I have absolutely no regrets.

Having a job is not only an important part of my personal identity; as I have no source of private income, it is necessary to work in order to stay off the street. If I had had money in the bank in 1968 or 1978, I would undoubtedly have transitioned. Even if I had physical characteristics that would make me unlikely to pass with hormonal therapy and electrolysis, I would perhaps have transitioned had I a guaranteed income. Had I had peer or family support in 1968 or 1978, I would have made the decision to transition. I made what seemed to be the wisest choices I could make under the circumstances. Had my life or body been different, my decisions might have been different.

We each of us must chart our own course based on our own circumstances and hope in the absence of any assurance that we are doing what is right for us. And then we must live with the consequences of those decisions. In an imperfect and in fact scary world, what is right for one person may be the worst thing for another. The better we educate ourselves about our options and the better we pave the way beforehand for our transitions, the better our chance of surviving them. ☪