

III
LadyLike
magazine
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**LADIES OF
MID-AMERICA**
Vicki Sheridan &
Chriss Crossen

Expanded
**MIRROR-
MIRROR**

THE PROBLEM
CHAPTER 2

**LIKE FATHER,
LIKE SON**

**GROWING UP
TRANSGENDERED**

Vicki
Sheridan



LadyLike #20

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Vicki Sheridan

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Chriss Crossen

So, You Thought Being Gay Was Lonely? Growing Up Transgendered in the South.

by Dallas Denny, writing as
The Girl Who Now Has A Name

Despite its prejudices, the Old South always had a toleration for, or even love of, the unusual. Until the 1960's, when the proliferation of strip malls, supermarkets, limited access highways, and other triflings of postmodern Amerikan Korporate Kulture 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. But they, wearing their faded roses of days gone by, 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 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 but never verified, was that a sergeant from the nearby air base had been very much in love with him and 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 high schools of the period, which were usually principled by ineffectual bald-headed, fat, white men, invariably had coaches with yellow flat-tops who doubled as assistant principles, enforcing their McCarthy-ist ideas with a 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-Yeahed on television for Ed "Really Big Shew" Sullivan, the boys of the South watched on black-and-white sets, their hair cut burr-short on 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. I had no idea why I, a boy of the highest ideals and purest character, a boy who had always been strong of heart and unlined of brow, suddenly found myself drawn so powerfully to women's apparel, but I did know that I was possessed of something far stronger than I. A sleeping demon had somehow wakened 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 I did. I must have struggled with myself all of fifteen minutes before making this life-altering decision.

I would slip on panties, tug into a girdle that was already too small, pull on nylons fastening 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. And then madness—I slipped on a dress, pulled on a kerchief, and all was lost.

You see, unlike crossdressers, 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 my gender identity leapt for the first time out of the "M" zone and strayed de-

fiantly into the “F.” I was perhaps fifteen. 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 mirror was a fantasy, and I could see no way to make her a reality. She 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 crossdressing 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 42.

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 had found out that the Johns Hopkins University had a gender clinic, and that they evaluated two people a month. Two people a month in a country with a population of hundreds 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.

It was 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 had found a job as a busboy at Shoney’s restaurant #2 (the second Shoney’s ever to be built), and I 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. Men in cars would whistle and slow down and try to convince me to get in with them, 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 minute. 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—

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Laine Alexander

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Growing Up Transgendered...

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 bed with this man like any other woman.

I managed to halt the proceedings just shy of blast-off, 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 him, and 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, there was more hair on the face, and less on the 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 hormones, could think of nothing to do about it, short of self-castration, of which she was not capable.

I did think of one possibility, but I could never quite bring myself to take it. Nashville had a gay bar of legendary fame, Juanita's, but in my mind's eye it was a wrinkle room, and when, years later, I finally got around to visiting it, I discovered that it indeed was a wrinkle room. I didn't go, and there was nowhere else to go. And then an opportunity arose. A new bar opened. It was called the Watch-Your-Hat-and-Coat Saloon, and it had a drag show. I went once, in DRAB (Dressed As 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 Girl). The female impersonators there were stunning, full, I now know, of silicone and hormones.

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Growing Up Transgendered...

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 very convincing, I had no documentation to make my girlhood official, and so never went, for the same reason that I could never bring myself to go to the psychedelic night club which was fifty yards from my room at the Ross. And then the Hat-and-Coat burned, and some people died, jumping from upper stories to avoid the flames, as a fireman friend of mine once told me. 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, and 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, I wanted to be her so much. Got divorced (of unrelated causes).

It was 1978, and, single again, I had 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 the gay bars, blowing men in parking lots, facing a lifetime of looking increasingly more bizarre in a dress, becoming increasingly dysphoric about my body, 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 crossdresser. I quit worrying that my pumps or wig would be seen, or that I would be seen 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 ask myself if it would be possible to change myself, via surgery, electrolysis, and better living through chemistry, to pass convinc-

ingly 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 that day when 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, but Fuck You! I didn't go back.

The story of my change from a man to a woman is lengthy, and full of pain and expense and loss and joy and strength and self-awareness, a story for another article, 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 ten 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 applied to me, thank you veddy much. 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 mankind's most difficult to cope with—but I also knew that there had to be a community, gatherings of people like me who would get together and talk trans, provide support, swap stories of girls-within and marriages to air men and trysts with cab drivers. I had just never been able to find that community. The libraries certainly hadn't pointed me in the

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right direction. Adult bookstores were no better. I would buy shrink-wrapped magazines with disgusting names, hoping to find some useful information inside. Instead there would be 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 cross-dressing club; it was the only thing I knew to do. I was a crossdresser who passed, a crossdresser who had had electrolysis, a crossdresser with size C breasts, a crossdresser people were calling ma'am even when I was at my masculine best with my girlfriend. I was no crossdresser at all. I phased through that 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, although she would rather not tell the world what it is in this article. 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.

Author's Note:

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 looking glass, so that they can pass through if they so desire. Perhaps, as I am post-op now, I should do the usual transsexual trick, blending into the woodwork. Maybe I will one day, but I can't yet. 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 the your way through the looking 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; their address and phone number appear below.

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 transgendered persons.

The American Educational Gender Information Service, Inc. (AEGIS), offers information and referrals to crossdressers and transsexual persons. AEGIS' excellent magazine, *Chrysalis Quarterly*, can be found at bookstores or by direct subscription.

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