

I'm paying £9000 for a Sex Change

From More Magazine - 9 February 2002

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It Happened to Me

*Within the next year, transsexual ***** (left), 22, will have a sex-change operation. She was born a boy, but ***** says she has always known she was meant to be a woman. This is her story..*

A really sexy man tried to chat me up on the train the other day. I was flicking through some papers and he asked me If I was an actress learning lines for a play. Whilst I was shocked at passing for an actress, I was more blown away by the fact that he truly believed I was a woman. Until last December I was living as a man and the pretence was killing me. Wearing men's clothing and going by my real name, *****, felt so wrong - from a really early age I knew I should have been born a woman, that I was a man trapped in the wrong body. It's such a profound feeling to be a transsexual that you know you're different before you even understand why.

As a child I was never a typical boy. Whilst the other lads would make dens and tear up the street on their BMXs, I had more in common with the girls. I'd hang out with them at school playing house and dressing dolls, I was only six at the time so my teachers and family weren't concerned and just put it down to me being sensitive. I was a lot more emotional than the other boys and forever bursting into tears, not because I was bullied for being girly, but because I knew there was something different about me - and I was terrified that they would find out.

It was such a heavy burden living with this secret but, rather than the feeling subsiding, it got stronger with age. Puberty was a nightmare. I was repulsed as my voice deepened and I grew facial hair. I was so distressed that instead of shaving my beard, I tweezered out the individual hairs to try to stop them growing back, I also waxed my legs and chest - anything to feel more feminine.

When I turned 16, I started shopping for women's clothes - well, I'd grab what I could from the rails at Topshop and pay before anyone noticed me. I'd then try them on in secret at home. The immediate relief I felt at being 'normal' was followed by disgust. In the mirror I looked like a freak, a boy in girl's clothes. I was so guilty and ashamed that I cut them up and threw them away. I now realise living this double life wouldn't have been so hard if I'd shared it with someone but I was too ashamed to admit what I was going through. Instead, I locked myself in my room, listening to music and poring over pictures of beautiful women in magazines, wishing I was like them.

I think my mum thought I was just being a typical teenager. She'd ask if I was OK. but what could I say? 'Er, well no, actually. I feel like a girl trapped in a boy's body.' I couldn't even speak to my close friends about it. Whilst they were discovering the opposite sex, I was too disgusted with my body - particularly the dangly bits - to even think about dating.

It wasn't until I was 19 and at university that I realised I wasn't just the kind of oddball guest who turns up on Jerry Springer. My course in software engineering gave me access to a computer and I'd spend my free periods surfing the internet reading stories about people like me. But while this was a revelation, the relief was short-lived. I was stressed out with coursework and revision, and the self-hatred constantly buzzing round my brain didn't help.

Working late one night. I felt like my head was about to cave in. I couldn't cope with my studies and as it started to get light. I cracked. Feeling suicidal, I lay down on my bed, gripped my pillow to my chest and cried. I was desperate for my pathetic life to be over, and I even prayed that I wouldn't wake up the next morning. But I did and as I rushed to the bathroom to get ready for lectures. I again broke down in tears hunting for something sharp to hurt myself with. I wanted to die. I still don't know what stopped me killing myself, but as I sank to the floor sobbing. I realised that my life meant so much more than a degree. I had to quit my course and come out as a transsexual.

The thought of opening up to my mum made me feel physically sick - I couldn't put the thoughts into words. So instead, I dressed in a black skirt and red top and called her to my room. She was obviously shocked to see me dressed in women's clothes, but she also looked relieved. Mum had spent years agonising over my depression and at last she understood. As we sat holding each other and crying. I promised to get help.

Whilst coming out to my family was the most positive step I had ever taken, the four months that passed before I saw a specialist were the slowest of my life. Knowing that I had come so far, but was still no nearer to becoming a woman, pushed me into a deeper depression. I would get up around 2pm each day, stay in my pyjamas and only eat when I felt close to passing out. But at least now I had support - my older brother would often take me to the pub and tell me how proud he was of what I was doing. He also said that although my dad didn't feel able to talk to me, he just wanted me to be happy.

When I finally saw a doctor at the London Institute last April, I managed to cram my lifetime into an hour. I know now that the genital defect I was born with - one of my testicles hadn't dropped because of the hormones in my mum's womb - was a contributing factor to my transsexualism. The doctor gave me a prescription for female hormones and I ran so hard to the chemist that my chest hurt. At last I could begin my life as a woman.

Taking the hormones has changed my life. I've developed breasts, the skin on my face has become softer and my body fat has redistributed giving me fuller, feminine hips. It's impossible not to notice the changes, so I've had to be more public about my transsexualism. My friends were brilliant but I was more nervous about telling my workmates.

I told my boss as we shared a lift to the office. Considering it's not the kind of news you expect on the way to work, he was incredibly supportive and encouraged me to tell my colleagues. I typed up an e-mail and I was terrified as I pressed the send button. Then I started getting replies saying how brave I was and wishing me luck. Just knowing that people cared brought a lump to my throat. It gave me the courage to change my name to ***** and to start wearing women's clothes. Finally I felt normal.

I now have to live for a year as a woman to prove that it's really what I want - and it is. Not for one second have I doubted my decision and if I could have the op tomorrow I would, That's why I've gone private. It can take up to five years to get a sex-change operation on the NHS, so I've opted to get things moving by paying £9,000, which I'm saving from my monthly salary. Knowing that the end is in sight has left me calmer and happier. Of course I'm scared, but only in the same way that I'd be worried about any medical procedure.

I get mood swings sometimes too because of the hormones, but they're nothing compared to the hell I went through when I was growing up. Being treated like a woman makes me happier than I've ever been in my life - as does my relationship.

I've been with *****, another transsexual, for six months now and we've just moved in together. I consider myself a lesbian and I count myself the luckiest woman alive to have met someone as wonderful as *****. She had the op last October so she knows exactly what I'm going through.

I'm just glad to be passing as a female. Men go out of their way to help me now, like opening doors for me. I've noticed them giving me the eye, which is really strange, and I've even had blokes whistle at me in the street. It makes me laugh but it also makes me finally feel complete - if only they knew what I've been through to become the woman they fancy.

Making the Change..

- Although there are no official figures for how many transsexuals there are in the UK, at least 5,000 people have had surgery over the last 30 years, while many thousands more are living as transsexuals.
- For those who do want to undergo the change, the process can take between 2 and 3 years. Each patient is initially assessed by a psychologist and then started on hormone therapy. This allows the body to start developing into that of the opposite sex.
- Transsexuals have to live for around two years in their new gender role, both at work and in a social situation, before being out forward for NHS surgery. Private treatment can be quicker and surgery costs from £4,000, plus additional costs for hormones.
- Male to female surgery is called vaginoplasty. The penis and testes are removed and then the skin moulded inside the body to shape a vagina. Phalloplasty is female to male surgery. Skin is taken from the forearm and constructed into a penis, which is then attached to the body.

- The law makes it difficult for transsexuals to do things like take out insurance and get married. But proposed legal changes will give transsexuals a birth certificate showing their new gender - a great step forward for people like *****.
- If you think you may be transsexual, your first step should be to see your GP. You may then be referred to a psychiatrist who will assess your condition.

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