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# Chapter One

This is the story of how I married a man who turned out to be a woman but still lived happily ever after. It isn't a story I expected to be telling, and sometimes I look around me and wonder at the strange normality of it all. Sometimes I look around me and wonder what the hell just happened. I didn't always believe that it would turn out how it has, but I hoped. This is the story of how I found out what was possible, if two people really loved each other. This is a love story.

I was born in 1962 in London, one of twin girls with an older brother of nearly two. In 1964 we were joined by my younger sister. My parents were creative and intelligent, but their lives had been blighted by an illness that hit my father a year after they married. Brain injured, paralysed and epileptic he was not an easy man to live with. That last sentence was a massive understatement, but you get the idea I'm sure.

We children were all born after the cataclysm of Dad's illness. I wandered off to teacher training college at 18, because some teacher told me I should and I couldn't think of a good answer. I met my first husband as he was in his final year at Cambridge. He was everything my father wasn't, quiet and logical, so I decided this was love and stuck to him like a limpet. Not one of my best decisions. I think he married me because I, or maybe his parents, told him to, and he couldn't think of a good answer. It was not a happy marriage, but two beautiful children came out of it, my son in 1989 and my daughter in 1993, so it wasn't a complete waste of time. In 1999 everything that could happen, happened. My older brother died when his motorcycle collided with a car on the M40, Rob, then 10, was finally diagnosed as autistic and my marriage ended, to rousing cries of "About time too" from all who loved me. 1999 was not a good year, I call it 'the year of vodka'. Turns out vodka doesn't resolve anything, and there was a day when I was on my way to

my daughter Ellie's school, that I considered driving into a lamp-post, thus, in my mind, simplifying everything. A split second later it occurred to me that if I felt that miserable it really was time to change things. So I did.

It was scary moving out of the family home with no certain future. The flat the children and I went into was in a bit of a state. The previous owners had sealed up every source of outside air in an attempt to keep warm. It hadn't worked, except the sealing up part, which was triumphant. The place was damp and rotting. I guess that's why I could afford it. Luckily for me by simply opening the windows and removing the wallpaper from the air bricks ( bless their determination), all signs of damp miraculously disappeared and I was left with a rather sweet home. I battled with the local authority to get funding for my son's education. That meant residential placements - schools specially focused on children like him. They were not in London. The one I found was just outside Southampton, an hour and a half's drive away. Expensive stuff and not the sort of thing any council can afford to hand out without being sure it's the right thing. Still, it is painful that in order to get help for your child, you must constantly admit what they can't do, why they are not normal and what a nightmare each day is. It goes against the grain. Like all mothers my default setting is boasting and pride. I thought when he was diagnosed, that I would be given a helpful pamphlet, 'How to raise your autistic child' and a list of useful phone numbers and addresses of schools. Ha Ha. For anyone else with a disabled child reading this, all together now - Ha.

Eventually though, everyone involved bit the bullet and I sewed labels into his socks and shirts and trousers. Of all the hurts involved in arriving on this planet with a disability, like a spaceman in a faulty spacesuit, it was his having to live with labels in his socks that made me cry. I took him to the residential school. I had been warned that long drawn out goodbyes did not help the difficulty of the situation, and I was to bring him to the house group, say a brisk goodbye and go. You have to understand that up to this point I had been my son's liaison with the world. His speech was hard to understand and he



was very nervous of strangers, new situations and change. I knew all the things he couldn't handle, and how to handle them. Going to a residential school was a huge step for him. As I hugged him goodbye and told him it would be fine he whispered in my ear, "I can't do this". Every maternal instinct screamed, get him out of here, don't abandon him, save him. But I knew if I really wanted to save him, from a life that only functioned through me, this was the only way. I left. It is the hardest thing I have ever done. Ever.

I still believe, however that it was the right thing. Life began to find an equilibrium. During term time, while he was away, I could work. I started a business called 'The Piano Lady'. I taught in schools, I ran choirs, I ran toddler music groups and worked with disabled children, including two groups of autistic children. On the last day of each term I would drive down to Southampton and collect him. The holidays, were a full time occupation, with no tea-breaks, very little sleep and definitely no going out. On the last day of the holidays, I would drive him back to Southampton, get home at about ten at night and then back to work the next day. It was rather unremitting, but I was able to support myself and my children. We bought furniture and plants for the garden. I felt pretty damn proud of myself.

I had been single for about three years and was, I liked to think, a self-sufficient free standing adult. I kept all my bills in a small wicker box called the picnic basket of destiny. When I felt brave enough I would open it and deal with the grown up things inside, like insurance documents, bank statements and special needs assessments.

It made me very happy that my kids were safe, my bills were paid and I was no longer married. I got to be me all the time. I can remember the power of that realisation. I think I had spent a lot of time trying to be what others expected of me, and I did it so successfully that I got lost somewhere. What I wanted, what might make me happy, these things were not only a mystery to me, I wasn't even thinking about them. On the first night I moved into the maisonette with my children I sat on the damp and smelly shag pile

carpet, I had no furniture at that point. I had tacked a sheet over the window and I had very little money in the bank. It was wonderful. No matter how difficult things were it would be me dealing with them, as me. When I had time to think of it, I was lonely, but mostly I was way too busy to think of it.

Then, one evening, a friend came round with a bottle of wine to watch a movie, her husband, she said, would join us later. When my son was at home this was my version of going out. We quickly got into a discussion about how lonely I must be. I explained that I was self-sufficient, free-standing, and had a picnic basket of destiny. I had no need of a man, and unless one was going to turn up in my living room, I had precious little chance of meeting one.

The doorbell rang, on cue, as I finished this hymn to feminine independence. It was her husband, and he'd brought a friend. I had actually met this friend a couple of times before. Once at their house, when we had all set the world to rights over tea and biscuits, and once when he turned up with her at a Salsa club. His father was French and his mother Spanish - it was a good mix. His name was Anthony and he was lovely, but he had never called so I assumed that was that.

Salsa dancing, I should mention, had been the once a week night out with my sister and a friend that kept me going. It was where I remembered what fun was, and how much I missed it. Like a long fused bomb it ticked away inside my marriage, not belonging to my married life but standing in direct contrast, highlighting everything that was wrong and missing. Fun, I eventually decided, should not be an optional extra. I think I also reached that conclusion about love. When I had to explain to my children that mummy and daddy were not going to be together anymore, I told them this: "There are some things you want, like chocolate and bicycles, and if you can't have them, you'll still be o.k. There are other things that you need, and you can't choose to live without them, like air and water and love." Not an optional extra.

Anyway, back to the movie night. There I stood letting them in at the front door. Friend's husband came in first saying, "I've brought



Anthony, I hope you don't mind." Then Anthony walked in. Well no, he stood in the doorway and I stood there and the universe shifted. It just did. It was as though he'd come home. We completely recognised each other. Technically it wasn't love at first sight, because I had already seen him on two separate occasions, but it was sudden and instant, so in my mind it qualifies. I know this sounds overly romantic. I am willing to admit that no orchestras played, and local wildlife remained stoically un-melodic. Nonetheless, we both experienced something very profound and after it everything was different.

He never left. We took up our life together as if it were the most natural thing in the world. To wait any longer would have been ridiculous. At the end of the working day he came home - our home. Two weeks later he proposed. I've no idea what took him so long. I had never been proposed to before. I had been involved in negotiations of 'isn't it time you asked me to marry you' which is not the same. This was the fantasy. Completely surprised but utterly sure. Lovely. Suddenly my life went from I am woman I am strong, to fairy tale. Instead of kindly pitying the hard slog of my life, people expressed wonder at my luck. I was engaged to a gorgeous fun and kind man who was seven years my junior. Classic tall dark and handsome.

Ellie seemed to find a bond with him immediately. He talked to her in a way that said he respected what she had to say. What she thought mattered. It wasn't an act to 'win her round' it was sincere and I think she sensed it. He was endlessly willing to help with homework and play sock football with her. We went on a day trip to Legoland. I knew we were getting a bit carried away with the sweets and souvenirs, but I hadn't been able to give my kids any of these things and suddenly it was all possible. It also meant I could look after my son while Anthony prevented Ellie from being left out. A lot of her childhood had been dictated to by her brother's needs. If he couldn't handle it, she couldn't do it. Parks, swings, swimming pools, crowds. She missed out on a lot. Even more amazingly, my son began to form a trust with Anthony that meant sometimes,

I could focus on Ellie. Anthony took his role as step-father to an autistic child very seriously. He came to all the meetings, found out as much as he could about autism and would jump down the throat of anyone who suggested that all that was needed was a firm hand to make all the problems disappear. I think my boy very quickly sensed that this was someone who was going to be there for him, to fight his corner and listen to what he had to say.

Anthony also had an encyclopedic knowledge of graphic novels (which I imagined were comics, but apparently not) and rock music. This proved a real winner, because my son was fascinated by these things, and I hadn't the first idea. I like jazz. Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong. Who the bass guitarist is in Iron Maiden? Sorry, not the faintest idea. Unlike me, Anthony could engage in conversations about best albums and gigs for hours at a time. Or the 'Sandman' series. Don't ask. I'm told it's very good.

He was learning how to be a parent at speed. Of course every now and then he'd make some rookie error. For instance, when passing under a low bridge at Legoland with a nine year old girl on your shoulders - duck. She got a bump on her head, nothing worse, but poor Anthony was mortified. She, once she'd got over the surprise of being walked into a bridge, thought it was hilarious, particularly Anthony's horror at his own stupidity. He promised not to spoil her, but he couldn't help himself. If he saw something cool and interesting that he thought she'd like, he just had to get it. Having spent a good few years wondering if there were enough coins down the back of the sofa to buy half a dozen eggs, I was happy to go along with his generosity. Suddenly life was just better.

One of the things that was a lot better was sex. To be fair it didn't have much to live up to so far, but even so there was an instant freedom between us, a sureness that either of us could express themselves without fear and would find acceptance. Anthony told me very early on that he got a big turn on from wearing women's underwear. Not anything I'd experienced before, but it worked for us and was happily embraced. Passionate, spontaneous and loving, why had I ever settled for less than this? He had a name for this



feminine part of himself. It didn't suit him, or indeed her, I told him I would call her Vicky. Victoria is my middle name and as we were two halves of the same soul, it seemed right.

Anthony was also infertile, it had been a great source of sadness to him initially. In his mid twenties he had gone to the doctor to assess his fertility after a relationship he had been in for several years ended. He had begun to question why there had never been so much as a false alarm over the years. The discovery that his sperm were all dead or deformed must have come as a shock to such a young man, but he saw no alternative but to accept his situation. He had come to terms with it long before we met. Though it may sound selfish, Anthony's infertility was a bonus to me, freeing me as it did from the worry of accidentally becoming pregnant.

At first my family were anxious that this was all too sudden and they were relieved that we intended to wait two years before actually marrying. We had all been through a great deal as a family, and we were very protective of each other. My father had eventually had to be sectioned to the Maudsley in South London, when the medication designed to control his epilepsy began to make him quite quite mad. We all had to go elsewhere, immediately. I remember walking away from the house with a carrier bag containing a nighty and a toothbrush. I was 19 and not entirely ready for the adult world. The housing association then decided we weren't 'making use' of the family home and took it away dumping anything we couldn't organize to remove within a week into a skip. Leaving home is not something any of us got to do, it sort of left us. It didn't make for very stable choices in our twenties, (see page 1: earlier decision to marry wrong person), though it did make us all excellent at de-cluttering. More importantly it made us a very tight knit and protective family. We looked out for each other.

The two years came and went and we were still blissfully happy, devoted to each other and to both children. All the hardness went out of life. If I had to face something challenging - usually more funding battles for special needs provision, Anthony was there. Calm, loving and helpful. I found myself having doors opened for



me, shopping carried. Every day began and ended with 'I love you'. Vicky was always there, but always private. We had a lot of fun, all the time. This, I decided, was how life was meant to be.

Looking back on those early days, I was already concerned about how dominant the feminine part of Anthony's personality might prove to be, but I believed it to be an aspect of who he was, a private bedroom aspect, not all of him. He was certainly kinder than any man I had ever known. There was a side of him that seemed in touch with a gentler nurturing gender, but he was also a determined provider and protector. My anxieties about this other person, this female identity that lurked in the secret background of our life, finally found words. I was determined that it couldn't ever be allowed to take over our family.

One day not long after the proposal I ended up asking Anthony for a guarantee that Vicky would never 'come out of the bedroom' because I needed a husband and my children needed a dad. Anthony said 'of course I understand'. I was hugely relieved and we left it at that. In retrospect, with the glorious advantage of hindsight and a much much greater understanding of the transgender experience, that was an impossible promise for Anthony to make, and an impossible promise for him to refuse to make. He promised it, I believe, because he desperately wanted to be able to live this life with no more complications to be faced. No coming out, no rejection and no surgery. He would suppress his feminine self and all would be well.

Logically it was the easiest path to take. Anthony didn't want to find himself somewhere in the middle of the gender spectrum, he, like the rest of us, expected to be just a boy or just a girl. The feeling that he was a girl had been contradicted by everyone around him ever since he could express the idea and he had tried to conform to that. Everyone around him confirmed he was he. When he looked in the mirror, there was a he. He had fallen in love with me and we were the happiest of families. Surely that must mean he was a perfectly normal heterosexual man. Why couldn't this be the truth? And yet and yet.

I was blissfully unaware of all these inner torments. For me, he was clearly a man and he loved me. I was happy. My sister had been worried that I must have presented the less nutty version of myself, until she met Anthony and saw we were both as quirky as each other. Everyone could see how happy we were, how secure the children felt and how right this was. We were a golden couple, ideally matched. An infertile man who had finally found himself with a ready made family against all expectation, and a single mother who had suddenly found love and care when she really had given up on the idea. How lucky were we? Smugness may not be a very noble sentiment, but I allowed myself odd moments of thinking, 'well, this IS going better than expected'.

We were married on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2005 at the Church of the English Martyrs in Streatham. We had - good Lord - seven bridesmaids and my twin sister as matron of honour. Trumpets and flowers, Salsa bands and dinner for a lot of people. It was all very wonderful and we had had a great deal of fun planning it. Ellie even wore a miniature version of my dress. All our friends came and all my family, except my son, because a wedding is the gathering together of all the things that would have phased him at that time - crowds, noise and and me not focussing my attention exclusively on him. Although Anthony's father had died in 2002 and most of his family lived in Canada and couldn't come, his mother and her cousin were there and the church was full.

The party that followed was everything we hoped for. It was a beautiful day. Our first dance was to a classic spanish love song, 'Besame' it means 'kiss me'.

Besame, besame mucho  
Como si fuera esta la noche  
La ultima vez

Besame, besame mucho  
Que tengo miedo a perderte  
Perderte despues



Kiss me, Kiss me so much  
As though tonight might be  
The last time

Kiss me kiss me so much  
Because I'm afraid of loosing you  
Afterwards.

Everything was perfect. We both felt rescued from half lives. Where before relationships had been fraught and stressful, ours was relaxed and happy. I had no thought in my head of how meaningful the words of that song would become to me as our lives unfolded.

It lasted for about four years before something began to change. It was a subtle something, and it had nothing to do with how much we loved each other. That, through everything, has never been an issue. How we felt about each other on that first night, standing in the doorway and knowing that everything had changed, that is the truth of our love. Honestly, undying love can be a bit of a nuisance at times. Something else had changed. Anthony seemed to be carrying a heavier and heavier burden. Where once he had been relaxed and endlessly playful, now he seemed sadder and more stressed by daily life. Everything challenged him. He just stopped smiling. I couldn't work out what had gone wrong, as far as I could see we were on exactly the same path we had started out on. Nothing had changed and yet everything was different. He was obviously dealing with something terribly painful. I needed to understand and I wanted to help, but most of all I wanted to make it go away.

We talked about his childhood and about his relationship with his father. We talked especially about his transvestite behaviour. He told me how he had gone out, years ago, in a dress to a tea shop and met a female friend. He told me how girlfriends in the past had rejected him when he had told them about his desire to dress as a female. He also began to talk about his belief that this was more than just a part of Anthony. This Vicky, this was who he really was. Anthony wanted to talk more and more about this 'feminine' part of

his personality and his desire to express it. I remember saying to him that as far as I could understand it, he had a male body but a female brain. Something must have happened while he was developing in the womb, but the bottom line was, he had come out male. Very sad and everything, bad luck and all that, but there was no acceptable solution, or at least one that I felt ready to even contemplate. It was the often used description of transsexuals as the 'woman trapped in a man's body'. Best place for her, I thought.

Although I was on the surface calmly discussing these things with him, in my head panic was rising. The news that he had once sat in a tea shop in a dress, shocked me. This was meant to be a sexual game, how had it expressed itself by sitting in a shop chatting about the weather and drinking tea? What was being described didn't fit the explanation I had in my head. What was being described was going to change my world and I didn't want my world to change, it had already changed once and it was perfect, it didn't need further alterations. I convinced myself that everything would be fine as long as I could 'control' this part of him. Though between the two of us, I felt at ease with the feminine version of Anthony, it was, as far as I was concerned, still Anthony. What ever games we played he was a man so that meant I was a straight woman. Nothing to frighten the horses. I was adamant this was a private pleasure not for anyone else's consumption, certainly not in front of the children. I told him we needed him to be him, that this female aspect was just going to have to keep itself under wraps. He had married me and become the children's 'step-dad, that was the deal and that's what he must do. He agreed.

He agreed to something that he had no more power to control than I did, but I don't think he really understood that any more than I did. These were the foundations of a great deal of unhappiness that we were going to have to deconstruct before we could make our way forward. I wish I had known then the absolute futility of trying to make someone be something they're not, but I didn't. That particular life lesson was just beginning.



There is a parallel here with my son's diagnosis of autism. I knew, from a very early age, maybe a year, maybe less, that there was something different about my lovely boy. I worried and fretted about his development, his inability to hold his head up, or sit upright without tumbling over. His incredible sleeplessness, and his distress, his violent screaming distress, at all sorts of things, especially unexpected things, and choice. Health visitors and doctors reassured me he was 'going through a phase' and that he would 'grow out of it'. In my heart of hearts I knew that whatever this was it was a permanent part of my lad and no amount of growing would take him magically out of it. But I so wanted to believe they were right. I ignored those nagging doubts and trusted it would get better. It got worse, of course, why wouldn't it? He's autistic, it's not nits. There is no shampoo for this one. In retrospect I wish I had known earlier, had got him the right help earlier, maybe it would have spared him some of the awful suicidal depression he went through, and maybe not.

The parallel then, is that, deep down, I knew that what Anthony was telling me about himself, was not some temporary delusion and I was not, no matter how much he loved me, going to be able to make him not be this. That knowledge though, was deep deep down. It was a knot in the stomach, an unspoken, un-worded fear. Back in the main world, I wasn't having it and I kidded myself I had been firm but fair. Vicky would stay under wraps. Problem solved.

To watch someone you love slip away from you is of course, heartbreaking, but not being able to talk to anyone about it is worse. I felt so miserable. I couldn't see any way forward and yet I was too ashamed to talk to anyone. I didn't want anyone to know that my beautiful handsome husband thought he was part female and fantasized about having breasts. I didn't want to know it. If I'm being really really honest, and there seems little point in writing this if I'm not going to be honest, I didn't find the idea of my lover having breasts repellent, it was just the idea of anybody else knowing that that was what was going on. What others would know about our relationship and our sex life and how they might judge it, seemed

extremely important to me. I know that was hypocritical but the part of it that was worst in my mind, was the invasion of my privacy.

For some people privacy is a minor issue and for others it is a medium issue. For me it has always been THE issue. I'm not sure when I got so protective of my every thought. I could not have written this book five years ago, because I simply wouldn't have been willing to share any of it. Not a word. Like a cast iron body suit, privacy, not sharing my feelings, my true feelings at any rate, had always been my survival mechanism. I was the worst, and the best person, to find myself in a situation that blew my absolute need for privacy out of the water. It was good for me and it needed to happen but it hurt. I clung to my privacy like a drowning man to a cast iron body suit, with nearly the same result.

So I didn't share this huge fear. The awful knowledge that my whole life with Anthony was going to turn out to be a sham, that I was heading for another failed marriage and no one was going to know about it until it was too late. There wasn't going to be any helpful advice. Who knew about this stuff? I invested a great deal of energy worrying about how stupid everyone would think I was for being so happy when the whole thing turned out to be a mistake. Surely, they would say, you must have known? How could you marry someone without understanding something so profoundly central to them? I didn't envisage any compassion, only derision. My friends would be sad to know how little I expected of them. It is, of course, always about the self and the derision was self inflicted, nobody else was laughing. How could they? Nobody else knew.

Anthony and I had a conversation just before Christmas of 2008 in which it all came to a head. Anthony wanted to talk about Vicky, about the pleasure it gave him. It made me anxious because this 'alternative' person, as I saw her, seemed to be taking over every spare moment. I asked him the question I didn't really want to know the answer to. Would he, actually, be happier as Vicky, as a woman? Did he not want to be my husband or my kids step-dad? These two things, I made it very clear to him, were mutually exclusive. Choose. He couldn't answer. I was devastated, I wept, I shouted,



I demanded, but I couldn't bear what that silence meant. I knew something was happening that I wouldn't be able to stop. It felt as though I was standing on the smooth snowy surface of an avalanche about to break free. Why would I think I could stop an avalanche? Understanding that it couldn't be stopped took me a long time.

We got through Christmas without mentioning that conversation once. It was as though the thing I had asked for had happened. That unanswered question had never been. This was the perfect scenario, the way I had wanted it. everything as it had promised to be on our wedding day. But where before I had relaxed confidently into my reality, now I felt like it was the last dance on the Titanic. This wonderful happy perfect relationship had hit an iceberg and no one but us knew there was a problem. The question was not would it sink, the question was, had we got any lifeboats and would we all fit? We just stopped talking about it and I hoped it would go away.

Then, one night in January of 2009, lying in bed together, his arms wrapped tight around me as he always did, Anthony said "I can't do this anymore". I knew exactly what he meant but I desperately didn't want to. I asked him "What?", daring him to say the unsayable, but he said it anyway. "I can't be Anthony, it's not who I am. I'm a woman, this isn't my right body. I look in the mirror and I see this male face and this male body and it's not me".

The shock froze me. The fear locked down. I calmly told Anthony that we needed to deal with this mental health problem. These thoughts were irrational, he was a man. "Look in the mirror for God's sake. I understand you want to be a woman, but you're not. If you make yourself look like a woman, I will leave. That will be the end. If you really love me, you won't do this. If you really love me you won't be this. End of discussion". Certainly not the response Anthony needed but it was my trump card, my last ditch attempt to make this not be. Was I willing to blackmail him into living the rest of his life 'wrong' on the inside as long as it worked for me? Was this what it would mean to really love me? At that moment I was not thinking of Anthony's needs at all. I was thinking of what I wanted to be the truth and what would be the simplest truth for my

children. I was angry, so very angry, that he had even mentioned the possibility of exposing my children to anything other than unending happiness. I wasn't thinking at all really, I was terrified.

The next morning we did all the normal things. We made breakfast, fed the cat and got Ellie into school as though everything was normal. As soon as we were alone though, the discussion started again. Anthony spoke of his need to express his true self, his feminine self. I was adamant that could not be allowed to happen. Maybe when Ellie had left home, got through university, maybe I might allow it, but not now. We talked about how long he had felt like this. That was a shock. It turned out his first experiences had been as a very small child, not understanding why he couldn't dress like the other girls, or why he had to go into the boy's line at infants school. He had secretly dressed all his life. As a tiny child he had put on his grandmother's nighty and curled up next to her in bed. I don't know if she found that alarming or sweet. I found it alarming. Again I was confronted with the idea that this was nothing to do with a sexual game, it had to be something at the very core of Anthony. I had misunderstood entirely.

When Anthony was 21 his father had found and read his diary in which he had described his belief that he should have been born female. His father confronted him and told him 'stop this nonsense, you are a man, be a man'. In retrospect I see how similar my own reaction was, but at the time, though I was repelled by the cruelty of such a response, I saw no connection. His father had been cruel and selfish, I was just asking for what I had been promised. He was wrong, I was right.

I felt angry and self righteous. One of the things that made me most angry was that in the year before we had met, after his father had died, Anthony had looked on the internet for information about sex change operations. Why hadn't he told me? His answer was quite simply that when we met he believed with not a little relief, that he couldn't be a woman, because he loved me so much and really wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. He had dodged the bullet at the last moment. Meeting me meant he was



just a man who liked stockings and all the rest could be packed away and never looked at again. It reminded me of a story I heard about Ghandi in his later life. He admitted to allowing his young female helpers to share his bed in order to 'test his resolve to be celibate'. What, I wondered, happened if he failed? Anthony's belief that he could suppress his feminine self I felt, had been quite a gamble to take with someone else's future.

Unable to say what I wanted without crying or shouting, I wrote Anthony a letter. It explained that though I respected his desire to be a woman, he was not a woman. Furthermore, he was a 6'2" muscular and handsome man and would never be able to look like anything but a bad transvestite, opening himself and those with him to ridicule or worse. What did he think this would do to the children, was he seriously going to turn up to parents evening in heels and lipstick? Though I respected his belief that he was in some invisible sense, female, for all intents and purposes he was male. Tough, get on with it. He could not do this to us. I would not allow him to. I could not have made it plainer the utter lack of support I was offering, but, I said, I still loved him, completely...except for the female bit.

It is not a great letter, it does not cover me in glory. I expect if the transgendered community were giving out supportive family awards, this would not feature. I'm not proud of it and I wish I hadn't written it, but I did. To be fair, over the next few months we both said some pretty awful things to each other.

Afraid as I was of the consequences of Anthony's beliefs, I couldn't help but feel compassion for the man, for the person that I loved. What must it be like to look in the mirror and see the wrong face, the wrong body, the wrong gender? How awful must it be to be rejected again and again, just because you say, 'this is who I really am'? How scary must it be, how desperate must you be to risk losing your partner, your step children, maybe even all your family and friends, just for admitting your truth? I was pulled violently between this compassion and the desire to keep Anthony unchanged. Within a single hour I would veer wildly between thinking I could accept

this and live with Vicky and screaming in my head that I wanted my husband, my Anthony and nothing else. It was exhausting and though I wasn't telling anybody that there was anything wrong, I think the strain began to show. There was no balance in our life anymore, everything was a day to day struggle, a mixture of intense and distressing arguments and housework, paying the bills, life. It was exhausting and miserable, for both of us.

At this very early stage telling no one else about these discussions was part of my strategy. I hoped that I would be able to guide him back to being my husband and no one would ever need to know anything about it. The one person I was talking to was God. I was raised an atheist but had, much as come to think of it, Anthony had described his experience, always been aware of something else that didn't fit that view of the world. I made various exploratory forays into local churches through my teens and finally was baptized in my early twenties. My mother called me the 'white sheep' of the family, but respected my faith, even if it baffled her. So praying had always been a silent part of my adult life.

I found myself in church the next Sunday praying silently for guidance. 'I don't want a hint or a sign or some general sense of well-being' I prayed, 'I want actual guidance, just tell me what to do God, right now, right here', not very polite but to the point. I heard the words in my head, 'Love is the answer'. My voice but not from me. That's how it felt. I knew it was true and it seemed the right piece of information, but a nagging part of me felt much like the recipients of the answer to the question of life the universe and everything in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Forty-two. Great, wonderful, how do I use that information? How does knowing 'Love is the answer' help me decide what I should do next? Still, it is. I believe, the truth and I've kept that thought with me ever since.

I was determined to maintain the control. Every sign of slight femininity, his longer hair, shirts that looked too blouse like, I would jump on. We had agreed, I would tell him, you won't do that. It has to be private. Nothing that a teenager could pick up on.



Nothing. Most days the discussion became a full blown screaming argument. Anthony didn't seem able to understand why I couldn't simply accept who Vicky was. Anthony was just a mask, a cover, not the real person. This was who I had really fallen in love with. If I really loved him, I would love her. If I really loved her, I would love him. That challenge flew back and forth between us again and again.

We quarrelled again about his hair. I told Anthony it was too long, the time had come to get it cut. Women have short hair too I reasoned, why couldn't he be one of those women? Trouser wearing short haired. I might as well have added beard growing and manly. Anthony was distraught, he couldn't see how such a request was accepting his truth or even trying to accept it. I went on though, determined that I was winning the argument. He looked ridiculous with long hair, and wanting to look like that was ridiculous, he was embarrassing his step-daughter and me. Finally I screamed at him that he was himself ridiculous and selfish and cruel. Anthony ran into the bathroom and I, determined to have the last word, followed him in. He had taken a pair of nail scissors from the bathroom cabinet and he began hacking away at his hair, tears streaming down his face. And I saw it, properly for the first time. At last I understood it. The real agony of this human being. This person that looked like a man, but was, really was at the deepest most important level, a woman. A woman who had spent forty years trying to suppress something that wasn't his fault, no. That wasn't her fault. I recognised the person I loved was in terrible trouble and all I had been thinking was, why is he doing this to me and why won't he stop? I knew that I loved this person, that had never been in doubt, but what I hadn't understood, what I hadn't truly seen until this moment was that at some level at some degree, this person really was as female as me and if I really loved her I had to help her sort herself out.

I cannot imagine what it must be like to be transgendered. It is not imagining how I would feel if I wanted to be a man, it is imagining how I would feel if on the inside I was exactly myself as I am today but had a male body. A body that didn't have anything to do with the real me. I'm female. Everyone who's ever met me knows

it, no one questions it. I don't have to do anything to be recognised as female, it just happens. How would it be if everyone told me I was male, reacted to me as male and laughed at me if I suggested otherwise. How would that feel? I don't know but I imagine you'd want the people who loved you to at least believe you. If they really loved you.

I wish I could tell you that I then became a caring and supportive partner and Vicky approached the rest of her journey to become her true self with generosity and compassion, but that really would be a fairytale.



## Chapter Two

There are many many different kinds of people on the spectrum of gender. Most of us, sit neatly at either end, male or female. The few thousand left over, and it is only a few thousand who have come out and sought treatment, express a myriad of feelings about their gender. Some are quite clear that their body simply got it wrong. Took a left fork instead of a right somewhere in the womb and delivered the wrong gender body. There are many more male to females than female to males. I don't know why, these things seem to be a combination of genes and hormones and luck. I should make it clear that I am talking only about male to female transexuals, because I'm married to one and those are the transexuals I know. Others find themselves with a random selection of male and female body parts. Some of them may still feel very strongly they are a certain gender, others that they are a third sex, not provided for in the world of form filling, or toilet facilities. Whatever these people experience about gender, everyone I've ever spoken to has been very clear that they knew what they were as soon as they knew what a boy and a girl were. They knew which camp they belonged in and had lived with the dismay and confusion of being put in the wrong one all their lives.

Others feel drawn to express a feminine side whilst utterly sure they are male. I once met a very nice transvestite who had gone the Marilyn Monroe route. When I asked him about his gender he said, I think a little offended, that he was only Marilyn with the clothes and the wig and the make-up, take that away and he was a bloke. Still looked fabulous though! He just liked expressing that part of himself. Vicky, I remember thinking, was Vicky naked. It had nothing to do with what she was wearing. That is not to dismiss the experience of transvestites. Certainly to some it is a sexual thrill and that's an end of it. And why not? Sex should be thrilling. But to many others it is a necessary expression of a real

part of themselves. Not all of themselves, but important for their sense of well-being and calm. There is a joke in the transgendered community, it goes: What's the difference between a transvestite and a transexual? Answer: about 4 years. Well, there's some truth in that for some people. Certainly transvestism can be the opening gambit in coming to understand that you are in fact in the wrong gender body, but it's by no means true for all. If you catch your husband in your knickers it's not a foregone conclusion that he is really she. What I have found out over the last few years is, if you want to know someone's gender, ask them, they are the best judge.

Vicky had told me she was Vicky in January 2009. I was still convinced that this would be a long drawn out process and that nobody else was going to need to know anything about it. I still found myself swinging violently between loving support and despairing anger. One moment wondering what life would be like with a woman, and the next fantasizing about escaping and starting a new life on my own away from the inevitable ridicule that would follow a woman who thought she had found her fairytale but had ended up married to a transexual. It was the ridicule and judgement that frightened me, not the actual life. If I had been on a desert island with Vicky, I don't think I would have had a problem.

We did have a problem though. Vicky was miserable. Probably suicidally so if we hadn't done anything, but we did do something, so thank God we didn't have to go down that road. Many transgendered people, unable to square the circle of their reality and what seems possible, do tragically end up committing suicide. Statistically a much higher proportion than the rest of mankind. Some will never have told anyone of their suffering until it's too late. What a sad waste of life, just because it wasn't average.

The first stage, we decided, was that Vicky, I still called her Anthony unless we were alone, should see her G.P and get a referral for psychological assessment. Vicky found out about the clinic which ran out of Charing Cross hospital. It treated Gender Dysphoria, or unhappiness about one's gender. It's an odd term. It covers a very very wide spectrum of people, but some of the people



it covers are transsexual men and women, who are rather reasonably dysphoric about their apparent gender, as it is mismatched with their actual gender - a thing defined not by a particular set of genitalia, but by their own self-knowledge. It seems odd that such people are treated as having a problem of unhappiness when they have a physical condition. There is, as far as I'm aware, no cancer dysphoria unit. What this comes down to, is funding. Transsexuals are treated as having a mental health issue which is resolved with a physical operation. The problem is, the minute you start trying to define a set of physical parameters to describe the condition you will inevitably leave someone on the outside, no longer qualifying for treatment. At least this way no one gets turned away.

Transition is the journey a transgendered person makes to function full time as the gender they know themselves to be, rather than the one that was mistakenly assigned to them at birth. I understood all this, and I never wanted to be the kind of person who would want to stop someone else being themselves. All I can say is, it is different when it's your husband. My vision of this journey was one spread out over decades. Vicky's trip to the doctor's was my first experience of the high speed ride that transition can be. She came back excited, almost euphoric. Her G.P had certainly been taken aback by her request, but had managed after talking to the other doctors at the surgery, to find the correct protocol. As soon as she had had two psychiatric assessments to ensure she wasn't suffering from schizophrenia or some other mental health issue, she could begin hormones and her breasts would begin to grow. A lot of transgendered people feel pretty offended at the suggestion they should undergo psychiatric assessment before accessing the treatment they know perfectly well they need. The trouble is, at this initial stage -gender dysphoria- there are a few people who are genuinely suffering from mental illness, who need other help which has nothing to do with aligning their gender. Obviously it's important to redirect those people to the right treatment for them, but it does have the unwanted side effect of making transgendered people feel as though, once again, they might be 'making it up'.

Vicky was just happy and excited to be following the path that would eventually lead to her full physical transition.

I was devastated. No, I was furious. We hadn't even told anyone that she was anything but Anthony, and any minute now Anthony was going to have breasts. Also Vicky said she needed to start living 'in role' dressing as a woman, changing her bank details and driving license to Victoria. This is also a very important part of the transitional journey. Some find the cold hard reality of transition, or living as a woman who looks and sounds like a man, just too hard. Sometimes they start but the reaction and anger of family and friends is just too much to bare. In their fantasy version, transition is the thing that is going to make everything all right. In reality, at least for a time, it adds a huge extra pile of troubles and does nothing to dissipate the ones you came in with. Some people give up at first, but then find that, difficult as it is, and what ever the cost in relationships and painful surgery, they just have to do it. It takes a lot of courage to sort yourself out when you're transgendered.

I told her I needed more time. A lot more time. Well, I may have shouted that actually. I shouted a lot. I felt like I was fighting for my children's happiness, for my world that was crumbling around me at speed. It is easy from the perspective of partner to say, 'wait, not yet, its not the right time' but for the transgendered person who has finally reached the point , after a whole lifetime, of saying 'I can't do this anymore' waiting another half hour is too much.

How long must another few months be for a woman who has been forced to live as a man for 40 years. I got it, really I did, but I truly needed more time to come to terms with this new reality. The strength of her need to move forward and the very real need I felt for more time to understand this shuddered between us like a steel girder about to snap.

Vicky couldn't slow down though, no matter how much I wept and shouted and begged and bullied, no matter how much I said don't do this, the avalanche crashed on. And all through this, we still loved each other and felt lost when the other wasn't there. We were also trying to keep as much normality as we possibly could for the



children and for our own sanity. I knew by this time, that I wanted to stay and somehow, somehow make this work. That sounds like a very positive statement, but maybe the more accurate truth is I knew I didn't want to leave and therefore somehow had to make it work. No matter how strange things were, the thought of not being a couple anymore made no sense. I couldn't visualize it. Although some things were changing, other much deeper things were the same and I couldn't and wouldn't walk away from them. Is that, I wonder, how my mother felt when my father's illness changed him so radically just a year into their marriage? In a strange mirror image of my own situation, her husband still looked like himself, though paralyzed down his right side. His mind though was very damaged. My mother sometimes described it as though all his faults and failings had been magnified by the damage to his brain, and which of us could come out of such a process as a tolerable human being? She stayed with him because she refused to believe he was gone, and she loved him. I wanted to stay because I too could not believe the person I had fallen in love with had gone, evaporated. Don't judge a book by its cover, or as the lovely child of a transgendered woman remarked, 'same sweetie, different wrapper'. Intellectually I understood, but my heart was a long way behind.

We hadn't told Ellie yet. I dreaded it, but she had to know what was going on, or one day she would bump into Vicky and that would be a hundred times worse. It was nearly her sixteenth birthday and we agreed we would wait until after that before I would sit down and talk to her. Vicky's euphoria seemed to protect her from the awfulness that was unfolding around her. All she could see was the wonderful prize of freedom just ahead. She felt hurt that I couldn't see how wonderful it was. My distress was disloyal. My requests for her to slow down were unfeeling. If I really loved her then surely I would support her. I felt just as let down, just as confused. Why couldn't she see how hard this was? If she really loved me, she would slow down. Surely she could see how crucial that was. One thing I knew by now though. If I was actually embarking on this journey with Vicky, I couldn't do it alone. I needed someone to

talk to, someone who wouldn't be hurt by my inability to rejoice. Eventually everyone would have to be told. That was a huge task ahead and every step off it frightened me, and this was the sort of thing I couldn't believe anyone had ever had to tell anyone before. How on earth do you start such a conversation? I remembered the old joke of the sergeant told to inform a soldier his mother had died. "All those with a mother still living step forward...not so fast Perkins". Maybe I could try, "All those without a transexual sister in law step forward...". Brutal but effective.

The first person I told was my twin sister. We were driving down to visit our dad, who was in a nursing home. After years of very extreme behaviour he had mellowed into a sweet slightly bonkers old man. His speech was not good and he was in a wheelchair. Both these things made him considerably easier to deal with than the mobile talking version. That may sound callous, but trust me, it was an improvement. It was possible to feel closeness, even love for this version of dad. Every now and then he would give you one of his knowing winks that meant, 'you think I don't know but I do'. What he thought I thought he didn't know was part of his own private madness and involved a lot of numbers scribbled on any piece of paper he could lay his hands on. But it didn't matter. Part of his madness was that he didn't seem to know his son was dead. That he was protected from the awful pain of losing his precious son, was an unexpected side effect of his illness, an illness that had taken so much from him over the years. At least it gave him that. So, driving down to see dad, with my twin sister as captive audience, I chose my moment. I was glad I couldn't look at her as I drove, it was easier to tell her this extraordinary thing without watching her reaction.

I started by saying that recently Anthony had been going through some very tough personal stuff and that we had finally got to the bottom of it. My sister said she had noticed something was up and had wanted to talk to me but I'm such a private person. Well, yes, whatever I imagined about my powers of deception, my sister had been on to that one for years. The moment had come, I'd said there was something up, now I had to say what. 'Anthony is a transexual



and he is really a she. She is called Victoria and she is going to transition over the next few years. She told me six months ago and you're the first person I've said a word to.' If I'd been writing for a soap opera, I'd have been sacked for implausible plot lines. My sister was, at first, speechless, then amazed and then very very worried. I focused on the road.

It was a relief to be able to say these things out loud, but it also made it real, in a way it hadn't been just talking to Vicky about it. Now there was no way back. All hope of talking Vicky out of being this, of keeping my life with Anthony, was gone. We talked about the best way to handle this for the whole family. Especially the children and Vicky's mum. My sister was very concerned at the burden this would put on my children, especially as they had both already been through so much. She had hoped it would be plain sailing from here on. I agreed with her, It was all very sensible stuff. We also came up with a time frame for transition. I should ask Vicky to wait until Ellie had left home before she appeared in anything but jeans and a T-shirt. Dressing 'more androgynously' was code for no dresses no lipstick. It was also code for, 'don't actually do this - we'll pretend we accept you as long as you show no signs of being anything but Anthony'. I thought it sounded a terrific plan.

Vicky was very pleased that I had told my sister, but a bit put out that I hadn't told her in advance that's what I was planning. It wasn't the last time that I was to come up against the gap between Vicky's dream of how things would happen and my actions. To be honest though, I hadn't been planning it. The moment was just right so I spoke. Was that selfish? She was my sister after all, but then it was Vicky's condition not mine. I was very attached to being in control of every aspect of our future life together. It was as though I had decided Vicky had forfeit the right to make any decisions by coming out as transgendered. Everything that followed would be as I dictated it, because she owed it to me. She had dropped this huge challenge in my lap and the price for my staying would be a lifetime of doing everything exactly as I wanted.

It wasn't just that this idea would have changed our marriage into punishment and compensation, not a particularly healthy way of life, it would never have worked. That was one of the many dead ends I tried going down before finding the real way forward.

In April, tired of waiting for the NHS to spring into action, Vicky discovered a private clinic in London that could give her the psychiatric assessments she needed, the counselling I wanted her to have and most excitingly from her point of view, the hormones that would get her physical transition under way. This didn't mean she was giving up on the NHS entirely, and at least what she was doing was a lot safer than the route many transgendered people took. The hormones needed for transition and other drugs that promised miraculous effects, were all available through the internet, and some took it upon themselves to self medicate, without any checks or blood tests to see what these hormones were doing to them. It was a dangerous gamble that I am glad Vicky, even at her most impatient, was not tempted to take.

About this time she asked if I would join an online support group for partners of transgendered people. The website was populated by all variations of gender dysphoric people. Transvestites, transexuals, those who felt themselves to be of a third sex, neither wholly male or female, and, I guess, guys who just liked wearing a frock every now and then and wanted to find out where the best thigh length boots size 10 could be found. Reading a few posts very quickly revealed how similar many peoples experience had been to Vicky's. Early childhood awareness seemed the most common factor. Some were out and proud, living their lives fully as women, others dressed secretly when their wives were out, or had already divorced and found themselves in bitter battles to be allowed anywhere near their children. Some were happy, many were suffering great loneliness and anxiety. The posts were on the whole, painfully honest and pretty hard reading.

The partners board was off limits to the transgendered members, the idea being that partners could let off steam and get support



from others who had found themselves unexpectedly married to a woman. So I posted:

*Hi I am Emma, the wife of Victoria C. She's been posting quite a lot on Angels, so I expect some of you know her already. Anyway Victoria told me of her true transgendered nature just over six months ago and of her desire to transition and live as the woman she truly is. I knew Vicky enjoyed cross dressing from almost the beginning of our relationship, and I've always been fine with that, but, the desire to transition was a bit of a surprise (much like hurricane Katrina was a bit windy!).*

*It has taken time, lots of discussion, lots of tears, a bit of shouting, but we are still here and heading forward together. We haven't told my two children from my first marriage yet, but we are getting ready to - GCSEs first! So by summertime Vicky will be well and truly 'out'.*

I waited a few days and then, there were replies. I was at last in touch with at least one other woman who had been down this path and survived. She was incredibly kind and spoke of so many feelings and fears that I recognised. She was also further down this road than we were. Her partner, she no longer said husband, was getting ready for the final surgery, in which male genitalia would become female.

Let me at this point make one thing clear. In gender reassignment surgery - GCS - NOTHING gets chopped off. OK? I'm sure that any man imagining this process has nightmarish visions of his manhood being lopped off and dumped in a bin. Well that's not what happens. If you are eating, look away now. In the UK this is the most common method. The erectile tissue is removed, the 'tube' is inverted. Nerve endings from the head of the penis form the clitoris. The testes are removed and the skin over them used to create labia. The end result is very convincing. Every effort is made to create a fully functioning vagina, repositioning, but not cutting, the nerves. Sometimes, because everyones body is a bit different, more tissue

has to be moved about, and the more you cut and reattach, the greater the risk of tissue rejection. The urethra is also repositioned to allow a more female form of peeing and the end result should be indistinguishable from any other woman's vagina.

It was unexpected to discover that I needed to remind Vicky that most women don't spend their coffee breaks comparing labia size. Another side effect maybe of being raised male, where compare and contrast seems to be the law of the land. I suppose if you've never been in a women only changing room, it's possible you wouldn't be aware of the different atmosphere. Competitive discussions about vagina depth just don't happen. Then again, when most of us discovered our bodies, we were considerably younger and 'you show me yours and I'll show you mine' was quite normal. I'm supportive of Vicky's journey of self discovery, but there, I very much draw the line.

Plenty can go wrong and it will knock you out for months not weeks and you can end up at the end of it all with no sensation at all. Not something one would do on a whim. Not something, really, I think a man would do, but then, a transgendered woman isn't a man. Some transgendered women don't ever have this operation, sometimes because they can't for medical reasons, and sometimes because they don't want to take the risk. They too, are not men.

It was a huge relief to be able to talk about how things were going to someone who understood from the inside. It was also rather worrying to note that this partners board had a membership of about three. If continuing partners of transgendered women ever had a get together, clearly a phone box would be adequate, if not a little roomy.

What had happened to all the other wives? Through the online support groups I had gradually come to see that there were dozens of other women who had married a man who turned out to be a transexual woman. For the most part they formed a huge statistic of sadness. For most of these women the discovery that their partner was transgendered meant, quite suddenly, that they had lost their husband as much as if he had died. Transition meant the



very real physical end of their husband and they found themselves married to a woman. They were heterosexual women who suddenly found themselves in a same sex relationship. For the vast majority of them there could be no happy ending. The online forum was full of transgendered women bemoaning their wives' unwillingness to change, to 'become' lesbian. It was as unrealistic a dream as a transgendered woman 'becoming' a man, but they didn't seem able to see it. You are what you are. The heart wants what the heart wants. The result was often, but not always broken families. Some couples managed to keep their love and friendship, whilst acknowledging that the physical relationship was over, but I don't think they're a huge group either. It wasn't anyone's fault. I don't think any of these people went into their marriages thinking they would get a nice family set up going and then blow it apart by transitioning. I don't think any of their wives thought, I could be in a same sex relationship, but I won't out of spite. Still, it wasn't hugely encouraging to see the tiny number of transgendered marriages that survived intact. It did make me realize that we were lucky. Vicky hadn't found that she now wanted to be with a man, and I was just as happy to be with a woman. What were the odds of that outcome? Pretty small I think.

Sometimes Vicky and I would go out for the evening to central London, and she would be able to dress up and wear make-up. I found it very very hard. I knew I had to try and get used to this new reality. In theory I would convince myself it was no big deal. If I chose not to be bothered by peoples looks or comments, they would bounce off me. My torments though came from inside myself. I could still see my husband underneath the lipstick. If I held her hand, it was his hand. I found that very difficult and I would sometimes look away so that I could imagine I was still with Anthony, eventually looking back to see Vicky and experiencing the pain of losing 'him' all over again. Why I kept banging my head against that particular brick wall, I can't tell you. I just wasn't ready to let go of 'him' yet, and holding hands was a way of holding on.

I rarely did hold her hand though. She looked every bit the dodgy transvestite and I was just plain embarrassed by her obviously male

physique incongruous beneath the floral silk blouse and necklace. Sometimes I would be fine and other times it was unbearable. Once we got ten feet outside the car park and I just froze. It was too much, the feeling that everyone was staring, that people were pointing and laughing. I wanted to be the kind of person who would bravely stand next to Vicky and care nothing for what the world thought. I believed myself to be that kind of person, but I wasn't. I did care. I had loved walking alongside my handsome husband noticing the envious glances of other women. Foolish and childish, but I had loved it. I felt so proud to be his, and now? Now I felt like a freak. Even if Vicky couldn't choose who she was, I had chosen to be with her, and all these strangers were judging me. Well that's how it felt. I'm sure a few people did have a bit of a stare, but so what? I expect I stared at some of them. That's how I feel now. Then I was rooted to the spot with shame and the hideousness of my situation. Vicky was very hurt, why wouldn't she be? I'd encouraged her to dress up, told her she looked lovely, waited until we were in the middle of China town and then bailed on her.

On another occasion we went to a National Trust house for a day out. In my head this was going to be an easy trip. Not in the centre of London, very little risk of bumping into crowds of jeering teenagers. National trust properties do not hold many attractions for teenagers, and if they are there, they are generally so locked in the injustice of their predicament, that they rarely look up. When we got there though I became overwhelmed by embarrassment. It wasn't Vicky's fault, she looked very nice, very unspectacular, but I couldn't walk with her. I strode on ahead consoling myself that no one could tell we were together, let alone, God forbid, a couple. She was desperately hurt. I kept telling her I was staying and supporting her, and yet I only seemed able to stay and pull support from under her at every opportunity. I'm not trying to demonize myself here. I know that I was trying to come to terms with an enormous life change, which most women walk away from on day one. I don't blame them for walking away, and I don't blame me for finding it incredibly hard, I'm just telling you what the consequences were.



Still, practice makes perfect. We continued going out together and gradually got used to going into restaurants and correcting waiters who called her sir. An unexpected problem was that I felt ashamed at being seen as having chosen a transgendered partner. Vicky after all had not chosen to be transgendered. Most people could understand that, but I - I had chosen to be with this person. I wanted people to understand that I had chosen a normal man. THIS had happened afterwards. THIS wasn't my fault. That, I felt was my truth, and if Vicky was going to have her truth recognised then me too thank you very much. Public spaces were a very stressful experience for me in that first year. If we could have just never gone out again I would have been happier.

Sometimes I would find the staring particularly hard because people would wait until Vicky's back was turned and then point and laugh. It didn't seem to matter that I was looking directly at them. For some reason petrol stations were particularly bad. I remember as Vicky walked back to the car, having paid inside the shop, the cashier called the other staff over to the window and they stood and laughed with no idea of the hurt they were causing. Well with no concern for the hurt they were causing anyway.

I'm sure people, particularly teenagers, don't spend much time considering the pain they cause pointing out someone's difference. I experienced it with my son, with people making audible comments and tutting when his behaviour didn't conform. Now I was experiencing it with Vicky. To be honest I was getting a bit tired of turning the other cheek.

I amaze myself looking back at this time how very much I cared what people thought. I had always seen myself as someone who accepted the rainbow variety of humanity. I had gay friends but beyond condemning homophobia, I didn't give much thought to what their lives might be like day to day. Did they have to put up with comments from narrow minded strangers. Did they get 'spotted' the fact that they were a couple. Never? Sometimes? What must that be like? To be regarded as odd just for being yourself. I had no idea, well, I'd had no idea. I was beginning to find out. Before this

though, I had intellectually supported anyone's right to express their sexual orientation, but at the same time enjoyed the benefits of being half of a heterosexual couple in a heterosexual society. Booking a hotel room, going to a party where we didn't know anyone, walking together around the supermarket. I had never had to question my right to do those things unmolested. Big companies are certainly more switched on than small ones. Individuals put in a situation where they could ask you questions, wanted to ask questions. Most people were surprisingly kind. Well I was surprised anyway. The vast majority of people who weren't, were young, foolish and usually drunk. Not exactly a cross-section of society.

Drunk men and women are far more likely, when in the protective cover of a group, to shout out abuse or point and laugh loudly. I hated walking past pubs. The truth is though, Vicky was at far more risk when she was out on her own. My presence, as a 'normal' person, seemed to signal to other people that Vicky was not a 'wierdo', but a normal person too. When she was on her own she suffered far more verbal abuse than she ever did with me.

One aspect of Vicky going out on her own surprised me. She was rather worryingly unaware of the dangers that a single woman might face late at night on her own. I suppose these are the things mothers teach their little girls and don't mention to their little boys. Being conditioned to be male Vicky had never had to think in this way and responded to my anxious warnings like a stropky teenager convinced that such dangers were the fevered imaginings of the over-protective. Vicky though, for all her plucked eyebrows and nail polish, still had the strength of Anthony. It would have been an unwise mugger who attacked her.

I wondered what it was about her that was so threatening. Partly, I think it is the misunderstanding that cross-dressing is always, always sexual and parading about in public is forcing your private sexual desires onto strangers. Following on from that misapprehension is the idea that a transexual, even if they have undergone every surgery available to make them look naturally female, is perceived as a really committed transvestite who has just gone that little bit further to



'get the look'. There is not much public understanding of the inner life of a transsexual. When we were together though I was always quick to leap to her defense. My public support of her, if challenged, was much better than my private support, undermined as it was by so many fears and reservations.

For all these reasons then, holding hands was very difficult for me at. We had always held hands and cuddled in public without a shred of embarrassment. A greeting hug at the airport or a farewell kiss, All these things were natural and acceptable from a heterosexual couple in a heterosexual society. Now I mostly refused to hold her hand. Anything more was unthinkable. I didn't want anyone to know the nature of our relationship. I was Vicky's friend. Her kind accepting heterosexual friend. No one need judge me. She would try to take my hand and I would pull away. I would take her arm but after a few moments give it back. I absolutely would not kiss her in public. Not on the lips, not on the cheek. No kissing. People would stare. Maybe they would attack. I was very afraid. Kissing and holding hands in public were just two of the things I was loosing. Vicky was absolutely unable to see that I was loosing anything. Why, she wondered, couldn't I just hold hands and kiss her in public. Easy. She could not contemplate the idea that her transition was taking anything from me. She couldn't understand why I didn't want to call her my wife. She could not see that I had been the wife, the only wife, and she had been the husband. Bacon and Eggs, Beans and Toast, Husband and Wife. I didn't want to be wife. I had been wife to Anthony. I was not Vicky's wife and she was not mine. Some people were happy to call each other wife she told me. That's nice, I thought, I'm not one of them.

Vicky was determined that nothing essential was changing and that I was being stubborn in refusing to move swiftly to happily ever after. What was the big deal? She was the same person I had married, it was still the same. Well, some bits were the same, but some very important bits weren't. Sometimes I thought I was going mad, because what seemed so reasonable and obvious to me, was utter nonsense to Vicky. Our discussions always became painful

and angry. We always shouted. We didn't really get any further forward. There was just so much pain on both sides. I couldn't see how we would ever get beyond this. It was a time of great misery, but because we had only told my sister up to this point, and more importantly, not the children, we were still trying to maintain the illusion of business as usual. Running a normal happy family for the sake of the children sounds such a good idea, but who is a good enough actor, or so detached from their feelings that they can really successfully pull it off?

We decided we needed to do something fun. Vicky was very keen to see 'Priscilla Queen of the Desert', the stage musical based on the Australian film. The story revolves around a drag queen going to meet his son for the first time. His fears about how that meeting will go, and whether or not his son will accept him. It definitely struck a chord with us as we got closer to telling Ellie. The show was of course, wonderful. More feathers and crazy costumes per square foot than the House of Lords. In between all that though, it was surprisingly moving. When we got outside the theatre Vicky suddenly pulled me to one side, collapsed into my arms and sobbed her heart out. All the fear about how Ellie might react just hit her, in the middle of Cambridge Circus. As I hugged her and listened to her talking about this enormous weight of emotion I thought 'Thank God, now we can move forward together'. Finally I felt she was facing her fears as well as her hopes. Before this I had felt like the bad part of good cop bad cop, with me delivering all the negative stuff and Vicky in danger of turning into Julie Andrews and bursting into a rousing chorus of 'my favourite things'.

It was something of a breakthrough. I also began to understand that part of my struggle was caused by trying to move and stay in the same place all at the same time. There were only two ways forward. Stay and embrace the person Vicky was or accept I couldn't and leave. I had been trying to do both, everyday I was questioning whether I could accept this but not deciding and neither staying nor leaving. It wasn't fair to Vicky and it wasn't fair to me. My body, stuck on the



treadmill of my indecision, had rewarded me with coughs and colds and niggling sore throats that just wouldn't go away. I knew I had to make my mind up and get on with it. I knew it but I found it very hard to actually do. I would think to myself, yes, I have made my decision, I'm staying, I can live like this and then minutes later be overwhelmed with fear. How could I possibly stay, how could I put my children through this. I found myself getting through the most difficult bits by telling myself that I was probably going to leave. I would call her Vicky and then in my head say 'Anthony, Anthony Anthony'. Even if no one would know, I would secretly hang on to him. It was fairly nuts and the truth was I didn't even mean it anymore. I knew Vicky was the real person she had always existed, with a top layer of Anthony, and I had fallen in love with all of him and that meant I had fallen in love with her. I didn't want a life without her. This was the process of letting Anthony go. It wasn't going to be done anywhere but in my head and it was going to be done alone. The choice was not Anthony or Vicky. The choice was let go of Anthony or leave, so at last, I began to let go.

My mood by the end of May 2009 was broadly hopeful. I felt I was getting to grips with life and that I would be able to control the telling of the children at the right time, a time which I would decide. I was still regularly entering into discussions online, sometimes with partners but more often with transgendered women. I wanted to be a voice they might hear from the other side of the fence that they might get a glimpse at how it felt being the partner.

*One of the biggest issues any mother will struggle with is causing their child pain. when they're new born you won't let anyone with a cold near them, believing that with good enough care they will never get sick, never graze their knee, never hear an unkind word. This is called a 'new' parent. It passes. Thinking about asking my children to take on this challenge, I couldn't help remembering my own journey thus far and wanting to protect them from it. The inner mother tiger engaged. I had to remind myself that challenge was*

*not all bad. A person who never had a cold has no immune system built up. A person who has never been challenged has no idea how to cope with life.*

Now we were moving forward together, in a more realistic way. I felt, for the first time in a long time, like we were a couple again. I was still very anxious about telling the children but, I trusted them to be the people I knew them to be. Not telling them wasn't an option... eventually they would notice the tall dark woman at the breakfast table.