



Transvestites & their women

Marriage to a cross-dresser presents unique problems to both husband and wife, the solution of which can lead to true intimacy.

By John Townley

It's an all-too-familiar scene. An unsuspecting wife is casually rummaging through her husband's drawers, looking for a stray piece of laundry. Or perhaps it's a not-so-unsuspecting wife, looking for some lipstick on a collar, perhaps a hidden love note—evidence of another woman, a hidden love life.

In either case, she finds it. The evidence. A dress, bra and panties—not her size. A make-up kit, fingernail polish, a wig, perhaps perfume—none of it hers. There is another woman, and as she examines the oversized frills and feminine toiletries the sickening realization dawns on her: the other woman *is her husband*.

For most women, it is a shattering experience to discover that the man they hold dearest has a compulsion to dress up in women's clothing. It is confusing, alienating and ego-threatening: confusing, because few women (or men) know just what transvestitism, or gender cross-dressing, is all about; alienating, because the woman realizes that the man she married is not at all what she believed him to be, and, finally, ego-threatening, because she believes that her femininity is not enough for him and perhaps he is even homosexual and has no real need for her at all.

In order for a marriage to survive this kind of revelation, the confusion, alienation and ego-threat must be confronted and dispelled, but to do so can be very difficult because accomplishing it means a successful assault upon what are some of the very pillars (weak though they be) of most relationships.

Malcolm Lanphear

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Dispelling the confusion and ignorance about transvestitism is the easiest part. There is ample literature available that will demystify the common beliefs about transvestitism and suggest various theories about its causes (see reading list at end of article). For example, many people assume that because a man wants to dress up like a woman it means he is homosexual. However, in the vast majority of cases, this is not true. Most transvestites are heterosexual and the focus of their sexual orientation is women—whether they're making love to them or dressing like them or both.

Unfortunately, the stigma of stepping out of the rigid masculine roles imposed by society has been so severe that few transvestites are willing to go public about their needs and desires or, indeed, to even confide in their closest love or marriage partners. Fear of out-of-hand rejection by their partners keeps them in the closet, living a lie that could be found out at any time.

The fears are not groundless. Many women just can't, or won't, relate to the thought of a man who enjoys dressing in women's clothing. They are simply too locked into the social gender roles they were brought up with.

For the single transvestite, (a TV, in their own parlance, avoiding such a woman is the best strategy. Said one TV on a recent New York sexual liberation group discussion panel, "When I start a relationship with a woman, the first thing I do is tell her I'm a TV. I may get rejected, but it's better than putting in weeks or months of time and having the same thing happen in the end. This way, when I do get into a close relationship, it has a real chance to succeed."

For a relationship to succeed, the

woman involved has to have some idea of just what a TV's feelings and desires are, and where they do and don't differ from those of the non-TV. There are conflicting theories of just how TV-orientation develops in early to middle childhood, but TV's have little difficulty in describing what it does for them. Says Len, a married artist and, along with his wife, a member of the discussion panel, "It's like a release. I can take the burden of masculinity imposed on me off my shoulders for a while and just relax and let my gentle, tender side come out. When it's done, I put my masculine image and responsibilities right back on again."

Len (not his real name) is a big, strapping lumberjack of a man in size and dress and it is hard to conceive of him in women's dress. It was also hard for Anne, his petite wife of twenty years. "I had a lot of difficulty relating to him as a woman," she explained, and it made me do a lot of thinking about my own masculine, dominant side. Anne was fortunate to learn early in the relationship that Len was a TV—and lucky as well to have read a bit about the subject in a book in her mother's library. At least she was somewhat prepared. Nevertheless, they both admit to a lot of pain and struggle about the issue over the years—years that forced them to come to terms with the prejudices imbued in their own upbringing and to reshape their own inner concepts of love and communication.

What they did—and what other couples, TV-involved or not, may well emulate—was dispel some of the common illusions of marriage that are all too often the main foundations of many a relationship. They came to view each other not as the roles they

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play—provider, protector, aggressor, submissive, housewife, flirt—but as two persons who love and trust each other and may at one time or another display these qualities *by their own choice*.

This is a major emotional and philosophical step, and not an easy one. In perhaps most marriages, a *husband* with all the social behavior stereotypes which that word connotes is married to a *wife*, another role with a set of obligatory behavior tacked on to it. Each player makes the appropriate motions, learned since early childhood, and were one to suddenly shift costume (like the husband suddenly showing up in a dress), the play would collapse because it is founded on the roles alone. What each partner has married is not another person, but a set of behaviors. What the wife loves is not her husband, but his role, which is formed and encouraged by her own expectations—so in fact she is all alone, loving her own personal projection which he, by his behavior, reinforces by living up to her expectations. He does the same, loving a good wife, mother and even lover without ever having gotten to know the person behind all those masks which they both have created and maintain.

There is nothing like having your husband show up in a dress to put a sizable crack in this pillar of marriage. And this is where the second problem, alienation, arises and must be confronted and dispelled. "This isn't the man I married!" is the first thought—but the next thought should be, "No, but this is the person I love." Too often a woman cannot honestly make that second statement because she is confronted with a man, now unmasked, whom she has never really met. Instead, the decision must be

either to reject him entirely and find someone with a mask more to her liking or to bear the pains and risks of real intimacy in coming to know and love the actor behind the mask.

Len and Anne made this difficult journey, with more than a little help from Eastern philosophy along the way. They are not the average couple with an everyday outlook on life and sexuality. Because Len is a TV, they have been forced to explore their sexuality with a depth and intensity greater than those with a more "normal" sexual orientation. But they are probably luckier than most, because they have been forced to examine the true nature of intimacy and achieve real person-to-person communication.

The third and final hurdle a wife has to cross is the initial threat to her femininity, which goes beyond the social roles to the biological question of what is male and what is female. This was what gave Anne the most trouble, even with the social masks cast aside. She had trouble relating to Len as a woman because she couldn't relate to being a man. But in the end she found that she didn't have to completely reverse roles with Len, because, like most TV's, that wasn't what he wanted. What he did want was to love her as a woman—more dominant than he, but a woman nonetheless.

Len dismisses the issue, "An erection is an erection is an erection—of course you turn me on," but it took more self-examination for Anne to become comfortable with her position. In fact, it took a reexamination of the masculine and feminine qualities within both of them to reach the final level of understanding that not only were they not the social roles they had learned,

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they were also not male or female but persons who could display traits of either when and how they chose to do so.

It was at this level that they found Eastern philosophy so helpful. It may sound far-out to seek sexual help from Esoteric Buddhism, but when you're a TV or married to one, you're *already* far-out, and you want whatever works, wherever it comes from. What they found there was the belief that most of what we think of as reality—the careers we pursue, the security we seek, the pleasures we enjoy—is simply illusion, flickering shadows that are but the playthings of God, a concept quite in accordance with Western Platonic philosophy. Only when you can cast off the illusion and relate at the level of the real, central you which *is* God can you take control and enjoy and manipulate at will the outer trappings of reality, whether they be your social role models or even the nature of your sexuality itself. At that point, when you are relating to another, you are truly relating person to person and are not lost from each other, wrapped up in your own illusory presumptions.

Perhaps this is only a more mystical way of describing the word intimacy, that difficult-to-achieve but eminently desirable state that people yearn for, fantasize and write about more often than they experience. It can be painful to achieve and indeed takes all the diligence, courage and selflessness that mystics describe as necessary on the journey along the road to enlightenment.

For most people, the trip is never made unless there is a remarkable inner desire for something more, something better. But for those outside the pale of social acceptance, and TV's and their partners are perfect examples, the journey to real

intimacy is not an option but a necessity, if their relationship is to succeed. Once a woman knows her husband is a TV, she must either reject him totally—a cruel non-solution for both—or forever set aside the illusions and expectations of her former self and learn to meet her partner person to person, stripped of previously learned behavioral trappings.

Not an easy task, but a necessary and desirable one. In the final analysis, the discovery that a husband is a transvestite need not be the end of a marriage, but the beginning of a real one-to-one relationship. When the initial confusion, alienation and ego-threat are carefully and lovingly dispelled, with both parties working together in openness and honesty, then the journey on the road to true intimacy will have at last begun. □

John Townley is a personal counselor and freelance writer living in New York and is Managing Editor of Sexology Today.

AVAILABLE READING ON TRANSVESTITISM

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JEALOUSY

A Husband's Story

Jealousy is a green-eyed monster that hides behind many masks. Here's how one man grapples with it in his own life and keeps the beast at bay.

By Robert T. Francoeur, Ph.D.

Six years ago, with our two daughters off to school, Anna, the woman I married fourteen years ago, decided to return to a career in business. The morning of her first day on the job, a colleague backed me into a corner with the third degree. His cross-examination started off with a silly question about how Anna liked her new job. After only two hours' work she's supposed to know that and to have called me with the news!

Where's she working? Where's that located? Whereabouts in Parsippany, off Route 46 or 10? Fritz's questions then began to focus on the department Anna was working in, more specifically on how many women and men there were in the department. A definite uneasiness entered the questioning when I said I thought Anna was

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editor's page

Our first remembered sexual experience is burned into our memories and can affect us for the rest of our lives. If the experience is a pleasant one it augurs well; if unpleasant, it may exact a profound toll. In her article, "How Young Is Too Young?" Dr. Loretta Haroian outlines the many ways parents fail to provide the information to their children that would insure a sense of pleasure and well-being in that first sexual experience. As it stands today, for teenage boys, the first experience is more often than not an act of conquest; for teenage girls, a result of not knowing how and why to say "no."

The last importance of Dr. Haroian's message is the shocking realization of how unprepared most young people are for the possible consequences of that first act: the creation of new life. The figures speak for themselves: Over one million teenage girls became pregnant in this country last year. It's no wonder that parents are worried sick about whether or not their teenager daughters will become pregnant. They know that bringing a child into the world means coping with everyday reality. They know, above all, that it entails the maturity of adulthood to bode well for both parent and child. The only imponderable is, why do parents, knowing this, shield their children from the most vital knowledge of all—that while the sexual act can indeed be beautiful, it is also fraught with responsibility. For underlying the act is the chance that it will lead to the responsibility of caring for the welfare of another human being. No parent would expect their teenager to drive the family car safely without instruction. Why are their expectations so much lower with regard to their teenager and sex?

Barbara E. Schrank

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