



**My life as a man**

**YOU**

**The Mail on Sunday Magazine**

April 28, 1985

**A lot of  
respect  
but  
not much  
attention**

**The differences between the sexes are discussed endlessly – do men get a better deal than women? Are women really treated differently from men? Celia Brayfield put on a suit, a beard and a manly demeanour and set out to find the truth**

**L**ife as a man had two major, immediate disappointments; one was that no matter how I combed my hair I didn't look remotely like George Michael of Wham! This was a blow. If a thing is worth doing it's worth doing well, and I felt that if I had to be a man I should at least be an attractive one.

The second great let-down was that I was no longer tall. As soon as I put on the jacket, shirt and trousers I had a distinct sense of physical diminishment, as if I'd drunk Alice in Wonderland's shrinking medicine. As a woman of 5ft 10in I was accustomed to being – well – striking; as a man at that height I was merely average. Just putting on the suit transformed me from an amazon to a wimp. These were the first of a series of jolts to my self-perception which made me realise what a different life the other half lives.

A jacket is a wonderful garment, less like an article of clothing than a living environment. With its four inside pockets, multiple change pockets and architectural construction, my jacket felt like a protective shell and a portable home. With my cheque book stashed over my heart and keys chinking on my hip, I began to feel armoured against the outside world. My face,

starved of ruinously expensive wrinkle creams, was slathered in spirit gum and covered in masculine hair by Peter Kerr of Wig Creations.

Uncomfortable as it was, the disguise was completely convincing. My first stop was the Zanzibar, a chic (or posey, depending on your viewpoint) Covent Garden cocktail club where, as a woman, I often call for a restoring margarita or two. As a bearded stranger I boldly signed the member's book in my own name and strode nervously up to the bar. No one gave me so much as a second glance.

'Would you like that table?' asked a surprisingly agreeable waitress eagerly. As a woman I had been used to standing around the bar jockeying for elbow room. It was a new experience to be seated so quickly and pleasantly. Perhaps she felt I was taking up too much room in the crowded club.

Professional acquaintances and personal friends passed me by as they would any other undistinguished-looking bearded bloke. The Head of Drama Series at the BBC spared me that shifty look which BBC heads of departments bestow on media journalists. One of my oldest friends, my daughter's godmother, saw my name in the register and looked for me in the ▽



MAIN PHOTO STEVE LYNE. INSET KEITH VALENTINE  
JEWELLERY BY MARTINA LANGER



'At large in a man's world, with a [genuinely] male companion, I found myself making firmer, stronger gestures, demanding instead of asking'

< expensive gloom, but failed to spot a familiar face under the second skin of gauze and bristle; the deception was complete.

The longer I spent in the suit the less I felt personally defined by my clothes. In consequence, everything else that I owned began to feel like a status symbol. Was my wallet impressive? I found myself wondering. Should I get a nice Gucci-fied key-ring to tell the world I'm a person of consequence? As a man I felt my clothes to be a camouflage, not a personal statement.

My voice, which is soft even for a woman, proved no problem provided I spoke loudly and did not smile. (Smiling, in any case, was excruciatingly painful in the sticky false whiskers.) If I lowered the pitch of my voice I sounded like the Prime Minister in her Gordon Reece era, but no one queried an odd treble as long as the inflections were forceful. I found that as a man I was expected to talk in a way which would have been interpreted as harsh, or downright rude, as a woman. I had to act out part of that old women-at-work joke - 'she is aggressive, he is self-confident'.

At large as a man in a man's world I began to discover the secret of some of those eternal male-female misunderstandings. For instance, the idea that women flaunt themselves to attract attention, or dress to be looked at, immediately came into focus as I realised that people do not look at men. Neither men nor women made eye contact in casual situations - sometimes even looking away while they talked to me. Men do not attract glances; in consequence, they do not move in the subliminal cross-currents of relationships which I found I had been accustomed to as a woman.

I began to have a distinct sense of isolation. Without the rapidly exchanged, insignificant glances to which I was accustomed, I had a sense of greater distance from the other people around

me. A black hole in space would have got more individual feedback.

People gave me an unusual amount of space physically, as well as psychically. In the rush hour in the City, on crowded pavements or on the Underground, people were reluctant to crowd me, thought twice about opening newspapers in my face and seemed unusually good at not treading on my well-armoured toes. After a while I realised that this extra respect was inspired by fear - fear that aggression would be aroused or that intimacy would be implied by contact.

Driving as a man was a very much improved experience. In my rusty old Renault 12 it was difficult to command respect as a woman, but as

### 'Waitresses stepped livelier, barmen were brisker'

a man I found the road miraculously clearer and thronged with other drivers who waved me on matily or acknowledged that my desire to sneak into a traffic jam was perfectly reasonable. Best of all was the experience of breezing confidently out of a blind corner into our local high street which is normally, for women drivers, a kind of motorists' *oubliette*, where one can languish forever, walled in by traffic. As a man, I found I did not need to inch out and force a bus to stop - other, male, drivers let me pass.

Some casual relationships were transformed by a change of sex. Policemen responded to me with a kind of matey, George Dixon respect instead of a patronising flirtatiousness. Waitresses stepped livelier, barmen were brisker, but waiters were undeniably harder to attract.

I took a pretty girl to dinner at an Italian restaurant, wondering what it would be like to order fettucine without the elaborately gallant

Italian-waiter treatment. Sometimes I wonder if all Italian waiters are sent to a training college to be drilled in flourishing napkins and saying things like 'Signora-bella, where-a-you-bin-so-long?'

Now I suspect they are also trained to make a man feel welcome just as effectively; instead of the flowery compliments and the bows, I got a bluff, manly handshake and hearty slaps on the shoulder. What was not so pleasant was having to take the seat with its back to the room, so I lost the enjoyment of watching the other diners.

However, men do not look at other people, in restaurants or anywhere else; I discovered that certain lines of behaviour fazed people and fogged their expectations. Even people in on the secret freaked if I patted my hair or fiddled with my cuff-buttons because these gestures were quintessentially feminine. Interpersonal curiosity was absolutely taboo as well. Men have to keep their eyes to themselves.

Any nervous or hesitant behaviour confused people, too. I found myself making firmer and stronger gestures, demanding instead of asking and tending towards the Noël Coward ideal of 'never apologise, never explain'. As my time as a man wore on I began to accept that it didn't matter if salesgirls thought I was polite or taxi-drivers found me irritating. People did not expect me to seek approval, and I stopped doing so within a few hours; being pleasing wasn't an issue.

Finally, I found the key to two more eternal mysteries. In the British equivalent to a singles bar, a pub in Covent Garden with a certain reputation for liveliness, I discovered why men always fall for blatantly obvious girls. The answer is simple. They don't notice the others. From the receiving end girls put out such extraordinarily low-key signals to a man they want to know that most of the time the fella probably never notices. A come-hither glance is very hard to spot, >

◁ even when you know *exactly* what you are looking for. It is even harder to catch and hold. 'Was that what I thought it was?' I muttered to my (genuinely) male companion as a girl with blonde bubble curls darted a glance at us. 'Yup,' he confirmed, 'see what I mean – shooting rabbits is easier. Now you see it, now you don't.' And indeed, the bubbly lady was gazing demurely into her lemonade as soon as she realised she had been sussed.

The kind of behaviour which feels outrageously bold and provocative to a girl still looks faint and covert to the man whose attention she is trying to attract. No wonder most of the men were crowding together around the bar, rather than attempting to strike up conversations with the girls.

I found that living as a man was

rather like living in a plastic bubble as far as relationships were concerned. A man's world seemed a harsh, lonely place where most relational behaviour was mysteriously taboo. I felt cut off from other people, distanced from them simply by the assumptions they made about manhood. As a person I had a sense of pitching from further back, needing to be louder and tougher in order to be acknowledged.

Complaining was easier, though. There were no quibbles about warm drinks or cold food, just prompt, corrective action. Sometimes it can be useful to make people afraid of you. It was a pity I couldn't keep the suit to go back to the Zanzibar and complain that a stranger signed into the club under my name and nobody challenged him.