

FATHER, DEAR FATHER

Ex-officer and gentleman Judy Cousins and her daughter Penny Croucher talk to Liz Hodgkinson. Photograph: Guglielmo Galvin

Judy Cousins, now 64 and a former male army officer, decided in 1968 that it was impossible to go on living as a man. His youngest daughter Penny was then 10. Three years later, Cousins staged his own disappearance and had a sex-change operation without telling his family. When Penny next saw her father – six months later – he had become a woman. Penny Croucher, now 25, an accountant, and Judy have since developed a very close relationship. Judy works as a sculptor and lives at Ascot; Penny shares a house with friends near Farnham, Surrey.

Judy Cousins: I had wanted to be a woman ever since I can remember, but I tried to live a completely normal male life for as long as I could, which included joining the Army, marrying and having three children.

Penny, the youngest, had been a planned afterthought – there's more than a 12-year gap between her and my other daughter Angela. Penny grew up almost as an only child and, from the start, my relationship with her was different from that with my other two children. The others were war babies, and I was travelling round the world a lot when they were small. Penny's arrival coincided with my deciding to leave the Army and attend art school to train as a sculptor. This meant I was at home more and was able to spend a lot of time with her. Also, I had watched her being born, which made me feel closer to her from the start.

When I made the momentous decision that somehow, one day, I would have to change sex, Penny was one of the factors to be considered. No doubt her presence delayed the date of my operation. But when she was 13, I knew my current life was unlivable, and that something drastic had to be done. I decided to disappear, and become a non-person. I hoped my family would regard me as dead. In the event, I don't think it was a good idea to disappear, without telling anybody what was up. But I felt that nobody would understand, or that they would be horrified and try to prevent me. I had planned it all very carefully. I had left the art-materials business I was running at the time in good hands, and made sure my wife and Penny were financially all right. As it happened, six months after my disappearance I was discovered. I then realised how difficult it was to appear to vanish off the face of the earth.



When the time came to be reunited with my family, my doctor was very helpful. He explained what had happened, and arranged the meetings. My elder daughter brought Penny to see me. I'll never forget that meeting. I was extremely nervous, sitting there dressed as a woman, and looking quite different from the father she had known. But she walked in, said quite naturally, 'Hello, Judy,' and carried on talking as though nothing had happened. It was amazing, and I have felt eternally grateful to her for not

being upset or bewildered. She was marvellous about it then and has been marvellous ever since. There were never any problems about her accepting me as Judy, and she later became very interested in all aspects of transsexualism. Since changing sex, I've never thought of myself as Penny's father, though I know that logically I still am. I feel more like a friend, or a familiar auntie. ➤➤➤➤



RELATIVE VALUES continued

Obviously, I was soon divorced from my wife, who then remarried. Penny lived with them until she established her own life, so I saw her only intermittently while she was growing up. She did have some emotional problems as a very young adolescent – the only time I've felt real regret and a pang of guilt that I couldn't be with her as much as I would have liked. I have never felt the sex change has put me outside my responsibilities as a parent. But she came through teenage difficulties, and grew up into a poised and responsible young woman.

Penny and I have an easy relationship. We both like to read the same sort of books, and share a fascination with metaphysics and the supernatural. Penny has a similar outlook on life to me, and we see each other about every four or five weeks.

She feels quite able to confide in me, and introduce all her friends to me. Perhaps it is easier for daughters than sons to accept a father who changes sex. Both of my daughters have been happy about it, but not my son, who is now a doctor working abroad. I suppose, for another man, changing sex and going over to the enemy camp seems very much like letting the side down.

Penny Croucher: Until I was about 12, I had what seemed like a completely ordinary, typical childhood. I always had a very good relationship with my father, who was great fun. He played with me a lot, and did conjuring tricks. Ours was a very happy home, or so it appeared to me. I grew up as an only child, and hardly knew my brother and sister.

Then, one day, my father disappeared, and we were all quite certain that he was dead. It was all very mysterious; I never had the slightest inkling of what might be up. My father had always seemed absolutely male in every way, and just like every other middle-aged man.

I had no idea of this longing to be a woman. My mother had some idea, I think, but she kept it to herself. But even she was not prepared at all for what happened.

After we discovered my father was not dead, my mother and elder sister went to meet him. By this time, he'd had a sex change and was living as a woman. They came back and told me, then asked me what I thought about it all. Somehow, it didn't seem to matter. The important thing, for me at least, was that Judy was alive.

I have never felt at all embarrassed that my father had a sex-

change operation, though I know the others felt very peculiar about it.

It's very odd but, when I was told that Judy was now living as a woman, I didn't feel surprised. When eventually I was taken to meet my father, I was introduced to this woman. My father now had to be referred to as "she" and looked quite different. There was no problem over recognition, though. The meeting was awkward because everybody was so ill at ease. You could feel the tension. There were also problems after that reunion, because my mother didn't want to have anything further to do with Judy. That meant I didn't see much of her during my teenage years.

When I got married (I am now separated) I invited them both to my wedding. I hoped it might bring them together – but they just spoke very coldly and formally to each other, and didn't really make contact. Now, I can't understand why they got married in the first place as they don't seem to have anything in common at all. My mother is very proper, whereas Judy is unconventional.

I have never experienced any difficulty in regarding Judy as the same person, and still call her "my father". I tell friends quite matter-of-factly that my father has had a sex

change, and let this sink in. It seems to me that nobody has been shocked or bothered in the slightest.

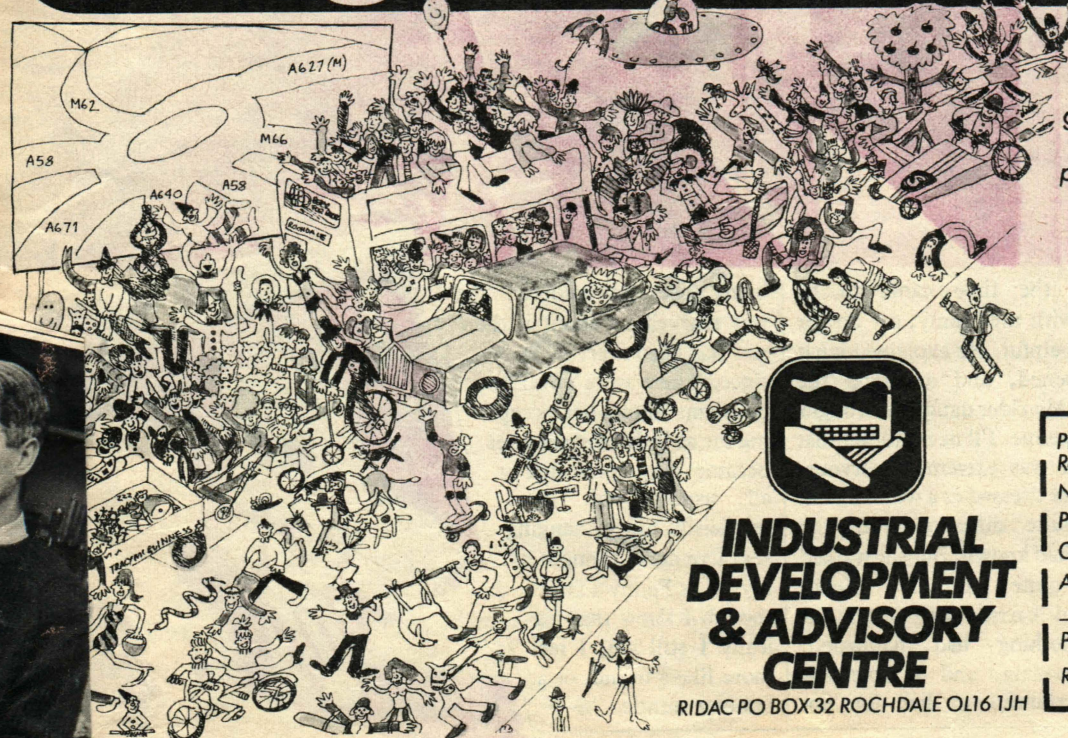
I don't think of Judy as a kind of second mother but I do talk to her as if she were female, though we never discuss clothes because our tastes are so different. I am probably closer now to her than to my mother, as we are so much more alike. I don't think our personalities are similar as Judy is very extrovert whereas I'm rather reserved, but we share interests and our outlook on life is very similar.

She seems to me just like a woman of a certain type. You do meet a lot of biological women just like Judy – positive, independent and talented, living their own lives. I can't really say whether she still behaves in a masculine way at all, but I don't think of her as a man in the slightest.

Many transsexuals feel extremely isolated and lonely, as if their experience separates them from the rest of the world. Judy has always had plenty of friends, though.

I don't consider Judy's sex-change has blighted my life in any way. After all, I had a proper father for the first 12 years of my life, when it mattered. If it had happened earlier, I would probably have felt I'd missed out ●

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