

How Jane became Laurence and lived (more) happily ever after...

Why should anyone want to change their sex? Laurence is one of the few who really know. He grew up as a woman called Jane and then made the decision to go through the lengthy, sometimes painful, tests and treatment to become a man. That was eight years ago. Arlene Sobel reports

Laurence is a transsexual—one of the rare transsexuals who was once a woman and is now a man. Laurence is not his real name. He has kept his identity secret because the one time his sex-change was publicly revealed, his landlord tried to evict him, local boys taunted him and he and the woman he lives with received scores of obscene letters and phone calls. He wants no further publicity. "I'm not a showpiece," he says. "I'm a human being. All I want is for me and Caroline to have a quiet and happy life." By remaining anonymous he hopes to lead as normal an existence as he can, but at the same time he feels he would like to tell his story so that others may understand his position and the position of people like him...

I didn't know what to expect before I met him. I had spoken to him a number of times to arrange our meeting: he had a deep male voice that broke once or twice when he made a joke. I suppose I pictured him as a particularly butch lesbian.

In fact, Laurence is not like that at all. Now 28, he is of medium height, with a broad chest and the beginnings of a belly. His neatly trimmed black beard is flecked with grey and his hair is receding slightly. The day we finally met, he was dressed in a floppy sweater, a pair of jeans and desert boots. His walk was masculine, the way he held his cigarette was masculine—even the way he moved around his small kitchen, making coffee, was masculine. He was by no means a caricature man, though he admitted that many of his mannerisms, of necessity, had been copied from the masculine world. Now they have become part of him. But what led up to this extraordinary transition? For that we have to go back to his childhood—a childhood as a girl called Jane.

"I was brought up in the West Country," he explains, "as a perfectly normal girl. But I was not particularly happy—I never felt comfortable. What made things worse was that I was brightest of all the children—I have two older sisters and two younger brothers—and this caused problems at home. My father had very fixed ideas about boys and girls, and he was depressed by the fact that it happened

to be me, and not my brothers, who did well in school.

"My father thought that girls should be secretaries or at most teachers, but my mother encouraged us all equally, and she was the driving force behind me going for a scholarship at a direct-grant school. I was the House Captain, Deputy Head Girl and Soccer Captain. I did masses of things—lots of sports, school plays, Girl Guides—I crammed my life with activity. I needed to feel busy so that I wouldn't have time to think. If it hadn't been for that school I would have cracked up completely. I was cracking up gradually all the way through it."

The reason for Jane's distress was that from the age of 10 she knew that she wanted to be a boy. "I used to have a story that I ran in my head before I went to sleep. I was always a man in it." Until she went to the direct grant school, she had no female friends, and when she played with her younger brothers in the street, her father would "wallop" her for it. "It was all right for boys to grovel in the gutter, but it wasn't right for me.

"When I was made to wear a bra, I felt pretty stupid. And my first period was a nuisance, to put it mildly. It was always painful. I felt dirty and embarrassed when I had to wear sanitary towels.

"It was not so much a case of hating myself, but rather hating the way I had to be. I hated the clothes I had to wear, the way I had to look and behave. I was a fairly nice-looking

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girl, but I didn't want to look like that. I was even Harvest Queen at my church, but the only way I could cope with an occasion like that was to laugh at it. If I had to be a girl as such, I had to clown my way through it to stay sane—because all the time I wanted to look male. I wanted to have a beard, I wanted to have a flat chest. But I was very confused because I knew that this wasn't what a girl should want."

Jane's confusion and unhappiness about her sexuality also extended to her sexual preferences. "By the time I was 14, I found myself attracted to both men and women. I didn't know whether I was a lesbian or not. I only realised much later in life that I was basically bi-sexual—that if I am attracted to a person, I don't think of what's between their legs, I think of what's between their ears. But at that time I thought I might be a lesbian because I had a few lesbian relationships with older women who were in the Guides. They were the first real loves of my life, but the relationships weren't that sexual.

"Then, at 15, I began to be attracted to girls of my own age—and that was horrifying. For years I had been sitting in the library every night reading psychology books, and they said that I would outgrow these crushes on older women, that lesbians were people who were attracted to people of their own age. Then, when I was 15 and I realised I liked this girl in my class, I thought, Oh my God, this is it!"

At 18 Jane left school. Her father wouldn't allow her to go to university, so she began a course at a teacher-training college, where she was catapulted into the male/female world of dating and sex. "Before that, I'd only had tender love affairs," Laurence says with a wry smile, "but once I got to college it got down to raw sex."

In one term, Jane slept with three men. "I really enjoyed their friendship and I quite enjoyed the sex. The trouble was, I didn't want to be anybody's wife. Though I'm quite boringly suburban in my outlook—I want a nice home and everything that goes with it—I knew I could never have married. I wouldn't have minded having kids, but I could never

...ve played the wife and mother, wearing frilly knickers or tights or high-heeled shoes or make-up or a frock. I just didn't want to go through the whole process of being a woman in society, the way one is meant to." Towards the end of her first term, Jane was seduced by a lesbian. "I was drunk and it was all rather sordid. After that, I decided to give up sex completely." She also gave up on the college when she could no longer tolerate having to look like a "smartly dressed girl" for the weekly teacher-training practice. "I began to feel physically ill when I had to put on a dress, and that made me desperate. I knew I had to do something to sort myself out."

After she left college, Jane got a job as a clerk at a polytechnic. "It was great—I could wear jeans all the time." She also contacted the Campaign for Homosexual Equality and began going to a local lesbian group. "I had affairs with some of the women, but they were all disastrous. I couldn't actually have a sexual relationship with a woman at that time: I felt so freaked out whenever I had to get undressed in front of a woman. I felt so uncomfortable and I couldn't work out what the problem was. I tried, I really tried to be a good lesbian!" Laurence laughs. "But at the same time I had this real dread of ending up looking like an old, fairly frumpy, tweedy woman with her two dachshunds."

For the second time, Jane resolved to "give up sex". "I decided I was going to stop being a lesbian, and somehow I was really going to make a go of being a woman. I even had my hair permed! But then I got involved in the Women's Movement and we set up an alternative lesbian group. One day I said to them, 'I've got to be honest about this, I really want to dress as a bloke. I really think I want to be a bloke!'" Of course, all the lesbian feminists were aghast, but eventually they came round to the idea and began giving Jane butch clothes that they no longer wanted.

"So there I was in my bomber jacket and tie, which I used to wear to gay clubs, and to this new transsexual/transvestite group I helped to set up. I would dress like a man when I went to those meetings, and for work I would dress in my in-betweens—although, strictly speaking, I was regarded as a woman."

Then, one day, a transsexual phoned her at work and asked for "Laurence". That was the turning point for Jane. "Very few people change over voluntarily: it usually takes something to make them do it. The transition period feels quite safe, you see—and changing over seems a really frightening thing to do, very scary. It's the same thing with names. I had no great longing to be Laurence—I was quite content to be called Jane—but the other transsexuals I spoke to said it would be very difficult if I kept a female name. So I went through the whole alphabet until I found a name I moderately liked.

"But when this person rang up at work and asked for me by this other name, I really got panicky. My boss noticed and so he sat me down with a cup of tea, and said, 'Right, tell me about it. Why did this upset you?'"

Jane explained that for the past year she had been attending a psychiatrist at a Gender Identity Unit to get their agreement for a sex change. The psychiatrist had told her

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that she would have to live as a man before she could have the treatment. On hearing this, to his credit, Jane's boss said simply, "Right, you might as well start!"

"My boss arranged everything for me. I was to take two weeks' holiday and come back as Laurence. That way, the other employees would have a fortnight to get used to saying, 'Good morning, Laurence'! When I came back as a man, they were a bit wary at first, and I noticed that for the first few months when I went to the loo, if there was a bloke peeing there, he stopped immediately. But on the whole, I was very lucky: I had the boss and the union on my side. The other people at work used to call me 'thingy' for a joke—but that never bothered me.

"A few revolting things did happen—for instance, someone wrote 'Sex Change Department' on the toilet wall. But I kept my job, and that was the important thing. Because if you lose your job when you're having a sex change, you end up in the unemployment trap and never get out of it."

Unfortunately, Laurence was not so lucky in terms of getting sex-change treatment, as the psychiatrist he was seeing had assessed him as a butch lesbian. Eight years ago, when Laurence started the changeover, there was not the strong underground movement there is now for transsexuals to give information on how the system works—who to go to, what you should wear and what you should say to get the requisite hormones and operations. So Laurence went in blind, and did everything wrong in the eyes of the psychiatrists who, he maintains, have very stereotyped ideas about what transsexuals are—"based on five case studies back in the thirties".

"I said to the psychiatrist, 'I'm a normal female biologically but I want to be a bloke.' But you should never say that to them, even if you believe it. What you should say is 'I'm a man trapped inside a woman's body.' It's a load of rubbish but you have to say it and never waver from it. It's very rare to get a transsexual who honestly believes that they're a man trapped inside a woman's body or vice versa. Usually transsexuals sit down and think about it rationally: they are what they are but they want to be the other.

"Also, when you go to the psychiatrist, you have got to look very middle class—not too butch, like I did, and not too feminine. You have to wear a nice sports jacket, a nice shirt and tie. Also, they prefer it if you're educated: if you're not, you've got real problems trying to persuade them.

"I did everything wrong with the psychiatrists—I didn't stick to the guidelines because I didn't know what they were. That's

why they said I was a butch lesbian, and they told me that anyway the waiting list is 11 years."

Rejected time and time again before actually changed over, Laurence became suicidal. "I would have killed myself. I hadn't been able to get treatment. transsexuals who have been rejected. He was lucky, though, in that his boss believed in him and so, within a fortnight coming back as Laurence, he was allowed to start taking hormones.

The hormone treatment is hideous and protracted: not only must you desperately want to change your sex to undergo it, but also you must have the constitution of an ox to be able to see it through. For the female-to-male sex change, there is a choice of tablets or injections of testosterone, the male hormone. The tablets are sub-lingual: they take an hour to dissolve and you have to take three at once, nine a day. They often cause very bad acne, and, if you forget to take them, you feel dizzy and slightly sick. Laurence started on the tablets but switched to the fortnightly injections.

The hormones bring about physical changes almost immediately. "At first you have a slight period, but if it doesn't stop you get given a higher dosage. After three months your voice begins to break, and that goes on for six months. Gradually your body shape begins to change: your hips narrow a bit and your breasts fall into the hollow of

After three months of treatment, your voice begins to break . . . Gradually your body shape changes: your hips narrow a bit and your breasts fall into the hollow of your chest

your chest and get a bit droopy, but they don't shrink.

"After a year you get facial hair growth. How thick it is depends on your family: if the men in your family have thick beards, then you'll get a thick beard; if they tend to go bald, then you'll go bald. Two years ago, I was ill and my hair receded a good inch and a half at the front and on the sides. But I do have a nice hairy chest now, and nice hairy legs," he says with a grin, lifting the leg of his jeans.

"Within a year and a half, you go through male puberty, but it takes another four years to reach mature manhood, and then you have to cut down on the dosage, because otherwise you get old quite quickly. You have to go on with the injections, though—every fortnight for the rest of your life. If you stop, you revert."

As well as the hormone treatment, there are three operations available for female-to-male transsexuals: a mastectomy, a hysterectomy and, for want of a better description, a penis graft. First, Laurence ▷

◁ wanted a hysterectomy: he'd had fits because of the injections, but when the doctors increased the dosage he got his periods back. But to get approval for the operation, once again he had to submit to the standard psychiatric inspection. After being rejected by the top psychiatrist in this field, he was deeply depressed. His mother, who was as understanding as a mother could be in the circumstances, rallied to his support, and eventually he found a psychiatrist privately who gave his consent.

After the hysterectomy, Laurence had a mastectomy. It was now six years since he had first started on the treatment, and rather than being excited about the operation—which he would have been if it had taken place sooner—he was merely relieved. “At that point, you’re blending into society, and everyone accepts you for who they think you are.”

The third operation, to graft on a penis, is not available in Britain: attempts have been made but have failed for a variety of reasons. Such surgery is available in America. But it takes two years of going in and out of hospital and costs 35,000 dollars.

Laurence, however, is quite content to forgo the penis—“though many transsexuals get hung up about not having one. But I’m a coward,” he says. “I hate operations. Of course there are times when having one would make life easier—if I had to pass a medical examination for a job, for example. But otherwise I don’t think it would make any difference to my life. Caroline and I have a good relationship—we understand each

other well...” He pauses. “Anyway... I don’t feel that a penis maketh a man.”

Laurence and Caroline have been together now for three years. She had never met a transsexual before, so he had to break it to her gently before they actually slept together. She took the news with remarkable aplomb, and they now live together in a suburban street on the edges of the northern city where Laurence is taking a university degree in history.

They seem very happy and in tune with each other, though he maintains that “transsexuals have to work much harder at relationships than heterosexuals or gays. They have to, because it’s so difficult for them to get someone to accept them.”

Even now, not everything is perfect for

Want to know more?

The following organisations offer information and advice to transsexuals:

SHAFT,
4 Adelaide Square,
Windsor,
Berks.

Friend,
274 Upper Street,
Islington,
London N1.
Tel: 01-359 4868 on
Saturday, Sunday or

Monday evenings,
7.30-10.

Gay Switchboard,
Tel: 01-837 7324
(They provide a
24-hour service.)

Beaumont Society,
B.M. Box 5084,
London WC1N 3XX.

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Laurence. On a practical level, he has obvious difficulties when he goes to the loo and there are only urinals, and he can't take part in sports where he has to change in public changing-rooms. More importantly, there are legal difficulties: he cannot take a job in the State teaching system because he is not considered “post-operative”; he can't marry; and he and Caroline would have difficulty if they wanted to adopt children.

“People have so many hang-ups about transsexuals. You'd be surprised how dirty it is to some people. Of course I mind what other people think, but in the end it doesn't really matter because I'm happy. Now I can sit back and I don't need to do masses of things because I feel comfortable in myself. People say to me, ‘What a waste!’ From being a good-looking girl, I've turned out to be a fat hairy bloke. But it wasn't a waste for me!” □