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HOW A HAPPILY MARRIED MAN TURNED INTO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER WOMAN

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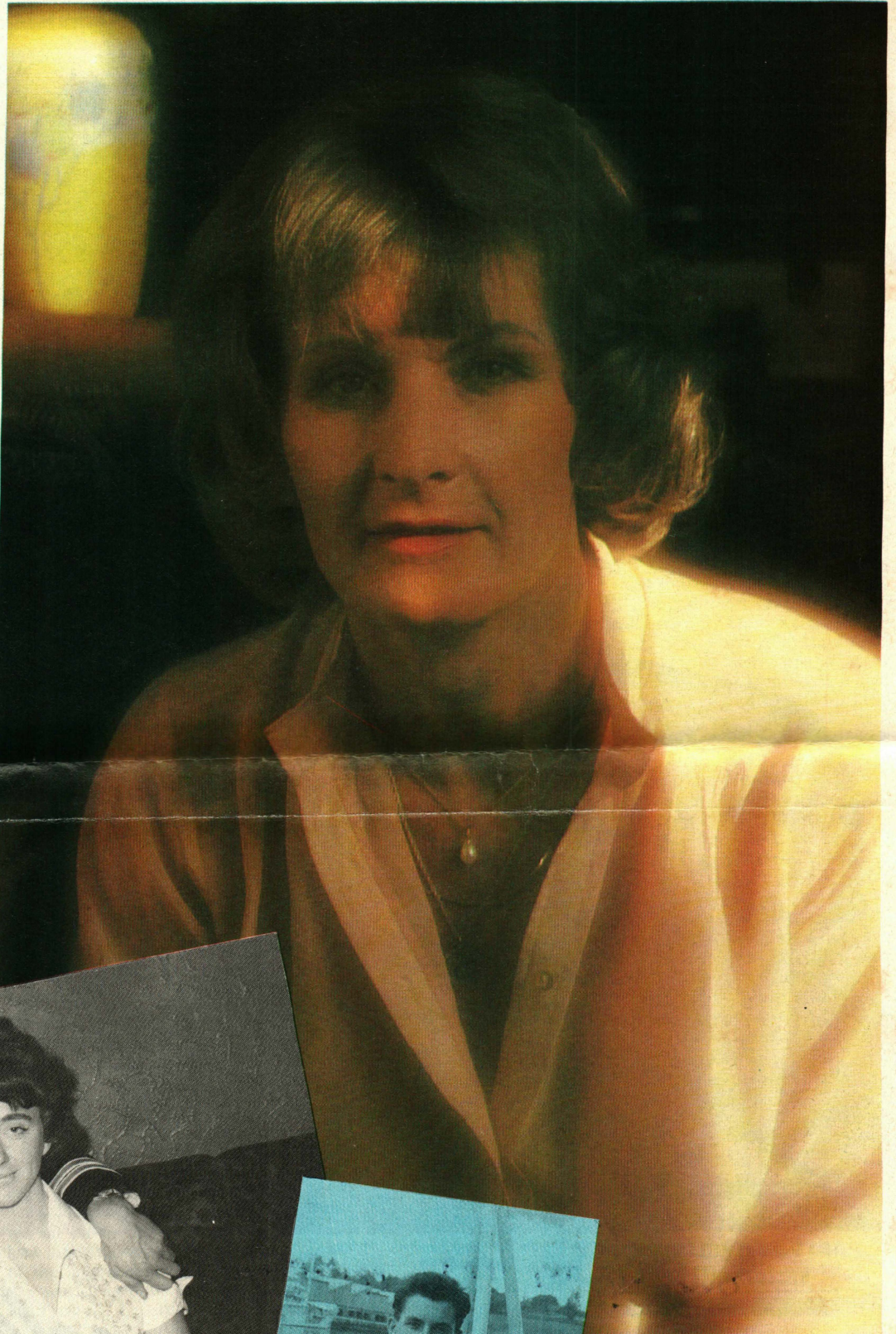
By Shirley Lowe

For the first 36 years of his life Vincent felt that he was playing a role instead of being a real person.

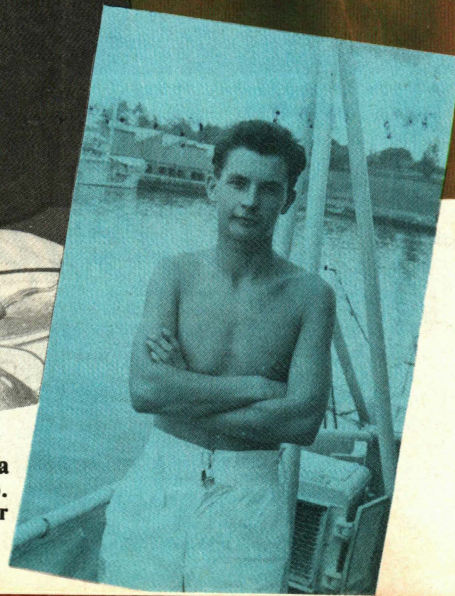
The elder son of a bank manager and his wife, living in the Home Counties, Vincent went to prep school and public school, played with his brother and sister and pretended to be a perfectly ordinary little boy.

When he hung around the house, his parents said: "Why don't you go out and kick a ball around with your friends . . .?" "Why don't you play with the other boys . . .?" Vincent wanted his parents to be proud of him, so he learned to do the 'right' things, which meant a certain amount of respectable rowdyism, acceptably grubby knees, and making the School soccer team. Later he played hockey for his town and became a competitive swimmer. Everyone agreed he was a first rate all-round sportsman.

He grew up and somehow it didn't matter that he was sexually underdeveloped because, 20 years ago, sex wasn't something you discussed with your parents or friends. Muscles, though, were different. People could see them and Vincent worried that he didn't have the requisite arm bulges. So he attached heavy stones to the ends of broom handles and did



Above Living it up with a hostess in a West End night club.
Right National Service 1957. Vincent as Stoker



daily surreptitious exercises.

When, eventually, he turned to his parents and said: "I don't feel right . . . I don't feel me . . . I think there's something wrong . . ." they were terribly upset because they thought he was a homosexual. "What you need is a girlfriend," they said.

Vincent had no trouble at all attracting girls. The problem was that he didn't know what to do with them when he'd got them.

Worse, he didn't want to do anything with them.

When he and his friends were Vincent was invariably egged on by his less attractive mates: "Go on, Vince - you go and chat her up. She'll fall for you..."

His good looks were an anxiety: "I remember a square dance party, in 1953, when there was this terrific girl everyone fancied. She was very attractive, even to me. She was really super. So, all my friends said: 'Okay, Vince... get her to come over!' and I did and we chatted and danced and then everyone said: 'Aren't you going to take her home?' So, of course I said: 'Yes', and we walked around the block and then she led me across a bit of park and I could sense the way she felt and I didn't know how to handle it. I was terrified. She said: 'Shall we stop here for a bit?' and I got right behind my bicycle, the other side of the handlebars. But, before I knew where I was I found myself spreadeagled on the ground, all tangled up in my bike. I got up and ran. I ran home as fast as I could."

After a brief spell clerking in the local bank, Vincent was called up for National Service. He went into the Royal Navy and found himself playing the even more demanding role of a Stoker, a hard-drinking lad with a girl in every port. It was an interesting and dangerous time with a spell in the Suez mix-up, witnessing the H-bomb tests in the Pacific, travelling with a UN force to Japan and Korea and fighting terrorists in Malaya.

The Navy was also a dangerous place for a young and sensitive boy: "During my first month at sea a whole crowd of us went ashore at Singapore. I was with a gang of sailors - they were meant to be a higher rank than me and responsible - and they got very drunk and forced me to the ground and all of them had me, every which way they wanted. After that I found I became very manly indeed. I broke the leg of the next man who tried to lay a finger on me."

But the Navy was a way of seeing the world and of avoiding facing up to personal relationships, deciding what to do with a life which seemed increasingly confusing. Vincent signed on as a purser in the Merchant Navy and he got engaged twice: "Being together with somebody else, sharing, not being on your own. That's what is important. I drifted towards anyone who could give me love but, of course, it never lasted. I was very lonely."

Vincent met Inge in Rhodesia. He'd left the Navy and, after another spell in a bank, was working as a salesman in the big international firm where he was later to become a junior executive. Inge was German, a model and very, very beautiful: "After I'd known her three weeks she said: 'Aren't you going to kiss me good night?' and we kissed and wham! It was amazing. There was some-



thing very beautiful between us."

They married and were together for five years: "I think Inge found in me a gentleman who didn't want to have sex all the time. Well, sex is very nice, all very well, but it isn't everything, you know..." Inge also found in her husband a shy man who was unable to have an erection, who was increasingly anxious about his sexual identity: "We desperately wanted children. It didn't work out."

I knew I wasn't homosexual, I knew I wasn't nuts

Together they studied medical text books, collected cuttings about transsexuals. They were too shy to approach doctors or clinics. In spite of this sexual problem there was a lot of loving and sharing and happiness. After work, Vincent joined Inge in shows as a male model and they travelled the country, making money and friends.

When the marriage ended ("It was family pressures rather than personal problems.") Vincent went to pieces. It didn't help that he was made redundant at the same time: "I broke up. I couldn't cope any more. I took to drink and pills and got in with a really unsuitable crowd. I knew I wasn't homosexual, I knew I wasn't nuts and yet it was becoming increasingly clear to me that inside myself, the real me was a woman. I felt so lonely. It doesn't matter how many times you try to be part of the heterosexual world or the gay world, nobody accepts you. Everyone, I suppose, feels threatened by something they don't understand."

Back in England Vincent heard about a gender clinic at a big London teaching hospital: "I'd always known that somewhere along the line I'd pick up a clue, that there must be some answer for me other than killing myself."

The clinic accepted Vincent for treatment, but as he had already taken a job in South Africa, they sent him on to Cape Town's famous Groote Schuur Hospital.

"What I'd like people to know

- the ones who call after me in the street and snigger and say: 'Oooh, is it a he or a she?' - is that you don't go into a reputable hospital, swinging your handbag and announcing that you want a sex change.

"There are endless consultations and questions. I went through ten days of exhaustive mental and physical examinations and that wasn't easy, believe me, because I've always been shy. I found it hard to talk about sex or about myself.

"At the end of those ten days the hospital recommended that I should take on female identity. They told me to go away and think about it for 24 hours. They said: 'It's going to be difficult to change your identity at 36. You are destroying a life you know for something you don't and the world isn't easy or kind'. But I knew I had to take the chance. Without it I was nothing. With it I might become myself."

Before a sex change operation you have to learn to be comfortable in your new identity. Most doctors insist on their patients dressing and living as a woman for at least a year. Not surprisingly, they may recommend a new town and job along with the new gender.

Vincent had just moved to Cape Town and started work at a print and poster shop. On the first day he had turned up for work, impeccably dressed in suit and tie: "Hey, this is an informal office," said the boss. "We don't dress up here." His reaction, two weeks later, when his new manager announced that he was about to become a manageress was estimable: "If I'm to have a girl in the shop I want a real dolly bird," he said.

Prudently, Vikki didn't leap straight into a mini skirt or Max Factor's latest look for spring. He had a friend, the girl who lived next door and knew what was going on, and she advised beginning cautiously with asexual slacks and shirts, and the very minimum of make-up. There's a lovely photograph of this nice girl and Vincent, all togged up in frilly shirt and dinner jacket, dining out together at the rooftop restaurant of the grandest hotel in Cape Town on his last evening as a man.

"It must have been a very tense evening," I said.

"No, it was great," says Vikki. "We really had a ball!" She seems to have a great capacity for enjoying life however lousy it may be and it was, as she says, pretty gruesome in that two years before the operation.

"I was so self-conscious, so obviously ill at ease, that I attracted catcalls and snide remarks. I grew more confident daily and the psychological effect of dressing and feeling like a woman meant that I no longer needed to shave. I shut my ears, went on living and concentrating on my job.

"Funnily enough it was the little things that kept letting me down - like automatically picking up the bill in a restaurant and holding doors open and walking on the outside of the pavement. Even now I still find myself helping other women on with their coats.

"When a year was up the hospital gave me a letter to take to my attorney so that my passport and papers could be legally altered to a woman's. And by the time I left Cape Town I was managing three shops."

The operation was only partially successful. "They were marvellous. I'm sure it couldn't be helped. But there was a slight perforation and I was stuck with a colostomy. I had this awful little bag, up by my waist somewhere and every time I ate or drank something it gurgled. Those were the worst eleven months of my life, until a second operation put everything right."

Vikki had left Salisbury, Rhodesia, as a married man. She returned as a single woman, to a good job running the public relations and press advertising side of a big employment agency.

"I drove into Salisbury and went the rounds of the people I used to know. When I went into the model agency where Inge and I worked they all said: 'I know you... I know the face. Hey! It's Vincent!' Almost everyone I knew was welcoming and kind. I think that says a lot for a country like Rhodesia where attitudes are pretty narrow."

I've been told to forget my past. I can't, I'm still me

Vikki's brother wrote from Australia wishing her luck and hasn't been in touch since. Her sister, a headmistress, said she was sure Vincent would understand that it was impossible for him to visit - how could she explain him to her own children? Vikki's parents were saddened, they wished they had understood her more as a child and been more help. Even so, now that she has returned to England - because, she says, they are old and frail -

they are slightly embarrassed by her. She accepts the fact.

"My parents are very sweet, their love," says Vikki.

"I understand it would be very difficult for them to explain me to their friends." She doesn't see them often.

Now Vikki lives in London and works as an assistant manageress in a West End branch of a print and poster firm. She shares a cosy mews flat with Julia, a 21 year old who works in the same shop: "I knew and liked Vikki and agreed to share a flat with her before I had any idea she was a transsexual," says Julia. "Everyone likes putting labels on other people but I don't think about it or care. It doesn't make any difference to me whether she was a man before or not - she's just my friend."

Of course there have been problems. Vikki looks like a woman with the most enviable bosom and slender legs that go on for ever. She moves like a woman and talks like one - "There was this man I met when I first came back to England. He was a real gentleman. He wined and dined me . . . well, you know what women are . . . I fell for it. We went to bed and when I woke up next morning he'd gone. I should have known better." - but there is no doubt whatever that she *sounds* like a man.

"I could have had an operation on my voice but that wouldn't have been me. And I've never tried to affect a high voice because that would make me seem even more like an effeminate male or homosexual.

"I've been told to throw away all my old photographs, forget my past, so that I could start life afresh. Well, I don't think you can do that. I'm still the same me, underneath, someone who's been all around the world, met fascinating people, been married to somebody I loved. I've still got the same interests and I'd adore to join a woman's soft ball or soccer team if they'd have me. Although I was the official PRO for the Women's Soccer Association in Rhodesia I wasn't allowed to play in South Africa because they claimed I had an unfair advantage.

I'm very ambitious. How will sex discrimination work for me?

"Now, I just want to get on with my job and live an ordinary life. I'm so happy now, I feel so completely *right* inside myself that everything, including that ten days' grilling by the psychiatrists and the operation and its aftermath, has been well worth while. You see, it's so hard to explain. I wasn't *anything* before. I just wish that it could all have been sorted out sooner, when I was younger.

"I'm going to enjoy being me, an ordinary woman doing an



ordinary job. I'd go out with a male if I was asked and if he was a gentleman, but the thing I don't like about males is that they aren't prepared to be friends; they can't wait to get you into bed and, let's face it, I am a sexual curiosity to many people.

"I'd certainly love to take up sport again, and dancing, even modelling. I'm very ambitious and it will be interesting to see how sexual discrimination works for me. I wonder how far I shall get as a woman, even though I've held executive jobs as a man?"

The people she works for are understanding. When they received her curriculum vitae (an impressive document revealing that Vikki can tackle almost anything, from stock control, through promotions, lifeguarding, modelling to accounts) they called her along to head office: "Excuse me," they said. "We don't quite understand this. You appear to have been a man?"

People, in general, have not always been so nice: "Once I got on a bus and went upstairs and I heard the conductor shout out: 'There goes one of those . . .' well, he used a very crude description I'm not going to repeat. I have had a lot of very nasty comments to my face and sometimes people come into the shop and whisper. Paul, our manager, said to me the other day: 'Honestly, I don't know how you stand it.' But I think the thing that upset me most was when I called on the psychiatrist I'd seen originally at the gender clinic. It was just a social visit, to thank him, and he said: 'Go and stand over there. I want to take your photograph. Do you know I've got the largest collection of photographs of transsexuals in the world?'"

"That's pretty insensitive, isn't it? You see, I don't want to be a freak, a part of anybody's photographic collection. I just want to be me, the woman I always knew I was inside. It hurts that so many people imagine I belong to the world of transvestites, drag artistes and gay homosexuals."

Not everyone does believe that: "If you are interested in a story of perseverance and success against all odds, you should try to

interview the woman we've been working with since August," two of Vikki's colleagues wrote to us. "She is the most fascinating and wonderful person we've met . . . almost unbelievably, she is actually a transsexual who is totally ordinary and normal . . ."

And Inge? She has married again and lives in Germany with her husband and three children.

A PSYCHIATRIST AT GUY'S HOSPITAL, LONDON, SAYS:

"A transsexual is somebody who is anatomically male but who feels that they are and always have been or would like to be a woman.

"Sometimes it works the other way around and a woman has the gender identity problem, but there are at least four times more men wanting to be women than the reverse.

"I see about three new patients each month who are seeking to change their gender identity, but we have no exact figures of the number of transsexuals that exist because some people go abroad to have sex changes, others have the operation privately rather than on the NHS, and there are probably many more transsexuals who never reveal themselves to anybody. We suspect that the figure is somewhere around one in every three hundred thousand.

"Very, very few people are born hermaphrodites, which is to say they have the organs of both men and women, although some transsexuals believe that they have female physiological features. It must help them to think that there is this rational reason for the way they feel.

"We still don't know *exactly* why people are transsexuals, but a strong possibility - based on tests on rodents - is that it is the result of a hormonal imbalance either just before or just after birth. Another theory suggests that transsexuality could be the result of social pressure for people to be manly or womanly. Margaret Mead pointed out that in societies that don't elaborate two-gender behaviour on top of the anatomical fact of being male or female, there is little or no instance of homosexuality or transsexuality.

"We wouldn't operate on a man unless he has shown that he can live successfully as a woman for at least two years. This means dressing as a woman and it has to be a 100% commitment. We wouldn't, for instance, operate on somebody who says he is only a woman at weekends because it is difficult for him to appear in front of his work mates or colleagues.

"Of course there are lots of difficulties and some cope well, others badly. Some people pass marvellously for women, others have large bodies, large features and feel they are being noticed: 'Cor, is it? Isn't it?' Adolescents seem particularly cruel. Older people are either more accepting or more oblivious.

"The operation is to remove the penis and testicles and create a space for the artificial vagina. It is not an easy operation. After all, there isn't meant to be room for three different passages in a man's pelvic outlet, so we do sometimes have anatomic problems. Oestrogen tablets are taken daily and we sometimes give booster injections every three months. In 1933 there was a Danish person who had ovaries transplanted as well, but she died.

"In the case of a woman changing to a man the breasts are removed, we give hormone injections, sometimes there is a hysterectomy and sometimes we construct a plastic penis.

"Some people feel that a transsexual's lifestyle is a limited one, but most people who have had this operation report a feeling of release and happiness. Their sexual life as a woman is claimed to be satisfactory even though there is a tendency for the artificial vaginal opening to close up.

"Although I've heard it said that transsexuals have a low libido and are often distressed by sex, in my experience this isn't necessarily so. Some have a high libido and there are transsexuals who relate, sexually, to women and others who relate to men. It is rare for a homosexual to seek to change his sex to please his partner because this is obviously not what the partner requires. He is interested in men, not in women.

"About one third of all transsexuals are originally married and have had a very close relationship. This initial attraction would have been because a woman is delighted to find a man with the same interests and attitude to life as herself. The problem comes later, when the man is unable to play the male role she requires of him.

"We often find that wives of transsexuals either agree or are coerced into helping with the role transformation, advising on clothes and make-up and so on. Often, the transsexual will try to go on living in his own home as 'auntie' or his wife's 'sister', but this usually ends in unhappiness when the children demand a father figure and the wife wants a man around the house.

"Although a transsexual who has changed his gender identity from male to female is legally a woman, she may not alter her birth certificate or have it changed, she can't get married in this country (although many priests will perform a blessing service for a common law couple) and she is not allowed to draw her pension at 60. This often causes considerable hardship since most women are forced to retire at that age. Presumably the pensions people must imagine lots of men are suddenly going to change sex in order to claim an early pension."

Photograph on page 51 by Lorna Cattell. Hair by David Blair's Changing Room. Make-up by Douglas Young. ■