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The Long and Winding Road

To Be Able To Be Who I Am

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I no longer have a terrible secret

In the middle of my life I am finding contentment. A sense of balance. I do some systems development work a couple of days a week. This keeps my mind active. I go to art classes and indulge in oil painting. This is good for my spirit. I do volunteer work in the national office of a political party whose values most closely match mine. This is good for my soul.

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I have most of what I need. My unmet needs cannot be bought. I delight in the simple pleasures ... time with family and friends; watching a parrot in the tree outside my living-room; reading; sunsets and sunrises; the natural beauty of this

country; good wine, good food and good conversation.

I despair at times about the state of the world and of the direction Australia is heading. We need more tolerance; we need more talking to resolve disputes rather than using primitive means like warfare. We need to embrace and manage change in such a way that all are given the opportunity to share in the benefits. We need to appreciate what we have. Above all, we need to respect each other and the fragile environment in which we share our existence.

Contentment has been a long time coming. And I had almost given up.

My journey thus far...

I am a transgendered woman living in Canberra. For over forty years I presented to the world as a male - it was a chromosome thing. I have XY instead of XX.

I have three wonderful daughters who have taken my drastic new direction in life in their stride. My mother and brothers and sisters are (mostly) supportive of my decision to live as I have chosen.

The 1950's

I was born in Balmain in December 1951. In those days Balmain was a working class suburb of Sydney. We moved up market to Concord in 1953 following the birth of my first brother (I have an older sister). I knew I was different from an early age but somehow knew that I had to conform or risk humiliation and ridicule.

"I don't want to be a man called Peter"

There was a popular song from a movie of the time (c.1955) called "A Man Called Peter". I clearly remember throwing tantrums whenever my mother sang this song to me. Recently, after I had told my mother of the changes I had planned for myself, she recalled those tantrums and told me that I used to scream out: "I don't want to be a man called Peter"

My childhood was a happy one. In 1957 I commenced school at the local convent. I thought school was a magic place with all those colourful crayons and plasticine and finger-painting and listening to stories and singing songs. I have clear memories from one of my first days at school.

"Why can't I be a girl?"

I remember feeling very envious of a "boy" in my class who was able to wear a dress to school and be a girl. Of course this person was in reality a girl but she had short hair and was tall so I naturally assumed she was a boy. I thought:

"If he can be a girl, why can't I be a girl?"

Of course I knew not to share such thoughts with anyone. It was my deep terrible secret.

The 1960's

During the 1960s I attended Christian Brothers schools in Sydney. Of course, I would have preferred an education. I knew that I could never let anyone know of my secret yearning to be a girl so I just tried to fit in. School life was fairly ordinary. I enjoyed art during primary school and was greatly encouraged by one of the teachers. I was an altar boy.

In 1962 my younger sister was born.

Peta? Yuk!!

When my mother was expecting the fifth child in our family, we all participated in selecting names. We had a boy's name picked out and a girl's name. I took this opportunity to find out what girl's name had been chosen for me. "Peta," said mum. "Yuk!!" I thought.

I soon came to realise that art wasn't seen as a serious subject and so when it came to high school I did what was expected of me - English, Maths, Science, French, Latin and History. Just the sort of subjects needed for a proper job. The Christian Brothers did a fine job of training me in "how to pass the Higher School Certificate". By the end of the 1960s I had my H.S.C., a Commonwealth Scholarship to attend university and no faith in the Catholic Church.

The 1970s and '80s

I really didn't know what I was supposed to do after leaving school. Well, I knew I should go to university, (especially since I had a scholarship to pay for it) but I had no real idea what courses I should study. I chose Engineering partly because I had done well at Maths and partly because it was such a male dominated area ... no one would suspect that I was really a woman. In the 1970s First Year Engineering class there were a few hundred males and, besides me, one female. One of the consequences of attending a Christian Brothers School was that I didn't have to develop any self-discipline. All discipline was imposed from above. So when I started university I was completely unprepared for freedom. I spent many hours in the library learning as much as I could about transsexualism (not much) and many hours at the movies or lying on the grass in the Sun. I don't think I attended one tutorial (they weren't compulsory) although I did get to most lectures. Inevitably, I didn't do well in the exams at the end of my first year although I somehow managed to pass Pure and Applied Maths and Physics.

Much to the dismay of my father, I decided to drop out of university after the first year. I went to the Vocational Guidance Office in Sydney in the mistaken idea that they would be able to guide me in my choice of career. I did a number of tests and was told I could be anything I wanted. Fat lot of help that was.

I moved to Canberra and worked in Systems Development for a Government agency. I married a wonderful woman and had three lovely daughters. My life was very conventional - moving up the ranks at work, handing over lots of my money to the bank to payoff a mortgage and raising a family with my wife. Not so deep down, however, I had this terrible secret.

I grew a beard.

The early 1990s - the Dark Ages

My wife left me and the children in early 1990. She needed "space". I suspect she just wanted me to accept what she had known for a while. She has a great deal of insight and is a very supportive friend. Work was becoming hectic. I was Project Manager for a couple of major systems development projects. The work was interesting and I had a great team working with me. But I was becoming dissatisfied with the new style of "economic rationalist" management which was sweeping through the public service agencies. One night in 1993, I felt I'd had enough.

Autumn 1993

***Black. Dense, smothering black
I sit back waiting ... for what?
Whatever comes after this time on earth.
Another hell?
My eyes are closed as the engine
Quietly pumps its breath around me
I thought I was ready
But my daughters fill my mind.
Tears run down my cheeks as
I switch off the engine ... So weak
I despise myself.***

What a failure! I couldn't even kill myself. I knew I needed professional help and got it. This terrible secret was killing me slowly.

The Late 1990s - the Renaissance

I confided in my G.P. and was referred to a psychiatrist who confirmed my gender dysphoria. After exploring some of my issues through the Seahorse Society of N.S.W. and the Gender Centre in Sydney, I accepted myself. In early 1997 I commenced taking hormones (prescribed by an endocrinologist). I accepted a "voluntary retrenchment" at work and started living again. In late 1997 I told my daughters and my mother of my plans. This was the hardest thing I have ever done in my life. Had my daughters rejected me, I didn't know what Plan B would be. As it was, they were just wonderful. A huge weight was lifted from my shoulders.

Happy ... Coincidence of Self

*To be able to be who you are
is not a remarkable thing for you.
It's just the way it is, the way you are.
No wonder you can't understand
the overwhelming joy I feel
As at last I am able to be who I am.*

In early 1998 I wrote to my brothers and sisters and to a dear friend, advising them of the changes I was going through. The response was more than I could have hoped for. During 1998 I commenced electrolysis, and over the next two years underwent over 250 hours of torturous hair removal. I applied for a job in Batemans Bay (a beautiful town on the South Coast) and informed the interviewers of my transsexuality and my intention to transition (i.e. start presenting to the world as a woman within months. I got the job and in October 1998 I changed my name and transitioned. In November 1999 I had plastic surgery to feminise my nose. In July 2000 I moved back to Canberra to be closer to my family.

During 2001 I saw a couple of psychiatrists in order to get the go-ahead for gender reassignment surgery. In September of that year I met with a surgeon to discuss the operation. On 3rd February 2002 I was admitted to Westside Private Hospital in Sydney and on the following day I underwent gender reassignment surgery.

I no longer have a terrible secret.

The clerk in the Vocational Guidance Office all those years ago was right. I could be anything I wanted.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.