

Kenna / A Transgender Life

by Kenna Henderson

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To my wife, whose love without condition made the journey possible.

CONTENTS

[Preface](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

PREFACE

Tomorrow, I would step out of the closet. Born and socialized as male, I would enter the workplace presenting myself as a woman.

How had I come to this point? What was this internal force that rode roughshod over my fears and pushed me to do something I believed to be fraught with peril? Why was it so important that I seek validation as being female when I was, in all physical respects, a man?

And the most troubling question of all: Where would this journey take me?

* * *

As a child in the 1940s and 1950s, I knew nothing of matters involving gender or sex. It was a time of innocence, without the barrage of information we take for granted today.

So it's important, I think, to relate that I recall symptoms of my gender confusion appearing as early as age six. This is remarkable in the sense that I'm not a person who has a great memory for details of his early life. These events are among the very few mental snapshots I retain from those years. They made an impact.

I learned that it was "wrong" to wear girls' clothing. I'm not sure if I was punished, but before the age of eight, something had instilled in me the importance of hiding any desire to follow whatever inner demon was leading me down that forbidden path. And I was already burdened with the profound sense of shame that would accompany my departures from the gender "norm" for decades to come.

Crossdresser. Transsexual. Transgender. These were terms I would learn and ponder much later. Then, I was just a kid walking a hidden tightrope. With no basis for comparison (and no one with whom I could share my secret), I struggled for so many years without the self-assurance that comes with knowing precisely who and what you are.

I'm amazed that I made it this far.

Chapter 1

Certain Native American cultures, I have heard, revere people like me. I'd be known as a "two-spirit" person – someone who is blessed with special knowledge or insight.

How I wish that were the case.

After years of study and self-analysis, I do know more about my gender identification issue. But that's not to say that I understand it. And I'm not the only one. No scientific research has yet determined why some of us are issued brains that don't quite match our bodies. I think it's evidence that God has a highly-developed sense of humor.

Perhaps you are among the fortunate majority who awaken each day knowing full well where you perch on the gender spectrum. For the most part, humans see themselves as entirely male or entirely female. It's the programmed mindset that makes the world go 'round and – not coincidentally – makes more people.

What is one to make of a person who insists that he doesn't fit that binary system. . .that his self-image as male and/or female is still evolving? Speaking from experience, I can state that some would have me locked away, re-programmed or worse. But I dismiss those individuals as willfully uninformed. There's a large amount of information available to support the contention that the transgender condition has been with us throughout recorded history.

* * *

I don't fully understand how, so late in life, I came to "the decision". I don't know why, after decades of secrecy, I chose to bathe myself in the unforgiving light of public scrutiny. It makes no sense on any level except within the context of what I had come to know about gender dysphoria. It cannot be ignored, forgotten or defeated. It gains strength and fights for attention. It will have its day.

And so I found myself plotting an improbable adventure. In spite of all my fears and trepidations, I was seeking a way to *work as a woman*.

I wasn't crazy. This was a choice I made with a perfectly clear mind. Mental agitation was no longer a factor. I had discovered purely by accident what was causing it. My body was making something my brain did not like: testosterone. By self-prescribing a regimen of estrogen and spironolactone, I brought things into balance. That was quite a revelation, as I had started taking the hormone and anti-androgen solely because it seemed like the next logical step in my gender

evolution. I had read a great deal on the subject and chose my medication carefully. Conventional wisdom said that feminizing effects on the body of a person my age would be minimal at best, but I found that not to be the case.

By the time I began thinking in terms of introducing the world to the female person who lived inside me, I had functioned quite well on girl juice for several years. My doctor was in on my secret and had given my chemical solution her stamp of approval. There really was no reason to push the envelope any further.

“Rational”. “Careful”. “Unadventurous”. These are words most would use to describe me, and I would give them no argument. I’m not a person who takes chances or makes waves. I live my life in the background, always playing supporting roles. I don’t like being noticed.

But I was going to do this. I didn’t know why or how, but there would be no stopping now or turning back.

I can’t think of another time in my life when such a force welled up from within and overcame all of my instincts, concerns and resistance.

I can only describe the feeling in simple terms. It was as if a long-suppressed female essence had finally found the strength to take over.

And so I began working on a plan of action. It would be quite a leap from casual and furtive crossdresser to full presentation and interaction as a woman. There was a lot to consider, and I was determined to give it my very best effort. It wasn’t a game for me. It was deadly serious.

At the same time, I decided to keep a journal in blog form. I called it “Another Self”. Although its purpose was to document what I thought would be a rather short-lived foray into the outside world, it grew into something much greater and developed quite a wide audience.

I needed a name. Few people ever find it necessary to decide what they wish to be called when representing a gender other than the one assigned to them at birth. But those of us who do are faced with countless choices and no particular rationale to apply to the selection process..

For a time, I was “Linda” online. I don’t know why. I drew some transgender-themed cartoons and I wanted the artist to have a female persona. I often hide behind pseudonyms when I do creative things. At some point I realized that there were many real Lindas in my life and it no longer felt right to use that name.

I’ve always thought that as a woman I would have dignity. I would dress a certain way and exhibit good manners. Isn’t it odd that I knew this “other” person so well? Once I saw a series of

photos depicting someone in various outfits and knew right away that she represented how I would look.

In the end, I decided to honor my Scottish heritage by choosing the female version of what I was called as a male and took my mother's maiden name to complete the process.

And that's how "Kenna Henderson" was born.

* * *

Sometimes, it's as if two people are using the same mind.

Unless you've come down squarely on one side of the gender fence, you have dual identities that constantly jockey for preeminence. But society dictates that you play for just one team and wear only that uniform.

That's fine for adults. Most of us learn to conform, if only to avoid the ridicule that comes with being "abnormal".

Coming of age when I did, I heard the term "queer" many times before truly understanding what it meant. I instinctively knew that my crossdressing would fall into that category and, if only for that reason, could never be revealed.

But very young children are not bound by such definitions and restrictions. Some argue that they could not possibly know anything about matters of gender without being taught. It's an opinion that is often expressed when, for example, a male child tells his parents with certainty that he is a girl. And it is decidedly incorrect.

Without *any* outside influence, I was acting upon my feelings of being female before I was six years old. There was nothing in my life to lead me in that direction. We didn't have television. No one was plying me with pictures and saying, "Hey, kid. . .look at these. Change your gender."

Those were very vanilla years. Whatever seamy underbelly there might have been to adult existence was kept far from the eyes, ears and minds of those of us whose lives were based upon a few simple concepts: Wake up. Eat. Play. Eat. Play. Eat. Sleep.

Then, I got into big trouble. The details are lost, but they involve "dressing up" with a girl of my age who lived two houses away. I speculate that her mother caught us and had a talk with my parents. What happened as a result I have (perhaps mercifully) forgotten, but it was at that precise point in time that I lost the innocence of a child giving in to his impulses and became someone who knew he had a very dark secret he could share with no one.

I remember clearly being in a store with my parents and grandparents. I had a bit of smudged lipstick on my forearm. I don't know where it came from, but I had not been able to remove it completely. And I knew I needed badly to concoct a story in order not to be punished. So I planned to pretend that I had brushed against the ash of my grandfather's cigarette. (In retrospect, I think that was quite a clever ruse.)

My grandfather thought he had injured me. My parents were concerned. I was relieved.

And I'm sure that, in the end, I fooled no one.

* * *

"Christine Jorgensen". I will never forget that name. As an eleven-year-old in 1952, I devoured all the details of her story without knowing why they seemed so important. She was the former American soldier who traveled to Denmark to undergo the first widely-publicized "sex change" operation.

I didn't want to change my sex. I never gave the subject any thought, at least on a conscious level.

But crossdressing was quite another story.

Under a cloud of secrecy, I had been doing it for about five years. All I had to work with was my mother's clothes, so I looked pretty ridiculous.

I suppose it's pointless to keep asking "why". But I still can't help wondering what would drive a prepubescent child to engage repeatedly in an activity for which he's supposed to be ashamed.

If I were to rank all of the silly things I have done in my life (and I shall not do so here), prancing about as a youth in 1940s-era fashions would be close to the top of the list. In fact, I wish I could erase what little remains of those painful mental pictures.

But it seemed so right at the time.

* * *

My mother and father never gave me "the talk". Because of their own upbringing, discussing such intimate matters with their children would have been difficult for them at best.

So I slid into puberty both unprepared for its changes and shackled to my omnipresent gender confusion. I was on my own, with a brain swimming in powerful hormone cocktail and a body redesigning itself in troubling ways.

I was not, I would soon realize, your typical teen-aged boy.

People who aren't transgender often find it hard to believe that there is no correlation between that condition and sexual preference. A young natal male whose mind says he is female does not necessarily have any interest in other boys. But his attraction to girls can be multi-layered and complex.

Testosterone's arrival precipitated my transition from tall, skinny kid to tall, skinny, somewhat older kid whose mind was a cauldron of competing urges. I had worn glasses since the age of ten, and now I developed a world-class case of acne. With all that and my complete lack of self-confidence, I was no young woman's image of Prince Charming. And, to make matters worse, in some ways I saw myself as being like the very females to which I was attracted.

My body was already at odds with my self-image, and it seemed determined to become manly despite my growing concerns. Once, I shaved my legs while taking a bath, knowing that I should not but for some reason driven to do so.

This was in the mid-fifties – still a time when there was nowhere I could turn for help in our small town. Revealing my secret to my parents was out of the question. What little searching I could do at the library turned up nothing. Left to sort it out in a vacuum, I somehow consolidated my new-found sex drive and my urge for feminine things into a sort of clothing fetish. From that point on, there was no hope for normal boy/girl relationships.

To make matters worse, my family relocated after I completed tenth grade, and I found myself attending a school with far fewer students – all of whom had grown up together in their tight-knit community. Bonds were already formed and social groups were set in place. I was liked, but I was also designated as a “brain” because I had brought good study habits with me and found it easy to earn high grades in that somewhat less challenging academic environment. As something of an outsider, I never gathered the courage to ask a girl to go out with me.

During all those teenage years, when I should have been dating, I was crossdressing – wracked with guilt and wanting very much to stop.

I didn't know that my battle had only just begun.

Chapter 2

At various times in my life, I was certain I had overcome my desire to crossdress. Repeatedly, I threw away clothes, free at last from this demanding mistress that led me to do those things of which I was so ashamed. Will power! I shall overcome!

Well, that freedom lasted for a while – sometimes for several years. But one thing you soon learn is that gender dysphoria never goes away. It may lie low, but in time it will come back even stronger.

Once, as an adult, I screwed up enough courage to seek the assistance of a mental health professional who had been featured in a newspaper article. She didn't have specific qualifications to help with my problem, but very few doctors did at that time. In retrospect, her solution seems very simplistic: just cut up the clothes. I think it was then that I began to realize I had more knowledge of my condition than did anyone whose advice I might solicit.

Years later, after I had studied the subject a great deal more, I decided to talk with a psychologist. She was close to retirement age and had no experience with transgender patients but found the subject very interesting. We got along very well. Once, she had me come in dressed as a woman. After about ten sessions, during which I took a number of tests, she pronounced me one of the most well-adjusted people she had ever counseled. It was her recommendation that I simply treat crossdressing as something I enjoy doing and not worry about its implications. She also told me I might benefit from pursuing some interests that are stereotypically female.

One would think that getting the “green light” from someone with her credentials would be sufficient. Things should have settled down nicely, and I might have had no problem integrating my transgender needs into my otherwise unremarkable life.

But no. That wasn't enough. As far back as I can remember, there was an ever growing urge to be *seen by others*. That sent what could have been a harmless (if unusual) hobby into the realm of potential embarrassment and possibly even physical danger.

I think it's testimony to the power of gender confusion that some of us will take risks we know to be unwise in pursuit of validation of what we feel is our feminine side.

A far better alternative would be to seek the company of others like ourselves and confine our activities to locations we know to be safe. However, I never had an interest in meeting other

crossdressers. That sets me apart from the vast majority of the sorority, as does the fact that I don't like seeing photos of myself no matter how I'm dressed. And I don't try to attract men.

It's worth mentioning here that "crossdressing" covers a lot of territory. I don't pretend to understand some of the fetishists that populate this group to which I am linked (if only by semantics). But who am I to judge? If someone desires to serve a mistress as her French maid, replete with crinoline, I say make the most of the experience. I repressed so much of myself for so long that I'm well aware of the mental anguish self-denial can create.

And now I was about to learn that its antithesis – self-acceptance – changes everything.

* * *

Even when contemplating something as innately impractical as working in the "opposite" gender role, I have to bring logic into the picture. I over-analyze. It's my nature. Spontaneity is not my strong suit.

What sort of organization could be expected to be most open to my proposal? I guessed it would have some relation to the arts. Surely I'd find some situation there that would allow me to make a contribution without creating a stir. I envisioned working at a table in some back room, stuffing envelopes with volunteer women who would accept me for who and what I am. And that's all I really wanted.

Did I believe I'd be successful? No. Of course not. Why would any group bring that upon themselves if they didn't have to? I could think of any number of reasons my plan wasn't going to work. I could have made a list, presented an argument or skewered a debate opponent. It was common sense and reality versus pipe dreams and unformed thoughts. There was no contest.

But I might as well have opened a window and let all that fly out. It only buzzed noisily about my head as I pressed on toward the abyss.

Living in a city that had not only an orchestra but ballet and opera companies, I felt that I might have some opportunities to make my case. Was I courageous enough to take advantage of them?

Is one of the definitions of courageous "scared out of one's mind"?

What did I think was going to happen? I had no idea. Perhaps the unknown was the very thing that petrified me. After decades of hiding, I could not help thinking I was doing something wrong. Although it's not illegal to crossdress, in some environments there are risks of shame, ridicule, persecution and even violence.

In short, I did not know how I could possibly accomplish the task I was about to create for myself. But it had to be done in spite of any concerns I might have. My need was that strong.

I went to the web sites of the three arts organizations, selected the contact person I thought would be my best option and began to compose an email message.

Perhaps this wasn't the ideal approach, but I attempted to defuse any concerns they might have by saying that I understood how my presence might be disconcerting to some people and I would be happy to work out of public view. I do have extensive qualifications that lend themselves to office work, and I outlined those.

Just sending those emails was very cathartic. I had little confidence that anything would come of them. But I had overcome my fears and taken a baby step in the right direction.

As an afterthought, I also sent the message to someone at the local office of the Retired Seniors Volunteer Program (RSVP).

* * *

What would I tell the youthful me if given the chance? That's hard to imagine, because my advice to someone today would not have applied when I was a child.

But if I knew a young person felt as I had, I'd recommend that he or she talk to someone – a parent or perhaps a trusted relative. Whatever the reaction, at least the topic would be open for discussion. Because there's so much more information available now, the chances that the gender dysphoric boy or girl will find understanding and compassion are significantly greater.

New generations become more tolerant as they come to know people who don't fit neatly into binary gender categories. In my lifetime, I've seen the transition from homosexuality being something that was only whispered about to being a characteristic that's only one small part of who a person is. So we do evolve – sometimes kicking and screaming – as a society and come to realize that we're all just fragile humans with far more in common than we once might have believed.

In trying to tell my story, I find myself repeatedly facing this question: “So what?” The life I have lived was important to me, but why should anyone else care?

One reason for my wanting to document my struggles is to demonstrate that it's possible to be convinced that behavior is “wrong” for a very long time and then find that not to be the case. Despite what others thought (or what I thought they thought), in the end it turned out that I was right all along.

All those years ago, I didn't have the inner strength to demand to be myself. In those days one was either a male or a female. There was no middle ground. Anyone who did not fit the pattern was a "freak". I still remember the Christine Jorgensen jokes ("He went abroad and came back a broad."). To tell someone, I would have had to rely solely upon what I felt, with absolutely no point of reference or supporting data. And I was always the "good boy" who did what he was told. I wonder if having to sacrifice part of my inner self contributed to the development of the stoic streak that plagues me even today.

It was a secret that had to be kept. There was no other choice. And, unfortunately, it went to the very heart of who I was and how I related to others.

If there's a lesson to be drawn from this, it's not to allow the opinions of others to proscribe who you are. Thank goodness we live in a time when more allowance is made for those of us who color outside the lines. I don't like to use the word "tolerate" in this context, because I think it implies that there's something unacceptable about being different. I don't need anyone to make a decision regarding whether I meet some arbitrary standard for normality. I'm as middle-of-the-road as they come. You would not know I'm transgender unless I chose to reveal that aspect of myself.

The self-assured person who wrote those last few words is a far cry from the young man, socially-stunted and wracked with self-loathing, who managed to finish both high school and college without having a single date.

It's a transformation I credit to one remarkable person: my wife.

* * *

On our fifth anniversary, I had spilled my secret to the very special woman to whom I'm still married.

If you're like me, you reach a boiling point at which hiding something like this from the person you love most becomes terribly painful. But we transgender husbands know that disclosure will likely spell the end of our marriages. We want to be forthcoming, but we fear inflicting pain. How is a wife supposed to react when she learns that her spouse is not the person she thought he was? What else is he hiding? Is he going to leave her for another male? So many questions. We wish we could alleviate their fears, but we often don't understand ourselves well enough to provide the answers.

Nonetheless, I felt it was right to tell her. We had been close friends for four years before we became man and wife, but I could not predict her reaction. Uncharacteristically, I was operating

strictly on instinct without giving much thought to the possible repercussions. Sometimes that happens when love is involved. And the wine we had with dinner helped.

You may be surprised to learn that I side with the spouse in these situations. I would not fault anyone who, presented with this new reality, decided to leave. That opinion may place me far out of the mainstream of transgender thinking. But I believe that when we reveal ourselves as having perpetrated a lie of this magnitude, the marriage vows are broken.

Some of us have a great deal more to lose than others. When there are children involved, we may be more reluctant to open up for fear of alienating them as well. A person with community standing and reputation to consider will be far less likely to risk being honest. But unresolved gender identity issues can lead to depression and, all too often, suicide. It would take a strong person indeed to keep it inside for a lifetime and not be affected.

I'm so fortunate. We weathered the storm, and she thought no less of me. More importantly, she stayed. There were and sometimes still are questions, as there should be. I've evolved since then, and we've learned together as I've come to understand this important part of me. I really can't put into words how grateful I am to be spending my life with someone so accepting, so genuine and so downright lovable. There's no way I could compensate her for what she's done.

One reason I bring this up is to put into context why I was able to present my job-seeking plan to my wife before I took any action. She knew it was the right thing for me to do at that time, and she was totally supportive. Had she reacted otherwise, I would not have gone any further. My hormone regimen had long ago dampened the urgency of my need to be seen in public, so doing it behind her back was out of the question.

The one aspect of this that we still wrestle with from time to time is why I don't have the desire to "be a woman". The only answer I can offer is that all of us aren't the same. Strictly (and perhaps medically) speaking, I might be classified as a late-onset transsexual. But it doesn't follow that my path will be the same as that of others who are so defined. In some respects, life might be simpler if I felt driven to live entirely as female. Then I could just get on with it.

The best description of my position on the gender spectrum might be "stuck in neutral". Raised as male but now having had some experience in the woman role, I imagine I could function all right either way. Switching teams would be difficult but not impossible. I still have the uniforms.

What's important to me now is that I'm content. I'm not seeking change. It took years for me to know myself and even longer to accept who I am.

And therein lay the strength I needed to push the envelope, step outside the door and become the lovely and vivacious person so many now know as Kenna.

This is probably as good a place as any to insert the fact that I saw some humor in my volunteer experience. As important as it was for me to take on this challenge, I never lost sight of the fact that there was still something rather silly about me working so hard to recast myself in a feminine mold. And I had so much more to consider than just clothing and cosmetics. I needed to stay constantly aware of my voice, my movements, my gestures...any little thing that would shout "male" to a casual observer.

So...did I practice for hours in front of a mirror, fine-tuning all the many nuances of behavior?

No. I'm much too lazy for that. I just winged it.

Chapter 3

There were earlier relationships. It took a very long time to get started, but I finally hit my stride (such as it was).

Had I not been at a place and time in Korea when anything and everything American was prized, I might not have been so successful. Being a military counterintelligence agent, I had a job that was both respected and feared by the populace. Those were simpler times. I gained a certain confidence from being able to go wherever I liked, on civilian status and driving an unmarked vehicle, circumventing the curfew in place during that period. Of course, none of that had to do with my worth as a person, but without the experience I might have remained a bumbling fool to this day. (There are those who might wish to comment on that, but they can write their own books.)

I can't delve further into my counterintelligence activities without having to kill you, myself or both. Plus, I think there's a fine.

This saying is pertinent: "Even a blind squirrel finds an acorn once in a while." When you're one of very few American men among hundreds of women in a small town who want to meet you for any number of reasons, your social life is going to develop in ways you could never anticipate. Many wanted simply to learn English, and I taught classes for a while in addition to having countless informal conversations over tea or meals. One thing that stuck with me over the years was the basic dignity of the people. I learned to suspend moral judgment of those who were doing work that in more affluent societies would have been looked down upon. This was not so long after war had ravaged the country, and they took whatever opportunities they could to survive. I knew prostitutes, and I would include them in that group.

Going overseas was remarkable in another way. My transgender feelings subsided for a while. Perhaps there was so much new sensory input that my brain had to prioritize. Ebbing and flowing wasn't unusual then. But at their strongest the urges never reached the intensity of those I would combat later in life.

The male Koreans with whom I worked would state with certainty that there were no homosexuals in their society. But later, when I moved to Seoul, I saw plenty of men dressed as women waiting for soldiers outside the gates of the military headquarters compound.

After about a year, I met the person who would become my children's mother. A college graduate, she was working as a server in a beer hall. I had made a conscious decision to settle down to seeing one woman exclusively, probably because I'm monogamous by nature and never

really learned to “date” several people at the same time. I think I may have been attracted by the fact that she wasn’t particularly interested in being involved with an American. Her family owned a pharmacy, and they were very traditional in their beliefs. Once they knew me, we got along just fine.

It’s painful to recount the details, because things didn’t end well. We married and had a child about thirteen months later. Honestly, I think I formalized our relationship because it seemed like the right thing to do. I’m not sure I really knew what love was at that point. I would become a husband and father, for that was my preordained role. Gender confusion was never a factor.

I returned home with wife and daughter in tow. We made friends with other American-Korean couples, and we had a son the following year. By that time, I was back to my old habit of crossdressing in secret and finding it necessary to take more and more chances. Except for the fact that I feel it’s unhealthy and unfair for a husband to keep such an important secret from his wife, none of that had any effect upon the marriage itself because no one but I knew about it.

Eventually she began to drift toward her friends and away from us. Then it was over. Our children and I were abandoned, and after some very prolonged and painful soul-searching I filed for divorce.

Then I fell into a deep depression, lost fifty pounds and faced my new life as a single father.

* * *

How do you fill the void a mother has left?

My children, aged ten and seven, now lived with me in a house that now seemed in some ways alien. I disliked it for many of its memories but knew it represented stability to them in a world gone haywire.

It would be nice to report that I was a sterling parent, filling the roles of both mother and father and giving my offspring the idyllic upbringing we all hope to provide.

All I can say is that I tried. Having shouldered more and more responsibility for their care as the marriage fell apart, I did have some experience. But now came the emotional aspects of the breakup. My daughter was devastated by her mother’s decision to estrange herself, and it was left to me to offer solace and help her understand. I credit whatever portion of my brain that provides the typically feminine traits of compassion and empathy with helping me through those difficult times. Without grasping at straws in order to “prove” I’m womanly, I can tell you that in those moments I knew it felt right to be functioning in some way as a surrogate female figure. I

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