

# Dire Straights? Transsexualism and Gender Stereotypes

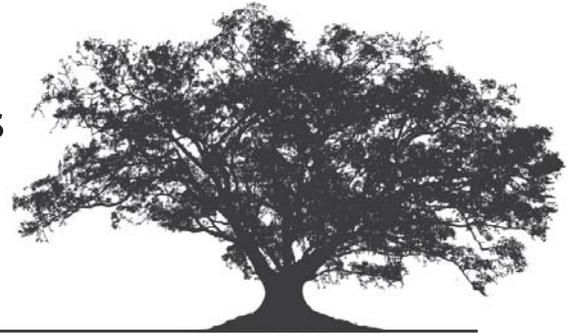
by

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It was evening and just starting to get dark. The trees were beginning to cast long shadows due to the angle of sun as it began to sink below the horizon. Johnny was driving his oyster shell gray 1975 Monte Carlo down a dirt road near the muddy, murky, Neches River close to Beaumont, Texas. He had just finished a beer that was “properly disposed of” on the back floorboard in a crushed condition. His empty hand and arm now found a new use as it wrapped itself around Virginia’s shoulders; after all only one hand was really needed for holding the steering wheel.

Johnny was thinking they had been down this road many times together, but tonight was the most significant and the beer was needed, even at the risk of a DWI. He backed into his favorite “parking spot” under a giant live oak tree facing the river and gently leaned over and French kissed her to help him get into a romantic mood. He had fallen in love with her two years ago and she clearly loved him as well. Johnny had never considered himself to be extremely handsome, but despite her being one of the most beautiful women in town she had been extremely excited, nervous and a bit awkward the first time that they had met. Her beauty had later led to more than one fight at the local honkytonks and ice houses as locals had tried to pick her up despite his presence. It was, in fact, her physical beauty and his feelings of inadequacy that had delayed this moment.

Johnny reached into his back pocket and touched his grandmother’s engagement ring to make sure that it was still there. He knew that the inherited ring was a sign of familial approval and that his mother would never have given it to him if she had thought negatively of Virginia. Virginia had often helped his mother out with cooking and she loved to go clothes shopping with her. His father had been smitten by her looks and her good reputation and had been pushing him not to be such a coward and “pop the question.” He looked deeply into her green eyes and asked, “Will you marry me?” and held out the ring to her. Johnny saw a great sadness rise up in her eyes before she quickly looked away. She started crying, making small sobbing noises for a short time. Then very quietly she said, “I will agree to marry you if you still want me after I tell you about my personal history.”

She spoke in a low voice and said “I have waited all of my life for this moment and I love you with all of my heart, but I have a secret that I must tell you first and you may hate me for it.” Johnny looked at her and said, “I cannot imagine anything that would make me hate you and the ring is a witness to my love for you.” Virginia moved away from him slightly and turned in her seat to face him.

She had been dreading this moment ever since she met him. He was her first and she had been so nervous the first time that she met him that her hands were shaking and her stomach was tied in a knot. Virginia had always worried that she would have to make up a story, but Johnny had never asked about her past. He always made her feel like a lady and she did her best to perform in that role. She sighed deeply and knew that introspection would not solve anything. The only way to deal with it now was to tell him directly. With her fingers she nervously twisted a lock of her long black hair that she had become so proud of and said “I was born a male.”

Virginia watched carefully and saw a mixture of sadness and anger appear on Johnny’s face. He acted for a moment like he was going to slap her but instead abruptly grabbed the rest of the six pack, opened the door and walked off into the night. She felt a great pain well up within her and her tears began to flow freely down her face. It felt almost as bad as the pain of gender dysphoria that had led her to contemplate suicide before her sexual reassignment surgery (SRS). She had been through so much pain and had to do so much to turn herself into someone she finally felt comfortable with.

Johnny could not believe his ears when she told him that she had been born male. He felt angry and wanted to slap her, but he still loved Virginia and could not do so; besides, he had never struck a woman before and did not intend to start now. He knew that he was not gay, yet he had had sex with her and she was just like a woman in all the important ways. Moving to the back of the live oak, he proceeded to drink the rest of the six pack because he knew that he would have to take her home. The beer cooled his temper. He realized that he still wanted her and even still thought of Virginia as female. He decided to return to the car and talk to her; after all, he had known her for a while even if she had deceived him. As he re-entered the car, he saw that she had been crying. Every time she cried, it hurt him too and if nothing else he was curious about her history. He said, "You better tell me about this," and added "I'm not sure that I can handle it, but I love you enough to marry you, so telling me about it may help."

Virginia was able to clear her emotions enough to talk and realized that there might still be hope for their relationship. She said, "Let me start at the beginning. When I was young I never felt like a boy and always thought of myself as a girl. I began to wear my older sister's clothes in junior high school and realized that the only way I would ever be comfortable was as a woman. My sister helped me because she felt sorry for me."

"During my early years of high school I began to see a psychiatrist because I was diagnosed with depression and experienced suicidal thoughts. The problem was actually gender dysphoria or simply feeling like the sex opposite to my appearance. My parents had money and they thought that by giving an extra amount for my allowance that I might not be so depressed. I knew that they would never accept me as a woman so I asked them to allow me to live with my aunt across town. She would be sympathetic to my problem because she was bisexual. I talked with her and she offered a place for me to live, but she said that she would not help me pay for what I needed in terms of my feelings."

"I used the money that I had been given by my parents to start on female hormones and to continue seeing the psychiatrist. The money did not last long, however, and I had to explore other avenues of employment. I had met a couple of people with my issue during therapy and one of them suggested that I work with her as a topless dancer because a lot of the 'girls' did this to pay for the operation. In examining myself I realized that I had progressed enough to appear female in terms of my breasts and I generally looked and sounded female, so I applied for and got the job." Virginia felt her cheeks redden in embarrassment and she saw Johnny look at the floorboard of the car.

She quickly added, "I would never normally have chosen that type of work had I been born a woman. The work was miserable because it made me feel like an object of desire, a sort of cartoon, and not a real person. The male attention at the job, while flattering, was not the sort I was really looking for—actually, you were my first date."

"After working in the club for a couple of years, I achieved full womanhood and quickly moved away from where I used to live to allow me a fresh start as a 'real' woman. The exotic dancing job allowed me to save enough money to move, so in that sense I am thankful for that job. The rest you know, since you met me just a short while after I moved here." She noticed him still looking at the floorboard and heaved a deep sigh within herself and joined him looking in the same direction.

They both sat in silence for about five minutes. Virginia was hiding her silent tears by holding her head forward in such a way that her hair blocked his view and Johnny was deep in thought. He took the time to examine his feelings about her and finally came to a conclusion. Johnny cleared his throat and started speaking. "My parents are fundamentalist Christians and my mother would never accept someone she knew to be a transsexual." Johnny added, "I might even have a bit of a problem with it myself." He heard her groan and she moved away from him and leaned against the door. He slid over beside her and put his arm around her even though she tried to shrug it off.

Johnny quickly added, "I know that you are one of the most feminine women I have met and I love you and accept you as fully female." Virginia turned to face him quickly and he could see the tear streaks down her face.

Johnny held up the ring and said, "You know that my parents would never accept this and would consider me to be homosexual and I value my family's opinion highly." He saw her eyes harden for a moment and she said, "I would never be a homosexual and date women; as a woman my only interest has been in dating men."

Johnny shrugged and continued by saying “It is my desire that your prior life remain private and between us since it is not any of their business anyway.” He saw her look down, perhaps a bit sadly, and she slowly nodded. He sought her lips and gently kissed them as he slipped the ring onto her finger.

She did not like to keep secrets, but she understood his desire and his ring on her finger fulfilled her deepest desire. It really was none of his parents business anyway and she knew that she loved him and wanted to spend the rest of her life as his wife. She was fortunate, because when she started her new life she had acquired a birth certificate and the Social Security number of a deceased female child about her age who had died young, so she could marry. She had determined when she was young that she would wear a white dress at a good church wedding and she planned to follow through on her commitment.

Virginia drew herself back to the present and said softly, “I was so scared when you almost hit me and looked at the floorboard for awhile. It was only for a short time, but for those moments I felt you were so far away from me. I never want to feel that from you again.” She saw him smile as he looked into her eyes and said “You never will,” and she felt his lips on hers.

### **Questions**

1. Are Virginia’s actions in line with a stereotypical version of femininity or are they different?
2. According to the case study does being transgendered begin early or later in life? How accurate do you think this is and why?
3. Is there any suggestion of a biological basis for “transgenderedness” in the case study?
4. Why do you think that she does not see herself as being gay when she was born a male and dates men?
5. Virginia suggested that she had suicidal thoughts. Do you think that this reflects individuals with gender dysphoria (a part of leads to transsexualism) in general or is it just a special case involving her own thoughts?
6. Virginia brings up an important issue about the costs of having sexual reassignment surgery. In the past, many transsexuals had great difficulty finding work and ways to finance their expensive operation and quite a few turned to prostitution. Do you think that this medical issue still necessarily leads to dehumanization in order to afford something that may be necessary in terms of mental health issues?
7. Virginia initially did not tell her boyfriend and never intends for his family to find out that she has had sex reassignment surgery. Does this seem to be an moral sort of decision?

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