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Tiptoeing through the Tulips at Seventy: A Memoir

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Tiptoeing through the Tulips at Seventy: A Memoir

A Capstone Project

Presented to

The Academic Faculty Advisors

By

Francesca Miele

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts in Professional Writing

in the Department of English in the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of

Kennesaw State University

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Kennesaw State University
Master of Arts in Professional Writing
Notice of Capstone Completion Form

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Introduction

This is a memoir about a person's lifetime search for clarity about their gender identity. It begins with the searcher—a child who's very confused about that identity. S/he has the anatomy of a boy, is being raised and treated like a boy, and plays with toys and wears clothes designed for a boy.

But something is off. That child is indifferent about things that interest other boys. S/he's drawn to what is unattainable—toys and clothes designed for girls. But why? S/he catches a fleeting glimpse of the answer when s/he's about seven years old. There's a TV news report about a man who goes to Denmark and comes back to America as a woman—Christine Jorgensen. The child is fascinated by this and wants to know more. S/he'll have to wait a long time for that, but Christine remains tucked into the back of the child's mind.

As the child approaches adolescence, s/he starts fantasizing about being a girl or even a woman, and catch as catch can, starts dressing like one in secret. Doing so feels natural, comforting, and affirming, but s/he's deathly afraid that Dad, who abhors sexual nonconformity, will find out. But the propensity to cross-dress continues well into adulthood.

As a young teenager, despite the obsession with girlhood, s/he's actually deathly afraid of girls as well. You see, s/he's sexually naïve, and to cloak this ignorance, decides s/he's going to become a celibate Catholic priest.

Won't have to worry about girls no more, s/he thinks.

However, the idea doesn't last long. In the meantime, Dad is concerned about the searcher's avoidance of girls and thinks out loud that his teenaged child is gay. But, when s/he finally gets a girlfriend, Mom and Dad dislike the girlfriend's parents—and maybe the girl too—and do everything possible to sabotage the relationship.

As a young adult, s/he is still beset by the feelings s/he experienced as a child, especially the fantasies about being a woman.

Hmm—maybe I am a woman!

Even with this recognition—this flash of insight—s/he struggles to sublimate these feelings and live life as a *normal*, heterosexual male. S/he has a succession of relationships with women, one of whom makes a marriage proposal. However, the relationship implodes for a variety of reasons, not the least of which are the searcher's rebuffs of the prospective bride's sexual entreaties.

I can't, I just can't. I don't think I can perform as a man.

Finally, s/he meets the woman who becomes the searcher's lifelong sweetheart. Initially, the searcher plays the part of a chivalrous gentleman, but when the time arrives for them to make love, s/he has figured out that if s/he loves her *mentally* as a woman would love a woman, s/he can perform as a man.

They marry, have two children, and move to a suburban county of a large metropolitan area. They join a Unitarian Universalist church that becomes the staging ground for the searcher, who has become a social justice warrior. S/he, along with a gay/straight coalition, battle their County Commission, which passes a shortsighted, meanspirited, and divisive antigay Family Values resolution after being pressured by the Christian Coalition and a prominent local religious leader.

Although s/he presents as a straight social justice ally of the gay community, by now, s/he self-identifies as the "T" in LGBTQ+, which is to say, s/he finds the county's resolution infuriating, takes it as a personal affront, and vows to fight it tooth and nail. Eventually, the

resolution fizzles out and in short order, its most ardent supporters on the commission are booted out of office.

S/he nonetheless continues the fight for social justice by moving onto other issues. Upon retirement from the workforce, s/he decides to become an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and maintain a social justice ministry. That doesn't work out, but along the way, s/he discovers social work, whose ethics and values echo the principles of UUism.

So, s/he becomes a social worker, and through the study of mental health, learns that s/he's living with gender dysphoria and, for all practical purposes, is indeed a woman. After a debilitating psychic crisis, s/he resolves to solidify this revelation at age 70, when *she* initiates the MTF transition, is *reborn* as the woman *she* almost always, in one way or another, thought or suspected herself to be, and lives happily ever!

Chapter 1: Am I a Boy or am I a Girl?

Exploring My Sexual Identity

As a young child, I assumed that I was a boy and was treated as such. However, when I was about seven or eight years old, a hypermasculine, future U.S. Marine playmate asked if I ever wished I was a girl.

Where'd that come from? I wondered. Did he wish that he was a girl? Did he get the idea to ask me from his father?

“Nah—why ya’ askin’?”

“Oh, just wonderin’.”

“Do *you* ever wish that *you* were a girl?”

“Me? Nah—never!”

There are two ways to look at this. On one hand, at our age, we were at the latency period of Freud’s stages of psychosexual development. During this phase, children prefer to interact and play with same sex individuals. However, if this individual secretly preferred to play with girls or wished to be one, his macho persona served to deflect or mask his desire. This does not go without saying that this is pure speculation about him on my part.

But on the other hand, I was wondering about my preferences as well. I didn’t care for many of the things that interested other boys at or near my age, especially sports, which I didn’t follow, watch, or listen to, and even at my age, I detested boxing, which seemed barbaric. But sports seemed to be almost everyone’s obsession, both as observers and as participants. I tried playing baseball or stickball with neighborhood kids, but I sucked at it and it wasn’t long before no one wanted me to be on their team.

That didn't bother me because there still were my gender specific toys to play with, such as little green plastic army men and an arsenal of weapons: tanks, artillery, machine guns, jeeps, and trucks. War can be so much fun and is only for men; I suppose that's message being conveyed by the little green men and the armaments.

I did have a lot of gender-neutral toys like a Magic 8-Ball, a slinky, Play-Doh, Silly Putty, Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head, a View Master, and a chemistry set. But I was yearning for toys that were gender specific for prepubescent girls like doll houses, Barbie dolls, dress up sets, and the biggest prize of all—a play kitchen. These things were out of reach, and I didn't dare verbalize this—except on one rare occasion—when I blurted out the quiet part out loud when my mother and I were walking to Brooklyn's downtown shopping district on Fulton Street.

“I want a doll!”

“You want a WHAT?”

“Ha-ha—fooled you—just kidding!”

But honestly, I wasn't kidding, and I must have turned fifty shades of red. My mother didn't pursue my faux pas, but my Archie-Bunkerish father, who abhorred sexual nonconformity, was another story. If ever he heard such things coming out my mouth, he'd have been appalled, angry, and disappointed.

* * * ♡ * * *

As I transitioned into puberty, I started having certain urges, noticed that girls were growing breasts and undergoing other changes, but I didn't understand what was happening to them or to me. I also noticed the pretty clothes they were beginning to wear like the wide flaring skirts with lacy blouses to go with them, and the shirtwaist or party print dresses. I was jealous; I wanted some for myself.

At the time, I was sexually naïve, and it wasn't like I could go to a library or a book store and pick up a copy of *Everything You Wanted to Know about Sex but were Afraid to Ask*. As far as I knew, such things didn't exist in the 1950s. But then, I never made an effort to find out.

Other eighth-grade boys seemed to be more astute on these matters, and were gaga over Annette Funicello on the Mickey Mouse Club. I didn't comprehend that either, and while they lay in their beds in the dark of night on their way to sleep, they most likely fantasized about the things they'd like to be doing with the bewitching Mouseketeer. My nighttime fantasies were of a different sort and involved a variety of scenarios in which I became a girl or even a woman. In a recurring fantasy, my life was in danger and people were after me so, depending of the scene, I disguised myself as a girl or a woman. As a woman, I wore makeup and my attire was much more elaborate, all the way down to my undies.

It was around that time I started crossdressing. A towel wrapped around the waist could serve as a skirt, but I didn't have much to go on beyond that until I reaped what to me was the motherlode! My mother discarded an old, well-worn leisure bra, and in the spirit of someone's trash being another's treasure, I rescued the doomed garment and made it mine. I started wearing it to bed, and the feelings of peace, warmth, security, naturalness, and femininity it exuded were blissful. However, one night when my father came to my room to say goodnight, he noticed something odd, asked me what it was, and I said that it's just my pajamas bundled up funny. If he knew better, he didn't make an issue out of it. Thereafter, I decided to be more careful about this new practice.

At first, the activity wasn't sexual or pathological. It was more an expression or manifestation of my gender identity. The pathologies would emerge later in my mid-teens and continue into adulthood in terms of transvestism and the self-bondage derivative of sexual

masochism disorder. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th Ed.; DSM-5) indicates that under specific circumstances, transvestism can be precursor for gender dysphoria, which is described as a condition and not as a pathology. However, the self-bondage certainly is pathological, and it usually involves fantasies.

One fantasy evolved into me being a helpless woman being raped by a man. It was during one of these episodes that I experienced my first orgasm—years of sexual tension was unleashed in a single explosive moment, like the Big Bang from which the expanding and evolving universe emerged. A few years later, I read Southern and Hoffenberg's satirically erotic novel, *Candy*, where a character reminisces about a climax that was so powerful that he could feel in in his throat.

Yeah, I thought, I felt it in my throat too!

But in spite of the momentousness of that event, I was scared at first. I wasn't sure what happened; I thought something broke inside me and what the hell was all that white stuff pouring out of me? And then it hit me.

Oh! That was baby-making juice; semen!

It has occurred to me that in my sexual ignorance, I gravitated toward these paraphilic behaviors naturally, without external influence. I simply was following my instincts, and they were directing me toward a path of sexual nonconformity or, if you will, on the path I was destined or meant to follow.

I can't say if my sexual development or proclivities would have been different if someone—like my father—took the time to explain the birds and the bees to me, but it doesn't really matter now and most likely wouldn't have made a difference.

In the meantime, any discussion about sex was verboten in our home. At some point before my father died at the very young age of 51, I asked him why he was mum on the issue. He said that he tried to explain the birds and bees to me when I was—oh, I don't know—about three or four years old (what was he thinking?), and as a result, I said something stupid and inappropriate to my grandmother about her genitalia. When my mother got wind of it, she made my father swear that he would never bring up the subject again.

Of course, that was only half the story. He didn't mention that my mother was sexually repressed, for social-cultural and religious reasons. Her parents were poorly educated, deeply religious, Roman Catholic immigrants. Regardless, two of my mother's sisters became pregnant out of wedlock, and I believe this had a profoundly negative impact on Mom. One sister, unable to cope with the negative stigma associated with her condition in gossipy, judgmental Tamaqua, Pennsylvania, committed suicide. The other held her head high and moved on with her pregnancy and her life. Unlike her other three sisters—my mother, Florence, and Isabel—who moved to New York in search of work and presumably husbands, she remained in Tamaqua and lived life on her own terms. In time, the stigma against her of being an unwed mother dissipated, and the townsfolk accepted her for who she was and provided social support as she raised her son alone.

As for my mother, she might have accepted the necessity of marital sex in order to get pregnant, but in her mind, sex for simple enjoyment and pleasure was dirty, untoward, and sinful. That is why I am convinced that beyond the circumstances relating to my conception and birth, my parents' marriage was sexless, joyless, and arid.

In that regard, I have estimated that my conception occurred on January 11, 1948, the date of my father's thirty-third birthday. I was born nine months later, so, for all practical

purposes, I was a belated birthday present! Moreover, considering his antagonistic relationship with my mother, I'd bet my bottom dollar it was the only time they made love. He did have a cache of nudie magazines—tame by today's standards—in the bottom of his chest-of-drawers. I looked through them a couple of times, but didn't find them arousing. I feel certain that my mother was aware of their presence, but don't recall her ever making a fuss about them. Regardless, I now suspect that Dad used them to self-pleasure himself

Nonetheless, to make amends, of sorts, for not revealing the secrets of reproduction, my father gave me what seemed to be an ancient, hardcover book to read entitled *On Sowing Wild Oats*. For starters, I didn't know what it means to sow wild oats. I tried reading a few pages, but the verbiage was so oblique and stilted that I couldn't comprehend what the author was trying to say, so I tossed it aside and it never saw the light of day again. I did learn one thing from the book, but I didn't grasp what it was until I became a parent; it was a pledge to avoid keeping my children in the dark about sex.

The Birds and the Bees

Nonetheless, I did have another opportunity—sort of—to learn the facts of life during the final months of eighth grade in my parochial elementary school. The boys in my class were sent individually to the rectory to have a *meeting* with Father John Powis, a radical, forward-looking, community-organizing parish priest who was well ahead of his time. When some of the boys returned from the *meeting*, they were laughing and giggling but saying nothing. When it was my turn, I trekked down to the rectory with apprehensive curiosity.

I knocked gently on the door and it was answered by the matronly housekeeper who ushered me to the rectory's office. On the way, I could smell the incense that was used in the church that morning during a solemn high mass for a deceased parishioner.

The center of the rather large and musty office was dominated by four large cushioned armchairs arranged around a circular coffee table. Except for a large brass crucifix, the walls were barren and in need of painting. At the back of the room was a simple wooden desk piled high with books and papers. It was positioned in front of an arched window, and Fr. Powis, who was wearing leisure clothes rather than clerical garb, was seated there when I entered. He stood up to greet me and signaled for me to sit in one of the armchairs. He came over and sat across from me.

“Are you doing okay today, Frank?”

“Yes Father; I’m doing fine.”

“Are you still serving as an altar boy?”

“Yup—at St. George’s.”

“Great! Glad to hear it. Anyway, the reason I’ve invited you and the other boys in your class to come to the rectory is to talk about the facts of life—about how babies are made. Do you know anything about that, Frank?”

“Not really, Father.”

“Are you interested in hearing what I have to say, or would you prefer that your father talk to you about it?”

I squirmed a bit and said, “I don’t think he would, sir.”

“So, you’re okay with my talking to you about this?”

“Yes Father.”

He began by asking me to describe the anatomical feature, besides breasts, that distinguishes boys from girls.

“Well, a boy has a di— . . . a penis and a girl has . . . I dunno . . . a hole?”

“Yes.” He pointed to it on a full-color but, at least to me, hard to decipher and abstract anatomical diagram of the female reproductive system. But not wanting to seem like a dummy, I played along and pretended to understand.

“It’s called a urethra, a tube-like structure that’s attached to the bladder, where the urine goes after it leaves the kidneys. The girl pees through the urethra just like the boy pees through his penis.”

Fr. Powis referred to his illustration again. “Now, just below the urethra is another, much larger hole. It’s called the vagina. The vagina and the male’s penis work together and serve a very important function. Do you want to take a guess about what it might be?”

“Umm—does it have something to do with making a baby?”

“Bingo! When a married couple lie on the marital bed and want to make a baby, they engage in lovemaking—they hug and kiss each other, and their bodies react to this excitement. The husband’s penis becomes hard or erect and he places it into his wife’s vagina which, from the excitement, has produced an oily fluid which makes it comfortable for the penis to be inside her.”

I wrinkled my nose and said, “Ewww, Father, that sounds so gross.”

“I suppose it does, Frank, but actually, it’s a beautiful thing and it’s pleasurable for the husband and wife. You could say that it’s a gift from God.”

Maybe so, Father, but it still sounds yucky to me!

“So, as the lovemaking continues, it builds up to a grand finale, in which a fluid, called semen, shoots out of the husband’s penis into the vagina.”

He continued, ad nauseum, always pointing to the chart as he described how the worm-like sperm swim through the cervix into the uterus and beyond in search of an egg to fertilize,

how the fertilized egg makes its way back to the uterus where it plants itself and how, over time, it transforms onto an embryo and then into a tiny, tadpole-like fetus that develops into the baby that will be born after a total of about nine months.

I'm not quite sure when my eyes glazed over, but when he finished, I said, "Gosh, Father, it all sounds so complicated."

That was my way of telling the good Father that he lost me. Although he did his best to simplify the process, it was a lot to absorb, and due to my lack of maturity, I filtered out most of it. For one thing, I couldn't fathom the idea of eggs, or ovum, being inside a woman. That sounded made up to me. And the thing about the tadpole—that seemed a little hard to swallow as well. Regardless, I commend him for making the effort. I don't recall if there was comparable instruction for the eighth-grade girls.

He did talk about the celibacy of the priesthood and that priests, being only human, achieve sexual release via nightly emissions. While I didn't know what Fr. Powis was talking about in reference to nightly emissions—a.k.a. wet dreams—I did have an inkling about the meaning of celibacy, and it spawned the idea in my head about becoming a priest. Although a passing fancy, it was a means of compensating for my continuing sexual naiveté—priests do not marry and must remain "celibate"—I understood the unmarried part, but at the time, the "celibate" part was a mystery, just like girls. All I knew was that as a priest, I wouldn't have to form a relationship with a woman, and that was fine with me.

My father took my lack of interest in girls to mean I was becoming gay and not the predatory Lothario he was expecting. In his mind, to borrow a word from the Book of Leviticus, it would have been an *abomination* and he actually called me a *fag*. I wasn't quite sure what that meant either, but thought it might have something to do with my gender confusion. He was so

worried that he set me up on a date with a distant cousin who was thought to have a “reputation,” but there was no chemistry and besides, I didn’t know what I was supposed to do with her.

Joan

Ironically, when I finally did get a girlfriend during my second year of high-school at a time when I was living through what turned out to be the worst year of my life—I was on the verge of flunking out of a high-pressure Catholic prep school and was dreading how my parents would react—to the point that I was actively contemplating suicide—my father and especially my mother poured fuel on the proverbial fire by doing their level best to scuttle the relationship.

The girl’s name was Joan; she lived in our apartment building, and was the daughter of an allegedly degenerate, beer-drinking Irish couple. She was tall and slender, attractive but not pretty, and her sense of humor was playful. Her eyes were steel gray, her hair was mud blonde, and her smile was wide and welcoming. She was about my age and if I remember correctly, was attending a business school to learn secretarial skills.

There was chemistry between us, and while we necked a lot, I still wasn’t quite sure what to do beyond that. All I knew was that it felt good, that I thoroughly enjoyed it, and wanted to be alone with her. She too was rumored to have a “reputation,” but to this day, I am convinced that it was unwarranted. But even if she had a history, she was committed to me and ironically, the neighborhood girls my parents *did want* me to date became pregnant out of wedlock.

We made out in the staircase near her apartment or in the darkened theater of the Marine Barracks across the street in the Navy Yard. Our embraces were warm and tender, and our kisses were passionate and French. Moreover, we’d hold hands to and from the local candy store or soda shop. Through all of this, there was no inappropriate feely-touchy behavior. I can’t say we were in love, but certainly, we were infatuated with each other.

When my parents found out about the relationship, my mother in particular demanded that I break it off. Joan's parents were put off by my parents' meddling, and so, until my family moved to the East New York section of Brooklyn the next year, we continued to meet in secret—a sort of Romeo and Juliet romance. I always wondered if my relationship with Joan factored into my family's move across Brooklyn.

I ran into Joan about two years later on Fulton Street where I shopping for a new jacket before heading to work. I just stepped out of the Abraham and Strauss department store, and someone called my name. I looked up and saw Joan; she was holding hands with guy I hadn't seen before.

“Joan! Hey—wow—so good to see you! How've you been?”

“I've been good. This is my husband, Charlie. We got married late last year after he got out of the Marines.”

“Pleased to meet you, sir, and thank you for your service. If you don't mind my saying, you got out at a good time. Things are really ratcheting up in Nam.”

“Yup, they sure are, and I'm pleased to meet you as well. Joan's told me a lot about you.”

I laughed. “I hope it wasn't too horrible!”

“Nah!”

“And Joan, what else have you been doing besides getting married?”

“Well, we've been trying to have a baby, but I just miscarried.”

“Oh my gosh—I'm so sorry.”

“Thank you. It was a really big shock, but we're young and we're going to keep trying.

“I wish you all the luck in the world!”

“Thanks again! And what have you been up to?”

“I’ve been taking classes at Brooklyn College, and to be honest, it hasn’t been going that well. I have too many distractions, like my job with the *Daily News*.”

“The *Daily News*? Wow!”

I laughed again. “It’s not as impressive as it sounds. I’m not a reporter or anything like that. It’s a low level, get your foot in the door kind of position. But I get to do a lot of cool stuff, like go to hockey games with a photographer and help him write captions and other stuff. We sit in the front row in an unprotected box so the photographer has a clear view of what’s happening on the ice. Being unprotected, we have to keep an eye out for flying pucks and try to remember not to stick out heads out of the box so we’re not clobbered by a passing hockey player!”

I looked at my watch and saw it was time to catch a subway train to Manhattan. Joan sensed that and asked Charlie if she could kiss me. He nodded, and while it wasn’t a passionate kiss, it was a kiss nonetheless, and a fitting way to acknowledge what once existed between us. It also was an acknowledgement that our lives had moved on and we likely never would see each other again. As she pulled away, I noticed a tear in her eye. There might have been one in mine as well.

And It’s One, Two, Three, what are we Fighting For?

That same year—1967—when I was turning 19, I was agonizing over how I was going to deal with the military draft. One way to avoid the draft was via a student deferment, which required you to be a full-time student. However, I didn’t meet the qualifications for full-time status because, in essence, I roller skated through high school.

Hence, I was allowed to attend the School of General Studies (SGS) at Brooklyn College on a part time basis. In this status, I needed to maintain satisfactory grades and make up any math deficiencies from high school. Basically, I needed to prove that I was capable of

performing at the college level. The carrot on the stick was ultimate admission into the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and full-time student status.

Unfortunately, my roller-skating days weren't over. I was distracted by my position as feature editor of the SGS student newspaper at Brooklyn College and by the job at the *Daily News*. Besides hockey games, my job exposed me to many fun and interesting things, such as attending the Westminster Dog Show at Madison Square Garden where I sat next to former NYC Mayor Robert Wagner who was wearing tails and a top hat, or sitting at the press table a hair's breadth away from Pres. Lyndon Bains Johnson who was in New York to deliver a speech at the New York headquarters of the AFL-CIO. However, I was more impressed by the journalistic royalty seated at my table, which included Peter Jennings!

One of the coolest and weirdest events I attended was something dubbed "A Happening" aboard one of the Staten Island ferry boats that sailed back and forth between Manhattan and Staten Island. It also was referred to as a "Hippie Happening" and took place on the evening of September 29, 1967. It was the creation of controversial cellist (controversial because she sometimes performed nude above the waist), Charlotte Moorman. She described the event as an avant-garde festival that would feature modern art forms, musical groups, poetry readings, body painting, and much more.

The *much more* included the smoking of funny-smelling cigarettes and the ingestion of psychedelic substances. I was too strait-laced at the time to grasp that, but I think the photographer I was with understood what was going on. He was chastised by one of the hippie chicks when she discovered he worked for the *Daily News*.

"Hey, man, how can you work for that fucking fascist rag?"

“Well—yeah—it is a fascist rag and I’d much rather work for *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, or something like that, but they’re not exactly hiring right now. In the meantime, I’m married, I got kids, and ya’ know, we gotta eat.”

“Yeah—I hear ya’, man. Hope ya’ find something better.”

“Me too, and thanks.”

The exchange was a teachable moment for me in that it demonstrated how educated people viewed the *Daily News*, and it was a lesson on how to defuse an otherwise sticky situation. At the time, I understood that the paper was a low-brow tabloid, but hadn’t thought of it as a fascist rag because of my conservative political leanings—which were about undergo a 180-degree shift.

* * * ♡ * * *

With a student deferment out of reach, I thought there was an ace up my sleeve that could help me beat the draft by getting a medical exemption—my deaf ear. So, when I went to Fort Hamilton in Brooklyn for my first preinduction physical, I carried a letter from my doctor which certified that indeed, I am deaf in my right ear due to a botched surgical procedure. So, as I sat there in anticipation of the physical, a doctor entered the large waiting room to talk about medical exemptions. He just happened to gravitate to the topic of hearing loss, and said that if you’re completely deaf in one ear but could hear completely well in the other, that wouldn’t impair your ability to shoot a gun, and therefore, you’re draft-able. I then looked down at the envelope bearing what I thought was my salvation and thought, *oh, shit!*

A few months later, toward the end of 1967, I was called up for my second physical, which meant that my date with a howling Army drill sergeant was imminent. I still was working at the *Daily News*, and on slow nights, I gathered with the other copy boys by the UPI or AP

teletype machines and watched as they spit out name after name of war casualties. We were looking to see if there was anyone we knew on those lists. I also got the sinking feeling that my name might wind up on one of lists as well.

It seemed to me that the only people getting killed in the Air Force were pilots and flight crews, and since my lack of a college degree and my hearing loss would preclude involvement with either endeavor, I decided to join that branch of the service. In retrospect, it turned out to be a wise choice; the odds certainly were in my favor. Of the 58,152 U.S. military service personnel who were killed in Vietnam, 65.6 percent were in the Army, and only 4.4 percent were in the Air Force.

Also, in retrospect, I did have another potential ace up my sleeve that I could have used to avoid the draft, but was too timid and confused about my gender identity to use it. In the 1960s, by law, the military eschewed sexual nonconformity.

In that regard, when I was waiting to get my second physical at Fort Hamilton, what I perceived to be a trans woman glided into the waiting room as if she was standing on clouds, and took a seat.

She was sandal clad and was wearing what appeared to be men's casual clothing, but she had a very feminine countenance. She had a light coating of makeup but still would have been pretty without it, her pinkish red hair was not very long but was coifed elegantly, and her finger and toenails were expertly manicured and coated with a clear shiny nail polish. Most of all, her figure was amazing, not that it was buxom, but she bore an uncanny resemblance to the rail-thin 60s supermodel, Twiggy.

Among the assemblage of potential cannon fodder, heads turned, eyes stared, fingers pointed, and tongues wagged in hushed tones. When the newcomer was spotted by an official,

she was called aside and questioned at great length out of earshot. Eventually, she was dismissed. Looking unsure about where to exit, the inquisitor pointed and said,

“It’s that way, *sir*.”

That triggered a crude response from a jackass seated in the room.

“Srrrr? Don’cha mean ma’ammm—hah, hah, hah!”

“Hey, baby, d’ya wanna do it?” teased another buffoon.

A chorus of laughs and cat calls followed from the macho, gung-ho, and transphobic Neanderthals assembled in the room.

Geez—these fuckers are disgusting, I thought. I have to admire that woman’s willingness to bear the scorn and disrespect from these assholes so she can express her true self, her true identity.

Despite my admiration, I didn’t know enough about myself to do what she did. I thought there was something wrong with me—that I was mentally ill—so I kept my desire to be a woman and my fetishes in the closet. Fears of discovery and stigmatization were stronger than the desire to publicize my inner thoughts and feelings.

This was at a time when sexual nonconformity was pathologized and regarded wrongly as or equated to pedophilia, when homophobia and transphobia were cultural norms, when the LGBTQ+ liberation movement was striving to get its feet on the ground, and when the watershed moments of the Stonewall Riots were still two years away. From my perspective, it just wasn’t safe to come out—yet. And it would take almost a lifetime to recognize the reality that the time indeed did arrive. But I would have to learn more about myself, about my inner workings, before I could leap over that chasm.

Chapter 2. Adulthood: Dating, Courting, and Marriage

For many people, adulthood is about relationships and responsibilities. In terms of relationships, I had a few, and they were complicated by my struggle to navigate through them living with gender dysphoria.

As for responsibilities, I was required by law to serve my country in what I came to regard as a war of imperialist aggression. So, to avoid the draft and lessen the chance of being killed in a senseless war, I went into the Air Force, and in between serious relationships, I spent a year overseas in a drug induced haze.

Austin

I was inducted into the Air Force on Valentine's Day, 1968, while the bloody Tet offensive was raging in Vietnam. After about six months of training, I reported to my first permanent duty station at Bergstrom AFB in Austin, Texas. After growing up amid the hustle and bustle of New York City, it was a refreshing change. With its progressive ethic and its reputation as a southern mecca for the 'sixties hippie countercultural movement—former Texas Governor Rick Perry once referred to the city as the “blueberry in the tomato soup of Texas!”—I grooved on the scene, and in my spare time, self-taught myself to play the acoustic guitar and harmonica. A slew of hole-in-the-wall coffee houses emerged in Austin that were tuned into the folk revival that was all the rage in New York's Greenwich Village, and I hung out at two of them: the Checkered Flag, where Jerry Jeff Walker and Lightnin' Hopkins were regulars, and a cabaret called The Red Lion. I spent more time at the latter venue, and was planning to perform a guest set there.

Beverly

In the meantime, I was lonesome and felt the need for female company—someone I could hang out with and talk to. I was not looking for a lover, although I dated a few local women but our relationships soured because of the invisible barrier I erected between them and myself, namely, an unwillingness to engage in sexual relations. My reasoning was that sex should be reserved for the marital bed, but that was merely a rationalization because I didn't think I could perform as a man once our clothes were off.

I did have a few male friends but it generally was difficult for me to form a bond with a guy because of the lack of common interests; to me it seemed that most guys focused on sports, or on carnage filled wartime battles as if in and of themselves they were sporting events, or on souped-up cars, or especially on sexual conquests. All of this talk attested to their sometimes-toxic masculinity, and I found it repulsive. Hence, it was easier to relate to women than guys. I thought I'd find this person at the USO in Austin, and I did. Her name was Donna. Her husband was serving overseas in Vietnam and Donna was lonesome too. We became friends quickly, but strictly in a platonic sense. That's how she wanted it, and I was fine with that.

One of my favorite songs was and is Leonard Cohen's *Suzanne*. Donna had a great singing voice—much better than mine—and she offered to join me in the guest set in performing a harmonized rendition of the song. We practiced constantly, getting better with each rehearsal. Winter was setting in, and she decided that it was too cold to practice in my car. She wondered if I'd mind practicing at her parent's house.

“No problem,” I replied.

During our first rehearsal at the house, I met her sister Beverly, a sophomore music major at UT-Austin. I found her to be attractive, amiable, and bubbly.

“Hey, Donna, I think I’d like to date her.”

“Well, I think it’s a good idea!” she giggled.

We dated and after just about two months, she asked *me* to marry her. We were so much in love—or so it seemed—and we spent many an evening in each other’s arms. She encouraged me to fondle her breasts, and we French kissed, touched each other’s private parts, and we both found this arousing. But that invisible line against coitus was always there.

The Proposition

On a cold winter afternoon as Beverly and I walked along campus after I picked her up from class, she propositioned me.

“I’d like to take you to a room and seduce you.”

I could feel the blood draining from my face, and I pulled the chivalrous gentleman card.

“That sounds really nice, but there’ll be plenty of time for that once we’re married.”

But she didn’t give up. As I was driving her home from a movie a few days later, she had another idea.

“Let’s elope!”

Here we go again, I thought.

“That would be super, Bev, but I’d hate to start our marriage on the wrong foot by alienating your parents. They’ve been so good to me and I just don’t know how we’d repair the damage.”

We continued along in silence until she asked a strange question.

“What’s the difference between love and lust?”

I turned my head and looked at her with disbelief. *WTF? Is that a trick question? What is she getting at? Is this her way of saying that she wants to have sex?*

I didn't have a good answer and fumbled my way through it.

Today, I'd have a more cogent and direct answer.

“Love is the deep emotional bond that exists between two individuals, and lust, or sex, the unimpeded giving of one's self to another, is the reification or ultimate expression of that bond.”

To that, I imagine Beverly would have said,

“Well, damn it Frank, then *show* me that you love me!”

That's what I was afraid of, but yes, if I said *that*, whatever it took, we would have made love that evening.

In the weeks and months that followed, we started saying things to each other calculated to torpedo the relationship. Contributing factors were not only my perceived sexual inadequacy, but my dismal academic record, my sense of low self-esteem, and my lack of self-confidence. I was intimidated by her brilliance and felt intellectually deficient next to her, and let her know it. I also was intimidated by her brainy, nerdy friends and was uncomfortable around them.

Moreover, the elements of our incompatibility started coming into sharper focus. Beverly was a devout Lutheran who claimed she was high on Jesus—I preferred wine myself. She started trying to bring me to Jesus and her mother gave me a copy of *Good News for Modern Man*, a vernacular version of the New Testament. They even started dragging me off to Sunday services.

I already tried Jesus and Christianity via Roman Catholicism, found them wanting, and thus stepped away from them. At this point in my life, I was leaning toward atheism. Hence, to put a lid on the proselytizing, I revealed my feelings about religion indirectly by introducing them to my hero, Madalyn Murray O'Hair. At the time, Ms. O'Hair lived in Austin. She was regarded as the demon that allegedly kicked prayer out of public schools, although the 1963

decision in *Abington School District v. Schempp* simply banned mandatory, teacher-led Bible reading or praying in public schools.

O'Hair broadcast a weekly local show in which she highlighted the inconsistencies and misinformation in the Bible, and eviscerated clerics who had the temerity to debate her. I was a big fan, and invited Beverly and her mom to join me in listening to an episode. They did, and while they disagreed with her in principle, they were dazzled by her brilliance. But having them listen to the broadcast had the desired effect; they stopped trying to save my soul.

Regardless, things continued on a downward slope and on about our six-month anniversary in June 1970, Beverly dumped me. Coincidentally, this was the night I was going to present the engagement ring. She selected it a few weeks earlier in the Base Exchange at Bergstrom, and they called me that day to say it was ready for pick up.

When I pulled it out of my pocket, the bad news began.

"My mother thinks I'm mean."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I can't accept that ring."

"Why?" I asked plaintively.

"Well, my aunt has been very sick lately, and I don't think it would be good for her to deal with the stress and excitement of a wedding."

What does that have to do with anything," I wondered. Regardless, I offered a compromise.

"We don't have to get married right away. We can wait until she's feeling better."

"Oh, I don't know when it'll be a good time to get married."

"I don't understand." I'm crying now. "You wanted to elope."

“Yup, I did, and we’d probably be happily married now. But we’re not, and maybe I’ll want to marry somebody else.”

“Do you have anyone in mind?” I asked sarcastically.

“Well, there’s Peter.”

“The guy who whipped my butt playing chess?”

“Uh huh—that Peter. I asked him to marry me last night, but he’s got too much going on right now.”

That little tidbit felt like an arrow piercing my heart.

“We can still be friends though,” she said.

“Friends? Seriously?” I scoffed. “After what we’ve meant to each other, even with our ups and downs, I can’t see us being just *friends*.”

“Well, I’m sorry Frank, but other than that, there’s no future for us.”

I sat in silence for a while, tears still streaming down my face, and finally got up and left.

With my emotions running wild with feelings of loss, anger, denial, and betrayal, I sat in my car until I was calm enough to drive back to base.

As dysfunctional as our relationship was, I was blindsided by what happened that evening and it took years for me to come to terms with the rejection. Understandably, what left me gape-mouthed about that traumatizing moment was her revelation about having asked her brainiac friend Peter to marry her. If nothing else, what she did was pretty damned duplicitous.

Was she having relations with him on the side? I wondered.

Ultimately, I realized that the depth of our incompatibility would have been insurmountable to overcome, and having gotten married at that point in my life would have stymied my intellectual growth and development. It turned out I was a late bloomer, both

intellectually *and* sexually! In regards to the latter, I ultimately found a way to way to overcome or cope with my sexual inadequacy.

Over There

About a month after the breakup with Beverly, I learned that my life was going to experience another disruption. Initially, it seemed as though I was going to spend my entire tour of duty at Bergstrom, which was not unheard of; that worked for me.

But then it happened; to my shock and dismay, I received orders to go overseas. The orders indicated that I would be stationed at Ching Chuan Kang Air Base (CCK). My immediate thought was *Oh geez, oh shit—I'm going to Vietnam!*

I was weak-kneed and shaking. I continued reading and it turned out that the base was located on an island off the coast of mainland China, namely, Taiwan. I didn't know it at the time, but I was going to waste a year of my life in a drug-induced haze.

The only bright spot of that year was my experience with LSD which I regarded as spiritual and transcendent. Some people refer to it as “instant Zen” and others say its effects are akin to the numinous experience—the sensation or perception of being in the presence of God, or a higher power, or ultimate reality. As a result, I rethought my position on religion, began to regard the universe as a manifestation of God, of which we are a part, and therefore a part of God, and thus started drifting away from atheism toward pantheism.

On a more personal level, LSD helped me to look into my own mind, and I liked what I saw. It helped me to overcome the feelings of inferiority and low self-esteem that arose from the abuse and humiliation inflicted upon me by my mother during childhood. In short, through acid, I was able to achieve what in clinical terms is referred to as a “corrective emotional

experience”—an experience that most people undergoing psychotherapy don’t achieve until after months, or even years of therapy.

Otherwise, I was either stoned on pot, which I hated, or high on heroin, which I loved. When I was introduced to heroin, I never looked back and became addicted quickly. I concluded that it did two things for me in that it was a powerful analgesic for both the body and the mind. On the one hand, I was living with a chronically painful orthopedic condition that nothing could touch; the heroin solved that problem.

On the other hand, it numbed my mind to the pain of being in the military. By mid-1971, I became thoroughly disgusted with my association with the Air Force and the military, with all the stories and images coming out at that time about the atrocities being committed by American troops against the Vietnamese people—the Mỹ Lai Massacre of 1968 being one of the earliest gruesome examples of many—and worse, how the Air Force that I was serving for nearly four years was burning innocent Vietnamese babies to death as it rained napalm down upon them.

Although as a medic I didn’t have any direct involvement in these outrageous acts, I nonetheless felt guilty by association, hence, in protest, I refused to file the paperwork for promotion to staff sergeant. The people around me thought I was crazy—and perhaps I was—but the way I saw it, the promotion would have made me a more valuable asset to the war machine, so I stuck to my metaphorical guns.

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As my date of separation neared, I took stock of my life, about whom and what I’d become, and about my plans for the future. I decided that being a junkie did not fit in with those plans. I wanted to return to Austin, go to a junior college to get my grades up in order to be admitted as a full-time student at UT, and earn a journalism degree.

Hence, I resolved to break the chain that bound me to heroin and quietly went through the process of withdrawal. To anyone who observed me, I seemed to be presenting flu-like symptoms. But obviously, a lot more was going on. Afterwards, I still had cravings for the drug and even kept my body prepared to receive it in the event of a relapse. One keeps their body prepared by not eating. An effect of heroin is nausea, so you want as little food as possible in your stomach when you use it. Hence, as the result of this abstinence, I lost a substantial amount of weight. When I was inducted into the Air Force in 1968, I weighed 180 pounds; when I returned to the states in early 1972, my ribs were sticking out and I was a scrawny 152 pounds.

By the time I was detoxified, it was time to return to the states, or what we had been referring to as the world, as if service in Asia was akin to being on another planet. So, I packed up my stuff and sent it to my former barracks mate Josh at Bergstrom so it could be deposited at the apartment we'd be sharing.

The Return to Earth

I departed from CCK in December 1971 and was back in Austin in early January. I moved into the apartment with Josh and the everything seemed hunky-dory. But it didn't take long for me to realize that it was not going to work. Josh was into drugs much more than I could have imagined; the apartment served as a full-time party venue, much like my barracks at CCK, and one of his creepy friends, another medic from Bergstrom, who was aware of my history with heroin, offered to procure a powerful, injectable barbiturate for me that would simulate the heroin experience. I declined the offer.

After a few weeks of this, I bolted and moved out. Obviously, I fantasized about how perfect my life would be, just as all of us at CCK fantasized and romanticized about what our lives would be like once we got back to the world—but the world had changed—our heads were

stuck in a world that moved on and no longer existed. We were all wannabe pot-smoking, acid-dropping hippies, and I tried so hard to fit into that mold when I got back to Austin, but I soon saw myself as a caricature of what once existed. So, I cut back on the drugs—as a student now, I wanted to proceed with a clear head—and I abandoned most of the external affectations, such as the love beads, a headband, a fringed suede vest—basically the whole *Easy Rider* schtick—but not the hair; it was going to be shoulder length. On one level, it was a reflection of my anti-establishmentarianism and disdain for the military, and on that score, long hair was still in vogue in Austin.

On another level, it was a reflection of my gender identity and of how I hoped to wear my hair someday as a woman—like an American World War II veteran I heard about on TV in the mid-1950s when I was about seven years old—George Jorgensen—who went to Denmark to undergo hormonal therapy and sex reassignment surgery, to become Christine Jorgensen. She was not the first American to make the transition, but Christine became the de facto spokesperson for transgenderism. Even at that early age, I was fascinated by her story and wanted to know more, but didn't quite know where to look. I was just learning to read and how does a seven-year-old *boy* tell his parents, one of whom abhorred sexual nonconformity, that *he* wants more info about *Christine Jorgensen*? And little did I know that her dream would become mine, but its reification was years away.

Alta Lee

Being high most of the time when I was overseas quashed most thoughts about sex, especially the heroin use, which is associated with decreased sexual desire. However, once my head was clear, I started dating again. I went out with a variety of women but nothing clicked. One of them, Marlene, claimed she was a witch who could predict the future. For me, she said

that marriage was on the horizon, but not to her—she was a free bird. By then, it was the summer of 1973, and she predicted that I was going to be married within a year to someone I hadn't met. I was incredulous.

Later in the year, a guy with whom I worked at Bergstrom before going overseas, Doug, just got his discharge and asked if I wanted to share an apartment with him and one of his friends, Brian, who was a UT student. Doug would be attending UT as well. After the experience with Josh, I was leery at first, but remembered Doug as a level-headed person, and once he showed me the apartment, I was hooked. The price was right and after living in that cramped little room for over a year, it was like moving up to the Ritz.

In late October, Doug asked if I'd like to join Brian and him at his brother's apartment for a pre-Halloween party after a Longhorn football game. I demurred, saying that my partying days were over. Doug was insistent, and finally, I capitulated.

I try to avoid parties because I tend to be socially awkward and shy among strangers, in large measure because of my hearing problem, and usually become a wallflower. So, I showed up expecting to have a crappy time. Of course, the minutes seemed like hours.

Is it time to go yet? I wondered. *Damn—it's barely gotten started.* In exasperation, I sighed audibly and rolled my eyes.

To pass the time, I stood in a corner and sipped wine, devoured hors d'oeuvres, examined the predictably chintzy apartment complex furniture, accented with early-modern Pier 1 Imports—beaded room dividers, a Buddha statue, and an incense burner—and watched people interact with one another—and how they started making fools out of themselves as they became intoxicated. As I considered calling it a night, I noticed a young woman who was keeping pretty

much to herself. She was tall, thin, pretty, had short brunette hair, and was wearing a short-sleeved knit top and mid-thigh culotte shorts.

Hmm—another wallflower, perhaps? Maybe I should join her so we can commiserate!

Ha-ha—I can ask her if she’s having a good time! That’ll be a terrific icebreaker!

I walked nonchalantly over to the part of the wall she was buttressing and introduced myself. Expecting an immediate rebuff, I was prepared to retreat back to my corner. Instead, we became engaged in a very nice conversation.

“Hi! My name is Frank, and you are . . .?”

“Alta.”

We looked into each other’s eyes and I gave her a gentle handshake.

“Are you a friend of Lester?” she asked.

“Nah. I’ve met him, but I’m a friend of his brother Doug. He and I were in the Air Force together. We’re roommates now.”

“Oh—I guess that means you’re rooming with Brian as well.”

“That’s right. How do you know Brian?”

“We’re student workers in the audio-visual section of the campus library. In fact, it was Brian who invited me to the party. I don’t particularly like parties, but Brian bugged the heck out of me to come so, here I am!”

“Well, I’m glad you came and it’s a pleasure to meet you, Alta.”

“And you as well, Frank.”

We smiled warmly at each other during the exchange.

“Ya’ know, it’s funny—funny as in strange—but I didn’t want to come either. I told Doug in no uncertain terms that my partying days are over. But like you, here I am!”

“Lucky you!”

“Yup, ha-ha! So, what’s your major, Alta?”

“Education.”

“In what field or level?”

“Oh—yeah—language arts. In fact, that’s where I started out. But I decided that I wanted to teach it in my junior year. I’m student teaching this semester at a middle school where most of the kids are disadvantaged.” Pointing to her head, she continued. “So, I’m having to be *creative* in finding ways to get them interested in reading and especially writing. Fortunately, my supervisor has given me the flexibility to do that.”

“Is it working out?”

“I think it is. The kids are really into this emerging musical genre called hip-hop. I’m having them write about their lives, hopes, and dreams using this format. On the one hand, the rules of standard English and spelling don’t apply, at least initially. The idea is to get them started. But, on the other hand, the rules of hip-hop, with its rhythms, rhymes, and beats, do apply. And they’re really into it and are having a blast. They can recite or sing their creations, that, if you think about it, are a form of poetry! If they want a hip-hop beat playing in the background, that’s fine too.”

“Wow—that sounds so cool!”

“It is—it really is! And what’s your major, Frank?”

I laughed hard and loud. “Writing!”

“Oh, come on!”

“Well, it’s a form of writing—journalism!”

“Interesting. How’d ya’ get started in that?”

“When I was in high school, I was like Bob Dylan’s rolling stone who had no direction home. I was a total slouch, and one of my teachers went so far as to call me a vegetable—but that’s denigrating vegetables because they serve a useful purpose.”

Alta laughed.

“But really, I didn’t know where I was going in life, I hated school, and except for one thing, might have wound up becoming a garbage collector.”

“And what was that *one thing*?”

“It was my best friend, Tom. We were two peas in a pod, but his part of the pod is where the brains were. He loved basketball—as an observer—and wanted to cover games for the school paper. This meant having to take an English class during the second half of our junior year that included a journalism module. It sounded interesting, so I signed up for the course as well. Taking the course was our ticket to write for the school paper during our senior year. I enjoyed it so much that, to make a long story short, it became my *direction home*, and that’s why I’m here working on a degree in journalism!”

Having stood since I arrived, my back was giving out and Alta seemed a little uncomfortable as well.

“Would you care to sit down?”

“Oh my gosh—*yes*—my new shoes are killing me!”

We gravitated over to an unoccupied loveseat and made it ours! I offered to massage her aching feet and she welcomed the idea. We both turned sideways to face each other, and she placed her feet on my lap so I could massage them.

“Oh, God, it feels so good—I wish there was a way to put it in a bottle and take it home!”

“I’ll tell you what. I wanted to sit down because my back was killing me. This is not the place to give someone a backrub, so let’s just say that if we ever see each other again in a more appropriate venue, you’re indebted to me for a backrub.”

“Okay—it’s a deal! But that means we’d have to see each other again. And what if I needed a foot massage?”

“Do you want to see me?”

“I think so—yeah! You could come over to my apartment . . .”

“Or you could come over to mine—or better still, we could go picnicking. Every Sunday morning, I step away from the academic grind, hop onto my motorcycle, ride out to Lake Travis in the Texas Hill Country where I meditate and become one with nature. Then, before returning to Austin, I stop at the Paleface Park Inn in Spicewood for a barbecue sausage sandwich and a root beer. We could do something like that on, say, next Saturday afternoon. And you have the option of going by bike or car.”

“I only ride in vehicles that have four wheels.”

“Got it! Pick you up at noon?”

“Works for me!”

As our conversation continued, I began to notice that the guests were filtering out of the apartment and thus it was time for me to take my leave.

“Well, there’s a song sung by Austin’s favorite son, Willie Nelson, about all good things coming to an end, including parties, so I guess I’ll be on the road again.”

Alta chortled. “Ooh—that is so lame—but I’ll let it pass ‘cause I love Willie so much.”

Again, I told Alta that it was nice to meet her, that I enjoyed talking with her, and was looking forward to the picnic. It went well, and we started dating. Initially, I maintained the

posture of the chivalrous gentleman, especially when she told me during a candid moment that during her freshman year, a drunken frat boy tried to rape her. With that in mind, I decided if we were going to be intimate, she would be the initiator.

During the Christmas break, we flew to New York to spend the holidays with my mother, and to do the tourist thing in the city: we walked through the snow-covered Central Park, went to the Met, MOMA, the Guggenheim, Radio City, St. Patrick's, FAO Schwarz, and many other landmarks and attractions, including the iconic Rockefeller Center.

As we looked down at the ice skaters, a familiar female voice was screeching my name.

“Frankeeee! Frankeeee!”

I turned, and of all the millions of people I could have run into in New York on that day and at that specific moment in time, it was my eccentric, bag-ladyish Aunt Isabel.

“Hi, Auntie!”

I pecked her on the cheek.

“Whad're yous guys doin' heah?”

I wondered the same about her. Although like Mom, Aunt Isabel was from rural Pennsylvania, her speech pattern evolved into an exaggerated and elongated version of New Yorkese.

“It's just a little vacation. We're taking in the sights and sounds of the Big Apple. Oh, by the way, this is Alta Lee. It's her first time in New York.”

“Oh, my! She's so beautiful!”

“Thank you, and yes she is!”

“So, you're takin' in the sights? Ya' wanna go to the top of the RCA building [i.e., 30 Rock]? I know the elevator operator.”

“Umm, that’s such a generous offer but, umm, we have tickets and it’s almost time for the show to start, so we better get moving. But it’s been great to see ya’! Tell Aunt Florence I said hi.”

I pecked her on the cheek again and we scurried off.

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As we walked along 5th Avenue, I told Alta a couple of things about my aunt—like how, when I was a kid, she insisted on giving me big, sloppy, and creepy kisses on the lips. More interesting—and disturbing—was what she did when I was about eight or nine. She babysat for me in her apartment on New Year’s Eve so my parents could go to a party. The next morning, still wearing her bed clothes, she came into the living room where I was sleeping and woke me up to wish me a Happy New Year in a loud, cheerful, sing-song voice. She then asked if I wanted to see her scar. I was aware of her recent abdominal surgery, but wasn’t particularly interested in seeing the scar. Regardless, she didn’t wait for a response and lifted her nightgown up to her neck. All I noticed was that she wasn’t wearing any underwear. I turned away in embarrassment for her and myself. I told her that it looked like it might have been painful. She replied that it was at first but that she was doing okay now. She then lowered her nightgown and proceeded to make breakfast as if nothing strange and untoward just happened.

Intimate Moments

After we returned to Austin, Alta signaled a readiness for intimacy. We proceeded slowly: kissing, hugging, fondling, and cuddling. It wasn’t long before she was ready for the next step. Sometime in January or February, we made a single-day trip to her family home in Houston. For the sake propriety, we slept in separate bedrooms. I can’t remember the reason for

the trip; it might have been something involving her younger sister. Nonetheless, when we got back to Austin, she told me she wanted so badly to come to me that night in Houston.

After that, I found myself spending much more time at her studio apartment. And I was ready to offer to her what she now was offering to me. The word *autogynephilia* was not yet in my lexicon, and would not be for about another 50 years. But instinctively, I arrived at the understanding that if I loved her *in my head* as a woman would love another woman, I also could perform as a man.

And so, we were in love; falling deeper and deeper in love, and this time, it was for real.

Houston

After dinner one evening as we lounged on Alta's sofa, she asked about my post-graduation plans.

I shrugged my shoulders and said I wasn't sure.

"I guess I'll hang out in Austin for now and look for a job as a journalist. They've gotta need one somewhere. But I'm also looking into graduate school. I have enough G.I. Bill benefits left to get me through at least a Master's. What're you gonna do?"

"I have to go back to Houston."

"Why? Why can't you stay here?" My disappointment was obvious.

"Well, I've got to take care of my sister, Penney. Mom died of cervical cancer when I was a sophomore, and Daddy couldn't stay home because of his job which takes him all over the world. So, an alternate arrangement had to be made."

"I'm so sorry about your mom, Alta."

"Thank you." She teared up a bit.

"She must have been so young."

“Yeah; she was 42 when she died.”

Alta was crying now, and I held her in my arms as she unleashed two years of pent-up grief. For the sake of her younger sister, she, and not her self-absorbed older brother, had to be the strong one when her mother died, but now she was free to express the sorrow she kept bottled up inside her since the funeral. She finally fell asleep, and when she awoke, she was still in my arms.

“Sorry about that.”

“No reason to be sorry, Alta. You needed that.”

She continued where she left off. “Anyway, some family friends, Gene and Bobbie Stewart, stepped up and agreed to take care of Penney so I could go back to school. The understanding was that I’d become her guardian when I graduated.”

“Wow, that’s a lot of responsibility to bear.”

“Yeah—it is—but a promise is a promise.”

Alta stopped to think for a moment and then smiled.

“Hey, I have an idea—why don’t you come home with me?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You could stay at the house in my brother’s old room while you look for a job or consider other options. Daddy promised to be here for my graduation, so you’d get to meet him and he could help load my stuff into a van and then your stuff from your apartment.”

I thought about it for a moment. Our relationship was, metaphorically speaking, almost heaven, and I didn’t want to lose her. I didn’t know a thing about Houston, but decided if she was at my side, things would work out.

“Ya’ think he could squeeze my Honda 350 into the van?”

“That and more! He’s a professional squeezer!”

“Well—okay—sounds like a plan!”

When we got settled into her house, we planned a graduation trip back to New York.

This time, *I* had an idea!

“Hey, Alta, what would ya’ think about us getting married while we’re up there?”

Looking at me with starry eyes, she said “It’s with you.”

“Well, I guess that means we’re getting married!”

With my mother taking very shaky wedding ceremony pictures with her Instamatic camera, that’s what we did, in Brooklyn’s Borough Hall on June 14, 1974—Flag Day! Our elopement irritated members of her and my families, but from our perspective, it was the perfect way for two shy and socially awkward people to tie the knot; no muss, no fuss!

Moreover, things didn’t work out with Alta serving as guardian for Penney, so she returned to the Stewarts, and we were able to move on with our lives unencumbered. And oh; turns out that Marlene the witch’s prediction about my being married within a year was spot on! On the other hand, my Aunt Isabel’s subsequent prediction that our marriage was doomed to failure because we married outside the Catholic Church (yes—she said that) was a bust!

I’m also off the drugs. I left those behind when I left Austin. My preference now is for Pinot Grigio, and lots of it! But I miss Austin so much, as does Alta. We wanted to settle there, even purchasing some land in the Texas Hill Country near Wimberly and planning to have a weekend cabin built on the site. But eventually, we sold the acreage because our lives are entwined solidly now in metro Atlanta, and for better or worse, with our daughters and grandson living in close proximity, we have decided to retire in place. However, there’s always the PBS show, *Austin City Limits*, to provide some comfort and stir up the memories.

Chapter 3. The Golden Years: Reconciliation and Rebirth

With minor ups and downs, our lives proceeded on a relatively even keel. We maneuvered our way through graduate school, work, and parenthood. Before we knew it, our kids were grown and on their own, and it was time for us to retire. Alta called it quits in 2008 after 30 years as a high school librarian and started a quilting business. I retired three years later after 35 years in the work force, working mostly as a historian. Although I didn't realize it at the time, everything I did from that moment on prepared me to jump over the chasm alluded to earlier. I would come out of the proverbial closet and make the MTF transition.

It took me nine years to get there, and the path I followed on that journey of discovery may seem convoluted and unrelated. However, all of these things—namely, a short stint in seminary, followed by the study of religion, gerontology, and, most important, social work—ultimately coalesced and delivered me into the Promised Land. Any deviation might have left me wandering in the desert like the ancient Israelites.

A Flirtation with the Ministry

A year or two before I retired, I reflected on what I was going to do during my golden years. Besides my full-time day job, I spent my free time involved with social activism. Informed by sixties idealism, the Civil Rights Movement, and the ongoing conflict in the U.S. between property rights and human rights, I cast my lot with the latter and became a social justice warrior. I was headquartered, as it were, at a Unitarian Universalist church in Marietta, Georgia. Religiously, it was a perfect fit for me. I became very active, editing and writing for its newsletter, and often leading services.

On one occasion in the early 1990s, I was the co-leader of a service that addressed the antigay resolution that was just passed by the Cobb County Commission, with pressure from the

Christian Coalition and a prominent local religious leader. Donna, the wife of the congregation's president, provided background information about the resolution, and I talked about the state of religious extremism in Cobb and beyond.

The presentation went well and at first, the discussion that followed was low key and civil because it seemed that the attendees were like-minded and sympathetic toward our opposition to the resolution. Despite the comity, however, there was an individual sitting in the pews that day who was uncharacteristically quiet. When he spoke, it usually was from a far-right perspective. For example, he bought into the conspiracy theories that were circulating about what happened at the Branch Davidian Complex in Waco, and blamed Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms agents and U.S. Attorney General Janet Reno for the conflagration that occurred there, calling them baby killers.

So, on that Sunday when this gentleman, a balding, fifty-something political rabble-rouser stopped listening and started talking, all of us who were gathered under the expansive, vaulted ceiling of the sanctuary were both surprised and mortified. Surprised because he has a Master's in psychology and in my mind, should have known better, and mortified because he delivered a hateful, ill-informed homophobic rant.

With a scowl on his face and a growl in his voice, he opened accusingly, "I don't understand you people today. I mean, what's with the fundamentalist bashing? Those folk are entitled to their beliefs and opinions just as we are."

Still standing in the front of the sanctuary with Donna, my jaw dropped and I responded.

"Hey, Mike, I wasn't attacking anyone's beliefs. This is America and you can believe anything you want. That being said, you don't have the right to impose those beliefs on your neighbors. The point I'm making about religious extremists is that many of their beliefs lean

toward theocracy and they just don't have a place in a secular society where there's supposed to be a separation of church and state."

"Well, whatever," he continued. "But what I really don't get is how all of you can sit there and act like homosexuality is completely normal. It's not and it's disgusting. Those animals are pedophiles and Pat Buchanan is exposing them for what they are and their agenda for what it is. Do you know that there's an organization out there called the North American Man/Boy Love Association? Well, Buchanan is writing about it, and what this organization is all about is defiling young boys. How sick is that?"

He stopped for a moment to look everyone in the eye and then continued by wagging his finger at the congregants.

"And so, by attacking the Family Values Resolution, and worse, by inviting this scum to come here and sit in our midst and worship with us, you're basically saying that this kind of behavior is just fine, but in no way, shape, or form am I okay with it."

An unsettling murmur arose among the congregants, and a woman—a social worker—who was beside herself with anguish, spoke up.

"No, Mike, I wasn't aware of the Man/Boy Association. In that regard, you can find incidences of pedophilia or pederasty in any population. But I don't think there's a person in this sanctuary who would sanction or defend that kind of behavior."

She was shaking now and paused to take a deep breath.

"But that man/boy thing is an anomaly and despite what Pat Buchanan has to say on the matter, I'm certain that it attracts a miniscule cross section of the LGBT community. According to organizations like the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association, the percentage of children who are sexually abused by gay people is very low. On

the other hand, Mike, research shows that there's an 80 percent greater likelihood that a child will be sexually abused by a married heterosexual person, and it can and often does include members of their own families.”

The gentleman wasn't convinced, and after he stepped out of the church that day, he never darkened its door again. However, if he returned, he certainly wouldn't have been comfortable at our congregation or at any other UU church in the country because like us, they were in the process of opening their doors wide to welcome LGBTQ+ persons into their midst.

Unbeknownst to my fellow congregants, that included me as well! Even though my transition was years away, I now saw myself as the “T” in LGBTQ+. However, I was not prepared to come out yet and thus throughout the controversy, I presented myself as a *straight* ally of the LGBTQ+ community. I felt hypocritical about it, but nonetheless, I regarded the resolution as a personal affront, it angered me, and I was determined to fight it tooth and nail until it was repealed or subjected to a sunset law. I thus poured all of my energy into fighting the resolution, working in tandem with groups opposed to it, such as the gay/straight alliance of the Cobb Citizens Coalition and a UU group, the Network for Social Responsibility–Cobb, whose newsletter I volunteered to edit.

I became involved in other controversies as well, such as the Cobb Commission's unconstitutional and quixotic fight to display a Ten Commandments plaque in the Cobb State Court Building. Hence, with so many injustices plaguing our society, I decided that for my retirement project, I would become a full-time activist. I would do this by studying to become an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister. My goals were to establish a social justice ministry, take up the cause of the downtrodden and marginalized, and fight injustice wherever it exists. The only problem was getting through seminary.

I would have to earn a Master of Divinity degree from any seminary in the country accredited by the Association of Theological Schools. The two UU seminaries in the U.S. are accredited, and while I assumed I'd be comfortable in one of those settings, they're not exactly convenient; one's in Berkeley, California, and the other is in Chicago, and I wasn't physically or financially prepared to make the trek to either. Hence, as an alternative, I applied to the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, where I was accepted and awarded a small scholarship.

I was elated and was looking forward to the experience. Candler has a reputation for being theologically liberal, which led me to believe that I'd be comfortable in that setting as well. I was wrong; I was out of place in a Christocentric environment—I was the square peg trying to fit into the round hole. Candler's idea of religious liberalism is a far cry from what it means to UUs. Although Unitarian Universalism emerged out of Christianity, it evolved over time from its roots and many of its ministers have gravitated toward an agnostic humanism and away from the supernaturalism of more traditional Christian denominations.

In Candler's defense, while the faculty is comprised of believing Christians, they acknowledge that the Bible is not an infallible document. My professor for Old Testament History and Interpretation noted that many errors and improbable stories have crept into the Bible, along with content from many other religious traditions which preceded the emergence of the Israelites and the Abrahamic tradition. However, he believed that as a whole, the Bible is the inspired word of God. I wouldn't go that far, but I relished the opportunity to pull back the curtain to see how the Biblical sausage was made.

While I reveled in the revelations, some of my fellow seminarians did not. For example, a young woman with whom I was friendly since the start of the semester approached me in tears

after class one day. I was eating lunch alone and was reflecting on the day's lecture in which the professor debunked the story of Noah and the Great Flood.

She sat down next to me and said, "This is not the Bible I've grown up with and love and cherish. I'm so confused. I feel like my mind is being poisoned."

I empathized with her, but dared not say what I thought about the Bible. She dropped out of the program a few days later.

I dropped out at the end of the semester for the opposite reason. Despite the qualified liberalism or openness of the faculty, a large segment of the students were quintessential *holy rollers* who relished the fact that there were prayers before and after class because it provided many of them with the opportunity to make ostentatious demonstrations of their love and devotion to the Guy in the Sky by standing up, closing their eyes, and lifting their arms, palms upward in obeisant supplication. I understand and appreciate the place that ritual has in religion, but it made me feel uncomfortable and like I was in the documentary film, *Jesus Camp*, which depicts young children being indoctrinated into ultra-fundamentalist Christianity.

The turning point for me occurred mid-semester when I was approached by a particularly pious but self-righteous young man who wore a cross on his neck that seemed larger than the one Christ is said to have borne at Calvary.

"I hear that you're a Unitarian and that Unitarians don't accept Jesus as their savior. If that's true, it means you're going to Hell when you die."

I was baffled by his brazenness and forthrightness and momentarily was at a loss for words. I stared at him for an uncomfortable moment and finally began my reply.

"Yup, I am a Unitarian—a Unitarian Universalist to be exact—and while most UUs, including me, do not accept Jesus as their savior, we do accept some of the teachings ascribed to

him, especially those that are morally and ethically consistent with UU principles. We do that for all faith traditions. And by the way, our theological model does not include a Hell nor, for that matter, a Heaven. *Imagine that!*”

Another of the three UUs in the program, who self-identified as being a nontheist, told me about having a similar experience and how she responded.

“It’s your Hell, bud, so you can burn in it, and as for Jesus, I don’t have a hole in my life that needs to be filled by an imaginary friend!”

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Although I left Candler, I still had an abiding interest in the historical, anthropological, philosophical, psychological, and sociological aspects of religion, so I transferred into Georgia State University to work on an MA in Religious Studies. Unlike seminary, where religion is taught from a faith-based perspective, Religious Studies looks at religion from a scholarly and objective/empirical point of view.

Another thing I took from Candler was a love for senior citizens. This came about via a chaplaincy internship in which I worked a day a week at a senior independent living complex in Sandy Springs. I ministered to the psycho-social-spiritual needs of my parishioners and fell in love with them and loved what I was doing. Hence, as graduation neared, I pondered what I could do to continue serving the elderly. To my delight, I discovered GSU’s Gerontological Institute, which offers a Master’s in gerontology. This, I thought, would provide me with the knowledge and skills necessary to continue my new calling.

Discovering Social Work

Thus, after graduating from the Religious Studies program, I entered the gerontology program. However, after a few courses, I made another consequential discovery in my *Race*,

Ethnicity, and Aging textbook. It included a module on social work which outlined the principles and core values of the social work profession. I was amazed at how closely they mirror the seven principles of UUism (Unitarian Universalist Association, 1985) with their emphasis on social justice advocacy, challenging social injustice and empowering the vulnerable, oppressed, and impoverished, respecting the dignity and worth of individuals, and honoring the self-determination of clients.

Wow—that's me! I thought. I'm gonna become a social worker!

It would mean stepping away from the gerontology program, but I felt deep in my heart that it was something I just had to do. Moreover, it would be my way of achieving equifinality—reaching a goal or destination by way of a different path.

Reconciliation

My specialization was direct clinical social work with a concentration in mental health. I graduated in 2016, and in the next several months, my mental health training provided an unexpected dividend. But I had to deal with a struggle first. Late in 2017 and into 2018, I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I was anxious, deeply depressed, and having concentration problems. Alta could see that I was tormented—about something—but I refused to talk about it and kept it bottled up inside. My fear was that if I revealed what was going on in my head about my gender identity, it would wreck our marriage.

But I knew that I needed to speak with someone. At that moment in my life, thoughts of suicide did cross my mind, as they did when I was a high school sophomore. While I did not act upon these thoughts, I could sense that I was spiraling in that direction and might even be getting close to the edge.

My first thought was to find a mental health professional in my insurance plan who specialized in LGBTQ+ issues. There was no one—more proof that treatment for mental health issues in this country is not taken seriously. I then looked outside the plan and found a licensed clinical social worker (LCSW) in Decatur who specializes in sex therapy.

The only problems with working with her were that I wasn't thrilled with the idea of having to drive from west to east metro Atlanta for counseling and therapy on a regular basis, and I knew with certainty that I couldn't afford her fees. Nonetheless, she could see that I was hurting and agreed to speak with me on the phone with the hope and expectation of finding an agreeable alternative. I made the call sitting at the desk of my spacious, cathedral-ceilinged home office/library, with the door closed for privacy.

I felt comfortable discussing the reasons for my psychological discomfiture with her, and for a brief moment, I felt like a Catholic again who just stepped into the confessional. But there's no way I could have confessed to a priest what I was revealing to the therapist. Definitely not; I assumed the priest would have been judgmental and/or condemned me to spend eternity in the fires of Hell for what he would perceive as my unforgivable, lifelong sins of cross dressing, masturbating, and engaging in self-bondage. When I told the therapist about my fetishes and fantasies, she just brushed them off.

“Unless you're endangering your life or someone else's, there's nothing out of the ordinary going on there, and I have plenty of clients who do the same thing and who otherwise lead completely normal lives. There's nothing wrong with spicing things up for *yourself*—or your lover!”

I laughed and was impressed with her nonchalant attitude on these sensitive matters. “I guess that's why they call you the *sex* therapist!”

She laughed as well. “Is there anything else that’s bothering you?”

I pondered for a moment about whether I wanted to reveal my true intentions. *If you’re not going to be up front now about what you want, then when?* I wondered.

“Yeah—there is. I’ve come to the conclusion that my life has been a lie and I want to do something about it.”

“Please explain what you mean.”

“Well, there’s more to this than just fetishes and fantasies. I’ve always known that I’m different, and have the feeling that I’m a woman trapped in a man’s body. You know, kind of like Christine Jorgensen. I’ve known about her since I was a kid.”

“Yeah—that goes back a long way!”

“And she’s always been in the back of my mind—but I didn’t know what to think about her. Was she nuts and was I nuts for wanting to be like her?”

“Back in the day, that’s what a lot of people thought about transgenderism.”

“In the eighties, when I knew a little more about it, I started thinking—even accepting that I was a trans person, but kept it to myself.”

“Were you afraid?”

“Yes, I was. Afraid of being discovered, ostracized, and ridiculed.” I recounted the appalling story about the trans woman at the Fort Hamilton induction center.

“Yeah, the way she was treated is pretty horrific, and your fears are not unwarranted.”

“But things are changing for me. Since I retired, I *discovered* social work, and my mental health training has helped me to understand that I have lived with gender dysphoria since childhood and I am struggling to find a way to come out of the proverbial closet and affirm my gender identity.”

The therapist was silent for a moment, processing what I just said.

“So, what does that mean to you?”

“It means that I want to initiate the male-to-female transition and live my life, as much as possible, as a woman. But I just don’t know what to do, how to get started, where to go, who to talk to. I see ads on the web for hormonal therapy and stuff like that, but I just can’t trust these people and don’t know if they have my best interests in mind. They seem to be a lot like those pain clinics that are popping up all over the place.”

“You’ve got that right. Stay away from those hucksters. But I think I know where you can go to get the help you need.”

“Where?”

“Well, when you gave me your background information earlier, you mentioned that you’re a veteran. That’s the solution to your dilemma. The VA can help you get what you want.”

“Huh? The VA? Seriously?” I laughed! “You’ve *got* to be kidding!”

“Nope—it’s for real! I know it’s surprising, but the VA has issued a directive that requires its facilities to provide respectful delivery of health care to transgender and intersex veterans. And that, I presume, includes you!”

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I went online to find the directive, and it says that while the VA *does not* provide sex reassignment surgery, it does provide pre-operative evaluation, and medically necessary post-operative and long-term care following sex reassignment surgery that is performed in a non-VA medical facility. In addition, it provides sex-specific care like mammograms and transition-related care such as hormonal therapy and mental health services.

I was not surprised at all. Nope—I was shocked—shocked that the VA was so enlightened on this issue. I thus contacted my PCP by phone at the VA and told him that I was experiencing emotional turmoil and needed to have an appointment with a mental health professional.

“What seems to be troubling you, Mr. Miele?”

“I’d rather not discuss it with you, sir.”

“Well, I need something to go on.”

“Umm—it’s sexual.”

“I see. I suppose I can set you up for an appointment with a social worker.”

“Sir—I am a social worker—I think it would make more sense for me to see a psychiatrist or psychologist.”

“Hmm—are you worried that you might be gay?”

I rolled my eyes and sighed. “It’s something like that, sir.”

“Okay. I’ll have our clinic’s social worker call you, and if he deems that your situation requires a higher level of intervention, he’ll set up the appointment.”

“Thank you, doctor.” *Yeah—thanks for nothin’!*

The social worker called later in the day. I was surprised by the rapid follow up, but it made sense. The suicide rate among veterans was and is alarmingly high, and the VA has been doing its level best to stem the tide.

After some lighthearted mutual banter, the social worker administered a suicide risk assessment.

“Do you wish you didn’t have to go on living?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do have thoughts of wanting to die?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you have thoughts of wanting to take your own life?”

“Sometimes.”

“Umm—what do you mean by sometimes?”

“Well, over the past several months, I’ve been in a deep rut. You know—the negative triad—negative feelings about myself, about the future, and about the world. But it’s looking like I’ve found a way out of that rut.”

“Sounds good, and we’ll discuss that shortly. But in the meantime, have you thought about methods to kill yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you decided on *how* you would kill yourself?”

“Yup.”

“Elaborate on that, please.”

“My first thought was to blow my brains out.”

He seemed startled by my response. “So, *you own a gun?*”

“Yeah—but I decided that it would be too messy—and I wouldn’t want to put my wife through that.”

“So, how would you do it?”

“By taking a dose of my sleep meds that’s strong enough to put me to sleep forever.”

“And what med is that?”

“Temazepam. You know—Restoril. I’m sure you’re aware that it’s a controlled substance and definitely would get the job done.”

“Yes, it would. So does that mean that you’ve started making preparations to commit suicide?”

“Nope—at least not yet.”

“Does that mean you *have not* gone as far as putting your affairs in order or writing a note?”

“That’s correct.”

“Have you made any kind of arrangements for what happens *after* you die?”

“Yes, I have—and so has my wife. After the seven-year-long Terri Schiavo fiasco, my wife and I drafted living wills to make sure we didn’t wind up in the same boat. Of course, this includes instructions on what to do with our remains after we die.”

“That makes sense and I commend you for doing that.”

Having established that I was not in imminent danger of ending my life, the social worker gravitated to the purpose of the call.

“Your doctor mentioned that you’re experiencing some kind of psychological upheaval and that, as he put it, your complaint involves something sexual.”

I relayed to the social worker what I told the sex therapist, and that I wanted to be evaluated by a psychologist for the purpose of initiating the MTF transition. Actually, it takes two concurring psychologists or psychiatrists in order to move forward with a transition. But that’s only the first step. Other ducks must be set in the transition row before the process can begin.

The social worker set me up with an appointment with a VA contract psychologist. She was an amiable person and the evaluation took place over three weeks via tele-mental health phone calls. She put me at ease and I discussed aspects of my sexual history that I hadn’t shared

with anyone except the LCSW sex therapist—like how I cross-dressed secretly since childhood and was mortified that I'd be discovered and tagged as a perverted transvestite—or worse.

For many people, transvestism is a paraphilic disorder in which the crossdressing individual merely derives sexual pleasure from donning apparel associated the opposite gender but has no interest in transitioning to that gender.

On the other hand, if the crossdressing is accompanied by autogynephilia—imagining or fantasizing one's self as being a woman, as well as a desire to transition at the outset or over time—then the DSM-5 characterizes the crossdressing in that instance as a precursor to gender dysphoria, which in and of itself is classified as a condition and not a disorder. This is true during copulation as well, when one likely is not wearing clothes but still imagines or fantasizes that they are the woman being penetrated.

I concluded that this is applicable to my situation, and mentioned it to the contract psychologist. She agreed, and given that in all respects the assessment went well, she set up an appointment for me with the head of the psych program at the Atlanta VA in Decatur. On the day of the appointment, I was a nervous wreck, fearing that my dream would go up in flames. Adding to the stress was the fact that a male clinical psychologist Ph.D. candidate was going to observe and participate in the meeting.

The session took place in the roomy, soothingly furnished and warmly illuminated office of the fortyish facilitator, Dr. L. At the outset, she allayed my fears and concerns. Looking at me with a warm, maternal smile and speaking with a soft, calming tone, she said,

“I want you to know that I'm not a gatekeeper, and barring any unforeseen issues—which, based on the report I received from my colleague, seem unlikely—I should be able to respect your goal.”

“Thank you, doctor. You *can't imagine* what a relief it is to hear that!”

“Well, Frank, I can! A lot of people seem to think that when they're coming to see me, they're entering the lair of the wicked Queen Grimhilde!”

I laughed, sat back, and relaxed. *Wow—if she's trying to put me at ease—she hit a home run!*

The session lasted almost three hours, and we covered every aspect of my sexual history, down to the tiniest detail, including my desire for a baby doll when I was a child. I did note to them that the primary factor which solidified my conviction that indeed I am a woman is my propensity toward autogynephilia. She was not familiar with the concept, but the Ph.D. candidate was and he agreed that it is marker for gender dysphoria.

The session concluded with Dr. L. informing me that I was psychologically suited to begin the transition and that she would make a recommendation to that effect. That was wonderful news, but there were two more hurdles. First, I needed to get medical clearance from my VA PCP. I was a little worried about that because I have chronic kidney disease. Hence, before I met with the doctor, I did some research to see what kind of effect the estrogenic substances in hormonal therapy have on the kidneys. I found a peer-reviewed article on the subject, and to my relief, it indicated that estrogen provides a protective effect on the kidneys.

I brought the article with me to my appointment with the PCP in case he had any concerns or qualms about issuing the medical clearance. The appointment went well, and the final hurdle would be a physical exam by an endocrinologist who would do a final assessment and, all things being equal, would prescribe the hormones and periodically monitor my blood chemistry and general health.

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But with most of my ducks now in a row, there was one more thing I needed to do before I pushed the metaphorical start button. It was time to explain the nature of my psychological upheaval to my wife and what I hoped to do about it. While I was able to discuss all of this with the social workers and the psychologists, I wasn't sure how to do it with my wife. After much thought, I decided to broach the subject by way of the written word. It would be a love letter of sorts. I told her I was emailing it to her, along with links to objective information on WebMD about gender dysphoria and transgenderism. The slightly edited and abbreviated letter is reproduced below.

"Sweetheart, over the years, you may or may not have noticed that I have a feminine side. That's why I asked you to read the WebMD articles. The truth is that I've been living with long-term gender dysphoria. Now that you've become familiar with this condition, you now know what I've been wrestling with for years, and why, over the past few months, I've been experiencing such pronounced psychological stress, anxiety, and depression.

The fact of the matter is that there's a woman trapped inside me, and she's screaming to get out. Basically, I've been living with gender dysphoria since childhood. I didn't understand it at first, but these feelings have plagued me for years, and recently, they reached critical mass, causing me to conclude that it's too painful and lonely to bear these thoughts and feelings by myself.

It seemed prudent, however, that before I brought this to your attention, I should get professional confirmation about possible gender dysphoria. That's why I reached out to the VA for psychological assistance. I had sessions with two VA psychologists over the past few weeks in which we discussed my sexual feelings and history going back to childhood, and both clinicians concluded that indeed, I am experiencing gender dysphoria. Moreover, they, along with my PCP,

believe that I'm psychologically and physically fit to begin the male-to-female transition. But all of this is preliminary. Before anything is set in motion, I'd have to undergo a much more thorough and extensive endocrinological assessment to determine if I'm a suitable candidate for the treatments. And so, this is where things stand. I told my PCP that before I see an endocrinologist, I wanted to discuss the matter with you to get your feelings and input.

Regardless of what we decide about undergoing the treatment, my hope is to embark on a new chapter of my life, and I want us to do it together. I certainly don't want to lose you, and I sincerely hope that you'll be able provide me with the understanding, acceptance, and support necessary to make a smooth transition. As you'd expect, it's been difficult for me to convey all of this to you, and I'm sure it's been hard for you to process. But for me, bringing this out into the open has been both therapeutic and liberating because I'm no longer alone and in the dark.

Thanks for reading this, and please know that I love you."

When Alta finished reading the missive and took time to reflect, she came to the bedroom where I was waiting in a recliner. I had no idea what to expect. Not expressing any kind of emotion, she stood and stared at me for what seemed like an infinite moment, and finally spoke.

"I never really thought of you as being a woman, but if this is what you want to do, then I'm all in."

I started breathing again, stood up, and hugged her for another infinite moment. My emotions undulated wildly, from joy, to gratitude, and most important, to relief. Eventually, I released my embrace and sat back down. She reclined on the bed where our children were conceived, and propped herself up on her study pillow. She stared at me again for a while before speaking again.

"It all makes sense now."

“What does?”

“You getting your ears pierced a few weeks ago.”

“Oh, yeah!” I gave her a crooked, sheepish smile. “I guess it was my first overt way of expressing my gender identity!”

“So, what’s next?”

“I need to make an appointment with an endocrinologist who’ll evaluate me and, all things being equal, will prescribe the hormonal therapy.”

Nothing more was said about it that evening. I joined her on the bed, held her like there was no tomorrow, and we fell asleep. We would have longer conversations about how things would proceed after my chemical transition began.

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When I tried to make the appointment, I encountered an obstacle. It was early February and the soonest I could see a VA endocrinologist was mid-May. When I expressed my disappointment and frustration, the appointment clerk empathized and noted that because the earliest appointment availability was months away, the VA would look for an appropriate non-VA provider through the newly instituted Veterans’ Choice program.

Not hearing anything after more than a week, I called and was informed that the VA was unable to find an appropriate provider. I was told that I could continue the search myself, but was advised that in order for the VA to cover the costs, the provider must be registered in the Veterans’ Choice program.

I came up empty as well, and decided to look for providers in my own health plan and pay for it out of my own pocket. I found an appropriate provider quickly who is located a short drive from home. She became the person who’d administer the preliminary assessment, initiate

the transition by prescribing hormonal therapy, and monitor my health. All I'd have to do is ask the VA to Fax my psych evaluation to the endocrinologist.

Rebirth

I arrived early for April 20th appointment. After the nurse checked my vital signs, the doctor entered the sterile, sparsely furnished examining room and introduced herself. She looked through my digital chart and reviewed my psych evaluation. She then conducted a thorough, head to toe exam and when finished, asked if I had any questions. I didn't, but she did.

“Are you aware that the estrogen could induce a debilitating or even fatal embolism?”

“Yes ma'am.” I was well aware of the risk, considering that Alta almost died from one when we lived in Louisiana.

“Are you aware that the estrogen is likely to result in diminished libido?”

“Yes ma'am, and at my age, I'm not too concerned about that.”

“Are you aware that the effects of the hormones are permanent?”

“Yes ma'am. And I have looked into other actual or possible effects, including the thinning or disappearance of body hair and the shifting of body fat.” I was becoming impatient. I already did the research!

“Good. Do you have a social support network?”

“Yes. My wife supports my transition, and in fact, it was her idea for me to get my nails done by her nail tech. I'm hoping my daughters will accept and support what I'm doing as well.”

“Do you intend to present as a female?”

Wow—that was a hard question to answer. In my letter to Alta, I told her that I'd be discreet but we did not discuss it beyond that. We would talk about it soon. In the meantime, if you looked closely, there were subtle indications already that something was going on. The

longish hair, the earrings, the woman's blue jeans, the fingernail polish—a neutral but shiny pink called *Bubble Bath*—and the toenail polish, a luscious deep red that I love as much as its name—*We, the Female!* Normally, I keep the toenails hidden, but if I'm feeling sassy or if I or we are going to a *safe* place, such as to a restaurant, to my nail tech, or to my hair stylist, I wear open-toed sandals.

As for the doctor's question about presenting *en femme*—going the whole nine yards, if you will—I gave her a squishy answer, intimating that I was going to ease into it. She gave me a side-eyed glance but mercifully, went on to talk about the therapy. She prescribed a 1mg dose of Estradiol, and a low dose of Finasteride, a drug that blocks the effects of male hormones on the body.

Within an hour, I was home with the pills in hand and was giddy.

Wow—this is almost like receiving my first Holy Communion, but only better, I thought. Today, I am being reborn, not as a boy, but as a woman!

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A few days later, my wife and I were planning a family meeting in which our grown daughters—Marianne and our younger daughter, Katharine—would be introduced to the new me. It would take place the following Sunday. I then mentioned the question the doctor asked about my presenting as female and the tentative answer I gave her.

“I know I promised to be discreet, concerned that you might have qualms about my going out in public in a dress or whatever, but that was my assumption and we really haven't talked about it.”

“That's true, we haven't.” She smiled and continued. “But if it's what you want to do and you're comfortable with it, then I am as well.”

Geez! I thought. This whole time, I worried that she'd be freaked out by all of this, and it turns out she's into it almost more than me!

“Okay—so maybe we could do it next month when we go to the Bill Maher show?”

“Works for me!”

“Alright! But hey, I know I can pass as a woman with just a little lipstick, but I want to be glamorous for the occasion so I'll need help with my makeup. Can you assist with it?”

“Nope! I think our daughter the aspiring artist can be more helpful in that department.”

“Great—sounds like a plan—I'll bring it up during the family meeting next Sunday.”

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The meeting took place in the family room at midmorning. I was enthusiastic and had high expectations for the outcome. It quickly became clear that things would not go as planned. My daughters were not hostile—yet—but were not very receptive. They just couldn't understand what I was doing and what had gotten into my head.

“Hey guys, look—I didn't just wake up one day and *choose* to be a woman. It's my psyche, my predisposition, and the way my brain is wired that's telling me that indeed, I am a woman. In fact, the decision was made for me in the womb before I was born. For my entire life, I have struggled to understand and come to terms with my destiny, and I'm doing it now.”

They didn't seem convinced but were a little curious.

“So, what do we call you?” asked Katharine.

“In a book I just read about a trans woman's transition, she said that she combined Mom and Daddy into Maddy, and that's how her kids referred to her when they were young. What do you think about that?”

“I don't like it,” said Katharine.

Marianne chimed in and said she didn't like it either. She changed the subject. "What are you going to choose for your first name?"

"I'm thinking I'd like it to be Francesca."

"Nah—it sounds a little pretentious," Alta opined.

The girls agreed.

"Okay—how about Fran?"

It was a matter of simply dropping the 'k' off my male given name, Frank. Everyone could live with that—but I'm still stuck on Francesca and use the name when I can.

When I brought up my intention to go *en femme* to the Bill Maher show, neither Marianne nor Katharine were interested in physically assisting me with my makeup. But Katharine did offer a few pointers.

"You'll need to ditch those glasses and get a pair that look more feminine. And false eyelashes, the magnetic kind, would be a good idea."

The girls were not happy with the proceedings and expressed their displeasure by way of frowning, sighing, crossing their arms, and avoiding eye contact. It would be an understatement to say that the meeting was tense and I was relieved when it ended. I was disappointed as well—thinking that we had raised our daughters to be more accepting and open-minded than that.

A week later, my wife and I were relaxing in our sunroom. The phone rang; Alta answered it and quickly handed it over to me.

"It's Marianne, she's crying, and she wants to talk to you."

I put the phone to my ear and asked her what was wrong.

"Dad, you've always been such a good friend to me, and I don't want to lose you."

"You're not losing me sweetie; I'll always be your friend."

“I don’t know, Dad,” she sniffled. “I feel like you’ve died.”

“I’m very much alive, sweetie, and I’m the same person I’ve always been. You’re just getting to see another dimension of me.”

And that’s how the conversation went until she hung up. She ruminated about it all week after the family meeting and fell into a state of grief, which is a natural thing to do. People grieve when their customary day to day existence or routine is disrupted. The most obvious and common trigger is the death of a loved one, but it can occur in response to any other significant life event, such as the loss of a job. Hence, while the notion that your father has come out as a woman can be discombobulating, I didn’t and still don’t understand why she equates my transition with death.

I think about it often and wonder if I could have made more headway with Marianne if I asked her to think of me not as a person who has died, but as someone who has been reborn as their true self—as a woman. That’s how I see it, and perhaps she would have as well. I’ll never know. I do know that in addition to the grieving, she fell into a deep depression. It got so bad that my son-in-law called me.

“I’m sorry to hear she’s in such a bad way, Drew, but I don’t know what to tell you. If she doesn’t snap out of it soon, take her to a therapist. In the meantime, please keep me up to date on her condition.”

What was I supposed to say? That it’s all a big misunderstanding? That I’m only fooling and I’m not really a woman? My thought was that Marianne needed to work it out on her own or with help from her husband and/or a therapist. She would not seek or accept help from me whom she now regarded as a pariah.

Prior to my coming out, we indeed were very close—much closer than with Katharine, who always has been a standoffish and very private person. In contrast, Marianne regularly came to me for counsel and advice or just to chat. But now we barely speak to each other and I feel estranged from her.

Marianne did call me a couple of months after the family meeting to lambaste me when she saw the changes that I made to my Facebook page. I now went by the name Fran, listed my gender as female, and in my profile picture, I present as female. The reaction from my Facebook friends was positive and congratulatory. What Marianne did was unfriend me! Given her ongoing hostility, I was not surprised but was slightly miffed. What boggled my mind was that when her husband's sister came out as a lesbian, Marianne didn't bat an eye and even congratulated her for coming to terms with her sexuality.

A few months after that, my younger daughter the *artiste*, who at the time was working on an MFA in art at the University of Georgia, came home for the weekend and wasn't in the house for more than ten minutes before she read me the riot act about the Facebook page and everything else related to my transition, how unfair it was and how it let Marianne and her down. I let her go on and on and get it off her chest.

Obviously, it was simmering for a long time and this was her cathartic moment. I didn't have much to say, and why bother? Her tantrum was not going to change anything. In my mind, the *only* person in the world who has the right to raise any objections about any of this is my wife, and she has stood beside me unflinchingly since the beginning.

Alta also encourages me to present as female and thinks I should do it more often—to be true to myself. I'd love to do that, but I'm also aware of existential realities. For example, while I might go out to get the mail wearing open-toed sandals from time to time, I'm not going to

broadcast blatantly to my neighbors that I'm a trans person. If they haven't figured it out by now, especially since I've had my otherwise nonexistent eyebrows tattooed permanently in a feminine style, it's on them.

Two of the families in our cul-de-sac have small children. I know with certainty that one of these families is deeply religious. Regardless, many people with small children tend to be suspicious of sexually nonconforming individuals and think the worst of them—that they're pedophiles. In fact, in today's toxic and ultra-polarized political environment, far-right conspiracy theorists are denouncing the political opposition as being pedophiles or worse, as baby-eaters. A couple of weeks before the governor of Florida signed the ignominious "Don't Say Gay" bill, his spokesperson denounced everyone in the LGBTQ+ community and anyone who supports them as being predatory, child-abusing *groomers*, a word that's becoming fashionable in the conspire-o-sphere.

Another family in our cul-de-sac has grown children and their youngest son graduated a year or so ago from the institution founded by Jerry Farwell, Liberty University; that's a red flag in and of itself and should say something about the family, which makes no bones about its religiosity.

When they first moved to Georgia from Colorado in the late 1980s, where the wife worked as an administrator at a religious college, she invited Alta over on numerous occasions for Bible readings. Alta declined politely each time, but the wife—let's call her Angel because she's so angelic—was slow in catching on that Alta wasn't interested. When Alta asked if she intended to work, she replied with a broad smile.

"Nope! I'm gonna stay home and make babies!"

But after a year, there were no babies, and Angel complained to Alta that her husband—let's call him Micah because he has the bearing of a Biblical prophet—was failing to do his job. But soon thereafter, Micah must have received a revelation, because the baby factory started producing at full capacity. They turned out five children, but sadly, one was stillborn.

So, in this milieu, on the issue of presenting *en femme*, discretion is the better part of valor, and Alta has come to see the wisdom of that as well. For me, the most important and affirming aspect of transitioning is being accepted and supported as a female, not only by Alta, but by my friends and classmates, and they have been amazing.

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The first time I presented as a female in public, I thought the best and safest place to do it would be at my hairdresser's shop. I checked with him first to see if anyone else working there would be bent out of shape if I showed up wearing a dress. He told me not to worry since everyone there already knows I'm transitioning!

I drove to my appointment in Roswell wearing a wig, lipstick, a long-sleeved, Bohemian print, knee-length dress, black tights, Mary-Janes, and carrying a clutch purse. I was looking good! My presence at the shop was uneventful and everyone treated me with the usual courtesy and friendliness. Afterward, I drove up to Alpharetta to pick up lunch for Alta and me at the Original Pancake House. That turned into an interesting experience.

Alta ordered the food in advance by phone so it would be ready upon my arrival; there was no record of the order. Moreover, the person assisting me—I believe it was the manager—evidently forgot to wear his glasses that day because he kept referring to me as “sir.” I corrected him but he didn't seem to notice. So, I'm not sure why—I mean, I wasn't pissed or anything—but I haven't returned to the Original Pancake House since then!

In reality, however, I was pissed—pissed about his ignorance, intransigence, and shortsightedness. But in my anger, I actually triumphed in the moment because my greatest fear was that if a situation like that ever arose, I'd be humiliatingly embarrassed. But I wasn't. Instead, I felt disrespected and insulted.

Crossing the Rubicon

One of most noteworthy and affirming events of my transition occurred two years after the initial assessment appointment with my endocrinologist. During that appointment, we discussed the possibility of my getting gender-affirming surgery via an orchiectomy. She thought I should get it done right away because of my kidney issues, but when researching the transition process, I saw in several reliable sources that the procedure usually is done about two years after the start of hormone therapy. Hence, while I told her I planned to get it done, I wanted to observe the usual two-year protocol. She was fine with that.

At the two-year mark, I prepared to cross the Rubicon by getting written approval from the endocrinologist and another psych evaluation from the VA. The procedure would be done in tandem with a hernia repair.

The repair turned out to be a blessing in disguise, because it provided cover for the main event—the orchiectomy! Not wanting to give our daughters another reason to be upset, when we informed them about the upcoming surgery, we told them it was to repair a hernia that I was living with for years—nothing more, nothing less! Moreover, we felt that the orchiectomy was none of their doggone business!

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Two years after the surgery, in what can be regarded as the final stage of the MTF transition, my expected and welcomed breasts finally arrived. I noticed them in the bathroom mirror after taking a shower.

Wow—look at them! They seemed to take forever, but they're finally here! And now that I have my own boobs, I won't have to wear the silicone breast forms anymore!

I bought the breast forms with the recommendation of my endocrinologist after I expressed disappointment about the pace of my breast growth. Nonetheless, still looking into the mirror, I cupped my well-formed breasts in my hands and tried to imagine what they'd look like in a bra.

Hmm—I'd say they're a Perfect A, just like the bra with that name made by Glamorize. Guess I'll be buying a few of those! But I'm so freakin' jealous. Jennifer Finney Boylan says that her boobs blossomed out as C Cups!

Final Thoughts

I am at peace and I am happy. Happy in body and spirit. Happy I came out of the darkness of the closet into the light. Happy with the support and acceptance I'm getting from Alta and my friends, including classmates and professors. Happy with the respect, understanding, and assistance I've gotten from the medical community, including the VA, throughout the transition process. Happy that there are women like Jennifer Finney Boylan and Danica Roem—the first out transgender person to be elected to the Virginia General Assembly—that I can look up to for inspiration and serve as role models. Happy there's a rapprochement, albeit tenuous, with my daughters. Happy I can spend time visiting and playing with my almost three-year-old grandson. Last and foremost, happy to be experiencing the realization of my dream.

Reflection

My primary goal for the Capstone Project was to write a memoir about the sometimes-tortured path I followed over the course of my life striving to understand who and what I am, vis-à-vis my gender identity and how, once it was clarified in my mind, coming to terms with it and, at the age of seventy, taking the steps necessary to affirm it via the male-to-female transition. A secondary, incidental goal was to develop a roadmap for individuals who are beset with a similar predicament and most important, demonstrate that it's never too late to have a fulfilled life.

I wrote the first draft during the summer of 2022 after a conversation with my capstone advisor, Prof. Garrard Conley, and reading the first chapter of Vivian Gornick's, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (2002). As a Johnny-come-lately licensed social worker who was trained in direct clinical practice, I appreciated Gornick's metaphor about the nonfiction narrator as an analyst who expects their clients to be open and honest about their inner selves. However, in turn, the analyst must be willing to do the same. In other words, how can you expect honesty if you're not willing to bare your soul yourself? With that in mind, I strove to craft a narrative that is true to the facts, regardless of how embarrassing or uncomfortable it made me feel.

In addition, I derived much inspiration from Jennifer Finney Boylan's book-length memoir—*She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (2003)—about her own MTF transition. I ran into it serendipitously, and read it just as my transition was about to begin. It provided a lot of insight into what to expect moving forward, but it would have spared me from a lot of frustration and headaches if I read it when I was still in the planning stage.

When the writing began, I somehow overlooked the fact that the MAPW Capstone guidelines stipulate that a creative nonfiction narrative is to be no more than 70 pages in 2-3 chapters. Hence, the first draft I submitted was about a hundred pages over four chapters.

Moreover, while it was not my intention to write an autobiography, that's what it became. That was the historian in me, endeavoring to place myself within the historic context and social milieu in which I grew up and lived. The result was a lot of irrelevant and unnecessary details that added little, if anything to the main thrust of the story, namely, my gender identity and the MTF transition. I believe the current draft avoids these pitfalls and is more succinct and to the point. However, if space permitted, there are some things about my early life and upbringing I would've liked to include.

Another problem my committee identified is the lack of scenes throughout the narrative; I was *telling* more than *showing*. Yes, I'm guilty of that, but to me, it seemed more honest to *tell* the reader about events or interactions that took place over the course of my life 60, 40, or 20 years ago than to place them in scenes. My feeling was that it's impossible to reconstruct dialog in verbatim form. Nonetheless, since this is *creative* nonfiction, I decided that I could pull it off by using my recollection of events or interactions to create scenes that are close approximations of what was said, done, or experienced. But the caveat to this is that recollections can be colored by the lenses we've worn through life, be they clear, rose-colored, or jaundiced.

One of the main components of the Capstone process involves responding to the feedback of committee members. Initially, it can seem like an ego buster, but I realized quickly that commenting and revising are necessary, even welcome parts of the process because I'm being shown things I didn't see or think of, being prompted to provide examples or elaboration, or asked to justify content which otherwise should be deleted. In a way, the exercise becomes a group project that reflects the thinking of everyone involved and thus, the final product is, in essence, an organic process in which the manuscript evolves into a mature, refined version of

itself. This does not go without saying that I didn't always agree with a suggestion or recommendation, but explained my reasons for rejection in comments.

As for my plans to move the project forward, I feel confident that my story is appropriate for some LGBTQ+ literary journals, such as *Screen Door Review*, *Stone of Madness Press*, *Foglifter Journal*, *Gertrude*, *The Fiddlehead*, and others.

There are many other publications, but they are limited to particular genres (e.g., *Vetch*, trans poetry) or LGBTQ+ subgroups (e.g., *Raspa*, Latinx writers; *Sinister Wisdom* and *Lavender Review*, lesbians).

While I'm happy with the current iteration of the memoir, I'd like to expand it a bit by including additional information about my early years. Of course, what I wind up doing is contingent upon submission guidelines. The bottom line is that I'll do what it takes this puppy published!

In that regard, I started looking into more mainstream publishers, and kept bumping into Austin Macauley. The nice things are that they welcome creative nonfiction short stories and don't require you to have a literary agent. As I continued to read, however, red lights started flashing. They operate under a hybrid model in which, depending on circumstances, writers are offered non-contributory contracts or contributory contracts in which the writer *might* be asked "to cover a small proportion of the cost of publishing the book." I started researching this beyond their site, and there were complaints about this *small proportion* amounting to thousands of dollars and lo and behold, the prospective book never sees the light of day. However, if it does, it's butchered by incompetent editing. The lesson here is that if the arrangement sounds too good to be true—especially if you're dealing with a vanity press—trust your instincts and avoid them like the plague!

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Curriculum Vitae



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STATEMENT OF PROFESSIONAL GOALS

Since retiring from my position as a historian in 2011, I have become a Licensed Master Social Worker and ultimately would like to secure an administrative/managerial position with a governmental or nongovernmental social agency, where I can write and/or edit grant proposals, public service announcements, in-house or externally distributed reports or memoranda, and other relevant materials.

EDUCATION

MA in Professional Writing (Applied Writing), Kennesaw State University, 12/2022.

MS in Criminal Justice, Kennesaw State University, 12/2019.

Graduate Certificate in Gerontology, Georgia State University, Atlanta, 05/2017.

MSW–Social Work (Mental Health Concentration), Kennesaw State University, 05/2016.

MA in Religious Studies, Georgia State University, Atlanta, 12/2013.

MLS-Library Science (Archival Studies), Univ. of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, 08/1985.

PhD, U.S. Intellectual History and Philosophy, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, 12/1984.

MA in History, East Texas State University, 05/1977.

BJ–Journalism, University of Texas at Austin, 05/1974.

EMPLOYMENT RECORD

Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA; Technical Editor, *African Journal of Information Systems* (Graduate Research Assistantship), 2020-2021.

National Park Service (NPS), Southeast Regional Office, Atlanta, Georgia, Regional Historian and Chief, History Branch, Cultural Resources Division, 1989-2011.

Georgia Institute of Technology, Atlanta, Georgia. Campus Records Manager/Archivist, Price Gilbert Memorial Library: Archives and Records Management Department, 1985-1989.

University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Archivist (Part-time) McCain Library, Manuscript-Archives Division, 1984-1985.

Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana, Archivist, 1982-1984.

Isidore Newman School, New Orleans, Louisiana, Teacher of high school level American History, U.S. Social-Intellectual History, and Civics, 1980-1982.

East Texas State University and Tulane University, Graduate Teaching Assistant; had full autonomy in the teaching of U.S. History survey courses, 1975—1984.

United States Air Force, Sergeant, Medical Materials Specialist, 1968-1972.

WRITING AND EDITING EXPERIENCE

Technical Editor, *African Journal of Information Systems* (Graduate Research Assistantship), Kennesaw State University, January 2020-Present.

Reviewed *The Bronx*, by Evelyn Gonzalez, in *CRM: The Journal of Heritage Stewardship*, Vol. 4, No.1, Winter 2007.

Guest Editor, *CRM: Cultural Resource Management*, special edition on U.S. Utopian Communities entitled, Preserving America's Utopian Dream, Vol. 24, No. 09, 2001 (Washington, D.C., National Park Service, 2001).

Author, The Amistad Research Center, *CRM: Cultural Resource Management*, in a thematic issue entitled, *Slavery and Resistance*, Vol. 21, No. 4, 1998, pp. 48–49 (Washington, D.C., National Park Service, 1998).

Editor and Designer, *NPS Employees' Association Newsletter*, Southeast Regional Office (SERO), 1998-2000.

Editor and Designer, *NRPD Notes*, newsletter of the National Register Programs Division, SERO, 1996-2002.

Editor, *NHL Network*, newsletter of the National Historic Landmarks Program (Washington, D.C., National Park Service, 1997—2002).

Editor and Designer, *The Middle Ground*, newsletter of Citizens for the Middle Ground, a social responsibility group affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta, that was concerned with church-state issues and political extremism, 1995–2000.

Editor and Designer, *The Moravians in the Southeast—North Carolina and the U.S. Virgin Islands: Preservation Issues* (National Register Programs Division, NPS–SERO, ca. 1995).

Author, The Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Universalist Herald*, Vol. 147, No. 4, May/June 1995.

Editor and Designer, *The Networker*, newsletter of the Network for Social Responsibility–Cobb County, a subcommittee of the Unitarian Universalist Church Network for Social Responsibility, that arose in response to the Cobb County (Georgia) Commission's anti-gay resolution, 1994-1995.

Editor and Designer, *The Synergist*, newsletter of the Emerson Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Marietta, Georgia, 1993-1995.

Editor and Designer, *The Price's Write*, newsletter of the Price Gilbert Memorial Library, Georgia Institute of Technology, 1987-1989.

Editor and Designer, *ARMAGRAM*, newsletter of the Atlanta Chapter of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA), 1987-1989; named Committee Manager of the Year (1987) for work done in this capacity.

Editor and Designer, *Newsletter of the Greater News Orleans Archivists Association*, 1982-1984.

Feature Editor, *ken*, student newspaper of the School of General Studies, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, 1966-1967.

Editor-in-Chief, *Academian*, official publication of the academic organizations of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Brooklyn College of the City University of New York, 1967.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Hospice Atlanta (Inpatient Facility), 1244 Park Vista Dr., NE, Atlanta, GA 30319; Advanced Year Clinical Social Work Internship, August 2015—May 2016.

Regency Hospice (Home Hospice Care), 4255 Wade Green Road NW, Suite 210, Kennesaw, GA 30144; Foundation Year Clinical Social Work Internship, Home Hospice, August 2014—May 2015.

Campbell-Stone Senior Living Community, 350 Carpenter Drive NE, Sandy Springs, GA 30328; Chaplaincy Internship, August 2011—December 2011.