

## When the man in your life is a woman

**T**o a casual observer, the occupants of No 63, one of a row of neat detached bungalows, set in attractive, long, well laid-out gardens in a suburb of Colchester, are ordinary people. There are two teenage girls, their mother and an aunt, plus a noisy dog.

However, their actual relationships are not quite so straightforward. "Aunt Monica" is, in fact, the father of the two girls, Jennifer, 16 and Carol, 14. They and their mother are trying to adjust to the fact that he is a trans-sexual, living as a female for a two-year trial period before being considered for the irreversible sex-change operation. An operation that would realise the hopes he's always cherished.

As I walked down the path to their house, my head teeming with questions, I wondered how a family coped with such a devastating upheaval to their lives. My knock at the door was answered by Monica, in his, or rather "her" mid-forties, wearing an attractive woollen dress over a polo-necked sweater; she then showed me into the living-room where "her" ex-wife, Pam—for they have to be divorced before he can have the operation—was sitting nervously leafing through a magazine. She looked drawn, and slightly older than Monica, but there was a warm atmosphere

between the two of them, and when Monica left the room Pam relaxed and told me her story . . .

"It really hadn't occurred to me that Martin was very different from the husbands of any of my friends. When we first married in our twenties, I used to think how lucky I was that he was kind and thoughtful. He was in the Army so we moved around quite a lot, and, like most Army wives, I more or less had to bring up the children on my own.

"Over the years I'd been aware that my husband was becoming more and more irritable and difficult when he was at home, but thought that when he left the Army and started his own small engineering workshop, as he planned, that would pass.

"That was seven years ago, but after he'd successfully established the business he seemed to get more depressed and couldn't sleep at night.

"He didn't seem to be interested in me any more, not sexually or in any way at all; he was just in a world of his own. After months of this, and the sleepless nights, we were all at screaming point; the girls couldn't understand why we were always so bad-tempered

so usually they went to their friends' houses after school.

"Eventually, Martin went to our local doctor who said it was fairly natural for a man of 40 to have emotional problems, prescribed tranquillisers and plenty of exercise and fresh air and said it would pass.

"So I felt relieved, even started to plan a summer holiday for us all in Spain, but things got worse. I felt so rejected I was sure there must be someone else, and one night I blurted all this out.

"Martin looked at me amazed, then horrified, and just sat down in the chair and sobbed. It was awful; I'd never seen him cry before and didn't know what to do. But then out came all the misery he was feeling, in a great flood of words; how he used to say to his mother, when he was about four, 'I will be a girl next week, won't I, Mum?'"

Pam's knuckles were white, gripping the arm of the chair as she relived that shattering evening. She went on to say that as he'd got older the tensions had increased . . . "That's why he joined the Army, because he thought that a real, tough job would get rid of those feelings.

Then we met and married, and he said he'd never felt so happy and had been sure that having a wife and family to love would stop him feeling such a misfit. But, of course, nothing could change him, nor the mental conflicts eating away at him.

"The final straw had been the diagnosis, or rather advice, of that local doctor, who couldn't seem to understand that Martin had always felt like that, and it wasn't just his age.

"My husband thought he would go mad, as obviously no one could be expected to understand how much he hated his male form, nor his feeling that somehow he had a female body and mind inside a male skin. He was in a state of total despair. It's surprising he didn't do anything drastic, not being able to talk to anyone about it.

"But it was extraordinary, really, that at that stage I felt quite calm, almost relieved that at least he wasn't having an affair.

"We had a drink and sat talking for hours with our arms round each other. His relief that he had at last been able to tell me helped us both, and we decided that there must be someone in the medical profession who would understand."

**P**am at that time was at breaking point. "While Martin slept the first time in months, I lay awake all that night feeling as though someone had kicked me in the stomach. I almost understood. And I realised then why he hadn't made love to me for such a long time, but then perhaps he never would again, and how could he still want to be with us all, feeling the way he did?"

"Somehow we got through the next few days and I tried to make some anonymous enquiries on the phone. Then, trying to cheer myself up with a visit to the hairdresser's, I read an article in a magazine about a physician in psychological medicine at one of the London hospitals. The article said that he had made a study of trans-sexual behaviour—I didn't even know it had a name.

"When Martin eventually had an appointment with him he was able to reassure him that there could be a solution. It would mean taking female hormones, dressing and living for two years as a woman, our getting a divorce, and finally, when Martin could satisfy everyone that he could be emotionally stable and happy as 'Monica', he would be considered for the operation to remove . . ."

At this point Pam began to stammer and, mustering all her control, said, "to make him a woman.

"When Martin told me all that I went to pieces. Up until then I'd been able to help and support him because I could appreciate the mental strain he was under; still working to keep us, trying to be normal with the girls and everything, and I know, deep down, I hoped someone would be able to change him and make him into the man I'd always believed him to be.

"When *he* was able to discuss his problem outside the family I felt so bitter that there seemed to be no one *I* could talk to. I didn't want to live with my 'sister', I wanted my husband. I didn't want a divorce, we'd always been a happy, loving family. What would happen to the girls? How would it affect them when Dad appeared as 'Auntie Monica'?"

"My head spun; I had to give up my job as a part-time receptionist because I just couldn't concentrate at all, thought I'd explode with the seemingly endless problems. Martin, on another visit to the hospital, told the psychiatric social worker how ill I was getting with the worry of it all, and she offered to talk things over with me.

"It was such a relief to be able to discuss this non-discussable problem with someone who actually understood and was sympathetic towards our dilemma.

"She was also able to tell me that there were other families like us—something I hadn't really believed before. And she reassured me that help was always available if ever I felt the need to talk things over with someone willing to listen.

"When Martin and I talked it over we decided that the best thing would be for him to try and have the operation. We decided to have a family meeting and talk to Jennifer and Carol, as we felt it would be better to move away from the town where we were living and start afresh.

"Martin could open a new workshop—at least he didn't have to go into an office and tell them—make new contacts as a female engineer and no one need ever know.

"We explained that our divorce would be a formality and that we'd all continue living together."

**E**xpecting the worst, Pam was relieved by her children's reaction.

"It was amazing, the girls seemed much more excited by the prospect of having riding lessons out

in Essex than by the fact that their father was going to dress as a woman and become 'Auntie Monica'. We couldn't bring ourselves to talk to Martin's parents and thought we'd wait a while.

"Next came the challenge of turning Martin into 'Monica'. We were much the same size then, both overweight, and one night he tried on a skirt and blouse of mine. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry, he looked grotesque; the sleeves were far too short and the skirt didn't hang properly. And although his hair was fairly long it was the wrong shape.

"I kept trying to 'think positively' and offered to go out the next day to buy a wig and some more suitable clothes. We were making progress though, because as Martin took the skirt off, he dropped it on the floor like he used to drop his trousers, and I remember I laughed and said he'd have to stop doing things like that—there hadn't been many laughs for a long time.

"When we went house hunting for the first time Martin had to dress as a woman and I was terrified that someone would think he looked odd. I kept sneaking sidelong glances at him in the car, checking that his

make-up looked all right and his neck was covered up—you don't realise how noticeable a man's Adam's apple is until he isn't wearing a collar and tie.

"I felt that everyone was staring at us, but I think I was just so nervous I imagined it.

"Martin started to have electrolysis to remove facial hairs, went dressed as a woman to see the doctor, and then started to go to speech and beauty therapy classes at the psychiatric wing of the hospital.

"In a way this helped me too, because he'd come home and show me what he'd learned, and the girls as well, and we'd all practise walking and experiment with make-up. We even started dieting together, and both lost over a stone.

"It's so much better now we've moved. When I think how Monica would come home sweating when she'd been out on her own, and now she drives the car around and sees business people fairly happily. In fact, one day recently the car broke down, and without thinking, she got out, put her shoulder against the car and steered it into the kerb. A policeman noticed her, and went up, saying, 'Madam, you really must be careful, you

could strain yourself very badly'. We all had a really good laugh about that.

"Now the feeling of shock and, I must confess, revulsion, is passing. I think we're both happier although I still find it difficult to look at Monica in the bathroom.

"It was so difficult to live with Martin when he was keeping all his problems bottled up inside. And I suppose I'm glad I'm middle-aged—lots of things about married life aren't so important now, just as long as you have someone to care for and share things with.

"The girls worry me, though. They seem to have taken the change so calmly—I'm terrified that when they're older they'll

develop some awful psychological problems of their own. They don't often call Monica by her name or use 'Auntie' when friends come home. They just say, 'Oh you know everyone, don't you?' They both comment on her clothes, though, and the other day Jennifer bought Monica a yellow bracelet, said she thought it would suit her.

"The rest of the family find it difficult to accept. Monica's parents find it hard to think that they've got two daughters now, and not a son and a daughter; but they have tried to understand and be sympathetic, and I know my mother-in-law feels terribly guilty that in some way she might have caused Martin's problems. She's talked to the

psychiatric social worker too, and I know that has helped her a lot, but she always avoids the issue with me and asks about us in general terms, rather than as individuals. My sister-in-law has ignored us completely since she heard; it's sad, but I think I feel more sorry for her really . . ."

At this point, Monica came into the room, wearing an apron. The two girls were with her and they'd all been in the kitchen experimenting with a new dish for supper, giggling about the way the sauce had gone lumpy. There were still many questions unanswered when I left No 63, but I was full of admiration for a family who were managing, reasonably successfully, to come to terms with a situation which few of us could have faced.

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