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THE COUPLE CAUGHT IN THE GENDER TRAP

YVONNE ROBERTS REPORTS

Chris Johnson, 33, looks the Outward Bound type. He lies on cushions on the floor of his sitting room in Handsworth, Birmingham, rolling cigarettes, relaxed. He is dressed in brown cords, a check shirt; his black hair is cut into a crewcut, a faint stubble can be seen on his cheeks. His body looks as if it has seen a shade too much beer. Chris Johnson would be lost in a football crowd.

Opposite him, sitting cross-legged on another pile of cushions beneath posters of Abba and Adam and the Ants, Cathy Brown, 32, stands out because she is startlingly punk. She is small, slight, her hair is guava pink; she has a leather collar around her neck; she wears leopard skin drainpipes, a stud in her nose and thick make-up. Her gestures are delicate, her hands and feet tiny, her skin smooth except in the area where a five o'clock shadow has not quite been vanquished by foundation cream. It takes over an hour for her to put on her 'face' each morning.

Cathy says Chris is a male chauvinist pig at times. "I don't know what it is, but I can feel the male ego in there. He's got that edge." Chris says Cathy claims independence but always hands him the money. "She can never make her mind up." "That," replies Cathy, temporarily deserting the feminist position, "is a woman's privilege."

Chris and Cathy are Britain's first transsexual couple. Five years ago, when Chris was Anne Johnson and Cathy answered to Eugene Brown, they had a child, Emma — then they reversed roles. Emma has only ever known Cathy (Eugene) as mummy and Chris (once Anne) as her dad.

At a time when so many couples are confused about their sexual roles, this couple have had the opportunity to experience life on each side of the sexual see-saw and have made their choice.

Has Chris, then, become a macho stereotype? Or, as someone who was once involved in the women's movement, a sensitive man with an ability to understand and relate to women? How does Cathy define herself? As a flirting queen of cheesecake? Or has her previous dislike of men made her into an aggressively liberated feminist?

Cathy is sure of the answers, Chris more uncertain. He is surprised that the masculine responses he always believed to be the result of conditioning now well up in him instinctively. "At the point I realised I was a man, the important question about my own identity was answered," Chris says. "I felt at peace — and still do. I have absolutely no regrets. But, in answering that one important question a hun-

dred more arise. When you go through something like this, you've got to really know yourself — and that can hurt."

Chris was first married in his twenties, when he was a girl called Anne, a university student, a socialist. Now, although he is in his thirties, Chris says that the acquisition of a new gender means that he and Cathy have had to begin again.

They feel more like adolescents than grown ups. Chris says he identifies with skinhead because the young are broad-minded and he likes the feeling of being part of a clan.

"I surprise myself because I sometimes think I'd like to be in the army. It's not that I've got the instinct to kill but I do want to be part of a group of men, a team doing a job well. Women never have that group feeling. I wasn't conditioned to want it, it's just there. I'm not sure how I feel about women," Chris adds cautiously. "I'm in sympathy with the women's movement but I don't know how chauvinist I could become..."

Cathy is more emphatic. She says she is a feminist. "I'm a strong, independent woman. I tend now to be bisexual — not because I was a man before — but because as a woman, I feel more in sympathy with women." But Cathy just as strongly believes in the maternal instinct. It smarts, she says, that other women say she can never be a 'proper' woman because she lacks the experience of childbirth. She also enjoys "a bitch and a flirt" and when the male cameraman arrives Cathy vamps and poses: "I'm a poser," she agrees. "That's nothing to do with being a man or a woman. I act sexy because that's me."

Eugene Brown was born in Belfast. His family were travellers, his father in and out of jail. At 14, Eugene was placed in a Borstal for constant truanting. At Borstal, he had his first experience of homosexuality and rejected it.

Throughout his childhood, Eugene felt 'different'. He dressed in women's clothes. He disliked the idea of a heterosexual relationship in which he took the male role but neither was he attracted to men.

In his teens and twenties, Eugene was an expert in Kung Fu, eventually becoming an instructor and inventing a Chinese background for himself. At the same time, he had visions and believed that he had mystical powers.

His family accepted him as he was, a jigsaw with too many odd pieces. "My family have always had the attitude that it's no good brooding about what can't be helped," says Cathy, now.

Anne Johnson was born in Birmingham, her father was a metal-polisher and there was a ten year gap between Anne and the youngest of her three

brothers and sisters. At 20, she married Andrew, her boyfriend from school days. She was never 'a good wife', but when Andrew graduated a year before she did, and got a job in the Birmingham area, Anne dropped out of her course in London and moved with him, becoming a clerk. The marriage was uneasy but Anne never felt she was a lesbian; she just felt different.

"I feel we are similar to any physically handicapped person," Chris now explains. "If you had three legs you'd expect to have one removed. I believe everything about me is male except my skin and bone. It's a biological problem, not a matter of sexual preference or a mental attitude. I was a man in a woman's body."

Six years ago, Chris (who was still Anne), went along to an evening class in Kung Fu. The instructor was Eugene. From the beginning, they say, they felt they had known each other for years. Within months each had told the other of their transsexual feelings and Anne left her husband Andrew. In 1977, Eugene and Anne moved to their present house and began their change of gender.

Eugene took a course of hormones "because I'd got more to grow" and the couple began the slow process of finding a doctor willing to complete the change with the necessary operations — a mastectomy and the construction of a penis for Anne; castration and the construction of a vagina for Eugene. At the same

time, Anne announced at work that she intended to have a sex change. "The men didn't like it much," Chris says. "I suppose they saw it as yet more competition when they had enough already."

Two years ago, it became obvious that Chris would have to leave his job. Since then, he and Cathy, now no longer able to earn a living teaching Kung Fu, have been on the dole, drawing £78 a fortnight. "It makes me ratty," Chris says. "I hate hanging around the house all day."

Cathy expresses sympathy. The image of the traditional breadwinner frustrated in his masculine duty obviously has some appeal for her.

A year ago, the national and international press discovered Chris and Cathy. They camped on the front door for ten days, wooed other members of the Brown family and finally got their story.

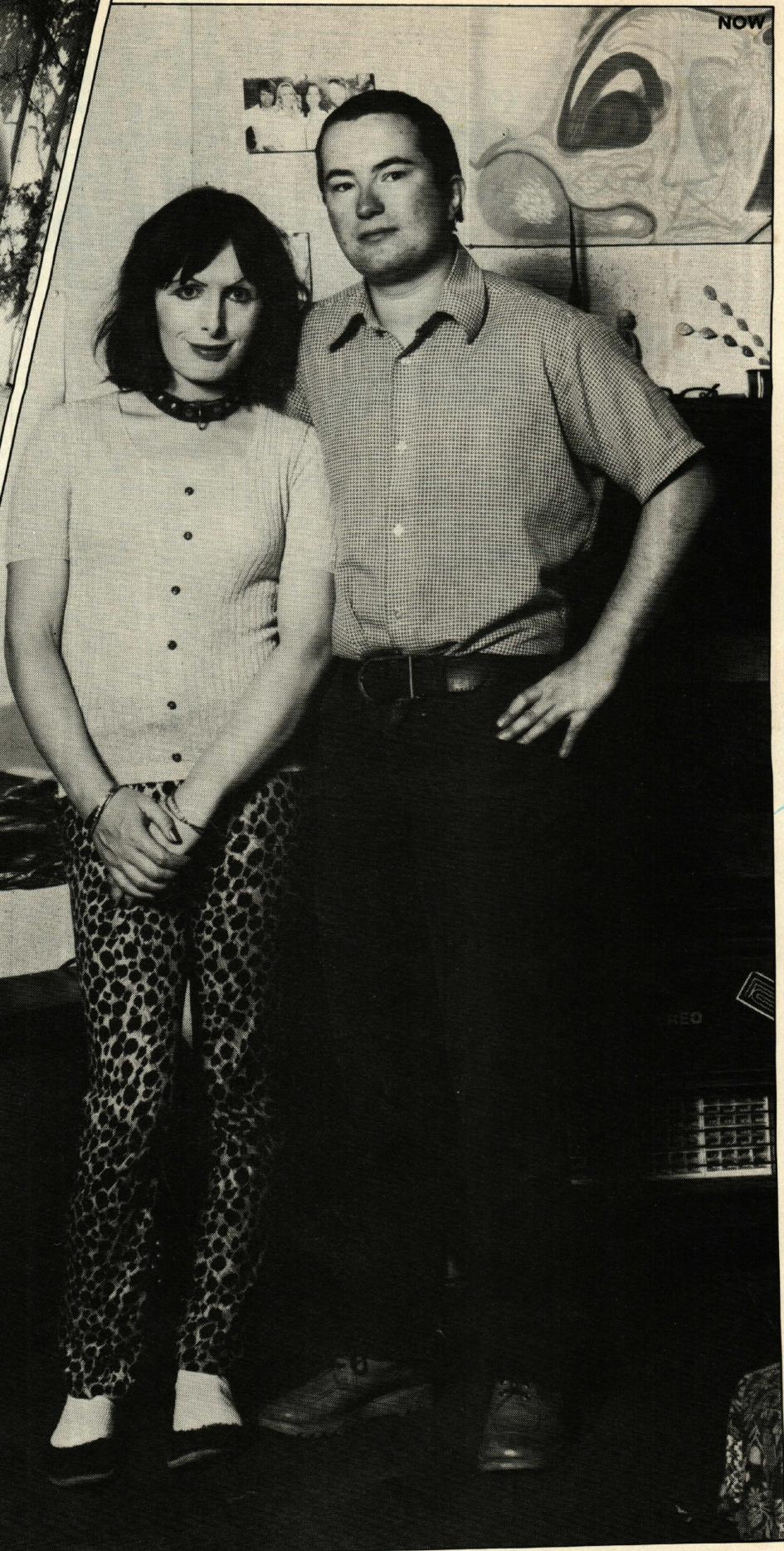
Chris was by then taking the hormone testosterone, and had already established his maleness, in his terms, having had a 'heterosexual' affair with a female colleague at work who was not a lesbian.

The publicity dented the couple's confidence. They had started going out socially in the evenings, usually to punk clubs and concerts, not daring to open their mouths but content to be seen in their new roles; temporarily that stopped.

It was Chris, once a social worker with a professional knowledge of analysis, who >104



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◁ guided them through the crisis and the impact of the reaction. The disgust expressed at their 'homosexuality'; the revulsion that they should try to reconstruct what nature had given them; the lack of understanding as to what transsexualism actually involves (confused as it is with transvestism where sexual satisfaction is derived from cross-dressing); the voyeuristic interest in who does what and how; their rejection as 'freaks'.

Simultaneously with the public attention the couple were also coping with their own relationship. Cathy, under pressure from Chris, was able to make female friends — acceptance came quickly from most women, particularly those in their early twenties. The male circle has been — and is — harder to break into; Chris was more often trapped in the home. "I can't bear his aggression," Cathy says. "I am not aware that I am aggressive," says Chris. Finally, Chris and Cathy also had their duties as parents.

"We're trying to bring Emma up as an individual. Not as 'a little girl' or a tomboy," Cathy says. "We want her to make her own choices, to feel free to do or be what she wants to be."

As a family, Chris and Cathy admit they take on stereotype roles. Cathy does the 'mothering'; when Chris was Anne, he hated his pregnancy and says he feels irritated by children. It was Cathy's idea to have a child before they both irrevocably changed gender. Chris occasionally feels trapped by his responsibilities and he has the same worries as any young married man.

The unwanted publicity also meant that Chris and Cathy's doctor at Charing Cross Hospital in London abandoned their NHS treatment. The power of the medical profession allowed doctors to lay down certain conditions. Cathy and Chris each had to live the part of the opposite sex for two years and there had to be no publicity.

Now, Chris and Cathy are "90% right" but they need £10,000 to complete the change (Chris has already had a mastectomy performed privately which cost £5,000).

The need for money and the

wish to increase the public's knowledge about transsexualism are the two reasons why Chris and Cathy agreed to co-operate on their life story.

*The Gender Trap** written by Wendy Nelson is published this autumn. Already, its serialisation in the *News of the World* will mean that not only Chris and Cathy but Emma too (soon to start school), will become public exhibits once again.

It is a high price to pay, just as stability appears to have entered their lives but the couple insist they have no alternative. They hope too that the attention may help the new careers they want for themselves as song-writers and singers. If, as Chris and Cathy believe, they are only now in the adolescent phase of their new genders, the dream of being a rock star is the classic 19 year old fantasy. "How many 19 year olds have written 40 songs?" is Chris's response. "I desperately wish I didn't have to go through the publicity again. I'm reserved by nature. I want to get on with my life. I want to be known for something other than being a transsexual. Ten years from now, I want to be known for having done something."

The Gender Trap wins sympathy for Chris and Cathy — but only just. The threads Wendy Nelson chooses to weave their story are so highly coloured, you feel that in the reconstructed flesh, the two should resemble Regency romantics. On the occasion of Chris and Cathy (then Anne and Eugene) exchanging their first kiss, for instance, Wendy Nelson writes:

"For Anne (it was) a chance to adopt so naturally the predominant masculine role, protective and caring of women . . . For Eugene, the sheer delight of being treated . . . as a vulnerable woman, hungry for the loving attentions of a man."

In person, Chris and Cathy are easy in conversation, 'different' but difficult to pinpoint in what way, unless you know the truth. What they say, how they react to each other — sharing housework, trying to find a balance so that one partner's 'equality' doesn't result in the other partner's loss of freedom — is less to do with being transsexual than about two personalities trying to co-exist like everybody else in a period when the rules are no longer so rigid; the options much greater.

"People worry too much about what is 'right' or not 'right' to feel; what instincts they have and what they lack," Chris says. "They should concentrate on what is inside them. I don't think I've become a male stereotype. I'm still learning. I'm not trying to find out about me as a man — just me, as an individual." □

**The Gender Trap*. Chris Johnson and Cathy Brown with Wendy Nelson. To be published by Proteus next January, £7.95.