

PHYSICALLY A MAN... EMOTIONALLY A WOMAN

All his life George Roberts was deeply disturbed. He felt he was a woman trapped in a man's body. Finally a sex-change operation transformed him into Julia Grant. This week that transformation will be shown in a series of controversial TV documentaries. But first Julia told her extraordinary story to us. By Corinna Honan



Julia Grant was born in March this year. She is 25 now—but the first 24 years of her life were lived as a man called George Roberts.

"I have no identity before March 13, 1980," she says simply. On that day she emerged from the operating theatre as herself, leaving behind George and a life-long search for her identity. That day a BBC film crew were with her, as they had been for most of the past two years, to record the transition from George to Julia.

The resulting three hour-long documentaries, which will be shown on BBC 2 this week, are an often controversial, blow-by-blow account of Julia's struggle to become the woman she has always felt herself to be.

"I was a woman trapped in a man's body. I could dress as a woman, even live as a woman, but physically I was still a man," she says. "Julia was screaming to get out. I felt I was two people—almost schizophrenic. George was the more aggressive of the two and Julia was a softer, much nicer person."

Even now, she lapses into the third person when talking about George—it is hard to relate to a lifetime of pain and confusion in the wrong body. It's hard for her to believe she was once married to a woman for two years and harder still to think of her two sons, whom she has vowed never to see again for their own sakes.

Julia's is an extraordinary story—and it follows that she is an extraordinary woman. Meeting her, you accept very quickly that she is indeed a woman. Her features are delicate and feminine and her make-up has the subtle touch of a woman who has been experimenting for years until she has found exactly the right look.

On the day we met, she was wearing denim dungarees—"I've just realised that trousers are an essential part of a woman's wardrobe," she said, eyeing my own dungarees with a smile.

She laughs a lot and sparkles with the inner contentment of someone



who is at home with herself and enjoys life. And she has that rare quality of instantly seeing the funny side to the ironies of her life.

"I don't mind if people laugh with me," she says on a more serious note, "what I mind is if they laugh at me."

Even when some people do, inevitably and depressingly, laugh at her, she has the strength of mind to shrug it off.

"I love life. Nothing can keep me down for long. The BBC kept expecting me to get very depressed during all the set-backs and loneliness of the year when I lived and dressed as a woman but was still physically a man. But it never really happened."

Part of the reason it never happened is that David Pearson, the producer of the documentaries, his girlfriend and all the crew helped and supported Julia emotionally the whole way through. They are now close friends and it's not hard to see why. Julia is a likeable, intelligent woman.

The only remnant of the man she once was is her voice. "When I meet someone for the first time, there's a nervous tittering for a couple of minutes. Five minutes later I can feel them relax and accept it. I do soften my voice when I go out in public, like going shopping for instance," she explains. "But if I tried to do it all the time, I would shatter everything if I forgot in an unguarded moment."

"I feel quite normal and my voice doesn't matter. It's me. And because I've made my stand by making people aware of the desperate problems of trans-sexuals, I shall be known as George who became Julia for a long time yet."

She has no regrets about exposing her innermost emotions and incredible story to the public view if it can help people understand. But it is hard on her boyfriend, Amer, a softly spoken, gentle and totally heterosexual Iranian who came to England as a student and has been unable to | please turn to next page

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Amer and Julia, completely in love

return since the revolution. Amer knew and loved Julia as a friend before she became a complete woman. He now lives with her in London and clearly adores her.

"I couldn't help liking and accepting her as a woman when we first met in a nightclub. She was dressing as a woman then and I had to keep reminding myself that she was a man," he says. "I'd just split up with a girlfriend and I found myself drawn to Julia . . . she was always happy and funny and easy to talk to.

"As we became closer, I thought of her only as a woman. It was understood that our relationship would develop after the transformation. But there were times when I would sit down and think—she's a man, what am I doing? I'm a straight and decent boy—what would my family think? I'd feel ashamed and guilty that I loved her."

The pressures of the last year would have broken any man less sure of his love. Some of Amer's friends taunted him and then shunned him. And then, because he was such an important part of Julia's life, the BBC started pleading with him to appear in the documentaries.

"I refused to be filmed at first but later I accepted for Julia's sake. I decided, well, I know what I am and I don't care what anyone says. My relationship with Julia gets stronger and stronger. But I have to admit I don't know how I'm going to feel when the films are shown."

Julia has already seen the documentaries. She cried and couldn't bear to watch some of the sequences. But she agreed to talk to *WOMAN* for the same reason as she did the documentaries—to bring the dilemma of trans-sexualism out into the open.

George Roberts was born, the eldest son of eight children, five of whom were girls, to a Fleetwood fisherman and his wife. It was a hard life, with George's father away at sea nearly 11 months of the year.

"Mum couldn't cope and needed someone to help her. So because I was the oldest, I did the shopping and

gave Mum a hand with the cooking. Mum used to go out at night and I'd look after the kids. If one of the babies started crying, I'd change its nappies and feed it. At 11 p.m. I'd wash the girls' school blouses which I'd iron in the morning," says Julia.

"I loved being with my sisters. When I was with them, I felt the same as them. I didn't like games or getting dirty or anything boys are supposed to like doing."

When George was 13, his mother had a nervous breakdown and the children were

split up and put into homes. George made friends with the girls there, advising them how to put on make-up and, for the first time, had to put up with the taunts from the boys, which would become a feature of his life. He learned to hide his unconventional activities, locking himself in the toilets for hours to do some knitting.

The crunch came when he opted to do a shorthand and typing course. "I had dreams of becoming the editor of *The Times*, you see," laughs Julia. "The first day of the new term, we all paraded in the grounds as usual before lessons. The teacher called out 68 girls' names for that class—and then mine. There were 150 lads jeering as I walked away."

After three months, he was totally undermined by "boys taking the mickey all the time. I was 15½ and the only way out of the home was to join the forces. So I joined the navy for six months. I wanted to be a real man and win the respect of men.

"I tried harder than anyone else when I did the assault courses and five-mile runs. My washing and ironing skills stood me in good stead, though—I was judged best dressed junior seaman in the section for 16 weeks running and the other men would give me 10 pence a time to iron creases in their trousers."

It might have been a happy time, but already George was conscious of being different, in a more basic way, from other boys his age. He was attracted only to men. When his time was up, he left the navy to work in a succession of hotels as a waiter and had a number of brief, unsatisfactory homosexual relationships.

The turning point came when a waiter at one of the hotels invited George out to a club one night. It was a "gay" club, frequented by transvestites. Julia recalls: "I could not understand why there were all these men standing around in women's clothes. One man had a full beard and was wearing a mini-skirt. I found it absolutely disgusting. Then two women came up to the bar and started talking to me—and I found out to my astonishment that the prettiest of the two was, in fact,

the husband of the other woman."

That night George went back to Tom and Jean's house for a drink. Before he really knew what he was doing, he found himself in Jean's bedroom, being made up with her cosmetics and putting on a dress.

"I looked at myself in the mirror and it was instant recognition. I thought: that's what I've been searching for. I had to take the dress off and go home then because I needed to be alone to think about it. I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking—is it really wrong to want to be a woman? I'd accepted my homosexuality and now I was faced with something even more abnormal, being a minority of a minority."

From then on lies and deceit became a necessary way of life. Julia laughs bitterly. "The lies I told for five years! To buy myself dresses, I'd pretend I was buying something for a sister who happened to be around my size. Shoes were more difficult, although fortunately I'm a size 7. I'd go up to the counter and say: 'Sorry to bother you—my sister's in a wheelchair and she needs some shoes for a party tonight.' Then I'd explain that her feet swelled up from being in a wheelchair and she wore my sports shoes so we must be about the same size."

George carried on working as a male waiter during the day—and practised dressing as a woman at night. Finally he ventured out.

"I'd spent hours getting ready—it had to be perfect. Then as I walked down the hotel passage, one of the night porters came out. My heart nearly stopped. But he just said, 'Evening, madam,' and walked on.

"From then on I went out regularly as a woman. I felt more comfortable, more *me*. But I was very unhappy working as a man. One day Tom told me he was seeing a doctor about having a sex change, with Jean's approval. I thought—if he can, why can't I? I went down to London to see a doctor and I didn't even get past the secretary. She said, 'You're too young—come back in four years when you're 21.' I was bitterly disappointed.

When George arrived back at the hotel, he slashed every single item of men's clothing he owned, packed up his tights, shoes, make-up and dresses and left for London. One of the chambermaids, Sandy, had recently left for Australia—so he went straight to an employment agency and filled out a form in her name. A couple of days later he had a job as a chambermaid at a hotel in the Cromwell Road, on the strength of Sandy's references.

No one even suspected that the new 17-year-old chambermaid was a man. She was slim, very pretty—and George's voice hadn't broken sufficiently to expose her. Men found her attractive. "Sandy" began to believe she actually was a woman.

The ghastly inevitable happened and she fell in love with a man. An ordinary, decent man who happened

to be a policeman. For three weeks she went out to dinner, theatres and films with him every night. He took her down to the country for a weekend to see his parents, who were respectable, and very kind to their son's young lady from London.

"I loved him," says Julia. "He was totally fascinating to me. He wanted me for what he thought I was, not for my body. But after a while I started to feel guilty. His parents were so sweet to me. When we went to see them again, he asked me to marry him. I didn't answer for 15 minutes and he kept saying, 'Are you all right?' My mind was racing—I thought maybe I could have the operation done before the wedding and he'd never know. Finally, I said I'd think about it.

"When I arrived back in London, I tried to see the doctor again and once more he refused. Then I knew I had to run. It was a nightmare. I wrote a letter to him trying to explain. I rewrote it four times, crying and crying.

"I decided I had to become a man again. I didn't want to deceive again, to hurt and be hurt. I bought some men's clothes, left all my women's clothes hanging in my room and left my job."

What happened next was the strangest, most unlikely episode in George's history: he met a woman and married her.

He'd gone to Amsterdam for a brief holiday to escape from London and try and forget "Sandy's" heart-break. An acquaintance invited him to a three-day canal boat party. Sitting opposite him on the boat was an attractive, petite woman with long, curly black hair who kept smiling and giggling at him. They talked, had fun and when the party was over, she invited him to stay.

"She was like a chum really," says Julia. "I moved in with her for three weeks and had my first sexual experience with a woman without really thinking about it. In her eyes I was a man—there seemed no need to tell her anything else."

George went back to England, and when he received a letter from his girlfriend telling him she was pregnant, he asked her to marry him.

"I was overjoyed about the child. I felt great. Here at least was a way of escaping from being abnormal in one quick, easy move. I adored kids and I was really looking forward to having one. My wife wasn't demanding sexually or emotionally—I was convinced it would be all right."

Julia sighs deeply. "I hate talking about this period of my life, I try never to think about it. It was a dreadful, terrible mistake."

The marriage broke down, but not until George's wife had given birth to two sons—Carl, now aged eight, and Wayne, seven. George, not surprisingly, made a perfect "mother".

"I fed Carl, changed his nappies and did most of the washing and cleaning. I suppose I was more of a mum than my wife was. I adored them. But my old feelings of being attracted to | please turn to page 54

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Julia's new life is hectic but happy

men had come back. It was an intolerable situation.

"I told my wife and together we decided it was best that I should go. I knew that what I was could never be good for the kids. I didn't want it to touch their lives, but it broke my heart to leave them. My wife took them back to Amsterdam where she soon met another man.

"Carl and Wayne have been brought up by their grandparents and I've seen them twice since the break-up. The last time was two years ago but I very much doubt that I'll ever see them again. I don't think I'm something they should have to know about or accept. I think it would be selfish to force myself upon them. That is the price I have to pay for becoming a woman," says Julia.

George returned to London and started performing in a drag act. "I kept thinking—if only I'd been born a woman! But if I couldn't be one, then I'd send them up. I'd go on stage in heavy make-up and sequins and I was good at making people laugh.

"I had a good job during the day, working as a catering manager at the Middlesex Hospital but I was desperately unhappy. I even thought about killing myself. I decided I had to have a sex change. I talked to friends about my feelings—but no one could understand."

One of those friends knew David Pearson at the BBC and mentioned Julia's plight to him. He rang her and she would be willing to appear in a documentary.

"At first I said no," recalls Julia. "Then I thought about all the problems I'd had and the way no one really understood why I wanted a sex change. Here was an opportunity to try and tell a lot of people: 'Look, I'm not a freak. I'm not normal now but I could be.'"

David and two BBC executives met Julia. "The executives were worried about the project—should the BBC be involved in something like this? But David was more

worried about me. Before I signed the contract, he warned me that I was going to be in the public limelight. 'Write down a list of pros and cons first,' he said. I couldn't think of any cons. The decision was easy."

The reality was harder. Julia saw a psychiatrist who agreed to consider referring her for a sex change operation if she could live and work as a woman for a year. But the hospital where she worked suspended her from her job as soon as they knew. Most of her friends, says Julia, didn't want anyone to know that they knew her. It was a lonely year.

In the end, Julia had both her operations done privately—the one to increase the size of her breasts, already swelling from hormone treatment, and finally the one to have the last remnants of her manhood removed.

The sex change, she was warned, would probably take 10 years off her life and the hormone tablets made her gain weight and put her at serious risk from thrombosis. There was also a 50 per cent risk that she would have little or no sexual sensation in her newly constructed organs.

"I would have gone through with it even if I'd known I would die in five years. It would be five years of happiness. I would not have regretted it if it had meant losing

all sexual sensation," says Julia.

Happily, the operation was a complete success. Julia describes her feelings about her new womanhood as "a great sense of release". But, she adds, she doesn't feel that "now, suddenly, I'm a woman. It doesn't work that way because I've felt for a long, long time that I was a woman in a man's body."

Today she glories in the feminine side to being a woman. She buys long, floating, expensive dresses in sales and enjoys disconcerting the people who expect a rather butch woman with, perhaps, suspicious traces of 'five o'clock shadow' when they first meet her.

"I went to a party the other day," she says, "and everyone was wearing jeans. I turned up in a chic black evening gown with gold edging and felt I was the most feminine woman in the room. It didn't embarrass me that I stood out—I certainly haven't been through all this just to turn up at parties wearing jeans."

One thing that has taken some getting used to is unwanted advances from men. As George, she could walk through the West End late at night, confident that no one was going to bother her.

"But a woman on her own at night can look like an easy pick-up. It disgusts and annoys me when cars pull up. One night I left a disco and was walking to the bus-stop

when a car pulled up and a chap got out. He started following me. Finally he grabbed hold of my arm and said: 'Come on then, what are you on the street for?'

"I lost my temper," she chuckles deeply. "I picked him up, pinned him against the wall and said in my most masculine voice, 'Do you want your mouth smacked in?'"

"I know what it's like to be a bully or in a crowd of men shouting things at the women who walk past—and I enjoy disconcerting them."

Julia can joke about her sexuality with the confidence of someone who knows exactly what she is. But there is one way in which she will always feel inadequate. There'll be no more children for her. And surprisingly, perhaps, she has very traditional ideas about motherhood.

"I don't think a woman is complete until she's had a couple of babies. I want a baby very much—it's part of being a family. I've been so used to children, bringing up my brothers and sisters and feeling as though they were mine."

Obviously one solution would be adoption, but it is unlikely that the authorities in Britain would ever permit it—here it is actually illegal for a trans-sexual to marry. Julia and Amer dream about going to the States when all the publicity has blown over. There they could legally marry and eventually adopt a baby.

If that sounds rather horrifying, Julia is convinced that it could work. "I'd want my child to be normal. When the right time came, I'd have to be honest and tell him the truth about me. But if we'd done the right thing by showing him enough love, I know he'd be able to accept us."

She and Amer did recently have a chance to look after a baby for a couple of months. One of Julia's sisters, who is unmarried, had just had a second child and found she couldn't cope.

"It may sound soppy," says Julia, "but when Amer and I had the baby we were busy every minute of the day, taking him for walks in his pram and playing with him. We were dotty, doting parents for a few weeks. He became part of us. He used to laugh and laugh. When he had to go back, I cried for ages."

Julia's sister felt the baby would have a better home with Amer and Julia, but a bid to have him legally adopted failed.

Julia has weathered worse storms. Now she is happy in a stable, loving relationship. Friends from before the change have dropped by the wayside—"you can't take up the threads of a past like mine," she says philosophically. She's found new reserves of energy and enthusiasm, writing her own autobiography, a novel and a couple of plays for television—all within a year.

And if she appears to want too much too quickly, it's not hard to understand why. Julia Grant—th name she picked out of a hat when she started her new life as a woman—has 24 lost years to catch up on.

FEELING QUILTY?

If you are interested in the clothes shown on pages 16 and 17 telephone the number listed below for your nearest stockist. Or try the London shops listed.

Bronze blouson, cotton with borg lining, 8-14, by Wallis (01-450 8989); Wallis, Oxford St. London W1 (01-437 0076) and branches.

Trews, 30% wool/55% poly-fibres/15% other fibres, 8-14, by Experience (01-637 8855); Way In, Harrods, Knightsbridge, London SW1 (01-730 1234).

Lace-ups, 3-8, by Russell & Bromley (01-629 6903); Russell & Bromley, New Bond St. London W1 and branches.

Crew-neck sweater, 70% acrylic/30% wool, 1-3, by Harold Ingram (01-323 4911); Jane Norman, Oxford St. London W1 (01-437 0132).

Silver quilted anorak, satin quilt reversing to simulated fur, 10-16, from Debenhams (01-408 4444); Debenhams, Oxford St. London W1 and branches.

Black pants, polyester, 10-14, from Debenhams (as before).

Black patent sandals, 3½-7, by Ravel (01-499 1949); Ravel, Oxford St. W1 and selected branches.

Glazed jacket, cotton, 8-14, by Wallis (as before).

Culottes, 65% polyester/35% wool, 8-14, by Wallis (as before).

Check shirt, cotton, S.M.L., by Experience (as before).

Tights, by Mary Quant; from major department stores.

Moccasins, 3-7½, by Walkers (01-404 4811); Howie, 138 Long Acre, London WC2 (01-836 3156).

Quilted banana bag by Mulberry (01-229 4416); from a selection at Harrods, Knightsbridge, London SW1 (01-730 1234).

Scarf and gloves, from selection at Top Shop, Oxford St. London W1 (01-636 7700).

Khaki jacket, 34% nylon/33% cotton/33% viscose, 10-16 by Marks & Spencer; Marks & Spencer, Oxford St. London W1 and major branches.

Sweatshirt, cotton, 1-3 by Goldie; Elle, 92 New Bond St. London W1 (01-408 2343).

Reversible pants, nylon reversing to cotton, 1-3, by Goldie (as before).

Quilted boots, 3-8, by Saxone (01-629 6381); Saxone, Oxford St. London W1 and branches.

Bag by Mulberry, (as before).

Grey coat, cotton reversing to acrylic, 10-14, by Chaston (01-437 4765); Fenwick, New Bond St. London W1 (01-629 9161).

Pink ski pants, 78% polyester/19% wool/3% polyamide, 8-14, by Experience (as before).

Grey suede boots, 4-7, by Bertie (01-487 4951); Bertie, 70 Wigmore St. London W1 and branches.

Cream roll-neck sweater, acrylic, S.M, by Dorothy Perkins; Dorothy Perkins, Oxford St. London W1 and branches.

Gloves, Boots, from larger branches.

Blouson with skyline scene, cotton, 10-14, by Jones (01-352 5323); Jones, 129 King's Road, London SW3

Roller skates, 3-7, by Sacha (01-499 7272); Sacha, 351 Oxford St. London W1 (01-629 0651) and branches.

and branches

she started her new life as a w