

Conservative Men in Conservative Dresses: The World of Cross-Dressers Is for the Most Part a World of Traditional Men, Traditional Marriages, and Truths Turned Inside Out.

by Amy Bloom

Heterosexual cross-dressers bother almost everyone. Gay people regard them with disdain or affectionate incomprehension, something warmer than tolerance but not much. Transsexuals regard them as men "settling" for cross-dressing because they don't have the courage to act on their transsexual longing, or else as closeted and so homophobic that they prefer wearing a dress to facing their desire for another man. Other straight men tend to find them funny or sad, and some find them enraging. The only people on whose kindness and sympathy cross-dressers can rely are women: their wives and, even more dependably, their hairdressers, their salespeople, their photographers and makeup artists, their electrolysisists, their therapists, and their friends.

Drag queens make sense to most of us. They represent a congruence of sexual orientation, appearance, and temperament--feminine gay men dressing as women for a career, like RuPaul, or, less lucratively, for prostitution, or to express their sense of theater and femininity. (Barney Frank as a drag queen makes no more sense, intuitively, than Dick Cheney as one.) Actors whose most famous performance is as a female--from Barry Humphries, with his brilliant and textured Dame Edna, to Flip Wilson, with his one-note gag of Geraldine--don't puzzle us. Tootsie and Mrs. Doubtfire and the boys in *Some Like It Hot* don't puzzle us; they're just men doing what they have to do to survive, learning a nice lesson about the travails of womanhood, and giving one on the benign uses of masculine self-esteem. Even the cross-dressing women of history, women from many countries and every century since the ancient Greeks--from Joan of Arc to Pope Joan to America's jazz-playing Billy Tipton, from Little Jo Monaghan, the cowpoke, to Disney's adorable Mulan--don't puzzle us; they chose to live as men because they couldn't otherwise have the lives they wanted.

Heterosexual cross-dressers--straight men who have not only a wish but a need to wear women's clothes and accessories --manage to be marginal among heterosexual men, marginal among other men who wear women's clothes, marginal in the community of sexual minorities, and completely acceptable only to fetishists, who take anyone who claims to belong. Gay men do not say, "Oh, you're a straight man who likes to wear a dress? Welcome aboard." Straight men do not say, "Well, except for the dress thing, you're just like me. Howdy, pardner." Even in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where cross-dressers hold their annual fall Fantasia Fair, few of the residents, gay or straight, seem to recognize these men as people with whom they have a lot in common.

Many heterosexual cross-dressers never come out of the closet, not even to their wives. Others tell their wives after ten or twenty or thirty years of marriage, sometimes because they've been caught wearing their wives' clothes, sometimes because the clothes have been discovered. (The revelation that a man himself is the "other woman" is a staple of cross-dresser histories.) Heterosexual cross-dressers often spend their whole adult lives ordering size 20 cocktail dresses from catalogues and dressing in secret, with only the mirror for company. But lots of these men, driven by loneliness, by unmet narcissistic needs (all dressed up and nowhere to go), by risk-taking impulses (it's not hard to grasp that a forty-five-year-old 240-pound former Marine strolling through the Mall of America in full drag is consciously courting risk), want to cross-dress outside their bedrooms. Engineers and accountants, truck drivers and computer programmers, disproportionately represented among the retired military, predominately Christian and predominately

conservative (far more moderate Republicans than liberal Democrats), these men go to get-togethers in Kansas City, in Pittsburgh, in Seattle, all over America. They make forays into malls in pairs, and they go to tolerant gay bars in small groups. They browse in the Belladonna Plus Size Shop of Beverly, Massachusetts, and they hang out at Criss/Cross Consultants, of Houston, which offers special package rates for shopping, a makeover, and dinner at a restaurant. They go to weekly or monthly meetings, of six or ten or twenty guys, in Nashua, New Hampshire, and Trenton, New Jersey, in Springfield, Missouri, and Water Mill, New York, and throughout the Bible Belt. Arizona has enough cross-dressers to support chapters in both Phoenix and Tucson. A man who cross-dresses and needs to be seen can go to conferences like Fantasia Fair and Fall Harvest, in the Midwest, or take trips on any number of cruise lines that happily host groups of cross-dressers and their spouses amid a thousand other guests sailing to Catalina and other destinations.

Sometimes the wives wish to come, to support their husbands and to enjoy the trip, or to hang out with other wives, like golf widows or wives in AI-Anon. Some come because their husbands need them to. "I don't mind, but really, if he could learn to do his makeup properly and fasten his own bra, I'd rather stay home," one woman told me at Fall Harvest 2000. (Later she called to say that she had bought her husband a video guide to makeup for men and a magnifying mirror, and that she was resigning as his dresser. "He can ask one of the other guys to hook his bra," she said.) Happy wives are everyone's favorites, but happy or cowed, enthusiastic or grimly accepting, the wives at these functions are simultaneously objects of much public appreciation and utterly secondary to the men's business. The world of cross-dressers is for the most part a world of traditional men, traditional marriages, and truths turned inside out.

Reliable statistics about the number of heterosexual cross-dressers don't seem to exist. In the fall of 2000 I spent several weeks trying to pin down that number. I checked with the International Foundation for Gender Education, in Waltham, Massachusetts, which acts as switchboard, referral service, news agency, and educational center for both cross-dressers and transsexuals, and with GenderPAC, a lobbying organization, but neither group knew. "Too many guys in the closet," a voice at the IFGE said. "How could anyone presume to count?"

I called Ray Blanchard, the head of clinical sexology services at Canada's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, a self-described "traditional clinician" who has been studying sexuality for thirty years. "No one knows," he told me. "I consulted several colleagues, and the consensus is that we have no useful epidemiological information. Period."

I checked with Jane Ellen and Frances Fairfax, of Tri-Ess, the Society for the Second Self, "an international support and social organization for Heterosexual Cross-dressers, their spouses, partners, children and friends." The Fairfaxes live in Texas, where Jane Ellen is otherwise a physician and the father of three boys, two in college and one in prep school. The Fairfaxes told me that at last count 1,100 cross-dressers and 320 wives belonged to Tri-Ess's thirty chapters nationwide, but they didn't know the total number of heterosexual cross-dressers either.

"Maybe three or four million," Jane Ellen hazarded. "Maybe somewhere between three and five percent of the adult [male] population. People who claim it's more--I think that's just, you know, a minority wanting to be bigger than it is. And people who say more like one or two percent--I think those are the ones who are ashamed." When I asked Ray Blanchard for an estimate, he agreed that three to five percent sounded about right.

There are really only two points of agreement between Blanchard and the Fairfaxes: that no one knows how many heterosexual cross-dressers there are, and that all these men in dresses who assert that they are straight, sometimes to the point of annoyance, are straight.

JANE ELLEN: A MAN WITH A MISSION

Tri-Ess was founded in 1976, as a melding of several cross-dressing groups, including the historic Hose and Heels Club, which began meeting in California, in 1961, and which is to many cross-dressers what Stonewall is to gay men: the beginning of the end of shame (although not, for the cross-dressers, the end of fiercely preserved anonymity). The Fairfaxes are now the driving force behind Tri-Ess. For some cross-dressers, Tri-Ess is a beacon of hope in a society that labels them weirdoes and queers when they know they are not. For critics within the cross-dressing community, the Fairfaxes are good people who are misguided, even self-deceiving, about the nature of cross-dressing.

Jane Ellen is a man with a mission: to save cross-dressers from their worst selves and to preserve their marriages. Frances, firm but unassuming, competent, and mild except when offended, is his partner in this, and has been the secretary of Tri-Ess's board of directors (of which Jane Ellen is the chair) since 1988. A central tenet of Tri-Ess is that cross-dressing is a gift--that wearing women's clothes is both relaxing and expressive of a feminine self that is nurturing and gentle--and that it can enhance any marriage if the wife is wise enough to appreciate it and strong enough to corral what can be, as Jane Ellen admits, a narcissistic, self-indulgent habit. In the words of "Do You Know Someone Who Is a Crossdresser?," on the Tri-Ess Web site,

Most [cross-dressers] are ordinary men who have discovered a feminine aspect to their personalities, and desire to transcend the narrow stereotypes mandated by conventional society. Happy in their masculinity, they have simply discovered a feminine gender "gift" and decided to explore it ... There is within each man a set of personality potentials that are part of his birthright, but that society labels as "feminine" and says he should suppress. Crossdressers have made contact with these potentials and found their expression fulfilling. Integrating these into their whole personalities, crossdressers are able to smooth off some of the macho rough edges programmed by their upbringing. The result is a healthier whole person.

Once a wife or partner realizes her mate isn't leaving her for another man or for a new life as a woman, or taking risks that could destroy their financial and family life, the two of them can seek a balanced solution ... Many of the traits that attracted her in the first place--sensitivity, kindness, appreciation of beauty, etc.--can now be seen as belonging to that "woman within."

The Fairfaxes believe that heterosexual cross-dressers are just normal folks, not at all like those gender outlaws--bearded men in dresses, "chicks with dicks"--whom Jane Ellen calls "gender mockers." The Fairfaxes want cross-dressers out of the closet, not because Tri-Ess wishes to defy or upend society, but because they believe that if society understood how normal cross-dressing is, resistance to it would vanish; it would be seen as no stranger a form of relaxation than golf. The words that Ray Blanchard uses when he talks about cross-dressing--"fetish," "continuum of gender dysphoria," "narcissism," "erotic self-absorption"--are words the Fairfaxes don't ever want to hear. They are upset when cross-dressing is viewed as being about sex, or as unusual (although they know it is), because they realize that they are exactly the kind of folks--Christians, family people, Texans--that George W. Bush wants and needs. When you say "cross-dresser," Jane Ellen and Frances want you to think only of a guy relaxing in a dress.

"Of course it's not relaxing," Blanchard says, with some heat. "Heels and makeup and a wig and a corset? It's preposterous. Even women don't find that relaxing. Relaxing is a pair of sweatpants, clothing that doesn't even feel like clothing. Cross-dressers want to normalize this, to have it seen as relaxation and self-expression. I've had people say to me, 'You know, I bet if there wasn't all this stereotyping, these people would not choose to wear a dress.' I say that's nonsense. Cross-dressing is an attempt to resolve an internal conflict, and it's not about fabric. If we had clothing for men and women that was identical in every way except men wore shirts with four buttons and women had shirts with five, cross-dressers would want more than anything to have the shirt with five. We don't know why."

Our categories and descriptions are so narrow and self-protective that we don't have words for the drive to cross-dress; we don't have any language to describe the mixture of attraction and envy that often leads these men to have sex with women while thinking of themselves as male lesbians.

A brochure from the Fantasia Fair of 1986 encapsulates the cross-dresser's bind as he tries to describe what drives him.

What is a Crossdresser?

An individual, usually heterosexual, who desires and needs to dress in the clothing of the opposite sex at different times throughout his or her life. This compulsive behavior generally starts at a young age and the individual struggles alone for many years with this closeted need. Crossdressing is not a sickness, but represents a person who enjoys expressing another aspect of his personality and gains both emotional and physical pleasure from this transition. It is not a hobby, but a necessity and Crossdressing is for life.

This seems to me to be the heart of cross-dressers' dilemma, and the heart of mine in writing about them. Cross-dressing is a compulsion, but we must not see it as a sickness. A good wife should tolerate it because

the man has no choice, but it isn't too hard to tolerate because it's a gift. It is about fun and pleasure--and it's a necessity. The necessity of cross-dressing is frightening to the men and to their wives, and their wish to tame it, to characterize it as a preference and a gift, is understandable.

Jane Ellen told me, "Men are still being trained--well, you know, as Virginia Prince [the founder of Tri-Ess, and one of the godmothers of cross-dressing] says, `Men are always trying to become what women are content to be.'"

"What is it that women are content to be?" I asked.

"Oh, you know, they know when to give it a rest. They know when and how to quit. They can relax and be themselves."

I did know. He meant that in his vision, idealized and old-fashioned, women are like oceans, or like fields, or like horses, and men are sailors, farmers, and cowboys, and that is their curse and that is women's blessing, although women may not realize it. It is exhausting to be a man, and delightful to kick off those demands and slip into something more comfortable. The longer I talked to the Fairfaxes, the less surprising their middle-of-the-road Republicanism became. It seemed odd only that their cross-dressing would make anyone think that they belonged at the same party as Queer Nation, Dykes on Bikes, and transsexuals who become lesbian feminists.

"A lot of men, myself included, want to go there, to be a feminine self, to slow down and stop striving," Jane Ellen told me.

"It sounds like yoga," I replied.

Jane Ellen was silent. It sounds like yoga except for the two hours of preparation time. It sounds like yoga except that it begins in a man's life as an erotic response and becomes an erotic fetish. Sometimes I put on lipstick when I'm tense. It makes me feel armored, less vulnerable to the world. That's not the same thing. I don't feel that the lipstick is essential to my being, that without it I must stay home, though I know that there is an erotic dimension to getting dressed up (it's not just cross-dressers who appreciate the silkiness of a slip, the slide of a stocking). When the dressing and the garments are the fuel for and the expression of one's sexual wishes, it is about sex, not gender.

"Cross-dressers' desires do not map onto anything in our world," Ray Blanchard says. "You will never know how they feel if you are not one of them. And they have to disconnect between reality and their fantasy. Otherwise their desires are too disruptive. It's too disruptive to acknowledge that you wish your penis was part of your wife's body and not yours. It's too disruptive to acknowledge that this is a sexual compulsion."

For all their talk of relaxation, the Fairfaxes are too smart to think, or to try to persuade me, that cross-dressing is ordinary, or that it's just a hobby. Fly fishing is a hobby. Spending two hours preparing yourself to walk through a mall or a hotel lobby hoping--hoping to the point of anxiety and arousal--that you will be perceived as female is not what anyone, not least the cross-dressers themselves, thinks of as a hobby.

LEVELS OF JOY

I am aboard the Carnival ship *Holiday*, waiting to meet twenty-five cross-dressers and their wives on a cruise to Catalina with about 1,400 other passengers. (Names and identifying details have been changed for many of the people in this article, at their request.) I am wondering what to wear to dinner and to a preliminary party in the suite of Mel and Peggy Rudd, my hosts. Peggy has written a number of books on cross-dressing, the best known of which is *My Husband Wears My Clothes* (1989), and was formerly the head of SPICE (the Spouses' and Partners' International Conference for Education), a Tri-Ess auxiliary conference for wives and girlfriends of "ordinary heterosexual men with an additional feminine dimension." (I've met the Rudds before. I traveled to Texas to interview them several years ago, when I first became interested in the less common ways in which people inhabit their gender. I stayed at their home, woke up in their astonishingly sunny and beribboned guest room, and walked down to the breakfast nook past a phalanx of posed photos: the Rudds with Ronald and Nancy Reagan, the Rudds with George and Barbara Bush. At breakfast Peggy said to Mel, "Oh, dear, we should have taken down all those pictures before Amy got here." Mel smiled. "Oh, I think she's

a true liberal--she won't mind about the Republicans.")

I waffle about what to wear for nearly half an hour. Finally I decide that silk pants, a tank top, and sandals is right--for the level of dressiness of the dinner (which I have overestimated) and for my own social and appearance anxiety (which I have underestimated). When I walk into the party, the Rudds hug me and introduce me as "Amy the writer." Some men flinch, although the Rudds have told everyone to expect me. Tory, a good-looking young man from Mexico, shakes my hand and says, "Hello, Miss Amy." His aunt and his cousin and his girlfriend, Cory, are on this trip with him--his first time cross-dressing in public. Tory and Cory, with their happy sexual banter, his devoted relatives, and his final painstaking and successful transformation from Antonio Banderas to Daisy Fuentes, become the darlings of our group; they make everyone feel better.

I mingle with the rest of the guys and their wives. These men, to whom I will refer in print as "he," and to whom I refer in person when they are cross-dressed as "she," are not drag queens, hardworking perennials like Pearlene the Size Queen and Big-Boned Barbie, not Las Vegas female impersonators, and most definitely not gender-benders of any kind--not Marilyn Manson, not Prince. When cross-dressed, they look more like Mrs. Attanas, my formidable fourth-grade teacher, a big, tall woman with a bolsterlike bosom, thick legs, sensible pumps, hennaed hair, and twin spots of rouge on her cheeks. Like Jane Ellen Fairfax, they have the matronly look so common to straight cross-dressers. At first I thought this reflected some weird attachment to their mothers--that the image they wished to present was that of their own first woman. Hence the heavy foundation, the blue eye shadow, the big pearl-button earrings. I no longer think so. I've noticed the same look among their wives, and among lots of middle-aged women not much interested in changing fashions. These men are not regular readers of Elle, Vogue, or even Ladies' Home Journal.

I have met cross-dressers whose presentation is just this side of Christina Aguilera, and I have met a fifty-year-old midwestern engineer and a sixty-year-old born-again Christian CEO and a forty-year-old police captain who dress exactly as they would if they had been born on the distaff side, in clothes both contemporary and appropriate, whether Gap or Escada or Dress Barn. But though anatomy may not be destiny, it certainly lays a hand on our options. Most cross-dressers, and almost all married cross-dressers, live lives in which they are not cross-dressed. They don't take female hormones, and they usually don't have electrolysis even if they would like to (many express the wish to wake up and find themselves without facial, arm, or leg hair, but their wives are opposed). They cannot easily put together a natural, believable female appearance. First they need beard camouflage, to flatten and disguise the stubble, then powder over that and foundation over that. Sweating is a big problem. Jim Bridges, a transformation guide and guru, the creator of the videos Bridges to Beauty 2000 and Hollywood Makeup Secrets, which are offered at his boutique in North Hollywood and through his booming Web business ("Can't tell you who in the House of Representatives, can't tell you who in the NFL," he told me while putting false eyelashes on a John Deere salesman at Fall Harvest 2000), counsels a quick swipe of antiperspirant on the upper lip and at the hairline. Cross-dressing is not only anxiety-provoking and arousing, it is also warm under the wig, the corset, the padding, the pantyhose. A pronounced face requires pronounced makeup, and after the false eyelashes and even the most subtle contouring of the wider jaw and the thick brow, one can look beautiful or ridiculous, but one cannot look like most of the women around.

At dinner I am seated with the Rudds, wearing nearly matching floral prints. To my right are Tory's aunt and cousin, who speak almost no English, and next to them is Lori, a Lee Remick lookalike, husband nowhere in sight. On the other side of her is a man in his late sixties, recently retired as a senior partner in a white-shoe law firm in the Deep South. He looks great. He looks like a Neiman Marcus matron, and if he seems a bit out of place, it is only because the cruise is so downscale: twenty-year-old guys are clumping around the casino in their NASCAR jackets, baseball caps, and hiking boots, as if a nice shirt and a pair of slacks would be way too much trouble.

To my left are Felicity and his wife. Felicity is a large, hunched man, made up in a very conventional, slightly stiff manner. He looks like a librarian, or perhaps the strong-minded wife of a minister; in fact he is a Southern Baptist minister from the very buckle of the Bible Belt. "So, you're the writer," he says. "Well, I'd say you pass pretty well." I smile pleasantly, as if I am not offended, as if I don't think he intended to offend me. He clears his throat twice and stares at my silk pants. "You gals just get to cross-dress all the time and no one says boo." He sounds furious that life is so easy for me and so hard for him, but because he is a minister, and even more because he is dressed as and representing someone named Felicity, he cannot be direct or angry; he has to try to convey a serene and gracious femininity regardless of his feelings. And his wife is beside herself, tight-lipped, hands clasped; she is a Christian woman doing what she must, and though she might wish otherwise, she cannot be pleased.

Felicity and Merrie, a large, sweet man on the other side of the table, take turns dominating the dinner conversation. There is a great deal that they both want me to understand, and they are also gratified, painfully gratified, by my attention, by the fact that I even think about them without horror. I come to see why so many women find themselves sympathetic to cross-dressers: women are raised to be sympathetic, and protective toward the vulnerable, and there is something sweet, unexpected, and powerful about being a woman and sympathizing with a man not because he demands it but because you genuinely feel sorry for him, for his debilitating envy and his fear of discovery and his sense of powerlessness to live as he wants. The supermodel Heidi Klum and her crowd may feel sorry for helpless men, whipsawed by passion every night of the week but this is not a stance that society affords most women.

Over the next few days I meet most of the members of the Rudds' group. I meet a couple who look alike whether he's cross-dressed or not. I meet a shy, skinny engineer who attends the cruise talent show in a white stretch-velvet dress and a platinum Tina Turner shag. I meet Harry, who is always somewhat cross-dressed (women's jeans, women's sneakers) but never flamboyantly; his appearance is that of an effeminate man, and he doesn't bother with a femme name or seem to have any of the common need for a more feminine presentation. I would have thought this would be easier for his wife than a husband who called himself Lulu, spent hours in the bathroom making up his face, and paraded around in a strapless lavender tulle dress and matching pumps, but it's not.

"I love him," she tells me. "I love him, but I don't want a man who is excited by the idea of being a woman. We have two kids, he's a great dad, a good provider, but I want a man who's comfortable with masculinity. I don't want to be sisters ... or lesbians. If I wanted a woman, I would have found one by now. But ... other things are good." And he tells me, with great sadness, "She is the most supportive person in the world--and this is a terrible thing for her. We work on it, we struggle." He stops and gathers his defenses; throughout the cruise he will condescend to the men with femme names, the men who insist on elaborate makeup, because he sees himself as "evolved," free of the trappings and compulsions of cross-dressing. "All couples struggle," he says. "They fight about money, about sex. You can't tell me they don't. This is no different." He looks out at the ocean. "This is different, I know, but I refuse to let it ruin our lives."

Peggy Rudd is the boss and the model for the wives, their spokesperson, a movement spokesperson, the cruise director. Mel (or Melanie, as he calls himself when cross-dressed), all hearty kindness, a genial grandfather even in a dress and a bolero jacket, does not seem to have similar obligations. None of the men say to me, "I've learned so much from Mel." He is a good old boy in drag, always looking for a laugh, a little playful fun, another piece of bread and butter under Peggy's watchful eye (the whole table knows of his cholesterol troubles and hers). Although he does not make a pretty woman, he makes a reasonably convincing overweight, coarse-featured sixty-year-old woman, I think--but my eyes have adjusted: none of these guys look as tall or as large to me as they are.

One evening Peggy says, with a slightly pursed expression, "My next book is on joy: the difference between the level of joy that cross-dressers experience"--she holds her hand up over her head--"and the level of joy that their wives experience." Her hand drops to her waist. The cross-dressers around us say nothing. They nod, joyous astronauts sympathizing with the poor wives left behind and trying not to show how much better a time they are having. I think of the twinkle in Mel's eyes and the fact that nothing like a twinkle ever appears in Peggy's. It must be psychologically exhausting for her to turn this pain into a shared hobby, his compulsion into entertainment, his need into an occasion for celebration, and I feel ashamed that, knowing all that, I still prefer his company.

Every night the headwaiter becomes more and more camp and foolishly flattering; these people are big tippers, moderate drinkers, considerate of the staff, and extremely polite. On the third night of the cruise Felicity comes to dinner "en drab" as they say, looking like what he is--a heavysset Baptist minister who worked construction in his youth. With a flourish the headwaiter delivers roses to his wife, to applause from our four tables. Felicity puts his big hand on hers and squeezes it. He makes a toast to their thirty years of marriage and to her goodness and support. He begins to choke up; her remote look never changes. I can see that she is not pleased that he decided to dress like a man for her tonight. She is not pleased that he is so grateful to her for trying to believe that he cross-dresses only because he cannot express his warm and nurturing self while wearing trousers. Nor is she pleased, God knows, to sit with a bunch of men in makeup and dresses, some modest, some outrageous, some passable, most not, and call it an anniversary party. Later they come to talk to me, and when Felicity says that his path may be to minister to the transgendered, his wife puts her hand over her mouth and says quietly, "God will show us the way." She means, unmistakably, that the way will surely not be this one--that God cannot want her to be the wife of a cross-dresser who

ministers to the transgendered.

Felicity says, "It's like there are three of me in this little boat: the husband, the cross-dresser, and the minister. I can hear the falls approaching, and I know, I know with all my heart, one of us will not survive this ride." He begins to cry, and I get tears in my eyes. As I hand him some tissues, his wife glares at me and says, "You sure do get involved with your interviews." She must think that some pretty fancy footwork is required to wind up so sorry for the cross-dresser and not for the wife; when I look at her sympathetically, she almost spits. Pity from people like me is not what she wants either. For the remainder of the trip Felicity seeks me out and his wife avoids me.

THE GLEAM IN THEIR EYES

After the cruise, after follow-up e-mails with Melanie and Peggy, and more phone calls with the Fairfaxes, I found that I had more to say than I had thought, and more concerns about saying it. I didn't want to demonize or pathologize any sexual preference or behavior that doesn't hurt anyone. I didn't want to make fun of fetishists. Now that our culture has begun to shift toward the notion that no mature reciprocal love between two people, of the same or opposite sex, is a disease, I didn't want to consign everyone who isn't just gay or straight to the DSM junkpile. I wanted to focus on people like Steve and Sue, happily married for more than thirty years and now often mistaken for a lesbian couple, or like the well-adjusted state trooper from Montana, whose John Wayne manner, walk, and wink never changed, even when he wore a black-lace cocktail dress, even when his pretty wife sat on his lap and kissed him, telling me, "That's just who he is. He's a fun person, a people person, and I guess the cross-dressing is part of it." The men I met were by and large decent, kind, intelligent, and willing to talk openly. Their wives were the same, many of them under the additional pressure of having to make the best accommodation they can to a marriage they did not envision and do not prefer.

But I do think that passion for a person, or a capacity to love people, is different from a sexual impulse that is directed toward an object or an act and that is greater than the desire for any person. And although one could argue that all desire focused on an object or even an act is a fetish, I don't think so--any more than I think that gender-reassignment surgery (even when it's known as gender-confirmation surgery) is no different from a tummy tuck. The greatest difficulty people have with cross-dressers, I think, is that cross-dressers wear their fetish, and the gleam in their eyes, however muted by time or habit, the unmistakable presence of a lust being satisfied or a desire being fulfilled in that moment, in your presence, even by your presence, is unnerving. The combination of the cross-dressers' own arousal and anxiety and our responsive anxiety and discomfort is more than most of us can bear. We may not mind foot fetishists, but we may not wish to watch them either.

The cross-dressers of Tri-Ess insist that cross-dressing is not about sexuality, and therefore not about sex. They are right about the first, and we can all stop assuming that any man who wears a dress is gay. But they are not right about the second, and their assertion, their defense, that cross-dressing is their creative expression of both genders is unsettling, because it is at such odds with their behavior, their natures, and their marriages. These men are as far from being gender warriors and feminists as George W. himself. As one wife said to me, "For twenty years he couldn't help with the dishes because he was watching football. Now he can't help because he's doing his nails. Is that different?" For these men, the woman within is entirely the Maybelline version, not the Mother Teresa version, not the Liv Ullman version, and not even the Tracey Ullman version. There is no innate grasp of female friendship, of the female insistence on relatedness, of the female tradition of support and accommodation for one's partner and giving precedence to the relationship overall. If there were that kind of understanding, rather than shopping for accessories and watching tapes on how to walk in heels, these guys would be unable to ask their wives to go through this cross-dressing life with them--and everyone, husbands and wives, knows it. They know that if any of the women insisted on wearing three-piece suits or baseball uniforms in public, and asked their husbands to accept hairy legs, hairy underarms, and jockstraps as part of their sex life, the husbands would not be rushing off to join spousal support groups while cheerfully spending the family's money on bespoke shirts and expensive glue-on facial hair. The marriages would be over.

As with the Ladies' Home Journal of the 1950s, or Cosmopolitan of the seventies, eighties, and nineties, when I read Tri-Ess's advice to wives, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. The advice seems to be both traditional and optimistic, and when optimism seems impossible, the general tone is that love conquers fear and a good man is hard to find. If Dickens's Nancy were alive today (and Bill Sikes, his sadism aside, is exactly the kind of

macho, overcompensating, risk-taking guy one might find cross-dressing), she would be in a wives' support group, happy to pick out a lipstick, apologizing if they ran out of Slim-Fast a week before the Harvest Ball.

Is it just delicious irony that makes so many people's eyes sparkle when I tell them about my Christian Republican cross-dressers? Is it something less sophisticated, like schaden-freude, or even less civilized, like homophobia? It is gratifying to yank the covers off hypocrites: the fundamentalist-Christian congressman with his handsome young pages, the old-school feminist who tolerates abusive boyfriends, the priest and his porn.

The widespread assumption is that heterosexual cross-dressers are hypocrites, publicly lambasting deviance of all kinds and dressing up in private like Little Bo Peep. There is still plenty of Little Bo Peep (and Scarlett O'Hara and Courtney Love) in private, but the lambasting has died down considerably since 1980. In the past cross-dressers were eager to disassociate themselves from gay men and about as interested in feminism as Ward Cleaver. Now the unimaginable has happened, and the landscape has changed. All the cross-dressers I spoke to expressed admiration for the gay civil-rights movement and hope that whatever acceptance gay people have won will somehow envelop cross-dressers too. Gay men and women turn out to be their role models in terms of self-respect, even if the cross-dressers are well aware that the gay community offers them tolerance but not a warm welcome. And feminism of the women-are-nicer-people variety, although not a part of the wives' lives, adds an unexpected aspect to the cross-dressers' self-image: in their remarks about the burdens of masculinity and the innate nurturing and graciousness of women, and in their attempts to connect with nature and spirit, they sound like the softest and most Goddess-worshipping of second-wave feminists.

Almost everything Tri-Ess has said about its members is true: they are straight and traditional men who love their wives and wear dresses. Just as Tri-Ess says, its Christian, conservative Republican men have a great deal more in common with other Christian, conservative Republican men than with anyone else. Their wives are not professional women with their own substantial incomes and career paths; and they are not royalty or Hollywood types who expose their spouses' peculiarities and let the muck cling to their kids. They try to make their marriages work, and if the price of a good provider and a decent man is not much sex and a certain amount of constant pain, it is not an unfamiliar bargain. The wives are not uniformly overweight, motherly, and devoid of self-esteem (as some mediocre research has suggested they are), or at least no more so than any other group of middle-class women married young to traditional and dominant men, devoted to home and family, and lacking in advanced education. Juggling the limited resources of time, money, and pleasure, balancing dominance and fear, self-deception and love, selfishness and desperation, cross-dressers and their wives struggle with one big difference--his compulsion--and otherwise, just as they have told me all along, they are just like everyone else.

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