

Chapter 11: The Real Life Test

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

I set my own work hours, and chose 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. I joined Gold's Gym and worked out every day after work, then hopped a bus back to Lucy's. My female body was giving me no joy, now that I was conscious about how I felt about it, and I didn't set foot in a locker room, but the endorphins released by these daily workouts kept the worst of my depression at bay. Though I was still depressed and had little sense of centeredness about my identity, having a job provided sufficient stability and focus for my life, as well as having weekly Choir rehearsals, that I was no longer in danger of committing suicide. Most of the time.

I still had periodic bad moments, however, particularly on Friday nights. Sundays had structure because of evening Choir rehearsals, but Saturdays had no structure to them, and a structured schedule was much of what held me together that fall and winter. I dreaded Friday nights, always followed by a day with no structure. Whenever I had bad nights, I would wake from a crushingly depressing dream, always, it seemed, at 3:00 a.m. I came to dread 3:00 a.m., a time when I felt no one else existed in the world.

One such night I woke and was so depressed and in such despair that I just said through my tears, to no one in particular, "Help me. I can't do this anymore." And suddenly I felt... lighter. I would not describe it as the presence of God or any other deity known (or unknown) to humanity. I just felt a release from the sense of isolation I'd lived with for so long. I no longer felt alone, and knew I had come through a darkness that would never be quite so overwhelming

again as it had been in recent months. I later learned to call this the dark night of the soul, and to realize I had survived a spiritual emergency. All I knew at the time is that I was through the worst.

Through Alan, I found several on-line mailing lists for FTMs, and developed some close on-line correspondents. I found this particular method of support most comforting – I was becoming increasingly self-conscious about my body as I became more comfortable with the degree of masculinity in my personality. I relished being able to sit alone in my room, out of sight, sharing my turmoil and feelings with others in much the same situation. In hindsight, this was a much more useful source of support to me than a face-to-face group would have been. I highly recommend on-line trans mailing lists for those in the very earliest stages of figuring out who they are.

One perceptive Choir member, herself a survivor of clinical depression, asked how I was doing and I confided to her that I'd been feeling isolated and was enjoying on-line support. She suggested I sign up on the GALA Choruses (GALA is the Gay and Lesbian Association of Choruses, an international organization of nearly 200 men's, women's and mixed choruses from all over the world. Both the Choir and Bridges are member choruses.) on-line mailing list. I did so, and enjoyed chorus correspondence as well as FTM mailing lists. The internet became an important aspect of my life, and a godsend. I had no one else to talk to in Portland about trans issues, or how I was feeling, and don't know that I would have made it through as well as I did without the on-line support I received during the winter of 1995-96.

I also read a few autobiographies of trans

people, and received some inspiration from the stories of those who transitioned at a time when there was no peer support and very little medical support available. Alan had lent me some books in the fall of 1995, but I was too scared to touch them. I read the back cover of Kate Bornstein's "Gender Outlaw" at that time and was so terrified and vaguely repulsed, I put the book back on the shelf. Every time I saw it amongst my other books, I felt anxiety, fear and anger rush through me.

Internal, unconscious processes act in their own way and time, however, and milestones sneak up on us undetected. One evening in the spring of 1996, the thought crossed my mind to take that book off the shelf and read the back cover again. This time, I felt intrigued and exhilarated by her words. I read "Gender Outlaw" that evening and immediately felt, as many other FTMs have, that Kate Bornstein was my ally.

Most of the attitudes I'd heard expressed to that point envisioned transition as a switch from one gender to another, without looking back, without loss or grief for what went before, and without retaining any part of one's previous existence. It all seemed very black and white, cut and dried, and not reflective of my experience. And it depressed me, for it seemed inevitable that I would be totally cut off from the Choir – my family of choice – forever. Kate showed me another way, giving me a vision of gender as a social construction and therefore malleable to suit my life.

Alan and I were still seeing each other socially on occasion. One afternoon, I saw a newsletter in his car, produced by the partner of an FTM and aimed at families and friends of FTMs. Alan had picked it up for me on a recent trip to Seattle. I looked at the masthead and my heart leaped. The name of

the editor was Rachel Borlin, and her partner's name was Stephen. Alan had met them in Seattle, and I excitedly asked him what Stephen had looked like.

Alan was a bit mystified, but thought back to their meeting and described Stephen sufficiently that my hunch was confirmed! Though I had never officially been introduced to them, Rachel Borlin and her lover Stephanie Norman had been actively involved in the Portland lesbian community at the time I'd moved there in the late 1970s. I had not heard either of their names for years, and now it appeared that the reason for this is because Stephanie had transitioned and was now Stephen!

As soon as I got home, I e-mailed Rachel and said, "We never officially met, but I know your name and I think you will know my former name, also. I was Nancy Vanderburgh. I'm now Reid Vanderburgh and am in the process of transitioning FTM." Rachel replied that she did indeed recognize my name, and a week or so later the three of us met at a local restaurant for dinner.

I recognized Rachel when she walked in the door, but I would never have recognized Stephen as the former Stephanie. We had a good time, and I knew that once again, I had met a couple who were going to be family to me. And this time, I would have the added bonus of having an FTM as part of my family, to mentor me. Things were looking up!

A few months after we met, Rachel told me that she and Stephen had been discussing my future and that they thought I should go back to school and get a Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology. Both are academics; Rachel was close to finishing her Ph.D. in Psychology and Stephen was part-way through a Ph.D. in History. I was astonished at this proclamation on their part, and the

thought crossed my mind that I didn't think I could do it.

I was also amazed at this coincidence, because I had been toying with the idea of getting an MA in Psychology and becoming a therapist, though I had not articulated this to anyone as yet. Though their ambitions for me were higher than my own, they were along the same lines. From being mentored on-line, I had found myself in the position of peer counseling others recently and had realized late in life that I had a knack for reframing problems and helping people come to terms with hard choices in their lives.

I derived such satisfaction from this in my on-line correspondence, it occurred to me I'd probably be very good at it in person, also. Through my own experience and from reading others' stories, I had come to realize how few therapists understand anything about gender identity at all, and I decided peer education would also be on my list of "things to do when I grow up."

Rachel and Stephen had had their own discussion and come to similar conclusions about my future, but with far higher degrees in mind than I had! A Ph.D.! I remember walking home from their house that afternoon thinking, "I can't get a Ph.D.!" I thought I could probably handle an M.A. But first I had to finish my B.A!

In late spring of 1996, I attended Rachel's graduation ceremony, the granting of her Ph.D. from Portland State University. During the ceremony, my resolve hardened that I would go back to school myself, perhaps finishing my M.A. in the year 2000 (I was not off by much – I will finish in 2001!).

The following Monday, I went over to Portland State University and re-enrolled. In the mid-1980s, I'd tried to study computer science at PSU and had learned the hard

way that my brain just does not work like that. I make far too many intuitive leaps and was unable to slow my brain down sufficiently to create the literal step-by-step instructions required in a computer program. I dropped that idea, but having once been accepted at PSU, it was not difficult to re-enroll, this time to study psychology.

By the summer of 1996, Alan and I had not seen each other for some months, as I'd been unable to really let go and he was wanting to move on. One evening we had an argument on the phone and he said something to the effect that it wasn't easy for him to let go, either. I was incredulous, and I said, "You're having a hard time letting go?" With some impatience, he said, as if I should have known this obvious fact, "Of course I am! It's really hard!"

I wish it weren't the case, but knowing it was also hard for *him* suddenly made it much easier for *me* to let go. I learned a hard truth about myself in the process, that I was clinging because of my own fear of not being needed or loved. After that conversation, I was never seriously depressed about our break-up again, and my own life started coming together in a way it had not before. I was finally ready to face the world again as my own person.

During that summer, I traveled with the Choir and Bridges to Tampa, Florida to sing at GALA V, my third GALA festival of queer choruses. It was a bittersweet experience, as I knew it would be my last GALA with my beloved PLC. Bridges was one of the hits of the festival, but that group had never meant as much to me as the Choir and I was more aware of my countdown as a Choir member. The next PLC concert would be the tenth anniversary, and that would be my last. Then would come the CD recording.

I felt the pressure of leaving the Choir

mounting. I worked out with a vengeance, producing those wonderfully anti-depressant endorphins and as a by-product, becoming very physically fit. I enjoyed life very much during that summer, and looked forward to attending the second FTM conference, scheduled for August in Seattle. Little did I know that I was about to embark on a shattering adventure that colored my life for years.

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