strip!

diana courvant

If you ever want power: Strip.

Now, I wouldn't strip in a smoky, dim club for men who like to exercise control from the shadows—too often using more than just imagination or money. But I live every day in a misunderstood body, and I have never had a day that taught me more confidence, more self-love or more power than the day I stripped.

Five years before that day, no one would have noticed anything exceptional about me. Being clean, white, tall and thin, I looked like the picture of an average American—an average American man. But that picture was one without a history.

As a four-year-old, I was convinced I would grow up to be a mother. As a seven-year-old, I fought urgently for girls to be admitted to boys' games. I took their exclusion personally, in a way that other children couldn't quite understand. But it was vital, even visceral to me. Perhaps those feelings were even more important to me

because I couldn't explain (or forget) them. In that sense, they were similar to the pain that had been in my joints for as long as I could remember. When I was young, that pain was dismissed, along with my visions of motherhood, as a phase. But I never outgrew either.

With my first lover, a woman I met in high school, it was both eerie and wonderful to feel excitement in my breasts and nipples, an excitement that seemed to come from above and within me at the same time. Closing my eyes, the boundaries of a body that would enclose all those feelings shone whole and real on the backs of my eyelids.

My facial hair came in late, thin, blond and patchy. Hating the ritual of shaving, I found the hairs easier to ignore. After a week or two, my skin itching, I would take them off, sometimes with a chemical hair remover, sometimes with a razor, but always with a mixture of unease and amusement at the idea of a beard on my face. When I began to work, to look for a career, I planned it around the vision of myself as a mother. As I walked along a sunny sidewalk, blond hairs on my chin, pregnancy plans rolling through my head, and pain ever worsening in my knees, it hardly occurred to me that I might be seen as anything like an average man.

Over the next year, as I came to acknowledge my transsexual identity, others did begin to see me as less and less average, taking clues more from my new openness than from any changes in my body. Though I planned to go through electrolysis, then hormone therapy and, finally, surgery, those steps all required money and time. Instead, or in anticipation, I came out to each of my friends. Some were confused or denied my experience, thinking that because I had dated women, that I couldn't *be* a woman. So, in coming out trans, I also had to come out as a lesbian. My best friend, a bisexual woman, was the most supportive. She bought me a "dyke" pin and gave me a copper pendant in the shape of a goddess. I wore both everywhere.

And, I named myself Diana.

I had long been depressed, but my self-image was improving. I used my rising energy to break out of unemployment and take a job conducting surveys over the telephone. Though it felt good to use my new energies and to work for the money I needed for my transition, every time I met a new co-worker or spoke to a stranger over the phone I felt nervous. I knew the discordance between my name and my body or voice would conjure images of drag queens in sequins and heels.

Though I felt more whole than at any other time in my life, many would assume I must have a second, separate life filled with Cover Girl makeup and matching handbags. Actually, I had long preferred loose silk shirts or cotton T's in neutral colors worn over jeans or slacks. It was an androgynous look that felt comfortable to me, especially since most of my clothes were years old and broken in just how I liked them. Even if I had had the money for clothes, I would have spent most of it on new copies of favorite clothes that were pulling slowly apart at the seams. In a culture with a decades-long Barbie fetish, only my friends in the lesbian community could understand how I could claim a feminine identity without adopting dominant feminine beauty standards. Acquaintances or strangers would often ask why, if I were a woman, I didn't have on a dress. I wondered, but didn't ask, if they couldn't see all the other women on the street wearing slacks or shorts or sweatpants.

On the streets, my unease at meeting new people often turned to outright fear. Though I was six-foot-three, something in my body language would cause people who saw me from behind to call me ma'am or miss. If I turned around, my scattered, scruffy facial hair convinced most they had made a horrible mistake, for which they would apologize abjectly, calling me sir. Then, if I were introduced, my name would elicit a second disconcerted apology. Some took

my androgynous looks and clothing in stride, but others would stare with hostility, as if I had intentionally caused their confusion and embarrassment.

Because a political campaign against queers had sparked threats and violence throughout the state I lived in, my fear grew to a point where I could feel the eyes of anyone looking at me. Hypervigilant, I read each pair to discover whether I would disgust or offend them because I was not the Diana they expected. Would they hate me? Would I be seen as a freak?

It wasn't long before I found out. I began pursuing a medical transition to a body that for years had been my self-image. But I was required to get a psychotherapist's approval for each step: hormone therapy, changing the designated "Sex" on my driver's license, sex reassignment surgery and, eventually, recognition in a court of law. Because the entire process takes years to complete, I wanted to begin hormone therapy right away.

I picked out a therapist who advertised in a women's resource directory as a specialist in "gender issues." A telephone call confirmed that she treated trans clients and that she recommended hormone therapy for some of them. Within the first hour of my initial evaluation, she told me she wouldn't write the letter of recommendation I needed to begin hormone therapy until I had the money in the bank to pay for sex reassignment surgery. "Anyone," she went on, "with breasts and a penis is a freak." Well, there it was, and it was *not* very reassuring. Not only was I an official freak, but I was only going to get freakier.

Though I wasn't ashamed of being a trans woman, I began to realize the safety issues inherent in my growing visibility. Being a freak was dangerous. I didn't know how people would react to me—would their hatred and discomfort move them to violence? Never sure of the answer, I would vacillate between claiming my identity

and withdrawing from people. More and more I wanted to hide, to blend in. Though jeans and flannel were usually too "butch" for me, I sometimes wore the more butch clothes from my closet to be more anonymous.

Not that I felt safe even then: The gender police were always on patrol. Flat chested/small breasted? Wearing jeans and a T-shirt? Maybe a pair of earrings? Here they come. "You a fag?" "Dyke!" "Hey babe, you tryin' to be a man?" I've heard it all: twice. I could have gone crazy trying to figure out what makes a woman "normal" and what makes her a freak.

When you play the gender game by everyone else's rules, you can only lose. So, I stopped listening to the taunts and the slime. If I was going to be a freak, at least I'd be my own freak, making my own choices.

Linen slacks, denim jeans, velvet dresses: I started wearing whatever I wanted. As electrolysis and hormones moved me further into androgyny, it became obvious that people had an incredible ability to ignore the obvious when deciding my gender. "Dyke" pins, height, breasts, facial hair: Most people felt they had to ignore something, since I had to be male or female, didn't I? But there were no tall, bearded women or breasted, dykey men in American gender vocabularies. Most people would simply pretend that parts of me or my personality didn't exist, that they could still use simple categories to describe me. It was amazing how many familiar strangers—regular passengers or drivers on the buses I rode, grocery clerks in the neighborhood stores, servers in my favorite restaurants—were sure I was a man, while just as many were sure I was a woman. No matter how hard I worked to keep myself from getting tagged a freak, I realized that most people looking at me worked even harder.

But wearing whatever was in my closet, using whichever bathroom felt safest, every one of those choices painted me as a target.

Still, they were choices I was willing to make, chances I was willing to take . . . until the next time I was stalked by a man with a vicious leer as I walked home from the bus stop. Those stalkings were society's unsubtle reminders that if you wear a target, someone will shoot at you. Sooner or later, someone will shoot.

In that respect, some good came from my fading visibility. As my joints deteriorated further and my pain increased, walking became so excruciating that I chose to use a cane. Though thinking of myself as disabled came slowly, the cane made an instant difference in my visibility. Bus drivers would pull away from the curb without noticing that I was rising from the bench. Shoppers began to reach right in front of me to get bread or cereal off grocery store shelves. If I borrowed my housemate's electric scooter to carry home grocery items like juice or peanut butter, I might spend ten minutes trying to get a store clerk to reach the top shelves for me.

One day, I was asked to wait by a busy pharmacist, even though I just had to drop off a written prescription before I started shopping. The next woman to arrive began to nudge the footrests of my wheelchair with her ankle, trying to push me away from the register. She wouldn't stop with a look; I had to say, "Excuse me!"

"Oh. Are you in line?" she asked with a look of surprise I found difficult to fathom. I expected her to respect my place in line after that, but when the pharmacist came back, the woman placed her hand on me, leaned heavily on my shoulder and handed her prescription to the pharmacist right over my head. No one could have spun my world around faster. Used to a public that focused overtly on my androgyny, trying at various times to guess, assign or punish my gender, I was completely unprepared for how quickly that same public could turn me into an inconvenient object. And it was all because the rubber I was using to get around town was on a set of tires instead of a pair of Nikes.

For the next two years, I was alternately perceived as a visible freak and a background object, but less and less often. As my breasts grew and the sparse hair on my face diminished, strangers stopped perceiving me as male, or even androgynous, no matter my height. A tall woman, I might still stand out in a crowd, but I presented a gender paradox only infrequently.

As my breasts and face changed, my disabling pain spread into my shoulders, arms and hands. I set aside my cane in favor of bright purple crutches. Purple crutches are so rare—rarer still decorated with stickers and garlands—that they sparked conversation more often than dismissal.

For a time, with new friendships, lessening street harassment and renewed mobility through crutches, wheelchairs and drugs, life took on a deceptive normalcy. It became convenient, or perhaps just healthy, to forget that my body remained freakish because I identified as, looked like and was accepted as a woman, but hadn't had "the operation." The unnoticed truth was that my body had become *more* unusual, more directly challenging to American assumptions about gender, sex and anatomy. I spent as little thought on it as possible, but my body, in its cultural challenge, still wore a target. I never allowed my romantic partners to see me completely naked, and another episode of stalking and abuse on the way home from a bus stop left me shivering with the fear of "what if?" What if my stalker had attempted to rape me in my disabled, transsexual body? I thought of the many rapes and abuses of trans men and women, and of the haunting but unverifiable estimates of how likely I was to be murdered because of my body.

Still, as society's perceptions of me became more and more consistent, I lost some of the need to cling strongly to an anchoring self-identity. I became more free to imagine how others might see me, if they knew as much about me as I knew myself. Eventually, I

realized, it was my *self*-perception that had begun to alternate more frequently between freakish and normal, or helpless and able.

Then came a summer conference, a radical women's gathering held in an empty, neglected building that had once been an athletic club. Several women had helped to build ramps to make some of the interior rooms accessible to me in the wheelchair I was using. But when I first used the bathroom I found that the stall with the space and handbars I needed had no door. Since the bathroom itself had no lock, I knew that for four days I would feel unsafe. Every time I transferred from my wheelchair to the toilet or back again, I would be naked to any woman walking in the door. I used the bathroom and tried to leave my fear there, but as I was falling asleep that night, my fear was still with me. It stayed with me in my dreams, and it was with me when I woke.

I hated that fear, and I hated the bathroom where my transsexuality and my disability conspired to make me vulnerable, to expose me, to put me at risk at a women's gathering, a place where I should have felt safe. If I could strip, I suddenly decided, then I wouldn't have to be afraid: There would be no new reactions to fear. Still, I felt like a freak, viscerally. Leaving the gathering seemed easier than exposing my secrets, exposing the breasts and the penis of my transsexual body, something I had never done—still have not done—for the woman who has become my romantic partner. If I hadn't believed so strongly that women's gatherings must be safe spaces for all women, I might have left, conceding to my fear and continuing to conceal my target-body. Instead, I announced to the gathering that I would teach a workshop on transsexual bodies and told my friends that I would strip, maybe . . . probably . . . at least a little.

I spent the morning worrying that the whole idea was crazy enough, and threatening enough, that no one would show up. To keep the workshop from becoming too personal, I felt I needed at least

eight to ten women to attend. Instead, eighty to ninety women came. Nearly every woman who attended any part of the gathering, as well as the few men there, came to the room that had once been used for aerobics to hear me talk about transsexual bodies, and to see me strip.

I started with my socks, throwing them backwards over my head. For ten minutes or so, I spoke about my feet and about the appreciation for them I have gained through a friend who lost hers in a train-hopping accident. My necklace was next. It was my goddess image, which had its own symbolic significance for me, and I spoke about wearing it in the early days of my transition as a visible symbol of my core self. Then I took off my shirt and spoke of growing breasts, of second puberty, of the hormones I will take every day for the rest of my life. When I removed my pants, I looked at my legs. They seemed both weak and strong to me. I spoke of the days when my pain was less and I used a bicycle for transportation. I talked about how I would never lose the image of my legs swollen strong with blood after propelling me seven hundred miles in seven days. I spoke of the pain and how it changed from day to day. I spoke about what I still could accomplish using my legs and what was now out of reach.

And then I pulled my underwear past my knees, over my feet and off of my body. Using my wheelchair's arms, I stood. My testicles and penis, shrunken by estrogens, hung between my legs, while my breasts, firm and growing from the same hormones, stood out from my chest. I introduced the room to my transsexual body, my disabled body, my woman's body. I realized, as I stood naked, that I was the freak my onetime therapist wanted to keep me from becoming. I even told the gathering, "This is the body of a freak." And though I felt it, deeply, painfully and truly, that was not the description of myself or my body that was written in the eyes watching me.

I spent over an hour answering any and all questions, naked in

body and soul, before it was time for the gathering to turn its attention to other workshops. Friends gathered my socks, thanked me briefly and left me alone to dress. It wasn't until then that I noticed the mirrors that had been behind me as I had been stripping and naked. It occurred to me that it might be years before I discovered exactly how naked I had been. I went to the bathroom, giddy and giggling with the twinges of insecurity I couldn't quite leave behind. In contrast to the intense fears that had been with me for a full day, I found the twinges more reassuring than frightening.

Coming home again, I moved through a city of hundreds of thousands with a different confidence. No matter which of those hundreds of thousands of different interpretations of the stereotypes of gender or ability I might have to confront, I had stripped naked. I had stripped naked, before women and men, and been seen not as a freak, not as an object, but as a woman, as a person, with a unique and human power.