

Stories of women who support trans men: An autoethnographic voyage

By

Lyn Merryfeather

BSN, University of Victoria, 2006

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Supervisory Committee

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Supervisory Committee

Dr. Anne Bruce, School of Nursing

Supervisor

Dr. Laurene Sheilds, School of Nursing

Departmental Member

Dr. Wanda Hurren, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Outside Member

Abstract

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Supervisor

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Departmental Member

Dr. Wanda Hurren, Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Outside Member

“The only true voyage...would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them sees, that each of them is...” (Proust, 2003, p. 343). This wonderful quote from Proust seems like a fitting place to begin because I wish to take you on an autoethnographic journey of discovery so that you can see for yourself what it was like for the participants and me as we found ourselves in strange and sometimes frightening territory. We realized that we were, sometimes unexpectedly, in positions of support to our friends or lovers who were uncomfortable with the sex they were assigned at birth. Most of us would describe ourselves as lesbian and, when our partners began to explore the possibility of sex reassignment, struggled with our established identity.

My friend Christopher was the inspiration for this exploration. We were domestic partners before and during his early transition from female to male. Both Christopher and I were public figures in the small town in which we lived and our lives were somewhat on display. Christopher founded an organization called *Trans Connect* to provide support to those who present their gender in alternate ways and to provide education to service providers as well as to schools with regard to transgender issues and is well known in that town as well as in the larger gender diverse community as a trans man. Because of this, he has agreed to waive anonymity.

The body of this work includes the entire texts of three papers I have written during the course of my studies as I navigated the path to this research. All of these papers have been published in peer-reviewed journals. I have used these papers to illustrate my autoethnographic journey toward the discovery of diverse gender presentations, to describe the state of knowledge in the discipline of nursing regarding this issue, and to demonstrate how autoethnography works. The centre of the work is the novel I have written based upon the stories the participants and I have shared with one another. The novel is written in everyday language and aims to show, rather than tell, the stories of ten women who love and support trans men. In many parts of the dissertation I have used dialogue, both internal as well as conversation among created characters, as a way to bring to life concepts under discussion. This is in keeping with an autoethnographic style.

The dissertation is organized into three parts. Part one is a description of the process and methods I undertook in order to arrive at the novel. It consists of eight chapters that are placed in a more or less linear way, although the process was not at all linear, from the beginning of my exploration, to a discussion of the overall voyage. Part two consists of the novel, which is the story of experiences of women living with trans men during their transition or consideration of transition, disguised as having been experienced by fictional characters. Part three contains four chapters that are the analysis, a description of how I managed the information gathered, a discussion of evaluation for such a work as this, and some consideration as to the distribution and future for the study.

My research questions were:

- What is it like to be in loving relationship with an FTM during and after some of his transition?

- What are the effects on the relationship for the female partner during this time?
- What happens to the supportive partner's ideas of her own identity?
- Does the balance of power shift during this transition, and if so, how?

The novel poignantly addresses all these questions. To be in a loving relationship with a trans man in the early stages of transition can be very challenging, and for the participants and me, often ended in a breakdown of the relationship. It can be a difficult time for women supporters because their adjustments and struggles with identity and sense of self and community are frequently overshadowed by the enormity, and for some, curiosity of sex reassignment. Often the relationship shifts from egalitarian to one that resembles more of a male-female binary where the male exerts power over his partner. Half of the participants in this study said they would not enter into another relationship with a trans man. That leaves the other half who said they would. The novel might serve as a help to those considering such a relationship as well as to those already walking the sometimes slippery, sometimes exhilarating road of partnership with a trans man. There are no easy answers to these questions. My aim is to reveal a glimpse into the lives of people about whom not much is known.

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Thanks

My first debt of gratitude is to the unnamed women who gave of their time to tell me their stories. Thank you all. It has been an amazing and humbling journey to meet you all, compare stories, to laugh and cry with one another. The lands we visited together were not strange or different but you helped me to see something different with each of your tellings.

Thank you Christopher. You have been my inspiration, confidant, supporter, and friend. Without you, I would have no story to tell. You taught me ‘trans 101’. I admire your courage and your commitment, both to me and to yourself. I look forward to many more years of walking on together.

Dr. Aaron Devor taught me ‘trans 201’. Thank you Aaron.

I have been blessed with a committee who encouraged me to do something that is not usual in the School of Nursing at the University of Victoria. I am very thankful for your courage and your trust in me to construct a dissertation that is as much art as it is science. I have heard some words from you that kept ringing in my head, drowning out other voices when I thought this work was becoming too much. Dr. Laurene Sheilds said, “I absolutely think that you can do this” and “Find your own voice as a scholar Lyn and tell that story” (October, 2010). Dr. Wanda Hurren said “proposal, proposal, proposal, we’ve seen it and I think it’s great! I like it. I want to see you get going on this” (Sept, 2012). “The change in time is lovely to see”, said Dr. Anne Bruce, also in September of 2012. You have all inspired me to have the courage to see with other eyes, to see my potential and ability through your eyes.

To Mayne Ellis, my writing guru, you have taught me things I didn't even know I didn't know. You helped me show rather than tell and reminded me to write the novel like people talk, not like academics write. Thank you!

Anne, my supervisor, you have been there whenever I needed you, through email or face-to-face discussion. You have been kind, honest, and patient. I have never before been listened to with the utter presence that you bring to every conversation. I could not have completed this work without you.

Dedication

To Jennie

At Last

Part One

Chapter 1

Prologue: Where have I come from? *Paper 1.*

Forward

I am standing at the entrance to a long shiny corridor. The light glints off the floor and the closed white doors that punctuate the walls. It is so bright that I stand, hands shading my eyes, blinking and dazzled. The end of the hallway is hidden in a splash of brilliant white light. “Where is this light coming from?” I think, and as soon as I have this thought I realize the answer. This light is emanating from me. This corridor is not the first I have seen, nor will it be the last. It’s a place along the way. The doorways are paths I might choose but they’re not open yet. If I choose not to open any of these doors, the light at the end will show me the way to another hallway, and another. I have to start somewhere, so it will be here and I step forward...

I know the kind of story I want to tell. That part is easy. The difficult part is how to tell it. When I write prose, I want it to reach out sneaky fingers and grab the reader by the heart, although I suspect it is often easier to shield the heart from the intrusions of prose than it is from poetry. Prendergast (2009), says, “Prose is eloquence, wants to instruct, to convince; wants to produce in the soul of the reader a state of knowledge. Poetry is the producer of joy, its reader participates in a creative act” (p. xxxiii). In addition to joy, poetry can unleash arrows of wonder, illusion, and power that strike directly at the seat of emotion. I have used a combination of creative prose, as well as poetry created with words found in the literature, or with words that bubble up from my own being. As Pelias (2004) says, “Science is the act of looking at a tree and seeing lumber. Poetry is the act of looking at a tree and seeing a tree” (p. 9).

I found it an amazing, joyful, harrowing, and lonely road to be in partnership with Christopher, my dear friend, whose letter of support and consent is included in Appendix A, during the initial stages of his transition from female to male. Some days he sat in the sun, glorying in the hair on his arms, which seemed to sprout fast-forward like a film about nature. Other days he stalked about, mad at everything, and if I were home, he would find something about me to make him angry. It was all about him. Of course it was. Can you imagine doing anything more courageous, more self-affirming, or more frightening, than changing your physical and chemical make-up to match who you have always felt yourself to be? It is, by nature, self-absorbing. So what about me? There were two of us.

Slowly it began to occur to me, with a trickle at first, and then gradually increasing until it became a deafening, dam-breaking flood, that the thing I needed to examine, the thing pressing against the back of my eyes, was what happened to me in this transition of his. Even the fact that initially, I, feminist that I am, would want to study them rather than us is a testimony to the creeping hegemony of normative femininity (Hale, 2006).

Along with this dawning awareness came autoethnography as an intriguing possibility. I discovered this methodology more by accident than design. I had been planning to employ another philosophy to guide me when it suddenly occurred to me that it just wouldn't work for the kind of research I wanted to do. So I decided upon autoethnography and enrolled in a creative non-fiction writing course to help me with my writing. When the instructor marked my final paper, she pointed out that I seemed confused as to whose story I was telling. It was true. Even though I had decided to use autoethnography, I was still captured and confined by trying to tell Christopher's story rather than mine.

But who was I then? I don't think I even thought of it really. Other than, when Christopher gets a beard and a manly chest, will we look like a straight couple? I wondered about that. Even then, if someone who didn't know us saw us, (as unlikely as that was—us the big fish in that small pond where we lived), they would think we were a guy and a girl (though not a girly girl). The truth was, I disappeared. As long as I was with Christopher, it was he who was the main attraction, the FTM, the guy. It took a separation of 300 miles and twelve years for me to see that.

I have researched that. My disappearance I mean. I have researched it from here, this place, this identity, this distance. I have also researched the experiences of nine other women, attempted to see their universe through their eyes. Since these stories are intensely personal, I have fictionalized the people, places, and situations, leaving the essence of the experience intact. Some details have been changed so that the anonymity I promised the participants is protected. It has been a journey of discovery, a true voyage.

I wrote the following paper when I still planned to study the experience of people who identified as transsexual. It illustrates my journey along the road to the discovery of that which I really needed to research: my own and others' experiences regarding supporting trans men. I use the pseudonym 'Stan' for Christopher.

Merryfeather, L. (2010). A Personal Epistemology: Toward Gender Diversity. *Nursing Philosophy*, 12, 139-149.^{1, 2, 3}

In this paper I would like to take you on a journey of discovery. This journey is about my epistemology of gender diversity, first as a slowly emerging personal understanding, then as a realization of the larger meaning this epistemology has for exploring how I am to live and work in a culture devoted to duality, homogeneity, privilege, and normativity.

I will assume the standpoint of a storyteller (Frank, 2000), rather than one of a detached purveyor of information. Sometimes stories are the only means for people in one social segment to come to understand ‘the experiences, needs, projects, problems and pleasures’ (Young, 2000, p. 74) of people differently situated. In addition, this will be an embodied story, a ‘cherishing, treasuring, profoundness of feeling’ (Gadow, cited in McDonald & McIntyre, 2001, p. 238) where ideology takes a back seat to relationship (Gadow, 1994). My hope in telling this story is that those who read it will appreciate ‘the enlarged thought’ (Young, p.76) that leads us from viewing issues in a narrowly self-concerned way to one that takes into account the concerns of those outside our usual social or academic sphere.

This story is not about sexual orientation, although this issue comes up as early as the next paragraph. In spite of the fact that there is a connection between gender diversity and sexuality in much the same way as that between male and female and heterosexuality, for the most part these are different topics. For example, what connection does being female have with

¹ This paper has been published in *Nursing Philosophy*, which uses the Harvard Style of formatting, citing and referencing. The text is exactly as published, using this style. There will be differences from the APA style used in citation and references, and the use of quotation marks. Since the referencing style is different from APA, please see Appendix C for the list of references used in this paper.

² I have received permission from the publishers, which is included in Appendix B, to use the entire text of this paper.

³ Because this paper has been published the text cannot be altered. Therefore I have inserted footnotes where necessary to indicate new awareness regarding some issues such as conflation of sex and gender.

homosexuality, or being male and being heterosexual? I will enlarge upon this as the story progresses.

In the Beginning

In 1952, when Christine Jorgensen's 'sex change' hit the news, she was the most written-about person in the press. As she remarked years later in her autobiography, 'I found it a shocking commentary on the press of our times that I drove news of the hydrogen bomb tests on Eniwetok Atoll off the front pages of newspapers around the world' (TransgenderZone.com, n.d.). Even so, this situation, of a person transitioning from one sex to another, was not discussed in my diploma nursing education. At that time, I believed there were two sexes and one sexual orientation. Homophobia was rampant and completely acceptable. I heard whispers of women being with women, but never knowingly met any who lived this way. Men who had sex with men were called pejorative names, and were considered deviant by my nursing colleagues and me. But never was there a mention of sex change, although it is a fact that during this time, in the late 1960s, if a newborn child presented with ambiguous genitalia, the decision was made to declare the child male or female and, if necessary, provide the surgery to complete this decision (Lorber, 2008).

As early as 1937, Dr. Young, a prominent urologist of his time, wrote a detailed and extensive description of surgical and hormonal methods to alter those who had genitalia of both sexes into the appearance of exclusively males or females (Fausto-Sterling, 2008). Why was I not taught any of this? Transgender people were invisible, although they numbered a very conservatively estimated one in 2500 of the population in the USA in 2001 (Conway, 2002). According to Fausto-Sterling, the legal community began the power-over of any representation

of gender⁴ other than male or female with the requirement of only two choices on a birth registration. The medical profession has followed that up so that there is ‘complete erasure of any form of embodied sex that does not conform to the male-female, heterosexual pattern’ (Fausto-Sterling, p. 332).

My first personal experience with whom I now recognize as a transgender person was with an orderly at work in 1969. He was fascinated with my pregnancy, which was fast becoming obvious. It was poignant to me that he so obviously wanted to be pregnant too and his longing deeply touched me. I had never before considered what it must be like to wish to be a sex other than what I was born into. It seemed to me to be a very rare and hopeless situation for this man and I felt very sorry about it and felt guilty that I was happy with my own sex. But that was not always completely true.

I remember being happily myself at around the age of 10, rather tomboyish and lacking the grace and femininity of some girls I observed. That did not matter at 10, but it began to be an issue as I neared puberty. I slicked my hair back in private and imagined what it must be like to be a boy with none of what I saw as the encumbrances of the female sex⁵. This, according to Devor (1989), is part of normal childhood for many girls. I only wanted maleness because it seemed so much more fun than what appeared ahead for me: menstruation, marriage, household drudgery, and being second (de Beauvoir, 1949). Even if I knew such a possibility existed I would have recoiled in horror at the idea of changing my sex. I believe now that this prejudice stood in the way of my struggle to understand gender diversity.

As I matured and came to learn that many more people than just my orderly friend deeply desired such a change, my reaction was deep fear and repulsion. Butler (1987) talks about this

⁴ Subsequent to publication, I realized that this word should be ‘sex’.

⁵ Subsequent to publication, I realized that this word should be ‘gender’.

when describing people who take such radical steps as sex change. She says these people often experience ‘vertigo and terror over losing social sanctions...’(p.27), and although I did not understand it at the time, that was the reality behind my feelings as well. I lived many years in this blinkered mentality, my epistemology of ‘if you don’t look, it won’t be there’.

Will the Real Man Stand Up?

Do any of our awakenings take part outside of our lived experiences? Gadamer (2004) talks about experience as initially always a negation; that is, it is not what one supposes it to be. I, as a child of the 1950s, had to overcome a thick and terrifying blanket of homophobia in order to claim my place as a member of a sexual minority, but once I did I began to notice something. The lesbian, gay, and bisexual community offered shelter to other people whose identities had nothing to do with their sexuality. I began to awaken to the reality that there were many other people who did not identify comfortably as either male or female, or who wished to identify as a sex other than what was originally put on their birth certificates. It was around this time that I met Sheila (a pseudonym).

Sheila became my closest friend and confidant. I watched and participated when she began to navigate the path to gender change. I was terrified that I would lose her in the process. She had always expressed herself in ways that were more masculine than feminine, according to our narrow social construct (Butler, 1990) so it was not much of a stretch to begin calling her Stan and switching to the male⁶ pronoun.

Then the day came when he decided he would investigate living as his preferred gender. I watched as he slowly made his way through the labyrinth of name change, dressing and acting like a man, hormones, surgery, and finally, the crowning achievement: a new driver’s license. I

⁶ Subsequent to publication, I realized this word should be ‘masculine’.

have seen how ‘the system’ is flawed and dangerously unfair. I have seen him struggle each time he needs to find a new doctor or have contact with the healthcare system. He still needed pap smears for some time but avoided them. He ‘passed’ as a man for a year, with both a full beard and breasts. This, a requirement of the ‘real-life experience’ before sex reassignment (Meyer *et al.*, 2001, p. 17), effectively curtailed what he loved to do most, swimming and working out at the gym. He would be exposed due to not being able to swim bare-chested or be found out in the dressing room as he changed his clothes. This real-life experience also produced much paranoia on Stan’s part, as he wondered who could tell that he bound his breasts, and it also exposed him to the very real danger of physical violence should any insecure men discover his secret (Shelley, 2008).

My exposure grew as I accompanied Stan to conferences that supported female to male transsexuals. I heard their stories about looking for health care: many horrific and some heart-warming. This experience in my life has underscored what is apparent in the healthcare literature: the experiences of people living outside the Western constraints of gender are poorly understood by health care providers and improved understanding could vastly effect the health of gender diverse people (Bockting *et al.*, 2005; Kenagy, 2005; Nemoto *et al.*, 2005; Sperber *et al.*, 2005; Willging *et al.*, 2006; Scourfield *et al.*, 2008).

I did lose Sheila for a while as Stan struggled to become established as a man. It was as if he needed to deny Sheila’s existence in order to forge his new identity. This is not surprising when I consider that many transsexuals were told by counsellors at gender clinics to invent pasts as children of the current gender and, in fact, to lie about their past gender (Bornstein, 1995). After a few years Stan became more comfortable in his masculinity and I saw a return of the

whole person with both a male⁷ and a female⁸ side. This return, or repetition as I now understand it, is a moving forward and at the same time a movement of recovery or retrieval, as one never really returns to the same place (Caputo, 1987).

Sexuality

As I mentioned earlier, this story is not about sexuality or sexual orientation. As you will see, this is an important distinction. When the topic of gender diversity comes up, often the conversation will turn to one of homosexuality. Perhaps the reason is that, stemming from the Victorian Era, the person of indeterminate or unorthodox gender (according to current cultural standards) is lumped together with homosexuals as an ‘incorporation of perversions’ (Foucault, 1978, p. 42). Although the last vestiges of homosexuality as a psychiatric condition were removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) in 1987, there is now a diagnosis that many feel takes its place: gender identity disorder (GID).

Some groups who see homosexuality as wrong and sick say that if you can diagnose GID in children there is a 75% chance that child will turn out to be a homosexual (Butler, 2004). To even consider this statistic springs, in part, from a heterosexist normative discourse of the world, which says that all men desire women, and all women desire men. Since we were already taught (according to the DSM-IV) that the desire to change genders is an illness, in many minds, a woman who desires to become a man is really a homosexual because of the confusion over the difference between sexuality and gender. This is an unfortunate confounding of two separate issues that often stands in the way of those who sincerely want to become aware of their

⁷ Subsequent to publication I realized this word should be ‘masculine’.

⁸ Subsequent to publication I realized this word should be ‘feminine’.

prejudices but who become mired in the discourse that says that any gender expression outside male and female⁹ is not normal, in much the same way as homosexuality is seen as not normal.

Mills (2004) says that discourse is organized around ‘practices of exclusion’ (p. 11). For example how often do you see transsexuals represented in the popular press, on TV, or on billboards just living their lives? The same can be said about homosexuality. People who are gender distinct or homosexual are classified and lumped together as how they identify rather than as who they are. In reality, it is not possible to draw correlations¹⁰ between sexuality and gender. Butler (2004) states, ‘it would be a huge mistake to assume that gender identity causes sexual orientation or that sexuality references in some way a prior gender identity’ (p. 79). One is about desire and attraction, the other about how one presents in the world in terms of gender.

There is another confounding issue in regard to sexuality and gender that I must bring to the fore for consideration before we continue. That is the issue of whether sexual preference changes as a result of sex reassignment surgery (SRS). If I were to change my sex to male, would it mean that this caused me to become heterosexual since my desire is still toward women? Butler (1993) emphasizes that it is important to maintain a ‘non-causal and non-reductive’ (p. 238) connection between gender and sexuality. This is because sexual practices have little or nothing to do with gender but they have been associated with gender in a pathologizing and demeaning way, such as the ‘feminine man’ who is assumed to be gay but who may be entirely heterosexual in his desire and the masculine woman who may or may not be a lesbian.

What difference does it make if I change my sex¹¹ to become a man and still desire women as my sexual partners? It means that I step out of a pathologized category into one

⁹ Subsequent to publication I realized this should read ‘masculine and feminine’.

¹⁰ Subsequent to publication I realized this word should be ‘causations’.

¹¹ Subsequent to publication I realized this word should be ‘gender’.

approved by the privileged majority. The reverse is also true. If I were a heterosexual woman who decides to become a man, I would be removed from a place of relative privilege to one of stigma and prejudice. Sexual preference does not change according to gender but the privilege and social status it accords depends on the gender within which it operates.

Language

My first introduction to the idea of gender-neutral language came about when I noticed that a co-worker whose first language was Filipino used female and male¹² pronouns interchangeably for the same person. I was told that the language had no pronouns that were gendered. This was a completely new concept to me, and one that I had some difficulty imagining. In a recent casual search of the Internet I learned there are several other languages without gendered pronouns: Finnish, Hungarian, Persian, Bengali, Basque, Chinese, Japanese, Quechuan, Tamil, and Turkish (Wikipedia, 2009).

Unfortunately it is very difficult to speak or write English without referring to gender. One out of four of the world's population speak English to some level of competence (The English Department, 2005). This creates an obvious problem for those people who do not wish to be labelled as male or female¹³, as well as a difficulty for those who wish to address or refer to gender diverse people with respect.

Some scholars and trans-activists have attempted remedies to the English-language conundrum by suggesting gender-neutral language. One of the suggestions, coined in 1858, is the use of *thon*, meaning 'that one, he, she, or it' for a pronoun in the third person (Barge, 1992, n.p.). Another frequent suggestion is the use of the singular 'they' (Footnotes, 2003). Kate Bornstein and Michael Spivak have both suggested variations on the singular they by contracting

¹² Subsequent to publication I realized these expressions should be 'feminine and masculine'.

¹³ Subsequent to publication I realized these should be 'masculine or feminine'.

it to ‘ey, em, eir, eirs, and emself’ or ‘ze, hir, hirs, and hirsself’ (Footnotes). I do not find the latter any improvement for spoken English since many sound like the female¹⁴ pronouns or slang. Following Barge then, for the remainder of this paper, I will use thon as the singular third person pronoun where appropriate.

These attempts to introduce gender-neutral language have failed, to a great extent, because we are steeped in language from birth. An infant does not have understanding without prior immersion in human society. Thon needs to hear language over and over to make the connection that the word ‘chair’ means the chair mother points to, and later to the understanding that *that* chair can stand in for other chairs. It is by this language, this linguisticity that we enter into tradition (Gadamer, 2004). Who has not met a person who is gender ambiguous and felt a strong need to decide whether they were female or male¹⁵? If we had gender-neutral language, this may not happen, or may happen less, as Allen (2006) illustrates when he says, ‘description is the creation of difference, difference entails classification, and classification involves power’ (p. 66).

Vocabulary

I learned, in my journey, that it is very important to use correct vocabulary when venturing into new territory, to provide both intelligibility and understanding between and among people, as well as to show respect for an unknown culture. Much the same as nursing has its own vocabulary, so also gender diversity. I learned that the biggest step of respect and support I could take was to ask if there was a preferred term as well as pronoun the person wished and then use it consistently.

¹⁴ Subsequent to publication I realized this pronoun should be ‘feminine’.

¹⁵ Subsequent to publication I realized this should be ‘feminine or masculine’.

I realize the risk in detailing vocabulary is that it could be seen as creating a disembodied ‘us’ and ‘them’ as a colonizing enterprise (Anderson, 2004, p.239). When used as a primary, natural, and neutral method of categorizing people (Anderson), these terms can be disrespectful and harmful. This is not my intent. Those who claim them as their identity have taught me the following terms and I share them with you with the understanding that language is not a sedimented thing; it is alive and fluid and changes over time (Gadamer, 2004).

Transgender, or trans, is a blanket term used by many people who do not comfortably fit into our culture’s binary of male or female. It seems to be the most common term used both within the culture and outside. Under this blanket term is transsexual, referring to those who desire to change sex or have had some surgery or hormones in order to transition from one sex to another, though this transition can be on a continuum.

Another term that may fit under the blanket term is intersex. Some people who identify as intersex wish this to be a separate category and others are happy to be included as trans. Intersex is a blanket term in itself, and those who use it have varying particulars by which they could be identified as male or female. Many of these people do identify as male or female and only experience difficulty with medical or legal procedures that demand certain proof of gender¹⁶, or in cases of emergency when aide is rendered by insensitive responders. Other intersex people refuse the binary of male and female and courageously insist on being a third (or more, or neither) gender¹⁷.

Still other terms under which people identify are crossdressers, those who enjoy dressing as another gender; drag kings and queens, who may be men who dress like women and women who dress like men although space precludes a detailed explanation of the intricacies of these

¹⁶ Subsequent to publication I realized this word should be ‘sex’.

¹⁷ Subsequent to publication I realized this word should be ‘sex’.

distinctions; and two-spirited people, which is a respectful term many First Nations people use for transgender people. When trans people, or others who identify close to this term, speak of those who live in a male or female born gender¹⁸ they frequently use the terms ‘cisgender’ or ‘cisborn’, for much the same reason that it is easier to say trans than list all the ways people do not fit the cultural binary. A support person is often referred to as a ‘SOFFA (Bockting *et al.*, 2006, p. 24), which stands for significant other friend family ally.

I have deliberately not included medical or legal terms since the people who are named did not choose them and they often result in objectifying, disembodiment, and are based on stereotypes. I have used a term previously that seemed to relieve me of the need to say each time, ‘those who do not comfortably identify within the binary of male and female’. That term was gender variance. It seemed innocuous to me until a correspondent questioned it as follows ‘I think also examining the term “variance” in gender variance, in terms of what it says about our unintentional reliance upon cisgenderist gender norms [would be helpful]. I recently stopped using that term.... It’s hard, we have to keep challenging ourselves to get closer to something helpful and it will keep changing’ (Gavi, personal communication, 2009). Following that conversation, and after much reflection, I am now using the term ‘gender diversity’. I have asked for feedback from several trans groups and have received positive results.

Does it Matter What I Call You?

When Stan changed his name and wished to be addressed by the male¹⁹ pronoun, I did it consistently and without fail and I did not find it difficult. I cannot describe the love and gratitude he showed me for this. Kate Bornstein described how she felt when a casual friend came over to her house, slipped on the pronoun and called her ‘he’. She said that all the joy was

¹⁸ Subsequent to publication I realized this word should be ‘sex’.

¹⁹ Subsequent to publication I realized this word should be ‘masculine’.

sucked out of her and words like failure and freak crashed down on her (Bornstein, 1995). Many stories retell Kate's experience and underscore the difficulty some in the mainstream culture have with recognizing something outside of the dominant discourse.

Ricoeur (2005) speaks of Hegel's three models of recognition with the first being love, which encompasses erotic love, friendship, and family. The term that leaped out at me in terms of gender diversity and love is 'approbation' (p.191). This is what lovers, friends, and family do for one another: they mutually approve of one another's existence. When that is withdrawn, the result is humiliation, a feeling of insignificance, and 'the person is as if non-existent' (p.191). This is an echo of what Butler (2004) talks about when she says that recognition is 'the uneasy dynamic in which one seeks to find oneself in the Other only to find that that reflection is the sign of one's expropriation and self-loss' (p. 241). As I read further in Ricoeur's discussion of lineage and the assigning of a name as a sign of recognition, I thought of how exuberantly joyful it is when gender-diverse people come together at support groups and conferences. They are approbated, given a name, and are taken into a family. And so too, when those associated with people who are gender-diverse show respect by honouring the chosen pronoun and given name, the result is joy and gratitude: so much happiness for so little effort.

It follows then that when I entered graduate school, my desire would be to study the lived experience of those who identify under my description of gender diversity. 'Inquiry thus begins by being "struck" by something, being "taken" with it...the unanticipated eruption of long-familiar threads of significance and meaning in the midst of a wholly new situation' (Jardine, 1998b, p. 40), and this is what happened to me. I began to see all the threads of my life experience up to this point weave themselves into a cohesive focus. There are many views of knowledge production and acquisition and what remains to be discussed is the epistemological

approach I believe most fits my ontology and is the most appropriate for people who fit the description of gender diversity.

Personal Epistemology

My epistemology of gender diversity has developed from personal experience and has been enlarged by study. It is by no means solid and unchanging but is a place from which to view my moral horizon in the present moment (Storch *et al.*, 2004). The perspectives on knowledge, how it is acquired and enacted, that I find the most fitting with my ontological belief of authentic Being (Heidegger, cited in Gorner, 2007) are unknowing (Munhall, 2007), embodiment (McDonald & McIntyre, 2001), and experiential or intuited knowing (Benner, as cited in Brykczynski, 2002; Altmann, 2007; Lyneham *et al.*, 2008). These are not exclusive and stand-alone concepts; rather, they are inextricably intertwined and often dependent upon one another but I will speak of them separately for the purposes of explication. My use of the pronoun ‘we’ in the following is not meant to represent an assumption of homogeneity but rather to indicate our location in Western society.

Unknowing

I first read about unknowing in Doane and Varcoe’s (2005) book, *Family Nursing as Relational Inquiry*. Doane and Varcoe gave me language to identify what I had been doing in my nursing work for many years: ‘practicing from true presence’ (p. 109). They attributed this idea to Parse who had first advanced the notion of the ‘not knowing stranger’ (Parse, 1997, p. 173). It is through not knowing that the nurse is able to be truly present to the person, rather than relying on their previous knowledge. This is not to say that the nurse jettisons their other ways of knowing but instead puts the person experiencing the issue first and enters into relationship with them. Munhall (2007) contrasts knowing and unknowing, comparing them as states of openness

or closure. Knowing, according to Munhall, creates the risk of shutting out alternatives and differences, while unknowing ‘seems essential to the understanding of intersubjectivity and perspectivity’ (p. 76). Gadamer (2004) speaks of understanding as involving an awareness of the fact that we are always projecting our prejudices onto the thing (or experience) we are trying to understand. If we do not achieve this awareness then ‘the tyranny of hidden prejudices’ (p. 272) will make us unable to reach an understanding.

I tried this way of ‘not knowing’ in a turbulent relationship I had with one of my nieces (a true account, fictionalized for confidentiality). Because of the intimate lifelong knowledge I had of this child, I reasoned not knowing would be difficult. I determined to put aside (while knowing it was there) all the prejudicial knowledge I had of her and enter into each encounter in an unknowing way. It was an amazing and humbling experience and I learned more about who this child really was in a few conversations than in all the previous years I had known her. The nurse’s prejudice could be her knowledge of disease processes or even the knowledge of the way the person behaved previously, as in my experience with my niece. An attitude of unknowing can prevent us from the fate warned of by Kurtz (cited in Munhall, 2007), that ‘knowledge screens the sound the third ear hears, so we hear only what we know’ (p. 76). This ‘listening with the third ear’ (Tonge, 1967, p.16) is also listening for what has not yet been said. It is really listening with the heart.

Embodiment

Since we entered Descartes’s nightmare (Jardine, 1998a) we have been struggling to become reunited with our distanced bodies. We think therefore we are, and, like Descartes, we ‘could conceive that [we] had no body’ (Descartes, cited in Jardine, p. 8). Descartes’s revolutionary ideas captured the imaginations of the 17th Century people and are still with us

today in our desire for certainty, in the idea of the separation of mind and body, and in the denial of any knowledge as truly scientific that is obtained by means other than the objective (Blackburn, 2008).

What is meant by the term embodiment? McDonald and McIntyre (2001) tell us what it is not: the body ‘objectified, sanitized, and stripped of embodied emotion and physicality’ (p. 234). They suggest that rather than repeating the dualistic idea of right or wrong, we look for ways to ‘embrace dichotomized knowledge’ (p. 236) and understand that both ways (objective and embodied) are simply different ways of seeing and interpreting the world. Epistemological privilege (McDonald & McIntyre) is knowledge that is embodied and confined to the person experiencing it. This privilege gives expert status to the person regarding their own experiences, rather than to a healthcare professional (for example), who in turn has their own epistemological privilege. Embodiment then, according to McDonald and McIntyre, is subjective, messy, emotional, a re-owning of one’s experience, and a re-inhabiting of physicality.

Merleau-Ponty (cited in Wilde, 1999) defines embodiment as ‘how we live in and experience the world through our bodies, especially through perception, emotion, language, movement in space and time, and sexuality’ (p. 27). Contrary to the ideas of duality put forward by Descartes, Merleau-Ponty states, ‘the world is not what I think but what I live through’ (Wilde, p. 28).

Combining McDonald and McIntyre’s (2001) and Merleau-Ponty’s (Wilde, 1999) ideas of embodiment leads me to the understanding that my experience, whether it is in-the-world, or of more esoteric endeavours, is foundational if I want to understand the experiences of others. By this I do not mean that I can only understand the experience of gender diversity by identifying as gender-diverse myself. I mean that, by being present in my body and tapping into an experience

of exclusion that I have had, for example, I can more readily offer heartfelt support to those for whom this is an occurrence in their lives (Butler, 2004). Paradoxically, I must undertake this understanding in an unknowing stance in order to avoid shutting out the sound the third ear hears.

There is a third way to be heard too. It is possible to write in an embodied way, to avoid the dualism that presses a choice between bodies and words. This way is an interpretivist approach that privileges neither the body nor words above the other because the line between them is 'interpretive and moving' (Gadow, 2000, p. 93). Gadow is speaking of poetry but avows that it is also possible to achieve this third place with prose that, 'redescribing, making contingent and surprising what has become literal...before it sounds true...gently supports the deliberate fall into grace' (p. 95). This grace is a celebration of the human condition common to both nurses and the ones they care for: embodied knowing of the finiteness and fallibility of life (Gadow).

Intuited or Experiential Knowing

As recently as 1999, Polifroni wrote a paper in which she states that intuition is 'a flash of insight whose source the receiver can neither fully identify or explain' (Polifroni, 1999, p. 55). Munhall (2007) says that intuition fell victim to nursing's push to establish itself as a science. Intuition was believed to be unscientific since it was associated with women, who were thought to be unable to grasp scientific principles. Zander (2007) also ascribes some rather non-scientific terms to intuition such as 'sixth sense', 'innate', 'unverifiable', 'non-rational', and indescribable (p. 9). These misunderstandings or underestimations of intuition are perhaps some reasons that nurses still have hesitation embracing it as a valid way of knowing.

In her seminal²⁰ work, *From Novice to Expert*, Patricia Benner elevated and validated intuition to the sphere of an experienced nurse who functions at the expert level (Brykczynski, 2002). Benner describes intuition as coming from a thorough grasp of the problem because of ‘deep experiential background’ (Brykczynski, p. 172).

This way of knowing, rather than relying on an overemphasis of emotions at the expense of other forms of knowing, as some have suggested (Purkis & Björnsdóttir, 2006), is developed through direct perception, education, and ‘deliberate practice with appropriate exemplars’ (Altmann, 2007, p. 117). Several scholars have noted the importance of an intimate connection with the patient in order to practice using intuited knowledge (Miller, Burton, cited in Dean, 1989; Lyneham *et al.*, 2008) which answers some concerns (Purkis & Björnsdóttir) that the use of nursing intuition may deny the voice of the patient.

The time has come, as Silva (1977) states, ‘to value truths arrived at by intuition and introspection as much as those arrived at by scientific experimentation’ (p. 17). Rather than intuition perceived as arriving in a flash of unexplained insight, it is now recognized as something that can be learned (Altmann, 2007), is arrived at through a thorough understanding of the subject at hand (Silva), and results in negative consequences when ignored (Lyneham *et al.*, 2008).

How Can this Epistemological Approach Make a Difference?

I will confine my remarks to my intended population of study, those who I identify as gender-diverse, although I also believe all people would benefit from the previously discussed epistemological stance. I am aware of the fact that it has been suggested that to use the term *marginalized* reifies oppression and can characterize people as victims who lack agency (Angus,

²⁰ Subsequent to publication I have become aware of this term as androcentric. I would now use a term such as ‘pioneering’.

cited in Browne *et al.*, 2005). Nevertheless I am using it to signify a situation in which people, simply because of their gender presentation, lack or have limited access to life opportunities that other people take for granted.

During my nursing career, which spans three decades, I have been personally involved with only two situations involving transgender people. This low incidence is illustrative of how hidden people keep their gender issues, given the demographics cited earlier.

The first situation was with a person who, like my orderly friend, deeply desired to become a woman. She was living in a residential care facility and, because of her medical condition, was unable to take hormones or undergo SRS. The best she could do was to dress in the style of her preferred gender, ask the staff to address her by the female²¹ pronoun, and use a female²² name. The administration was supportive and allowed me to provide training to the staff and volunteers regarding transgender issues. Still, the staff of the facility struggled and some covertly refused to respect Susan's (a pseudonym) wishes. Her physician refused outright to give her what she wanted and continued to call her Harry (a pseudonym) and address her in the masculine. When she died she was buried as Harry since her family also refused to recognize her desired gender.

The second situation was more subtle yet more troubling for me, and, I am sure, the person in question. It raised ethical and moral concerns and illustrated profound marginalization and power-over. David (a pseudonym), who had been blind since childhood, also lived in residential care and had secretly bought and handled women's clothing for years, according to long-time staff members. Finally, with support from some wonderful care staff, he decided to begin wearing these clothes in public. As the nurse leader in the facility, I believed it my place to

²¹ Subsequent to publication I would now use 'feminine' in place of this word.

²² Subsequent to publication I would now use 'feminine' in place of this word.

investigate further to see if all his needs were being met. With careful questioning, it became apparent he wanted to go further than just wearing women's clothing; he wanted to choose a female²³ name and be addressed in the feminine. I assured her I would do my best to see that this happened for her. Then her brother intervened. Management met with David alone and following that meeting declared that it had all been a mistake and that David wanted to return to the male gender²⁴. I believe this was because of pressure from David's family and had nothing to do with his wishes but I felt constrained from any further discussion with David due to my manager's directives. I continue to be troubled by the moral distress (Varcoe, *et al.*, 2004) this situation caused me.

Butler (2004) asks, 'Whose life is counted as a life? Whose prerogative is it to live?' (p. 205). When someone who identifies under my description of gender diversity seeks recognition in a world that only allows two genders, and finds in that reflection of the other 'the sign of one's expropriation and self-loss' (p. 241) it can be an incredible act of courage to just go on living. The outcome of serving only knowledge arrived at by empirical means and sustained by our society's insistence on the binary of male and female is that first we are polarized into opposing positions (Thorne *et al.*, 2004), and second, a great number of citizens are marginalized, rendered incoherent, and are even murdered, because they do not fit that binary (Butler, 2004). Some others are left by healthcare workers to die in their time of need (Shelley, 2008).

My personal life experience as a member of a marginalized group, as a woman in a male-privileged world, as a nurse, and as one who has travelled with a person on his journey of gender transition gives me a unique epistemological viewpoint. These experiences can also, paradoxically, cause prejudices to operate unconsciously since I am invested in what I know and

²³ Subsequent to publication I would now use 'feminine' in place of this word.

²⁴ Subsequent to publication I realized that this should read 'masculine gender'.

my experience can tend to reinforce that investment (Ceci, 2000). Part of my understanding is identifying my prejudices before the fact so they do not manifest, as it were, behind my back (Gadamer, 2004). These life experiences of mine are what make my tradition and when I am aware of the prejudices I carry, this tradition creates a powerful source for understanding (Gadamer).

If I approach a person who identifies with my description of gender diversity using this epistemic framework of personal experience and embodied intuition informed by unknowing, the impact of ‘diverse’ disappears as a central factor in my understanding. Instead, what I know and do not know is relationally guided and I am open to meet with the person as they are, to come to them as a not-knowing stranger. The knowers here are all of the players, not just the so-called ‘experts’ of religion, science, reason, or authority. The person is considered expert in regard to their own body and situation. I come to the encounter as an embodied person with an attitude of openness and humility.

It has become very apparent to me that those who identify with my description of gender diversity must be treated with the utmost sensitivity because we are all immersed in a culture that, by its insistence on only two genders, renders the lives of those who cannot or will not identify this way unlivable (Butler, 2004). Our Western culture denies the very viability of those who are gender-diverse and sends a message to them that we would rather they remain hidden and secret. In Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble*, she tells the tragic story of Herculine, a 19th century intersex person. This story, of shocked exposure, of being forced to choose a gender and eventual suicide has not really stopped being written. People are still made to feel as if they must choose one gender and abide by that or risk virtual or actual death. Herculine’s wonderings if she

is ‘the plaything of an impossible dream’ (p. 143) are pretty accurate and unfortunately still hold true today.

By practicing from a place of intuited relational unknowing, a bridge is formed across difference, where the difference is not ignored but honoured as a valuable contextual knowing. Embodiment recognizes the person first and forms a bond of human caring between two people that is palpable. This is the third ear hearing, a hearing with heart, which is really the gift of recognition. What else can one give another that is so precious and meaningful? Nothing is expected in return; the gift is one of pure love. If we could live this way, it would be a good start to paving the way to a viable life for those who identify with the term gender-diverse.

Chapter 2

Found Poetry, Fiction: Is This the Right Boat?

Found Poetry

Rather than launch into a traditional analysis and synthesis of the literature I explored, I followed the lead of Monica Prendergast (2006), a professor in the department of curriculum and instruction at the University of Victoria, who wrote about and demonstrated a different kind of review in her paper, *Found poetry as literature review*. Prendergast describes found poetry as “the imaginative appropriation and reconstruction of already-existing texts” (p. 369). She believes a review of literature conducted this way “offers an arts-based approach to literature review in inquiry” (p. 369). Prendergast (2006) uses found poetry to review 23 papers, and from those papers, she composed 30 poems. Wiggins (2011), who is a professor of music education at Oakland University, used her found poetry to analyze her data. She describes her process as “compelling” (p.3). She had first written a composite conversation and sent it to her participants, who loved it, but then, when she wanted to present it at a conference, she realized she would need to remove some identifying phrases. That’s when she discovered found poetry, uncovering “the nuggets that were the essence” (p. 3) of the larger version. She became fascinated with the process of removing, reducing, and refining. She discovered, each time she shared the resulting poem, “the response was visceral” (p. 5). In this case, Wiggins composed the original writing from which the poem was drawn. In contrast to Prendergast’s 30 shorter poems, Wiggins composed one that spans 5 ½ pages.

Every word I employ in the found poems in this work is taken from the paper referenced, although each may be rearranged or repeated for emphasis. I extracted what I saw as the main

message of each paper, like a distillation, or a winnowing, of what was already there. The essence I looked for was the women's experiences, using, where possible, the words they spoke.

Regardless of the length of the poem, or the number of sources, found poetry is a powerful way to convey the essence, or nugget, of an idea. This method can be used to review literature, analyze data, or anytime the power of poetry is required to get beyond the intellectual lumber that sometimes prevents us from seeing the beauty of a tree.

Fiction, or is it Creative Non-Fiction?

Creative Non-fiction

Creative non-fiction is a way of telling stories “with an artful presentation of real people and real events” (Lee, 2008, p. 150). The book from which this quote is taken, *The authentic dissertation* (Four Arrows, 2008), is itself an example of creative non-fiction. The author has artfully devised a method, an imaginary symposium, to showcase the work of real scholars. He has created two characters, composites, to represent real people: an American Indian woman as the protagonist, and a Western scholar who is steeped in traditional academic methodology, as the antagonist. Together they set the stage for the researchers who describe various alternative methodologies.

In creative non-fiction, the non-fiction aspects are the “truths” told in the story, while the story itself can be a fictionalized account. In the example previously mentioned, the scholars were presented as themselves and their work was what they actually produced. The fictionalized part was the symposium and the two characters created to provide a vehicle to showcase the stories. In her methodological novel, *The ethnographic I*, Carolyn Ellis (2004) uses a fictional classroom, two created characters, and includes real characters, to instruct about autoethnography. Ellis has taught extensively and so was able to create characters and classroom

situations that were close to experiences she has had. She says, “This book is based on ... ethnographic details, making it possible to construct the ethnographic scenes that happened and the fictional scenes that didn’t—but could have” (p. xx).

My memories, and those of my participants, form the foundation of my story and this requires creative non-fiction. Muncey (2010) says, “memories are a construction or... a reconstruction of past events in the present” (p. 103). It is common knowledge that accounts from memory of incidents such as accidents vary from witness to witness, and the more removed in time those memories are, the more they vary. So, although I attempt to relate my own memories as faithfully as possible, it is with the knowledge that they are current constructions that I proceeded. Neither my stories, nor those of the participants, are to be taken for historical truth, if there is such a thing.

From the point of view of the structure of the work, I pursued an approach that can best be described as “writing as a method of inquiry” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 959). In contrast to “writing it up” after I collected all the data, I wrote as discovery, wrote as analysis, wrote my way into subjectivity, wrote my way into the data. This is not something new and strange, since many scholars have approached their research in this way (Tillmann-Healy, 1998; Foster, 2002; Sargeant, 2002; Kaufmann, 2004; Smith, 2006; Craig, 2008; Rose, 2008; Smith-Sullivan, 2008; Boylorn, 2009; Grubb, 2010; Hagens, 2010; Merkel, 2010; Coughlin, 2011) but it is relatively new in the discipline of nursing. Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) say, in one of my favourite quotes on the subject, “Any dinosaurian beliefs that ‘creative’ and ‘analytical’ are contradictory and incompatible modes are standing in the path of a meteor; they are doomed for extinction” (p. 962).

I have written in the form of a novel. Much has been said recently in praise of the novel, but Dorothy Smith, the founder of Institutional Ethnography, said it best when she recently spoke to a crowded room at UVIC on her desire for a new feminism. She said, “the novel is one of the best ways to learn about people with whom we might never come into contact” (D. Smith, public address, March 22, 2012). Ellis (2004) enjoys the “incongruence, even arrogance” (p. xix) of claiming to write a novel as an academic text. She has put together methodology and the format of a novel and it works beautifully. It draws the reader into the story of the characters, supplies drama and plot twists, all while providing painless education about autoethnography. What I have done is similar. I created composite characters out of my experiences and those of my participants. Our experiences form the details and I have devised a plot that demonstrates the findings of my research.

In this novel I “use language like paint to create what is self-evidently a version of what was, what is, and/or might be” (Pollock, 1998, p. 80). In other words, the writing is performative, “for writing ourselves out of our-selves, for writing our-selves into what (never) was and may (never) be. It is/is it for love?” (Pollock, p. 98).

Not everyone agrees that what I have done in the novel can be termed creative non-fiction. In fact, I have encountered some distinctly hostile attitudes surrounding my claims, recalling the furor over James Frey and the discovery that some of the events in his memoir, *A million little pieces*, were not true (personal communication, circa 2010). In *Slice me some truth: An anthology of Canadian creative non-fiction*, edited by Luanne Armstrong and Zoë Landale (2011), the editors struggle with the definition of creative non-fiction and decide “Because the writer is using his or her own name, and the names of other people, the reader assumes the story is ‘true’” (p. 7). I do not use either my own name or those of my participants. Does this mean I

am writing fiction or something untrue? Further in the same text, Armstrong and Landale say, “With CNF [creative non-fiction], the reader has the illusion of being dropped into someone else’s life. They get to live vicariously, to learn from the writer’s mistakes, or rejoice in their triumphs, with no risk, but with both entertainment and understanding as a result” (p. 9, material in brackets added). This definition would fit my work. Gail Godwin, in her essay, *A novelist breaches the border to non-fiction* (Godwin, 2001) says of her first work of non-fiction, “I’d be quite happy to let it stand as a ‘complex, personal work of intense imagination’” (p. 77). In the same essay, Godwin cites her *Handbook to literature* that defines fiction as “narrative writing drawn from the imagination of the author rather than history or fact” (p. 72). The novel I have written is both fiction and non-fiction. The characters have sprung from my imagination, or are composites of people I have known. They have taken on lives of their own and, in some cases, have directed the writing. For example, I tried to change some features of a character after they were drawn, without success. They already were who they were. The situations are all works of my imagination. The experiences are all true, although I have changed some details in order to protect the person who told me the story. I have taken some liberty with some experiences by drawing them to their logical conclusion, although some of those conclusions might not have actually happened. If the reader wishes to categorize the work as fiction, “faction” (Armstrong & Landale, 2011, p. 7), or creative non-fiction, it is up to them. I will stick with creative non-fiction until a better term comes along.

Chapter 3

Justification: Do I Really Need to Go There? Paper 2.

Forward

The following paper demonstrates the lack of awareness on the part of nursing regarding issues of gender diversity. The main finding was that people who present with a gender different than the expected man or woman are largely invisible. If such people are largely invisible, their supporters and partners must be non-existent. If, when caring for trans people, nurses are unaware of the stress transition can have for the rest of the family, they would not be caring for those people holistically. And if they are caring for a partner of an FTM, they may miss a major factor in that person's healing if they don't attend to family relationships. Writing this paper furthered my realization that, rather than studying the experience of people who identified as transgender or transsexual, I needed to study the experiences of the women who supported them.

Merryfeather, L., & Bruce, A. (2014). The invisibility of gender diversity: Understanding transgender and transsexuality in nursing literature. *Nursing Forum*, DOI=10.1111/nuf.12061&ArticleID=1244432²⁵

It is taken for granted in our Western society that there are only two genders and the preference is that these be clearly presented (Lorber, 2008). At birth, if a child presents ambiguously, the decision is made to call the child either male or female and, if necessary, provide the surgery to complete this decision (Lorber, 2008). Increasingly however, people are living their lives without strict attachment to one gender or are transitioning from one gender to another (Monro, 2005). As with other health care providers, nurses are gaining knowledge of the physiological and psychological implications of these changes but have limited understanding of

²⁵ I have received permission from the publishers, which is included in Appendix B, to use the entire text

the scope of gender diversity including what vocabulary to use (Alegria, 2011; Bradley-Springer, 2009; Eliason, Dibble, & DeJoseph, 2010; Fish, 2010) to ensure respect, recognition and inclusion of transgender and transsexual (trans) people.

The aim of this paper is to highlight dominant discourses including the invisibility of transgender and transsexuality issues in nursing literature and to foster a better understanding and ability to talk with patients and families about gender diversity. To this end, the paper is organized as follows. First, we provide a background clarifying: key terms, the importance of understanding gender diversity, the size of trans populations, and the common vocabulary nurses may encounter when working with people who do not fit into culturally defined gender categories. Second, we present an overview of discourse, a description of the dominant gender schema adopted in Western culture (Devor, 1997) and four key discourses generated from a review of nursing literature addressing transgender and transsexuality. Third, we present stories of trans people's experiences to illustrate these discourses. And finally, we conclude with recommendations for nursing practice and education.

Background

Clarifying Key Terms: Trans and Gender Identity Disorder

For the purposes of this paper we use the term 'trans' to include both transgender and transsexual. In this context, a *transgender person* is understood as one who presents their gender in a manner that is different from the socially expected man or woman. This term can embrace a multitude of gender expressions, including transsexual, intersex, drag queens, masculine women, effeminate men, as well as a host of people who might fit anywhere in between (Stryker, 2006a). While these terms have some overlap, a *transsexual person*, on the other hand, is someone who believes their body does not match their true sex. For this reason, many desire surgical and

hormonal intervention. Even so, some transsexual people choose not to have any alterations to their physical bodies and live in a way that reflects what they believe their sex to be (Lev, 2004).

Another term nurses encounter that is related but not synonymous, is the medical term *gender identity disorder*. This is a psychiatric diagnosis presently under revision in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA, 2010) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV). The diagnosis includes the wearing of sex-specific clothing and engaging in sex-specific activities that are not consistent with natal sex. Some activists have called the definition of this diagnosis "a fiction of natural gender" (Spade, 2006, p. 320) because it reinforces the dominant narrative that all girl children play with dolls and wear dresses and all boys prefer pants and rough play. While critics have spoken out against pathologizing that which they understand to be a natural and normal variation on sex and gender (Cermele, Daniels, & Anderson, 2001; Chase, 2006; Feinberg, 2006; Singer, 2006; Whittle, 2006), the diagnosis is considered necessary by many clinicians in order to prescribe hormones and carry out surgical alterations of the body for those who do not identify with their natal sex and the expected gender presentation. Removing Gender Identity Disorder as a mental health diagnosis also risks removing the funding available for sex reassignment surgery (SRS).

Why is this Important for Nurses?

Without adequate understanding and experience, nurses may cause unnecessary and unintended harm when providing care for people who do not fit within culturally defined parameters of male and female. Nursing is a profession highly regarded among the general public and governed by ethical guidelines and standards of practice. In the Canadian Nurses Association (2008) *Code of Ethics* values such as "providing safe, compassionate, competent and ethical care; promoting health and well-being; preserving dignity; and promoting justice" (p. i)

are clearly outlined. Similarly, the College of Registered Nurses of British Columbia (CRNBC) requires that a nurse “Advocate and participate in changes to improve client care and nursing practice” (CRNBC, 2011) and that “Nurses have an obligation to provide safe, competent and ethical care to their clients” (CRNBC, 2010, p. 2). We contend that if nurses are not educated to critically question discourses of sex and gender, including the diagnostic category of “gender identity disorder” introduced above, they will be unable to provide competent, compassionate and ethical care to people who either change their sex or express their gender differently from the culturally determined gender categories.

How large is the Trans Population?

It is very difficult to estimate the numbers of people who identify as transgender and transsexual. According to Burrows (2011), 10,000 people have undergone SRS in the UK by 2009 and another 46,000 were waiting for treatment. Blunden and Dale (2009) state that the number of people in 2009 in the UK who were being treated for gender dysphoria was estimated to be 1 in 4,000. Lombardi and van Servellen (2000) put the numbers of trans-identified people in the Netherlands around 1 in 20,000-50,000 in 2000. A recent research report by Gates (2011) estimates the transgender population in the United States to be .3%, or around 697,529 people (p. 6). The lack of accurate numbers for transgender and transsexual people is complicated because neither the United States (Cobos & Jones, 2009) nor Statistics Canada (2011) include a category of transgender in the census forms. Furthermore, people whose transition is accomplished to their satisfaction may no longer identify as trans but prefer to present and identify as men or women (Stone, 2006).

Common Vocabulary

There is a wide range of terms used in the literature that reflect the heterogeneity and complexity of gender diversity. In Table 1, we present an introduction to common vocabulary nurses may encounter in health care contexts with patients and families and that are used in this paper.

Sex	Sex is thought by many to be based on the biological chromosomal composition of the body, with the visible manifestations shown in the genitalia and secondary sex characteristics. Sex is a fixed organizing basis for Western society so people are forced into one of only two choices, even if it is by surgical means. Sex is both a bodily reality and a social construction (Dozier, 2005), in that male or female can be constructed culturally by gender roles.
Gender	Gender is often differentiated from the biology of sex and understood as the socially constructed attitudes and behaviors used to differentiate males and females. There is no universal definition, but many scholars believe the expression and characteristics of gender are fluid and a process of becoming (Bornstein, 1994; Kaufmann, 2010; Linstead & Pullen, 2006; Monro, 2005). It is assumed, in Western culture, that a person who is pronounced male will become a boy, a man, and take on masculine roles and characteristics, and a female-bodied person will be a girl, woman, and behave in feminine ways (Butler, 1999 Devor, 1989).
Intersex	This term has largely replaced the previous medical term <i>hermaphrodite</i> and is used both by the health care community as well as those who claim this identity for themselves to mean someone who has primary sex characteristics of both male and female to varying degrees. It can also be used to refer to someone whose genitalia do not measure up, quite literally, to medical standards, or are ambiguous in some way. Chase (2006), an intersex-identified woman and advocate, describes the condition as “individuals who arrive in the world with sexual anatomy that fails to be easily distinguished as male or female” (p. 300).
Transgender	A person may use this term to convey that they do not identify with their natal sex or they do not wish to be confined to just that sex. It may also mean they identify with the gender usually associated with the “opposite” sex, or they may feel their gender expression is such that it does not fit the currently available categories.
Trans	This shortened version of transgender is an attempt to circumvent the struggles some have experienced with the word <i>transgender</i> . Shelley (2008) considers transgender an unsatisfactory umbrella for the many identities that must constantly be explained. As a result, many prefer the term trans. Shelley uses the term “trans-people” (p. 16). Others use “trans-man” or trans-woman”.
Transsexual	This term has been the subject of controversy. Combining “trans” with “sexual” seems to conflate transitioning with sexuality (Devor, 1997; Whittle, 1999). It often describes someone who uses varying means of altering natal sex, such as taking hormones, dressing as the preferred sex, or undergoing surgery and other body modifications to bring their body into alignment with their gender (Crossman, 2011). Some people struggle with the term due to the medical connotations associated with its use as category of diagnosis (Lev, 2004).
Gender Identity Disorder	This is a diagnosis in the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA, 2010) <i>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders</i> (DSM-IV). The diagnosis includes the wearing of sex-specific clothing and engaging in sex-specific activities that are not consistent with natal sex. Some activists have called the definition of this diagnosis “a fiction of natural gender” (Spade, 2006, p. 320) because it assumes that all girl children play with dolls and wear dresses and all boys prefer pants and rough play. The diagnosis is presently under revision. While critics have spoken out against pathologizing that which they understand to be a natural and normal variation on sex and gender (Cermele, Daniels, & Anderson, 2001; Chase, 2006; Feinberg, 2006; Singer, 2006; Whittle, 2006), the diagnosis is considered necessary by many clinicians in order to prescribe hormones and carry out surgical alterations of the body for those who do not identify with their natal sex and the expected gender presentation. Removing gender identity disorder as a mental health diagnosis also risks removing the funding available for sex reassignment surgery.
Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS)	This term is used for any surgical revisions made to the body in order to bring relief from the disjuncture of living in a body that does not match an individual’s gender identity. This can include chest reconstruction, hysterectomy, oophorectomy, removal of the vagina, phalloplasty, breast augmentation, orchidectomy, the creation of a neo-vagina, and face and voice surgeries. All of these surgeries are expensive and some are partially covered by the various provincially funded plans in Canada as well as health insurance plans in the United States.
FTM & MTF	These acronyms are in common use, both by the person so described as well as health care professionals, and refer to people who were born female but identify as male (female to male, FTM) or born male and identify as female (male to female, MTF).
LGBT	This is a common acronym that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans. The initials are often separated depending upon who or what is being discussed. For example, when indicating sexual orientation, LGB is used.

Table 1: Glossary of gender-diversity terms

We acknowledge that this glossary is both preliminary and may be incorrect in some situations. Terminology is considered correct if the people named have chosen the name, or at least are in agreement with its use. It is important to use correct terminology and therefore to inquire directly with the people involved. Calling someone by a term they do not recognize such as trans when the person identifies as a man or woman risks disrespect, invisibility, and exclusion.

Discourses, Dominant Gender Schemas and Nursing

A general discussion of the nature of discourse and the dominant gender scheme within Western cultures is presented. Within this broader context, a literature review of nursing scholarship addressing transgender and transsexual issues from 1985 to 2011 is described. Key findings from this review generated four discourses: invisibility/erasure, nurse as advocate, cultural competence, and emancipatory discourses.

Understanding Discourse

We live in a world of binary opposites: male and female, black and white, right and wrong. Discourse from a critical perspective refers to a manner of thinking that is often taken for granted, unexamined, and operates subliminally (Crossley, 2005; Mills, 2004). Discourses shape our lives and guide us in making meaning of our perceptions and experiences (Purvis & Hunt, 1993). A dominant discourse is made so by support from institutions and society generally (Mills, 2004). Discourses of gender are generated and reinforced in society through the power of institutions and social conventions that determine and support a particular manner of thinking.

For example, dominant discourse of sex and gender tells us that a child recognized as female at birth will behave as a girl and grow into a woman. Dominant discourse also tells us what behaving as a girl entails and what is acceptable as womanly behavior, but within this

discourse there is room for a discourse of femininity that allows for such alternate expressions of gender as the tomboy and the farmer woman who dress in clothing and behave in ways usually reserved for men. Therefore, the threads of one discourse can be woven alternatively and the same discourse can be dominant or alternative depending on the situation. Foucault (1978) describes “a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (p. 100) that are at once “an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (p.101).

Dominant discourse defines the margins of acceptability as well as who falls outside those margins. When someone exceeds that margin, it is as if they are invisible but at the same time they threaten the margin. As a result of this threat, exceeding the boundaries of dominant discourses of sex and gender can mean verbal or physical attack and, in some cases, death. In order to make room for alternatives, dominant discourse first must be exposed. Moussa and Scapp (1996) argue that it is the work of the members of a dominant culture (such as nurses) who see and abhor the discrimination and prejudice perpetuated through a dominant discourse to clear a “discursive space in which those who were previously silenced might speak up” (p. 90).

Dominant Gender Schema

The invisibility or erasure of trans people in nursing is a reflection of the adherence, in Western culture, to a rigid gender schema. Devor (1997) outlined the gender schema that is dominant in the West and that is still very much in evidence today. In this schema, sex is understood as “biologically deterministic” (Devor, 1989, p. 46) and is established at birth by inspection of the genitals. There are only two sexes, no one can be both or neither, and changing from one to another requires surgery. Within this schema, gender follows from sex. That is, males will be boys and men, and females, girls and women, and this cannot be changed unless

the sex is changed. And, like sex, no one can be both or neither gender. Devor also describes *gender styles* (p. 72), meaning each gender is expected to conform to socially sanctioned ways of being their gender, such as behaving in what is considered a masculine or feminine way, according to whether they are males or females. If people do not perform in the gender style considered appropriate, it is held to be an indication that they are sick in some way or that errors in socialization occurred during their formative years (Roughgarden, 2004).

Stryker (2006b), a male-to-female (MTF) transsexual person, writes of the birth of her partner's child and how the unquestioned proclamation of "it's a girl" reinforced the "hegemonic oppression" (p. 251) that results from the assumptions of all those around the infant about the naturalness of sex. Because of being trans, Stryker never had the experience of being recognized at birth for who she was, and further, this new child had a gender thrust upon her that may not accurately express who she will become. Stryker reminds us that, "bodies are rendered meaningful only through some culturally and historically specific mode of grasping their physicality that transforms the flesh into a useful artifact" (p. 253).

Trans and intersex people, more than any others, challenge or trouble (Butler, 1999) the dominant discourse of sex and gender. They may change their sex, present a gender different from their anatomical sex, claim a gender that is not within the binary of masculine or feminine, live in the space in between or outside the binary, or they may act in a way not authorized by dominant discourse, such as behaving as feminine men or masculine women. Some trans activists call upon one another to "speak from outside the boundaries of gender" (Stone, 2006, p. 230) rather than disappear into the dominant culture. Whittle (2006), a trans man, declares that "trans'ing...fully queers the pitch by highlighting, clarifying, deconstructing and then blowing apart...all the things we know about sex, genders and sexualities" (p. 202).

Sociologist Aaron Devor (1997) wrote *FTM: Female-to-male transsexuals in society* wherein he elaborates this dominant gender schema in seven descriptive points. They are as follows in an abridged format:

1. Sex is intrinsic, biological, there are two only, male or female, determined by visually inspecting genitalia or by genetic testing.
2. All people must be one sex or the other. No one can be neither or both. No one can change sex without surgery.
3. Gender is the social outcome of sex, there are only two genders that follow from sex, boys and men and girls and women. All males must be boys and men, and all females must be girls and women.
4. All people must be one gender or the other. No one can be neither or both. No one can change gender without also changing sex.
5. Gender styles are culturally determined expressions of sex and gender. There are two, masculine and feminine. Males are naturally masculine and females are naturally feminine.
6. Many do not live up to their expected gender styles because of poor socialization or because they suffer from some pathology.
7. Males, boys, men, and masculine people are naturally entitled to greater power and status than females, girls, women, and feminine people (p. 587).

More than a dozen years later, these gender and sex schemas are still pervasive in North American culture (Bauer, et al., 2009, Dewey, 2008). Until recently, we have not questioned the socially constructed understandings of sex, gender, and sexuality: the doctors who try to find a

diagnostic rubric for those who vary from the schema (Spade, 2006), the transsexual people who gladly take on the culturally inscribed attributes of femininity or masculinity (Hausman, 2006), and writers who attempt to make sense of something outside of their experience (MacDonnell, 2007). Through analysis of nursing literature, we identify four additional discourses that follow: invisibility/erasure, advocacy, cultural competence, and emancipation.

Review of Nursing Literature

Data Sources

A review of articles published between 1985 and 2011 addressing transgender and transsexual issues in nursing was conducted. Published articles and textbooks were identified from electronic data bases: The Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature, and Summon (which includes PubMed, Medline, Web of Science Direct [Elsevier], Sociology Abstracts, Academic Search Elite, Health Sciences SAGE, Healthsource [nursing/academic], Academic Search Premier, and PSYCinfo). Search words included combinations of nursing, transgender and transsexual. Inclusion criteria included research, discussion, editorials, magazine articles and theoretical articles where the central topic was transgender. Articles with a strict focus on pharmaceuticals, surgical intervention techniques, research tools, and methods were excluded. Only articles written in English were considered. A total of 77 articles were included in the review.

Key Findings

Invisibility/erasure.

In nursing, Devor's (1997) dominant gender schema is prevalent and often unquestioned as demonstrated by the few nursing schools or textbooks that teach about sex, gender, or gender diversity (Bauer et al., 2009; Fish, 2010; Hanssmann, Morrison, Russian, Shiu-Thornton, &

Bowen, 2010; Lim & Levitt, 2011; MacDonnell & Andrews, 2006; Merryfeather, 2011; Morgan & Stevens, 2008; Polly & Nicole, 2011; Richards, 2004; Sperber, Landers, & Lawrence, 2005; Vanderleest & Galper, 2009; Weber, 2009; Williamson, 2010). Nursing, as a profession, has been slow to enact policies regarding trans patients or nurses (Eliason et al., 2010; MacDonnell & Andrews, 2006; Polly & Nicole, 2011; Shaffer, 2005; Sperber et al., 2005; Weber, 2009). There is a scarcity of nursing literature or research into the lives of trans people (Addis, Davies, Greene, MacBride-Stewart, & Shepherd, 2009; Alegria, 2010; Bauer et al., 2009; Hanssmann et al., 2010; Lombardi & van Servellen, 2000; Sevelius, 2009; Sevelius, Carrico, & Johnson, 2010; Singh & McKleroy, 2011; Sobralske, 2005; Stieglitz, 2010; Thompson, 2008; Thornhill & Klein, 2010; Vanderleest & Glaper, 2009; Weber, 2009).

Based on the literature reviewed, nurses and other health care providers lack familiarity with the vocabulary with which to engage trans individuals (Burrows, 2011; Hanssmann et al., 2010; MacDonnell & Andrews, 2006; Merryfeather, 2011; Pimenoff, 2006). Unfortunately, there are still examples of nurses refusing to care for gender divergent people with respect and courtesy, failing to use the appropriate name or pronoun, or in some reported cases even abusing their clients emotionally or verbally (Adams, 2010; Fish, 2010; Lombardi & van Servellen, 2000; Phillips & Patsdaughter, 2009; Polly & Nicole, 2011; Smith, 2007; Sperber et al., 2005; Thornhill & Klein, 2010).

This invisibility is further demonstrated by research reports and articles in and about nursing purporting to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) people (or that mention transgender and/or transsexual people) fail to direct any remarks toward the specific needs of trans clients. Almack (2010) wrote a review of a paper that discussed social exclusion of LGBT people but focused more on LGBs without apparent awareness of the omission of trans people.

There is an assumption, based on a dominant gender schema discussed above, that trans people do not exist or that their needs are the same as the LGB population, even though LGB people's needs are not homogeneous either. In a comprehensive paper addressing the needs of the older "GLBT" person, Blank, Ascencio, Descartes, and Griggs (2009) spend less than half a page discussing the "more extreme" (p. 17) issues faced by transgender people. Seven papers included in this literature review indicated either LGBT or trans people in the title or abstract, yet the authors omitted any discussion of transgender, instead focusing on sexual orientation and homophobia and heteronormativity (Blackwell, 2008; Gabrielson, 2011; Heath, 2002; Keepnews, 2011; Irwin, 2007; McGuinness, 2008; Rondahl, 2009). Chesla (2005) directly groups "GLBT" under "sexual orientation" (p. 340), which entirely excludes the trans component. For Guberman et al. (2004, p. 15), *gender-based diversity* means diversity between men and women only. Even though the authors of this paper mention a focus group from a drop-in centre for "lesbian/bisexual/transgendered young women" (p. 17) they confine their discussion to the sexuality of women. Similarly, Owen and Khalil (2007), in their analysis of diversity, speak only of men and women in the category of gender but list "transsexuals and transvestites" (p. 471) under diversity of sexuality, by which they indicated they meant sexual orientation. Diversity does not include trans people for Yearwood, Hines-Martin, Dato, and Malone (2006) and, even though Weber (2009) speaks of transgender parents in the abstract of his paper about sexual minority parents, he restricts his discussion to same-sex parents.

Nurse as advocate.

It seems ironic that the discourse of *nurse as advocate* would follow closely on the heels of the discourse of invisibility for trans people since they seem in direct opposition to one another. However, the nurse as advocate has been central to the profession from the time of the

earliest nurse theorist, Florence Nightingale, who advocated better living conditions for the poor in order for them to experience better health, and saw nurses as instrumental in achieving this (Pfetscher, 2002). Likewise, with this emerging community, nurses have an opportunity to be leaders in advocating for gender diversity.

Several papers directly address the mandate for nurses to advocate for their trans patients (Adams, 2010; Cobos & Jones, 2009; Dysart-Gale, 2010; Fish, 2010; Jenner, 2010; Keiswetter & Brotemarkle, 2010; Morgan & Stevens, 2008; Polly & Nicole, 2011; Shaffer, 2005; Thornhill & Klein, 2010; Vanderleest & Galper, 2009), while others hold advocacy to be an important nursing function for all those marginalized and underserved without specific mention of trans people (Axtell, Avery, & Westra, 2010; Blackwell, 2008; Irwin, 2007; Lim & Levitt, 2011; McGuinness, 2008; Owen & Khalil, 2007; Weber, 2009, 2010; Yearwood et al., 2006). Some authors see the difficulty of advocacy in our current Western culture because research into trans issues is not considered as important as other areas (MacDonnell, 2007; MacDonnell & Andrews, 2006). Eliason et al. (2010) identify barriers to advocacy as including the labeling of such attempts as “having an agenda,” “strident,” or “unsubstantiated” and because of unwarranted scrutiny not leveled at advocacy for other groups (p. 214).

Cultural competence.

Cultural competence, according to Papps (2005), is an idea within the concepts of transcultural nursing, first proposed by Leininger in the 1950s. It begins with an awareness of differences among various cultures, which then develops into personal sensitivity, and culminates with the nurse becoming culturally safe to provide care defined by those who receive

it (Papps, 2005). As will be seen in the following discussion, cultural competence in regard to people who identify as trans is still an ideal waiting to be realized.

Cultural competence is a goal frequently mentioned in the literature reviewed. Wepa (2005) broadly defines culture as “our activities, ideas, our belongings, relationships, what we do, say, think, are” (p. 30-38) and this is the definition that informs our understanding. Although it has similarities with advocacy, cultural competency is seen as something to be approached from which appropriate advocacy can be launched. In order to become culturally competent, one needs to identify the culture in question. Bith-Melander et al. (2010) report findings from a study among transgender people of color in which the researchers identified many intersecting axes of discrimination and marginalization, but they did not recognize transgender as a culture in itself. Similarly Melendez and Pinto (2009) view culturally competent care for transgender women as being aware of racial and ethnic concerns. Yearwood et al. (2006) also view culture in a racial/ethnic light. In contrast, Gibson and Catlin (2011b), in the third paper of a series of three dealing with the clinical nursing care of transitioning children and adolescents, implicitly recognized a culture of transgender by calling upon nurses to be culturally competent by behaving with compassion and integrity in a nonjudgemental fashion toward those who undergo sex change procedures. Lombardi and van Servellen (2000) recognize transgender culture as a diverse but nonetheless unique culture requiring nurses to be culturally sensitive, as do a number of other authors (Sevelius, 2009; Shaffer, 2005). Several scholars name the difficulty for nursing to provide culturally competent care to the restricted understanding of culture as only race or ethnicity (MacDonnell & Andrews, 2006; Polly & Nicole, 2011; Vanderleest & Galper, 2009).

Emancipatory discourses.

The final discourse identified is emancipatory discourses. Daley and MacDonnell (2011) directly identify emancipatory discourses as social determinates of health, anti-oppression, and citizen/social rights (p. 5). These three categories, the authors demonstrate, expand the discourses of diversity and multiculturalism, which tend to exclude/erase transgender people. De Santis, Martin, and Lester (2010) reported on a program for human immunodeficiency virus prevention among trans women that used trans women to facilitate sessions. In another paper that reviewed research literature into human sexuality, De Santis and Vasquez (2010) named “respondent-driven” (p. 180) sampling wherein the researcher first identifies willing participants and asks them to recruit others. Dewey (2008) identifies resisting established medical decisions as a counter discourse for trans people. MacDonnell and Andrews (2006) and MacDonnell (2007) advocate research that focuses on sexual minorities as emancipatory discourse. Singh and McKleroy (2011) identify “just getting out of bed” (p. 34) or mere survival of traumatic events as counter discourse for transgender people. Steiglitz (2010) names this discourse “resilience” (p. 192). Phillips and Patsdaughter (2009), in their editorial to the special edition of the *Journal of the Association of Nurses in AIDS Care* that features transgender people, identify the special edition as an opportunity to engage in alternate discourse of trans. And finally, Cook-Daniels (1998) identifies ways of being such as identifying, recognizing relationships, careful listening, respect that compose a discourse that counters invisibility.

Illustrating Discourses with Stories

Nursing is a relational practice (Doane & Varcoe, 2005) and stories are a good way to demonstrate the relationality of a life lived. The brief stories we present here will, we hope, bring some trans people’s experiences to life and illustrate the discourses described above. Some

of the stories come from personal communication and others are from the first author's (L.M.) nursing experience. Names and locations are changed or disguised for reasons of confidentiality. These stories are recounted with the understanding that memory is created in the present (Muncey, 2010). The stories are presented chronologically, with the oldest first. Arranging them in this way helps to illustrate how discourses have and have not changed over time.

Sheila (circa 1999- 2000)

Sheila was over 6 feet tall, weighed about 200 pounds, and was male-bodied. As a man, she had been a marine and was the proud bearer of several navy tattoos. Later in life, Sheila identified as a woman but because of her medical status as a brittle diabetic and her lack of funds, she was unable to take any steps toward achieving her dream other than dressing as a woman, growing her hair, and using a feminine name and pronoun. Sheila came to live in a residential facility where I worked. She would come to the dining room dressed in a frilly housecoat that did little to hide her chest hair or her private parts and wore high-heeled mules lined with pink faux fur and the other residents reacted with shock and disapproval. She seemed to be somewhat unaware of the effect she was having and treated everyone with friendliness in spite of their reactions to her. Sheila's physician was not supportive of her and refused to call her by her name or use the correct pronoun. Some of the staff seemed to comply with Sheila's wishes but were then overheard speaking disrespectfully about her behind her back. I organized a workshop for staff and volunteers that was very successful and helped them to understand their own fears and embrace Sheila as a member of the community. Unfortunately, Sheila's sister, who was her only next of kin, did not support Sheila's choice of name or pronoun and when Sheila died, she was buried under her birth name.

This story illustrates the interconnectedness of various discourses. By their reaction to Sheila, the staff and residents demonstrated their adherence to the dominant discourse of sex and gender. They were often shocked and offended by her demeanor and clothing choices because these did not match the dominant schema of sex and gender. Her doctor adhered to a discourse of invisibility, as did her sister. The discourses of advocacy and cultural competency are shown in the attempts, supported by the organization, to organize education for the staff. By her exuberant existence Sheila was the creator of the most powerful counter discourse. She wore what she wanted, and the more flamboyantly feminine she could present, the better she liked it. It is my

observation that the education provided was very helpful but it was Sheila's unwavering belief in her own worth as a person and her right to be who she wished to be that had the biggest impact on staff attitudes.

Gerald (circa 2005)

Gerald, a trans-man, lived full-time as a man, used masculinising hormones and had had chest reconstruction surgery, but had not had genital surgery. He required surgery that had nothing to do with his gender status. During the preliminary examination of the surgical site, the surgeon asked to see Gerald's genitals, using the excuse that he had never before dealt with a transsexual person. Gerald refused his request but was troubled by it and so contacted the head nurse of the operating room where his surgery was to take place. He explained his concern to the nurse, that his genitals might be unnecessarily exposed or that his trans status would be discussed disrespectfully. The nurse reassured him in a respectful and professional manner. Subsequently, Gerald suffered complications from this surgery and visited his medical doctor. During the examination, the nurse who was present purposely looked at his genitals and Gerald saw shock on her face when she realized he did not possess a penis. Following this visit Gerald's doctor ordered home-care nurses to visit every other day to dress the wound. Gerald was able to conceal his genitals from them by positioning himself before the nurses arrived. He did not discuss his gender status with them since he felt too vulnerable due to the previous experiences surrounding this surgery (C. Moore, personal communication, December 10, 2011).

In this story the discourse of invisibility is both dominant and counter, "a multiplicity of discursive elements" (Foucault, 1978, p. 100). Gerald did not want to be seen as trans, but only as a man in this case, since it was irrelevant to his need for surgery, but his surgeon erased Gerald's identity by posing his inappropriate request. Gerald created counter discourse to his invisibility by asking the operating room nurse to advocate on his behalf, invoking what Daley and MacDonnell (2011) refer to as citizen/social rights. Because of his feelings of vulnerability, Gerald used the discourse of invisibility for his own ends in preventing the home care nurses from seeing his genitals, creating the impression that he was not trans but a biological male. In doing so, he may have prevented the nurses from practicing advocacy and developing cultural competency.

Charlene, (circa 2010)

Charlene, who had completed male to female (MTF) sex reassignment surgery and had changed her name legally as well as her designated sex on her driver's license, was admitted to a small town hospital for a procedure that had nothing to do with her sex or gender. The hospital staff, taking their cues from her previous records, insisted on calling her by her previous name and used the corresponding pronouns. Charlene was devastated. A peer support organization helped her file a complaint with the hospital and subsequently they changed their policy to one that recognized and respected the current name, pronoun, and sex of someone who changed sex (C. Moore, personal communication, December 10, 2011).

This story begins with the discourse of invisibility and the resultant emotional distress but ends powerfully and well because of advocacy provided by peer support. The staff were obliged to obey hospital directives, which further emphasizes that advocacy cannot flourish without institutional support. The power of the individual to create effective counter discourse is shown in that it was not a large and influential group that lobbied on her behalf, but the woman affected and other trans people, which resulted in a policy change that itself both demonstrates counter discourse of sex and gender but also encourages counter discourse by its existence.

Revisiting Dominant Discourses in Nursing

These stories and the research reviewed illustrate how the dominant discourse of invisibility has changed very little since Sheila's story in 1999. What has changed is that trans people are becoming more empowered to speak on their own behalf and institutions are beginning to enact policies for the protection of those who change their sex or identify outside the dominant gender schema.

In order for the other discourses in nursing under discussion, (advocacy, cultural competency and emancipation) to be properly rendered, the discourse of invisibility must first be revisited. The most frequently illustrated and most powerful discourse identified in nursing literature is that of invisibility/erasure. Namaste (2000) and Shelley (2008) have written

evocatively about the invisibility of transgender and transsexual people. Shelley uses the word *repudiation* to mean something similar to invisibility/erasure and claims that trans people are “the most subjugated and marginalized of social groups” (p. 3). Namaste argues that trans people are “continually and perpetually *erased* in the cultural and institutional world” (p. 2, italics in original). Why is this so and why would a profession such as nursing, dedicated as it is to health and wholeness, be a complicit partner in this erasure?

One answer could be that transphobia is embedded in all social institutions (Daley & MacDonnell, 2011) and that includes nursing. Another is that nursing has subscribed to multiculturalism and diversity but trans people are often not considered as having their own culture and are frequently subsumed into the LGB community when it comes to diversity (Daley & MacDonnell, 2011). Differences have been blurred rather than celebrated as a result, in spite of good intentions, of multiculturalism (Ramsden, 2005). De Santis and Vasquez (2010) suggest that nursing did not consistently include human sexuality in its educational curricula until around 1980 and there may be a lingering discomfort among nursing instructors regarding the place of sexuality in nursing education or practice. It is also becoming more frequent that institutions where nursing is practiced do not employ nurses at the level of policy-making (Canadian Nurses Association, 2009; Lowe, 2002) so the ethical and practice guidelines that direct nurses to empower their clients/patients are not present in decision-making, as illustrated in the stories of Gerald and Charlene. Those entrusted with the task of educating nurses are often unaware of either the existence or the unique needs of trans people so these are omitted when planning nursing curricula (Eliason et al., 2010; Irwin, 2007).

Advocacy has been an important aspect of nursing since nursing’s inception, as previously discussed. The various authors of the 25 papers reviewed in regard to advocacy have

singled out issues faced by trans people but only 16 have considered invisibility as the overarching problem. In the remaining papers, it has been assumed that the presence of trans people is “sensational” (Adams, 2010), “unusual” (Shaffer, 2005, p. 407), engenders discrimination (Owen & Khalil, 2007; Polly & Nicole, 2011), shows a need for change (Yearwood et al., 2006), and is an occasion for “tolerance” (Irwin, 2007, p. 72), “acceptance” (Jenner, 2010, p. 408), and intervention (McGuinness, 2008). In order for advocacy to be an alternate discourse for trans people, their voices need to be heard, as in the MTF and FTM stories. Thornhill and Klein (2010) told stories of individual trans people, Shaffer identified herself as the mother of a trans person but only Morgan and Stevens (2008) used the actual words of trans people. Research that foregrounds the experiences of trans people and tells their stories using their words would be an example of advocacy as counter discourse in regard to invisibility. If those authors who are trans or trans allies identified themselves as such in their work, it would further enhance visibility.

Cultural competency has been a relatively new concept in nursing, beginning around the early 1990s (Papps, 2005) so to find it as a dominant discourse in nursing is encouraging. However, it, too, must be examined in the light of trans invisibility or it can become little more than pleasant rhetoric. Of the papers cited in regard to discourses of cultural competency only two did not include the problem of invisibility for transgender or transsexual people (Gibson & Catlin, 2011a; Yearwood et al., 2006). Of the remaining papers, six included either the actual voices of trans people or their stories.

All of the literature reviewed containing emancipatory discourses address the problem of invisibility. Emancipation is created by seeing and recognizing trans people as valued human

beings. Cook-Daniels (1998) identifies herself as a member of the LGBT community and says, “If they (lesbians and gay men) are invisible, then transgendered elders have been inconceivable” (p. 36). Daley and MacDonnell (2011) noted that “the very few references to LGBT populations are often bracketed as afterthoughts” (p. 4) in the literature they reviewed. De Santis and Vasquez (2010) suggest that people who represent sexual minorities may be unwilling to participate in research unless one of the team is also identified as belonging to a sexual minority. MacDonnell (2007) implies her membership in a sexual minority category and discusses the need for nurses to examine the often “invisible dynamics of power” in regards to sexual diversity (p. 81). One of the hurdles transsexuals face in their contact with the medical profession, according to Dewey (2008), is to be seen as “real” or authentic (p. 1345).

Recommendations and Conclusion

As previously discussed, it is within the mandate of nursing to provide care that is safe, ethical, compassionate, and competent. In order to do this it is important for nurses to become aware of issues faced by people who are transgender and transsexual. We offer some concluding thoughts and recommendations as to how this important task can be accomplished.

To be rendered invisible is one of the most emotionally painful experiences possible. It happens to many people at different times of their lives: childhood (adults are in control), illness (a person becomes a patient), disability (the tendency to address the one pushing the wheelchair rather than the person in it), women (if there is a man present she is often relegated to inferior status), and aging (white hair can render one unimportant). In fact, invisibility is something that all minority groups must face. For trans people it occurs in a much more systemic way: women’s shelters (many won’t help MTFs), surgery (many American states won’t fund SRS), prisons and hospitals (some will only recognize birth sex), media (many are focused on SRS rather than

issues of justice), academia (research in the trans arena is often underfunded and less respected), and government policies (trans people are often not consulted) (Namaste, 2005).

Findings from this literature review suggest there is a pressing need for nurses to understand gender diversity and transgender people in particular. Through educational processes and researching the lives and stories of transgender people, understanding and awareness may help to dispel and counter the discourse of invisibility. Developing curricula to educate about trans people should be in direct consultation with trans people and their allies, and/or by consulting research conducted by people who identify as either transgender or allies. Nursing research is urgently needed to counter the discourse of invisibility of trans-identified people.

Nurses can advocate for transgender and transsexual people when we understand the issues and the barriers trans people face every day when we see people living their lives. If nurses approached everyone as if they could be trans, as indeed they could be, then we would be able to stay aware of our part in erecting barriers or fulfilling our advocacy mandate.

Nurse leaders, educators, and academics need to develop cultural competence as it relates to trans people and sex change by first recognizing that this population has a unique culture. Those belonging to trans culture have different views and needs than other sexual minority groups, though there are many areas of overlap. For example, gays and lesbians face discrimination as a result of heterosexism, which could also apply to trans people if their sexual relationships are seen as same-sex. However, trans people also often face discrimination from the LGB community (Raymond, 2006; Rubin, 2006; Stryker, 2006a). It is also important to realize that trans culture represents a wide diversity. For example, it could be said that FTMs and MTFs, while sharing some cultural uniqueness such as the obvious need to find practitioners to aid in their transition and find funds to pay for such assistance, have divergent challenges and goals.

There are quite separate issues in regard to availability and cost of surgical procedures between FTMs and MTFs, and mainstream cultural gender values come to bear if one's goal is to pass as a natal male or female.

We cannot escape the “vectors of power” (Butler, 1993, p. 187) created by discourse, but we can examine them and bring them to conscious understanding. Nurses can be challenged, transformed, and enriched by learning about and caring for people who identify outside of cultural parameters of sex and gender. Phillips and Patsdaughter (2009) see this opportunity as a gift that makes us capable of “professional transformation” (p. 335) and remind us of every patient's right to self-determination and a nurse's ethical responsibility to uphold this right.

Chapter 4

Purpose and Questions: Where Do I Want To Go?

Purpose

The purpose of my research was to inquire into the apparent invisibility of women who are partners and intimate supporters of FTMs. I investigated my experience in relationship with an FTM, connected with others who have had similar relationships and constructed and relayed our stories, in order to bring new knowledge to nursing. I created an account of these experiences that is rich with personal meaning so as to draw the reader in, engaging the whole person. My purpose was not just one of adding new knowledge or information; it was to create a work of art that could stand alone as creative non-fiction literature.

What I Want to Understand

Testosterone

Every appetite painfully sharp.

Physical sensations

acquire a piquancy

both entertaining

and inconvenient.

Moving through the world is more fun,

involves

more stimulation.

Life is

more here-and-now,

more about bodies and objects,

less about thoughts and feelings.

It's easier to make decisions.

Hand-eye coordination has improved.

I don't fret

It just seems to happen,
fall into place.

I feel

lightness of being
and hope
and optimism.

I feel relief.

Found poem based on Califia, (2006, p. 435, 437)

More than any other single attribute or device, testosterone brings about massive masculinisation in the body. As Pat Califia indicates in the found poem I created above, there is a remarkable change in the way the body, influenced by testosterone, moves in the world. Just as remarkable are the changes in mental and emotional functions and reactions. How was I to know, that day at the swimming rock, when I marked, with ceremony, Christopher's first shot, April 1, 1999, that the storm was already gathering and about to break over our heads?

The questions with which I began my research were:

- What is it like to be in loving relationship with an FTM during and after some of his transition?

- I know some of what it was like for me. I disappeared. I want to know if it was like that for other women and if it was different, how so?
- What are the effects on the relationship for the female partner during this time?
- What happens to the supportive partner's ideas of her own identity?
 - Does she begin to reflect on her gender, her sexuality, her identity as a result of her partner's transition.
- Does the balance of power shift during this transition, and if so, how?

I said I would not be surprised if other questions surfaced during this work, or if some questions changed slightly or dramatically. In fact, the questions didn't change as much as they became more detailed. For example, what happens to the balance of power in a relationship when one partner chooses to keep his transition a secret? What are the effects of this secret-keeping on the rest of the family?

Chapter 5

Methodology: How Will I Get There? *Paper 3.*

Forward

In the paper I include here, co-authored with Dr. Anne Bruce, we show, rather than tell, how autoethnography works in practice, while at the same time we also demonstrate gender diversity. Because of its nature, the paper does not fully ‘tell’ what needs to be told here regarding the methodology and theoretical framework I employ in this research. Therefore I have given further explanation before the manuscript, which will then follow.

One of the lenses through which I view my story and the stories of the women who participate is feminism. Specifically, I use third-wave feminism as described by Rosemary Tong (2009), postmodern feminism as demonstrated (rather than described) by Judith Butler (2006, 1993, 2004) and material feminisms (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). These are appropriate lenses given that the issues I anticipated were ones of gender relations, embodiment, identity, and power. As Tong remarks, there is no “mode of feminist thought that aims to provide a single explanation for why women are oppressed...” (p. 270) and there is no simple answer to why women might embrace patriarchal gender roles during such crises as the transition of their partner. Third wave feminism is more welcoming of diverse views, and even contradictory ones, and embraces all who are marginalized, women and men alike (Tong, 2009).

Although I have not used Parse’s theory of Human Becoming as a research methodology, her views of what constitutes nursing have guided my practice and my way of being in the world and continue to guide this work. Specifically, the idea of being “in true presence” (Parse, 1998, p. 69) is foundational. Parse describes true presence as a “special way of ‘being with’ ... a free-flowing attentiveness...an intentional reflective love, an interpersonal art” (p. 71). I have

approached this research “as a not-knowing stranger” (Parse, 1997, p.173) so that I could be open to the surprises that inevitably occurred.

I have included direct narration, found poetry, poetry, journal musings, and an ‘inside voice’ and an ‘outside voice’. At the end, the resting place, is a story that is compelling to read, informative, has the potential to enrich nursing practice, and one that speaks not only to the head, but will also touch the heart.

Carolyn Ellis used an image on the cover of *The Ethnographic I* (Ellis, 2004) painted by a woman who attended a workshop where Ellis spoke. The artist, Karen Scott-Hoy, painted an image of herself partly naked to illustrate the intimate connection she had with the participants of her research. She is weeping in the painting, making herself vulnerable, yet hiding something behind her back, although the mirror behind her reflects her back. It illustrates the mystery in “revealing/concealing” and “bearing witness, the standing with unconditional love” (Parse, 2007, p. 309) that we bring to intimate relationships.

Autoethnography is about genuine friendship, not just acting like a friend. In fact, a student of Carolyn Ellis, Lisa Tillman-Healy (2003), wrote a paper based on her doctoral research called *Friendship as method*. She says the relationships with participants might progress to “a crucible for the shaping of selves” (p. 731). The selves here are both the researcher and the participant.

Why did I choose autoethnography?

I came to this methodology like I do so many things: it dropped from the sky, or out of my subconscious, or out of somewhere that is beyond my conscious reckoning. I believe Anne, my supervisor, planted the idea quite some time ago with a half-joking suggestion that I change my topic and write an autoethnography, but I rejected that idea outright. The short story is that I

saw the writing tutor in the bathroom. Isn't it interesting how many great connections happen in the bathroom, the hall, and the places outside our normal work place? She commented on my recent publication and that she heard it was good. We talked briefly of writing in the first person and how one has to get past the accepted academic way 'it should be done', and agreed that we all prefer to read something personal and engaging.

Later, as I struggled over Caputo's *Radical Hermeneutics* (1987), where he discusses "the virtuosity which seeks innumerable ways to evoke the simplicity of the simple" (p. 108), I thought again to "the things themselves" (Husserl, cited in Caputo, 1987). The ideas began to gel. Indeed, why not tell the story as simply and directly as possible? I write best in the first person, telling a story. My interest in trans issues came from my close association with my dearest friend Christopher. Why not tell that story? I will let the people affected tell their own stories directly, with no intermediary. As the researcher, I tell my own story in a compelling account, full of description and emotion and I include others as participants whose stories are about the same experience. This is what autoethnography does, or at least the version I have used, 'evocative autoethnography'.

Ethnography has its roots in anthropology, its matrix consists of symbolic interactionism, and its basic idea is to get inside the culture being studied (Crotty, 1998). One of the ideas that particularly impressed me is that ethnography and autoethnography are like bookends of the qualitative library. Ethnography began as a methodology to study the exotic other. It has changed with the emergence of more enlightened ideas of colonialism, but many branches of ethnography still abhor the idea of "going native" (Patton, 2002, p. 84) as a loss of detachment and perspective.

To illustrate the evocative part, I include an account of the day, nearly 18 years ago, when I met Christopher, the person whose friendship was to become an inspiration for my research. I wrote this as part of a longer piece for a creative writing class I took.

It was a hot and dusty August day in 1994 and Kelli and I were sitting in the relative cool of her front porch, swinging languidly on the creaky log swing. The air hung without breathing and the only sound was the slow squiiiiich, squaaaaach of the swing and the far-away calling of the cicadas.

Someone emerged from the dark of the house, squinting like a mole in the bright light. I noticed first her white-blond eyebrows, standing out like bleached straw across her forehead. The sleeveless tank, strong brown arms, khaki shorts, and legs covered with the same white-blond hair of her eyebrows; I took them all in with one glance that included her curly blond hair and lopsided grin. She was a song that spoke to my heart and, though I thought it impossible then, we were destined for an amazing friendship.

I came to know that the strategically ripped shirt she was wearing was a sort of trademark. The arms were ripped out, or maybe cut with scissors, but the impression was that strong, determined hands had torn out the unfortunate offending sleeves. Plainly visible through the jagged holes were smooth brown shoulders and bulging biceps. I knew she was female since I had been told that, but she had a masculine air, and I found the combination fascinating.

This is how autoethnography can disrupt dominant discourses. It moves from telling to showing. I could have told you about Christopher and our first meeting, but instead I painted a picture and shared my feelings. You can ‘see’ a person who troubles the binary of male and female as someone who is real, rather than as an abstract idea called ‘androgynous’.

Autoethnography is about writing my own story, and I am part of the culture of intimate support for transgender people. I have written about my reactions to his transition from my perspective, as ‘family’. I have recruited other intimate support people to tell their stories about the transitions of their loved ones. Since my experience is with a person who transitions from female-to-male or FTM I found others who love and support, or who have supported, other FTMs.

I could have written a philosophical paper in the traditional academic style, and many have, that could disrupt dominant discourse. There’s certainly nothing wrong with that, but a personal story packs an added ‘punch’. Frank (2000) talks about personal narrative as a standpoint that illustrates both a political as well as an ethical act. Various positions of marginality can be present, like that of women when they take up agency by speaking in their own voices.

Rigor.

What I would call autoethnography, Laurel Richardson (2000) calls “*creative analytic practices*”, or “*CAP ethnography*” (p. 929). In order to ensure academic rigor, Richardson has proposed five criteria. She wants to know if (1) the work will make a substantive contribution to the understanding of social life, if it (2) has aesthetic merit, if it is (3) reflexive, if it has (4) impact, and if it is (5) an expression of reality. Richardson elaborates on reflexivity as including self-revelation. She asks, “how does the author’s subjectivity be both a producer and a product of this text?” (p. 937). I will discuss these criteria more fully in part three.

Muncey (2010) says, “there is no distinction between doing research and living a life...the autoethnographer is both the researcher and the researched” (p. 3). And Jones (2005) insists, “emotions are important to understanding and theorizing the relationship among self,

power, and culture” (p. 767). Ellis and Bochner (2000) talk about how most researchers who do AE also struggle with being vulnerable and exposing to the world the contradictions they uncover about themselves. For example, I had not really considered the hidden impact Christopher’s transition had on my life, even though that story is the impetus for my investigation. Now I find I have a well of anger about it that I had not previously acknowledged. I am sure there is much more lying undiscovered. Not only will writing my story and that of other intimate supporters of trans men be therapeutic for us all, it will serve to validate those feelings and bring to public scrutiny some of the taken-for-granted ideas about transgender issues and hopefully debunk them (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

There is a lot of black and white thinking in much of the controversy surrounding issues of validity for qualitative work. It’s good or it’s bad, it counts or it doesn’t. If it doesn’t meet some pre-determined standard of validity, it’s invalid. This dichotomy puts me in mind of the binary of sex; if you can’t be neatly slotted into an either/or, you are neither, and rendered invisible (Namaste, 2000), or inhuman (Butler, 2004). Do we accept this binary of evaluation or is there another way?

Results.

It is my contention that autoethnographic research, by its very nature, counters dominant discourse. Mary Louise Pratt (2008) suggested that ethnographic writing is usually how the dominant culture represents itself, and autoethnography is often about the responses of those dominated. If dominant discourse is institutional and societal, as Foucault (1990) indicates, counter-discourse is created by foregrounding the stories of individuals. I will be telling my story, and including other accounts, of what it was like to be in relation with someone who transitions FTM. That will counter dominant discourses of sex and gender and transition. Spry

(2001) quotes Park-Fuller: “the telling of the story itself becomes a transgressive act—a revealing of what has been kept hidden, a speaking of what has been silenced—an act of reverse discourse” (p. 706). Jamison Green (1999) illustrates this very well when he tells his story about being identified as transsexual. He suggests that trans people can “twist that paradigm,” meaning the discourse that trans people aren’t normal, “by using our own bodies and experience as reference for *our* standards...”(p. 123, emphasis added). Autoethnography has the power to end this discourse effectively since it brings to the fore the voices of those silenced. It is their stories that are being heard. They are being made visible. It is what I intend for this research.

Assumptions and Moments of Tension

Since I have entered into this study as a “not-knowing stranger” (Parse, 1997, p. 173), even to myself, it is difficult to state what my assumptions were since often these are hidden from view until exposed. The concept of the not-knowing stranger is to enter into relationship anew, as if history is temporarily set aside and I look through new eyes. Oberg (2003) speaks of “suspending expectations” (p. 124) and “paying attention without prejudgement...then articulating what I noticed” (p.124) as a not knowing stance. In a wonderful story called *The bushtit’s nest*, Don McKay (2001) describes the mythical first man, Adam, tossing and turning in bed after a hard day naming all the animals. Adam realizes, too late, that his glib listing did nothing to open his understanding of the thing so named. Even as he thought of new names he realized the naming was the problem and did nothing to help him hold “the quality of the experience...as though cradling an egg” (p. 92). This is what not-knowing means to me; cradling the experience like a fragile egg, waiting to see what might emerge.

I assumed my hidden assumptions would be uncovered during the course of the study and they were. I have had my own experience living with an FTM in transition but the experiences of

others are different. I have assumed the topic is vital to nursing and to the trans community. I assumed little was known about the experiences of those women who chose to partner with trans men and that it is a good thing to know about these experiences because what is not known can be rendered strange and other. Intersecting oppressions already marginalize women who are in partnerships with FTMs: they are women, they are non-heterosexual, and they are in an alternative relationship. I also assumed there were likely to be more that are individual to each woman.

I am a woman and the participants I interviewed were also women. The assumption was that these women were lesbians, or at least were women in relationship with a trans person who was once technically female. I also assumed that many would not describe their relationship as lesbian but I also assumed that many would not describe it as heterosexual.

Although the study has a small number of participants this was not limiting in the way usually thought of in research. In a study such as this, the story of one participant's experience can be received and extrapolated into many different situations. For example, the story of David Reimer (Butler, 2004), the man whose penis was damaged by attempted circumcision so his parents were advised to raise him as a girl, touches me deeply, though I have not experienced any of the things he did. A human story, well told, touches many hearts.

Merryfeather, L., & Bruce, A. (2014). Autoethnography: Exploring gender diversity. *Nursing Forum*, DOI=10.1111/nuf.12087&ArticleID=1271025.²⁶

“Hey, wait up!” I turn to watch Sally²⁷ running towards me along the path to class, blond curls bouncing, looking as if she had just won the lottery. That’s Sally, always breathlessly enthusiastic. “Are you ready? Nervous? I am really looking forward to your seminar!”

This one will be different and, yes, I am very nervous. It seems that not many, either faculty or students, know much about autoethnography and, though I tried to find someone expert on the topic to sit on my committee, there just isn’t anyone at my university. I decided to follow the example of Carolyn Ellis (2004) where she demonstrated autoethnography using a classroom setting. In her book, *Ethnographic I*, Ellis’ (2004) students are multidisciplinary, with the majority in communications, one in psychology, one in sociology, and another in education. One of the major differences in my presentation is the homogeneity of the students, who are all in nursing. I have been unable to find any nursing dissertations that used autoethnography as a methodology. As well, the discussion I am hoping to have with my classmates will delve into topics that have rarely been studied using autoethnography.

I take a deep breath, put on a smile that I hope looks sincere, and say, “I hope everyone feels like you do, Sally. I am looking forward to the seminar, too. It will be fun.” I speak as if I really mean it. And I think I do.

The Cast

I watch as my classmates file into the room. Sally chats and laughs with everyone. Beth fixes me with her brilliant blue eyes and smiles sweetly in silent support. Amy swishes in, long

²⁶ I have received permission from the publishers, which is included in Appendix B, to use the entire text

²⁷ All names are fictional and the characters are composites of people I have known. Any resemblance to actual persons is unintentional.

dark hair straggling out of the restraints she has placed on it, which I know will be abandoned by break time, and says to me in her stage voice, “Oh gawd, I don’t envy you!”

“Hey, girlfriend!” sings Gerald. “Lookin’ forward!” He plunges into a seat. The chair shudders, its legs splay a little, and then it stiffens and shows itself up to the task of holding this gentle giant for three hours.

Lanky Karen shuffles in, coffee in one hand, cell phone in the other, finishing up a frantic-sounding call to her husband about her car. “Oh”, she sighs when she has hung up, “at least I got here. I am really looking forward to learning something about autoethnography. If it’s anything like I suspect, I may be interested in using it for my research.”

The instructor, Cynthia, seems a formidable woman on first glance, and she intones severely and fixes me with a piercing glance as she strides in, “Well, it’s you on the hot seat today, is it? This better be good!” She gives herself away with a smirk and a wink. I am not intimidated. Well, maybe just a bit.

The only one not present is Gail, and it’s five minutes past starting time. We spend a few minutes discussing if anyone knows where she is when she rushes in, pink-faced; her boyishly cut dark hair devoid of its usual spikiness, and apologizes.

Show Time

As I look for the dimmer switch for the lights, I say, “The slides you are about to see don’t have any text. They are images I thought would evoke an emotional response in you and make this presentation more like ‘show and tell’ than just about ‘tell’. Please feel free to interrupt and ask questions as we go along.”

Everyone knows that show and tell is the best part of primary school. You get to bring your thing to show, and as you show, you tell about it. If you just talked about your pet chinchilla

some of the kids might listen, especially if the teacher shushed them and frowned. If you actually brought the little creature and told about him while the kids got to see his liquid black eyes and funny round ears, and feel his silky softness, they would remember that for a long time. They may even try to tell about it at supper that night, but it would lose something in the translation without the chinchilla actually being there.



Figure 1. I-Thou

The first slide²⁸ is an image (figure 1) of my three-month-old grandson being held aloft by his grandfather, both of them grinning open-mouthed in the delight of one another. Martin Buber (1970) inspired the poem I wrote.

“Truth” made manifold, multiple, delicious.
 Hanging in the air, just inches from my face.
 I meet your eye. We see each other
 God is with us in this flash, this instant, captured here, fleeting.
 If I could I would stay here
 risk being burnt up.
 I-Thou

Relationship

“Uh, that’s beautiful” says Amy, more of her hair already hanging in her face, “but what does that have to do with anything? I get the show and tell thing, but how does Martin Buber fit in?”

“Thanks, Amy”, I say. “ Basically, autoethnography, or AE, is about relationships. Not the kind of relationship where the researcher interviews the participant, goes home and ‘writes it

up', unchanged by the experience, but the kind spoken of by Hartrick Doane and Varcoe (2005) in their book *Family nursing as relational inquiry*. This relationship includes, 'paying attention to . . . self experience and actions and engaging in a thoughtful reflexive examination of . . . experience' (p. 163) for the researcher (reflexivity), and 'the experience of being seen, being valued, and feeling of value' (p. 163) for those participating in the research process. An I-Thou (Buber, 1970) relationship is one where both parties interact with their whole being. It is an ethical relationship where there is respect, connectedness, and a concern for the dignity of both researcher and participant as well as for that of the community within which the research takes place (Ellis, 2007). Carolyn Ellis talks about the relationships she had with her participants when researching *Fisher folk*, her doctoral dissertation, and the lessons she learned (Ellis, 2004). She *acted* like a friend in order to get the information she needed for her research rather than *being* a friend and the result was a lot of hurt feelings and damaged relationships."

"Well, this sounds more like friendship than research," Gerald remarks. "What about observing from a distance, being objective or bracketing so as not to interject bias, and professional detachment?"

"Gerald!" exclaims Gail. "What decade are you in anyhow? Professional detachment went out in the 1970s (Storch, 2004). And eliminating bias is more a concern of quantitative research. Gadamer (1975/ 2004) talks about 'prejudices' (p. 271) as something to be aware of in the front of one's mind in order to arrive at understanding, so it doesn't happen, as Gadamer says, 'behind my back' (Gadamer, 1976/2004, p. 38). And the idea that we can put aside our bias is nonsense anyhow."

Gerald stifles a grin and nods thoughtfully. He looks satisfied at having stirred up some debate. I can always count on him for that and send him silent thanks.

“You both mention excellent points,” I say. “Some of the harshest criticisms of AE are about the intense subjectivity that is necessarily part of the process. Muncey (2010), a nurse researcher, sometimes worries that doing autoethnography is ‘just self-indulgent nonsense’ (p. 86). She has heard this accusation many times. For example, she attempted to tell the story of her teen pregnancy in a letter she wrote to a newspaper. In spite of the fact that she asked for her name to be used, the letter was printed anonymously. She identifies one rationale behind this as the belief that storytelling is considered ‘biased, personal, ungeneralizable, and unscientific’ (p. 91). In contrast, telling a personal story also gives voice to all those considered too small to record, making audible what otherwise would be lost to history” (Muncey, 2010).

“Doesn’t Gerald have a point, though?” says Sally. “About the objectivity, I mean. Even though we think we have moved beyond the myth that it is possible to hold yourself in abeyance while doing research, randomized controlled studies are still the ‘gold standard’ (Cook, 2006, p. 1) of research in most scientific contexts. We live as objects in a world that still separates mind and body. Women, especially, are seen as objects to the scientific community. Our natural life cycle has become pathologized and bodily functions like menstruation and menopause are seen as pathological, deficiencies” (Birke, 2000).

“Yes, Sally, I agree with you. You reminded me of Spry (2001) who wrote eloquently about autoethnography as performance. She says AE saved her life. She was a ballet dancer and determined to adhere to and excel at the most important thing after technique: thinness. Her body was an object to be controlled and dominated. Spry sees autoethnography as reuniting her severed mind and body, saying, ‘We have been expected to accept the myth of the researcher as the detached head—the object of Thought, Rationality, and Reason’ (p. 720).”

Excitedly, Gail adds, “I also thought of what Gadamer (1976/2004) had to say about scientific objectivity: ‘Society clings with bewildered obedience to scientific expertise . . . the individual is hardly conscious at all any longer of living out of his own decisions, even in the intimate sphere of his own personal existence’” (p. 111).

“Well said Gail, thanks for sharing that. I can see you are really getting into Gadamer.” I smile. “Autoethnographic researchers counter objective positivism by becoming, in the minds of their critics, ‘navel-gazers’ (Ellis, 2009, p. 231). McIvor (2010) counters that criticism by saying, ‘the navel tells the story of our first connections to another’ (p. 147). Crotty (1998) calls ‘rampant subjectivism’ (p. 48) the inability to hold objectivity and subjectivity throughout the research process. He believes that autoethnography turns the study of ‘the objects of experience’ into ‘the study of experiencing individuals’ (p. 48). Although I think Crotty is a great writer, I must adamantly disagree. AE studies the lived experience *of something*, not just the experiencing individuals, by hearing their accounts of that experience.”

Dominant Discourse

“I want you to look at the next three slides (figures 2-4 as a tryptic) and describe what they tell you about sex and gender.” The group rustles as sheets of paper are hastily drawn from backpacks and briefcases.



Figure 2. Androgynous



Figure 3. Wedding ©Darren Stone, Times Colonist, Victoria BC



Figure 4 Boy or Girl

After a few moments of contemplative silence, Sally offers, “I’ll take a stab at it. I am a bit confused by the first photo. I wonder if it is a man or a woman and it bugs me. The middle one is certainly of two women, and the last is of another woman who is posing to look like a man, maybe for a costume party or something.”

“What bugs you about the first photo, Sally?” inquires Karen, grinning at me since we have had this conversation before.

“Well, I know it shouldn’t matter whether it is a man or woman,” says Sally. “I should accept this person ‘as is’ but I keep going back to it and wondering. It’s like an itch. I can’t stop myself from scratching.”

At this, the class explodes with whoops of laughter. I notice Gail struggling with her thoughts. Finally she bursts out, “And you call this person ‘it’, thereby making them not really human. We all do it since we have no language to do anything else. But I think it is really hurtful. What if this person knew the only pronoun we had for who they are is ‘it’?”

Gerald wades in. “I agree, Gail. And I am sure the person in the first photo is very well aware that there is no gendered pronoun with which to refer to them. I was also wondering what you mean, when you ask for our thoughts about sex and gender. What’s the difference? They’re either men or women, aren’t they? Well, except for the first one, since there could be an in-between sex represented there, and I think the third one could be a transgender person or a lesbian, but how do we deal with all this?”

Before I can speak, Amy rushes in, flipping her now totally wild hair out of her eyes. “I think that sex is something you are born with and gender is how you display that. Like the woman in the third photo, she tries to look like a man, but most of us think she is a woman. And

the two women in the middle picture look pretty feminine yet it almost looks like a wedding photo, so I bet they're gay even though they don't look like it."

"Congratulations!" I tell them. "You have just beautifully demonstrated some of the dominant discourses of sex and gender." Holding up my hands, I tick the discourses off with my fingers. "You talked about how there are only two and everyone must conform to one or the other, those outside of that binary are invisible or considered not quite human, that gender naturally follows sex, gender and sex are conflated, that sexual orientation is often conflated with sex and gender, and that lesbian women either look like men or should." I hold up six fingers. Recognition dawns in place of consternation, but Sally looks uncharacteristically troubled.

"But how do we get out of that?" she wails. "It seems we are so conditioned by the dominant discourses that we have no choice."

Disrupting Dominant Discourse

"Could you create an alternative discourse of sex and gender?" asks Gail, a strange smile lurking around her lips.

"Well, when I was a little girl I didn't want to dress like my mother thought little girls should dress or play the part of the mother when we played house. Thankfully, I got my way for a few years, and wore what I wanted and was the daddy every time we played house." I tentatively offered.

"So, what you are troubling is the dominant belief that all females want to be mommies, and every little girl feels feminine, is that right?" asks Gail.

"Yes," I answer. For some reason, I feel defensive.

Gail's face reddens, and she fixes me with a belligerent glare. "But you are a woman and were born female. Is this correct?" The force of her statement feels like a blow, and others

squirm in discomfort. “You are not really qualified then to trouble this discourse using AE, are you?”

“No, it’s true. Gail, I am attempting to present you autoethnography but there is a difference between my story and Michael’s.”²⁹ I decide to address the discomfort in the room.

“Gail, I don’t understand the animosity you seem to be directing toward me. Do you want to say something to help us through this?”

After a moment of shocked silence, Gail bursts into tears. The nurse in all of us makes us draw our chairs closer. The one nearest holds her hand, some stroke her back, while others sit in supportive silence. I glance at Cynthia. She makes eye contact and gives me the thumbs-up sign. The sobs subside and Gail speaks in a strained voice. “I don’t mean to lash out at you. It’s just that *I* am qualified to disrupt the discourse that says gender follows natal sex. Like you, I felt like a boy when I was a child. But, unlike you, that feeling never went away. I am ready to begin my transition and listening about some of the dominant discourses of sex and gender brings all my fears to the surface. There is nothing wrong with me, no matter what the DSM (*Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*) says. I am not an ‘it’, I am a human being with similar hopes and dreams as everyone else; I want to be happy, loved, and accepted. What will my family think? Will they stand by me? What about my kids? My daughter is only four. How will this affect her? And what about you guys? Will you support me, still be my friends, treat me like always?”

“You mean like heap abuse on your head like always?” says Gerald, his hand momentarily resting on Gail’s head.

Thankful for the break in the tension, we all laugh.

²⁹ Subsequent to publication, which required that this paper be drastically reduced in size to half of its former construction, I discovered that Michael, the pseudonym I employed for Christopher, had not been properly introduced and just appears here. His introduction was lost during the editing process.

“Seriously, though,” Gerald continues, “we love you and will help you any way we can, right, gang?” As he looks around the room, we nod and smile.

“So *you* can best disrupt this discourse that says gender follows natal sex, Gail,” I say softly. “What about the other discourses I mentioned, like the one that confuses sexual orientation with sex and gender, or that says lesbians want to be men, or at least look like men? If this is too personal that’s OK but, since you brought it up, I thought you might like to take a crack at it.”

Gail smiles tremulously. “Well I have already experienced both of those. When I told my Mom about being a lesbian back when I was sixteen, she asked me if I was going to have a ‘sex change’. Now she is going to think my transitioning is because I am queer, and I am going to have to correct her about using the term ‘sex change’.”

“What’s wrong with ‘sex change’?” asks Karen, looking confused. “Isn’t that what it’s called, changing sex?”

“There is a lot more going on for people like me than ‘sex change’ implies,” Gail pronounces. “For example, I have always felt male. It’s not like I am changing sex, it’s more like I am finally making my outsides fit my insides. I am becoming the person I always was. ‘Sex change’ makes it sound like a one-shot deal. This is a process, a transition. Some people take hormones to help make their bodies more masculine or feminine. They also may have surgeries to alter their bodies to match their gender, but not everyone does this. Some simply live as the gender they know themselves to be. I think a more accurate term is ‘transition’.”

“How is your girlfriend Julie taking all this?” Gerald asks.

Gail smiles sadly at him. “Actually, my girlfriend is freaking out since she is worried about her own identity when I start presenting as a man. We will look like a straight couple. My

worry is the in-between bit, when I look like both with a beard and breasts. Talk about troubling the dominant discourse! And, by the way, I might as well begin right here by asking you all to start calling me Gordon and using the male pronoun. I'm starting testosterone shots on Monday."

We all hoot and clap, and Amy yells, "Way to go, Gordon!"

"I'll do my best, Gordon," I promise. "Please forgive me, us, if we stumble a few times. It's hard since we have known you as Gail and 'she' for two years now."

Gordon smiles and his eyes fill up with tears again. "I am so glad I told you all," he says. "I just couldn't hold it in any longer. Thanks for the wonderful support."

Ethics

"Let's move on to one of the major ethical challenges to autoethnographic research. When I write about myself, other people in my life are automatically implicated. Ellis (2007) calls this 'relational ethics' (p. 4) as opposed to procedural ethics. We have already discussed the ethical implications of developing friendships with participants so now we will talk about how to maintain confidentiality for others, such as relatives, friends, and other people who may be identified simply because the researcher is writing in their own voice. For example, when I write about my experience with Michael, it would be impossible to disguise him. Our community would know it is he. Fortunately, he has decided that this is OK with him. I have asked him to read what I have prepared for you today and he has given his wholehearted support. In fact, he said, 'It is so wonderful that you are bringing this stuff to light for nurses. It brings tears to my eyes', and he thanked me. My parents are both dead, but my siblings aren't. I am sure this research will bring up things from my past. Do I tell my siblings? Do I let them read the work? What if they don't like what I have written? We have to assume people we don't expect may read the work. In fact, it is my intention to make my work accessible to people who don't

ordinarily read academic work. I will change your names and give you different characteristics, but you are in my class, so anyone could assume one of my creations is one of you. Or you could give me permission to represent you as you are, as Cynthia has done. There are no easy answers to this ethical dilemma. It has to be negotiated step by step. Ellis (2007) exhorts her students to remember they don't own their stories, that they always involve others so they don't have a right to tell anything they want. She tells them to try to leave everything better off because of their research: the community, the participants and themselves. She also reminds them that sometimes this isn't possible due to the nature of the work. She tells them the best thing they can do is research 'from an ethic of care'" (p. 25).

Validity

"Lather (1993), in a paper written 17 years ago, identifies the problem of validity as one of truth-defining. In other words she queries whether ethnographic stories are found or constructed and denounces 'standard approaches' (p. 675) as irrelevant in a postpositivist world. In some sectors, I think her concerns are still very much in evidence. In spite of the fact that I adhere to and give intellectual agreement to many tenets of postmodernism, I find myself slipping back into my modernist indoctrination unless I am careful. I often want 'the truth' and feel sure it exists 'out there' somewhere. I don't think I am alone in that."

"Would Lather mean such standard approaches as peer debriefing, member checks, and triangulation are no longer appropriate?" asks Beth with a puzzled expression.

"I see!" interjects Karen. "There is nothing wrong, per se, with these techniques, it's the assumption that lies underneath the questions that is the issue. Are we looking for truths and facts that have emerged from the research, or do we understand that, in postmodern terms, there are no such things?"

“Yes, that’s what I am trying to show here, Karen. As Richardson (2000) points out, in order to triangulate, for example, we assume there is a ‘fixed point or object that can be triangulated’ (p. 934). We must conduct rigorous, responsible, and ethical research but we needn’t force it into a container that doesn’t fit.”

“So how do you go about evaluating AE?” Sally persists.

“I am coming to that, just hold on a minute,” I laugh. “Rather than elaborate further on what Lather (1993) calls her ‘scandalous categories’ (p. 683) for evaluation I want to go directly to Ellis (2004). She declares, ‘There is nothing more theoretical or analytic than a good story’ (p. 194), and goes on to say that readers are always testing a story’s generalizability and this provides validation when they compare their stories to those represented. Ellis prefers the word ‘verisimilitude’ to validity, in that it invites one to consider if the work is ‘lifelike, believable, and possible’ (p. 124). Richardson (2000) uses the word ‘crystallize’ (p. 934) in place of ‘triangulate’ in recognition that there are many more sides than three to approach the world.”

New Knowledge for Nursing

“I can see that your research, with the use of autoethnography, could really change the way nurses see us and our families,” Gordon commented. “Actually, it is more about being seen at all than the *way* we are seen,” he continued. “I am anticipating being invisible when I am not easily identified as either/or.”

“I agree Gordon. When you don’t fit into the binary, it is hard for people, including nurses, to see you,” I tell him. “And when they do see you, it’s as male or female and then when they find out you’re trans they don’t know what to do with that. It’s my hope that my research will be read by nurses and they will be enlightened. Nurses, as we all know, are steeped

in the awareness of ethical concerns. We have codes and standards to follow and, like most people, nurses want to do the right thing” (Ellis, 2007).

“Don’t you think we are enlightened?” Karen has a bit of an edge to her voice. “What makes you think nurses need education about transgender issues or sex and gender?”

“Good question, Karen,” I respond. “Since people who identify as transgender are at the forefront of shaking up dominant ideas of sex and gender, let’s assume that enlightenment about trans includes enlightenment about sex and gender.”

I glance around the room and, by the nods and smiles; I think most of the class agrees that trans enlightenment includes enlightenment about sex and gender. I continue, “Let me ask you all, how many of you have read anything about transgender, written by nurses, or included in nursing journals? And, except for this seminar, did you take any classes that helped your awareness and understanding of people who identify as transgender?”

Thoughtful silence descends. After a few moments, I continue, “I did a search of Summon, the unified search engine at the University of Victoria’s McPherson Library, using the terms *nurse* and *transgender* or *transsexual*. I narrowed the search to articles written since 2000, that were available on-line, and written by nurses or published in a nursing journal. I retrieved only 44 papers!”

“That’s incredible!” says Karen. “I had no idea! I assume that this represents the general level of awareness about trans issues?”

“I think that’s the conclusion we have to draw,” I say. “Only nine of those papers used the actual words of trans people and, even then, those quotes were very brief.”

“Well, we haven’t exactly heard much from Michael!” says Gordon.

“We certainly heard from you though, didn’t we?” She gives Gordon a mischievous grin.

Epilogue

As I think about what just took place, the showing and telling, the revelations, the self-discovery, I feel very satisfied with the seminar. Although I hadn't planned it that way, it turned out to be surprising, like I would imagine an autoethnographic study might be. But I have this nagging doubt about its acceptability in the academy. I have no doubt that it answers questions about how AE can disrupt dominant discourses of sex, gender, and transition. It also shows how AE can generate new knowledge for nursing. So where do these doubts come from? I think of Patricia Munhall's (2007) discussion of the evolution of nursing research, beginning with the scientific method. Munhall notes that, although qualitative research is now considered "scientific", many nurse researchers still use the objective language of the traditional scientific method. Even the text we use as the bible of writing, citation, referencing, and organization, the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2009) is steeped in objectivism and empiricism. The advice given within its pages for writing style is to avoid "creative writing" since this could "confuse or disturb readers of scientific prose" (p. 65). (It sounds like they don't have much respect for the intellect of the readers.) Rather, the advice is to "aim for clear and logical communication" (p. 65), implying that creative writing couldn't be clear or logical.

Then I think of Spry's (2001) wry discussion of her performative autoethnography and what she calls academic heresy. She says that "heresy is greatly maligned" and "when put to good use, can begin a robust dance of agency" (p. 708). She declares, "emotion and poetics constitute scholarly treason, it is heresy put to good use" (p. 709). Oh, I feel much better. And finally, Richardson's (2000) words ring in my head, "Those holding the dinosaurian belief that 'creative' and 'analytic' are contradictory and incompatible modes are standing in the path of a meteor. They are doomed for extinction" (2000, p. 930).

I value the voice of the individual. I value stories. I value creativity and evocative work. I value nursing. I value the startling diversity in the world around me. This is why I chose autoethnography. I think it will be the best methodology to demonstrate those values, interrupt dominant discourse, and generate new knowledge for nursing.

Chapter 6

Literature Review: Who Has Gone Before?

As I have been preparing to engage in this work I have gathered literature by using a variety of search criteria and engines. I have incorporated that literature, and as well, I have conducted a search for new literature in April 2012 and again in February 2014. I searched Summon, a broad-based search engine at UVIC, the *Cumulative Index to Nursing and Allied Health Literature* (CINAHL), the Social Science Index, and Humanities, and found one paper published in 2007 not previously in my collection, but nothing more recent. This body of literature was chosen because it is specifically focused on the partners of FTMs. I eliminated one article that represented relationships between MTFs and their partners and three that discussed family support but the lens was trained on the transsexual. Out of the remaining nine papers there were five first authors represented. This indicates a very small circle of writers and researchers concerned about the effects that transitioning from female to male have on women partners. Of these five first authors, one (Pfeffer) is from the discipline of sociology, one (Joslin-Roher) from social work, one (Ward) from women's studies, and two (Kins, Brown) from psychology. Brown (2007, 2009, 2010) used grounded theory for her work, Pfeffer (2008, 2009, 2010) describes her work as using a "grounded case study approach" (2008, p.328), and Ward's (2010) study is ethnographic. Joslin-Roher (2009) employs phenomenology and only Kins (2008) used a quantitative explorative approach, using a comparative control group.

The poetry I created from the literature I reviewed directly relates to my research questions, which are:

- What is it like to be in loving relationship with an FTM during and after some of his transition?

- What are the effects on the relationship for the female partner during this time?
- What happens to the supportive partner's ideas of her own identity?
- Does the balance of power shift during this transition, and if so, how?

In order to create the most effect and as a part of the dramatic and visual presentation of the poetry I have created, each is contained on its own page or pages. I use it to extract what I felt was the main message of the various papers. It is a distillation, a winnowing process, of what is already there in order to extract the essence of the work. For example Wiggins (2011) accidentally happened upon this when she had written a composite of her participants' stories and was in the process of removing identifiers in order to present at a conference where some of them might be recognized. She became fascinated with the process of removing, reducing and refining. She discovered, each time she shared the poem that, "the response was visceral" (p. 5). In this case, Wiggins composed the writing from which the poem was found. Another way to find poetry is in the work of others, which is what I have done in the following.

During the composition and especially following completion of these poems I found I had, as Wiggins (2011) noted, a visceral reaction. I found myself in tears as I read what emerged. This was an unexpected and uncomfortable surprise. I had read the papers several times and thought my reaction was finished. Rendering the key issues into a few carefully spaced words brought them into sharp relief and so I include my reaction to what I found in the poetry.

1. Discussions of Abuse

None involved the police

All reported abuse

*Manipulation, yelling, rages, name-calling, sleep deprivation
Walk on eggshells, anticipate (and avoid)
Punch walls, throw, bully, kick the door*

Themselves as victims?

*Transsexual partners were 'more oppressed'
"I realize I'm not treating you well. I'm just...
Transitioning, Going through puberty
Trying to "fit in", an oppressed person"*

Double-binds

*I wasn't femme enough
Me enough
I didn't love enough
I had to feel small all the time so he could feel okay
I can't tell the truth cause I am busy convincing them that trans is OK*

Androgens and aggression

*Anger and transitioning
Not synonymous
No 'one way' to be a trans man
Undo some of those rules
The myth of abusive behaviour
Healing*

Found poetry based on Brown (2007)

2. Renegotiation

I still identify as lesbian, but...

To the world, I've become identified by the way I *look*

That doesn't represent me so...I'm in a strange and uncomfortable place...

Yes, I *really* am a lesbian

They saw me as not one of them.

To erase my whole identity just felt awful

I was so angry...*my* identity isn't up for question here

The more he passes, how different is that going to be?

People would read us as straight.

When people "ma'am" him, it just kills him. I feel the same being thought of as straight.

He got that.

I.....never.....ever.....wanted to be read as straight.

I am always going to be part of the queer community.

My identity

doesn't necessarily reflect

my partner's identity.

I was a lesbian who could date a man.

I claimed the space of lesbian cause that's who I am.

I don't give up that title.

Found poem based on Brown (2009)

3. Left in the Dust

Femininity to prop up masculinity

ill-fitting role
 intimate labor
 erotic mommy figure
 revolting

The labor of forgetting, of gendered knowing

to know, but not know
 get it, but don't talk
 rules unspoken and changing
 treat the dildo like a real penis
 Negotiation, confusion, hard work
 allowed to...
 faking
 suspending truer accounts

Taboo comparisons

FTMs—non-trans women
 a trans-gender/ fixed-gender binary
 his gender and sense of self—her gender and sense of self

 Femme-identified lesbians get left in the dust

Found poem based on Ward (2010)

4. A Hidden Population

Identity

You finally settle into something you feel is yourself
 It settles out, you feel like
 ahhhh
 To have that shaken up again is weird
 I felt slighted...
 Like, all along I wasn't really a lesbian
 I had a really hard time identifying...
 then I was able to put a broader name on something
 The closest approximation to an identity

Caretaking

The times that I need breathing room
 are the times that he needs support...
 I need to go with my friends
 he's, *stay with me, I need you*
 One of the dangerous areas:
 your identity overshadowed by your partner
 I go to conferences for partners and we're talking about our partners
 tends to be the focus rather than the self.
 Your partner going through a transition
 doesn't mean you're not

Community

Lesbians really resent you
 Partnering with a trans man
 you're gonna cross to the other side
 suddenly you get to acquire male privilege
 suddenly you just get a free ticket to escape
 so they feel you are sort of giving up the fight
 some hostility... a lot of hostility
 Not knowing who's rejecting...
 Just because you're gay or bi
 You're gonna be OK with it

I just cried

 when I was face-to-face
 with another person who I was like
 You know
 you know
 you know

It was really good

Found poem based on Joslin-Roher and Wheeler (2009)

5. Relational Body Image

Breasts

It's starting to make me hate my body
 self-conscious
 dis-ease about having breasts and being visible
 Maybe I don't want you to see me—maybe you don't wanna see me
 If I touch his breast... "Oh god, I'm sorry"
 I don't touch them
 We used to ...we stopped
 shut out

Touch

I started hating my own body
 I need to be touched
 I'm waiting
 crying for hours
 You won't even hug me
 not wanted to touch me
 self loathing...constant rejection...shut down...not attractive...desperation
 undesirable
 utterly vacated
 real pain
 It's been shit for me

Gender

I started to feel really bad about my body
 My body is distasteful
 Minute scrutiny rubbed off onto me
 The way with his body rubbed off on me
Rubbed off on me
 our partners don't like theirs
 hypercritical about my own
 My thighs are too flabby
 I stopped walking around naked
 I felt less proud of my curves
 I look like a girl, heterosexual, uncomfortable
 I overfeminized myself to make him look more masculine
 to make him feel more masculine
 my queer identity elided
 It makes me angry...it makes me feel invisible...it makes my queer identity feel invisible
 I had a big problem with my identity
 I thought about my own gender. Could I be trans too?
 "Does that mean you're straight now?"
 I had no idea how to identify anymore
 Partners bear a huge brunt

Found poem based on Pfeffer (2008)

6. Women's Work?

I feel very female when I'm cleaning up his room
 I clean it of my own free will
 And try to take care of him
 Sometimes he'll let me

My musical career has gone by the wayside
 I would be happier being at home
 For my own personality
 Not because we have to
 Not because of gender roles

I'm the one cooking—a nurturer
 I don't know how to drive
 He's the bread-winner
 He fixes the car
 He scoops the dog poo
 he likes to do it
 Not because of gendered roles

I remind him, I am the planner, I keep on the ball
 I'm someone who will always support him
 I'm a lot better dealing with it

Processing transitioning,
 family,
 frustrations.

My own work neglected

He doesn't look at his stuff
 Forgetful
 messy
 clumsy with my feelings
 not able to process
 lack of self-care

He assumes I'm going to take care of it

He doesn't participate in my stuff
 I don't feel I was given the space to have grief
 off limits

It's the idea
 that I will support and be really happy about it.
 The short end of the stick.

Not related to gender

Found poem based on Pfeffer (2010)

7. Sexual Relationships

The relationship
 where he can connect... and I not deny parts of *myself*

Trans people don't take sex for granted
 Complicated, non-existent, furtive, frustrating, nothing
 something that got pushed aside

I love his breasts, he hates them

he's looking more of a man
 would I still be attracted
 afraid of his body

I ain't feelin' it unless it can go in a drawer

The sex was *so* good
 Changed how comfortable I was
 there's more access to his body now
he became more confident about his body

a part of sex feels like it's not about me, that bugs me
 Not Wow, I'm hot for you.
 I have this urge. I need to take care of it

I don't know what my role is anymore.

My sexuality was complicated too

Found poem based on Brown (2010)

8. Transsexual Couple Versus Traditional Couple

Assumptions of the Study

Sexual dissatisfaction (Not capable of peno-vaginal intercourse)

Versus

Sexual satisfaction (Phalloplasty/ “real men”/ erection prosthesis)

Transsexual men **versus** “real men”

Traditional **versus** transsexual

Transsexual **versus** heterosexual

Feminine **versus** non-feminine

Contradictions

Participant’s exclusive sexual preference for men

Versus

Participant’s relationship with female-to-male before sex reassignment surgery

Results

Women partners of transsexuals take on stereotypical female role

Versus...

It Emerges

There is no significant difference in sexual satisfaction

There is no significant difference in relational satisfaction

Versus

There is a significant difference...

Found poem based on Kins, Hoebeke, Heylens, Rubens, & De Cuypere (2008)

9. The Pragmatics of Passing

Identity Work

Unpaid labor

What am I—who am I—what does that make me

Question everything

I really don't know

You fuck them up being with a trans guy

Well, I'm not straight

I don't feel comfortable putting a label on it

I am a feminist and I don't want to be a housewife, the passive wife,
reinforcing his sense of masculinity

I needed a language

power

to justify

who I was.

The liminal space of insider/outsider

Your relationship:

nothing to do with *you*

everything to do with *them*

Women are only part of the “partners of trans men community” while they are partnered.

What are we? What box do we fit in?

Resist assimilation

Queer tensions

Sometimes queerness is irresponsible

over used, meaningless, vague

I'm bi, I want that acknowledged

Queer: A category that renders bisexuality invisible

Biphobia

Ambivalent, conflicted

Passing: straight, normal, boring

We're not so straight

He encouraged me to look more feminine

have my hair long

Following the script

It makes me feel really invisible

We get such privilege everywhere we go

I wish everyone had that

While

I wanted to shave my head, pierce things

the transgression

Fucking with heteronormative assumptions

Do things that normal, boring, straight women didn't usually do

I felt guilty, selfish

I don't miss being scared

Found poem based on Pfeffer (2009)

A Visceral Reaction

There was abuse

I remember, standing in the kitchen

Shocked silence

Finally...

Yes, what happened may have seemed

may have seemed

may have seemed

abusive to you

He wasn't himself, wasn't like that before

he never tried to live before

As a man

with breasts and a beard.

Back to me

Those pressures

Not femme enough, feeling small, lying to myself

My lesbian identity

I never gave up

I still question

I felt conflicted

we were queerer than lesbians

we looked heterosexual.

I remember struggle

angst

love

mutual support

it was mostly all about him

what he did

what we did

amazing

courageous

Lyn Merryfeather 2012

What is it about found poetry?

Sharp relief

Unencumbered

Alone

A cliff

A wave

Leaps up

Spray

Suddenly,
you are in it

The Shock

The cold

The salt sting

The difference

A philosophical plunge

Idea

Reality

Experience

Lyn Merryfeather 2012

The study that made me really angry was Kins, Hoebeke, Heylens, Rubens, & De Cuyper, G. (2008), in which transsexual couples were compared to straight couples. It is not the comparison so much as the assumptions that stunned me. The assumptions were all based on heteronormativity: a penis is necessary for sexual satisfaction, trans men are not real men, transsexuals could not be heterosexual, and women who were previously in lesbian relationships actually preferred men. Even though quotation marks were placed around the word traditional, there was no discussion about what this indicated. Since the word traditional to describe a relationship between cisborn men and women in a heterosexual relationship was used frequently and with no explanation I am left with the belief that the Kins, et al. view this kind of relationship as the standard against which all others are to be measured.

Why, I ask myself, am I more upset about this study than the others? Interesting. Am I a reflection of those women who, while attending a workshop for themselves, end up talking about the FTMs? I was raised and lived a lot of my early life untouched by feminism. I epitomized the song “Stand by your man”, written by Tammy Wynette in 1968 (Wikipedia, 2012) before I knew that I was a lesbian. What I didn’t notice before is the line, “You’ll have bad times, and he’ll have good times” (St Lyrics, 2002-2012), sung by Wynette with a perfectly serious poker face (St Lyrics). I wonder how much of my early conditioning sets me up for making excuses for “my man”?

Is having a relationship with an FTM during his transition all struggle and angst? I do remember struggle and angst, but I also remember love and mutual support. I do remember it was mostly all about him, but how much of that was my doing? I do believe that what Christopher did, what others like him choose to do, is an amazing and courageous venture.

Gaps

One gap that leaps out at me from the found poetry is the lack of joy and hope. There are so few studies (another gap) so perhaps the chance to talk about their processes for the participants brought up the struggles rather than the privileges. For me, the joy was more evident later, when the initial trauma of the transition settled. It has been interesting to see the variations on this for the participants I enlisted.

None of the 9 papers mentioned are Canadian and none of them are located in the discipline of nursing. At this point in time, the study I have completed is the first Canadian nursing study involving the experience of women supporters of FTMs.

The largest areas of concern I have in relation to the literature reviewed are the apparent lack of support for these women, their struggles with their own identity as their partner struggles with his, and how feminism seems to have offered little to no solace or solid underpinning for women in transition. This is a gap that has been alluded to in the literature but with so few studies, it remains a gap nonetheless.

The main gap my study has addressed is the paucity of work in the area of the actual experience of female partners of FTMs.

Chapter 7

Participants: Who Will Come With Me?

How Did I Find Them?

Many people, on hearing my research plans, exclaimed, “How will you ever find such people. It will take a long time!” In fact, from the time my email solicitations, samples of which are in Appendix D, and posters (Appendix E) were distributed in October 29, 2012, it took only until December 2012 to find 6 participants, two from as far away as Arizona, USA. I sent out a second request for participants via Facebook in December of 2012, which resulted in the final 3 participants contacting me.

Some Statistics

I recruited nine participants and count myself as one, 10 in all, so the demographics include my particulars as well. The average age was 37.4. The youngest participant was nineteen and the oldest sixty-six. The median was 30.5. In the novel I have created one character as a minor, but the actual participants were all consenting adults. Most (eight) were in BC, six from urban centres and two from rural. Two participants were from the same large southern urban centre in the United States. The criteria in order to participate in the research were to self-identify as a woman who had been intimately involved in the transition of a loved one from female to male, be in that relationship before the transition and at least 6 months into the transition, once (and perhaps still do) identify as a lesbian, and read and speak English (see Appendix F). The criteria that all the women would have identified, before the transition, as lesbian, was an unexpected hurdle. I discovered that many did not like that term and chose another that indicated non-heterosexuality. Generally, the population was a highly educated one, with six having degrees at the baccalaureate level, two women were PhD candidates, and two had high school education.

Two women identified themselves as being of Asian descent and one called herself ‘biracial’ and further described this as ‘Black and White’. The other seven women identified themselves as White and all either identified as being Canadian (8) or American (2).

The study has received ethical approval from the *Human research ethics board* for human participant research at the University of Victoria and I have ongoing approval in order to send participants the finished novel and receive their feedback.

The Relationship

Of the ten women who participated in the study, only three were still in relationship with the trans man they were referring to during the interviews. One subsequently informed me that she had ended their relationship and another had begun a new relationship with a different FTM. Although the interviews I conducted were open-ended and I did not approach them with a list of pre-planned questions, I reviewed my research questions before every interview and with the participant as together we discussed the consent form. The reason for not preparing a list of questions prior to the interview was partly methodological as well as a personal choice.

Carolyn Ellis (2004) speaks of both “reflexive dyadic interviews” (p. 61) and also “interactive interviewing” (p.64). A reflexive dyadic interview takes place when the interviewed and the interviewer are engaged in a conversation. Frequently participants would ask me about my history with regard to the research, or something they said would prompt me to share something of my own story. I also interacted with participants purposely to build their trust in what I was doing. I told them personal aspects of my relationship with Christopher, or some of my worries with regard to how the research might be perceived among certain people, such as the trans community. This is illustrative of autoethnography and how I think such a methodology should be reflected in the interview.

There was one question that spontaneously came to me during the first interview that, subsequently, I asked of all the women. This question was, “Would you do it again?” and five answered immediately and emphatically, “No!” The others either said “yes” or their answer would depend on the person.

Feminism

I also asked all of the women if they considered themselves to be feminists. Only one hedged a bit by saying, “I believe that all people deserve every equal right as everybody else, whether you’re male, female, black, blue, I don’t care. I’m very much – well, we both are very much the kind of people who stand up for the underdog” (Anonymous³⁰, Jan 9, 2013). The rest of the women all clearly identified themselves as feminists.

The terms ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ were used frequently during the interviews, often at the participant’s suggestion. I usually followed the lead of the participants in that if they brought these terms up, I would follow where they wished to go in the discussion although sometimes I initiated the discussion as a result of previous comments. Lesbian culture is still strongly influenced by that of the mainstream, and in spite of the fact that many women rejected the dualistic nature of these labels, all of them had an understanding of their meaning. Most of the women described them as being either more masculine or feminine. Some identified as femme easily, “I’ve always presented as fairly femme and feminine and it’s been pretty much constant” (Anonymous, Nov 30, 2012), but others struggled with this identity. One indicated that for her it was more a label applied from the outside when she said, “to some people I give out a very femmey vibe” (Anonymous, Jan 29, 2013). Another told of her ambivalence by saying,

³⁰ I did not give the participants pseudonyms. One of the cardinal agreements we made was that they would all be ‘anonymous’ in the dissertation, thus the use of this term.

I was more – far more hyper-feminized than I had ever been. ‘Cause I’m really not like that. I mean, I definitely have my tendencies. But to really try and put my finger on what it is that that means, to be really feminine in today’s world...But I did – naturally, I tried to be more feminine. But I don’t really know what that means still” (Anonymous, Nov 17, 2012).

One woman best illustrated the struggle femme-identified women faced in the 90s with this comment,

And so at that point there was still, like, a fairly predominant lesbian movement of being androgynous and a pretty strong stance to disidentifying as feminine in any way, shape or form. And so me and another friend were of the few women in the lesbian community at that point that really identified in a feminine or performed our gender in a really feminine version. And so it had been a difficult relationship in – with the lesbian community at that point but we were still involved in the community but it became a lot more peripheral. And people didn’t trust us. And so this person that I was – started to date at the time was a drag king and was more androgynous and so had a lot more social currency in the community and was really involved, not only locally, but internationally in the drag king community. So he had a lot of social capital which, when we started dating, then shifted my role within the queer community a little bit more and people started to see that I wasn’t a traitor or, like, all these kinds of connotations (Anonymous, Jan 28, 2013).

Along the same line of thought, another woman said, “bringing my partner, feeling like – like, a lot of people talk about feeling invisible, too, which is...” Q: As a femme? “Yeah. And even like – like, the only time that I felt like I was visibly gay with my girlfriend, even, ‘cause

we both were fairly femme, so we were holding hands and then people could go, ‘Oh,’”
(Anonymous, Dec 19, 2012).

Another neatly summarized the fluidity of identity,
I’m like, okay, you know, I also recognize that I’m sexually attracted to butch women
and to sort of androgynous women. My daughter tells me that, when I was younger,
when she looks at pictures of me when I was younger, I was much more femme and, now
that I’m almost fifty, she thinks I’m, you know, more butch in my presentation. But I
think, you know, a lot, like, I feel quite androgynous myself but I still never questioned
my identity as a woman and as a lesbian (Anonymous, Jan 7, 2013).

One woman did not identify as femme. When I asked her about it, as she talked she
worked her way to a definite decision, “Not really, I’m androgynous, I’d say would be – I’m not
butch, I’m not femme, I’m definitely androgynous. Yeah. I’m certainly not femme”
(Anonymous, Jan 9, 2013).

This is how another woman described her androgyny. “I wear guy’s shirts and baggy
pants or whatever but I’ll get dressed up and be feminine or whatever out in public. But I feel
like I’m pretty androgynous” (Anonymous, Dec 1, 2012).

I struggled with the term ‘femme’ as applied to me from the time I came out as a lesbian
twenty years ago. My attractions have always been to those I identified as butch women, or trans
men. In our culture, men still hold the power, and if a woman has an opportunity to perform in a
more masculine way, it is understandable that she takes it. In our culture too, there remain only
two genders, two sexes, and lesbians are caught up in the dichotomy of butch and femme.

In her book, *Gender trouble*, Butler (1990) talks about the moment of becoming human
as when one is declared a boy or girl, and describes those who can’t be placed in either category

as dehumanized. She describes this as gender identification and then discusses how de Beauvoir describes this identification as sex, with gender as a later “becoming”. The problem, according to Butler, is that gender does not always follow from sex. A female sexed body may identify as male or as neither gender. Internalization, according to Butler, is a fallacy. Instead she explains that identity comes about by corporeal signification. She says, “the gendered body...has no ontological status apart from the various acts that constitute its reality” (p. 185). Thus, there is no “gender core” but rather “an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (p. 186). Butler’s comments about gender being a “performance with clearly punitive consequences” (p. 190) is, sadly, just as true today as when she wrote those words in 1990. She says, “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (p. 190) and I would add up to and including the death penalty.

Butler (1990) declares, “it is only within the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible”. And “there is only a taking up of the tools, where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is enabled by the tool lying there” (p.199). I believe the tool she is talking about is performativity itself. In being conscious of the performativity of gender, we can use this very tool to perform gender in a way that confounds the expectation and brings to light the fact of constructed gender. This is what I believe she is saying on page 201: “the reconceptualization of identity as an effect, that is, as produced or generated, opens up possibilities of ‘agency’ that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational or fixed”.

I struggle with what Butler is saying in regards to sex and gender. I understand she does away with them as separate categories in *Gender trouble* (1990), but in *Bodies that matter* (1993)

she talks about sex and gender separately. Or perhaps she is using the terms interchangeably. I understand “sexing” as a discursive creation and then I see gender as something different, as masculinising or feminising that is also discursively created. Some people have been ‘girdled’, discursively constructed as female, who then reject the imposed gender of femininity and choose to either present as androgynous, or to assume the (only) other gender. It would seem that many of my participants, including me, have the same struggle.

The Interviews

I conducted two open-ended interviews with each participant, 4 in person, and 5 over the telephone, resulting in a total of 18 interviews. The participants were informed of my research questions (Appendix F) but I had no prepared questions before the interviews. The first interviews were longer than the second ones and varied from 2 hours to 35 minutes. The second interviews varied from 90 minutes to 25 minutes. I have also had email correspondence with some of the women I met for this study. One wanted information about support groups in her area, two had more to say when the interviews were over and they had thought about the discussions.

On-going Contact

I have sent the completed novel to all the participants for their approval. Only one participant has not responded, in spite of two emails. None have expressed concern regarding their anonymity. One commented, “So exciting! Thank you for sending this on. I’ve been wondering how writing was going.” Other comments were, “Lovely Novel! I love the ending too! I thought the part about the arm hair was tooooooo funny”; “I think it is perfect. Such a good thing you have done!!” and finally, “Well done! It has been an interesting and enjoyable read. We have learned a lot in reading your work. It’s amazing how much we didn’t know about

how transgender folks are viewed by some in the feminist community. We are so far removed and out of touch that maybe it's a good thing :)”.

Chapter 8. How was the trip?

I have been keeping a reflective journal of my personal journey of research and writing. My life has been a roller coaster of lovers, friends, and emotional and spiritual changes. I have struggled with the process of writing and learning. I have written about some of these struggles. Here are some entries, edited for brevity and privacy reasons, and citations added:

October 31, 2010

I realize that when I think about transgender, transsex, or intersex people, I go, in my mind, to a certain geographical place. It is a place where three roads run parallel with each other, two are major roads each going one way, the other is a lesser road going both ways. Crossing all three is a road called “Ravine way”. Not only are there all these intersecting roads, but there is also the galloping goose trail running underneath them all. As well, there are three shopping centres forming three sides of a square. Two are large and have major stores in them, the other is small and I think of it as mainly a place to go to eat. In my imagination, the trans person is often walking alongside this last mall between the main road and the lesser road. Roads are going everywhere in straight lines, but the shopping centres are places where one usually walks diagonally. This features largely in my mental backdrop. It really illustrates the “in-between” nature of transgenderism.

May 31, 2011

Exciting telephone conversation with Nancy (pseudonym). We have agreed to join together and walk this AE side by side. Ethics is a big thing for both of us. How do you protect someone’s confidentiality when anyone who knows either of us will know the person with whom we are collaborating? The problem is solved if that person decides to be himself and use his real name. It will be interesting to see what the ethics board at UVIC has to say.

June 5, 2011

The more I think about it, the more I need to investigate the concept of liminality. Yesterday it came up at the SON conference and has been reverberating around in my head since. Sometimes I feel as if my whole life is a liminal space, a timed space in-between the eternal of what was before and what comes after and what swirls all around me in moments of Being. One of the participants in the Restorying project said “Denial and enlightenment—they both feel the same”, and I thought that is an amazingly apt description. How do you know which one you are in?

July 4, 2011

I have been struggling with the format my dissertation will take and the requirement for a theoretical section and a lit review. Reading Carolyn Ellis’ (2004) *Ethnographic I* has helped. I am pretty sure I can do this in the form of a novel. I can weave both of those requirements into the conversation like she does. I am just concerned about citations. I think they really break the flow and would like to use footnotes.

June 4, 2011

In thinking about Aaron’s (Devor) question as to what exactly I intend to write about, my story or the story of the relationship, I realize I can’t separate the two. I also don’t think it necessary to do so, or even desirable. I intend to write about my story as the relationship impacts it. The relationship is, after all, about me as well as Christopher.

Laurene talked about mapping out the different pieces. I want to write the dissertation as a novel and incorporate those things that are usually thought of as distinct into the writing in a seamless manner. Carolyn Ellis (2004) does this very well in her novel *The ethnographic I*. It

will be more difficult than just writing a chapter called “literature review” but I want to try. I will certainly write about AE but from a first person, creative and evocative stance. I don’t want to trot out what this one or that one said, but I will incorporate that into the story. I will address the topics of validity and generalizability using different descriptors than these ones.

August 4, 2011

I met Gwenneth Doane walking across campus. She told me of hearing a MTF tell her AE story at a conference and being changed by the process. She said, “I was just spellbound. It changed my life”. This is the kind of response I want to evoke!

Aug 5, 2011

I have realized that trying to tell the story of Christopher and me is too confusing...too many focal points. Instead, I want to tell the story of intimate support people of FTMs. I will gather participants and select those who are either intimate friends or partners/lovers. I think it will be a queer story too. Either way, queer enters in.

September 12, 2012

“I don’t do brush cuts”, she said, “sorry”.

I wanted to know what that meant. I still don’t understand. And you know what...I am tempted to femme up! Me! The one writing about how I and probably other women like me “femmed” up for our FTMs, lost ourselves, became confused and miserable because we needed to be ourselves and had given that over and didn’t know how to get it back.

An Interlude

November 17, 2012

Hi Lynn,

I saw your call out for participants in your research on lesbian or previously lesbian identified partners of trans guys. I am a trans guy who was with someone who identified as lesbian when we met and we were together through my transition and for sometime afterwards.

Perhaps this is something you have considered already, I noticed in your ad you ask for folks who are were partners and then in the poster assume they were a 'support person' in a supportive role. This is quite a leap in logic and doesn't reflect the complexities that are often present in such relationships.

Here is my response, in part:

I have heard your concern expressed before and I am not surprised to hear it again. In using the word "support" I intended to indicate a person who was in a supportive role. This, of course, doesn't necessarily mean they were supportive. Since I wanted to include myself and I was not in a lover relationship with "my" FTM but rather an intimate friendship, I couldn't think of another word to use.

December 12 2012

So today I am one day away from leaving to visit Christopher to see if it is time for us to be lovers. The beginning of this journal starts with him, back in 2000. It is time? My reaction was first, oh my god, this is so amazing...and then it was "of course", of course. We have been waiting for this time since we met in 1994. That's almost 20 years. I should say it is time or we should forever get off the pot.

This has huge significance for my research...or should I say this is what my research has been about all along? It is quite amazing where the waves of life will float when I am along for the ride. I remember a friend saying that all is well when she rides along. It is when she thinks she sees where it is all going and tries to "help" by beginning to swim. She often finds then that

she is swimming against the current. Part of me feels a bit like that this morning. I am struggling a bit. I want to let go and trust that whatever is meant to happen will. I don't need to make it happen, I just need to be available.

December 18, 2012

I went to visit Joe today and she gave me a book by Ralph Blum (1982), *The book of Runes*. It is invaluable for my dissertation. I will quote here:

God within me, God without,
How shall I ever be in doubt?
There is no place where I may go
And not there see God's face, not know
I am God's vision and God's ears.
So through the harvest of my years
I am the Sower and the Sown,
God's Self unfolding and God's own.

Gravestone, St. Lars Church, Linkoping, tenth Century. (p. 16)

And then I found this quote:

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes"
(Proust, cited in Blum, p. 35).

These writings were composed in a class called *Writing as research* and follow my progress as I mull about the process of discovery.

January 29, 2012

World beyond language

I can't even imagine a world without language. A metaphor may be a step into the wilderness, but it still "cuts a fancy linguistic figure" (McKay, 2001, p. 85). I am sitting at the computer grasping for words with which to convey, in words of course, how impossible a world without language appears to me. From infancy, we are soaked in language, and those for whom this is a great difficulty, like people who can't hear and therefore have no speech, are relegated incommunicado. However, I suspect that the families of such people do develop a language with the person so affected so that they come to understand each other. The first task in teaching someone like this language is to name objects. If that person is older than an infant, they probably already can comprehend a glimmer of the thingness of the thing before it is named for them but once they have language they can fully explore this thingness.

Ah, but when I looked again at the words I chose, they are not "world without language", they are "world *beyond* language". This is different. Language starts us off and from there we leap...to where? We plunge off the cliff without a net, knowing we will sprout wings. We "attempt to summon something out of nothing" (p. 104). We watch for the surge (Mary Oliver, cited in McKay), we pause between flits.

January 24, 2012

Martin Heidegger

The thing

I sent an email to Heidegger but he didn't respond. I wanted to know his background and something about how he came to his amazing ideas. If he was able to respond he probably would have said something like this: "Never mind all that. It is to the things themselves that you must address your attention". He wasn't so much concerned with description and explanation as he was with the nature of being. Not *about* beings, but what it is to Be (Gorner, 2007). He claims a fundamental difference between Being and beings.

Heidegger moved the study of phenomenon from an epistemological stance (how we know) to an ontological one (what it means to know or to be). Many of his ideas are difficult to grasp and so require thoughtful reading. I think this may be why Heidegger was so drawn to poetry. He said, "our existence is fundamentally poetic" (Crotty, 1998, p.99) and believes poetry can lead us to the place where Being is illuminated. In keeping with a poetic stance, Heidegger often coined new words and used existing ones in new ways (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962). My favourite nursing theorist, Rosemary Parse, does the same thing. This attracts some and repels others with equal measure. Our language can be so limiting.

In the context of my research, I intend to allow the thing, in its thingness, to draw near to me. I plan to allow it to speak of itself to me and I will write what I hear and see. In my life, I stop in my hurry to "get somewhere" to watch the bushtits doing their titmousy thing or to smell the wild roses, those common hedges in Victoria whose heavenly smell rivals any petted and pampered hothouse species. The older I become, the more attuned I am to, as the song says, "the glow of my Being", but rather than outshining every star, I become, as mortal, at one with the

other three, divinity, earth, and sky. This is because, in Heidegger's explanation, I draw closer to death, which is the shelter of Being. If I didn't know I was going to die, Being wouldn't have the delight and mystery that it presently does. In my work, I speak of the experience of thingness in the face of invisibility and erasure, categorization and discrimination. I allow the thing to speak of itself and allow it to draw near to me.

Jan 30, 2012

My seminar on Heidegger's *The Thing* (Heidegger, 1971) stands inseparable from my successful candidacy defense a few hours earlier. I was full of such confidence and joy that it seemed an easy thing to share even Heidegger's challenging ideas. Besides, though I won't claim to clearly understand Heidegger's way of expression, it resonates with me on a deeper level as I "listen with the energies" (Chuang-tzu, cited in McKay, 2001, p.103).

I had been required to rewrite my substantive paper, and I found that extremely challenging. I had laboured over the first submission and had, I thought, poured everything I knew into it. "Not so", said my committee, and I rewrote amid tears and thoughts of quitting. I lost my confidence and wondered whatever someone like me could offer scholarship. I excluded from my thinking the fact that they liked my methodology paper since it didn't align with my self-pity.

Somewhere during this miserable experience, mercifully, I returned to "the things themselves" (Husserl, cited in Welch, 1999, p.236). That is, I thought of what I am doing and rather than objectifying it, I thought of the meaning it holds for me. This thing, this PhD, is not about pleasing someone else, not about gathering prestige, nor arriving somewhere. It is about the journey. It is not just I travelling my no-longer lonely road. The divine, the earth, the sky, are with me, as they have always been. I need to remember this amazing truth. As I said in my

presentation, the act of gifting, the pouring out of the contents, willingly and joyously, brings a wide beam of scattered light into a sharply focused point. That point of light is so powerful that it can set an entire city or forest on fire. That is the essence of Being, or thingness.

March 7, 2012

My Process

I am still not clear on what form my writing will take in my dissertation. I probably will do some writing about my writing to set the stage for my readers. Though Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) say we are lucky to be working in a postmodernist climate when “a multitude of approaches to knowing and telling exist side by side” (p. 961), that is sometimes hard to recognize in a conservative community such as ours. I will need to draw from papers such as this and other autoethnographic writers like Caroline Ellis (2004, 2008), who writes *about* autoethnography in an autoethnographic manner. I will need to convince my readers (though fortunately not my committee) that writing creative, engaging prose and poetry is a valid method of knowing and is capable of “deconstructing the underlying academic ideology” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 966).

In addition to a slightly defensive writing about my writing I may write about the process of my writing. What I would like to change about my writing practice is to accept my process and not worry about the outcome. The piece always materializes and I have never missed a deadline, so it would seem obvious that, because of this experience, that I would be able to relax about it all and trust. But that has not happened yet. On the other hand, anxiety is also part of the process, so perhaps I need to trust that as well.

I am, even now, seduced away from my writing by several competing situations. I am rearing tiny Corydoras catfish. As of this writing, I have one older fry from a previous hatching,

and several new babies that hatched last night. They are so very tiny when first hatched and although chances of survival increase with every day, I have not had any live past 12 days. The fry tank is right behind my desk. I can hear the bubbles and can't resist frequent checks. The other distraction is that I am selling some items on Used Victoria and have to watch for emails from prospective purchasers. But it doesn't really matter what my excuse is; it is my process. When I do settle down it will be because the ideas have matured while I was gazing at tiny dots skimming across the bottom of the tank or checking emails. There is a parallel in the survival of Cory fry or the persistence of on-line purchasers and ideas. Some of these ideas won't survive since they are not able to mature properly, they don't have tenacity. Just as well. When I do sit down to some serious writing, I want strong, persistent, viable ideas. They will be there. They always are.

My Product

Christopher sits in the bright yellow armchair he moved from Nelson to our new home in Victoria. He sinks into it and it curls around him like it's part of his body. The broad armrests are perfect for his new pastime: watching the hair grow on his arms. He hears that I am up and excitedly calls out to me, "Honest, I'm sure there are ten more hairs here than there were yesterday." He turns his arm this way and that in the sunlight so I can see and admire the fur accumulating in abundance along his muscled forearm. I try to show that I am suitably impressed with this achievement. I am amused by his intense self-absorption. And I understand. He has undertaken a task of monumental proportions, a metamorphosis from female to male.

I hold the letter in my hand and try to read it through tear-filmed eyes.

Christopher left last week and now I sit in our deflated home cluttered with boxes

half stuffed, nearly ready for my own defection. When I finally made the decision I couldn't live in this battle zone any longer, I had thought he would move into a place in town and we could work on what happened and recover some of what we had lost. Instead, he moved back to Nelson. I was furious. Now I am just sad as I read, "My anger came out at you...I am very sorry and ask your forgiveness...I was very surprised...because I thought I acknowledged...I realize it must feel like I left you...I miss you very much..." I cry, and the sounds echo, bouncing off the empty walls of our lost home.

I remember the thrill of first living together. We bragged to all our friends that this was the answer...live with your best friend, not your lover. How we descended into ugly pitched battles, neck veins popping out with the effort of shouting, or icy pouting silence, is a mystery to me. I blamed the testosterone, but in reality it was probably a combination of things. I think it is the end of a wonderful and horrible chapter in my life.

I walk into the crowded room, cement walls covered with posters each extolling the virtues of diversity and specifically *TransConnect*, an organization Christopher started. It began out of his desire to make life better for all those who express gender in a way different from what is usually expected. Now it is an official organization with a board and funding, and Christopher is the director.

Everywhere I look there are people who represent all aspects of gender and sexuality. I fit right in. A hush falls over the room as Christopher steps to the microphone. He is so handsome in his white shirt and black jacket. His hair is pretty thin now, so he shaves his head and the tidy beard makes up for the loss of those straw-

coloured curls. The lopsided grin is the same and he speaks in the easy drawl I have always loved. I hear fragments as my mind wanders over our lives together. “Official opening...grateful...funding...all people who are different...welcome...watch the videos...” he intones. He is the man of the hour, my best friend, and he still speaks to my heart like a song.

My Surprise

The biggest surprise of this course, *Writing as research*, is my rediscovery of poetry. What is so surprising is that this would be a surprise. I have been writing poetry since I was in high school. The poems may not have been great, but they expressed the angst and chaos of teenage life. I only wrote when I was in some sort of crisis. My greatest discovery in this course was of “Found Poetry” (Prendergast, 2006) and other forms of poetry that I had previous not heard about, like “Tanka” (Prendergast, 2009). I combined the two here:

Phallogocentric
Divagation divergence
Hilarious gulf
From unconscious to ego
Potent with misconception

(Lyn Merryfeather, inspired by Prendergast, 2009,

p. xxv, xxxiii)

February 7, 2014

I have been up since 5, worrying over how to say I’ve changed my views without giving offence. I know people in the trans community will be very interested to read this work. At least I hope they will be. Do I say what I think I must? How can the work be real if I am not?

Jennie comes out of the bedroom, sleepy-eyed and tousled. “What’s up honey? You look worried.”

I put my head in my hands and tell her. “I’m so afraid that what I need to say here will be misconstrued and I will become, in the eyes of some, a ‘trans enemy’. I remember when Christopher had an experience similar to the one I portrayed in the novel at the ‘lesbian party’. The lesbians didn’t exactly gang up on him as I have shown it in the novel, but they questioned him earnestly about his transition and if it is really necessary. I remember how hurt, shocked, and unsupported he felt. I don’t want to do that to anyone.”

She replies, “You just have to say it. This is partly what this trip has been all about, right?” She gets up from the table and comes back with steaming hot coffee for both of us. Her blue eyes search for mine. “What is it that you think is so awful?”

“I support anyone to make choices in their life. You know that.”

Jennie nods in agreement.

“I have been thinking that it is the fault of our culture that people need to transition in order to be who they believe themselves to be.”

“But you’ve always thought that,” she protested.

“Yeah, but it’s somehow different now. I feel angry about it. What would happen if our culture changed, and we accepted...no, celebrated, diversity. What if a child, born with a mixture of genitalia we now classify as either male or female, were to be welcomed into the community, just as they (used in the singular) were? What if we lost the need to pigeonhole people into little boxes, to determine if they were boys or girls? My research has been about the partners and intimate friends of those who suffered because of the discourse of gender conformity, and while the trans person certainly struggled, the partners struggled just as much, only in the shadows.

Like Ginger Rogers dancing backwards, but it's really Fred Astaire that is recognized as the amazing dancer."

"Wait a minute," says Jennie. "Are you upset about wondering, if our culture was different, people would no longer need to transition, or are you upset because these women you have interviewed struggled because they're women and their partners becoming men upset the balance of power?"

I look at her for a long moment. "It's really a mixed bag, isn't it? How can I hope to separate these intersections of marginality? My participants are women. They were non-heterosexual. Their partners transitioned to male. All of these things combine to create a tower of 'difference'."

"I think people in the trans community would understand how you feel," Jennie said soothingly. "I am sure many think these things as well."

"I guess it's not as bad as I thought. It's good to get it out and talk about it, rather than let it kind of fester. Thanks. I don't really feel much closer to peeling this onion, but it's out in the open now and it will just have to be what it is."

February 9, 2014

I have met some amazing women on this journey of ours. They will remain with me long after this dissertation gathers dust. I was surprised by some of them and reassured by others. Of course, the stories that reassured were the ones like mine. The surprising ones were from those women who said they didn't experience any problems at all in their relationship or self-identity while travelling with their FTM on his transition. I struggled with disbelief. I was torn between the need to accept the story as it is told, and my experience, both as a seasoned nurse and as a researcher and fellow FTM supporter. I surmounted that obstacle by creating characters that

represent both poles of ‘truth’. One character is seen to be in denial and very unapproachable, and another who, in effect, says, “Now hold on, I understand where she is coming from. I didn’t have any problems and I think the reason we don’t see this is because these people don’t come forward. They don’t join support groups or seek out help from others in partnerships with FTMs.” Nevertheless, I have worried about how this particular participant will feel when she reads the novel. The other woman who didn’t have any difficulty with the transition hadn’t identified as a lesbian for very long, so in a sense, she was an outlier from the start. It was as if she didn’t have a firm lesbian identity to mourn. She did admit to finding some counseling very helpful, although it was not for the transition. Still, it came during the early stages of her partner’s transition.

Part Two: The Novel

Chapter 1

A Successful Party: June

Marnie was only vaguely aware of the lazy drone of bees working their way through the sweet peas on the deck. She lay on the couch, thankful for its comfort, one plump arm flung over her eyes. Fragrant warm air puffed the gauzy curtains softly back and forth in front of the patio door. There were not many days like this, even in June, in the rain-drenched Pacific Northwest, and there had been nearly a week of glorious sunshine. She had spent some of it belatedly cleaning away the winter's accumulated grime, getting ready. Now it looked like she hadn't done a thing. Soon she would have to start tidying up the mess, but for now she enjoyed the stillness after the boisterous confusion and laughter of the night before. It had been a house full and, although usually hosting parties was not her forte, she had loved every minute of this one. *Any minute*, she thought, *I'll get started... any minute.*

The party had been perfect. Well, nearly perfect. *There has to be something unexpected for people to gossip about later*, she reasoned. She smiled as she thought of how her friends, Jody's friends, and the few new friends they had met together all seemed to mix well. Most were coupled, but there were a few singles. She wondered if Sylvia would ever get involved again. *There was that new woman they had invited. What was her name? Oh yes, April.* Marnie thought she noted a spark there, but maybe not.

Single or not, everyone seemed to get along. Except, of course, for Joshua, as he wanted to be called. What an arrogant, abrasive person! Why would he come to a

dyke party now that he identified as a trans man? Maybe Jody invited him. Even with his unsettling presence, Marnie happily judged the party a success, and hugged this to herself.

It wasn't often Marnie had weekends off. She was a nursing supervisor in a small facility and they were so short of nurses that she was often called in on the weekend. She dreaded hearing the sound of the telephone from Friday night on, in case it was work. When they got to her, she knew there was no one else and she had to go in. But this weekend had been perfect. No phone calls to mar their plans. Jody worked a predictable Monday to Friday job at the hospital as a social worker and always had weekends and holidays free. If Marnie hadn't loved her work so much she might have considered another career, but it was a bit late for that.

Restored after her brief couch potatoing, Marnie absently eased her hands into hot soapy water, doing more daydreaming than washing the few dishes that didn't fit in the dishwasher. Feeling very lucky that she had finally found the right woman, her hazel eyes closed for a moment as she thought of the day she met Jody. A friend had brought Jody over, thinking the two would find each other interesting. Something about Jody's fine blond hair falling across her face, the way her hands absently stroked the cat who claimed her lap, and her intelligent interest in what everyone had to say, told Marnie that this woman required consideration. She considered her for maybe a week, and then asked her out. Two years into the relationship they'd bought their dream home and moved in together.

They were the same height, five feet, five inches, but there the similarities ended. Jody was lean and muscled from long hours at the gym and her dedication to running.

She was fastidious in her choice of clothing; she dressed casually in slacks and shirts for both work and home, but somehow she always looked expertly turned out. Marnie had never been listened to the way Jody listened: sitting still and seeming so intent on every word that it was a bit unsettling. And when she did speak, it was measured and careful, with just a hint of Southern drawl she had picked up while living in North Carolina. She still wore her cropped hair the way it was when they met and her bangs still dropped tantalizingly across her large forehead, shielding her eyes in a very sexy manner. Her skin was fair and she was careful to stay out of the sun so she avoided the abundant freckles that danced over every inch of Marnie's exposed skin

Jody came up behind her, wrapped her arms around Marnie's waist and gently nuzzled her neck, bringing a welcome reprieve from washing dishes. Marnie always felt the same thing when Jody touched her: warm and weak, with a familiar fluttering in her belly. She loved the way Jody admired her ample body, her slightly wild reddish hair, and seemed not to care that she had little fashion sense. She turned, hands dripping, and held Jody for a moment in a slightly soggy embrace.

"I am so glad we have each other," she said into Jody's muscled shoulder.

Jody gently pulled back, looked her in the eyes and said, "We need to talk."

Marnie felt a curious mixture of fear and relief. She thought she knew what was coming. It was about that Joshua, Jody's new friend, and how he had tried to dominate the conversation with his opinions. Or that's how Marnie remembered it. *It was a lesbian party*, Marnie thought resentfully, *MY lesbian party*. Joshua didn't really fit that description any more since he had decided to transition, and Marnie had challenged him. She asked him why he wanted to hang out with lesbians, now that he had turned

his back on them. Before she could stop herself, she found she was heatedly accusing him of betraying them all. Many of the other women had joined in the discussion at that point. It seemed as if they had just been waiting for permission, and Marnie had provided that with her pointed comments. She had to admit that it had become a bit more heated than she anticipated. Several of her friends had asked, in different ways, why Joshua had to do this thing; cut up his body, subject it to foreign hormones, change his name. Their questions certainly shut him up. Sylvia, Marnie's feminist mentor, wondered aloud if it wouldn't be better for Joshua to fight the homophobia that was at the heart of opposition to a masculine-appearing woman rather than "joining the enemy", as she put it. Joshua just sat there, red-faced and silent. At one point Marnie thought he was going to leave, and good riddance to him, but Jody interrupted the discussion in her usual tactful way. She drawled, in an imitation of her preacher father, "Waaaalll, seems to me y'all are just heapin' up the fire, makin' way more heat than light." That broke the tension. Jody had put a protective arm around Joshua and quickly steered him out of the room. Marnie suddenly realized she couldn't recall seeing him again that night.

Jody took Marnie's hand and led her back to the couch. Marnie absently noticed a few cracker crumbs left from the party and brushed them off before she sat down. Jody took a deep breath.

"Joshua is very important to me," she began, "and he was really hurt and confused by what happened last night." Marnie's heart quivered and seemed to stop beating.

Oh no! she thought, *She's going to leave me for Joshua. I just can't bear it, I'll die, I didn't see this coming...*

Jody grabbed Marnie's hands, gave them a little shake. "Stop!" she said, "I can see you're freaking out. Listen to me. I love you. You are the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with. I am not going anywhere, it's just that..." She stopped, pain and indecision written on her angular face.

"Except what?" cried Marnie, bouncing with anxiety. "What's happening, what are you doing, you must tell me!" She could feel the blood draining from her face and sat, trembling.

"Joshua took me to a support group and I have been going for a few weeks," Jody began. "I didn't tell you because I know how you feel about this topic."

Marnie's shoulders knotted and there was a lead weight in her stomach. "You didn't tell me...?" her voice trailed off weakly.

"Just listen, OK? I gotta get this out now, especially after what happened at the party." Jody spoke as if the words couldn't come fast enough. "Joshua is my friend. He *has* to do this transition thing. He is in torment living as a woman. It feels all wrong to him. It is not a choice for him but a need, something he must do if he is to survive. Many people like him commit suicide.³¹ He has decided to live, but in order to do it, he must live as a man."

A wave of shame washed over Marnie and she nodded. "I am so sorry I wasn't more sympathetic towards him," she apologized, and then shot back, "but he's so bloody opinionated and pushy!"

³¹ Rudacille, D. (2006). *The riddle of gender: Science, activism, and transgender rights*. New York: Anchor Books, A Division of Random House, Inc.

Jody smiled and said, gently, “And you’re not? And your feminist friends aren’t either? What would happen if I decided to transition?”

Marnie stared at Jody as if from a long way away. The clock in the kitchen ticked off the seconds, the kids next door yelled from the swing set, a dog barked.

“What?” she finally managed. “What are you talking about?” Marnie looked at Jody as if she was someone she didn’t know, which, at that moment, was not far from the truth. Then she wailed, “You’re a butch woman, a lesbian, my best friend and lover, you’re not a man!” This wasn’t, couldn’t be happening.

“We haven’t talked about this because of what you told me before we got together,” Jody responded. “You said you thought women who transitioned to men were jumping on a bandwagon, doing the ‘flavour of the month’ thing. You thought they were looking for the privileges that come with being male and were abdicating their responsibilities to their sisters. I thought I could live this way because of the way you support me as a butch woman. You have always honoured the masculine in me and I am grateful for that. But this thing has been growing. It’s always been there but I have kept it down, hidden, and thought being butch would be enough. But it’s not. Now I don’t believe I was ever really a woman. I feel male. I want to honour that. Please don’t leave me. I don’t think I can do it without you.” Abruptly, Jody finished talking. Her clear blue eyes sought Marnie’s and she waited.

As Marnie sat across from Jody, her lover, her wife, she saw their perfect life dashed, shattered in a million pieces around them. She had always enjoyed the contrast between them, butch and femme, masculine and feminine, but in the context of a lesbian relationship. Jody said she had always known she was a lesbian, but Marnie

came to the realization of her attraction to women later in life. When she did, it was like finding a place, finally, where she fit. She quickly became such a part of the political lesbian scene many forgot she had not been a 'lifer'. She felt betrayed and foolish, thinking of Joshua and how Jody included him without telling her about the support group and what the weight of that connection meant. She should have asked, should have known, should have been told. Hadn't they been together for three years?

Marnie's mind whirled in a succession of dizzying memories. Jody's discomfort with her breasts, her abhorrence of menstruation, the way she shut down when Marnie crooned how beautiful she was; these were all signs Marnie saw now as evidence of her unhappiness as a woman. How had she not seen this before? Maybe she had seen it and banished it from her mind. It was terrifying! She didn't know what to do with the thought of Jody as a man. What would that mean for her, for their relationship? Would they still be lesbians, or would they be seen as a straight couple: middle class and boring? Funny how thinking about being straight made her think of boring. They were, after all, lesbian or not, boringly middle class.

What about the health risks? she suddenly thought. *I know nothing at all about this. Nothing has prepared me for my partner wanting to change her sex.* Marnie felt a surge of anger. Nothing in her nursing education or her experience served to help her. In fact, she couldn't remember ever meeting a trans person in her twenty-five years of nursing practice. A successful party indeed! *Depends on your definition of success*, she thought. The party took on a different and ominous meaning for her right then. It marked the end of something.

Chapter 2

Sylvia: June

“Just leave her,” Sylvia intoned calmly, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. Her intense blue eyes seemed to drill a hole in Marnie’s head. “Why would you want to stay with someone who has betrayed you this way? Betrayed us all, actually. She just wants to access male privilege, get on this bandwagon that’s going by. That Joshua has brainwashed her!” With this pronouncement, she slowly folded her almost six feet of lean body into her favourite chair by the window. There were lingering streaks of purple underlining the few clouds in the darkening sky behind her, emphasizing the shine in her cropped silver hair. Her narrow face, devoid of makeup, was hardly lined at all, despite her fifty-seven years, and she waved her graceful hands in the air as she talked. Her only jewelry was her mother’s family ring, a band of glowing blue sapphires circling her left third finger. Marnie watched her with undisguised admiration, and wondered, not for the first time, how she managed to stay so unflappable in the face of crisis. Sylvia was everything Marnie wished she could be; tall, slender, and confident. Her paisley silk loungewear looked like pyjamas to Marnie, but what did she know? Marnie realized that she had, without giving it much thought, put on the new burgundy sweatpants Jody had encouraged her to buy. She felt like a bit of a slob in comparison, but then what she wore was never at the top of her list.

Marnie had fled to Sylvia’s after Jody’s announcement of her desire to transition. She felt safe with Sylvia, and Sylvia always seemed to have an answer to everything. Marnie needed her. In fact, she almost worshipped Sylvia. There was only nine years separating them in age, but it seemed to Marnie an epoch. In addition to having all the

answers, Sylvia seemed to be fulfilled and self-sufficient, needing no one to complete her. Marnie knew the reputation Sylvia enjoyed among the lesbian community as a clear-thinking, no-nonsense feminist who frequently intimidated her adversaries, yet she also had seen the kind and generous side Sylvia reserved for her closest friends.

Sylvia owned a beautiful home perched on a point of land overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The bamboo floors glowed the colour of beach sand, the light shimmered with moisture. Marnie relaxed into the comfortable overstuffed love seat with a little sigh. There were books stacked in corners, by the couch, on the reading table, and there was a little teetering pile just inside the deck doors. In the twilight outside, Marnie could hear the waves roaring as if they were just outside the open doors instead of several metres straight down. The soft summer air swept in with a salty tang. If she hadn't felt so bereft and confused, she would have savoured the evening. Tonight all Marnie could think about was Jody and the frightening, mysterious changes that had taken place.

Sylvia's home had been the venue for many earnest lesbian feminist gatherings over the years where Marnie, Jody, and several other women had gathered to debate the issues of the day. Many in the lesbian community revered Sylvia as their leading feminist. Before she earned her PhD in psychology and set up her private counseling practice, Sylvia had earned a Master's degree in Women's Studies in the late 1970s and Marnie observed that her views had not changed since then. She believed, along with lesbian separatists like Janice Raymond,³² that trans women would always be men

³² Raymond, J. G. (1979). *The transsexual empire: The making of the she-male*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

and were actually a threat to women everywhere, and Bernice Hausman,³³ that transsexuals perpetrated and reproduced gender stereotypes and that it was these stereotypes that stood in the way of women achieving personal freedom. These views had become cemented into a sort of dogma that Sylvia brought out whenever the topic of gender transition reared its head. Tonight she was in her finest voice.

“Why would a beautiful woman like Jody want to change her body? She’s lovely as she is. If she starts with hormones and then surgery, who will she be when it ends? She will be a mutilated woman...she will always be a woman...and she will have betrayed all of us in leaving her rightful place among us. This whole movement, the transsexual movement, is nothing but an attempt by male women-hating surgeons to rob us of our birthright, make money off us, and leave us as failed women. Stand up to her, Marnie! Don’t let her do this to herself, to you, to us. And if she won’t change her mind, then leave her.” Sylvia ended her rant with a stern glare in Marnie’s direction, then calmly picked up her glass of Sauvignon Blanc and took an elegant sip.

“I don’t know, Sylvia,” Marnie moaned. “I just don’t know. I love her. It’s not as if she is doing this to hurt me. She seems to feel that she has to, that she has always felt this way and hid it because of my views. She says she can’t hold it in anymore. She even told me, in a sort of backhanded way, that not doing it could lead to suicide. Oh god! I can’t stand in her way!”

“Jody is not in any danger,” Sylvia huffed. “She’s just testing you. It’s a phase. The key thing is for you not to weaken. And don’t let her go to that group any more.”

³³ Hausman, B. (1995). *Changing sex: Transsexualism, technology, and the idea of gender*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

For the first time, Marnie had doubts about some of Sylvia's views, but she kept them to herself. She felt a bit as if Sylvia was practicing a form of 'helicopter mothering'. As if she could stop Jody doing anything, as if she would even want to do something like that! She shook her head. Sylvia was in her prime, and a formidable opponent to all who dared to stand in her way. Sylvia claimed she had always known she was a lesbian and had a series of famous, and some infamous, lovers to her name. It was rumoured that she'd had an affair with Judith Butler³⁴ when the two of them lived in France, but Sylvia would neither admit nor deny it, giving the questioner instead a sly smile and a wink.

In contrast, Marnie had come out after a miserable 20-year relationship with a man, a fact that she preferred no one knew. In the eight years since, she had had a series of what she thought of as adolescent lesbian romances — and then she'd met Jody. She thought love like this was possible, but didn't know if it would ever happen to her. She knew it was politically incorrect, but she felt complete with Jody. She had thought nothing could shake this wonderful relationship; yet here she was, listening to her idol tell her to leave it.

"I don't know what's worse," Marnie said, "the fact that she wants to do this or the fact that she didn't tell me sooner. I feel as if I failed her in some way, that she couldn't trust me with this. Now I'm wondering how much Joshua has to do with this. Did he plant the idea in Jody's mind? Whose idea was it to go to this group? I never liked him when he was a woman, even before he became Jody's friend. He always hung back,

³⁴ Name used with permission. Judith Butler is an internationally known philosopher and writer. Among her works are *Gender trouble, 1990*; *Bodies that matter, 1993*; *Undoing gender, 2004*; *Prekarious life, 2004*.

never said anything, always acted like he wished he were someplace else. Gawd, what a mess! And guess what Jody wants? She wants me to call her Joseph and 'he'. I don't know if I can do it." With that, Marnie suddenly ran out of steam and slumped back on the love seat, feeling utterly miserable.

For once, Sylvia found herself at a loss for words. She sat undecided for a few moments and then slowly walked to the love seat, sat down, and tentatively put her long arm around Marnie's shoulders and held her close. Marnie began to cry: a sob at first, followed by deep shuddering intakes of breath. Finally she abandoned herself to full-out weeping. Sylvia just held her, handing her tissues, and saying "there, there" at comforting intervals. The sobbing subsided and Marnie mopped at her face.

"Go home," Sylvia finally advised. "Talk to her. Tell her you can't do it. See if there is a compromise. There must be an alternative to this. It breaks my heart to see you so unhappy. I will be here whenever you need me." They embraced for a long moment. Sylvia watched as Marnie walked through the gloom to her little battered second-hand Ford and only turned away when she heard the engine sputter reluctantly to life.

Sylvia sat in her chair by the window for a long time, gazing into the soft darkness. Absent until now, her sleek black cat Nigel silently appeared and leaped effortlessly into her lap. She wondered aloud to him: "What is it all about, this need to change gender? What are women coming to when they no longer want to be women? How have we failed them? And what about Joshua? She just couldn't think of Joshua as masculine. "She certainly did look miserable before, but she doesn't look much happier

now.” But then, Sylvia had to admit with a guilty pang, they were pretty hard on her at the party.

She remembered what Marnie told her about suicide among transgender people and her years of experience as a counselor told her that Joshua was at risk. “If I had her as a patient...but that would never happen,” she thought ruefully.

Sylvia slowly got to her feet and drifted over to the computer that sat in the hall. She logged on, typed in *transgender*, hit “search” and began reading. She read through the evening and late into the night. Finally, she turned the machine off and headed to bed.

She was walking down a long tunnel toward the noises at the end. It was hard work. The tunnel seemed to be soft and spongy with slippery spots that threatened to throw her off balance every few steps. As she stepped out into the light, she saw that it was a garden party with tables set up and balloons in the trees. A man was there with his back to her and when he heard her footsteps he turned and, in a slow-motion, gut-dropping moment, she saw it was her father, though a much younger version. “Hello, son,” he said as he grabbed her shoulder and gave it a thump. She tried to say something but her mouth just opened and shut and nothing would come out. She felt like she was drowning. Her mother came running across the grass with outstretched arms. “Stevie, how wonderful to see you! What a beautiful birthday party this will be!” Horrified, Sylvia realized the party was for her, and somehow she knew it was her first birthday as a man. She passed a mirror leaning incongruously against a tree, and saw herself full length. She was handsome all right, and she was unmistakably a man. With a lurch, she sat upright in bed, sweat running down between her breasts, which she

grabbed in both hands to assure herself they were still there. "Damn Internet!" she muttered. But the dream left her shaken. All hope of sleep abandoned, she got out of bed, sat at her desk, and began to write.

Chapter 3

Changes: December

“If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a million times not to leave the dishcloth lying wet in the sink,” Joseph yelled from the kitchen.

Marnie glared around the corner. “Is it really worth yelling about?” she snapped. “Hang it up yourself if it bothers you so much!”

From there, the sunny Saturday morning deteriorated until they were screaming at each other, neck veins bulging, about anything and everything they could find as ammunition. Finally Marnie fled from the room crying and Joseph was left sitting at the table, dry-eyed and looking miserable. The house was warm against the December chill and sunbeams quietly stole through the living room windows, making patches of brightness on the rug.

Marnie sat slumped on the unmade bed. She loved this room, with its soothing soft green walls and minimal decoration. One of her friends had called it a ‘Zen’ room. She didn’t feel very Zen. She alternated between images of shaking Joseph until his teeth rattled and walking out the front door, giving it a good slam on her way. She remembered a time when she and Joseph could go for months without raising their voices to one another. “It’s the testosterone,” she thought. “He was never like this before. I just can’t take this. It’s bad enough that I no longer know who I am, where I fit. All he ever thinks about is himself.” After half an hour of nursing her wounds, she washed her face and came down the hall, determined to retrieve what was left of their day off together. She rounded the corner to see Joseph sitting in the sun in his favourite easy chair, looking at his arm. “What are you doing?” she asked.

“I swear there are more hairs on my arm than there were yesterday,” Joseph exclaimed, beckoning her over to see for herself, their argument long forgotten. He held his arm this way and that, so she could see the blond hair, now gathering in furry abundance on his thickening limb.

How could she stay mad at him? He was like a child in his glee over the changes to his body. He had begun to shave last month, although there wasn't much hair yet on his face. Still, it did create some stubble, and perhaps that's what he wanted.

Marnie thought of the six months since Jody...Joseph first told her of his desire to transition. He had lived for those months as a man, although he sometimes didn't pass as one, and had come out at work with not much difficulty. Everyone called him Joseph with few slip-ups, but then social work was more inclined toward acceptance than some other occupations might be. He'd also found a therapist, a recommendation of the Standards of Care of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health³⁵ and started testosterone injections.

She'd been the one to teach him how to inject himself, one bleak fall day, creating a ceremony of that first shot. They'd gone to their favourite swimming place, deserted these last months. It was a late afternoon in October, but the rocks seemed still to hold some heat from the weak sun and she had felt it radiate up her back as she knelt down beside him. In spite of the sunshine, the black clouds on the horizon promised rain and she had known they didn't have much time. The wind was beginning

³⁵ Coleman, E., Bockting, W., Botzer, M., Cohen-Kettenis, P., DeCuypere, G., Feldman, J.,... Zucker, K. (2011). Standards of care for the health of transsexual, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people, version 7. *International Journal of*

to get up and little drifts of dead leaves scurried across the barren ground. Joseph's hands were shaking as he drew the thick yellowish substance into the needle as she had taught him. As usual, he was wearing shorts and she made sure he correctly chose the spot since the needle was very long and it was important to avoid damage to the major blood vessels in his leg. His hand hovered indecisively over the place but he was trembling so much she had known he would need some help. Gently she had taken his hand in hers and drew it back and forth a couple of times so he got the feel for it, and then together, they plunged the needle into his thigh. This injection would mark Joseph's departure from feminizing hormones and begin his journey of physical transition. From that time on, Marnie had known that he would become more masculine with every passing week. Afterwards she wrote a poem about it.

Baby face

Round and sweet

Peach fuzz

We came here in the summer

Lay on the rocks, baking like cookies

Now it's chilly fall

New things growing soon

Face hair bristling, grizzly, growly

Muscles, more hair, neck, anger

Mark the spot, alcohol swab; draw it up sticky and slow

Your hand in mine, I show you

That hard, yes

Slowly push the needle in

That was easy³⁶

But what followed from there was anything but easy. The anger, fear, self-absorption; she could understand it, sort of, but it was still difficult. She never knew when something would hit him wrong and he would explode. Frequently an innocent conversation would quickly take a turn she didn't expect. She had once made a comment about taking the car in for a tune-up and Joseph flew into a rage that she hadn't taken it in sooner. When they had guests Marnie noticed that Joseph turned the conversation frequently to his transition and that he seemed disinterested in other topics. It wasn't even so much that this appeared to be his one interest as it was the aggressive, almost fervently religious way he presented it, as if he was always expecting opposition.

It'll be better, Marnie thought, *when he has his chest surgery*. How many times had she said this kind of thing to herself? She was beginning to think there would always be one more thing before it got better. The surgery was booked for next month and they were lucky to have it come up so quickly, although they had decided to go to a private clinic rather than wait in the interminable public line. Marnie just hoped none of her union friends got wind of that. Jumping the queue went against all of her political activist sensibilities but it was interesting to find how things changed when it was she who was affected by the wait times.

Living with Joseph on "T," as the trans guys affectionately called testosterone, was challenge enough. Living with Joseph binding his large breasts and living in fear of

³⁶ Lyn Merryfeather, 2012.

violence should someone discover the incongruence of facial hair, deep voice, and breasts, was a recipe for paranoia. Marnie tried not to get swept up into Joseph's fear but it was nearly impossible to prevent.

Just last week he was at a first aid workshop where he didn't know anyone. Joseph told her they were in groups and practiced on each other until the instructor came to examine them. They were to do chest thrusts on people who presented various challenges to this procedure. Joseph was terrified. He thought they would know he bound his chest until someone from the group suggested he play the part of a pregnant woman and they all laughed hysterically at the thought of him as a woman. It was a relief, but only one in a series of frightening situations. They knew it wouldn't end until he had his chest reconstruction. At least they both hoped it would end there.

Now, sitting on the edge of his chair after admiring his furry arms, Marnie leaned over and laid her cheek on his head. She loved the smell of him. It was different, yet somehow the same. Added to the familiar smells of Jody was a sharp masculine tang: a combination of aftershave, spicy deodorant, and something new that she couldn't quite describe. Joseph looked up at her and she saw that look in his eyes. For the first time since he began testosterone, Marnie took the initiative and led him to the bedroom. Usually she had had to wait for him to indicate his desire. Sometimes weeks would go by with no sex. Today he kissed her neck and began sliding the robe off her shoulders.

Marnie used to love the slow build-up of their lovemaking. First the languid kissing, then the sexy undressing: it could take them hours. She had felt precious to Jody, cherished, and that their lovemaking was held sacred. Today she felt Joseph's urgency, his need for her. She took off the rest of her clothes and he quickly took off his

shirt but left on his undershirt and shorts. At another time they might have laughed about the contrast, but not today. Now it was serious, sweaty, and with a fixed purpose. She missed the lighthearted fun. Today she felt exposed and vulnerable next to his protected body. She longed to feel his nakedness, skin against skin. His clothes covered more than his body. She longed to touch him everywhere but wasn't sure what parts she could touch since this seemed to change almost moment by moment in a bewildering, unpredictable way. He was as careful to please her as he always was, yet her heart felt raw and lonely; the sex only touched her body. Would their lovemaking be like this always: superficial, hurried, and lacking?

Chapter 4

SOFFA: December

As Joseph was outside raking the leaves in the weak December sun, Gloria rang the doorbell. “I brought you some scones. Got the coffee on?” Everything about Gloria was round and brown: her hairdo, a curved shiny helmet, the result of straightening her kinky hair every morning, that ended at her neck; her slightly protuberant eyes; her café-au-lait skin, and her torso that was a little like a snowman rolled in chocolate. Her motherly exterior did not hide from anyone that she was a force with which to be reckoned. Now she settled herself in Marnie’s comfortable kitchen, with its warm red walls and country pine table and chairs. The wood stove in the living room crackled invitingly, giving bone-warming heat against the approaching chill.

Marnie and Gloria had become friends at the SOFFA³⁷ group and met regularly outside of support group meetings. While it seemed like a good name, including significant others, friends, family, and allies, SOFFA reminded Marnie of what she had often felt like since Joseph’s transition began: sat on. She knew she wasn’t alone. Many of the women she talked to at the SOFFA group felt isolated even in such a support group. She wished she could talk about some of her issues around sex but felt inhibited because of the others present. Somehow, elder parents of a trans person just didn’t seem like the best support for such things. Some of those were the parents of some of her friends’ trans partners.

³⁷ Significant Others, Friends, Family, Allies. Retrieved from <http://soffa.activeboard.com/>

Many of the SOFFA members were heterosexual and she had learned through previous conversations that they didn't have an understanding of same-sex relationships. Marnie still thought of herself as a lesbian and she didn't trust that everyone would understand her concerns. This added to her feelings of isolation since she also felt separated from the rest of the lesbian community, where many, like Sylvia, had critical views of FTMs. Since Joseph's announcement of his transition, Sylvia had attended a few meetings and had been uncharacteristically silent. More and more Marnie wondered if another, smaller group just for women like her might be a good idea.

With fresh hot coffee and buttery scones between them Marnie and Gloria got down to serious visiting.

"What's new in your life Marnie? I see Mr. Right is outside doing his guy thing with the lawn." At that they both giggled--until Marnie started to cry. "What's happening sweetie?" Gloria was always so unruffled that Marnie often felt like a mess in her company. She and Frank had been together for fifteen years: all through the whole of Frank's transition and now in a peaceful and settled relationship.

"How did you get through it?" Marnie finally managed. "I feel so invisible and alone. I know that he is going through something that I can't even begin to imagine, but I am in a transition of my own. He doesn't get that. This is big for me too. He is so aggressive now, about almost everything. Our relationship had always been so...so equal. We didn't need to try to compete with each other or see who was boss. Now everything is a big battle and I get sucked in before I know what I am doing. I can't talk to my other friends about it. They all think I have deserted the lesbian 'cause', whatever that is. Sylvia thinks I should leave him."

“Maybe we had it easier than you guys,” said Gloria, rolling her large brown eyes in thought. “Frank had a really great role model for a father. And he stopped the ‘T’ after he felt masculinised enough, so that aggressiveness you experience with Joseph was really lessened. Yeah, yeah, I know the studies that argue testosterone has little effect on aggression--³⁸well, sorry, I ain’t buyin’ it. You and I and a lot of the women in the group know better.”

“Gloria, I know Frank’s father was gay, but I don’t get how that would make him a great role model. Doesn’t Frank identify now as a heterosexual man?”

“Well actually, Frank identifies as queer³⁹, but I don’t know if it is the gay thing so much as it is that Frank’s father, Gerald, is a sweet and kind of feminine man. You know, not the longshoreman type. He had quite the struggle of his own when he came out. Frank’s mother completely disowned him and refuses to speak to him to this day. Then Gerald and his partner took on most of the parenting of Frank when his mother began to drink. It was a really rough time but I think the love those two men showed each other paved the way for Frank to want to live like Gerald. He was a role model for what a man should be. Frank emulated him when he transitioned. Joseph is emulating his father, I would think, and we know that guy was a real stinker, even if he was a clergyman. Even if they don’t want to be that kind of guy, or maybe even because they don’t want to be that kind of guy, it’s who is in their mind when they think of men, so

³⁸ Cohen-Kettinis, P.T. and Gooren, L.J. (1992). The influence of hormone treatment on psychological functioning of transsexuals. *Journal of Psychology & Human Sexuality*, 5(4), 55-67.

³⁹ An expression many White people in the non-heterosexual community use when they prefer not to be confined to a label such as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’. It can denote both identity and sexual orientation.

Marech, R. (2007). Nuances of gay identities reflected in new language. In M. Stomblor, D. Baunach, E. Burgess, D. Donnelly, & W. Simonds (Eds.) *Sex matters: The sexuality and society reader* (2nd ed., pp. 52-54). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.

that's who they copy."⁴⁰ Gloria's rather simplistic version of male patterning gave Marnie some comfort.

"So it's just a matter of Joseph realigning his role model," she suggested brightly.

Gloria shook her head sadly. "I don't think it's quite that easy sweetheart. The kind of sexism Joseph displays is pretty deeply ingrained in our society⁴¹ and I think you had better accept that this is the kind of man he is going to be." As Marnie sat looking into Gloria's face, she felt herself slowly sag and crumple into a miserable wreck.

Loud voices outside made both women look out the window. The days were short now and the sky had taken on a navy blue tinge. Marnie thought it must be cold out there. Standing with Joseph on the grass, legs spread and arms wildly gesturing, was Sam. Sam was a different sort and neither Marnie nor Gloria could quite figure out what was going on. Sam did not identify as male or female and had recently asked everyone if they would use the pronoun "they" as singular. It took a lot of getting used to, although Morag, Sam's former partner, seemed not to have any problem with it at all. Marnie knew that Morag was born in Scotland and with her ruddy complexion, curly dark ringlets, and air of faint but lovely dishevelment, Marnie thought she looked like she belonged on a pastoral hillside, herding sheep. When she spoke it was with a soft lilting burr that could melt the hardest heart.

"We should ask Morag over for tea," enthused Gloria. "With all of her experience with Sam and the counseling she's had, I bet she could give us a lot of insight." Marnie nodded, with some of her former spark.

⁴⁰ Shelley, C. A. (2008). *Transpeople: Repudiation, trauma, healing*. Toronto, ON, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

⁴¹ Lev, A.I. (2004). *Transgender emergence: Therapeutic guidelines for working with gender-variant people and their families*. New York: The Hawthorn Press, Inc.

The two of them decided, right then, over scones and coffee, that the SOFFA women should have more regular support in a less formal way than the bigger group. “You host the first one, Gloria, and I will have the next one here,” said Marnie. “And then, after we get it off the ground, any other woman who wishes to can do that. But I think the trans partners should be encouraged to be out of the venue for the duration of the meeting.” Privately Marnie wondered if that would be possible with some of those men.

Grabbing a pen, Gloria made a list, and together they assembled the names of women to invite for the first meeting. Sylvia was such a mover and shaker in their community and always expected to be part of every meeting the women organized, but in this case, it was agreed she would not be invited because of the views she had expressed on transsexuality. Only partners or former partners of trans people would be invited. Buoyed by this new mission, Marnie felt lighter than she had in the past six months.

Chapter 5

The Group: December

Gloria's comfortable dining room seemed the perfect place for the first meeting of the partners' support group. The table was old and regal, its battered top a testament to the many family dinners served there. It had been Gloria's mother's table, and she told Marnie it held many memories for her of animated mealtime conversations. At the far end of the room, French doors looked out onto a rolling lawn, which, even in December, was green and lush. The cozy fireplace popped and sizzled with the cedar logs burning there and the room radiated a warm welcome.

Marnie looked around, counting five women, including herself. It appeared that she and Gloria were the only ones in stable partnerships. Diane was in a challenging relationship with Ivory; Marnie wondered how long it could continue. It had been five tortuous years now. Morag had ended her relationship with Sam last year but they still seemed to be good friends. Lucy was someone Marnie didn't know very well. She had just moved to town and seemed very withdrawn. Marnie could see she would be stunningly attractive if she didn't look so unhappy. She had long blond hair parted in the middle so that the golden strands fell down each side of her face. She was thin in a way that looked as if she had recently lost a lot of weight, and there was something troubled about her. Marnie wondered if she might be ill.

Gloria nervously smoothed her brown and green silk floral dress across her ample hips. "I imagine you all expected Sylvia to be here, but Marnie and I decided her feminist views are just too abrasive for such a group. The other reason is that we want this group to be for women who are going through or have experienced similar things.

We also want this to be a safe place to talk so let's all agree to keep whatever we say just for within these walls, OK?" Marnie saw that most of the women were nodding and smiling at Gloria's words, and then she noticed the look on Diane's face.

Diane quickly got to her feet, her light brown chinos and soft blue chambray shirt showing off her athletic body, and her expertly cut short black hair caught the light as she turned her head challengingly. "Well I take exception to your comment on feminist views. I am a feminist but I don't agree with Sylvia's views. I think feminism is very much needed in our discussions. Third wave⁴² feminism, the kind I follow, stands up for *all* the marginalized, like lesbian women, and includes the trans guys we love. And we are women who are greatly in need of reminding each other to stand up for ourselves and for each other. How many of you, since your partner transitioned or started identifying as a man, have taken on more of the so-called feminine roles in the relationship?" Morag and Gloria exchanged glances. "I rest my case." Diane sat down with a smug look on her face.

Marnie squirmed in her seat, caught between anger and guilt, and she didn't know what to do with these feelings. Diane was so articulate. She had a Masters degree in engineering, and was used to holding her own even with a group of men. Diane clearly didn't understand what it was like for her. And why should she? This was all so new for Marnie she'd had hardly a chance to put it in place for herself, let alone articulate it for anyone else.

"Maybe it's easier for you," Marnie burst out. "Ivory doesn't identify as a man so your relationship still has some lesbian elements. Joseph wants to do all the so-called

⁴² Tong, R. (2009). *Feminist thought: A more comprehensive introduction* (3rd ed.) Philadelphia: Westview Press Books.

male chores, like mowing the lawn, taking out the garbage, driving the car, and he leaves me with what he considers the feminine jobs. He also wants me to grow my hair a bit longer and dress in a more feminine manner, whatever that means. I spent a lot of years trying to measure up to some standard of femininity that always eluded me. Now, somehow it seems different. I feel caught between wanting to please Joseph, support his masculinity, and live my own life. At first I felt really resentful but as I go along I am beginning to wonder just what a feminine role means. Is this really a feminist question or is it more about those poles of difference many of us have experienced in butch/femme relationships? I know those terms have wandered in and out of favour, but those of us who have lived them know them to be true for us, and not just copies of heterosexual roles. There are poles of attraction and since I came out I have always been attracted to women who are butch or androgynous.” Suddenly she stopped speaking. Her head felt as if it might burst with the attempt at reconciling all the contradictions she felt. “I am so confused, I just don’t know what I am doing any more!” Marnie put her face in her hands and Gloria and Morag, who were sitting on either side of her, each gently put an encouraging arm around her sagging shoulders.

“Ivory may not identify as male,” responded Diane, a bit more gently, “ but neither do they identify as female. There is no pronoun in our language for that so we have hit upon using *they* in the singular. Our roles are dependent on equality and skill, not on gender. We have had our share of struggle, and it’s not over, by a long shot. I’ve often felt like I am on a roller coaster and can’t get off. Do you want to hear a poem I wrote about it?” She looked around at the faces watching her. There was a chorus of “yes, *please do, uh huh*”, so Diane pulled out a crumpled piece of paper.

The thing I have not yet learned how to forgive you for
is that you took so long to figure out (or at least to let me know)
that you want to be loved by me.

So much time, so much pain.

The wound of wanting you to want me to want you,
has been cauterized.

The nerves are deadened,
the pain is deadened,
the loving is deadened.

I sorrow

For our loss.⁴³

There was silence in the room except for the sound of sniffing.

“Diane, I had no idea,” said Morag, still wiping the tears from her face. “I wish I had known. I could have written that. It really was part of why Sam and I broke up. We also used *they* as a singular pronoun. I have since thought that Sam’s years of looking like a man and identifying as a woman took a terrible toll, one that my love couldn’t comfort or overcome. I often thought it might have been easier if Sam just transitioned, but they are steadfast in their determination to avoid the gender binaries in our culture. I found it nearly impossible to separate the gender dysphoria from the personality. If they chose to transition and the grittiness eased off then, in retrospect, one could see that the behaviour was part of the dysphoria. But with the choice not to do T or surgery, what

⁴³ Anonymous participant, 2012.

I am left with is that it's just Sam's personality. I do know several other trans or gender queer folk who are not so abrasive, so is it Sam's temperament and nothing to do with dysphoria? I can't tell."

Diane smiled sadly. "Yes, if we had known, things might have been different. I do know what you mean about the gritty behaviour. Often Ivory treats me like I am their adversary rather than their lover. They would rage at me about resistance out in the world when they first wanted to use the pronoun *they* and they had never even told me about the choice to use that pronoun. I felt blamed for that and found that anger pretty hard to live with. They often couldn't see past their own pain and understand that it was *their* behaviour that was causing some of the reaction from others that they interpreted as invisibility. But the worst is Ivory often blames me for lack of support while forgetting all the times I was supportive. Sometimes they can't even see the support at the time it is happening."

Morag eagerly nodded her head, looking like she could hardly contain herself. Excitedly, she burst in, "Once, I was admiring Sam's breasts in the summer when we were both sitting around without our shirts. That was the summer I broke my leg, remember?" Marnie and Gloria nodded. "They caught me looking and accused me of doing something similar to asking a person in a wheelchair to dance. What was so ironic about that is that they had no insight into how their remarks stung when I expressed envy about their hiking trip. They said, 'Well, get better and then you can come along'. Yeah, great help that was. And I was just somehow supposed to know things that Sam was only coming to understand, as if I was some kind of mind reader."

“I find it really amazing how similar our stories and struggles are even though our partners are all so different,” exclaimed Marnie. “I am still stuck on the gender roles though. Did you and Sam struggle with that?”

Morag rolled her eyes and sighed. “I guess the short answer is ‘yes,’ she said, “but we got over it.” Laughter erupted and she hastened to add, “and not by breaking up. We at least dealt with gender roles before we split. I learned a lot about myself during the counseling I did to help me through the break-up. I struggled like you, Marnie. Even though Sam didn’t identify as male, they wanted to do those guy jobs like fix the car.” At this more laughter “--even though I am a certified mechanic. They took on those jobs their father did. I was the cook and chief bottle washer, and you know how I like to dress up all girly, wear makeup and such,” she struck a pose in her peasant lace blouse, and tossed her tangled brown hair comically, “so I got a lot of flack from the so-called feminist contingent. But women...” she looked around the room, all hint of humour gone, “that is not feminism. It’s out of date. How Sylvia could have dated Judith Butler, if in fact she ever did, and missed what Butler had to say about butch and femme is beyond me. She said something like ‘lesbian femmes may recall the heterosexual scene...but also displace it at the same time’.⁴⁴ What that means to me is that we are not re-enacting heterosexual roles here, we are making it up as we go along, queer style.”

The room exploded with whoops and laughter.

“I am so glad you said that Morag,” sighed Lucy, who, until now had sat

⁴⁴ Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble* (p. 168). New York: Rutledge.

quietly, listening, her beautiful face now alive with interest. “I have always identified as femme and struggled in the community with the accusations of—“she hooked her fingers in quote marks “— ‘encouraging patriarchal objectification of women’⁴⁵ just because of the way I dress and act. Before I met Henry, my trans guy, I had just had one lesbian lover. I identified as heterosexual. I had only just come to the realization of my sexuality when I met Joan. We were together for seven years until it just didn’t work any longer. It had nothing to do with either of us having other attractions but when I met Henry, Joan had a fit and accused me of cheating on her, and then she accused me of not being a lesbian in the first place. She said I used her and just ‘tried it on’. I think this is pretty far-fetched when we were together for such a long time. I know it was just her pain causing her to make those accusations, but it still hurts and it doesn’t help that other women have said pretty much the same thing.”

“What happened with Henry?” asked Morag.

Lucy frowned. “Well, after fight after fight, and sometimes being actually scared, I decided to leave him. He was never violent to me...like he never hit me, or anything like that, but I always feared it might happen. He would erupt so suddenly, over nothing, or that’s what it seemed like. It would take me by surprise. He would punch holes in the wall and yell. Very scary. It frightened both of us. He agreed that it was probably a good thing to break up, but we loved each other so much it was just so painful.” Lucy’s eyes filled with tears. “He went off the testosterone and he’s much better now. In fact, we are thinking of getting back together. The only problem is....” She wiped her eyes, blew her nose, and took a deep breath. ”I’m pregnant.”

⁴⁵ Levitt, H.M., Gerrish, E.A., & Hiestand, K.R. (2003). The misunderstood gender: A model of modern femme identity. *Sexologies*, 48(3/4), 99-113.

There was a stunned pause after this announcement. Finally Gloria ventured, “So are you happy about this?”

“Oh, it’s just such a mess,” said Lucy, crying openly now. “Henry is happy about it if I want it and he wants to support me and raise the child together. I don’t want to raise this baby. I am not ready, but even if I was, I don’t want a child by this person. I just wanted to try out being with a cis⁴⁶ man again. I felt so much pressure and lack of acceptance from the lesbian community. I don’t know. I guess it was pretty dumb. But here I am, pregnant. And I have an appointment next week for an abortion.” She stopped and looked around. Marnie saw nothing but sympathetic support reflected in the faces of the other women. Somehow, this seemed to make Lucy want to cry again, and she began weeping softly into her Kleenex.

The doorbell rang and Gloria ran to answer it. She was gone at least ten minutes. They heard tense muffled conversation in the hall. The women began to whisper nervously to each other. This was supposed to be a private time for their group alone. Gloria, her usually serene face clouded with anger, came back into the room with Sylvia close behind her.

⁴⁶ Cis is a frequently used term in the trans community to refer to a person ‘born that way’. In other words, to say a “cis man” would mean a person who had been born with male genitalia.

Chapter 6

The Surprise: December

Before anyone could object, Sylvia said quickly, “I know I was not invited to this gathering, and I understand why.” She glanced quickly at Marnie and gave her a little tight smile. “I have something to say to you all. I hope you will allow me a little time.” Sylvia looked more nervous than Marnie had ever seen her look before and she thought anxiously, *I sure hope she knows what she is doing.*

The other women glanced at one another in consternation and shifted in their seats. Finally Diane responded, “Sylvia, your views on transsexuality just don’t work for us. You are welcome to them, but...”

Sylvia hurried to explain, “I’ve changed my mind. I’ve had an experience! I am so sorry I have been so judgemental and made you feel as if you couldn’t talk to me. I would have felt the same if I was in your place. Let me tell you what has happened.”

Gloria expressed what most of them seemed to be thinking. “We were just in the middle of hearing some of Lucy’s story before you burst in Sylvia, and I think we need to take a minute before we jump into your story.” She pointedly turned her attention to Lucy.

“I think I need to just sit with what I’ve told you all. I so appreciate you listening and being so supportive. I will let you know how next week goes.” Lucy’s shoulders relaxed and she smiled, although a bit tearfully, for the first time since the meeting began.

Sylvia smiled acknowledgement to Lucy, sat down, her briefcase at her feet, and squared her shoulders. “This transition stuff was all in the realm of the hypothetical.”

Marnie was surprised to notice that Sylvia's hands shaking slightly. "I actually had never met anyone who wanted to transition or anyone who was affected by the process." She looked around and caught Marnie's eye. "Until it happened to my dear friend Marnie. Meeting Joshua at the party caught me by surprise and I just trotted out my old, and I see now, very outdated ideas."

"You hadn't met anyone that you know of," corrected Diane. "What part do you think is outdated?" She fixed Sylvia with a frankly hostile stare. Diane was nearly as tall as Sylvia, and just as elegant, and today she looked ready for battle. Marnie remembered the many disagreements these two women had had over the years. She suspected Diane had been looking forward to such an encounter.

Sylvia calmly returned the look but there seemed to be no fight in her. Then her blue eyes filled with tears and she bowed her head so that all they could see was the top of her cropped silver hair and her usually mobile hands tightly clasped together. Marnie longed to put her arm around her but she was sitting too far away.

Sylvia lifted her head and looked around. "I know I have been like a broken record in regard to some things for so many years. I am ashamed of that now. I was stuck back in the days of blaming the patriarchy for everything. After seeing how broken up Marnie was over Joseph's changes I did some thinking and some reading. I learned a thing or two. Judith Butler has written some things since--" she coloured slightly, --"I knew her many years ago. I actually hadn't read any of her work back then. I know that is no excuse and I am so very sorry." She looked Diane in the eye, "To answer your question, I think what are outdated are my beliefs about gender. I think now that I was

wrong. I believed that ‘biology defined gender’⁴⁷ and that a transsexual woman was just the face of patriarchy.⁴⁸ I found a paper written by Butler in 2001⁴⁹ that deeply touched me.” Sylvia pulled out a paper from her briefcase and donned her reading glasses. “In this paper she poignantly asks the questions, ‘What counts as a person? What counts as a coherent gender? Whose world is legitimated as real?’ and finally, ‘Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me?’⁵⁰” Once again Sylvia’s eyes filled up and Marnie wondered if she would go on. After a deep breath, Sylvia continued. “I thought of Joseph, of Joshua, of all of us, and wondered what kind of feminist I am when I ignore the marginalization of anyone. I realize now that gender is much more complex than just a designation following the sex we are thought to be when we are born. And basically, it seems that much of this is decided on the condition of the penis, so even the declaration of a sex at birth is questionable. In this paper, Judith is arguing for such complexity. She uses the experience of David Reimer as an illustration that not only is gender socially constructed but that it is also undeniably linked to an internal truth. She goes on to argue that this ‘inner truth’⁵¹ is, in fact, socially constructed.” Sylvia hesitated and Marnie wondered if she would rather not bring up another bit of controversy. Then she added, “But I am not convinced of this part.”

⁴⁷ Stryker, S. & Whittle, S. (2006). *The transgender studies reader* (p. 183). New York, NY: Routledge.

⁴⁸ Raymond, J.G. (2006). Sappho by surgery: The transsexually constructed lesbian feminist. In S. Stryker and S. Whittle (Eds.) *The transgender studies reader* (pp. 131-143). New York, NY: Routledge.

⁴⁹ Butler, J. (2001). Doing justice to someone: Sex reassignment and allegories of transsexuality. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 7(4), 621-636.

⁵⁰ Butler, 2001, p.621.

⁵¹ Butler, 2001, p. 628.

“What makes you hesitate?” asked Lucy.

“Well, if you consider your partners, lovers, friends, who seek to change their sex, and live in a gender they believe fits them better, do you think they would really do this if it was all just a social construct, albeit a very powerful one?” answered Sylvia.

“Hmmm, and you got all this from Butler?” Diane looked at her suspiciously.

“Actually, I talked to Joshua and I had a dream.”

“You talked to Joshua?” exclaimed Marnie. “But I thought you despised him!”

Sylvia explained patiently, “I have changed my mind about a lot of things. I had a dream the night after Marnie first told me of Joseph’s desire to transition. I remember that conversation so well. I gave some very bad advice.” She shot Marnie an apologetic smile. “Anyhow, after she left I began to do some research and found a lot of information on the Internet, including the paper by Butler. Because I knew Judith many years ago, and also know of her reputation now, I regard her work as something I could trust. It was an eye-opener. But the biggest thing was the dream I had after all that reading.” She looked around to gauge the effect of her words. Satisfied, she continued. “I dreamed I had transitioned and my parents were throwing me this huge celebration. I was horrified in the dream and so happy to wake up and find it wasn’t real and I was still a woman. But then I started to think about it. What if I wasn’t happy being a woman? What if I was convinced I was male? It would be like my dream, I would be horrified and I would do everything I could to try to find some peace. And then I thought about this whole gender thing and what makes us decide on a person’s gender. I read a really

fascinating paper by Kessler and McKenna⁵² where the authors explained about the rules and assumptions society holds in order to slot everyone into either male or female pigeonholes. For instance, since I am tall and slender-hipped, all I would need to pass as male would be to cut my hair and dress butch. These people noticed that ‘male’ was designated more frequently than ‘female’ even when the illustrations showed equal gender attributes.”

“Yes, but what were these attributes?” Marnie could hear the challenge in Diane’s voice. “Penises and vaginas?”

“No, but even when those attributes were visible, in spite of all the other attributes, like breasts, wide hips, and long hair, a figure with a penis was always designated male. If the figure possessed no penis, and it looked like they had a vulva, they were frequently designated male if they had short hair, narrow hips, and chest hair. But what really got me was, when genitals were hidden, with all things being equally portioned, such as long or short hair, wide or narrow hips, breasts, clothing, and body hair, the designations were more frequently male than female. In other words,” Sylvia paused for effect, “we see people as female only when it is impossible to see them as male.”

The women murmured excitedly among themselves.

“What about those who sit somewhere in the middle?” Diane interrupted. Her tone still held lingering belligerence.

“That’s what I am getting at,” countered Sylvia, with a hint of exasperation. “My point is that this whole gender thing is so culturally ingrained that it is very hard, if not

⁵² Kessler, S.J. & McKenna, W. (2006). Toward a theory of gender. In S. Stryker and S. Whittle (Eds.) *The transgender studies reader* (pp. 165-182). New York, NY: Routledge.

impossible, to see someone who doesn't fit and to resist trying to slot them. I challenge anyone in this room to say they have never done it. We don't even have language for it, do we?"

For the first time, Diane seemed to relax. "Yeah, you're right. Ivory uses 'they' as a singular pronoun, but they get ma'med and sir'ed, actually sir'ed more often than not. And even those who support them in this request have trouble with it. Behind their back, and sometimes even loudly enough to hear, sort of 'accidentally on purpose' they get called 'it', with a sneer."

"Yes, so it really is a feminist issue!" Excited now, Sylvia began to gesture with her graceful hands, punctuating her remarks. "We need to start educating ourselves" a finger jabbed its emphasis "about this unacceptable dichotomy and the misery it's causing us and our loved ones. So I have secured a room at the women's centre for us to meet every last Tuesday of the month to talk about gender as a feminist issue."

"And just who would be welcome at these meetings?" asked Morag suspiciously.

"Everybody! Every gender, every sex, no distinctions." Sylvia's hands waved up with every word, and seemed to be pushing up the energy.

She really should have been in politics, thought Marnie, with an inward grin.

She's got them right where she wants them now.

"You mean, everybody, as in trans men, intersex women, and all those who don't, can't, or won't identify? And Joshua?" Diane viewed Sylvia with disbelief. She had half-raised herself from her seat and leaned forward on her hands, which were firmly placed, palms down, on the table.

Sylvia stood up, leaned in, and put her face very close to Diane's. The contrast was obvious, between Diane's closely cropped dark hair, her olive skin, and her aggressive stance, and Sylvia's slender charm, silver hair, and air of calm sophistication. And yet there was a similarity that Marnie loved about them both: their combustible passion. "I met with Joshua after my night of soul-searching, and he has agreed to lead the group discussion, or at least the first one," she almost growled. Then she sat down. "Did you know he majored in journalism at university, and was a Rhodes Scholar⁵³ in 2009? He researched how the media portrayed FTMs, using a feminist lens. He opened my eyes too, not only with his work, which he loaned me, but also by the way he forgave my inexcusable attack on him the night of Marnie and Joseph's party."

"Wow! How great is that?" exclaimed Gloria, who had remained uncharacteristically silent. "That'll go a long way to mending what went on that night. He turned up at my house after he left Marnie's and I was really worried about him. I had never seen him so distraught."

"Yeah, he told me about how great you were to him," broke in Lucy. "I think it is so vital that we are able to support one another like this, but, getting back to us," she glanced at Sylvia, "I think we do need to be careful. It seems that we get caught up in the awful struggle our FTMs and trans partners and friends experience, but let's not forget about us and what we need. That's what this group is all about, right?" She looked around. "I think we should have one of us take a turn at leading that group."

⁵³ A prestigious post-graduate award to study at the world-famous Oxford University in England.

“Well, that’s a no-brainer!” Gloria looked a bit impatient and Sylvia continued, “Exactly! My idea too.” She smacked her hands palms down on the table and stood up again. “So that’s why I brought a sign-up sheet. We can pass it around and sign up next to the issue that most interests us or one that we have experience with.” She held up the list and began to read: “First topic, after Joshua leads the discussion the first night, is ‘Bodies and perfection’, then ‘Sex for myself’, then...”

“Wait just a minute,” Marnie broke in, laughing. “We aren’t beginning feminists, and, I am sorry love, but who died and gave you the keys to the kingdom?”

“OK then,” Sylvia retorted, “you come up with topics. Ones you want to bring out of the closet, so to speak.”

After a pause, Marnie offered, hoping Sylvia saw the sly twinkle in her eye, “How about ‘Is your feminism up to date?’”

The room erupted at that point. Suggestions came in fast and furious and within ten minutes they had eleven topics, enough for a year with Joshua’s beginning. The topics included, ‘What is so male about cutting the lawn?’, ‘Your mother doesn’t work here’, ‘Support from the community’, ‘Why two genders are not enough’, ‘Who gets to take off their shirt?’, and ‘When did I become invisible?’

“Oh,” Sylvia interjected, “and I’ve just had my paper accepted in *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*. It’s called, ‘Feminism and transgender: A time for reconciliation’.” At this the women yelled and applauded.

Diane said, “Welcome to the group, Sylvia.” She held out her arms and the two women embraced, their differences set aside for the moment.

Chapter 7

The Runaway: January

Marnie rushed to answer the frantic ringing of the doorbell. The first snow of the year was falling in the gloomy January afternoon and she thought it might be her neighbour asking to use the shovel again. They had so little snow so that no one was ever prepared. She opened the door to a chilly blast of air and saw a young tear-stained face she was sure she had never seen before. "What's wrong and who are you?" she asked with alarm.

The young woman's small face and straight yellow hair topped with a fiery red Mohawk, and the fact that she was short and very thin, made her look around twelve. She looked very troubled and now her brow furrowed in confusion. "Don't you remember me?" She looked childishly astonished that anyone could forget her. "I'm Judy. I met you at the dance about three months ago. I was taking tickets at the door. I was wearing a rainbow shirt, a bright red scarf, and rainbow socks....I thought for sure you would remember. I remember you because you were with that trans guy. I wanted to talk to you but you were so busy with your friends." She looked hurt and a bit put out.

"I am really sorry, I don't remember you. I think it was kinda dark in the entrance," Marnie apologized. She didn't tell her that she often didn't remember the young people, and especially if they were taking tickets. "What made you come here?"

"You said I could call you anytime and you gave me your card." At this Judy produced a dog-eared card she had obviously been carrying around in her wallet for the whole three months. Marnie had to admit that it was indeed hers and she opened the door wider, allowing Judy to come in.

They walked down the hall to the big kitchen. Feeling a bit awkward and on the spot at this unexpected invasion, Marnie leaned back against the counter and fired off questions in rapid succession. “Ok, what’s up? And why the tears? And what do you need to talk about? And how old are you anyway?”

“I need a place to stay,” said Judy, and hurried on when she saw Marnie’s look of dismay, “just for a day or two until I get myself sorted out. I am actually older than I look. I turned seventeen last Monday and just can’t stand it at my parents’ house anymore. My mom is back in the dark ages! I am hoping to move in with my boyfriend. Well, he’s not actually my boyfriend but we used to be lovers and now we’re the best of friends sorta with benefits, but he doesn’t have room right now, and he’s going through his own stuff trying to decide if he’ll take T or not, and figure out what he’s going to do with his life. I am so worried about him—.”

“Whoa Nelly!” Marnie exclaimed. She pushed her auburn curls off her forehead, looked at Judy’s pale face searchingly, and said, “First, let’s have tea.” Her mind spun frantically while she put the kettle on and fussed about in the cupboard. She assembled plates, napkins, cookies, cups, plopped a tea bag and poured boiling water in the teapot and returned to her seat, decided. “Let’s just say you can stay here....”

Judy reached across and excitedly grabbed her hand.

“Wait just a minute,” Marnie warned. “I am not the only one who lives here and my partner gets to have a say in this too. But for now, stay at least for the night and we can figure it out as we go along. After supper we have a little support group meeting just for women who have trans guys in their lives. Wanna come?” She poured two mugs of hot herbal tea.

“Oh, that would be just so cool,” Judy sighed. “That’s way more than I was hoping for.” Her translucent skin began to look a bit pinker. She dipped her cookie in her tea and sank back in the chair with a satisfied look.

Later, over a dinner of savoury chicken, and between mouthfuls of buttery mashed potatoes, golden squash, washed down with a steaming mug of hot chocolate, Judy’s story tumbled out in a bewildering rush. *She eats like it had been days since she had much food, but then she’s only barely seventeen*, Marnie reminded herself. She and Joseph exchanged private smiles.

“I met Shane before he started his changes. He didn’t actually tell me at the start and I thought he was a lesbian, and he was, sorta. I had told my mom I was a lesbian about a year before that and so I thought she would be cool with it. Boy, was I wrong!” Her eyes rounded in emphasis. “My mom’s really really religious and just last week she told me she was praying for me to get over my ‘phase’.” Judy crooked her fingers exasperatedly in quote marks. “Then, oh my god! When she met Shane, she totally freaked! I thought he looked kinda androgynous but she said he looked like a bull dyke. I didn’t even know she knew those words! She said she wouldn’t let me see him ever again. But I didn’t stop. I LOVE him!”

Yeah, thought Marnie, *he probably did look like some scary bull dyke. I bet the mom was pretty frightened. It’s one thing to a religious woman for her child to say she’s a lesbian, but it’s another for her to show up with an obvious one in tow.* “So tell me Judy,” Marnie asked, “how old would you be at that point?”

“Well, I was fourteen then, and Shane was eighteen,” and Marnie thought to herself that perhaps the mother had a point.

“After a while, gradually my mom got to know Shane, and even started to like him. But now Shane’s getting serious about transitioning and dressing and looking like a guy so my mom said I couldn’t see him--like, here we go again! When she called him a freak of nature, that was just it for me.” She was so absorbed in her tale that she didn’t notice Joseph flinch at this description. “That’s when I thought of you guys, and here I am.” She finished her story between mouthfuls of hot apple pie smothered in ice cream, and beamed at them both as if everything was perfectly clear.

Joseph used his best social worker voice, apparently to mask his discomfort. “And how do you plan to support yourself? Do you have any money? Will your parents support you? You are seventeen, so they are under no obligation to look after you anymore.”

“Oh, no problem!” Judy’s perky little face exuded delight. “I finish high school this month and I already have an apprenticeship at QC. I’m going to work there once school is out, and it’s full time for fifteen bucks an hour!” Judy flashed them an amazed look. “Right now I work everyday after school and that all counts toward my credentials as a youth worker. I am very smart,” she added confidently. She grinned at the look of surprise on Joseph’s face.

“Do you mean Queerspace Central?” he asked.

“Yup, the very same. And once I am trained, the pay goes up to twenty an hour. I’d work there for free, it’s just such a great place,” Judy enthused.

Joseph nodded, some of his alarm subsiding. “It sounds like you have it all figured out,” he smiled. Marnie relaxed. She trusted Joseph’s wisdom in such matters.

Joseph stood up and started to clear the table. *It's so nice to have him helping again*, she thought. *It's almost like before*. The three of them worked together to clear up the supper dishes before the group arrived. Joseph excused himself and went to gather his gear to workout at the gym while the meeting took place. Although the group had held several meetings since the first one last month, this was only the second time Marnie had hosted. Joseph was starting to get the hang of it. Later he would meet up with Joshua for coffee and be out late enough to give the women lots of time.

Marnie and Judy got the large and battered pine table ready for the meeting, adding a leaf, setting it with more cookies, and fixings for tea and coffee. Judy dragged three more chairs in from the living room and barely had them in place when the doorbell rang, signalling the first arrival.

Gloria bustled in, with Diane and Morag close on her heels. She took one look at Judy and opened her arms. Judy seemed to fly into Gloria's motherly embrace. "How are ya, kiddo?" squealed Gloria, rocking little Judy back and forth like a rag doll.

Diane and Morag gathered around them, taking turns firing questions at Judy in rapid succession.

"How's school?"

"Has your mom settled down yet?"

"How's Shane?"

"How's QC?"

Marnie wondered if she was the only one who didn't know Judy. Why had Judy come to their house rather than the home of someone who knew her? Had Judy tried that already? Before she could ponder this any further, Lucy walked in with Sylvia and

April. She felt a quick flash of jealousy seeing Sylvia and April together, and then, just as quickly, let it go.

“OK, we’re all here,” said Marnie. “Let’s get started. This is Judy, and I see most of you know her. She’s having a bit of trouble at home and is going to crash here for at least tonight.” She looked around at the rest and saw no reaction so she concluded she was just being a bit paranoid about why Judy ended up with her and Joseph.

“Well, I know Judy from another setting” said Gloria, a bit evasively. Diane and Morag nodded, and suddenly the penny dropped for Marnie.

They must all go to AA together, she thought, and felt relieved. She respected the AA requirements regarding anonymity and said no more.

“But I don’t know this little punk’s story about Shane,” Gloria winked at Judy. “And what are you doing at Marnie’s? Why didn’t you come to my house?”

“Well,” Judy looked around tentatively, then plunged in. “I actually wanted to talk to somebody whose partner was early on in the trans process. I really want to support Shane, but I am so afraid to make a mistake. Like, he still gets mistaken for a woman a lot. I guess that’s because he doesn’t want to do T right now. I really want to be seen as a lesbian ‘cause I just love women and I’m one of those really ‘out there’ kind of gals and then I feel so ashamed because I know I am not being properly supportive,” she thrust her face forward in what would be a comical gesture for emphasis, had it not been for her intensely earnest look, “like they say you are supposed to at QC. Like at the beginning I didn’t know and nobody told me, and I talked about him all the time since it was my first lesbian relationship and I ‘mispronounced’ him all the time, calling him ‘her’ and ‘she’ and that was just so disrespectful, and even that I thought I was a

lesbian after I knew, I just look back and feel quite embarrassed at how unsupportive I was. Even when I discovered another way of identifying I still said that I wouldn't sleep with a cis man and then realized that this was another way of being disrespectful since it was like saying a trans man was not a cis man and nobody even corrected me...I had to realize it myself."

"Hey honey, slow down a bit, take a breath," Sylvia laughed. "You sure sound like you are hard on yourself. Do you know the purpose of this meeting?"

"Well, yeah, isn't it about supporting our trans guys?" Judy looked around, her round blue eyes eager and excited.

"Actually, no," said Morag. "It's about supporting us. We need support in this process. Yes, we support them, but this meeting is just to talk about what it's like for us to be going through this process."

"Ohhhh," said Judy. She squinted her eyes and puckered her childish mouth in thought. Then she brightened, "I really don't need support for myself, I just need to figure out how to be with Shane so that I can make it all right for him."

There was a moment of silence while the other women digested that. Morag shook her head sadly, Sylvia gave Marnie a meaningful look, while Gloria just held Judy in a loving gaze. Finally Lucy spoke up.

"Look darling. This is your first relationship, right?"

Judy nodded enthusiastically. She seemed to vibrate, wiggling like a friendly puppy, her sharp little face turning this way and that to take in everything at once. Marnie felt tired just watching her bright energy.

“Well, there are a few things you said...actually a lot that you said makes me feel just a wee bit worried about you,” began Lucy. “For example, what about you?” Diane and Gloria looked relieved and thankful. Marnie smiled and nodded, glad that Lucy had stepped up to the plate.

“Huh?” said Judy. “I don’t get it. What do you mean? I’m right here.”

“Well, I hear your desire to get it right, to be respectful and supportive, and that’s great,” Lucy leaned toward Judy and put her hand on Judy’s arm, “but you are going through something here too, not just Shane. I don’t hear any recognition of that in what you say. In fact, all I heard were things you thought you were doing wrong. For example, you say you really want to be seen as a lesbian. How is that for you when you are out with this masculine-looking person?”

Marnie gazed at Lucy in frank astonishment. *Those counseling sessions really have made such a difference*, she thought, and made a note to herself to ask who Lucy had seen for help with her grief.

“Yeah, that’s a hard one, for sure,” admitted Judy. “It’s a lot easier to be seen as a lesbian when I’m dating a girl. I don’t even bother telling people I’m lesbian when I am with Shane. It’s a real mind fuck for them. I try to avoid it whenever possible.”

“Doesn’t that make you sad?” asked Gloria.

“And how could you be ‘mispronouncing’ him when he didn’t tell you he was trans?” said Diane.

Sylvia looked into Judy’s surprised face and smiled, giving her a gentle pat on the hand. “There is nothing for you to feel ashamed about. You get to say what you like

and don't like. If you don't want to ever sleep with a cis man, it's OK to say so. A trans man may pass as cis, but he's never going to be a person born male. That's just a fact."

Judy looked around at the women in silence. Marnie watched the recognition dawning as Judy's face changed from its former perky enthusiasm. She looked more mature and a lot more sad. "You know?" Her voice trembled and broke. "I don't think it's working so well for me, this pretending that everything is all right. I think I am putting me way second to him. I thought that when I felt invisible, or like I wasn't being supportive enough, that I was just being selfish. It's really hard to tell the difference. I feel so confused. I...I..." she took a deep shaky breath, "I need to ask you something. Don't tell anyone. Please." She looked around anxiously. "So, when he tried to kill himself, and then broke up with me...do you think it was my fault?"

Chapter 8

Surgery: January

The air hung damp and thick when Marnie and Joseph, already chilly with the January weather, left the hotel and climbed into the car for the trip to the clinic for Joseph's long-awaited chest reconstruction. His beard was now thick, dark, and curly, and he had attempted to tame it into a 'V' on his chin, but the result was more fluff than 'V' and stood out on his pale face, a startling contrast to his well-mannered straw-coloured hair.

"It's weird to have my teeth chattering" he joked. "I didn't expect to be so frightened."

Marnie reached over and touched his hand. He gave her a thankful smile. "I am so sorry for all the shit I've put you through these past few months," he began.

Before he could continue, Marnie stopped him. "It's all part of loving you. I know you would do the same for me," although privately she wasn't so sure of that. She had been having many doubts about their relationship and what she wanted out of life. The two basic issues were whether she wanted to be with a man, and that she wanted to be with an adult. Joseph seemed so childish lately. He vacillated from temper tantrums to sweet and needy submission. She wondered how he could function at work, or if he was

Thankful for the seat warmers in the car, which Marnie had turned to high to help with Joseph's shivering, they arrived at the clinic the prescribed twenty minutes prior to surgery. Even though the receptionist had to know Joseph was trans because of the surgery he was having, she behaved as if they were a heterosexual couple. Marnie experienced that by-now familiar invisibility as the woman only spoke to her through

Joseph. Marnie flinched as she twittered, “Oh, I bet your wife had to drag you out of bed this morning, hmmm?” and “You just make sure she takes good care of you when this is all over,” all the while avoiding eye contact with Marnie. It was a conflict, since Marnie was thankful for the recognition of their partnership, yet resented the fact that, as had been happening with more frequency, her lesbian self was nowhere acknowledged. *And why would it?* she thought. *I am with a guy. Hello!*

After being prepped, which Marnie knew consisted of careful shaving of the surgical area, Joseph walked into the operating room, gown flapping comically over his bare buttocks. The look he gave her as the doors were closing was anything but comical. He looked terrified, a child walking into a frightful unknown. Marnie’s heart gave a lurch. She wanted to run after him crying, “You don’t have to do this! I want Jody back!” The doors shut with a sharp ‘snick’. Marnie stood silently for a long moment. *This is it, she thought, there’s no going back after this. Our future is sealed.*

Shooed out of the waiting room as if she were staff rather than Joseph’s life partner, she went for coffee, since that was all she could manage, although she should have been ravenously hungry. She had had only a piece of toast for breakfast in solidarity with Joseph, who was fasting. After spending as long as she could at the café, she paced aimlessly around the block where the clinic was located. It was a beautiful part of town but she hardly noticed the dappled sunlight that had burned away the cold mist of the morning, and the tree-lined streets, still beautiful even in the dead of winter. The brittle sun in her eyes made it hard to see, but then she wasn’t really looking. An extraterrestrial could have materialized and asked for directions and she would have given them absently and carried on. All she wanted was for this part to be over safely,

and she continued to pace, stomach sour and fists in her pockets, sweating in spite of the chill.

She couldn't wait for the surgery to be over and for them to be peacefully ensconced once again in quiet and privacy. They had booked a lovely suite in a venerable old hotel overlooking the beach. She remembered other times when she and Jody had come here for romantic get-aways. It was right in the heart of the gay area and they had felt at home. *Who am I and where is home now?* she thought. She looked at her watch for the hundredth time, and decided she could chance heading back.

Joseph was still in surgery. *Four hours! It's been four hours*, she thought, *what are they doing in there? They told me three hours, tops*. Just as she was about to spin off into panic, the doors opened and the surgeon loomed over her, stiff and regal in his operating scrubs. Before she could get to her feet, he said, "He's lost a lot of blood and we had some trouble getting his blood pressure up, but I think he's safe to go now." He was gone before she had a chance to open her mouth. *So much for bedside manner*, she thought, but before she could get angry, a nurse called her name.

The operating room doors were standing open. Marnie found Joseph lying very still on the gurney. He turned his head, as if in slow motion, to look at her and, for the second time that day, her heart gave a lurch. His eyes were unfocussed and his blank face had a greenish hue. She quickly forgot anything else in her concern for him.

"Can I have a drink?" he croaked. He raised his head and took a few gulps from the straw Marnie offered; his face became a paler shade of green, and he promptly retched into the basin conveniently waiting.

“It’s his blood pressure,” said the nurse. “We’ll keep him until he can stand up for a few minutes and walk to the bathroom.”

Marnie wondered how she would deal with an unsteady Joseph. *What if he falls? I will just have to let him.* The panicky feeling she had experienced all day intensified and her head felt like it would split.

The nurse showed Marnie the vacuum bottles hanging below the dressing on Joseph’s chest and described how to care for them. She told Marnie what the wound would look like and what to expect over the next few weeks. She emphasized that they were not to worry over what the nipples looked like and that it would likely take some time before they looked normal again. Most of what the nurse said was familiar to Marnie from the reading she’d done to prepare herself as well as her own long-ago experiences in the operating room. *It’s sure different when it happens to you.*

It was clear that she and Joseph were on their own. There was no follow-up care and only an appointment for three months post-surgery. Marnie was shocked, considering the money they had paid. There was not much in preparation for the surgery but she did expect more than what felt like an assembly-line approach. She had done a lot of work so Joseph could have the surgery sooner than recommended by the standards of care⁵⁴, but in this case she felt she could say nothing since Joseph had warned her not to use her credentials or knowledge with any of the operating room staff. He wanted to be in charge.

⁵⁴ Coleman, E., Bockting, W., Botzer, M., Cohen-Kettenis, P., DeCuypere, G., Feldman, J.,... Zucker, K. (2011). Standards of care for the health of transsexual, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people, version 7. *International Journal of*

Finally, after numerous failed attempts to sit up, and then to stand, Joseph staggered to the bathroom and managed a successful pee, and he was discharged. With a small packet of dressing material under her arm, a prescription for pain medication, and one dose to tide them over until they got to the drug store, Marnie settled Joseph in the car and started out into traffic. Abruptly, Joseph threw up all over his clothes and the rented car. Marnie decided there was nothing to do but head for the drug store, get what they needed, and get back to the hotel as quickly as possible. She left him in the car as she dashed into the store and returned to find a little group of concerned people gathered around. He did look as if he was half-dead, covered in vomit, and still as green as lime sherbet. She assured the good Samaritans that she had it all under control, got in, and headed for the hotel. The doorman helped them up to the room and even helped in the sticky task of getting Joseph's clothes off. Marnie thanked him profusely and gave him a generous tip. They were alone. She tucked him into bed and was asleep beside him almost before her head hit the pillow.

In spite of her exhaustion, Marnie had a restless night. The morning sun streamed into the room through a slit in the heavy draperies. Marnie's eyes flickered open but then she was dragged back into her dream. She was on a pirate ship in high rolling seas. They were battling an invading band and in the scuffle she was knocked down, her sword lost in the fall. She reached out her hand to feel something warm and sticky. She knew it was blood and she thought she had been stabbed, or maybe she'd killed someone. She slowly came to herself and it took her a few moments to realize there WAS blood. Joseph's. The bed was soaked. Shocked fully awake, she rolled over in a panic to see if he was still alive.

Marnie determined there was no fresh bleeding, and Joseph was no worse for the experience. She decided the dressings had to be changed. Joseph protested feebly that the nurse in the clinic had told him not to disturb the dressing for three days. Marnie took control, now having to deal with his panic as well as her own, and assured him she knew what she was doing. She changed the top dressing, leaving the inner one intact.

It had, however, been a long time since she had changed or emptied a vacuum drain and so she carefully followed the verbal instructions the nurse at the clinic had provided. *Why didn't I pay more attention?* she thought. Carefully, she clamped the tubing and pored the dark, sludgy blood into the toilet. She hadn't expected to have to empty the little plastic bottles so soon. How did people manage who didn't have able partners to help them? How would Joseph have managed if the situation were reversed? Would there have been more support for them if Joseph were a woman having a mastectomy and she were a man? Marnie recalled how often she had heard such slogans as 'closer to home'⁵⁵ and how her nurses' union warned about the shortfall in care that would result in the burden falling to women at home.⁵⁶ *Well, she thought, here I am, providing care that really should be performed by people who are experienced in such things.*

Joseph wanted food but was so doped Marnie doubted he would be able to eat. Dutifully, she ordered room service, but instead of the hamburger and fries he wanted

⁵⁵ Wiggins, J.W. (1999). Closer to home: The case for experiential participation in health reform. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 90(1), 30-36.

⁵⁶ McPherson, D. (1993, Feb 21). Nurses: More bureaucracy? *The Province*. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/docview/267459582?accountid=1484>

she ordered him a soft-boiled egg and toast. Luckily he didn't remember what he'd asked for and ate the egg gratefully.

After the meal she checked them out of the hotel and bundled Joseph into the car. He grumbled and whined most of the way home except for blessed periods when he dozed off. *I guess I would be the same*, she thought. *I expected this to be a bit more joyful. Here he is with the surgery he had been waiting for completed and he seems like a complete wreck.* A wave of guilt swept over her and she tried to be cheerful and sympathetic.

After a week of recuperation, Joseph seemed much improved, though still moody and on edge. He suggested they go out to lunch to celebrate the success of his surgery. They went to their favourite diner by the ocean, one that held many happy memories for them. She remembered her last birthday celebration, and the time Joseph was given a free parking space for a month at work in honour of ten years of service. They sat at a table by the window, looking out at the beach. In the foreground, people alternately either hurried or strolled along the promenade. It was fun to wonder where they were going, if they were on holiday or just out for a break from work. Marnie was hungry. Joseph's normal colour had returned, he had reduced his intake of painkillers, and seemed almost back to himself. They ordered: bacon and eggs for Marnie, and a clubhouse sandwich for Joseph, and sat back to watch the activities passing by the window.

As they ate, they made up stories about the people they saw. One handsome man waited for a long time just outside the window, and then finally slowly turned and walked away. They decided his lover had found another and there would be no happy

reunion that day. A woman rushed by with a stroller, the baby wailing so loudly they could hear it through the thick glass, and her little dog had to trot so fast to keep up that its legs seemed a blur. They laughed until tears were rolling down their faces. It felt wonderful, light, and loving and Marnie looked at Joseph as she hadn't in a very long time. She could still see traces of Jody in his unshaved face. His hair was still blond and it still flopped over his high forehead in the same way. Memories of Jody threatened to overwhelm her and she quickly put her napkin up to her eyes.

Joseph reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a little bag. It crinkled and rustled as he nervously unwrapped it. He pulled out a familiar-looking purple velvet box. Marnie watched with growing anxiety. He reached across the table and took her hand and in his other hand he presented the open box with a brilliant diamond ring nestled in its folds. Marnie clamped her teeth together to prevent her jaw from dropping. "Will you marry me?" he said, gazing at her with a look on his face she didn't recall seeing before. It was a puppy look, part fear, part hunger, and very needy.

"Joseph," she whispered, "is this the right time? I know we've talked about it but I think you need to be feeling better to ask this question. You're in a very vulnerable place and I don't want you to do this because you need me. I'll be there for you as long as it takes you to recover from this surgery. I am not going anywhere."

His eyes widened in hurt, shock, disbelief, but he said nothing. He methodically closed the box, crinkled it back into the bag and then into his pocket. They sat in uncomfortable silence. Finally he said, "I know I have been hard to live with lately, and I am very sorry. This is still such a new thing and it seems as if I don't know who I'm going to be from one day to the next. Do you still love me? Will you stay with me?"

I hear what he wants, Marnie thought, but what about me? It's scary how much of this is all about him and his needs.

She knew this conversation had been coming. She just didn't expect it so soon, and in these circumstances. Gathering her courage, she took a deep breath and said, "I love you Joseph, and I always will, but I am not sure our relationship will survive this transition of yours."

Chapter 9

Baby Talk: February

It was a miserable evening in February, blustery driving rain making umbrellas a waste of time and chilling everyone to the bone. There was an unusual threat of heavy snow, but the women had agreed their support group was too important to miss.

Morag buzzed several women at once through the front door of the condo and was waiting in the hall as they came off the elevator, her bouncy brown curls still damp from her shower.

“Mmm, is that fresh cookies I smell?” Marnie wondered aloud as she and Gloria took their coats to the bedroom. “I am so glad to get out of the house,” she continued in a softer voice to Gloria. “Joseph’s driving me nuts. He was totally freaked out about the look of his nipples the first time he saw them. I must say I was a bit shocked too even though they warned me at the clinic. They were black and I thought they might just fall off!”

“Eww!” responded Gloria. “They’re fine now though?”

“Yeah, but what an ordeal! Dressing changes, drain shortening, and him just nitpicky about every little detail.”

“Anybody home?” called Diane, as she and Lucy came in the open door, following the sound of muffled voices.

April followed close behind, alone. Marnie admired her tall, lithe figure and her long straight hair, which she wore in a single braid down her back. April was wearing her trademark black outfit, silk pants and a subtly patterned black blouse, emphasizing her slim body.

April saw Marnie's questioning look. "Sylvia's at that conference, presenting her paper. She asked me to remind you." Marnie felt something resolve between them and smiled.

Judy rushed in with her Mohawk limp from the rain and listing to the right. *She looks like a wet chicken*, thought Marnie, smiling.

"Sorry I'm late" Judy gasped. "I had to run all the way since I missed the bus. I told my friend Sally to come. I hope that's OK. Her boyfriend is in early transition and she is having a really hard time."

"Of course, you silly," said Morag. "We let you in didn't we?" and gave her a hug.

There was another knock at the door and Morag turned to welcome a small blond woman with a child in her arms. "Who's this?" crooned Morag. Marnie knew she had wanted a baby and was a pushover for any small person. The child squirmed and smiled, head buried in mother's shoulder. Marnie caught a glimpse of shiny brown eyes through chubby fingers. The wavy brown hair was in contrast to mother's sleek blond head and the round tummy and pudgy legs showed clearly through the overalls straining to cover them. Marnie guessed the child might be about three.

"I'm Sally, and this is Jennifer. I hope it is all right with you that I brought her. I don't have a sitter and Ben had to go out." Sally looked anxiously at Morag, who just opened her arms and embraced both of them.

"Just take your things through to the bedroom down the hall and meet us in the dining room," Morag suggested. Marnie realized she hadn't identified Jennifer's gender until she heard her name.

Morag's home was small but the open design made it seem spacious. Sally, Jennifer toddling along beside her, followed the sounds of laughing and chatter to the dining room. The modern table of sleek glossy oak was ready with coffee and cookies but the women had gathered beyond in the bright, colourful, living room. Five floors beneath them the city lights twinkled in the glowering evening darkness.

"Oh, look at this view!" sighed April.

Sally sat on the rich red corduroy couch and rummaged in her cavernous bag. She brought out a bottle of juice and a soft yellow bunny for Jennifer. Morag brought a colouring book and crayons and set them out on the yellow coffee table. It and the yellow side tables made a nice contrast with the dark wood floor, now covered in the jumble of crayons Jennifer dropped. Holding her bottle under one arm, Jennifer solemnly picked up a crayon in her other hand and began short little strokes across the page.

Morag interrupted the visiting, calling the women back to the dining room. "Let's begin. Since I am the host I will chair the meeting. Gloria, could you keep the cookies going and maybe Marnie you could keep an eye on the coffee? Sylvia is at a conference, presenting her paper so I think we are all here. Sally, I'm so glad you could join us tonight."

At this Sally's face went pink and she smiled. "Judy has raved about this group and she thinks you might be able to help me out a bit." She shifted nervously in her seat and Morag wisely turned the attention away from her.

"Marnie, want to start off by telling us all how you and Joseph are doing after his surgery? You look a little tired."

Gloria gave Marnie an encouraging grin.

“Well, where do I begin? I am so glad to be here. Nobody else would really get what it’s been like. The drains kept getting plugged with clots and the dressings would leak all over his clothes, the bed, everything. Finally I took the drains out a day earlier than suggested and Joseph nearly had a fit. But the worst thing was the way his nipples looked. The first time I saw them I thought they weren’t going to ‘take’. You know they move the nipples and make them smaller?” A few heads nodded. “They do tell you, in rare cases, that the nipples fail. I thought this was going to happen to Joseph. I tried to be matter-of-fact about it all but he picked up on my anxiety. He has been pretty anxious anyhow and this just put him over the top. He kept telling me how thankful he was and then in the next breath he would criticize something I was doing. Really, this meeting is going to save his life and my sanity!”

Diane laughed. “How are the nipples now?”

“Oh, they’re just fine. He’s pretty happy with the results. ‘Very manly’ he calls his chest. The nipples are pink and healthy and you can hardly see the scars. Once they fade the scars will be nearly invisible. But I tell ya, I am done in.”

Gloria reached over and gave Marnie a motherly hug.

“It makes me want to tell Shane not to have the surgery.” Judy puckered her brow.

“When Ben had his chest surgery I thought I might have to move out for a while,” offered Sally.

Morag turned to Sally. “Would you feel comfortable telling us what we can help you with Sally?”

Sally looked very uncomfortable but there was a determined set to her jaw. "All I want is a baby," she said, in a barely audible whisper. "Ben won't hear of it. He says we need to be married and before that can happen, he needs to have all his surgery done, so that he can be a proper father and husband."

"Is he a father to Jennifer now?" asked Morag. "I know he can't be her genetic father, but doesn't he act that part?"

"Yeah, but he doesn't want her to know he wasn't always male, and he wants to start off married before we have a baby. The problem is he only works casual in a care home for old people. When he works the money isn't bad, but he doesn't get called very often, and even then he sometimes turns the shift down so that he can work on his transition."

"Um, he sounds a bit...er..." stammered Marnie.

"Immature, inflexible, controlling?" offered Sally, speaking more loudly and looking decidedly angry. "Yeah, that would about sum it up. He insists I can't tell anybody about his transition unless they ask, which is weird for me, like either I can talk about it or I can't. But Jennifer is never supposed to know."

Marnie could picture the next family dinner where Jennifer shrieked, "Gramma, daddy's having a twansion."

"Wow!" exclaimed Diane. "You think you can keep such a thing a secret?" She shot a glance at Jennifer, who was quietly colouring in her book and apparently oblivious to the conversation. "And on his salary, how long is all this going to take?"

"I know!" cried Sally. "Forever! And time is marching on and soon Jennifer will be four and I want her to have a sibling close enough to play with. I suppose, if Jennifer

ever needs to know about Ben I would tell her. But why would she? I just assume I am my father's child, and I assume he was always male. Would it make a difference if I was wrong about those things?"

April, her long face a mixture of concern and compassion, said gently, "In years past, people who adopted children were told to behave as if the child were born to them."

Good, thought Marnie, April's speaking up about something she knows an awful lot about.

April had been adopted as a baby in Hong Kong to a wealthy family. They all had immigrated to Canada when she was still a toddler. She smoothed her long black hair behind her ears. "That didn't work so well when the adopted kid found out, and it is so easy for these things to come out. It can be a thoughtless remark by a neighbour or family member and then the child begins to suspect. It often came as a shock for them to finally find out that they were this shameful secret. That's the way I found out. My auntie was visiting from China and she made a remark about it being so sad my mother could never have her own children. I was sixteen and felt as if the bottom fell out of my world. I think that is why I became a grief counselor. I don't think I really ever got over the shock. These family secrets have a way of coming out, no matter how careful you are. I have been with a few trans men over the years and can remember a time when the official advice they were given was to pretend they had always been male and to invent a boyhood for themselves⁵⁷. I know one trans person who lives this way. Even her partner doesn't know."

⁵⁷ Bornstein, K. (1994). *Gender outlaw*. New York: Vintage Books.

Marnie and Gloria exchanged shocked looks amid the chorus of “oh god” and “no way.”

Marnie thought of the saying ‘secrets make you sick’⁵⁸ but decided to hold her tongue. It didn’t seem like the right time because Sally looked stricken.

“I do love Ben, but it seems his ‘needs’,” Sally crooked her fingers around the word “come first and everything else is second. I don’t want my daughter to find out about him by accident, but he is adamant. I don’t know what to do.” Diane and Morag, one on either side of Sally, put their arms around her narrow shoulders while tears ran down her face.

Marnie was uncomfortably aware that Lucy, sitting to her left, had had her abortion only two months before. In spite of her calm and compassionate handling of Judy last month when she reminded her to focus on her own needs, she seemed to be struggling again. As if on cue, Lucy blurted out “At least you have one child...” and then just as quickly, “Oh, I’m so sorry! I had an abortion in December and I can’t seem to get over it. I am so angry all the time. I know it doesn’t make sense but when I see pregnant women or women with babies in strollers, I resent the shit out of them. When I see families with a man included, this rage comes over me that’s directed at him. I guess I wish that was me, but I don’t get why I am so furious!”

Sally was shocked out of her tears and sat speechless, staring at Lucy. Finally she said, “I lost a baby before Jennifer and I do know a bit of what you might be feeling. It’s OK.”

⁵⁸ Kleinahns, K. (2011). Secrets make you sick. South Africa: Trevor Kleinahns.

The tension drained out of the atmosphere, Gloria passed the cookies and Marnie poured everyone fresh coffee from a pot she had just brewed.

Although it wasn't her area of expertise, Marnie knew enough of abortion aftermath that she suspected what the problem was. "You need some counseling Lucy, especially for post-abortion. I can get you a list of counselors from work."

Lucy, red-faced, tried to recover her composure. "I knew this was a possibility, but I just wasn't prepared for it to happen to me, or for it to be so...so immovable. I thought I had it figured out but I feel like a mess most of the time, and it's been three months!"

"How has Henry been with it all?" inquired Morag. "Has he stuck with you or just left you on your own?"

"Oh, he's been fabulous!" Lucy replied. "Much better than what I expected. I was not prepared for him to be this way, given how self-absorbed he's been. He calls just about every day and just listens. He takes me out to lunch and holds my hand when I cry. But he's off the testosterone now and seems more able to relate to what other people are going through."

"Are you guys still thinking of getting back together?" asked Gloria, narrowing her eyes thoughtfully.

"No," Lucy said. "We have decided to remain friends. In spite of how he stepped up to the plate around the abortion, I think he is just too unstable to be a partner to anyone."

Morag nodded her head. “Do you think this might be compounding your grief over the loss of the baby?” Lucy looked at her, comprehension dawning. “Yeah,” Morag continued, “I have wanted a baby as long as I can remember.”

Finally! Thought Marnie. *She’s going to talk about it!*

“I had two miscarriages, both at three months, and decided I just couldn’t take losing another one. Now, at forty-nine, I am a bit too old, but when Sam left last year, it brought it all back up again. I was angry for months. I think I am still angry.” But rather than looking angry, Morag’s face crumbled and she began to cry. Lucy reached over and took her hand. The other women sat in silent support and the only sound was the insistent rain against the windows.

Finally Judy ventured, “Wow, I never thought about all this stuff until now! I never wanted to have kids, but if I ever changed my mind, it’s a lot more complicated than I imagined. I suppose it’s a really important thing to talk about in relationships like ours. Stuff like how does a guy who wants to keep his transition private manage it all with small kids who ask all sorts of questions? And how do we honour their choice for privacy with answering those questions? Whew!”

Chapter 10

Irreconcilable Differences: March

March was a dull month, alternating days of wind and rain interspersed with days when shafts of weak sunshine struggled in the chill. It was enough to give hope that spring was coming, but disappointingly devoid of any real relief from the winter's blahs. Sylvia's party promised a bright spot in the midst of all the grey. She, with Gloria's help, was hosting it for their growing community of trans, non-trans, and all different shades of gender identification. Sylvia's home was always welcoming, but tonight it was lit with twinkling lights and candles, packed full of people, and seemed especially festive. Marnie knew most of the guests. Morag and Sam had their heads together with April. She heard Sam say, "I know, but you tell me what other pronoun would work?" Diane was dancing with Lucy, who twirled and stumbled; both ending up in a giggling heap on the couch, and in the very midst of all the noise and conversation sat Judy with her headphones on, legs crossed, making funny little noises as she grooved to her tunes. The sliding door to the deck was open to let in the sound of crashing waves on the beach below. The result was a friendly, confusing hubbub, and Marnie stood there savouring it like a tonic.

Tonight Sylvia looked stunning in a shimmering silver button-down shirt, black bolero vest, and black jeans with a satin stripe down the long leg that ended in black embossed cowboy boots. She sat across from Gloria, deep in conversation, one ankle crossed over her knee. Marnie had never seen her looking so hot and something about it took her breath away. She chastised herself with an inward grin: *Down girl, you're a married woman.*

Joseph had bought Marnie a red velveteen jacket for her birthday and with it she wore her favourite white shirt and tan cords. For her, this was as dressed up as it got and she knew she looked pretty darn hot herself.

Since Joseph's chest surgery in January, Marnie had found him increasingly difficult to live with. Their sex life was practically non-existent and they hardly even talked. She had tried to open up the conversation many times and was met with social pleasantries or quiet indifference. He spent a lot of time at work or with friends. She felt lonely, lonelier than if she had been alone, and utterly abandoned. It was a surprise that he had wanted to come to the party with her and she felt hopeful about their relationship for the first time in months.

Marnie groped her way along the dark hall, bumping into little groups of people on her way to the bedroom. She'd left her reading glasses in her coat pocket, or at least she hoped that's where they were. She reached for the light switch in the gloom. The room flooded with light and she saw Joseph and Joshua, arms around each other, kissing passionately. Hurriedly she switched the light off and retreated.

In a daze, she slowly walked down the hall toward the noise and laughter in the living room. As she rounded the corner she came face to face with Sylvia, who took one look at her and steered her into the guest room.

"What's happened?" Sylvia opened her arms and Marnie could only step into them. Her insides felt raw and churning and she thought she might be sick.

"He's with Joshua in the bedroom," she finally managed. "I have to go home."

"Not by yourself, you're not." And Sylvia got her coat, whispered a word to Gloria on her way out, and eased Marnie through the door and into her car.

At home, the months of pain all came out in a torrent. “He’s never home, and when he is we don’t talk! It’s like living with a statue,” Marnie wailed. “God, I feel so alone, so humiliated. I was glad he had Joshua to talk to. What a chump I’ve been, what an idiot, what planet have I been living on? I should have beaten them both to a pulp at your place, or screamed the place down. But no! What do I do? What I’ve always done...close the door...walk away...don’t make a scene.” She got up and began to pace around the kitchen. Sylvia sat quietly, sadness in her eyes. “I don’t get this change in attraction,” Marnie cried. “How can someone up and decide they now want to be with men, just like that? He has always been attracted to women and now suddenly he wants to be with a man? It’s craziness!”

Sylvia opened her mouth, then closed it, shifted in her chair, looking as bewildered as Marnie. “Did you ever talk about this?” she ventured.

“Earlier, when we actually still talked, we discussed his passing attractions to men.” Marnie sat down again. She continued, her voice getting louder, “That’s the way he put it anyhow. He claimed he didn’t plan to do anything, just that he was keeping me up-to-date. I was even willing for him to give this a try, to support him even in that. God! To find out this is happening right under my nose at a party—I just can’t quite get my head around it!” She pounded the table, and was practically shouting, “Why would he sneak around when I was willing for it to happen all above board? And what he said to justify being attracted to men is that he wanted to, quote unquote, ‘handle the goods.’ So now he’s romancing another FTM?! What gives?”

“I know. It seems such a mess. You have every right to be angry,” Sylvia spoke in a soothing voice. “I think Lucy went through something like this with Henry, but of

course it's different when you are not in a couple. That happened after they broke up. I wonder if there is any research that talks about sexual orientation changes following transition?" Marnie gave her a sharp look. Sylvia hurriedly continued, "But of course that isn't much help for what you are going through, is it? This isn't about sexual orientation, it's about betrayal. He should have told you."

The door opened with a gust and Joseph rushed into the room. "Oh, I'm so sorry Marnie," he began.

"A bit late for that, hmmm?" Sylvia fixed him with a hostile glare.

"It's OK Sylvia. I'm OK. You can go. I'll call you in the morning." Marnie kissed her on the cheek.

Sylvia picked up her coat. "Call me if you need me, OK?" She hesitated a moment and looked like she wanted to scoop Marnie up in her arms, then turned her back and was gone.

"It just happened. We're both just as surprised as you." Joseph looked at her hopefully.

"Yeah, right, you just happened to suddenly find yourselves in each other's arms, in Sylvia's bedroom, during a party that we went to as a couple." She stopped, so angry she was lost for words.

"Everything has been so confusing." Joseph looked distraught, his large brow drawn together in deep furrows. "I have been a shit, I know it. When it first started..."

"Oh, so now it isn't such a surprise. So just when did this all start? You should have told me." Marnie spat out the words like bullets.

“Yeah, you’re so right. I agree. I am so sorry. I just didn’t quite get it at first, and then, as it slowly dawned on me, on both of us...” he dropped his head in embarrassment, “I couldn’t find the right time to tell you. It’s not like we were talking much or anything.”

Marnie stared at him, something close to disgust on her face. “After nearly four years, this is the best you can do?”

“I’m here now. I’m talking. A bit late but here we are.” Joseph looked close to tears, a phenomenon Marnie suddenly realized she hadn’t seen in months. “At first I thought it was just sexual. You know, the novelty. We get each other. But now...” he paused. “I think I’m in love with him. And I love you too. I just don’t know what to do. Can you give me some time?”

Marnie had been listening to this with growing anger and astonishment. “This is not love! What kind of an idiot do you think I am? It’s bloody over! I want you out of this house tonight. Pack and get out.”

It was Joseph’s turn to look dumbfounded. “I made a mistake! Can’t you just give me a little time?”

“To do what? Choose? Sorry, you’ve made your choice. Now go and live with it.”

Joseph read the determination in Marnie’s face and quietly turned into the bedroom. Marnie could hear him opening drawers and dragging things around. She tried to block out the sounds.

It was two in the morning and Marnie knew that Sylvia would be waiting. She dialed the number and Sylvia picked up the phone after the first ring. “The last ones are

just leaving. Come over.” Her voice was like honey on Marnie’s wounded heart. “It’s better than being at your place tonight.” Marnie did not need convincing.

There was no sound from the bedroom. She yelled, “I’m leaving and when I get back I expect you to be gone.” She grabbed a coat and slammed the door behind her.

Marnie was surprised to wake with the sun shining through an unfamiliar window. Then she remembered she was at Sylvia’s, they’d drunk wine while she alternately raged and cried, and finally Sylvia had insisted that she spend the night in the guest room.

After a breakfast she had no appetite for but ate anyhow and a loving hug from Sylvia, Marnie reluctantly headed home. *I hope he’s gone*, she thought, and, in the next moment, *maybe he stayed, he’s going to explain that it’s all a huge mistake*. She felt a desperate clawing at her gut. *Now I know why he wasn’t talking to me*. She walked through the front door to silence. Joseph was gone, his side of the closet bare and the drawers in his dresser pulled open and devoid of most of his clothes. She wandered through the rooms that seemed empty without Joseph and memories flooded her. The sink where he would come behind her and kiss her neck; the couch where they had watched movies, eating popcorn and crying; the bed where they used to turn in the morning and be glad the other was there. It was like a bad dream. Any moment Joseph would come bounding through the front door, catch her up in his arms and kiss her like he used to. Or was it Jody who did those things? She sat on the bed, doubled over with pain. It felt like there had been a robbery.

Chapter 11

The Community: May

I wonder when Joseph is coming, Marnie thought. It'll be the first time seeing them together. It's been two months since he left and we're STILL working out how to be friendly with one another. She hadn't realized just how hard it would be to navigate the transition from lover to friend.

I don't know what I would have done without her, she thought, glancing at Sylvia skillfully arranging cups on the refreshment table. *She hasn't seemed to mind that I've been spending most of my free time at her place, crying on her shoulder. She's become as good a friend as Jody used to be.* They worked now in companionable silence, putting on the coffee, setting up extra chairs, and pulling a table to the front of the room for Joshua, the speaker. They hadn't booked a large room in the women's centre since they didn't expect more than around fifteen to twenty people for this first community forum. It was cozy with some slightly scruffy furniture around the room but that somehow made it feel intimate and homey.

Marnie tried to focus on the reason for the gathering. The group thought it was time the wider lesbian community considered its part in viewing gender as a feminist issue. Joshua had agreed to lead the first discussion, which would be a general introduction to the issues of gender and sexual orientation as feminist issues. *How great is that that they are supportive of a trans man leading the discussion here?* she reflected. It wasn't too long ago the centre would have categorically refused, just because he was male. *I hope he's going to talk about welcoming trans women to the*

centre, she thought. She knew this also had been a bone of contention among the collective that ran the women's centre.

Marnie saw a couple she had never seen before standing just inside the door looking a bit lost and hurried over to them.

"I'm Mary and this is Troy." Mary beamed at Marnie and nervously smoothed her untidy grey ponytail. Her clothes were those of a woman who worked outside: red flannel shirt over a blue T-shirt, jeans, and thick work boots. Her barrel-shaped body was partly hidden by her clothing but the arms uncovered by her rolled shirtsleeves were thick and muscled. Troy was similarly dressed but taller than Mary, who looked around five feet, and Marnie got the impression of a quiet thinker. He was lean and wiry and walked like a dancer, as if his feet floated over the floor.

Marnie glanced over at Sylvia, who nodded that she was OK to continue the set-up on her own. "Come and sit down. Why don't we grab the couch?"

"I've heard about your support group, but I have never really felt the need to come." Mary smiled sweetly and Troy looked at his boots. "And we both work pretty hard on the farm and don't seem to have much time for other things. Troy has been in transition for about a year now and everything seems to be going great."

Troy lifted his head and looked Marnie in the eye. She was surprised to see a twinkle in his hazel eyes. "Everything is always great with Mary." He laughed. "She always sees the good in everything. I've been really depressed and she just seemed to take it in stride. But it's lifting now and it's such a relief."

Mary gave him such a look of love that Marnie thought it would melt him on the spot. "We thought we should come out to this event to see what all the fuss is about.

We have never had any problems with our relationship or anything to do with the transition. I am so happy to see Troy coming out of this funk he's been in for so long, and if transitioning is going to do that for him, then I welcome it with open arms."

"And how about your friends and family? Has everything gone smoothly there too?" Marnie was a bit suspicious about these claims that everything was just peachy. Her own experience was quite the opposite.

"Well, you know, it's like this. People liked and respected us before. We are still the same. It's just that I feel so much happier as a man and that just seems to rub off on people." Troy gave Marnie a penetrating look. "And those that have a problem with it, well, we just don't have them in our lives. It might have something to do with being in a farming community. We all help each other out, chopping wood or mucking out if someone is sick or stuff like that. About six months ago I hurt my leg badly and our neighbours just took over and helped Mary run everything. Nobody seemed to mind that I was growing a beard and still had breasts. It was a non-issue."

Mary added, "It was my turn to get depressed around about this time, and it was really good for me because I got some counseling. Seems like I want things to be fine so I just act like they are. Most of the time that works for me, but there are times." Mary caught Troy's look. "I have to admit I can't do it all."

Troy put a protective arm around Mary and they sat there smiling a bit uncertainly at Marnie. "Say, is there anything I can do to help with the set-up?" Troy jumped to his feet as he saw Sylvia still struggling with some chairs. Without a backward glance, he hurried over to get the highest ones off the trolley.

“I hope you enjoy the meeting.” Marnie said to Mary. She was touched by the gentle energy of this couple and hoped they would feel comfortable. *I think most of the people who will be coming to this meeting will be looking for support, she thought. I wonder how Mary and Troy will relate.*

The room was starting to fill up. *I hope we'll have enough chairs*, Marnie thought as she noticed most of the support group in the crowd but also many other people as well. Gloria bustled in with a plate of butter tarts, Sally brought sugar cookies, and Morag placed her famous bran muffins front and centre. The table looked like it might not hold all the treats the women in the support group had brought and the smell of coffee filled the air.

Joshua and Joseph walked in together holding hands. Sylvia appeared at her side as if she had been beamed down. Joseph caught her eye and they smiled nervously at one another. *Maybe this is going to be fine*, Marnie thought.

Joshua's talk was simple and direct and seemed well received. He explained the basics of gender and discussed the need for appropriate pronouns, for recognition that there were more than two genders, more than two sexes. He spoke about how important it was for the women's community to be open to supporting those who chose to transition to men since they needed community. He also encouraged the centre to be especially welcoming to everyone who identified as female, including trans women. He drew parallels between the oppression women had traditionally endured with the oppression of trans people and quoted feminists such as Carol Riddell⁵⁹, who first

⁵⁹ (2006) Divided sisterhood: A critical review of Janice Raymond's *The transsexual empire*. In S. Stryker & S Whittle (Eds.) *The transgender studies reader*, pp. 144-158. New York: Routledge.

challenged Janice Raymond in the early 80s; Judith Butler⁶⁰, when she described the experience of having no recognition; and Kessler and McKenna⁶¹, who eloquently illustrated the social construction of gender. He concluded his talk with an invitation to all women who had trans men in their lives to the support group Marnie and Gloria had started, and then opened the meeting to general discussion.

A tall blond woman who had been sitting stiffly next to Gloria asked, “Why do we need a support group when there is finally some acceptance in the community towards trans people?” She gave her tousled curls a toss and her expensive-looking earrings tinkled in the silence following her remarks.

Joshua said, “I think Marnie, one of the founders of the support group, would be the best person to answer your question. Marnie, would you?”

“Thanks Joshua. I’d be happy to.” Marnie stood up so everyone could see her. “We all have had some sort of struggle with the changes in our lives because of our friend or partner transitioning and we’ve found that the only people who could understand were other women who had experienced the same thing. It’s not an easy thing, especially when frequently the person transitioning seems to be the sole focus of attention and their partner’s needs seem to be secondary.”

The woman who’d asked the question was frowning and shaking her head. “Tom and I—Tom couldn’t come tonight—my name’s Barbra, like Barbra Streisand, we’ve been together for twenty years and have never had any problems at all. My husband transitioned nearly fifteen years ago.” She looked around to ensure this fact had sunk in. “I understand that some women have issues with it all but I certainly have never

⁶⁰ (2004) *Undoing gender*. New York: Routledge.

⁶¹ (2006) *Toward a theory of gender*. In S. Stryker & S Whittle (Eds.) *The transgender studies reader*, pp. 165-182. New York: Routledge.

experienced any. Quite frankly, I have been to some support groups and just wanted them to stop their sniveling and get on with it.” Barbra smiled as if to take the sting out of her words. Sylvia rolled her eyes and April wrinkled her forehead.

April said gently, “Fifteen years is a long time ago. Do you think it’s possible that some of the memories of what you went through have faded with time? There weren’t many people transitioning publicly then. It’s great that you didn’t have any problems. Maybe you could tell us why you think that might be?”

“It’s true that there weren’t many advertising their transition back then, but the memories certainly haven’t faded,” said Barbra defensively. “It’s as if it happened yesterday.” *Hmmm*, thought Marnie, *sounds like selective memory to me*. “We had a small group of friends who were all in the same situation, so I guess we all supported each other. Tom works in construction now but when he was transitioning he worked in health care. In his current work nobody knows he was ever not male and that’s just how we like it. It’s not safe for him to be out about it.” *Well that’s weird*, Marnie thought. *She’s outing him at a public meeting when she’s just said it wasn’t safe for him to be out.*

Mary smiled and asked, “And you’ve never experienced depression around it or anything like that?”

“Well, I’ve been depressed most of my life, but it has nothing to do with Tom’s transition.” Barbra looked a bit defensive as well as a bit isolated. Gloria, who was sitting next to her, seemed to hold back from her usual gesture of putting a friendly hand on Barbra’s arm.

“Mary never thought her depression had anything to do with my transition either,” offered Troy.

After an awkward silence, Marnie said with a smile, “Well, you would be welcome anytime at the group. It’s always nice to get another perspective.”

“I do know what Barbra means,” said April. Sylvia looked at her in surprise. “I suffer from chronic depression and it’s there whether I am with a trans man or not. I go to the support group because I think lots of good ideas come out of the discussion but I also know that it’s not for everyone. I know several couples that have been together for some time, first as lesbians, then on through the transition, who sailed right through. I also suspect it’s not the usual course of things but I don’t know that for sure. After all, people who don’t have struggles over the transition don’t come to light. They just quietly go on about their lives.” Barbra smiled at her gratefully.

The meeting broke up after all the goodies and coffee were gone. Joseph lingered by the door. He kept watching Marnie, trying to catch her eye. Finally Marnie motioned for him to sit down with her. Sylvia lurked protectively. Marnie smiled and waved her away. She felt her heart contract as she looked at this person she had expected to spend the rest of her life with. *I still love him. I will always love him.* They held each other a long minute and Joseph whispered, “It was so good to see you tonight. You were awesome.” They made a date for lunch on the following Saturday and Marnie felt lighter than she had in a while. Joseph left with a happy smile on his face and Marnie hurried to help Sylvia finish the clean up.

“What are his intentions?” Sylvia’s question broke Marnie’s thoughts with a jolt.

Marnie looked at her and thought she saw something she had not noticed before. It was a look she had seen on Joseph's face in the past: tenderness mixed with fear. *Was Sylvia jealous?* She had to admit she did find Sylvia attractive but it was much too soon to even consider...but still, the thought was a nice one. Dishes all put away, and floor swept, the two linked arms and walked out to Sylvia's car together.

Chapter 12

The Beginning: September

The day was promising to be spectacularly sunny with just a hint of fall in the air: perfect for the end-of-summer afternoon barbecue Marnie and Sylvia had planned. Marnie stood at the sliding door to the patio, gazing at her garden, which was still gloriously clothed in brilliant yellow goldenrod, deep purple Michaelmas daisies with golden centres, and fragrant pink phlox. Here and there autumn crocuses bobbed their rose-pink heads as if they had been set free now that their leaves had gone.

This weather reminds me of the 'lesbian party' last year, only it's September, not June, Marnie thought. *What a change from that party. I am so lucky to have all these new people in my life.* Then she thought of Joseph and felt her shoulders tighten. *I hope Joseph and Joshua aren't first.* She wiped her moist hands nervously over her dress. She and Joseph had met with each other a few times over lunch or coffee. Marnie was still struggling over Joseph's betrayal, and just when she thought it was in the past, something would erupt to bring it all up again. The last time they'd met she'd asked him if there was anything he would have done differently, hoping he would say that he would have waited to act on his attraction to Joshua. "I think I would have waited until after my transition before we moved in together." She'd looked at him for a minute before it really registered what he had said. She was so angry she didn't trust herself to speak. Instead, she picked up her water glass and threw the rest in his face before running out, weeping.

Sylvia called from the kitchen, interrupting Marnie's unpleasant reverie, "Where are the beer glasses?" Marnie hurried in to help her.

“Do I look OK?” she asked Sylvia nervously, smoothing the yellow sundress Sylvia had bought her over her plump hips. It was the first time she had worn a dress in...well she couldn't remember the last time.

Sylvia surveyed her at arms length. “You look marvelous,” she said softly, “like a ray of sunshine. It's going to be fine. This is all perfect timing. I'm glad we took that little holiday.” They grinned at each other. Sylvia continued, “Now we can get caught up with everyone.”

Marnie caught a glimpse of matching purple Mohawks coming up the path. *Oh, I know who this is.* Judy burst through the door. “I brought watermelon. Everybody loves watermelon,” she exclaimed confidently, while Marnie shuddered inwardly. “Gads! What a time we had getting here. First the bus was late, then we got on the wrong one and only noticed when it turned down Alpine instead of Meadow. We had to run like crazy back to the other stop to get on the... anyways,” she stopped, panting, and added almost as an afterthought, “this is Shane.”

Marnie smiled at the quiet young man standing behind Judy and said, “Nice to finally get to meet you Shane. C'mon in and we'll put you both to work.” She wondered how his counseling was going. *Judy isn't quite as resilient as she likes to pretend. I do hope she can make her way through the maze of supporting him and looking after herself too.*

While Judy and Shane set up chairs on the lawn, Sylvia answered the door while Marnie set out the food. They had decided to let everyone cook their own meat while they supplied potato salad, bean salad, buns and fixings, and fruit and pie for dessert. Gloria had baked blackberry pies, her specialty. Marnie remembered the one Gloria had

baked one for a group meeting at her house. It had been hot from the oven and the sweet smell of succulent blackberries had filled the whole house. The crust was so buttery, it had seemed to melt in Marnie's mouth. *Why don't my pies ever turn out like that!*

Marnie felt her throat contract at seeing Joseph and Joshua enter the house that used to be her's and Joseph's. Sylvia came up behind her in time to steady Marnie during the wave of dizziness and nostalgia that swept over her. The touch of Sylvia's hand brought Marnie back to the present and Marnie gave her a tight little smile.

"Thanks so much for inviting us Marnie." Joshua took her hand in his and looked into her eyes. "I imagine this can't be the easiest thing and I want you to know I really appreciate it." Marnie's smile wavered. Joseph avoided meeting her eyes.

Sylvia came to Marnie's aid, smoothing over the painful moment. "Hi you guys. Coats in the bedroom and the food goes in the kitchen." Joshua and Joseph looked relieved as they hurried down the hall.

Someone came up behind Marnie, covered her eyes and popped a fresh blackberry in her mouth. She could smell the warmth of blackberry pie-- it must be Gloria's partner Frank. She turned and hugged him. Gloria engulfed her in a motherly hug and whispered, "this is going to be a great party!" then hurried to the counter and set down her offering. Sweet fruity fragrance filled the air.

Watching Sylvia gently steer Sally, heavily pregnant, through the throng made Marnie think of a tugboat nosing a tanker to its moorings. Morag followed behind, carrying Jennifer. Sally turned to Marnie. "Um, this is John, my new partner. He's the father of my babies." Marnie raised a surprised eyebrow. "Yeah," Sally answered the

questioning look with a smile, “he’s not trans.” John’s face turned an alarming shade of pink.

Marnie put her hand on his arm, “You are most welcome John...and congratulations!” John’s colour subsided and he looked relieved. *Must be hard being the only cis man here, Marnie reflected. I wonder how Ben is with all this.*

Jennifer, who had spotted Judy and Shane outside playing badminton, squirmed out of Morag’s arms and announced, “We are having babies! I want them to be girls...” and ran outside. Sylvia followed to check on the barbeques.

Marnie turned to Sally, surprise mixed with delight on her face. “It’s true,” Sally admitted. “We’re having twins. Be careful what you ask for.” She radiated happiness.

April and Sam walked in, hand in hand. Marnie’s jaw dropped and she looked at Morag. “It’s OK, I know,” Morag assured her.

Marnie hugged April and Sam in turn, laughing. “We should never take a month off like that again!” Her eyes flicked briefly to Sylvia outside. “I feel so out of touch with everything. And just when did all this happen?”

“Since at least July.” April looked at Sam for confirmation, who nodded their head. Marnie suddenly remembered Morag seeming out of sorts for a few weeks around that time and now it all made sense. “We took it slow and didn’t want anyone to know for a while, but we did talk to Morag right at the beginning. I admit it’s been a bit weird but it felt like the right thing to do...and I hear we are not the only two who have kept a bit under their hats.” She looked pointedly at Marnie.

“It’s true. I felt a bit like we were rushing things so it was my idea to try to keep it secret for a while. Me, of all people, with my favourite line about how secrets make you sick! Sylvia would have told everyone.”

Sylvia walked into the room. “What?” she asked.

“Us,” Marnie answered. “I was the one for keeping it quiet while you wanted to broadcast it.”

“Well, yeah! Like finally!” Sylvia put her hands around Marnie’s waist and pulled her close. “I have been waiting for this woman all my life.” She kissed Marnie in front of their friends in the crowded kitchen.

Diane, Lucy, and Ivory came in. “Henry’s parking the car,” announced Lucy. “Yes, we are still good friends,” she said in answer to Gloria’s inquiring look.

Ivory, Diane’s partner, was looking very butch. Marnie wondered if they still used “they” as their preferred pronoun. They usually tended to dress androgynously but there was no mistaking their intentions today. They wore a white T-shirt, black leather vest, tight black pants, and motorcycle boots. *All they need is a pack of cigarettes rolled into the sleeve*, Marnie grinned to herself. There was no hint of breasts. Diane was looking more femme than usual. She had on a silk maroon blouse and white pants that billowed softly and gathered at her ankles. Before Marnie had a chance to ponder this further, the doorbell rang and, since Sylvia was busy supervising the barbecues, she went to answer it.

On the step Mary and Troy and Barbra and Tom were laughing and it was clear that they were comfortably familiar with each other. *I never would’ve expected these*

guys to hit it off! Marnie ushered them in and nearly shut the door on a man who had run up the walk. "I'm Henry. I'm with Lucy," he said breathlessly.

"Yes, it's so nice to finally meet you," Marnie said warmly. "Down this way. I think we're just about ready to cook."

"Barbecues are hot!" yelled Sylvia. "Let's eat."

As people gathered around the four grills, cooking and talking, laughing, and hugging, Marnie watched Sylvia helping at the grill, stopping to talk to Henry, then laughing with Sally and patting her on the belly. Marnie sighed inwardly. *I am a lucky woman. I've never been that comfortable hosting parties. I'm so glad Sylvia loves it.*

The last of the pie was devoured, the coffee poured, and the shadows were beginning to lengthen when Diane stood up to talk. She looked around and the noisy party fell silent. "I have some exciting news, but first...Marnie, Sylvia, congratulations!" Everyone whistled and cheered. "And thanks for a wonderful party." More cheering. She looked at Ivory, who nodded solemnly. "I am so glad for our support group. I am going to need it more than ever. Ivory started 'T' last week. He would like you to call him Ivan." At this Ivan, who had never been much of a talker, silently raised his clenched fists over his head in a victory salute, grinning from ear to ear.

Marnie realized she had never seen Ivan look so happy. *Finally*, she thought. *Diane has a journey ahead. The whole group can support her. She's not on her own like I was!*

Sylvia and Marnie stood together as their guests mingled in the hall, kissing and hugging each other goodbye. Marnie caught Joseph looking at them. He came over and gave her a tentative hug and whispered, "I am so happy for you." She saw tears in his

eyes and wondered if he had any regrets. She thought he looked happy with Joshua and hoped he was. *Even with the best of choices it's not always all peachy*, she thought.

When everyone had gone, Marnie and Sylvia worked silently together to clear up and then went back to Sylvia's.

Marnie stood at the sliding door at Sylvia's, facing the ocean. She felt drawn into the grumbling crunch of waves against the beach. There seemed to be no separation of sky and water: a swirling sweep of blue and grey. Sylvia glided up behind her and put her arms tenderly around Marnie's shoulders and pulled her close. "You alright sweetheart?"

"I tried, I really did," Marnie whispered. "I realize now I just didn't want to be with a man, trans or otherwise. I am glad he is happy now." Marnie turned and embraced Sylvia. She couldn't believe she had ever doubted that they should be together so soon after her separation from Joseph. Sylvia had probably grown and stretched the most of any of the women. It wasn't just Sylvia's tact and hospitality during the party that had helped her see she had made the right choice. It was the support of their friends and their recognition and endorsement of them as a couple that finally washed away her doubts.

"I know, my sweet," Sylvia murmured into Marnie's neck. "It's has been hard on you, and it's been hard for him too. But you are with me now and for that I am so thankful. Let's just concentrate on you and me."

Marnie reflected on the changes since her 'lesbian party', and the moment when Joseph told her of his desire to transition. Her world had changed irrevocably. It seemed

like it all happened in some distant past. *If I'd known then that all this would happen...I'm glad I didn't know... Yeah, I'm glad it all happened. It's been such a short time, really, and we've all been through so much. And I've changed. I think I'm more confident, more sure of what I want.*

With a tired sigh, Sylvia sank into the comfortable cushions on the couch and Marnie snuggled close beside her.

She wondered drowsily if she and Joseph would ever mend the rift. At first she thought they could, but now she was not so sure. *Nothing lasts forever. I have to let him go. And what of Ben and Sally?* She knew Sally didn't even want to speak to Ben and wondered how that was for Jennifer, who'd loved him like a father for all of her four years. *Oh, and that dear Judy. What a treat she is, and she's so young. It's a different world for her. Judy must have such a struggle, fearing for Shane's life, and trying to get her own sorted out. Time will tell. Would Diane's new challenge of Ivan's transition help the relationship or end it, as the transition had done to her and Joseph? April and Sam were an interesting combination.* She could see that working and she could see it just as easily breaking them both apart.

Tired and feeling optimistic about her new life, she suddenly remembered a line Sylvia had read to her from Proust. It was something like, "The only true voyage...would be not to visit strange lands but to possess other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another, of a hundred others, to behold the hundred universes that each of them

sees, that each of them is..."⁶². *I think I know just what he was trying to say*, she thought, and closed her eyes.

⁶² Proust, M. (2003). *The captive & the fugitive*, volume V. (Scott Moncrieff, C.K. & Kilmartin, T. trans.; Revised Enright, D.J.). *In search of lost time* (Vol. V). New York, NY: The Modern Library.

Part Three

This section is purely a creation of my imagination. Similar to what I have done in the novel, the issues are real and I have enlisted the participation of some characters from the novel and some from paper three in Part one, chapter five. In this way, in keeping with autoethnography, I can both show and tell the struggles I have with the items under discussion.

Chapter 1. Analysis?

I look around the table at the women sitting there. “Finally, we get to have our focus group,” I say and rub my hands together in glee. Marnie, Gloria, Sylvia, Judy, Lucy, and Morag have graciously agreed to enter into this last discussion before we say goodbye. “Sally would have come but she’s just so tired with the twins and all,” I tell them.

Judy nodded vigorously, her Mohawk, now florescent green, wobbled from side to side. “Oh, I just don’t know how she does it!” She exclaims. “I babysit whenever I can and just when you think one is settled, the next one wakes up! I don’t think I ever want to have kids now!”

Lucy gives Judy’s shoulders a little squeeze. “You might think that now. Just give it time.” And they smile at each other like old friends.

“This isn’t goodbye though, is it?” asks Marnie anxiously, “just...well...can we say we are taking a break and might reconvene again?”

We all nod in agreement and Marnie heaves a sigh of relief.

“This section of the dissertation is about analysis,” I begin. At this I notice Gloria roll her large brown eyes at Sylvia and then turn them on me incredulously.

“What’s all this then? Didn’t you say this was autoethnography, and that the story was the analysis...that’s what you said Carolyn Ellis said...your AE mentor. So how come now all of

a sudden...you gonna analyze it all?” Gloria’s emphasis on the word ‘analyze’ was a mixture of outrage and wheezy humour.

Sylvia just looks at me, and a large grin creases her face. “Wait for it gang, she’s on to something...” and the women all look at me expectantly.

“My committee expects some form of analysis.” Gloria’s mouth opens again and Morag pats her arm and gives her a ‘shut-up’ look. “I have been struggling with this idea and actually wrote one version of my draft with just such a section. Then yesterday I came upon a paper written by Carolyn Ellis and her husband Art Bochner in 2006. Don’t know why I hadn’t seen it before, but anyhow it stiffened my resolve to ‘analyze’ what we’ve been through together in an autoethnographic way. So that’s why I asked you to come for this last...” Marnie gives me an imploring look.... “for this finish to the novel,” I amend. “This paper, called ‘Analyzing analytic autoethnography: An autopsy’” ...Judy laughs.... “takes the form of a conversation between Carolyn and Art, so it gave me the idea that we could all have a conversation about what the novel means to each of us, what we got out of it all, and where we think the next steps might be taken in this kind of research, or research that focuses on this kind of topic.”

“Sounds great to me,” Morag says enthusiastically. “What do Ellis and Bochner have to say about the analysis bit?”

“They have always maintained that autoethnography carries with it the analysis in the story. Both of them, in different papers and books, have repeated that refrain, and this paper is no different. Art says, ‘we use stories to do the work of analyzing and theorizing’ (p. 436), which is consistent with what they have always said. The paper is a critique of a colleague’s paper that claims autoethnography should have as its end goal ‘developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena’” (Anderson, cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 437).

“But we do point to some theoretical understanding in the novel, don’t we?” asks Lucy, her forehead wrinkled in perplexity.

“Yes, we point to it, but we don’t go about propounding on it. Ellis and Bochner cite Hanna Arendt who said that what we have done is something which ‘reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it’ (p. 438). Art continues with this idea by saying that what we have done is ‘continuing a conversation and thus to encourage multiple perspectives, unsettled meanings, and plural voices’ (Lyotard, cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 438). I don’t want to ‘sacrifice the story on the altar of traditional sociological rigor...and...lose the very qualities that make a story a story’” (p. 440).

“Are there any nurse scholars who also think this way?” asks Lucy, still looking a bit confused.

“Yes, quite a few actually,” I assure her. “I will share what Ayres and Poirier (2003) had to say about analyzing narrative work. They say that there is a danger in decontextualizing work by reducing the data to themes for analysis. They don’t say you mustn’t do it, but they suggest it be done carefully so as to ‘identify and use strategies that address the narrative as it was produced, as a coherent whole’” (p. 117).

“So what are you going to do in order to satisfy the committee and the academic institution?” asks Sylvia, a little smile lurking around her mouth.

Chapter 2: The Data

“First, before I get into that bit, I need to tell you how I managed all the information I got from the interviews with my participants,” I tell them.

“That’s how we came to be, right?” says Judy.

“Yes, that’s right. As you can imagine, with nine participants and two interviews each, there was a potential for approximately 200 hours of recorded material for each one, or 1800 hours in total. All of that was transcribed into written form exactly as it was spoken.”

“Whew!” says Gloria, widening her liquid brown eyes. “Then what?”

“I just sat with it.”

“What do you mean, you ‘just sat with it’”? Sylvia frowns. “Didn’t you code it, or break it down into themes, or make lists? In traditional ethnography I know that discovering themes is important” (Speziale & Carpenter, 2007).

“If you mean sitting down with the data and writing out themes as categories, then the answer is no, I didn’t do that. But I did organize it, only in a different way. By sitting with the material I mean that I didn’t do anything until something occurred to me. I knew I was going to write a novel but had no idea what the plot would be. I just waited for that to come to me. Gradually, as I read and re-read the transcripts, I conceived the idea of having a group of women relating to each other in a support group. Once I had that idea, I began to think of the experiences each of my participants shared with me, as well as my own, and I created characters, gave them personalities and personal idiosyncrasies, and then I began to think of who would have certain experiences.”

“Sounds confusing and complicated,” worries Marnie. “How did you keep us all straight, or rather, clear in your mind?” Everyone laughs at the reference to being straight.

“Good question,” I respond and give her a thankful smile. “At first I didn’t know how I could write these biographies and then use them to write the novel. It just seemed like a jumble of information. Then I found a writing program that is specifically designed to help writers who are composing longer works. It has a feature for writing character sketches that are easily accessible when writing the manuscript. After that I could add to the sketches as I wrote and the sketches also fuelled the writing. It was a process and I wrote myself into it rather than planned it and then wrote it.”

“Can you give us an example?” asks Marnie.

“Ok, how about the sketch I drew for Sylvia?” Marnie claps her hands, Judy whistles, and the rest laugh and nod. “Here it is then.” I hand out the sketch for Sylvia.

Sylvia

- Role in Story:** Main character, feminist scholar and charismatic leader
- Occupation:** Psychologist, women’s mentor
- Physical Description:** Nearly 6 feet tall, slim, elegant, straight short silver hair, well dressed, expensive tastes. Lives in a beautiful home overlooking ocean
- Personality:** Forceful and used to being the centre of attention
- Habits/Mannerisms:** Waves her slender hands as she talks. Very persuasive.
- Background:** Middle class academic, Jewish parents, now dead. Encouraged her to follow her dreams. Has travelled widely and rumoured to have had an affair with Judith Butler
- Internal Conflicts:** Struggles with sexual identity. Projects a fluid persona, sometimes femme and then sometimes leans toward butch. Struggles with her attraction to Marnie.
- External Conflicts:** Her role in the lesbian community, particularly among her friends who have or had trans partners, is in jeopardy when she

clings to her outmoded feminist ideas.
Notes: She will fall in love with Marnie

“Very cool!” exclaims Judy. “Did you do that for all of us?”

“Yes, but some are more detailed than others. It depended upon whether the character was clear in my mind and how much of a role they would have in the story. If I didn’t have the character clearly painted in my mind, I found it helped to add to the sketch.”

“I never considered whether I was butch or femme,” says Judy. “Is that more of a thing for older lesbians? Is it an issue for you Lyn?”

“I have to admit that although I see how dualistic thinking is dominant in our culture, and I want to be free of that, underneath I am very much conditioned by that kind of mentality. I identify as femme and have always been attracted to butch women.”

“Oh, me too,” says Marnie. “It’s hard to escape.”

“What’s the time frame around writing the novel then?” asks Morag, bringing us back to task. “It doesn’t sound very straight forward to me.”

“No, it wasn’t straight forward at all Morag. I wrote the first chapter quite early in the process, before all the interviews were completed. That first chapter was a template in that it established the leading character. I didn’t even realize that’s what I had done until after I had written the next chapter and understood that it would be much too confusing and beyond my skill as a writer to try to present the information from more than one point of view. I needed one character who would provide a pair of eyes through which all that took place could be seen.”

“That was Marnie, wasn’t it?” smiled Sylvia. Marnie turned a bit pink.

“Yes, Marnie became the main character and I used her to relay a lot of my own experiences. After that, the other main characters showed themselves as the story progressed. After creating a few characters, I began to think of grouping certain experiences into chapters, so

I began to make chapter headings. As I wrote I kept referring to the transcripts of the interviews and more ideas would present themselves as to how I would incorporate experiences. I moved some chapters around and changed some time frames to help with the flow.”

“Was each experience told as it really happened?” asked Judy.

“No, some experiences became melded with others that were similar and as the writing progressed, it became clear who would have those experiences. And I promised my participants complete anonymity, so any experiences that I thought might be identifiable I disguised. I sent the complete novel to the participants for their final approval in regard to guarding their confidentiality. Eight of them responded and said they were happy with the completed work, and only one did not respond, even after a second attempt.”

“What do you do in a case like that?” asks Lucy.

“I consider that I made every attempt to check with my participants and so I will leave it at that. I did take great care so that their experiences were disguised and that none of them would be presented as themselves so I didn’t expect them to have issues with the novel, but I did promise them a chance to read it before I defend it and I have done that.”

“Are you happy with the novel? Do you think it is faithful to the participants’ stories?”

Marnie’s face shows that she thinks I should be happy with it. I smile.

“Yes, I am very happy with it. I think it does what I intended for it. It shows, rather than tells, the experiences we all had in living with and supporting trans men. In many ways, the novel wrote itself. And you all,” I look around the room, “came to life as if you were already there just waiting for me to find you.”

“So,” asks Sylvia, redirecting the conversation. “How are you going to deal with ‘rigor’ and ‘validity’?”

Chapter 3. Was it Rigorous? What About Validity?

A loud knock at the door makes us all jump and before I can get up to answer it, my classmates Beth and Karen open the door. I get up to hug them and turn to the others.

“I asked Beth and Karen to help me with the discussion of rigour and validity. They were both in the seminar I led about autoethnography.”

Beth smiles her sweet shy smile and sits down, her intense blue eyes darting from face to face. Karen smiles and heads for the coffee, and over her shoulder says, “Glad to help you out Lyn. But really, haven’t we had this debate a thousand times?”

“Yes we have,” I tell her, “but we need to do it again here to be very clear about the process of evaluating AE as well as other qualitative research.”

“Two words that many in the academic community believe every researcher must address in regard to their work are ‘rigor’ and ‘validity.’” Sylvia nods, since, as an academic, she is very familiar with these terms.

Then her forehead furrows and she asks, “What do you mean, ‘many in the academic community’? Doesn’t everyone use these terms? I know they certainly do in sociology and psychology. What about nursing?”

“It is debatable,” I smile, glancing at Karen. “This has been a conversation I have been having with one of my nursing colleagues. She maintains that this is a battle that has been won long ago in qualitative circles, at least in nursing, and one I needn’t put forward now. I disagree.”

Lucy, who had just finished her Masters degree in social work says, “I am sure you must have your reasons. You can’t just claim this without substantiating it.” She looks satisfied with her challenge.

“You’re absolutely right Lucy! I do have some personal reasons as well as some support from the nursing literature. In order to support my argument, I collected 7 papers published in 2011 or later by nurse scholars. They confirmed my belief that the battle is far from won and there is justification for vigilance against a mentality that argues for proof and ‘the most bang for the buck’. As a lesbian, a woman, an educator, and a nurse, it has been my experience that alternate expressions of sexuality are still viewed as ‘alternate’ and people are still being murdered across the world simply for who they love, women are still second, students don’t know about the history of feminism and the work done so that they can live as they do, and nursing still takes a back seat to medicine. These are a few reasons for not resting on laurels, not thinking the fight is over, and continuing to intercept criticism before it is uttered in regard to rigor and validity for autoethnography.”

“Whoa, that’s quite convincing!” exclaims Gloria. “Tell us more about the papers you found.”

“I’m glad you asked!” I say, and everyone laughs. “In an editorial for the *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Cleary, Horsfall, and Hayter (2014) say, ‘ongoing comparisons of qualitative with quantitative research continue into the twenty-first century with the ongoing assumption that quantitative methodologies are hard/real science and the qualitative varieties distant cousins’ (p. 711). That is why these authors call for ‘Rigour and transparency in qualitative research...’ (p. 712). Similarly, Cope, whose paper was also published in 2014 in *Oncology Nursing Forum*, starts with a brief literature search outlining the criticisms of qualitative research, one of which is that it is “lacking scientific rigor” (p. 89). The general thrust of the paper is to describe and endorse Lincoln and Guba’s criteria for determining trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba are scholars who proposed guidelines by which to assess research conducted using grounded theory

methods (Wuest, 2007). The point is that this paper has only just been published. We are still supporting our claim that we can play in the same sandbox as the golden boys. Cope also cites Whitemore's 2001 paper, which outlines primary and secondary validity criteria for qualitative work" (p.89).

"Go on," encourages Sylvia. "I'm beginning to see what you mean."

"I found a paper published in 2013 addressing the issues of validity and rigor in qualitative research. Houghton, Casey, Shaw, and Murphy, writing in *Nurse Researcher*, repeatedly use the word 'rigour' in a similar manner to that of Cope, in that the thrust of the paper was to outline Lincoln and Guba's method of establishing rigor. Their conclusion is 'While the flexible nature of qualitative case studies should be embraced, strategies to ensure the rigour of such studies need to be in place' (p. 16). Also writing for *Nurse Researcher* in 2012, Pereira's title says it all (well, most of it): *Rigour in phenomenological research: Reflections of a novice nurse researcher*, although the author is no longer a novice, but an assistant professor of a university in Portugal. She seems to have no issue with the word rigour, but rather, her problem is 'what is validity? How can it be achieved?' (p. 17). Pereira also says she will talk about 'integrative validity (p. 19) and while I don't see that she really did that, she used the word 'validity' without flinching."

Gloria nods her head and all of the women seem to be following closely. I continue.

"Moving along then to 2011, I found three papers whose authors concerned themselves with validity and rigor. Cooney, another grounded theory researcher, doesn't hesitate at rigour, which is the first word in the title of her paper. She ends her discussion with the conclusion that what she has written '...may be of help to other researchers when attempting to demonstrate the rigour of their studies'(p. 22) and avows that 'Tracing the thinking behind rigour as defined in

qualitative research and grounded theory can be challenging’ (p. 22). Writing in the *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, Thomas and Magilvy take on ‘Qualitative rigor or research validity in qualitative research’ (Title, p. 151). These authors believe that qualitative rigor ‘may be one of the most critical aspects of qualitative research’ (p. 151). They also use Lincoln and Guba’s work in unpacking rigor and conclude, ‘Attending to the rigor of qualitative research is an essential part of the qualitative research journey...’ (p. 154). Finally, Judith Wuest writes a paper published in *Qualitative Health Research* where she takes a long view of qualitative research over 20 years and wonders ‘Are we there yet?’ (p. 875). She says she began as a grounded theorist but gradually morphed over the years into incorporating other methodologies into her repertoire. Her answer to the question is ‘yes’ (p. 881), but leaves the question of ‘whether we can hold onto our gains in the face of...shrinking budgets...’ where ‘universities fail to replace retired faculty with qualitative expertise’ and suggests that ‘those of us committed to the contribution that qualitative research methods make to answering important health research questions will need to continue, and strengthen, our advocacy’” (p. 881).

“Yes,” Karen narrows her eyes. “So your argument is that calls for rigor and validity, although you would not use such terms, are still very alive and well. Is that right? But aren’t a number of these papers,” she thinks a minute and continues, “5 to be exact, concerned with grounded theory?”

Beth nods in agreement.

“You are quite correct,” I answer. “I do realize that many of these authors work in grounded theory, which seems a bit more on the quantitative side of the ledger and not even close to autoethnography, but they present their discussions in the context of qualitative research. I think we agree that no one in autoethnography would ever refer to rigor or validity, but I think I

must. Wuest's conclusion brings me full circle to my point at the outset. The battle has not been won, it continues to be waged in the nursing literature, and I don't think I can relax in that regard. I am anticipating some hostile reception to my work. It's not that I am wearing a chip on my shoulder or anything. It's more that I know this is out there and won't be surprised if it surfaces in regard to my dissertation."

Beth says, "Patton (2002) says that Lincoln and Guba, those grounded theorists mentioned earlier, proposed alternative words for evaluation rather than the traditional criteria." She looks at me earnestly and continues. "Instead of internal validity they suggest 'credibility', and rather than external validity they want 'transferability', for reliability they use 'dependability', and of course we wouldn't use objectivity so they use 'confirmability'"(p. 546).

"Those criteria still don't quite work for more artistic and evocative work," I tell her.

"OK," says Karen. "How about a discussion of those criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba? What's wrong with using credibility, transferability, dependability, or confirmability to evaluate your work?"

"Nothing is really 'wrong' with these criteria," I answer. "It's just that they seem to carry an assumption of measurability, at least to me, that I don't feel comfortable applying to autoethnography. For example, in one text I have used to teach undergraduate nursing research, the definition of 'credibility' is 'a criterion for evaluating data quality in qualitative studies, referring to confidence in the truth of the data' (Loiselle, Profetto-McGrath, Polit, & Beck, 2011, p. 407). The word that sticks here for me is 'truth'. How can one apply that word to the novel? It assumes a universal truth, when, in fact, each one reading the work will discover a truth of their own. And I am using the pronoun 'their' in the singular to avoid the poles of 'his or her'."

“I guess you would have a similar concern with ‘transferability’, since one might wonder how such a unique story could be transferred to other settings, if even that is a goal. Would that be a correct guess?” asks Beth.

“Yes, and when you look for dependability, or ‘the stability of the data over time and over conditions’ (Loiselle, et al., p. 408) you can see that this just doesn’t seem to fit as a criteria for assessing the novel,” I reply. “And neither does confirmability since this is a measurement of ‘objectivity or neutrality of the data’ (Loiselle, et al., p. 406).”

“OK then,” Morag purrs, a hint of her Scottish heritage rounding every vowel. “What do you propose to do with these troublesome words, rigour and validity?”

“I plan to use them in a slightly less traditional manner. I will apply Laurel Richardson’s (2000) test for rigor to my work, as previously mentioned in chapter five. This will be like a more in-depth review of what I said there.”

“Will Ellis and Bochner approve of using this person’s definitions?” asks Gloria, still looking a bit disapproving herself.

“Oh yes, for sure,” I assure her. “Ellis speaks often of Richardson in her writing, and in *The ethnographic I* (2004), she has her as a guest lecturer in one of her imaginary classroom scenes.” Gloria looks satisfied and the others nod and smile.

Rigour

Did it make a substantive contribution to the understanding of social life?

“Richardson wants to know if this work will help with understanding how it is or was for us, living with our FTMs. What do you think?”

“Well,” begins Sylvia, “When I had my epiphany about it all, I discovered that there was copious research and writing about transitioning and about people who identify as transsexuals,

but very little said regarding those people who ‘support’ them. I think this work will have a significant impact on the understanding of what it is like for lesbian women who partner with FTMs.”

“Yeah, and everybody can read it, since it’s written in everyday language, and we get to say what we think in it so we’re not objects to read about but people to get to know,” says Lucy.

“And I think that anybody, straight or gay, will find places of connection with us since we experience emotions common to everyone. This is when hearts are transformed and old beliefs are seen as just beliefs that can be changed.” Morag looks close to tears as she speaks. “Look at how Sylvia changed her mind drastically because of the pain she saw Marnie experiencing.”

I see a loving look pass between Sylvia and Marnie.

“Didn’t you say this hadn’t been done before?” chirps Judy. “Won’t this kinda open the door for others in nursing who want to do work that blurs the line between art and science?” I look at her in amazement. Sometimes I don’t expect this level of thinking just because she’s so young. I cringe inwardly with embarrassment and hope she can’t see my surprise. “It’s OK Lyn,” her smile lighting up her small face like a sunrise. “I’m used to it. Just because I wear rainbows and a Mohawk, and I’m only 17, some people think I don’t know anything. It’s another layer of invisibility, isn’t it?”

Does it have aesthetic merit?

Swallowing my shame, I continue. “The next thing Richardson wants to know is the artistic value of the work. Do you remember, in April 2013, when I read an excerpt from the novel at a symposium at the University of British Columbia?”

Karen laughs, like a short bark. “Oh yeah, I remember how you expected to be welcomed with open arms because so many creative people work at UBC, like Carl Leggo. You had a bit of a surprise with the conservatism of the School of Nursing didn’t you?”

“Well, yes, but the response of the listeners to my presentation was very gratifying. It was clear the audience was captivated. Several wanted to know when the finished product would be available to read, and many spoke to me afterwards about how meaningful the reading was for them and how much they had learned about an unfamiliar topic.”

“I would say it passed then, wouldn’t you?” suggests Gloria, with a ‘rest-my-case’ look on her face.

“The test of aesthetic merit lies with the reader,” I say, “but from the responses I have gathered, yes, I would say the work passed.”

“I understand that the work is artistic,” says Judy. “But is that what ‘aesthetic merit’ mean?”

“Sorry Judy,” I say. “I thought that the meaning of aesthetic merit would be clear by the discussion we have had, but I see I need to explain that a bit more carefully. In a wonderful book written by Four Arrows (2008), Lorri Neilsen refers to aesthetic work as ‘lyric inquiry’ (p. 105). She further explains that a researcher who employs this kind of inquiry ‘aims to create an aesthetic experience, transporting the reader into a world, a mind, a voice...in the same way as does a fiction writer, a songwriter, or a poet’ (p. 108). So aesthetic merit is really in the experience of the one reading or hearing the work. The proof, so to speak, is in the pudding.”

“Well then,” says Gloria, “Speaking of pudding, I brought cake. Let’s eat!”

With Gloria’s fragrant cinnamon cake in front of us, and fresh hot coffee poured, we are ready to continue.

Is it reflexive?

“Richardson (2000) wants to know if the work is reflexive. She further clarifies what she means by this category by defining it as, ‘how does the author’s subjectivity be both a producer and a product of this text?’ (p. 937).”

“What on earth does that mean?” asks Marnie.

“I have thought deeply about what my participants have shared with me and attempted to preserve their stories while, at the same time, protecting their anonymity. That’s why I created you.”

“Who am I supposed to represent?” Marnie smiles a knowing smile. The rest snapped to attention, expecting their counterparts to be revealed.

“I think you know that a lot of my experiences have been told using you, Marnie.” She colours slightly and the rest look at her with admiration. “But others of you have told my story in different ways. Not one of you could be said to represent any one of the participants.”

“What about those stories that you didn’t expect?” Beth asks.

“I have struggled over the stories that were so different from mine as to be incomprehensible from the point of view of my experience. I think I managed to present these stories, using different characters in various settings, in ways that show both my struggle with believing them, and granting them the right to stand as ‘truth’ as that person or persons experienced it.”

“You mean the ones that didn’t come to our group?” Lucy wonders.

“Yeah,” says Judy. “There were those ones who showed up at the community forum, remember? We thought, and I bet they did too, that they wouldn’t fit in with us, but remember the barbecue? Everybody had a good time even though we have different points of view.”

“But getting back to the reflexive bit,” says Beth. “What about you Lyn?”

“I have been changed in the process,” I admit. “The change has been like a circle, or perhaps a spiral would better describe it, arriving at a similar place, but further along the staircase (Armstrong, 2004). Karen Armstrong wrote in her book *The spiral staircase*, ‘I have come full circle ...when I went back to my own twisting stairwell I found a fulfillment that I had not expected....And as I go up, step by step, I am turning, again, round and round, apparently covering little ground, but climbing upward, I hope, toward the light’” (p. 306).

Does it create impact?

“Richardson has two more questions of the work for her evaluation. She wants to know if it will create an impact. The impact of my work will be seen in its acceptance by the nursing profession. To adopt Richardson’s (2000) questions: Will it affect nurses, ‘emotionally? Intellectually?’ Will it generate new questions in their minds? And, most of all, will it move them to action? (p. 937). The answers to these questions remain to be seen.”

“Oh, I think it will have impact if the UBC symposium is anything to go by,” Gloria says enthusiastically. I give her a thankful smile.

Is it an expression of reality?

“The last question Richardson asks is, does this work seem real to the reader. Is it, as Richardson (2000) asks, ‘a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience?’”(p. 937).

“Well, we’re here, in the flesh...sort of,” answers Morag. “What have we been doing if it’s not an expression of reality? It does, because it is.” She sits back with a satisfied look.

“All of the experiences you had are what the women participants in my research experienced. But I guess only the reader can answer this question.”

Validity

“As I mentioned in chapter five, Carolyn Ellis (2004) speaks of ‘verisimilitude’ rather than validity, in that it invites one to consider if the work is ‘lifelike, believable, and possible’ (p. 124). She goes on to say that one can judge validity ‘by whether it helps the reader communicate with others different from themselves or offers a way to improve the lives of participants and readers—or even your own’ (p. 124). What do you all think? Does this story of your lives represent ‘verisimilitude?’”

“I don’t imagine too many of your readers will be women who love trans men, although hopefully there will be some. But it’s bound to improve some lives in the reading,” says Lucy.

“This work has improved my life,” I admit. “I see more clearly now why I struggled so in my relationship with Christopher. I also feel satisfied that I have remained true to my heart by writing in the way that I believe best conveys personal experience. Some of my participants have thanked me because they said they hadn’t had an opportunity to discuss their experiences about living with their FTM and had felt alone. This work has improved some of their lives. It is my hope that the novel will be received as ‘lifelike, believable, and possible’” (p. 124).

“Well, it’s been great to be here and meet some of your characters,” Karen fills up her coffee for the road and Beth goes from one to the next, shaking their hands or hugging them.

“I know you two have to go and I really appreciate your coming.” I get up to give them a hug at the door and see them on their way.

“OK,” I say after my two colleagues have gone. “There is one more issue in this section that I would like to discuss with you.”

Moments of Tension

“There are some areas in any study that require further explanation, and mine is no exception,” I begin, after more cake and coffee. “Since this work is the first of its kind in nursing, both in substantive matter and methodology, it is unique and, at first glance, my have what some would call limitations.”

“Ok then, let us have them,” Marnie says, her jaw set like she is ready to disagree.

“First, the sampling methods were by convenience, considered one of the weakest methods in qualitative work because it is thought to be ‘neither purposeful nor strategic’ (Patton, 2002, p. 242), and by snowball sampling. However, I had relatively narrow selection criteria, which considerably strengthens the method. Burns and Grove (2009) state that a researcher can improve on convenience sampling by ‘carefully thinking through the sample criteria’ (p. 353), which is what I did. I did not just look for participants who had supported trans men, they had to identify as non-heterosexual, as women, to have been in relationship with the trans person before his transition, and to have been in relationship with him for at least 6 months after the start of his transition. Encouraging snowballing meant that I did gather participants from large cities and rural areas, and from both Canada and the USA. I would say that in this case, the convenience method I began with was both strategic and purposeful.”

“How else could you have got them?” asks Lucy.

“There are not too many ways for a study of this kind,” I admit, but all I am doing is pointing out these areas of possible concern before someone else does. At this Lucy smiles, Marnie relaxes, and Sylvia laughs.

“Although predominantly White, there were some women of colour who responded to my call. None of the women were poor and most reflected middle-class income and aspirations. Most were well educated,” I continue.

“I guess most of the women would be middle class,” ponders Morag. “Transitioning costs money and I think it is probably not an option if you don’t have any. And so what is the significance of this area of tension?”

“Perhaps people who didn’t have money or education might have some trouble relating to you all in the story. In addition, there is this thing called ‘transferability’, as we discussed earlier, which means that you can take the results of one research project and apply it to other populations than the one you used.”

“But why would you do that anyway?” says Judy, scratching her head. “Doesn’t the story offer transferability just by the reader finding points of connection with the characters?” (Ellis, 2004).

“Yes, exactly!” I feel so excited that it is not hard for these women to ‘get’ what this research is all about, but then I remember that I am their creator.

“Another area of possible concern is that some of the interviews were conducted over the phone, both due to distance, as some were in Arizona, as well as convenience: many were busy and preferred a phone interview for the second discussion rather than finding the time to get together face-to-face. This means that I might have missed some visual cues during the conversation and might have misconstrued some of what was said.”

“Too bad you didn’t have a big budget, eh Lyn?” says Gloria. “You could have travelled all over the place doing face-to-face interviews.” I smile at her. “Did you try other technologies, like Skype?”

“I did try Skype, but it was so distracting that the participant and I decided just to telephone. Often the lip-sync was off, or the transmission was poor. I didn’t want to waste more time with that.”

I continue. “I planned to have 10 participants, including me, but I was open to more if there were people who wanted to take part. As it turned out, I received 9 replies that fit the criteria I had set. If it were feasible, a larger group might have been helpful, and meeting together in a focus group situation would have been very enlightening. However, an autoethnographic study could be, and has been done, with only one participant. From that one participant, who is likely to be the researcher, a full study could be completed. Many qualitative studies look for ‘saturation of data’ (Burns & Grove, 2009, p.361). I began to hear similar things from my participants as I conducted more interviews.”

“Yes, so many of us had the same or similar experiences. Is that how you showed that saturation?” asks Lucy.

“You got it!” I reply.

“Whether over the phone or in person, all the interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. I had both the written transcripts as well as the recordings to review. I was able to hone my interviewing skills by serving as a research assistant for several years. I interview many participants for that study. However, some participants in this study were easier to interview than others. One participant was very young and I am not the most relaxed with young people.” At this Judy looks up in surprise.

“But we had a great relationship!” she objects.

“It’s the young participant I mean, not you Judy. I found myself, at times, leading her, but as soon as I became aware of this tendency, I think I held it in check. In this autoethnographic

study, I am a participant, and so my interviewing style was one of a co-learner, a co-investigator, if you like. I thought frequently of Tillmann-Healy's 2003 paper, 'Friendship as method', where she says, 'Closest methodologically to friendship as method is interactive interview-ing. This demands more sharing of personal and social experiences on the part of the researcher...' and, 'interactive interviewing is an interpretive practice, requires intense collaboration, and privileges lived, emotional experience' (p. 733). It was easier for me to interactively interview adult women than it was to interview a teenager because I could more easily find points of similarity with the older women."

"The knowledge that the interviews were being recorded could have resulted in some participants holding back or not being as comfortable as they might have been without the device, but it seemed that most soon forgot the recording was happening."

"And finally, the methodology itself could possibly be seen as a point of tension. There will be some who don't accept what I have done as authentic 'scientific' research. I appreciate their concerns, but the comment by Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) bears repeating when they said, 'Any dinosaurian beliefs that "creative" and "analytical" are contradictory and incompatible modes are standing in the path of a meteor; they are doomed for extinction' (p. 962).

"Oh, doncha just love that quote?" Sylvia says.

I smile. "Some academics associate scientific research with empirical measurement and 'enhancing certainty' (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 47) and which can arrive at unambiguous facts that can be discussed analytically. These eschew the more creative side of research. Barone and Eisner believe that there really is no need for such dichotomizing. They think "Science... can be lifted to an artistic plane when the work is imaginative, sensitive to nuance, expressive in

character, and satisfying or moving to experience' (p. 46). More and more researchers are coming to the conclusion that 'creative' and 'analytical' can indeed go hand-in-hand."

"Oh yeah, I agree completely! It's just what we mean by analytical that gets us hung up"

Sylvia gets up to put her coat on.

"Hey, wait," I say to stop her. "Can you stay for just a bit longer? I only want to discuss a bit more, like only maybe 10 minutes or so."

"But we're out of coffee," moans Marnie. I think that she perhaps shares a bit too many of my characteristics.

"Ok then," Sylvia takes off her coat and sits down again.

"Got a plane to catch?" teases Lucy

Marnie and Sylvia look at each other conspiratorially. *Uh oh*, I think. *What's up?*

"Actually, yes," answers Sylvia, trying to look serious and composed and failing completely. "We're flying off to Maui tomorrow...right after we get married." She and Marnie hug each other and the rest hoot and clap. "We decided to do it this way...just because," Marnie apologizes. "We're having two witnesses and no big deal. Later on we will have a big party. That OK with you guys?" Everyone just yells and thumps the table.

"Congratulations you two," I continue. "Right then, just a few more minutes. I have been thinking of what might happen next."

Chapter 4. Where to Next?

Application to Practice

“How do you think nurses will take this study up in their work?” asks Morag. “Is there any way to tell?”

“Although the novel is deceptively simple and easy to read, this dissertation is complex and full of discovery. These two criteria, according to Kearney (2001), determine how applicable the findings are to generate insight and actual application to practice” I answer. “Since this study is the first of its kind in nursing it is truly full of discovery. As I showed in part one, chapter three, very little is known in nursing with regard to trans issues. In part one, chapter six, I think I made it very clear that there are very few studies concerning the women who support trans men.”

“What about complexity? Although I get the discovery part, I don’t see how it being complex is any big deal in terms of nurses actually using it in their practice,” intones Sylvia, looking a bit impatient.

I hurry on, sensing Sylvia’s need to leave. “The highest level of complexity, according to Kearney, is that of ‘dense explanatory description’ (p. 149). These studies are usually book length and full of ‘thick description’, which was a term coined by Geertz over forty years ago (cited in Kearney, p. 149). At this level there is a complex array of choices, contexts, history at several different levels, and the researcher is clearly visible. The point here is that this complexity provides nurses with insight into the experiences portrayed, and gives nurses ideas as to how to assess and provide care, coaching, and guidance to those being researched. This is the heart of what is now called evidence-based nursing.”

“But you have to get it out there for this to happen, don’t you?” asks Judy.

“Yes, thanks Judy. This brings me to how to do that.”

Publishing the Novel

“I think you should try to get this novel out to as many people as possible,” Morag exclaims, her dark curls bobbing in emphasis.

“Just my plan. It is my intent to expand on the novel, or as some would term it in its present length, the novelette. I will round it out with fuller descriptions and more interesting details about the characters.” At this Lucy blushes and Judy squeals. “After that work,” I continue, “which may take a year or two, I intend to find a publisher. If that proves daunting, I will publish it myself. All the same safeguards for anonymity for the participants will be in place. I intend to inform them of this plan and hopefully secure their enthusiastic approval. I have already outlined my plans to publish in the *Application for ethics approval for human participant research* and have been granted approval.”

“Yay!” Exclaims Judy. “We’ll be famous! Can you take pictures of us?”

“I do have an artist friend who has already offered to draw sketches of you all. Would that work?”

“Well, I need to get my hair done,” says Gloria, smoothing her round brown helmet.

We all laugh, including Gloria. She continues, “Who is your main target...who do you most want to read this thing?”

“My reason for publishing the novel is to provide a platform for understanding and change. I want as many people from all walks of life to read it, but practicing nurses are my first targets. I will create a marketing plan so as to reach as many as possible. I would also like to include the academic community in my reading audience.”

“How would you go about reaching the academic community?” asks Sylvia.

“One suggestion is that I approach publishers of educational books designed to be used in the classroom. I could write some suggested discussion questions. That would not only reach the academics but also get the information to student nurses. This could really make a change in the way nurses view their patients. If they were aware that behind many trans men there are women who have struggled with their own transition, it would make a difference to the kind of care they provide.”

“Any plans after that?” asks Sylvia.

“I would love to share my work with anyone who will listen. I would particularly like to address nursing students in the classroom as a guest speaker. These future nurses are going to work in every aspect of health care, including public health, where they will undoubtedly be in contact with families that include trans men. While the men need sensitive and informed care, the women who care for them need it in equal measure.”

Further Research

“My research is just the beginning. Much more needs to be done if these silenced and marginalized voices are to be heard. I hope my study spurs others on to conduct research of a similar nature on a larger scale. We need more qualitative work of this kind in nursing and then larger quantitative studies might be appropriate. While my interest and experience lies with being in relationship to FTMs, it would be interesting to conduct a similar study with partners and support people to MTFs. It would also be very interesting to find out how the experience differs when the lovers and support people identify as heterosexual.”

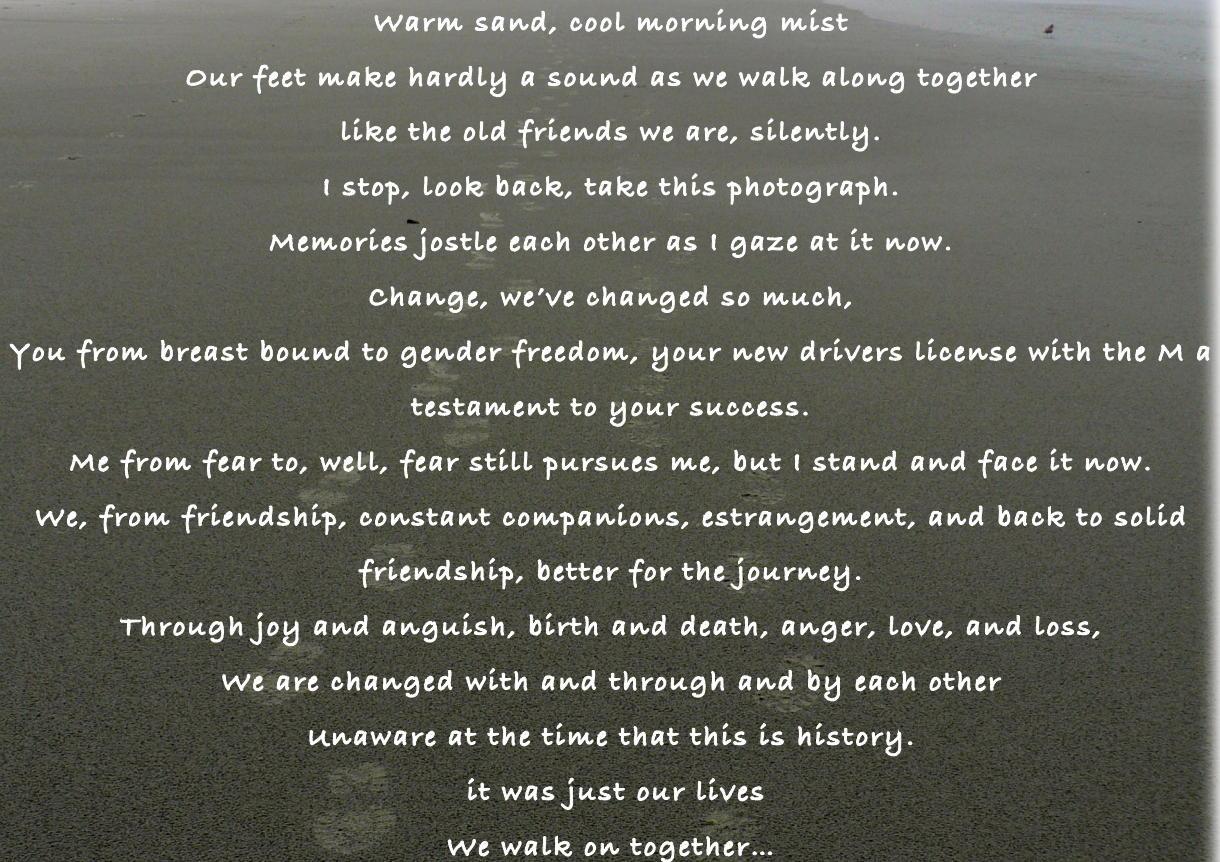
“Wow!” exclaims Marnie. “That could take a whole lifetime of work!”

“Several lifetimes,” I laugh. “I also hope that my study will encourage others to conduct research with methods that are more artistic than what is usually considered academically rigorous, and that this finds greater acceptance than it currently enjoys.”

“You can count on us any time,” right gang? Marnie looks around at the other women. Gloria intones, “Amen, sister.” Lucy smiles and the others nod and smile.

“OK then, we’re done here. Thanks for helping me out here. Until we meet again.” We hug and kiss and I usher them out the door. Marnie and Sylvia drive away together. Lucy, Morag, and Judy go with Gloria and I watch as her large Chrysler slowly turns the corner. The last thing I see is Judy’s Mohawk bobbing in the back seat.

Final Words



Warm sand, cool morning mist
Our feet make hardly a sound as we walk along together
like the old friends we are, silently.
I stop, look back, take this photograph.
Memories jostle each other as I gaze at it now.
Change, we've changed so much,
You from breast bound to gender freedom, your new drivers license with the M a
testament to your success.
Me from fear to, well, fear still pursues me, but I stand and face it now.
We, from friendship, constant companions, estrangement, and back to solid
friendship, better for the journey.
Through joy and anguish, birth and death, anger, love, and loss,
we are changed with and through and by each other
unaware at the time that this is history.
it was just our lives
We walk on together...

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Appendix A
Letter of Consent from Christopher

Human Research Ethics Board
University of Victoria

September 25, 2012.

I am writing in support of Lyn Merryfeather's research project titled *Stories of women who support transmen: An autoethnographic novel*.

Lyn and I have been intimate friends for over 17 years, and during the early time of my transition from female to male, we were domestic partners.

Lyn and I have discussed her intended research in detail and have decided that, due to the closeness of our friendship in a relatively small community, it would be nearly impossible to keep my identity confidential as Lyn writes of her relationship with me. In addition, my work as director of Trans Connect in Nelson, BC, my public exposure in the recent documentary *Rural Transcapes*, and my open life as a trans man, make it so that I am completely comfortable being represented as myself, using my real name and photograph, in Lyn's work.

Not only am I willing to take part in this research, using my name and image, I am delighted that Lyn is researching the experiences of this population. She has sent me much of what she has written to date and I am excited by the potential for understanding and healing this work could provide.

Appendix B
Letter of Permission from Publisher

Dear Lyn,

Thank you for your request.

Permission is granted for you to use the material requested for your thesis/dissertation subject to the usual acknowledgements and on the understanding that you will reapply for permission if you wish to distribute or publish your thesis/dissertation commercially.

Permission is granted solely for use in conjunction with the thesis, and the material may not be posted online separately.

Any third party material is expressly excluded from this permission. If any material appears within the article with credit to another source, authorisation from that source must be obtained.

Kind Regards

Permissions Assistant

Appendix C
Reference List for Paper 1, Harvard Style

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Appendix D **E-mail Solicitation**

The following email was sent to individuals and organizations that work with, support, or conduct research into trans issues:

My purpose in contacting you is to announce the beginning of my research, titled in the subject heading. I am a PhD candidate in the University of Victoria School of Nursing and this research will fulfil the requirement for my dissertation. Would you please forward this email to those you think may be interested in participating?

I am looking for women who identified as non-heterosexual previous to their relationship (either intimate friend or lover) with an FTM person. Whether they still identify that way is not important. They need to have been in relationship with the trans man before his decision to transition and at least 6 months into the process. It is not important that they are still in this relationship. They also need to be able to comfortably communicate in English.

This is very exciting and much-needed research. I appreciate your help with inviting people to participate.

In addition to email ,people can telephone.

I have included the participant consent form and a poster so you might have an understanding of the proposed research. Please feel free to contact me if you need more details.

Sincerely,

Lyn Merryfeather RN BSN PhD (c)

Research in Gender Diversity

Appendix E Recruitment Poster

Sent to the same organizations and individuals as the email solicitation

Women who support transmen: An autoethnographic novel
Invitation to participate



If you are a woman who is or was in a supportive relationship (intimate friend, lover) with a trans man I invite your participation in this important research project.

The criteria are:

- You identified as a lesbian prior to your relationship with a trans man
- You may or may not still identify that way
- You have been in this relationship before the decision to transition and at least 6 months into transition
- You are willing to share your story
- You understand and speak English comfortably

This will be a story about us: women who have loved and supported trans men into their transition. The photograph above is my intimate friend, Christopher, who is a trans man, and me. If you are interested, or know someone who may be, please forward this information to them so that they may contact me,

Appendix F Participant Consent Form

Stories of women who support trans men: Anautoethnographic novel is the title of research being conducted by Lyn Merryfeather, RN, PhD (c).

Lyn is a doctoral candidate in the School of Nursing at the University of Victoria and you may contact her if you have further questions.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a PhD degree in Nursing. It is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Anne Bruce. You may contact my supervisor.

Purpose and Objectives

The **purpose** of my intended research links directly to the problem, which is the apparent invisibility of women who are partners and intimate supporters of FTMs. My purpose is to investigate my experience in relationship with an FTM, connect with others who have had similar relationships and relay our stories, in order to bring new knowledge to nursing. I want to create an account of these experiences that is rich with personal meaning so as to draw the reader in, engaging the whole person. My purpose is not just one of adding new knowledge or information; it is to create a work of art that could stand alone as creative non-fiction literature.

My **questions** are:

- What is it like to be in loving relationship with an FTM during and after some of his transition?
 - I know what it was like for me. I disappeared. I want to know if it was like that for other women and if it was different, how so?
- What are the effects on the relationship for the female partner during this time?
- What happens to the supportive partner's ideas of her own identity?
 - Does she begin to reflect on her gender, her sexuality, her identity as a result of her partner's transition.
- Does the balance of power shift during this transition, and if so, how?

I will not be surprised if other questions surface during this work, or if some questions change slightly or dramatically.

Importance of this Research

The liberation of one gender at the expense of others is a contradiction. Women who have lived independent lives and struggled to free themselves from the confines of patriarchy and heteronormativity and who then enter into relationships with trans men need to find ways to support their partners in their masculinity while at the same time tend to their own needs during the transition.

The problem for nursing is, according to a literature review I conducted in January 2012 regarding the dominant discourses in nursing involving transgender and transsexual people, they are largely invisible. If trans people are largely invisible, their supporters and partners must be non-existent. If, when caring for trans people, nurses are unaware of the stress transition can have for the rest of the family, they would not be caring for that person holistically. And if they are caring for a partner of an FTM, they may miss a major factor in that person's healing if they don't attend to family relationships.

Participants Selection

You are being asked to participate in this study because

- You are a woman who has been intimately involved in the transition from Female to Male of someone very close to you.
- That relationship started before the transition and at least 6 months into the transition
- You once (and perhaps still do) identified as a lesbian
- You read and speak English

What is Involved

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include at least one face-to-face interview lasting approximately 60 minutes or more. This interview will be recorded. Following completion of the initial interviews there may be the need to have another interview of similar length. Following that it may be decided among the participants that it may be a good thing to meet all together as a group.

Inconvenience

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the use of your time, the need to travel if this is what you decide, and the need to find child or elder care.

Risks

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include fatigue or stress. Discussing your relationship to your trans man may bring up issues for you that may be upsetting or uncomfortable. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken. You will be encouraged to stop the interview if you become tired or upset. I will ask you frequently if you are fine to continue. In the rare even that you become very distressed, I am able to debrief with you, or call someone to come to help you. If you were to need follow-up counseling I have the name and contact for a counselor experienced in such matters.

Benefits

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include having someone to talk to about what this experience has been like given the tendency to place the focus on the FTM. It will lessen your feelings of invisibility and give you an idea of community if you are lacking that. When this information becomes more wide-spread it will give service providers and health care professionals insight into the stress a partner/intimate supporter of a trans man may experience and thus enable better provision of care. You are likely to develop some insights into your experience of this relationship that you might not have had before.

It is important that society includes women who are intimate supporters of trans men as important citizens. Bringing your experience to light is one way to encourage that. To hear and read the stories of real people, as opposed to abstract subjects who are ‘other’, is a way to bring you up close and help with the realization that we all share common needs such as love, support, recognition, and community.

The experience of women partners of FTMs has been neglected among researchers. There is now a sizeable body of knowledge on transsexuals and their experiences, but not of their support network, which consists frequently, for FTMs, of their female partners and intimate friends. My research, in particular, will add significantly to knowledge about your struggle of invisibility and your role as your partner/friend has a spotlight shone on his experience.

Compensation

I regret I am unable to compensate you for your time, resources, and energy spent on this research project. I hope that you will receive satisfaction in your participation.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your individual data will be destroyed and not included in the final results. If you participate in the group discussion and then withdraw, the data will be used in summary form with no identifying information.

Researcher’s Relationship with Participants

In order to prevent any risk of power-over, none of my friends, previous lovers, or any of my trans man’s friends or previous lovers will be participants in this research.

On-going Consent

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will review this consent form with you each time we meet and at any time you wish to review it together.

Anonymity

In terms of protecting your anonymity I will invite you to choose a pseudonym for the purposes of transcribing and I will disguise the people and places we discuss. The stories you tell me will be used in a composite way in a creative non-fiction novel. This way you will completely anonymous.

Confidentiality

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by keeping all recordings and transcriptions in a locked filing cabinet in my home office and stored on my computer, protected with a password. My transcriptionist has signed a vow of confidentiality and

by my signature below, you have my promise not to discuss anything you tell me with anyone in a manner that may identify you.

Dissemination of Results

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways. I will publish the resulting book. I will attend seminars, symposia, publish papers, and teach classes using the material that is derived from this study.

Disposal of Data

Data from this study may be used to inform subsequent studies. Your signature below indicates your consent in this matter. In the meantime, it will remain stored safely as described above.

Contacts

You may contact me at any time or my supervisor using the contact information stated at the beginning of this consent.

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and I will retain a copy.