

Just for a Change

MOTHER NEVER said I was not different. She knew I was not like other boys and realized the suffering that dissimilarity caused me. Unfortunately, she was powerless to make my pain go away.

“If everyone were the same,” she’d say to stem the flood of my youthful tears, “what a boring world it would be.” I wasn’t sure my mother knew what she was talking about. Nothing could possibly be better than being exactly like everyone else!

My reverie was broken as the nurse suddenly strode into my hospital room.

“That makeup has to come off!” she barked. Shaking her head, she left just as abruptly, slamming the door.

I did not like this woman. From the moment I was put in her care, my night-shift nurse had been the personification of a junkyard dog. Now she was proving herself a bitch, to boot. At twenty-three, my reckless quest for understanding and acceptance made me vulnerable to such hostility. I wanted to be universally loved. For this reason, I convinced myself that my nurse’s hatred was not directed toward me personally.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid,” I berated myself. “It isn’t you that’s upsetting this nurse—it’s your makeup. That’s why she wants you to take it off. You’ve chosen the wrong lip color!”

Flights of fancy were part of my survival technique in those last presurgery months in San Francisco. As quickly as I could snap my fingers, I’d create a scenario with which I could live comfortably. Self-deception had always been my mechanism for coping. I was good at it.

For example, there was the every-Monday-morning-after-leaving-electrolysis illusion.

Weekly I braced myself in the chair of an electrologist who had the unlikely name Ange’l. I’d grit my teeth and grimace as she pushed a small needle into the follicle of my offending facial hair and gave the root a sharp jolt of electricity. It hurt like hell—but I loved Ange’l for

doing it. As soon as one little hair was electrocuted, she would declare war on its partner. My upper lip and jawline were areas especially sensitive to her painful invasion. To endure sessions with the electrologist, I needed more than self-deception. I took Percodan. Before leaving her office, I would swallow my second pain pill. Thus fortified, I would undertake my walk home to the Victorian on Steiner Street.

In a Percodan haze, I would promenade. Toe first, then heel. One foot placed purposefully in front of the other. Toe. Heel. Toe. The shoulder placement was of major consequence. Was my walk more enticing with Garbo's slightly sloping shoulder or with a calculated Dietrichesque strength? I would glide by storefront windows and check my reflection. I could also judge the power of my strut by watching my shadow on the sidewalk before me. I dismissed pedestrians sharing my sidewalk; it was too embarrassing to acknowledge their presence. My face looked like ground beef, with some sort of greasy salve liberally spread upon it for preservation. I was a mess. So, in my head, I created a beautiful scenario. I was in the preliminaries of the Miss America Pageant.

Toe. Heel. First, one foot. Now, the other. Each placed purposefully in front of the foot before. Head held high, knees slightly bent, I would glide up Market Street toward home.

At a red light, waiting for the pedestrian signal to flash, I would pose in third ballet position—right heel pulled tightly into the curvature of the left foot. In my imagination, the red light represented the pageant's preliminary judging sequence, and I waited with nervous anticipation. The stoplight always turned green, the crossing sign always flashed "Walk," and I always passed into "the final phase of competition."

"Well?" the night nurse snapped. "Are you going to do what I told you, or not? You can't wear makeup to surgery."

So much for being crowned Miss America. I gave in.

Wearing makeup to surgery was a ridiculous hang-up; even I understood that. I was scared. I was holding onto the familiar, and my face was the only thing of which I was confident. If I were to die during surgery, I wanted to be beautiful when I departed this earth. All I wanted from this disgruntled nurse, my surgeon, and the Westlake Clinic was a little gender reassignment. That was all.

It was 1962, and I was one of a mere handful undergoing transsexual surgery in America. The procedure was in its infancy, but I was prepared to take advantage of everything medical science knew about altering gender. I hoped it knew enough.

I wasn't sure of my doctor. During an earlier meeting in his office, my surgeon had offered to take measurements of my future husband's private parts. He said it would ensure a proper fit. I thought his suggestion twisted and disgusting. I'd wanted to scream at him, but I knew no one else who did the surgery in this country. I smiled, cast my eyes toward the floor, and said nothing.

"He's only a means to an end," I cautioned myself. "This doctor doesn't have to be polite. You need his expertise, so keep your mouth shut, let it pass, and don't make waves." It was hard advice to follow.

The evening before my operation, the good doctor stopped by my room. "I'm going to carve a hole in you the size of that roll," he said, pointing a long, slender surgeon's finger at my dinner tray. I didn't want a vagina the size of a large dinner roll! Still, I smiled at his sexual allusion. I knew the drill. My destiny, as I saw it, was to accept whatever a more powerful male said or did. It was simple. Everything revolved around the penis. Men accepted theirs; I refused to acknowledge mine.

"You will have a wonderful future," the doctor assured me. "You know what it's like to be a man." And he swaggered out of my room.

"What the hell did he just say?" I asked aloud. My physician believed my future as a woman would be rosy because I understood what it was like to be a man? Only a male could possibly believe that. I had *no* concept of what it was like to be a man. Why did this doctor think I needed gender-altering services? But I swallowed my feelings. I couldn't complain. I valued this operation more than I valued my own life. It was clear, however, that there would be no violins sweetly playing in the background as my not-so-understanding surgeon worked his transgendering magic. I bit my tongue. I reacted as I always had when threatened—I turned everything inward.

Wisely, I decided to concentrate on my lip gloss. In only twenty-three years, I'd turned the safe haven of superficiality into an art form.

In the early 1960s, I wasn't alone in accepting superficial values. The whole world seemed to accept that life was, indeed, totally about how one looked. The Beat Generation had their dark, somber presentation. Allen Ginsberg, poet; Bob Dylan, musical spokesman for the generation; and England's shaggy-haired musical phenomenon, the Beatles, all had their own look. My image was a decidedly femme presentation, but it was a look. Projection of an image is, after all, a statement of how one wants to be perceived: self-identification is in the look.

In my very early twenties, I understood nothing beyond the planes of my face. Enlightenment was too much to expect. Sequins didn't come in that color! By the age of twenty, I'd become a drag queen. Queen? Hell—I'd become a goddess. I looked fabulous.

It was onstage at San Francisco's world-famous nightclub, Finocchio's, that people found me exciting. I found approval when dressed as a woman. Offstage, I was merely a sissy boy afraid of the world and trying not to be noticed.

Finocchio's featured "the world's greatest" female impersonators, and big-name celebrities such as Bette Davis, Lana Turner, and Sal Mineo came to sit ringside. Nightly, Grey Line Tours filled the club with audiences of predominantly upper-middle-class heterosexual tourists. The celebrated club was also Mecca for many of our country's predominantly closeted homosexuals. Partly this was because our impersonators were glamorous, openly queer entertainers—and gay and lesbian audiences shared a sense of pride in our mainstream acceptance. For me, Finocchio's offered the first sense of true acceptance I'd ever known. As Lee Shaw, drag diva, I was notable, and nothing was demanded except that I look incredible—and have a modicum of talent. As the blonde ingenue of the San Francisco nightspot, I was almost complete.

For the first time in my life, I was sought after. One major comedy star and his wife, both with hands steeped in front of them, were hanging around anxiously—hoping for a *ménage à trois*. Several straight men wanted to date me; a few luckless female strippers wanted relationships; and more than a few intrigued military men were willing to dismiss the fact that I was a boy. The prurient attention was disconcerting, but the lifestyle was certainly exciting. I wasn't sure what I had, but

seemingly I had it in ample proportions. I'd found what looked like love and felt like acceptance.

I was at loose ends as to how to explain this newfound acceptance to my parents. So I didn't. I wrote that I was working as a male dancer in a review. It wasn't a total lie. For the moment, I was happy, young, a semi-sensation, and . . . onstage, I was myself.

After a year and a half at Finocchio's, I remained the only blemish on an otherwise perfectly charming existence. In spite of the sparkling, protective veneer I'd learned to apply to my face and my professional persona, inside I was still the frightened, insecure kid I'd always been. I was still the problem. Offstage, I didn't belong. I was applauded by gay society, but they didn't accept me as one of their own. I was too feminine to be attractive to most gay men. "If I wanted a woman, I'd find one" was a familiar phrase. I didn't belong in straight society either. Society was apparently divided into two distinct sexual groupings, and I didn't fit in either one. It was as though one foot was forever wedged into a sequined, spiked heel while the other was firmly planted in a dingy sneaker. I spent my evenings in designer gowns, but during the day, society demanded I live as a man. It was a confusing way to live. In public, I generally wore jeans and lumberjack shirts and prayed I would pass as a lesbian.

From my earliest years I'd known that something was wrong with me. It wasn't about my body. That wasn't it at all. It was about who I was, about the boy I was presumed to be. I'd been subjected to all the traditional male training and none of it took.

There had been despised trips to the barbershop, after which I went home and cried. There were years of unflattering clothes in masculine, muted tones; summers at boys' camp; boxing lessons; dance class, where I learned to lead with my left hand elevated while guiding strongly with the right. I'd been carefully trained to make proper introductions, to rise to my feet when my elders or women entered the room, and certainly to offer men a firm handshake while looking them squarely in the eye. But the worst trauma was an introduction to every sport known to mankind and the subsequent misery of disrobing in the boy's locker room. That was the worst. Very early I developed elaborate ploys to escape that

locker room—the most terrifying of the traditional male rituals. There was never any real escape. There were subtle pressures from every corner of my universe to turn me into the proper little man I was said to be.

I felt that people kept treating me improperly. They did. They insisted on treating me as though I were a boy. That was the problem, and I didn't see any way around it. That problem could never be fixed.

I was wrong, of course. I was going to be “fixed.” Rebuilt! A nip here, a few tucks there, and I would be perfect. All the waiting was over. This very day I would be transformed/reborn/made whole. In the parlance of the early 1960s, I was having a “sex change.”

Bless you, Christine Jorgensen.

When, in 1952, Christine Jorgensen's gender reassignment became headline news all over the world, I was mortified. I feared that people would now watch me too closely. Miss Jorgensen's public spotlight might spill over onto me. I didn't yet understand that Christine and I were akin, but I knew I differed from the male standard. I was in danger of being stained by her transsexual notoriety.

“Buddy caught the same thing that Christine Jorgensen got!” I intercepted the note being passed around my freshman class. I pretended to drop the scrap of paper before reading the message, but I was devastated by it. I had always been ashamed of being noticeably different, but I made no conscious connection with the gender event of the century. In high school, I was clinging to rigid male definitions and identities even as the current of my life was washing them away.

Because sexual reassignment was a new surgical procedure, there was little postsurgical data available. There were certainly no self-help books. Even the prerequisites for the procedure itself were rather sketchy. Applicants were required to have psychotherapy. That was a firm requirement. Not even the professionals, however, seemed quite sure what questions to ask.

When I made my decision to transition, I saw a psychiatrist once for about an hour, maybe less. He asked me if I thought I was a woman. I did. That was pretty much that. He asked no clever questions to suggest that gender issues stem from Oedipal struggles—those opposing arguments would come later in the transsexual movement. In my day, *Oedipus Rex*

was merely a Greek tragedy. In my personal drama, Mother gave me life and then sustained it by becoming my best friend. She encouraged me to feel. Being intimate with another soul is a privilege, and I was blessed by having a mother who always tried to comprehend my emotional turmoil. My doctor viewed that relationship as a healthy coexistence between a mother and her daughter. Becoming a woman was easier in the old days.

The shrink, as an aside, did say he found me extremely manipulative. He also thought I was pretty. For that insight I paid him fifty dollars.

It could be I'm a full-fledged, governmentally stamped and certified woman because my particular psychiatrist had a manipulative wife—or mother—or both. More likely, he considered all women manipulative. No matter; I passed his test. Additionally, there was irrefutable proof that I should be a woman: I was engaged to marry a card-carrying man. In the 1960s, desiring to be a housewife carried a lot of weight. The fact that a man wanted me as his legal wife probably cinched my claim to womanly status.

I'd passed the medical world's inspection with the encouragement and guidance of Dr. Harry S. Benjamin. A renowned endocrinologist and the world's leading authority on the transsexual phenomenon, Harry led me through the maze to my day of deliverance. I'd filled out all the proper forms releasing the surgeon from legal responsibility should he goof. I'd faced my parents, releasing them from all moral responsibility, in case they'd goofed. I'd plunked down the required twenty-five hundred dollars. I was grabbing for the gold ring. After today, the gold ring could be on my lefthand ring finger and not beyond my grasp.

Nothing else mattered. Beatniks had turned North Beach into their own personal Times Square; Kubrick's *Lolita* was raising eyebrows in movie houses; Jackie Kennedy was in her pillbox hat, and I . . . was totally self-absorbed.

My time had finally arrived.

The pre-op injection was administered by a friendly technician who, without doubt, was sent directly from God.

Secretly, I had been a bit concerned as to how a patriarchal God would react to my changing his genetic blueprint. I'd grown up a God-fearing child of the South. I often felt my family lived inside the Church of Christ.

There was Sunday school, Bible school, worship on Sunday, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. There were church sings and tent revivals. My hometown was the very buckle of the Bible Belt—and, in the southern regions, male genitals were the next thing to holy.

Having been raised in the shadow of the church, it's amazing that I grew up wanting to be a woman. Women are not the movers and shakers of southern Christianity. In our churches as in our lives, men set the rules and women follow them. Disobedient women, biblically speaking, are generally stoned to death.

In spite of my fundamentalist upbringing, if not because of it, I discovered my soul in San Francisco's subculture. Drag was, is, and shall always be a subculture . . . and I took to it with a religious vengeance.

My eyes were beginning to get very heavy. The presurgery injection was kicking in. I must remember to add pre-op medication to my "Bless you" list. "Oh yes," I smiled, "and bless you, MM." There was a blonde goddess I'd come to worship.

Newspaper columnists touted me as Marilyn Monroe's double. That was flattering, but it was only good publicity. Mr. Finocchio paid for such fanfare. I was young, professionally blonde, and sang, "My Heart Belongs to Daddy," in a red knit sweater, but that does not a legend make. I knew the difference. Marilyn was the epitome of everything I wanted to become.

The nation's favorite sex symbol came to Finocchio's to catch my act. She must have read the publicity.

"Marilyn left after your number," I muttered to myself.

That was true. I might be reacting to the pre-op medication, but I wasn't hallucinating. Miss Monroe had watched me perform her song from *Let's Make Love*—and fled.

"Well, I wouldn't be sittin' my famous ass in some nightclub watching a drag queen sing my number," I mused. "Not if I was Marilyn Monroe! No way, darlin', I'd have better things to do with my life."

Soon I, too, would have better things to do with my life.

After hours of surgery, Alfred Brevard Crenshaw would legally become Aleshia Brevard Crenshaw. Aleshia was my chosen name. It was a combination of my first and last stage names, Lee and Shaw.

Alfred would become A Lee Shaw. It was a haphazard way to choose a name, but it served the government's requirements that a transsexual's initials stay the same.

Damn, I loved this suspended state of being.

"Oops!" What was going on here? They were wrapping my hair in a towel, or something. It seemed like a towel.

"Looks like a towel, feels like a towel . . . must be a towel," I cackled as they rolled me from my room. These orderlies had me confused with Carmen Miranda. "If you'll just put a little fruit on this turban, I'll look better," I quipped.

The aides were not a good audience. No one laughed. They continued to roll my gurney down the hospital corridor. Men!

"Darling, men are rats. They're either rats, or they're superrats," Holly Golightly whispered from deep inside my considerable memory of movie memorabilia.

Holly Golightly from Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was another of my heroines. I adored Audrey Hepburn's Holly! I agreed with her that men were rats, yet I'd been known to settle for a good-looking rodent or two.

"That flamenco dancer wasn't even good-looking," a nasty voice inside my head chided.

"Yeah?" I said aloud, "Says you. Did you get a look at the buns on Jose? Remember, honey, you can't drive a spike with a tack hammer. And, don't forget, Jose was famous."

"Star fuck!" the hostile voice shot back.

Then everything was quiet. Suddenly I found safety in a drug-induced euphoria. The random voices subsided. The panic was over. I felt like I was caught in an amber glow. It was like being center stage in my special Bastard Pink spot. I was in a grand state.

"Mr. de Mille, I'm ready for my close up," I said, giggling to myself.

Where was I? Was I still in San Francisco?

I was being rolled into the operating room. That took all the good feelings out of the lovely medication. The panic returned.

Seeing nurses in green masks and surgical gear sobered me right up. Their look was not fetching.

This wasn't a dress rehearsal. These people were ready to begin the show, and like it or not, I was headlining the bill.

I was acutely aware of the lighting. Bright lights. People in the room were something of a blur, but the operating table and the harsh lights above were very, very distinct. As a famed female impersonator, my appeal had been enhanced by flattering illumination. In this surgical arena's fierce glare I lay exposed. In such bright light, someone might see that I was not emotionally prepared for what was happening to me. It would become evident to everyone that my certainty was merely an act, just as it had always been. They'd decide I had no right to control my destiny. If people really saw me, they could never love me.

"Somebody put out the lights," I pleaded.

For the first time since taking the first female hormone pill, I questioned my decision to become a woman.

I had not been this frightened when I did my own castration. Emasculating myself was something that simply had to be done.

If I was to have surgery in this country, first I had to get a castration. That was that. Otherwise, the testicles would be placed inside my body during the operation. The ol' testosterone would keep right on pumping. That was the standard practice in America. On this issue, American doctors seemed to agree. For some reason known only to man, testosterone was sacrosanct. In the United States, it was unlawful to tamper with that particular part of the reproductive system.

I could get around that. No problem. I'd do my own castration.

I convinced a doctor I intended to castrate my cat. I didn't own a cat, but no need for the doctor to know that. It had reached a point where I had to take life into my own hands. So, while the doctor drew me a how-to-neuter-your-pet diagram—I stole Novocain and a syringe from his medical cabinet. If I botched my castration, the blame would be mine, but there was no reason for the procedure to hurt more than necessary. The worst-case scenario would be severe genital mutilation. That, after all, was the point. With serious enough mutilation, doctors would be duty bound to correct the damage. In contrast, if my castration was successful, minus testicles I could have surgery in this country without those hormone-producing organs being inserted inside me. For that, anything was worth the risk.

With a castration diagram in hand, the next step was to ensure a sterile operating theater.

I stuck my sheets in the oven after spraying them with Lysol, the first step in preparation. Heat and pine-scented disinfectant would surely sterilize anything. Next, I took a healthy dose of Percodan and waited for numbness to take over my body. While I waited, I put on *Thurber Carnival*. Maybe my favorite comedy album would take my mind off what was happening to me. My best friend and I then scrubbed for surgery.

"How bad could it be?" I joked, trying to bolster my surgeon's spirits. Stormy and I were both nervous. After my friend clipped and disposed of my testicles, I was going to get off the operating table and return the favor.

"Farmers castrate pigs and calves all the time. There's nothing to worry about. Farmers don't even worry about sanitary conditions."

All did not go as planned.

Stormy made the initial cut, saw blood, and went outside to throw up. In mid-operation, I was left alone on a kitchen table draped with Lysol-scented sheets. I sat up and finished my own castration.

Once the scrotum was split, the testicles were pulled from the sac and unceremoniously severed with a razor blade. They were gone . . . now what? Should the sac be left open to drain, or should it be closed? The diagram gave no clues—there was no one to call for help. This procedure was illegal. There was also the problem of blood. That came as a total surprise. I'd helped perform a castration or two in a high school agriculture class that I abhorred but had never noticed any blood. I should have paid more attention.

Once Stormy returned to our makeshift operating room, we decided that being 50 percent right was better than being 100 percent wrong. We closed one side of the empty testicle sac and let the other side stay open to drain.

The messy deed done, and with my testicles flushed down the commode—I passed out.

The following morning, scared, swollen, sore, yet delighted to still be alive, I dragged myself to Haight Street. It took thirty painful minutes to climb the steps to my doctor's office on the second floor. He was not glad to see me. "This is a strong antibiotic," he growled, giving me an

injection, “but you’re to tell no one that I saw you today. I could lose my license for not reporting what you’ve done.” I went home, fell into bed, and slept for a week before returning to work.

Now I was facing my final surgery, the operation that would physically change me into a woman. It was possible that I might not be so lucky again. This time, I might not wake up.

Even if I wanted to, I couldn’t call a halt to this procedure. What would I tell my parents? Mother and Daddy had come from Tennessee to be by my side at this moment of gender transition. They were both crushed, of course, but they were resolutely being supportive.

Neither parent had any concept of how or why this terrible thing had happened to their only son. The mere idea was beyond their understanding. Such things simply did not happen in their world.

Even though Dr. Harry Benjamin, the world’s leading authority and originator of the term *transsexual*, telephoned them and explained, they still didn’t understand. I couldn’t blame them. A strange doctor calls from the other side of the world and says someone needs to cut off their only son’s penis! It was a shock. Sure, I’d written a letter saying I was going to become a woman and marry Hank, the man I loved—but that only convinced my family I was crazy. It was my doctor’s call that made them nervous. He’d explained everything in great detail, but my parents still could not understand how God could let such a thing happen.

That I, too, had some trouble understanding.

My parents promptly went to see their minister. Surprisingly, he’d read something, somewhere, about the transsexual phenomenon. My parent’s spiritual leader shared what little he understood of the matter.

“Well, Brother Crenshaw, who can judge these things?” the preacher asked. “Some people love only one person in their entire life. Who knows this isn’t true for your son, Sister Crenshaw?” That was the deciding factor for my mother. Daddy still had doubts.

I was reasonably sure that Daddy came west under protest. It didn’t matter. Whatever pushed him there, he’d crossed a continent to be with me. Surprisingly, Daddy also accepted my future husband. Hank was about to steal “Daddy’s little girl” right off the assembly line, and yet my father liked him. My intended had the two qualities that, traditionally,

southern fathers expect in a son-in-law. Hank knew about football; Hank knew about fishing. In short, Hank acted as a male was supposed to act. He looked like a man, strong and tall and proud. There was none of that damn embarrassing sissy stuff. Hank was the son my daddy never got. If my father were to question Hank Foyle's masculinity, then he would have to examine the entire gender curve and societal assignment of power. That could not happen. Real men know a man when they see one.

"Oh, my! What about Hank?" I gasped, mentally lurching back to the surgical arena.

He'd be so disappointed if I got up and ran.

Could I run? Could I get up?

"He might leave me if I don't go through with surgery," I shuddered. I wouldn't blame him. He certainly wouldn't marry me.

"Men marry women—not freaks."

Freak! Where had the word come from? That ugly, hurtful word has a life of its own. People didn't call me that—it was how I thought of myself.

Hank had never looked at me as a freak of nature. He thought I was beautiful. He had loved me from the beginning.

"Maybe he only allowed himself to love me because of my promised gender change," I sobbed.

That's when I saw the anesthetist. I'd spoken to him the day before, but I hadn't noticed his eyes. They were beautiful. Now, standing there looking down at me, he seemed to be smiling. He looked somehow benevolent. He looked like the pictures of Jesus on the back of the fans they passed out in the summertime at our Christian tent revivals. I breathed a sigh of relief. I was going to be all right. I had panicked for a moment, but I was going to be fine. I was doing the right thing. Suddenly, I knew I would be taken care of by the charming, smiling man with the beautiful eyes. Jesus in a green mask. The decision was out of my hands.

"Whoever you are," I breathed deeply, "I've always depended on the kindness of strangers."

He asked me to count backward from one hundred. I obediently started counting.

"One hundred."

I felt a sharp spinal prick.

"Ninety-nine. Nine-ty-e-igh-t. Ni-n Ni."

I fell down a kaleidoscopic hole. My life didn't flash past me; I was the one whirling wantonly past colorful bits and pieces of my life.

Suddenly, I could hear voices. It was my grandmother, Miss Minnie Lee Crenshaw, calling me.

"Alfred! Alfred Brevard . . ."

"Nine-ty . . ." I tried to count.

"Ni . . ."

. . . and there stood Gran, telling me again how I was born the year Amelia Earhart disappeared in her plane over the warm Pacific.

"But you fell to earth during a huge snowstorm, December the ninth, 1937," my grandmother was saying.

"Nine-ty-seven . . ."

As my paternal grandmother's story went, it was a storm so fierce that James, my daddy, couldn't get to the hospital. "But Mozelle was okay," Gran said with an edge to her voice.

I can't remember my grandmother ever telling a story in which my mother or her family much mattered. Miss Minnie Lee told stories only about the Crenshaw family. To Gran, my mother's family, the Gillentines, didn't warrant a lot of discussion. Miss Minnie's first words to her son after meeting his new bride were "Well, James, I'll say one thing for you. You've certainly managed to marry beneath yourself." The statement caused a war between the two Mrs. Crenshaws that would divide our family just as surely as the Civil War had divided our nation. The women's fight for my father's loyalty would last the rest of my grandmother's life. That animosity, in large part, ruined my mother's chance at happiness.

I knew my Gillentine relatives and was well aware of their positive influence in my life. In truth, I generally considered myself a full-blooded Gillentine.

"I don't know who you are, but I know you're a Gillentine!" That was a comment I often heard growing up, and it always brought me great pride. The Gillentines were thought to be uncommonly handsome people. I liked having the Gillentine look.

Relatives on my father's side were not uncommonly handsome. Not at all. Most, in fact, were rather pinched around the mouth and took

themselves very seriously. I didn't want to be one of them. They had no color in their lives. More important to me was the fact that my mother didn't like them. They weren't exactly fond of her, either.

My mother's family painted life with bold and colorful strokes. An extremely close-knit family, they enjoyed each other. They didn't seem to miss the family tree my grandmother, Miss Minnie, said they needed so desperately.

Daddy had surprised his mother by ignoring her disapproval and marrying into the Gillentine family. Daddy was twenty-seven and my mother was seventeen when they married on a July morning in 1936. My parents exchanged vows at the Gillentine home in Erwin, Tennessee. Marrying Mozelle Gillentine was the only act of rebellion my daddy had in him.

James Upshaw Crenshaw had been born late in his mother's life. Miss Minnie Lee Upshaw purposely waited late to marry. As she would tell it later, there was no shortage of marriage proposals, but she was waiting for a gentleman who would support her well. Miss Minnie was rather attractive, trim, and, as the eldest daughter of a country doctor, had her choice of the available young bachelors in the county. Having the pick of the crop didn't make her desire the pickings. My grandmother was the daughter of an old, well-respected family with pre-Civil War plantations both in Tennessee and in Louisiana. The Tennessee property, where later I would be raised, had been a land grant from the days of the Revolutionary War. Land from the deed had originally filled the entire bend of the Cumberland River just outside Hartsville, Tennessee. Miss Minnie Lee was a small-town elitist.

Over the years, through mismanagement and the Civil War, all but three hundred acres of her family's property had been sold. Still, in the South of her youth, my grandmother was considered landed gentry. Miss Minnie Lee Upshaw could afford to wait for marriage without causing people to snicker.

When Gran married Alfred Brevard Crenshaw, they settled in a home on Church Street in Hartsville, Tennessee. It was there that my father, James, was born and would grow up, raised as though the Old South's aristocracy still remained intact.

"James was raised to be a gentleman," Gran would remind my mother from time to time. "He wasn't raised to work."

Their lives passed fitfully along.

In a barely respectable amount of time, I was born and named for my recently deceased grandfather, Alfred Brevard. Everything appeared normal enough. I had all the appropriate parts. But in the first weeks of life I suffered from pyloric stenosis, a hereditary condition in male children. Pyloric stenosis is a blockage in the esophagus that causes all food to be regurgitated. In short, I was on the verge of starving to death. Steps were quickly taken. I was the first male heir, born to an only son, and my life was very precious. My dad donated his blood for my transfusion; a doctor friend of the family operated; and my young life went on.

It was almost an idyllic life. I grew up on a sprawling farm with fields to roam and animals to be petted. As I remember it, I was happy. I adored the hollyhocks outside my window and the swarming bees that were always busy at the blooms. I loved my goldfish swimming in the horse trough. It was a good, solid lifestyle. At some point, however, I became dimly aware that all was not exactly right. I neither looked nor acted like the other little boys of Trousdale County. People, especially women, were always commenting on my appearance.

"Oh, he's too pretty to be a boy," they'd say. "Just look at that peaches 'n' cream complexion."

I am suddenly in my grandmother's front guest bedroom. It's my favorite room in her rambling old house. I love the scent of lavender that's always lingering in the air. The afternoons are cool and sweet, and I am sheltered from the summer heat by the high ceiling. I spend most of my afternoon visits hidden away in this, my favorite room.

"Alfred Brevard!" my grandmother is calling. "Your Daddy just drove in the yard."

That message always shattered the sweetness of a summer afternoon. In those early years before starting school, I treasured those quiet hours when my grandmother took her midday nap, and I lived freely in my own world. While Gran slumbered in the parlor, I was in the front guest room dancing to the music from the radio. Alone, I could be anybody I wanted to be—and I wanted to be Miss Ginger Rogers, dancing film star.

I danced in Gran's gray crocheted shawl with the rust scalloped trim. Gran's bed shawl was my lovely long skirt. When closed, the one throat button caused the garment to fit snugly around my waist. With my skirt secured, I would twirl and twirl around the guest room, now and then catching a glimpse of myself as I swirled past the chifforobe's full-length mirror. I was a whirling dervish in my grandmother's gray crocheted shawl with rust scalloped trim.

Only in those moments of freedom was I totally happy as a child. My real life existed in the world of my imagination—there I was safe. In the presence of friends and family, I accommodated everyone and tried to escape drawing focus. The boy people accepted as Buddy Crenshaw was an illusion. I was myself only when let alone.

"Alfred Brevard!" Gran would call shrilly. "Your Daddy's here. Get out of that shawl."

I would trip over my own feet getting out of that lovely shawl. Daddy would not like it. No one would like it. Glamorous Ginger Rogers transformed back into hated, skinny, frightened Buddy Crenshaw.

Gran's shawl only signified a larger problem. The older I became, the more I realized how different I was.

The realization occurred innocently enough while visiting my mothers' parents. I loved visiting Mama and Granddaddy Gillentine's big old house on Elm Street. I loved the little railroad town of Erwin in far eastern Tennessee. In Erwin, there was always the smell of pine. The woods of the Appalachian Mountains surrounded the little hamlet on all sides. Fingers of pine forest crept from the surrounding mountains into the town. It was a nice, friendly town with a movie theater only one block from the Gillentine front porch. I went to the movies a lot. At night, exhausted by a day of exploration of the town, I would try to hold back sleep. I liked to lie and listen to the lonesome sound the train whistles made as the Clinchfield Railroad's cars snaked their way through the mountains. Long trains hauling coal were headed for North Carolina. I'd listen to the reassuring sound until it lulled me to sleep.

Mama and Granddaddy's home was a great place to visit. I wished I lived there. I had the misguided sense that if my environment were upgraded, my life would be, too. I also loved the fact that while visiting

my mother's family, I had a lot of time to spend with Mother's youngest sister, Bobbie Jean. She was my only aunt. I truly loved Aunt Bobbie Jean. Only seven years older than I, she was more a playmate than an aunt. We'd play school. She was the teacher, and she'd read stories to her class. I was her class. She would read stories for hours. She liked to read, and she liked to read to me. I was an attentive audience, mesmerized by her stories of kings and queens, princes, and fair damsels in distress. She read the standard fare, but it was all wonderland to me.

One day after a reading session, Aunt Bobbie Jean took me to town with her. That was nothing unusual. I was not allowed to go alone, but Bobbie Jean would usually take me with her. This day, as a special treat, Aunt Bobbie Jean took me to Brown's Record Shoppe on Main Street. I really liked it there. If you were old enough, you could pick out records you wanted to hear, go into a little booth, and play them as long as you wanted. Bobbie Jean had lots of records at home, and we would play them over and over again in her room. I liked "Sentimental Journey" best.

As we were about to leave the shop, Bobbie Jean ran into some of her eleven- and twelve-year-old girlfriends from school. Everyone stopped to talk. I was hanging back, trying to disappear behind a counter. I generally was not comfortable with people I didn't know. One of Bobbie Jean's school friends made an effort to be friendly.

"What a pretty little girl you are," she said. She stooped down to my level. "What's your name?"

I didn't say a word; neither did Bobbie Jean. Instead, my young aunt turned a bright red. Nothing else was said. My aunt Bobbie Jean and her friends forgot all about my gender; conversation skipped from one girlish topic to another, and I stood there unnoticed. I was the only one overwhelmed by the incident. I'd always known something was wrong, and now I knew what it was. The way I looked was wrong. I looked like a girl.

Most of the time, when no one was there to cause me to feel otherwise, I was comfortable with my body. It was people outside the immediate family who bothered me most. Outsiders reminded me that I was a disappointment to Daddy. Consequently, I spent a lot of time playing

alone, where neither my looks nor my feminine ways would cause anyone embarrassment. Alone I was totally happy.

From the time I could form sentences, I'd told every adult I knew that I was going to grow up, go to Hollywood, and become a movie star. Having no idea that medical science could ever provide an opportunity for me to fulfill my dream, I didn't say the star would be female. But theatrically, I was maturing. I now visualized my stardom as the beautiful blonde heroine of Paramount Studio's 1942 *This Gun for Hire*. I never took a bath without draping a towel over my head and admiring my mirrored reflection from beneath the Cannon peek-a-boo bang. I'd matured from the tap-dancing, wholesome Miss Ginger Rogers into the svelte, seductive Veronica Lake.

Living on our farm was a friend who would sometimes come and play with me. Helen was the daughter of a tenant farmer. Until a few years later, when my sister was born, Helen Leigh was my only real playmate. She was about five or six years older than I, but that didn't matter. Helen was my friend. We'd sit in the swing out under the big trees. Swinging together, out by the beehives, we played at being grown up, assisted by a well-worn Sears and Roebuck catalog. I loved my friend. First, Helen and I would plan a marvelous trip, then we'd turn to Sears and Roebuck, looking for just the right outfits. Helen didn't mind that I picked out a woman's ensemble.

My disillusionment came one afternoon when Helen and I were playing in the bedroom she shared with her older sister. There, in the closet, were her sister's clothes. My friend suggested we both get dressed up. This wasn't pretend, and I knew Daddy would be awfully mad if he found out. I was afraid, but Helen kept pushing me to put on her sister's clothes. I didn't like the game anymore. It was moving too fast. I wanted to go home. Getting angry with me, my friend demanded that I put on a dress. Timidly, obediently, I did as I was told. Even this was not enough to suit her. She roughly zipped me up, smeared garishly red lipstick across my mouth, ran across the room and threw open the bedroom door. There Helen stood with her two grown brothers and her teenage sister. Together they stood in the doorway, laughing and pointing at me. Everyone laughed.

My five-year-old life suddenly took a swing upward. There was a war going on. Men were now vying for my attention, and Helen Leigh was easily replaced.

Soldiers were living in my backyard. The United States was in the Second World War, and, dressed in my own little sailor suit, I was a patriot of the first order. I could sing every patriotic song I heard on the radio.

"There'll be blue birds over the white cliffs of Dover, some fine day, just wait and see." I had no idea where those white cliffs might be; I'd never seen them on the three-mile drive to town, but I loved the idea that they existed.

I was in love with the armed forces. I worshiped every single dog-face. The die was cast, and I was to remain, in my heart, a camp follower to the end of my days. Draw the tattered veil.

The United States of America's military force was on maneuvers, and when the war effort came to Hartsville, Tennessee, I was ready. I would stand by the side of our country road, among the hollyhocks, resplendent in my sailor suit, saluting those brave young men as they drove by. There were truckloads of them, but as long as the caissons kept rolling along, this little sailor kept saluting.

"Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me, anyone else but me, anyone else but me." The Andrews Sisters were singing their patriotic message, and servicemen were bivouacked in the huge field behind my house. It would have been heaven, were I not strictly forbidden access to those wonderful men. They were just across the fence, almost close enough to touch, but they might as well have been bivouacked in Nebraska. I was not allowed past the wire barrier that separated my backyard from their tents. Going past that fence was definitely a no-no, but restrictions had no effect on me where soldiers were concerned.

I would stand by the fence for hours hoping that one of the soldier boys would notice me and come talk. They never did. Now and then, I'd test my luck with tentative steps into forbidden territory. That rock-encrusted cow pasture was Bali Ha'i. It called to me—but I knew that crossing the fence was wrong. It was probably a sin. I felt the flames of hell licking at my heels every time I crossed that fence, but like a shot I was across no-man's-land and into a tent.

I never failed to get my little fat legs flailed with a switch as Daddy dragged me, screaming, back to the homefront. Yet, in spite of everything, I kept crossing that fence. Switches didn't stop me; the threat of burning forever in hell couldn't stop me.

Pretty soon, one soldier started bringing me back home. He admired my dogged determination. Those return trips astride the shoulders of my smiling new friend were triumphant restorations to my side of the fence. The battle to keep me corralled was lost. I was madly in love with a red-haired soldier.

The soldier of my youth was named Matt. He was from somewhere I'd never heard of. Somewhere far, far away. They all were. They were fresh-faced, young American soldiers off to war. Many were away from home for the first time.

Sometimes, late at night, one or two young recruits would slip away from camp. They'd slip across the fence to our house. There would be a timid knock at our back door. Homesick soldiers had come to sit with my parents. They would sit talking around the oilclothed kitchen table. My parents never turned those young men away. I don't know what they talked about. I guess the boys just wanted company. Maybe they were missing home. In most cases, I guess they were frightened of what lay ahead. No matter how late the soldiers knocked, my parents never turned them away. In retrospect, I'm very proud of my parents for their kindness to those young men.

My Matt was the most special of soldiers. My parents liked him too. Matt would visit and sit with me under the big oak tree. There was no longer a need for me to go to the soldiers' camp. I'd found Matt. My soldier and I would sit for a long time on the oak's large exposed and gnarled roots. Sometimes we'd poke the ground looking for acorns. Sometimes we would just sit.

Matt listened to what I had to tell him. I'd tell him the stories I learned from Aunt Bobbie Jean. I'd tell him about kings and queens, princes and fair damsels in distress. If I didn't have a story to tell, I'd make something up. I'd tell anything to keep Matt's attention. Almost anything. I never dared tell my friend about being Veronica Lake. Even Matt would not want to hear that story. Instinctively, by the age of five, I understood that certain things must remain hidden.

As happened not infrequently in the chaos of preparing young men for the rigors of battle, errors in judgment were made. Early in the spring, pontoon boats full of servicemen were ordered to ford the Cumberland River just below our home. The locals tried in vain to convince those in charge that, in flood stage, the river currents were deadly. Those in charge did not listen. The pontoon boats, full of men, were ordered into the swollen Cumberland.

As predicted by those who knew the river well, the pontoon boats capsized. Scores of young human beings spilled into the river and were swept downstream. Many were drowned. Several, fearing the river, had silently slipped away before the calamity and found their way back to our farmhouse. Those soldiers spent that night and several days thereafter hiding in our attic. Matt was not one of them. The army moved out. The excitement was over. Matt didn't come to say goodbye. I never heard from him again.

Goodbye, Matt.