

Till death do us part

A Maltese couple went through a pretty strange experience three years ago. One day the husband turned to his wife and told her that he wanted to live his life openly as a female; this had been the emotion he had carried with him for many years.

So this is the story of Brenda.

A neat knock on the front window and Brenda is there. We have arrived before her. At 47 years, over six feet tall and boasting a perfect figure, Brenda is instantly joking about the coming photo shooting. In no time at all she makes you feel at ease, as if you have known her for ages. It takes us a short fifteen minutes of heartfelt laughter to take the photos, enough time to for my anxiety about the interview to evaporate. She gives us the sensation of being an open book, cutting no corners.

Her story starts at 17 years, at the time a young man, when she met Sue. They had a two-year long engagement, following which they got married and had a girl. "It was a very happy marriage, and we have been together ever since. Our only quarrels were about how to help one another."

Brenda confesses that when she was still very young, she felt as if she were different. Although raised among four boys, she still noticed a female element within her inner self.

"Today, after all these years, things are coming into place," she claims.

As the years went by Brenda went on feeling more feminine than masculine, but in her married life she did not wish to create problems for her daughter. It was only when three years ago her daughter got married that she found herself at a crossroad. It was an internal struggle. Her thoughts went on, insistently urging her more and more, until finally Brenda discussed the matter with the family doctor.

It was he who diagnosed the delicate situation and referred his client to a psychologist and psychiatrist who both confirmed that Brenda "was sane and there were no mental problems."

Then came the important step: Brenda had to break the news to her wife Sue. "I did not want to lose her. At first it wasn't easy at all, but we had always been open with one another and this factor was of great help."

Brenda and her wife had to attend counselling sessions, at times together, sometimes separately. The doctors were very open with Brenda: "The choice to go public is not an

easy choice. You will find those who will not employ you. There will be those who will not accept you." How true!

Then there was another issue which bothered her: her daughter. Brenda had to explain all this to her. The 24-year-old daughter's first reaction was a stab with a dagger. When she got to know she did not talk to her for a full year and a half.

Brenda was broken-hearted but at the same time she realised that the girl was going to lose the role model of a masculine person. Today the situation has come back to normal. Brenda has also become a grandmother and has an excellent relationship not only with her daughter but also with her grand daughter. They have now reached the phase where, with the help of an expert in the subject, they are seeking the best way how Brenda can be presented to her grandchild so that, right from these early years, the little one will not have to go through a psychological trauma.

Seeing her long dark hair flowing onto her shoulders and her long nails trimmed neatly, it is difficult for me to imagine Brenda as a former worker on an oil rig away from Malta. She explains to me that in recent years she has been undergoing hormone therapy.

"After two months my breasts started growing. Even my masculine strength began to wane. A few months before I was picking up a box as big as this table, then the effort started becoming painful. I had to stop working."

She stops for a while and says, "Once a month I sense all the effects a woman feels when her period comes along; it's the female hormones I take. But, of course, I do not menstruate."

She speaks about how she and Sue are of one mind. "My wife even helps me choose my clothes. Sometimes she tells me to change a dress so as to look nicer."

Now that Brenda is living a woman's life the atmosphere at home has changed for the better, especially because she is also doing household chores.

I was impressed by the unconditional love that reigns in this family. Sue, Brenda's wife, is an example of how one practices what she promised at the altar: till death do us part.

"We still wear our marriage ring. I am still married to Sue," Brenda tells me. "We are two souls loving each other. It's not sex...it's deeper. It is true love."

Which led me to ask her about their sexual life. "It did not have any effect on us. We still share our intimate moments, but as two women together."

The couple's mutual support is the basis of a strong relationship, and Sue and Brenda continuously cherish this value.

"It was Sue who found a new job for me, at her work place. Her manager is an exemplary man who realised how to deal with this delicate case." But then she admits that a large segment of society is still very backward.

“A worker did not let me use the women’s toilet at work.” Brenda tells me that this is not the only problem. “We had to sell our house and leave the village because of people’s gossip.”

Now the two feel that they have started a new life in a different locality. “The people around know me as Brenda, and perhaps that is why the situation is better.”

But she still carries a stigma within society. She mentions the identity card problem; until she performs the necessary operation she will have to carry her male name. And hundreds of other issues.

“In hospital I was placed in the men’s ward. Certain comments also hit you hard, such as when one of the hospital security staff called me names and when I was literally dragged out of a club because I am a transsexual.”

By the way, what about going out? Is it still the way it used to be? She smiles and tells me, “We like going out to dine together. Sometimes people think we are sisters. It has never occurred to anybody that she is my wife.”

I ask her if she feels close to God. The reply leaves me slightly stunned.

“When I was working in the desert the Bishop of Benghazi was a great friend of mine, and I still believe in what he told me. If you want to pray to God you can pray on the sand in the middle of the desert. You can pray when you are in your room. God hears you all the same, and he will answer you.”

Brenda’s positive attitude is impressive. She tells me that now that she is a woman she is happier than ever because she is living life according to her wishes.

“I have accepted myself and now I have a mission, to help, even through this interview, those transsexuals who have not found the help they need.”

In two weeks, Brenda and Sue will be without a job because the business they work at is closing down. Brenda reminds me of her hobby. “You know, I used to be a biker. And I still am! Every Sunday I go out on my motor-bike with hundreds of others who share this pastime. Will you come with us?”

I do not happen to understand much about motor-bikes. Some two years ago I convinced a fellow journalist to sell his two bikes because I used to tell him they were dangerous. But I will do it for Brenda.