

## THE TRANSFORMATION ZONE

by Anna Polonyi

“The doctor told my parents: ‘It’s easier to dig a hole than build a shaft.’ Those are the words he used.”

The prospect of meeting Catherine was a selling point for the workshop, though the organizers would never have admitted that. She works an office job in South Boston, she doesn’t say where. She looks disappointingly normal: mid-thirties, mouse-brown hair. What’s most surprising is her thick Boston accent, which I, for some reason, did not expect a hermaphrodite to have.

In her 1990 article “The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersex Children,” social psychologist Suzanne Kessler writes:

*The birth of intersexed infants, babies born with genitals that are neither clearly male nor clearly female, has been documented throughout recorded time.<sup>1</sup>*

Her hands are well-kept and small. They lie very still in her lap as she speaks. “You need to understand, I come from a working class Catholic background. My parents never spoke about sex between themselves, so just imagine their shock. They didn’t even know what words to use.” There is nothing for us to look at then but her hands.



The FEMSEX poster, garish pink with the workshop’s name in all caps and a cartoon cunt underneath, is hard to miss on campus. At the info session, they give us photocopies of the same cunt to color in. The workshop, Dre explains, was developed at UC Berkeley in the 1990s as a radical all-women’s course on sexuality. It fills in where conventional sex ed left off—with practical tips ranging from how to make environmentally-friendly pads to where to find the nearest foot fetish party.

The facilitators can’t be more than a couple of years older than me. They seem decades wiser. Dre introduces herself as a lesbian. I’ve never met a lesbian with long hair before. I scrutinize her closely for any tell-tale signs of difference. There are none.

They give us homework every week—like telling people they are beautiful and logging their reactions. They invite guest speakers, like Catherine.

“It was decided that I was more of a girl. They clipped off what they considered to be my abnormally large clitoris – this was in fact the beginnings of a penis. The doctor said he would have to wait until I was a teenager to finish ‘turning’ me into a girl.”



1 Kessler, Suzanne J. (1990). The medical construction of gender: Case management of intersexed infants. Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society, 16, 3-26.

2 Images (c) Tee Corinne. Reprinted by permission of the publisher, Last Gasp.

David isn't nearly as impressed with the idea of the workshop as I am. "Sounds a bit like a self-help group to me," he says, turning back to reading St Augustine's *Confessions*. David is German. He is not from around here, so I like him. His skin is pockmarked with years of bad acne, which I decide is a sign of an adventurous, gritty adolescence.

We spend most of our time lying on my rug. I stole it from the hall without remorse, even after it made David frown. "You know, the guys who live down the hall are probably pretty upset about it."

"I'll put it back before school ends. They should have known better than to leave it out there anyway." It's the back-handed revenge of the lesser privileged. I maintain that I am doing the socially sheltered a favor by toughening them up to the real world of petty theft and crime.

David turns on his back, casting his murky eyes at the ceiling. His locks spread out on the rug like a dirty blonde halo. "You're beautiful," I tell him.

He laughs. "No, really." I say it again and watch the word spread over his features, like a natural sedative. He is suddenly very still, his eyes softer than I've seen them yet. "No one's ever said that to me before."



Catherine's voice stays level, dipping only in parts where the current of her story pulls her under.

"Growing up, I knew I was different, but I never realized just how much. Everyone thinks they're different, right? But I remember this feeling of having done something unforgivable without knowing what it was."

*In the late twentieth century, medical technology has advanced to allow scientists to determine chromosomal and hormonal gender, which is typically taken to be the real, natural, biological gender, usually referred to as "sex."*

"My parents never spoke about it. I thought going to the hospital was what most families did on Saturdays. I was brought up prudish. I was very curious to know what the other girls looked like when we changed in gym class, but I didn't want to be caught looking."

*Physicians who handle the cases of intersexed infants consider several factors besides biological ones in determining the gender of a particular infant: such cultural factors as the "correct" length of the penis and capacity of the vagina.*

"I met Jacob when I was sixteen. He was captain of the debate team. My mother was so relieved a boy liked me that she didn't object to me going on dates.

When she sat me down one day, I thought she was going to ground me for staying out too long with Jacob. Instead, she told me about the 'procedure.' "It's something all young girls have to go through. Then you'll be a real woman," she said.

It made sense—I had spent most of my childhood in and out of hospitals. Why not now? She told me Jacob wouldn't understand and I should tell him I was going in for appendicitis. I didn't know what appendicitis meant, nor what the difference was so I said, 'okay.'"