Growin' up trans

by Dr Belinda Chaplin



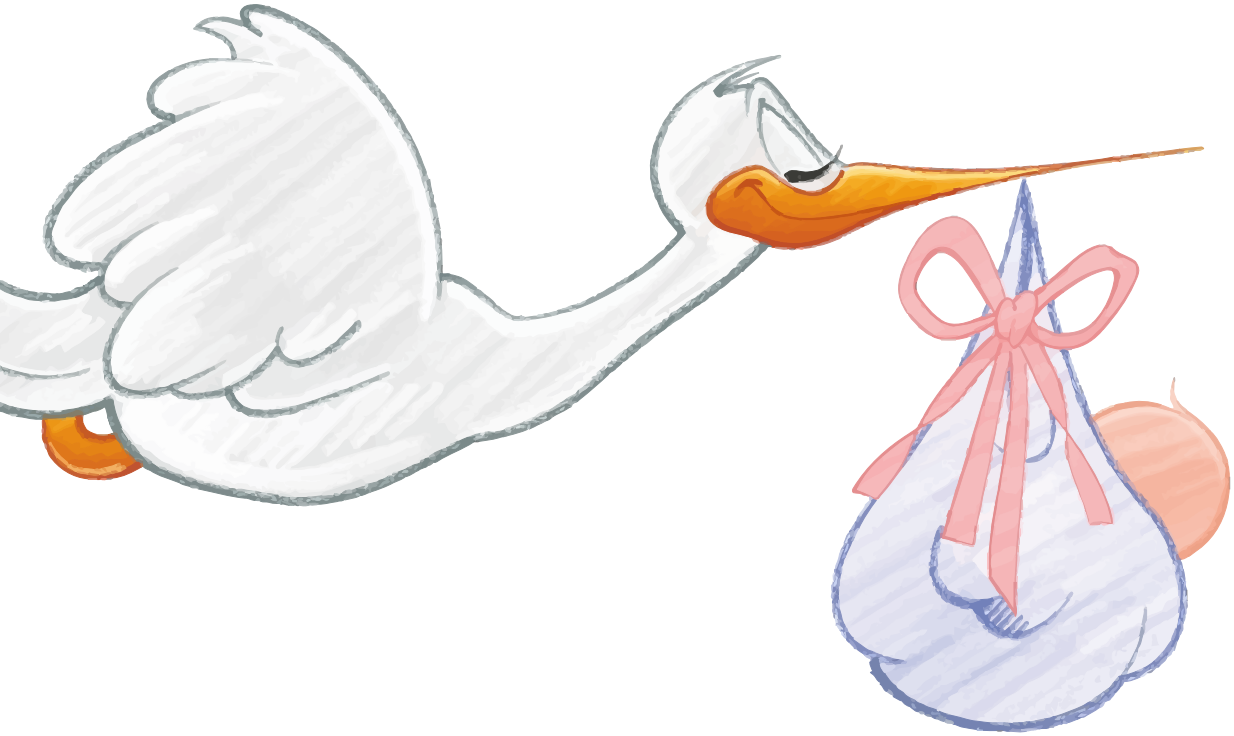
LGBTI LIVING WELL

Rainbow Tick

Quality Innovation Performance ACCREDITED

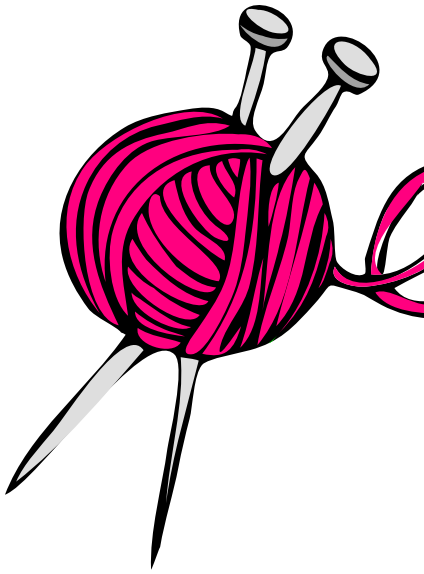
Once upon a time, in a land far away, Betty and Patrick gave birth to a healthy baby boy, and everyone was happy.

It was 1954 and everybody thought that Billy was a boy because he had normally developed sex characteristics. You know, he had a penis and testes that you would expect to see on a baby boy, and they were the right size and everything.



You see, that’s how doctors determine your biological sex, because of your sex characteristics. Some people think your biological sex is your gender, but that's not true.

Billy developed normally as an infant and then as a young child. But when Billy was about 4 years old, he displayed attributes that were not the social norm for boys. He liked to play with dolls and other activities that society expected girls to do such as knitting, sewing, and cooking.



He used to knit and sew clothes for Barbie, his sister Denise's favourite doll; and he helped Denise to dress Barbie because she couldn't do that.

You see, Denise was born with cerebral palsy. So, Billy's behaviour went unnoticed by his mum and dad. They just thought Billy was being a good brother. His gendered activities were not the way society expected a boy to behave. That's because society tells us boys do boy things and girls do girl things...that's gender, not biological sex. We do gender in a lot of ways. We express it in how we dress, how we speak, the things we like, the toys we play with, the sports we play. But the thing is...your gender doesn't have to match your biological sex. And for Billy, they didn't match.

Girl things became a normal part of Billy's life. He loved going to grandma's house where he helped his grandma bake cakes and other treats on Sundays, and he used to play dress-ups with grandma's 1920s crocheted dress. He'd happily parade around in that dress.



At primary school, Billy was attracted to the girls, and he would play skip rope and elastics with them at lunchtime. This continued without comment until Billy was in Grade 3, when a couple of the boys started to pick on him.



Billy didn't care; he was happy doing what he was doing, because deep inside, Billy thought and knew he was in fact a girl. That's what they call your gender identity, and Billy's gender identity didn't match his biological sex.

Things took a different turn when Billy was called into the headmaster's office one day. The headmaster, very tall, imposing and somewhat grandfatherly, pointed his finger at Billy and said, "if you don't stop playing with the girls, I'm going to put you in a dress".

That brought a huge smile to Billy's face. He fantasised about being in that dress and did so whenever the opportunity arose. It's at this time Billy realised he wasn't like the other boys. But he knew he had to change his ways at school, so he pretended to be the boy they wanted him to be.

He played cricket and football and even became House Captain in Grade 6.





Billy was still happily doing girl things at home until one day he got caught in the act of dressing up in one of his cousin June's dresses. Now his behaviour was unacceptable at home, and all the things he used to do with his sister were banned.



Billy had to keep his gender identity a total secret.

He played the secret girl behind closed doors substituting other clothing to make it work.

He took it even further by tucking his penis between his legs and pretending it wasn't there anymore and he often wondered why he wasn't born a girl, because that's what he felt like.

Puberty was confusing and confronting for Billy. His body had a mind of its own. His sex characteristics developed normally, but the idea of being with girls seemed abhorrent to him. He didn't know what was happening to him, so he decided to alienate himself as a form of self-protection and concentrated on his learning.



When he finished high school and left home in 1972, it was easier. Billy experimented in ways that were socially acceptable. Kaftans and long hair were the rage as the hippie movement peaked in popularity.

He could fit quite happily into that mould and get away with being a semi-girl.

Over time, Billy started mixing and matching boys' and girls' clothes, and presented more often in public as a girl. With long hair and the fashions of the time, passing was easy; so much so that people would comment on what “that girl” had on.



This made Billy think more about what direction to take in life, but it was difficult because was he the only one in the world like this? It seemed like it until one night, Billy ventured into a club, and it made sense.

The club was full of people he’d learn that night were just like him.



While he had some of the answers, it was still a huge decision. What would life look like? He just didn't know what to do. The answer was decided for him when one day he went home to find that everything he owned was gone, except for the clothes on his back, which were girls' clothes. Billy was now the new girl on the block.

So, that's the story of sex and gender through one person's eyes and how different those concepts are. Billy's glad they didn't have gender reveal parties back in the day...well they just would have got it all wrong!



The rest of Belinda's life is herstory.

The end.