Self-Made Woman
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Finally the big day arrived and I boarded China Air for my flight to Bangkok. It was a strange flight path, over Canada with a stop in Anchorage, on to Taipei, and then to Thailand. The stopover in Anchorage was surreal. We landed in a snowstorm; it was November and even though it was only 4 p.m., outside it was already pitch black. I had a two-hour layover, so I deplaned to walk around the terminal. I was struck by how modern the airport was, but what really caught my eye were a pair of taxidermied bears, a Kodiak and a polar bear opposite one another, both standing tall. I was awed by the immense size of these beautiful creatures, their giant claws, teeth, powerful legs, thick fur, sharp eyes, and large black noses. How efficient these animals must be in the wild, I thought, saddened to find them dead inside this airport.

It could’ve been the impression those bears made on me or the excitement of my pending surgery once I arrived in Bangkok that brought on an overwhelming desire to call my mother. Whatever possessed me to do this I don’t know, but by the time I realized it was a mistake it was too late. She had answered the phone. I immediately felt uncomfortable—why did I call her? I started off with small talk, eventually telling her I was in Anchorage, on my way to Bangkok. We’d had a few previous phone discussions about my upcoming gender change, none of which ever went well. Maybe, my thinking went, once she understood I was actually going...
through with sex reassignment surgery—that her son was on the
cusp of fulfilling a lifelong dream to become a woman—there
would be some loving support. Exactly the opposite happened.
I’d played this badly and my mother pleaded with me on the
phone not to go through with this and “hurt myself.”

Quickly, the discussion revolved around those three words.
Don’t hurt yourself: I listened in stunned silence, angry at her for
not supporting me in something that she’d had hints of my whole
life and was in complete denial about. On top of feeling hurt and
rejected, I felt momentarily guilty over what I’d planned all these
years. I was forty-nine, recently divorced, broke financially, and a
recovering addict. Two tragedies in my life, an abusive father and
an addiction to crystal meth, had ironically turned out to help push
me, giving me the resilience to take this step. My mother still didn’t
understand. The call ended with the two of us as far apart as ever,
but at least she knew my plans and could no longer deny my truth.

There in the terminal I stopped again at the two bears. Nothing
was going to take me away from who I really was inside. I returned
to the gate and got back on that plane, free of doubt about be-
coming Denise DuBois, and finally leaving Dennis Dubis behind
forever.

It was sweltering when I arrived in Bangkok, a heat not unlike that
one Sunday afternoon decades earlier when my journey began. It
was the summer of 1958 and I was four years old.

My parents, sister, and I were on our way to the lake cottage
owned by my grandparents. I can remember how huge the backseat
of my parents’ car seemed to me at that age. I recall the big shift
handle on the steering column and the musty car seats. I played
with the window handle, while my mother smoked a cigarette and
my father a cigar. The telephone poles seemed to fly by. I counted
the wires, watching them twirl and twist as we zoomed along the

Prologue
empty rural highway. Each time I lost count I started over again. I was very excited that we were going out to the cottage again because it meant I could play on the little dock and look out at the lake. I loved that lake. I could see all the way across it. I liked watching the wind-capped waves, the fishing boats with people rowing and the occasional outboard motor boat that always left a wake in the water. I would try to catch the dancing dragonflies buzzing around and landing on the dock, but I never could. I breathed in the scent of the fresh lake water and watched the sunshine reflect on the water and the small waves lap on the shore. I loved too the small yard that led to the lake, with its wispy willow trees whose branches snapped like whips in the wind, where Busha, my grandmother, had many Italian plum trees growing whose fruit I loved to eat. (In fact, my earliest memory is of being under the kitchen table of our house in Milwaukee on South Thirteenth Street, eating a piece of bread with Busha’s plum jam on it. I must have been three and a half. I ate the whole thing and crawled out from under the table and asked my mother and aunt for another piece. They laughed and gave me one.) In the yard at the lake cottage I was always on the lookout for the familiar shade of purple that meant the plums were starting to ripen so that Busha could make her jam for me.

Summer gatherings at the cottage meant plenty of alcohol, card games, and Polish food—cold blood soup, kapusta, pirogues, cooked beets, mock chicken legs, raw hamburger with onions—all piled on platters set on a long table. Adults drank constantly and played cards, while pretty much ignoring what the kids were up to.

On that particular Sunday, my sister and I were playing on the dock without supervision. I hadn’t learned how to swim yet. As much as I liked the dock, I was afraid too. The water looked so deep, dark, and forbidding between the wooden planks. I remember sitting down on the edge, next to a small boat tied to the deck, and feeling the hot planks on the back side of my upper
thighs as my tiny legs dangled over the water. My sister, only nineteen months older than me but much taller, had climbed down into the boat. She was urging me to do the same. I feared the worst. I had a premonition of falling in and drowning, but eventually she coaxed me into complying. I put my hands on the edge of the dock and tried to stretch my legs down to the boat. I was shaking; my legs were too short to make it. All I could do was get one foot on the edge of it, and when I released my grip on the dock, the boat pushed away.

I went into the lake like a bag of cement. I thought I was about to drown, to die. In fact, I was about to be reborn.

In Bangkok the next morning I met with Dr. Chettawut to go over the plan, which would start unfolding later in the day with pre-surgery prep work. I was struck by how young the doctor was and impressed by his extensive knowledge about sex reassignment surgery, or SRS. He had an engaging manner, spoke proficient English, and patiently answered all my questions. He also reviewed my paperwork, which included a letter of recommendation from a psychiatrist, who happened to be the mother of one of my roommate’s back in New York. She had been thorough in developing her recommendation, asking many questions about my life and how my RLE and HRT had gone. RLE and HRT are two crucial stages for anyone seeking gender reassignment surgery. The first, which stands for real life experience, demanded that I live fully as a woman for one year. The second, hormone replacement therapy, added medications to the process.

Dr. Chettawut was satisfied. “You make a good candidate for this surgery,” he said. I did have to sign the usual releases of liability, however, in case something went wrong while I was under. The entire operation was expected to take about six hours. I knew this was no simple procedure and I was entrusting myself to Dr. Chettawut’s skill. I also had to pay in full at this time, and since he didn’t
take checks, I handed over the large sum of cash I’d brought with me. The transaction felt odd. I watched the doctor’s wife count the bills, something she was quite good at, I noticed.

With time to kill before being admitted to the hospital I visited a shopping mall located next to my hotel. This was a part of the Bangkok I didn’t see when I passed through the city many years earlier. The mall was enormous, sleek and sexy. The stores were like what you’d see in the United States, but even more stylish and attractive. I wandered into a salon that offered mani-pedis, had one done, and then decided to have my hair trimmed and styled. When the attractive stylist handed me a mirror to view the results, I was dismayed by how short my hair was. The last thing I wanted on the eve of a sex change was hair that looked gender neutral! I had spent two years growing my blonde hair out, and in just one hour I was back to practically square one. Pretending to like it, I sulked out, self-conscious about my appearance. Back in my hotel room, I packed and then went down to wait in the lobby for my ride to the hospital from Dr. Chettawut’s wife.

During the drive I refocused on what mattered. This is it, I thought, as we rode along hectic streets, passing areas of the city I remembered from a different time, a different life. Arriving at the hospital, I was struck by how ultramodern it looked from the outside, even more so than many U.S. hospitals. We didn’t bother to use the front entrance for the usual check-in processing. Dr. Chettawut had hospital privileges here, his wife explained, so we entered via a side door and I was taken directly up to my room. It was spacious and bright, with huge windows that gave a view of the skyscrapers of downtown. My bed had an inflatable, alternating pressure mattress to help prevent pressure sores during my recovery, during which I’d be on my back, knees up, for five days straight. This was absolutely necessary to allow for proper healing. The room was private—no sharing with another patient—and there was access to English books and magazines. I noticed a big screen
TV and thought how handy it would be in the coming days of bed confinement.

As Dr. Chettawut’s wife prepared to leave, I asked her how the hospital staff even knew I was here, since we had yet to even see a nurse. She smiled, told me to relax, assured me that the staff knew I was here, and then she was gone. I poked around my room, checked out the bathroom, and turned on the TV. There was cable and plenty of U.S. channels. I propped up my pillows and was watching a rerun of *The Beverley Hillbillies* when in walked two of the hottest nurses I’d ever seen. Their uniforms were exactly like what I’d seen in porn magazines. I mean, they were so attractive I felt compelled to ask them if they were actual nurses, which they confirmed in broken, giggling English. Next came the best part; they were here to shave my pubic hair! I could not believe these gorgeous nurses were here to do this “chore.” I eagerly spread my legs, and they lifted my hospital gown. One of them said, “Oh, cute panties.” That did it. Despite the Androcur, a testosterone blocking drug I was taking, I felt my penis growing hard. I laughed. It was like a final curtain call for my last hours as male. The nurses were gentle with me, using a straight-edge blade, and laughed at my half-erect penis, cluing me in that they’d seen this all before.

More nurses visited to take my blood pressure and temperature. They chatted with me, always smiling, all beautiful and young. I couldn’t help but compare them to what we had in the United States. Well, there was no comparison. Thailand was just a younger country population-wise and it showed in the staff at this hospital. Later, I couldn’t sleep and mentioned it. In minutes another hottie appeared to administer a shot in my buttocks. I awoke the next morning a bit disoriented, but the beauty pageant began again and I was fine. Dr. Chettawut showed up for a final discussion before surgery. He asked me if I had changed my mind. “Nope, not at all,” I replied. And with that confirmation it was all systems go. I
was transferred to an operating bed and moved into the preop room for my general anesthesia prep work.

In my final moments of consciousness, having been given a relaxant via an IV and feeling loopy, I jokingly instructed the staff to make sure they used enough stuff to put me under, even as I resolved to resist falling sleep. The last thing I remember was looking up at the white ceiling in this cold, sterile room and seeing a giant green gecko just sitting there. How did that gecko get in here I wondered, and then nothing, complete darkness.

Back at the lake, I had lost my footing and I was drowning in its deep, dark depths. I remember going straight to the bottom, screaming and struggling. My eyes remained open and I saw bubbles and lake water surrounding me. I remember choking and gasping. Then suddenly I could breathe—I could breathe underwater. Out of nowhere a green tornado had begun to form and swirl around me. I blinked my eyes in amazement, as it kept moving around me. There was an air pocket between the water and myself. I remained very scared but somehow sensed that everything would be okay.

I heard people screaming up above. I wasn’t paying attention to them, however, I was fascinated with this green tornado, thinking I should just go with it and forget about what the muffled distressed sounds above were all about. Then I heard my mother yelling, telling me to put my arms up. Seconds later I found myself flopped on the pier like a beached baby seal. My mother had grabbed my arms and yanked me out of the water. At least that’s what I believe happened. My mother offered another, lighter, version of events in which my father jumped in to save me, but only after he removed his wallet from his trousers. But I don’t recall my father on the dock.

In any case, after nearly drowning, I found myself on the dock soaking wet, spitting up water. Everyone was making a huge
commotion about what had just happened. Then it happened. I was whisked—snuggled up in my mother’s arms—toward the cottage. Anyone still drinking and playing cards would’ve surely stopped when I was brought through there, probably still coughing, or even crying. My mother carried me into a dim bedroom and laid me down. My wet clothes were removed and taken away and put in the dryer. Meanwhile, I couldn’t just lay there naked; that would not have been right. So I was clothed in the only child’s garment readily available. I was put in a girl’s dress. That was the it—the earthquake that weakened the façade of Dennis and began my decades-long transformation into Denise.

I must’ve been left alone to rest. The adults would’ve wanted to resume their drinking and cards, the kids their own games. How I loved the way that dress felt! At some point, I got out of bed to gaze in the mirror hanging on the door and marveled in how it looked on me with its ruffled shoulders, how the breeze blew underneath it, how it swirled about as I spun myself around. I knew in that moment I was a girl and the dress would always be part of me. That summer dress felt electric and in that moment, probably for the first time, I recognized myself. This is me, I thought. This is right.

Gender roles were very strict in the Polish Catholic community I was raised in. I remember always wanting to be with the women at family gatherings like this one. Sometimes I would not be noticed and could listen to their conversation, learning about things every young girl has the opportunity to find out about from her community. But sooner or later I was always forced back to the poker table, to the men with their liquor, cigars, and cigarettes.

Nearly drowning had opened up a new world for me, but in this cultural environment it couldn’t last. What happened next was predictable. Once my regular boy clothes had dried I was told to put them on. I became very upset, saying I didn’t want to wear those anymore because they were boy clothes and I was girl now.
My father, plied with shots of whisky, was furious. His angry stare told me that I was not going to win this duel, and reluctantly I did as I was ordered. I knew my mother wouldn’t intercede on my behalf. She was a young woman and most likely was pretty drunk too.

My father and mother displayed no tolerance toward my wanting to be a girl, either in that moment or others that followed. Their attitude didn’t undo anything. My feminine side was born that day and remained alive inside me.

In my hospital bed on the morning after my surgery, I slowly moved my arm, letting my hand creep down across my stomach toward what had been the ultimate objective. A big smile spread across my face as my hand gently moved around the smooth, bandaged mound between my legs. I finally had my vagina. Tears of joy ran down my cheeks. I had never given up on my dream, from that day on Busha and Jaja’s dock at the lake cottage in southern Wisconsin until the day I had my surgery in the exotic city of Bangkok. Now my quest was over and my destiny had come to pass. I wanted to jump off the bed into the air, do a somersault, and run down the hall yelling the words “I am a woman now!” I could feel my new life opening up before me. At the same time there was much in my past that would not be transformed, that would keep trying to drown me if I let it. This is the hard truth and the core of my story in the struggle to become Denise. Eventually I would find a place of beauty and inspiration where I could write down the often painful events of my life, examine behaviors that were self-destructive, delusional, even illegal. Fifty years of battles—inner and outer. That nurturing place turned out to be in Hawaii. On the island of Kauai I live in an area of coastline with treacherous currents, whose name in the Hawaiian language means unfriendly water. Maybe that’s what drew me here; maybe I wanted to be close to dark waters that reminded me of my past, of waters that had tried to drown me many times. I
was saved once by the green tornado in the lake. To survive what came later, though, I would have to rescue myself.

These pages are a record of that journey: from male to female, from Dennis to Denise, from darkness to light, and from many lies to one truth.