

PROPELLED TO SELF-MUTILATION

by Dee Farmer

Recently, a writer at OUT/WRITE alluded that it would not be a responsible thing for a writer to write about a transsexual committing suicide. I assume by this remark he meant to do so would possibly cause other transsexual individuals to commit or contemplate suicide. Because this theory does appear to have some merit, I point out that the purpose of this writing is not to encourage any transsexual person to engage in self-mutilation. I would strongly dissuade such thoughts, and suggest other forms of relief. However, because self-mutilation is a reality among the incarcerated transsexual population. I do not believe sweeping the issue under the rug is the solution. Therefore, I present this writing to you only to enlighten you on some of the consequences of being transsexual and incarcerated.

It was going to be a hot Summer day, I could predict that from the early morning stream of sunlight reflecting in my cell. I had been sentenced several weeks earlier and had been dreadfully anticipating this day: The day the U.S. Marshal would transplant me from the local jail to the federal penitentiary to begin serving my long-term sentence.

I had already decided that I would dress casual. I had chosen a pair of black bermuda shorts with a black and white silk blouse and black sandals. Soon the cell doors opened, I would shower slip into my lace bra and panties, apply only a little make-up to the dark areas of my face and a dash of red lipstick to my lips. I would style my hair, get

dressed in the chosen attire and wait for the Marshal. I felt a lot more comfortable than I had in the formal skirt suits, dresses, stockings, heels, etc., I had worn almost daily for the past several months during my numerous court appearances.

While waiting for the Marshal, I wondered: How would it be in prison? Would I continue to receive female hormones? Would I be allowed my clothes and make-up? The questions in my mind seemed endless. Finally, the Marshal had arrived. I was placed in restraint and transported to the federal penitentiary in Pennsylvania. During the ride from Baltimore to Pennsylvania, I put on my brave face and envisioned the past. Damn, I thought with bitterness, I had come so close to the threshold of receiving sex-reassignment surgery. It brought tears to my eyes thinking of how much I had suffered trying to live with, accept and change my uninvited dilemma of being a woman confined in male body. However, when I was a child and everybody called me a faggot, I didn't cry. I didn't cry when people told me I was going to hell and God didn't love me. I didn't cry through all the court proceedings, including sentencing. No, I would not cry now. I fought back the tears, readjusted my brave face and smiled. After passing the sign "United States Penitentiary, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania," I was overwhelmed by the gun towers and high brick wall that surrounded what seemed to be the biggest cathedral in the world. But this was a prison. At the entrance, a man in a tower yelled to the Marshal, "She can not come inside" (referring to me)." After it was clarified that "she" was not necessarily a "she" we entered the prison. That was over six years ago.

I began prison life in a whirlwind. I learned almost immediately I would not receive female hormones or any other feminine articles during my incarceration. Because I was still young and my body seemed to be still thriving on my pre-confinement treatment, I took the unwillingness of prison officials to accept or treat my transsexual condition in stride.

I could survive the bigotry, hatred and sexual pressures that I had faced in prison from other prisoners and prison officials alike. In reality I had dealt with most of it before, either as a child or teenager. It was just that I had thought I would never have to "live" with it again. But here I was with it all around me and no way of escape. Though I could deal with this kind of trauma, I was not prepared for the drastic changes my body began to exhibit. One morning I realized my mind and body was not thriving, but deteriorating. I noticed hairs where once there were none. My voice became heavy and it became an effort to speak in a feminine tone. I could not remember when I ever uttered a word that didn't sound like it came from a woman. I spent many hours in the mirror frantically worrying about losing my identity. The truth revealed in the mirror could not be hidden with a brave face and smile -- tears flowed. Ultimately, I came to despise the mirror and my overall appearance. I guess it should be noted I even grew taller.

I turned to the courts for help. First, exhausting available administrative remedies, then filing and refiling suits. I even tried presenting prison officials with a forged court order requiring the administering of female hormones. The only success I had was in

periodically smuggling hormones into the institution, which was very expensive. Because the judicial system is so slow, I became very frustrated -- in addition to being depressed, frantic and desperate. During this time I began to play with the thought of self-castration. Would I bleed to death? Would I be preserving my future as transsexual? However, I say I played with the thought, because that's all it really was -- a thought. Certainly, I could not imagine myself doing anything so unorthodox.

The court battle continued. I went from district court to appeals court, back to the district court and back to the appeals court. It is like a vicious cycle. For every win it seems there was a greater loss ahead. I began to sense that prison officials didn't really comprehend the depth of my turmoil. They began to play word games with things such as the availability of treatment and treatment being provided. The law requires only that incarcerated transsexuals be provided with some form of treatment. Transsexual inmates are not entitled to any particular type of treatment, But they are entitled to some kind of treatment. Realizing that they had not provided me with any form of treatment as required by law, prison officials contended treatment (psychotherapy) was available, but I failed to request it. They made these contentions despite admitting that one prison psychologist had wrongfully informed me I was not a transsexual, but a transvestite and not entitled to any treatment.

While the courts entertained the position, whether treatment was available and if so, does it fulfill the constitutional requirement of treatment being provided? I played some

more with the possibility of self-castration. Regression had firmly set in and I only vaguely resembled the person I used to be. So self-castration went from thought to possibility.

I began to investigate the possibility. Not surprisingly, I found several cases where incarcerated transsexuals had self-mutilated. One transsexual prisoner had damaged her testicles so severely that prison officials had to remove them. Another incarcerated transsexual became frustrated to the point of smashing her television and taking a large piece of the broken glass to repeatedly cut her sex organs. I also learned from a gender specialist that it was not uncommon for transsexual persons, both incarcerated and those in society, to self-mutilate. I learned that most transsexuals guilty of self-mutilation have done so out of desperation. Though I felt desperate, I still had great reservations about self-castration. However, the possibility was forever revolving in my mind.

As the courts continued to try and decide whether treatment was available, etc., I decided to elucidate the matter. For an entire year I requested the supposedly available treatment (psychotherapy). In accordance with the law, I requested to be given some form of treatment. In response, prison officials wrote: "though, you claim [despite being diagnosed by their own doctors] to be a transsexual. You do not demonstrate any need for psychological treatment." This went on for about a year. In addition to this fact weighing heavily against prison officials in the pending case, it also provided grounds for another lawsuit. I filed that several months ago. During all the administrative remedy and suit preparation and filing, I thought some more about the possibility of self-castration.

I do not recall when I actually decided to self-castrate, but I had made the decision. Live or die and regardless of what anybody thought, I would self-castrate. On the fourth day after making that decision, I was permitted to receive a disposable razor. I broke it open and removed the blade. When I began cutting my scrotal open, I felt both relieved and happy. Relieved I was finally taking an affirmative step in the right direction and happy to be doing so. However, I discovered, much to my horror, that a razor is neither strong nor sharp enough to do the job.

Since that fourth day I have been confined in a cell twenty four hours a day under monitor. I am not permitted any property. I assume this is the prison officials way of trying to punish me. However, the only regret I have is that I did not complete what I had set out to accomplish. To say that some form of extreme confinement could deter my determination to achieve sex-reassignment surgery is not to say that another form of punishment can deter me from being transsexual. This is not so because I have not chosen to be a transsexual -- *I am transsexual*. Though such conduct is described as self-mutilation, I doubt that any transsexual would consider themselves irreparably damaging that which is damaging to their being.

Though I could easily see how one could be compelled to self-mutilate over and over again, the question remains: Will I do it again? That is a question I cannot honestly answer. Just as I did not choose to be transsexual, I do not feel I choose to self-mutilate. In the face of all the facts, I feel I was propelled to self-mutilation. Whether I will be

propelled again depends on a lot of circumstances.

I do believe I can now identify with the statement of a gender expert that transsexuals will go to the point of moving heaven and earth to accomplish their goal.