

Set Free

By Stacey Rice

The large glass entrance doors to Duke University Medical's endocrinology clinic were right in front of me and I couldn't move. The rhythmic swinging of the doors, as people came and went, hypnotically captured me as I pondered the unknowns. My new life was just beyond those swinging doors but my nerves stopped me for the moment.

It had taken more than a bit to get to this place. The past thirty-seven years of my life had been consumed with the knowledge I was transgender. Those long years held many things, including a desperate search for a remedy that would lift this burden. It was why I was standing in front of these doors. I was here to see an endocrinologist who could prescribe the miracle drugs that would set me free.

With an invisible nudge from the universe, I finally stepped across the threshold and into a packed waiting room. I found a chair wedged in a corner that became progressively harder to sit in as the minutes clicked by. Was it the chair or my nerves that was causing me to squirm?

My name was eventually called, and I followed the nurse down a labyrinth of sterile hallways lined with randomly placed oak doors. Our steps made no sound as we made our way along the highly polished vinyl floor. She continued to quietly lead me until we came to one of the last doors and into a treatment room. She took my blood pressure and heart rate, both of which were as sky high as I felt at that particular moment. She told me the doctor would be right in, took one quick glance at me, walked out, and closed the door.

I sat there counting the seconds to the beginning of my new life. My head was filled with a swirling collection of thoughts. I was anxious about what would happen next. I was lucky to find this doctor since this type of information was hard to come by in 1999. I asked my trans friends who I should go see and they gave me his name. They told me he was an accepting person, but was he really?

From a dark corner of those thoughts, I wondered whether I would have to prove I was transgender. That thought prompted me to compose a mental checklist of all the reasons why I knew I was. At the top of the list was the deep knowing that I was female inside this

male body. That knowledge had not budged since I was five years old. I kept going over and over my list until there was a knock at the door and it opened.

A tall middle-age man in a long white lab coat with a floppy stethoscope tied around his neck stepped in and introduced himself. He asked why I was there and in a very tentative voice, I replied “I am transgender and I want to start hormone therapy.” He asked “Do you have a letter of support from a mental health provider?”

I was ready for that question as I knew that a doctor treating transgender patients would likely be using the standards of care issued by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health.¹ As part of those standards an evaluation and letter of support by a licensed mental health provider was needed before treatment could begin.

I gave him my letter and after taking some time to read it, he started sharing the details of what my life’s new beginning would look like. His words washed over me like a pure stream of spring water quenching a thirst that had built up for decades. My journey would start with a hefty daily dose of estrogen and a testosterone blocker which would help the estrogen take effect. That would continue for the rest of my life.

There were side effects to be considered. He started down a list of the more serious ones that might come with taking estrogen - depression, memory loss, and blood clots that could lead to a heart attack or stroke. This seemed like a very small price to pay to free the burden that had weighed on my mind for decades.

When all my questions had been answered, he reached into his lab coat pocket and pulled out a prescription pad. As he was writing a prescription for the drugs that would change my life, I felt the hell of the last thirty-seven years of my life, slowly being erased with each stroke of his pen.

I was more than a bit dazed as I walked back along the vinyl floor and into the still busy waiting room. Patients, nurses, and doctors floated by me as I found my way back to the glass doors and over the threshold into my new life. My emotions hit with the force of a tornado – joy, fear, adrenaline, anxiety – they all arose in the five minutes it took me to walk to my car. I sat down in the driver’s seat, and released a long breath — almost a subconscious one that had been held tightly for years. As I exhaled, the invisible weight which had crushed my soul for so long, took wing on every molecule of breath that I pushed out. I was finally released.

Author's Notes

1. The World Professional Association for Transgender Health, formerly the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, first published a "Standard of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People" in 1979. It was developed to provide clinical guidance and education to health professionals who assist transgender people. The Standard of Care has been updated several times over the years and is still the main resource for health professionals.