

# 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

Each day I faithfully took my miracle drugs. The physical changes I experienced were many – softer skin, fat redistribution, breast growth, along with my eyes and face developing a more feminine appearance. Noticing the changes occurring was like watching a miracle manifest right in front of my eyes. A joyful one resulting from my body changing with each milligram of estrogen and testosterone blocker that was slowly being released.

With my facial features softening, I never knew how I was going to be addressed when leaving my apartment. I was dressing pretty androgynously as I hadn't transitioned to living full-time as my female self yet. Every trip out was a gender adventure. I constantly felt like I was participating in a game of "spinning pronoun" roulette with each and every interaction.

I was in Walgreens the first time it happened. As I wandered down the aisle, an employee walked up and said "Ma'am is there anything I can help you with?" For a split second, I was lost for words as I had never been addressed this way. I stammered back in my best female voice "No, I am doing fine." As I continued down the aisle, I said to myself "Oh my god, I got my first ma'am!" But then as I walked out of the Walgreens and into the Harris Teeter grocery store next door, a man almost ran into me and he jumped back saying "Oh sorry sir." Joy to disappointment in under thirty seconds. Even though it was short, I did realize that ma'am fit me just fine.

My parents had given me the name Stuart when I was born - after my father. I started trying out different female names to see which one would fit. I would run them by my friend Lauren. As we sat having dinner one night, I shared my latest list with her. She became exasperated and said "All of these are awful. To me, you feel like what a woman named Stacey would be like. So, you are Stacey!" And she was right. It wasn't long before I received a court document that said in bold letters: "It is hereby ordered that the name of the party be changed to Stacey Anne Rice."

The final piece was getting a new driver's license with my female face and new name joyfully splashed across the front of it. I didn't quite know what to expect at the Department of Motor Vehicles office which was just down the street from my apartment. I got dressed as Stacey and as I sat in the parking lot of the office, I kept repeating over and over again "Universe, please don't let there be many people in there." And almost at the same time, "Please make sure the DMV employees are nice and not so stern and judgmental." I continued my mantra as I got out of the car and made my way to the waiting room.

As I sat there, I focused on each and every employee, desperately trying to ascertain which one would be the most accepting. Soon, my number was called by the lone female employee in the office. As I sat down at her desk, she asked me what I needed. With a throat so incredibly dry, I croaked out "I just had my name changed and I need to get a new license." She took my existing license and name change document - intently staring at it for a minute or two. As I sat there silently, my mind was racing trying to guess what her next words would be.

She finally looked up, pointed down at my license and said, "You want to change this don't you?" I glanced down briefly, confused as I thought she was pointing towards my name. I didn't understand because I had just given her my name change document. I answered, "My name?" She said "No, this." She was pointing at the gender marker on my license - the M that had been there since I was 16 years old.

I was even more confused. In North Carolina at that time and as a trans person, you couldn't change the sex assigned to you at birth on any of your legal documents unless you had gender-confirming surgery. If so, the surgeon who had done your surgery had to certify in writing they had performed the appropriate clinical treatment for your new gender.<sup>2</sup>

It was incredibly hard to find a surgeon who did gender-confirming surgery back then. There were only a small handful in the United States who performed this surgery. It was expensive and no medical insurance carrier would cover it. There were stipulations in each carrier's medical insurance policy under the Exceptions to Coverage section that explicitly stated that no coverage would be extended to any treatment for "transsexualism and/or sex-change surgery," as it was worded back then.

As a result of this and other reasons, I had not gone through surgery. I had resigned myself to having the M on my new license. But it slowly dawned on me that she was pointing to the gender marker, I said with a quivering conviction "I thought that couldn't be changed unless I had surgery?" She looked up at me, glanced around at her coworkers, and quietly said, "Honey, you are not the first one to come in here. Wouldn't you want this changed?" I almost shouted, "Yes, I would." And she did.

I started living full-time as my female self not too long after the DMV visit. I found my first job as Stacey. However, I had to start my work career over since transitioning at my previous job was not going to be possible. I struggled financially for some time after transitioning. It was hard making ends meet working at Dillard's department store for

\$10.00 an hour — ironically as a sales associate in the men’s department. But no matter how hard those struggles were, my life overflowed every day with a joy that permeated my heart and soul. One that came from listening to my heart and becoming who I was always meant to be - a trans woman whose soul had finally been set free.

#### 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.
2. Twenty years after my experience at the North Carolina DMV in 1999, the Department released a new “sex designation form” making it easier for transgender people to have the proper gender on their N.C. driver’s licenses. The form only requires a medical or mental health professional to attest that “in my professional opinion, the applicant’s gender identity is male or female.” There is not an option to attest to for people who identify as gender non-binary.
3. Starting in 2014, the Federal Affordable Care Act prohibited insurers from discriminating on the basis of gender or gender identification. It was made illegal for private insurance plans to deny coverage for medically necessary transition-related care. Unfortunately, in 2023, over 100 bills were introduced in state legislatures which would ban gender-affirming medical care. Most of these bills prohibit gender-affirming care for people under 18 years of age, but some states have introduced measures that would extend to adults as well.