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AGE: 59

I USED TO BE A GYPSY.

**I used to just pick up and leave,
go from place to place.**

I was born and raised in Denver. I'm one of six, a big family. I'm one of the older ones. My mother stayed at home and my father was a heavy equipment operator with a long military background. I pretty much knew from the beginning that I wanted to transition, but my parents were scandalized by it all. When I told them I wanted to be a woman they said: "What's wrong with you? You're sick! You need help!" They were very conservative. All of Denver was conservative back then.

I started crossdressing when I was 17. I'd get dressed up on weekends, but I was scared to go out like that because it was illegal. Sometimes I'd go downtown to meet other people like me. I thought I was one of the few people like that; I didn't understand there were a lot of us. Many gay bars wouldn't let us in so we'd go to straight clubs instead. Since it was illegal they were afraid they'd lose their liquor license. We'd try to go in and they'd say no.

I stayed in Denver until I was 18. After high school I never lived with my parents again. Sometimes I still have doubts about myself. I was impressionable, and what my parents said was hurtful. It was rough with my siblings too, in the beginning. After I graduated I went to New York City. I wanted opportunities to get breasts and hips and things like that. I heard New York was happening.

I'D NEVER SEEN SO MANY BEAUTIFUL TRANSSEXUALS

There was a bar at 42nd and 8th Avenue called The Gilded Grape. I'd never seen so many transsexuals in one place in my life, and they were all beautiful. I was young and innocent. I thought: Where you'd get



that? It was exciting. I thought: There's possibilities here, opportunities.

I lived in the garment district—now they call it Chelsea. I stayed in the Chelsea Hotel. It used to be famous because of Jimi Hendrix and a lot of performers who stayed there because it was a party hotel. Back then—this was 1972—a room cost \$75 a week. I had been paying \$75 a month for my rent in Denver, so that was a lot of money for me. I did sex work the whole time I was in New York. I hustled in the street, and we all used to go down to Times Square. A lot of the girls would go to 9th Avenue



or Lexington Avenue, they'd hustle in the Village. I drank to help my nerves—buy a bottle of wine and pour it in a cup. I didn't have protection, I was just a kid, innocent. I didn't get the concept that there were people who hated me bad enough to hurt me. I got more street savvy eventually and carried a bottle like I was drinking out of it. If anybody got out of hand, well...

Back then everybody went to a doctor up in Yonkers, a plastic surgeon who did SRS [sex reassignment surgery] and injections. There was also a doctor on 5th Avenue who on Tuesday afternoons would let transsexuals come in. He was a renowned plastic surgeon. He didn't want us in there at any time except Tuesday because his 5th Avenue clients would be there. He did silicone injections, hormones, all that sort of thing. I got those done in his office.

I stayed in Manhattan for six months then went back to Denver. I'd make little trips to Los Angeles, West Hollywood, Chicago. I'd fly—you could get an airplane ticket for \$60 or \$70. I'd go somewhere, do sex work. In Denver I was also a dog

groomer. I kept my eyebrows tweezed and grew my hair out. My customers were fine with me because I was a good groomer.

It was around then I started thinking it was really, *really* time for me to transition. My mother had very bad problems with it. She'd say: "I don't want you around." My brothers were young, in elementary school at the time, so they all still lived at home. My mother said she didn't want me around them. I knew I had to do what would make me happy, so I left for New Orleans.

WHAT HAPPENS IN NEW ORLEANS STAYS IN NEW ORLEANS

I loved it right away. I had a little dancing stint at a transsexual topless bar on Bourbon Street. Every other place had real girls but we were what we were. They had barkers outside to lure people in and pictures and banners, all these lights. The crowds loved it. You know, what happens in New Orleans stays in New Orleans.

I went there to finally transition full time.



Except we didn't call it transitioning, we called it 24/7. I was anxious to get it done, but it was hard for me to raise the money. It was \$975. I just focused on it and every night put money away.

I'd hang around the French Quarter because I heard the girls there were lovely. It was true. There used to be a hooker bar on Bourbon Street, and I befriended the bartender, a transsexual named Alice. She became a dear friend. Everybody at the bar was transsexual, and Alice would watch out for all the young girls, let them know if a trick was good or bad.

I knew a lot of them had been to this guy in New Orleans who did silicone parties. A girl would tell you when he was coming by, and you'd go to her apartment to get it done. It was cheap back then. \$100 for the face, \$200 for the body. He used surgical grade silicone. A lot of the problems now are because people use industrial grade silicone and mix other things in it. If you put it too near the surface of your skin it will discolor; put it too deep and you'll have problems with your lungs and your

immune system. I never got vast amounts, just an injection and I'd be good. I wasn't born with these big cheeks, you know.

I went to Madison, Wisconsin, to get my first set of breast implants. I went by myself, and it was miserable. I got it done in December—why did I go to Wisconsin in December? I stayed in a hotel for a couple of days. The procedure took three or four hours, and afterwards it was hard to get up, hard to get dressed. It was very painful and I was scared. I thought: Oh, what did I do now? But I was happy too. I've never regretted it one day.

I'VE ALWAYS BELIEVED IN KARMA

I stayed in New Orleans until 1982, then I moved to Houston. One of my girlfriends told me it was really happening down there. Houston was a boom



city at the time. Oil was big, money was good, there was a big transgender scene. Those cowboys are really freaky, too. You know what's weird about Houston? You can carry a weapon as long as it's not concealed. Those Texans would have big knives and guns strapped to their waists. It made me uncomfortable.

The first time I heard about HIV was in Houston. We would be out on the street and these outreach workers would give us condoms, talk to us, explain about the virus. When somebody got sick they'd be around one day and dead the next. Before they had all the cocktails, the protease inhibitors, you'd contract pneumonia, get sick, die. It all happened really quick. I always used condoms. I was a pro. I could put it in my mouth and onto a john without them even knowing. Most of them were



cool with it, too. Guys have wives and kids, after all.

I'd talk about whatever men wanted to talk about. I never robbed my tricks. A lot of girls used to rob tricks or pick their pockets, but I've always believed in karma. I think that's what has gotten me through—I'm a good person.

But it's still kind of a control thing, sex work. Taking control of your clients: Do this, do that, give me, give me, give me. I would play a bit of a character with johns. I've always loved Grace Kelly and the Gabor sisters, their accents. I used different names. If you got into character things happened quicker. I was really good at it, in control of it all. There were a few people who found out I wasn't what I said I was, and they got quite upset. Even when I had lovers or husbands I was private about everything. They always knew what was down there, but that wasn't how I wanted to be seen.

I always had permanent people in my life, always had boyfriends. And while most of them were good, some weren't. When you're in the life you just attract that kind of person. All that was separate from my relationships. When I had a relationship I got a grooming job and squared up. I thought I was in love. I didn't want to be intimate with anybody else besides them. I sure didn't want them being with anybody but me. My mother and father were together their whole life. They stayed through it all, so I always had high expectations of relationships. My longest lasted seven years. I wasn't working in the clubs, not dancing. I was a bartender. I didn't mess around on him, but he messed around on me and that's what happened. That's how it ended.

I WAS SURROUNDED BY RAPISTS, MURDERERS, CHILD MOLESTERS

I went home to Denver in 1984. The truth is, I made much better money there. There wasn't competition. There used to be an itty bitty newspaper called *The Rocky Mountain Oyster*, and I put a three line ad there:

SEXY, SHAPELY SHE-MALE
38" 24" 36"

Wants to meet generous men for fun and good times

I put the ad in and immediately the phone started ringing off the hook. The only way I could get any sleep was to unplug it. I didn't want any of the other



girls to know because then they'd run ads and my money would dry up. When they came over I'd unplug the phone. They'd ask, "Have you heard of this girl, Marlo?" Because that was the name I used. "Do you know this person Marlo?" And I'd say no. "She's got an ad in the newspaper." And I'd be like, oh, I'd never put an ad in there. I wanted to keep it quiet. I wanted to keep the market on it, shall we say.

I only did in-calls because I worried about the police. Out on the corner from my house was a phone booth, and I'd tell guys to call me from there. I'd walk to the window and look at them. If they looked at all like a cop I'd say, "Sorry, baby, something's come up. This isn't a good time for me." I was suspicious, yes, but I'd had a lot of prostitution cases by then.

In Denver if you got arrested you'd be thrown in jail and everything in your apartment would just be gone. It was bad. I'd be in jail so long I couldn't pay my rent or anything. I did 90 days a couple of times. They used to put transsexuals in protective



custody. You know who else was in protective custody? Rapists, murderers, child molesters. I was in my own cell surrounded by those kinds of people. The worst part, though, was that I'm kind of a high-maintenance person, so I didn't have hormones, razors, no good products to take care of myself.

THE TRICKS COULD GET THEIR FREAK ON

In June of 1990 I went to San Francisco. I guess you know the kind of clothes I had coming to San Francisco in June. I almost froze to death! I had never been anywhere that you had to wear a coat in

June. I stayed cold for a whole year, too.

I got a room on Eddy Street down in the Tenderloin. My first place cost \$475 a month for a studio. I thought it was outrageous rent. There was a lot of prostitution around there; not only transsexuals, but women, guys, tons of drugs.

I'd sleep until noon then wake up and watch soap operas while I got ready. I'd go out to eat, go shopping, then come home and get ready to work for the night. I'd go straight to the liquor store, then to the Motherlode, which was a trans bar on the corner of Larkin and Post. I'd have cocktails, get a buzz on, get a heat on, and then I was out the door.





I worked down on Ellis Street, between Hyde and Larkin. I was most successful at sex work in San Francisco because cops looked the other way. It was definitely a relief. And being a pre-op hooker worked in my favor. The tricks could get their freak on.

Still, I had twelve court cases in San Francisco. I only served three days in jail. I got this really bright girl who was a public defender. They had these OR bonds where they'd let you out on your own recognizance. And they'd say, "Promise to come back?" Oh I promise, I promise, I'll be back, and, of course, I wouldn't go. The first time I saw transsexuals getting laid away proper was in San Francisco. If you OD'd or got killed by a trick the city would take your body and do whatever with it. We were all poor back then. If we did come into money we'd use it to get high, buy good shoes, a designer dress, hair extensions. It was hand to mouth. If you made good money you'd just spend it. I still feel that way. Who cares what happens after you die? You're not going to know anything about it.

THEY DROVE ME BACK TO THE BORDER AFTER

Around that time I heard about this doctor in Tijuana who did surgeries, all legal and very good. All you had to do was cross the border and make an appointment with him. So, in 2000 I went there to

get an Orchiectomy. You know what that is? Castration. The doctor wanted to give me an epidural, but I had him just give me a local. The clinic was also where women went to have babies. It was clean, kind of old school. I spent the night there and the next morning woke up surrounded by all the girls who worked there—the maids, the nurses, the ladies from the front office. And they all took their kids to work with them, that's how Mexican women do it. The language barrier was a problem, but I'm a little good with Spanish. They said: Come, have breakfast with us. So they took me into a big kitchen with all these kids and fed me a Mexican breakfast, then drove me back to the border after. It was sweet.

In 2006 I went to Thailand for my SRS. The hospitals there are the best, and the surgeons too. The nurses are very small and efficient. When you ring your bell, they're there. I stayed for almost a month. It cost \$72 a night for a five star hotel—you can really live large there.

Plus, trans women are more a part of their culture, I think. When you go into the better stores, all of the girls behind the counter are *kathoeys*, which is the Thai word for ladyboy. I went to Patpong and saw this bar called The King's Club. I don't why it was called that because every woman in there was a queen. I had a drink there—it reminded me of

places I used to work in New Orleans. They were all sweet to me, came over to talk, but they were always watching the door and waiting for a guy to walk in.

I went to Phuket in south Thailand for my second surgery. The language barrier was more of a problem there. I was on a budget then and stayed at a local hotel where the mattresses were too hard. But the doctors and their liaisons wait on you hand and foot. From the moment I got there a driver picked me up, took me around. If I ever leave the United States I'd love to go to Bangkok. It's very simple there.

I'M STILL HERE WHILE SO MANY OTHERS ARE GONE

When I turned 40 I started thinking, this really isn't working for me. It's time to realize this kind of life can't last forever. I knew the first thing I had to do was learn how to use a computer. So I did that, and doors just opened for me. I got the job I have now. I'm a facilities person and an office manager, so I deal with a lot of really big things. I'm good at bartering and negotiating with vendors, but then I've had a lot of experience with that.

I meet with a lot of people at my job or on my commute, and sometimes, because of my own

insecurity, I think they know about me. That they can tell. The truth is, I consider myself a transsexual woman. I like to be out about that when I want to be, but I like to be stealth too. I don't want to advertise it always. But it's bigger than just me now, it's about positive exposure for the community.

I consider myself a success story, but I don't consider myself that exciting a person. I haven't had a boring life, just a run of the mill life for somebody like me. The big difference is that I'm still here while so many others aren't. I was just talking to a friend I've known since I moved to San Francisco in 1990, and we were asking each other where's so and so? What happened to them? Dead. Dead. Dead. HIV. Overdose. Got killed by a trick.

I moved out of the city in 2000. It's just too hard, too expensive. I like working there and coming home at night where it's clean and quiet and safe. No panhandlers, no homeless people. I live on the top floor of a victorian. A lady, a poet, owns the house, and I do administrative work for her. I balance her checkbook, all the right-brained stuff she's not good at. She gives me a good deal for helping her out. I can't afford to leave.

