

# Trans Boomer: A Memoir of My Journey from Female

by Lee Jay

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*A sample of the opening pages*

Trans Boomer: A Memoir of My Journey from Female to Male

## ONE

As each of us journeys through life, the contemporary events of our time influence our life. This seems especially true for the largest generation to come of age in American history: the baby boomers. We were the post-World War II generation, born between 1946 and 1965, when America was wielding new influence in a postwar world. As youths, we rebelled against the Establishment, fought against race and gender inequality, protested the war in Vietnam, and supported sexual freedom within the context of economic prosperity. Our fathers were generally able to make more money and live better than their fathers, supported by stay-at-home wives.

In many ways, I was a quintessential baby boomer. I arrived late in 1957. President Dwight D. Eisenhower had been sworn in for a second term in January. During that year he asked Congress to authorize the use of U.S. armed forces against Communist aggression in Vietnam. The Soviet Union launched Sputnik, the world's first man-made satellite, into orbit around the earth. This began the "space race" and launched a frantic determination to improve public education. On the home front, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus, a staunch opponent of racial integration, defied a court decision when he ordered state militia troops to Little Rock, Arkansas to stop African-American students from entering a white school. The "separate but equal" court decision would prove to be the beginning of the movement for African-American civil rights.

At my birth, my mother was twenty-seven years old, and my father was thirty. My family would be completed with the birth of another baby girl four years later.

When I was almost four, my mother brought my baby sister home from the hospital with what seemed like endless scratches all over her tiny body. Perhaps they were signs of forceps used during her birth, or perhaps scratches from tiny nails before mittens had been secured over her roaming hands. I never asked about it, and my mother never discussed it, making me think it was more alarming for me than for adults. I wondered why my mother could not have picked out a child without any scratches. No one had told me that babies grew in their mother's wombs, and I thought that there were baby markets where mothers went and selected their offspring. I

had never given any thought as to how the babies arrived at the baby market. Sexuality was a mystery to me, but I never gave it much thought at that age.

Even at age five, however, I had a nagging thought in my head that something was different inside of me. I did not understand what it was or why it was there, but I knew that I was different. I had no words to describe it. As I watched my younger sister start to grow and form her own personality, I began to see just how different I was. She was at home in her female body which made me aware of how uncomfortable I was in my mine. My body didn't match my thoughts of being a male. Perhaps, had my life been different, with liberal and emotionally available parents, I might have voiced my confusion. However, this wasn't possible with my parents and their rigid gender expectations. They wanted a feminine female who followed society's demands for the stifling and limiting gender roles that were present during the early sixties. Women were to be in the home raising children and supporting their husband's careers. This was to be my fate as well in my parent's eyes, and I was appalled that this was the only option provided to me. Knowing that, I was secretive about the fact that I desired something different. My mother provided a constant review of how females were to be soft and dainty, almost barely present. Being constantly reminded to take small "girl" steps made me self-conscious, when my gait seemed naturally male and I lumbered along in a dress that wasn't meant for me. Yet, I had no role models, no descriptive vocabulary, and nowhere to turn to find any support in my confusion.

My sister and I would take opposite paths in our lives; however, I was always grateful that I had a sibling. She would stay in our hometown, marry and raise children, while I would leave and come of age within the gay world in a large city. Her story is hers alone to tell; however, I was proud to be the firstborn and took that role seriously throughout my entire life.

Both of my parents brought their own agendas into my life, as all parents do. My mother was born in 1930 into rural poverty, to parents who were attempting to scratch out an existence during the Great Depression. They owned ten acres in the Great Lakes region, complete with a few cows, pigs, and chickens. I listened to my mother talk of how she had to milk the cows every day, and how chickens would run around even after their heads had been cut off. She knew how to call the pigs and fetch fresh eggs. Most of all, she talked of how difficult it was to tend to the livestock and gardens, with the never-ending, demanding physical labor that required. Every member of the family had chores to complete as a team to ensure that things ran as smoothly as possible.

During the Great Depression, it was not uncommon for children to run away and ride the rail cars, or for men who were unable to support their families to desert them. Also, large families were forced to farm out their children to relatives who had more resources. This was the case in my mother's family, which had four children, born one to two years apart. My mother was second oldest. She and her older sister were sent to live with an aunt in a large city, when they were six and seven years old. My mother was homesick for her mother, and returned to the farm

after a year. My aunt stayed in the city, where she had a much easier life.

As the oldest daughter now, my mother took care of eventually five younger siblings while her parents were tending the crops. They had no indoor plumbing or electricity; a wood-burning, pot-bellied stove provided heat for the rundown farm house on ten acres of land. Life was beyond difficult.

Years later, when I was a young child, my mother would drive my sister and me out into the country twenty miles away, to the farmhouse to see my grandmother. I loved visiting. I thought the cars in the front yard, some on blocks, and some just rusting, were beautiful. I would climb into them and imagine that I was a teenage boy on a race track. Weeds and snakes surrounded the house, which leaned noticeably to one side. A pump in the front yard produced water which fascinated me. The walls were covered with road maps, given away free at the gas stations and used in place of wallpaper or paint. The only toilet was an old outhouse around the back of the house, among outbuildings in various stages of decay.

Across the street was a seedy truck stop owned by a large country woman with long, white hair, who was both manager and waitress. Her sons would urinate in their front yard; I knew this was the stance that males used to urinate because I had accidentally seen my father in the same position while I was running past the open bathroom door on my way down the stairs. I would stare in disbelief at their openness. This was the rural poverty that my mother had escaped by getting married the first chance she got. It was her only way out at the time.

My mother self-identified as a "depression baby," which would affect her all her life. I am grateful for many of the lessons that she taught me as a child. For example, she never threw anything away; everything was repaired and recycled. She clipped coupons, saved Green Stamps, and never paid full retail price. She would dress in sweaters rather than turning up the heat. She saved water and reused it whenever possible; we hung clothes outside on the clothesline in three seasons and in the basement during the winter. There was no air conditioning, no garbage disposal, not even trash bags. We put food waste in paper grocery bags and took it daily to the garbage cans. I have always lived that way, and I was later surprised to discover that many Americans did not.

In 1955 my mother married my father, whom she met while living in a rooming house that his parents owned. On the other hand, my father was born in a working-class neighborhood of a large city. His father was deaf by the age of twelve, but never learned American Sign Language. He taught himself to lip read, and worked in a factory. My father, like my mother, wanted out of the life that he had been born into. Factories and the big city were not for him. He wanted a better life in a small town, away from the pollution, grime, and crowded neighborhoods. He moved to a small town after graduating from high school, and worked as a valet in a successful hotel located on a bustling and profitable old-time Main Street as his first job.

My father's mother had died before I was born. She was diabetic, and had died from

complications of the disease. I never knew what year she died; it was never discussed. The rest of his family, which included his older brother and sister, and his father, would eventually move to the Southwest before I was born. In the few times that I saw my grandfather before his death, he was frail and asthmatic, with two hearing aids, and legs covered with ulcers. He wore glasses, and supported himself with a cane. I never knew him well or had much conversation with him.

My father's next job was at Sears, Roebuck & Company. He was a salesman in the furniture and floor covering department, paid on commission and given a gasoline allowance. My father was a raging alcoholic, but a born salesman. I started to notice his drinking at age seven; a constant beer in his hand whenever he was home, with behavior changes occurring as the disease progressed. When he was drinking his rage and disgust would surface and he was not to be trusted. He would begin his verbal abuse about how hard he worked and how little we cared, or how we had wasted his money somehow. He was a functional alcoholic: he knew he had to keep his job to pay for his alcohol and always managed to stay employed. There had been very little public discussion of alcoholism, or the effects it had on the drinker and his or her family and employment, despite the fact that Alcoholics Anonymous had been formed in 1935.

Phil Donahue began broadcasting his talk show in 1967, when I was ten. Donahue was the first to discuss topics that had been taboo in American society. He would foster discussions that were educational, full of exploration and learning. But at this time I knew nothing of alcoholism, and the denial and lying that were often involved, let alone the financial disasters and extramarital affairs that characterized my father's life. I always knew that he drank too much, because he and my mother argued the point again and again. He was able to control his addiction when I was young; however, by the time I was a teenager he was losing the battle. He maintained a double life, but more people in our small town knew that he was an alcoholic and when drunk in public exhibited deplorable behavior. My father, during work hours, associated with men just like him: alcoholics who also had mistresses and felt that they deserved them. After all, they were supporting a wife and children and felt it was a perk of the job. My father was in the company of men who shared his philosophy on married life; male privilege allowed men to share time with their family and their mistress.

I would receive reports from my friends at school who overheard their parents discussing my father's activities in his other life. Everyone in our neighborhood all went to the same school together so the community was very small and very few activities were that private. One night he would be thrown out of a bar because he would not stop verbally abusing the female staff, the next week he would be buying his mistresses' children all new clothes, the next week scheduling a decoy "sales meeting" in a hotel near the city with another mistress in tow. He would spend money faster than he could earn it: the alcohol, supporting his many mistresses and their families, the hotel rooms for meetings that were needed to provide false secrecy. By some miracle he was never charged with driving under the influence of alcohol, at least not that I was aware of. He considered himself a modern man and insisted on the newest toys on the market,

furniture, clothes, and appliances. My mother was just the opposite, never replacing an item until it was worn beyond repair. These extreme differences in money spending allowed for endless arguments.

My father made an excellent salary, without a college degree and only on-the-job training. He came of age during booming economic times long before investor "bubbles," downsizing, and outsourcing. He never had to worry about age discrimination, or his company going bankrupt. He was the sole breadwinner and like many alcoholics, demanded perfection from others, yet lived a double life. I learned at a very young age never to trust him when the alcohol took over. However, he was an excellent provider. I was enrolled in the best public school that my small town offered. Make no mistake; I am grateful for all that he provided. However, I do hold him accountable for the abuse that he gave to my family and chose not to tolerate his behavior once I became an adult. He never accepted any accountability, always believing he was right and I only a child, no matter what my age.

As I have mentioned, my parents married in 1955. Both parents had seen no combat duty or indeed, any direct involvement in World War II or the Korean War. Like most newlyweds of their time, they purchased a home in 1955. The cost was ten thousand dollars. I am sure they were excited and hopeful at that time. The house was large, containing a full basement, two large bedrooms, an eat-in kitchen, living room, and dining room, situated on a large lot. I loved my neighborhood. There were children in almost every house. Mine was one of the smallest families on the street; many of my neighbors had three to seven children. I formed bonds with some of my neighbors that would last a lifetime. As an adult, I look back with the fondest of memories on those who grew up with me, walked to school with me, and graduated with me. We were within walking distance of a farmer's market, gas stations, convenience stores, and my beloved junior high school. As an adult, I bought my own home in the exact same sort of neighborhood: within walking distance of everything I would need, and one block away from a school.

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## **TWO**

One of the most influential elements of my childhood was that I was born into the Jehovah's Witnesses religion.

The inception of Jehovah's Witnesses was in 1874, when Charles Taze Russell founded the organization that was first coined the International Bible Student's Association. Upon Russell's death in 1916, Joseph Rutherford assumed the presidency, concentrating on increasing membership. He died in 1942, and was quickly and quietly replaced by Nathan Knorr, under whose leadership I spent my early life living as a Witness and a member of the now-incorporated Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. I was the third generation of Jehovah's

Witness on both my parent's lineage. My father would lead a double life for years; male privilege and patriarchy were staples of the religion so it was easy for him.

Jehovah's Witnesses, like many other minority sects, are foremost separatist and isolationist. Their lives are very different from their neighbor's lives; there are scriptural doctrines passed down from the governing authority that must be followed without question. Any violation of these doctrines, based on scriptural content, results in the shunning of the violator.

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