

I found the real me after a near-death experience...

By Michelle Copley, 42, from Kent

Looking in the mirror, I frowned at my reflection. I was only 5, but it was obvious to me. I was a girl! I knew it for sure. So why was a little boy looking back at me? I was drawn to girl's toys, but soon learned it was 'wrong' for me to play with them. If I picked up a doll, a grown-up would switch it with a toy car or fireman's truck. And growing up, my feelings didn't change.

I thought things would get easier, but they didn't. It was the 1980s. Boy George would only have to come on the TV for my mum and dad to roll their eyes and scoff. 'A man wearing make-up, how ridiculous,' they'd say. I wish I could! I'd be screaming inside, longing to tell them the truth. But I had no-one to talk to. So I decided...

If I can't be a woman, I'll be as manly as I can be. Fast, powerful motorbikes became the perfect masculine front for me to hide behind. I grew a beard, lifted weights at the gym. And with this dangerous image came tattoos, muscles and, of course, girls. With a reputation as a ladies' man, I'd go to clubs with my mates and never leave alone.

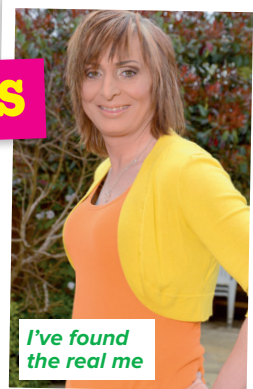


I hid behind my masculinity

Girls would catch me staring at them not knowing that it wasn't lust in my eyes as I looked them up and down, but jealousy.

To be honest, I never fancied boys. But I never really felt attracted to women either. Didn't stop me from getting engaged three times in my 20s, though. Each time I called things off before the big day. Was it any wonder people thought I was a selfish heartbreaker?

When I wasn't pulling



I've found the real me

From Mr Macho to pretty woman

girls, I was out on my motorbike, tearing up the miles. I rode every day, even won competitions. Speeding around the track, I felt fearless.

If I can't be me, what does it matter if I'm alive or dead? I'd think, as I zoomed around the track, taking dangerous bends far too fast. I wanted to be a woman. It's who I was inside. But that was impossible so I didn't care if I ended up dead. Or at least that's what I thought I felt... Then, in June 2003,

I was on my way to work on my bike when a car hit me. I felt a jolt, lost control and next thing I knew I was waking up on the roadside. Then the pain hit. Searing through me from head to toe. I'm in trouble, I thought, before fading out again. At William Harvey Hospital in Ashford, Kent, I went straight into theatre. Waking up in plaster I found, among other injuries, I'd broken both my arms, both legs, dislocated both kneecaps and my right foot had spun 180 degrees. 'You were lucky,' a doctor said. 'You died twice in the ambulance on the way here.' Unbelievable. All that time I'd spent thinking it didn't matter if I was alive or dead and now I'd died twice but something had brought me back. So, did I really mean it? I thought.

And I had lots of thinking time... I was laid up for more than six months. The pain never eased. And my shattered body didn't want to heal. 'The ankle bones in your right leg are dying, we may have to amputate,' a doc said. But my first thought? I'll never be able to wear heels now. It seemed that, despite it all, becoming a woman was still my biggest concern. And now it was further away than ever. In December 2005, my right leg was amputated below the knee and by Christmas I was wearing a prosthetic. But a bone infection set in five years later. The pain was excruciating and it was swollen, oozing fluid. There was only one thing for it – in September 2010, I had a second amputation, taking it above the knee. But somehow I got through it. I'm stronger than I thought, I told myself. And I began to wonder... I'd coped with losing a leg. The pain, the stares... I wasn't Mr Macho now, hobbling around with only one leg. Having come so close to dying, to actually being revived, twice, finally something inside me clicked. I realised life is short. Maybe it was time for me to make some big changes. So, in January 2012 I made a tough decision. I'd known I was female for 35 years. It was time to face it. First, I went to a friend's

I'll never be able to wear heels now

house for coffee. She'd barely taken a sip when I blurted it out. 'I'm a woman!' I examined her face. Shocked? Yes. But totally accepting! 'Good for you,' she said. Relief! Empowered, I hit Primark. Grinning, I grabbed a basket and started stuffing it with leggings, flowing maxi dresses, trendy bags...

Trying them out back home, I felt so happy! At last, I was living as I wanted, no more hiding. I shaved off my beard and grew my hair, started taking female hormones. By June 2012, I was wearing make-up and living full-time as a woman. I no longer see my family, but every friend and neighbour who I've opened up to has been really accepting of my decision. I should have done this years ago, I thought. The accident made me realise that I had to be my true self. Life is too short to live a lie. In a way, I'm glad the accident happened – it's made me go for what I want. I've retired from riding bikes but I don't miss it. Last June, I finally had the op to become a woman. The female hormones are something I'll have to take for the rest of my life, but that's fine with me. Eventually I'd like to find a male partner to share the rest of my life with. I was a lost soul for years but I'm much happier now. At last, I'm me!



Losing a leg changed my life

My range is the breast!

I want to help cancer victims

By Jasmine Morris, 23, from Newcastle

Most people know someone who's had cancer. But when it's your mum, it's devastating. I was just 8 years old when my mum Melanie was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was only 38. Being so small, I didn't really understand how serious things were. Especially as Mum never let the smile off her face. After 18 months, Mum had a trial treatment and it saved her life. But she had her right breast removed too, to be on the safe side. Then 10 years later, in 2008, Mum's cancer returned in the other breast. Luckily, Mum caught it early. She avoided chemo,

but did need another mastectomy. Mum had no breasts and she found it hard to find bras she could wear with her prosthetics. 'The ones I can find are massive ugly beige things,' she grumbled. I felt bad for her. All women like to have a few nice sets of undies. Then... aha! I was studying Design for Industry at Northumbria University and I had to design something for my final project. This was perfect! 'I'm going to make bras for women like you,' I told Mum on the phone. Using Mum as a model, I experimented with different fabrics and prosthesis pockets. With her input and the help of a tailor, in May 2013, I created three prototype bras, under the range name Blossom. Lacy and feminine, but functional and comfy too. Mum was chuffed. Since then, lots of people have been asking where they can get them. They're not on the market yet, but I'm hoping to set up a company soon – selling bras to beautiful women – just like Mum!

I'm hoping to make more



Comfy and sexy!



I'm hoping to make more

As told to Judy Cogan and Silvia Yara. Photos: Marina Platt-Evans

Photos: North News & Pictures Ltd

Transgender facts

Transgender is an umbrella term used to include transsexual people, transvestites and cross dressers. Many transgender people keep their true gender hidden from loved ones for years. For info and support, see gendertrust.org.uk