

'Dad's a woman but I still love

Nerrelle always knew there was something very different about her dad... Nerrelle Champion, 40, Landsdale, WA

why I had to say goodbye to Dad. I thought it was my fault they'd broken up. It was only six years later I learnt the truth.

My mum's sister, Christine, thought that I deserved to know the real reason behind the split.

'Neil wears women's clothes,' she said. As she explained he wore make-up, heels and a dress like a lady, my head spun.

When he left home to go to work he'd always dressed in old slacks like a typical bloke. But at night, he'd worn a skirt.

Wanting answers, I nervously broached the subject with Mum. 'Is it why you broke up?' I asked.

'Yes,' she said.

Imagining my manly, strapping dad in a flowing, colourful dress, I felt disappointed. Not because of his choice of clothes, but because he hadn't told me.

I loved him no matter what he wore. Not wanting to change anything between us, I decided not to tell Dad what I knew about his unusual hobby. But over the years we lost contact.

While I moved on and got married, I kept Dad's secret.

It wasn't until 18 years later – at my grandmother's funeral – that we reconnected. Dressed in a suit, he looked like an average fellow, but his lips were stained pink and his eyebrows were nonexistent. I'd never seen his hair so long. Putting my arms around him, we held each other.

Driving home together after

the funeral, I tried to be honest. 'Dad, I know,' is all I had to say.

Lost for words, I could see the shock on his face. 'Oh,' he said.

Dropping his head, I knew he had regrets. 'Things will be different now,' he told me as we hugged, vowing to never lose touch again. And slowly, I let Dad back into my life.

We started chatting on the phone and meeting for coffee.

Seeing him was wonderful and weird all at the same time. We avoided his life as a lady.

But just as I was getting my dad back, he told me he was going away – and never returning.

In 2008, he broke the news over the phone. 'I'm transgender,' he said, explaining that he felt like the person he was inside was trapped in the wrong body. He'd tried to fight it all his life and couldn't do it anymore. 'I want to live as Claire,' he continued.

It broke my heart knowing I'd never see Dad again. But I couldn't lose him, so I accepted his choice. Dad started taking hormones to give him womanly curves. He hoped one day to have surgery to complete his transformation to a female.

A few weeks later I agreed to meet Claire for the first time. Dressed in heels and a mini skirt and wearing a wig, our first greeting was uncomfortable. I didn't know what to do. Shake hands? Kiss? Hug?

We just stared at each other.

Breaking the silence, Dad took my hand. 'You'll always be my girl,' he promised.

It wasn't his fault he'd been born in the wrong body. This was who he was and for the first time, everything felt right.

Seeing each other every week, we grew closer. Claire was flamboyant and confident. She was never afraid to flaunt her figure. She started working as a coordinator for the Chameleons Society – a support group for transgender people. To show my acceptance, I helped out too.

Sitting with the members, I was disgusted to hear so many stories of hate and prejudice. Many of them were petrified to cross-dress because friends and strangers mocked them.

Sadly, I've experienced this ignorance when I'm with Claire. People whisper and laugh behind our backs, while others point.

Claire's so strong, never letting the taunts affect her. I'll never forget the time we got lost.

Pulling up to the side of the road, Claire jumped out looking for directions. Wearing a fitted dress, she caught the attention of a motorbike rider. Having only seen her back, he walked over.

'You all right love?' he asked. Claire flicked her blonde hair around. The look on the man's face was priceless when he realised she was a special lady.

Instead of being offended, we were in stitches from laughing.

After seeing how important Claire was to me, my husband, Greg, agreed to meet her. I was



Mum and dad were together for years

My stomach flipped as I took in the photo on my mobile phone.

Wearing a mini skirt and high heels, the woman's blonde hair was pulled off her face. But under the eye shadow and fake lashes, nothing could hide those deep grey eyes. I recognised them immediately.

They belonged to my father, Neil. He was there, under the make-up, and I knew in that moment I would never be able to call him Dad again.

I've always known he was different, but it was hard to believe he was no longer the man I'd grown up with.

As an only child, I was a real daddy's girl. But as I got older, I started to sense an awkwardness around him. Dad seemed uncomfortable at times, especially with physical contact.

He loved my mum, Florence, but I don't remember seeing a lot of togetherness. Tired from his night shift as a taxi driver, he slept all day. But work wasn't the only thing exhausting him. He was hiding a secret.

When I was seven, my parents got divorced, but no-one told me

I tried to be honest. 'Dad, I know,' is all I had to say

I now, love him

so proud of him for being so accepting of my dad's new life.

Our son and daughter, love Claire too. They're too young to understand Claire used to be a man, but I'll cross that bridge in the future.

While Mum isn't ready to face Claire yet, I know with time and patience we'll all come together.

I hope by reading our story others will understand that transgender people are human beings, just like you and me.

My dad may now be Claire, but I still love him. While the outside has changed, what's inside will always be the same. That's what really matters. ●

As told to Smita Mistry



I love Dad, no matter what he looks like

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TELL US YOUR STORY



As a child I was always a daddy's girl

Claire Elise, Perth, WA

I started wearing girl's clothes at 14, but I didn't know what it meant. Although I was born a man it took 50 years for me to realise I was a woman trapped in the wrong body. Now, living as Claire, I'm finally free. I know I've hurt a lot of people, but if I'd been given the proper education about transgenders, things would have been different. That's why I encourage the members of the Chameleon Society not to be afraid of who they are. Despite our differences, we all deserve respect.