



Becoming a woman was the biggest mistake I ever made

● When Paul became Paula after a sex-change operation, she was delighted. Unfortunately, her happiness was short-lived—and now she deeply regrets her decision...

Paul Rowe thought his dreams had come true when he had major surgery and became a woman. As Paula, she could wear make-up and dresses and felt she'd found her real identity. For a while, she was delighted. Now, she says it was an appalling mistake. From an early age, Paul loved dressing as a woman. 'I grew up with five brothers in a very macho household,' she recalls. 'But I was never like them. While they were out playing rugby, I was secretly dressing in my mum's frocks.'

I was only happy when I was wearing women's clothes

'I felt comfortable in women's clothes. For me, dressing up was a release. But it was also a shameful secret. I'd never heard of men dressing up before and thought I was totally alone.' Throughout his teens, Paul continued to wear his mum's clothes in secret—she never found out. And he remained a loner. 'I went to a boys' school and had little contact with girls. I was shy and never had a girlfriend—but I knew I wasn't gay.' When he was 20, Paul met and fell in love with Ella, a woman twice his age. 'I told her about my cross-dressing straight away. It was never a problem—I'd only dress up in private anyway—and we enjoyed a normal sex life.' They split four years later and Paul met Jean, who he married the following year. 'I wore my own dresses in the house when Jean wasn't around. She knew but she

didn't mind,' says Paula, 50. 'Wearing women's clothes made me happy but at the time, the thought of a sex change didn't cross my mind.' Paul and Jean were married for 10 years but they drifted apart and divorced. He met his second wife Wendy soon afterwards and they married in 1985. She too was unfazed by Paul's liking for women's clothes

but a year later, they split up after Wendy discovered she couldn't have children. 'We wanted kids but it just didn't happen,' recalls Paula. 'Wendy was devastated and it drove a wedge between us.' Paul's mother died soon

afterwards and a few weeks later he was made redundant from his job as a geologist. He began drinking heavily and became severely depressed. 'I even spent a weekend in a psychiatric hospital,' says Paula. 'It felt like my whole life was crumbling.' Then when he returned from the hospital, Wendy had left and Paul sank even further into depression. 'The only time I felt happy was when I was wearing women's clothes,' says Paula. 'I began thinking that maybe I was unhappy because I wasn't a woman. I concluded I was a woman trapped in a man's body and it felt fantastic to finally admit it to myself.' In January 1988, Paul contacted The Gender Identity Clinic in London's Charing Cross to discuss a sex change. There, he was given counselling and warned about the seriousness of his decision. 'I knew it was what I wanted,'

recalls Paula. Doctors and counsellors agreed Paul was a woman trapped in a man's body and began giving him hormone tablets, the first stage in the process. In two months he'd grown breasts and his skin was softer and less hairy. 'I felt so good—I was elated,' recalls Paula. 'I was certain I'd made the right decision.' Over the next 18 months, Paul lived as a woman. Because he wasn't working, and because he had little contact with his family, few people knew about his change. Finally, in July 1989, Paul became Paula. Surgeons reduced his Adam's apple and removed his penis, creating a vagina in its place. 'When I came round, my lower half was bandaged up. I couldn't wait to see what was underneath,' says Paula. 'I was in pain but eager to get on with my life in the right body.' In fact, Paula wasn't as happy as she'd hoped. A fortnight

after the operation, her father died, which left her depressed again. He'd known about her operation but they'd never discussed it.

For a change of scene, she left London and moved to a new flat in Penzance, Cornwall, 30 miles from where she'd grown up. Her brothers were nearby but she rarely saw them. 'They knew about my operation but I think they were ashamed. While people were generally accepting, I felt very alone.' Things changed the following year, though, when Paula met a local man, Peter. 'He knew all about my past and didn't care,' she says. 'I'd never really been attracted to men but we were great friends and I desperately wanted to live like a woman. We became lovers—but I was never very comfortable with our sexual relationship.' They moved back to London, where Paula started a degree in film production. Things were looking up—then, in 1992, Peter died from an asthma attack. 'We'd been so close. I was totally alone again,' says Paula. 'I felt just the same unhappiness

as I had as a man. I started having doubts about whether the sex change had been the answer.' Over the next two years, Paula realised she'd made a terrible mistake. 'I felt less and less comfortable with my body. Being a woman just wasn't for me any more.'

Eventually, Paula stopped wearing make-up, cut her hair short and threw away her women's clothes, hiding her curves in tracksuit bottoms and sweatshirts. 'I'm technically a woman and I'm living like a man, though I no longer think of myself in terms of either sex,' says Paula, who has decided to keep her female name while she's unsure of her gender identity. 'I try not to think about it at all—it hurts too much.' Whatever happens, Paula will never get her old body back—the process cannot be reversed. 'People treat me as though I have some terrible deformity—they assume I'm gay, dirty or weird,' she says. 'Children shout abuse and spit at me. It's so hurtful I've stopped going out. I have some friends, including

Jean and Ella, but no one close. I'd love to get a job but I feel as though nobody will give me a chance.' Paula says she can't help but feel bitter towards the doctor who allowed the operation to go ahead. 'I think he diagnosed me too hastily,' she says. 'The whole process lasted 18 months from start to finish and

that's too quick. 'At the time I was caught up with the idea of starting a new life but the truth was, nothing changed.

Now I'm a woman, there's nothing I can do. There's no turning back. 'I hope nobody else makes the same mistake—because however much I want him back, Paul is gone forever.' 'There are three to four years of counselling, drug treatment and psychological orientation before surgery,' says a spokesman from the Gender Identity Clinic. 'Ten years ago the process was new. Now we take longer to orientate people to the change they're going to go through. For that reason it's extremely rare for someone to regret a sex change.'

■ MICHELLE CORBETT and CLARE SWATMAN

People assume I'm gay, dirty or weird—it's so hurtful

Throughout his teens, Paul secretly wore his mum's clothes



'My first wife Jean knew I cross-dressed and didn't mind,' says Paula



After his marriage to Wendy ended, Paul became depressed



'Peter and I were lovers but I was never very comfortable with sex'



'I began to wonder if the sex change had been the answer'

