WHEN MY FATHER CHANGED SEX

In 1972, James Morris became Jan Morris. Here, MARK MORRIS reflects on the implications of this change for his own life

I FIRST knew that my father was going to change sex when walking down our front drive on a frosty January evening. That some momentous transformation in our lives was imminent came as no surprise; that my father was now going to be a woman was somewhat more unexpected.

It is now 10 years since the publication of 'Conundrum,' which described how James Morris became Jan Morris. I was then at Oxford, and the reaction of those I knew varied widely. A few shied away, crossed to the other side of the street, as if I was touched by leprosy. Others rang up, excited, exclaiming that they had no *idea*. There were those who, perhaps troubled by their own sexuality, were suddenly pleased to be in one's company, as if some curious magic would somehow rub off.

But almost everyone, with the exception of a few (always male) who wanted to shudder at every knife cut of the operation, was far less interested in the details of the change than in how it affected the family — my mother, my brothers, my sister, and myself. The questions have not abated in those 10 years, nor their tenor—for the subject is still regarded as not quite suitable for polite conversation. Sex changes are now more commonplace; but they continue to raise moral hackles, especially in these conservative times: while they may answer an individual's personal fulfilment, they are thought to be destructive to those around.

There had always been something different about our family. We had been lucky enough to live all over the place, from Venice to the States, from the French Alps to Egypt. We led an unusual and transitory life, with little sense of physical roots, but with the instinctive ability to adapt to a foreign culture. As strangers passing through strange lands, we became a close-knit and self-reliant family, and if my brother and I of necessity relied on our parents for stability and reassurance, they also relied on us for emotional response.

It was at my prep school that I first realised that it was not just our nomadic existence that set our family apart. My father had been more than just a father—he had been a hero. He had climbed Everest, perched on trucks across the Arabian desert, been catapulted off American aircraft-carriers, brought back tales of barely perceived places. Yet, with a child's instinctive reaction, I knew that there were flaws in my picture of father-as-hero, that the person didn't match with the masculinity of the image, even if I was too young to understand.

It was at Eton that I started to put these feelings into concrete thoughts. Not only had I reached the age when I could analyse, but he had started on the long, long process of changing sex. I can't claim that I noticed the changes — they were too gradual — but it became apparent that, however subtly, my father was bodily different from other fathers.

> **‘When I first saw him dressed as a woman, it seemed perfectly natural’**

School-friends also noticed. My father looked younger (the effect of the hormones), and wore casual clothes—the jeans of the unisex revolution, not the pin-stripes of the average Eton father. Occasionally, someone took him to be my elder brother; my housemaster simply assumed that all writers looked like that.

My father was, I think, embarrassed for me on such occasions, but he needn't have worried. His appearance seemed to make no difference to the relationships within our family, and if I drew any conclusion it was that he might be a homosexual who, in an age when the persecution of homosexuals was abating, had decided not to worry about hiding it. I never asked my father, though I suggested it once to my brother, who poured scorn on the idea.

By the time I did discover the cause, the masculine appearance of my father had slowly turned into something more nebulous. The swelling breasts had become too obvious to ignore, but by then it was difficult to recall what he *had* looked like. This slow rate of change, like someone gradually growing old, greatly eased acceptance by the family, so that when I first saw him, well before the operation, not only as a feminine figure but dressed as a woman, it seemed perfectly natural.

With no pronounced changes in my father's personality, the adaptations were practical rather than emotional. It was difficult getting used to the change of pronoun, but when I accidentally slipped into 'he' I was pounced upon by my little sister, and this corrective quickly succeeded. Jan had suggested a *modus vivendi* — that I was to introduce her as my aunt, and I tried it once, but it was as if I were denying my own parentage, so instead I simply introduce her as 'Jan.'

These were superficial adjustments. The only experience of real poignancy came when I drove my father to Heathrow Airport to see him onto the plane to Casablanca where he was to have the operation. He was nervous, as well he might be, and so was I, neither of us quite knowing what might go wrong, whether this might be the last time we saw each other — like seeing someone off to the front. But there was happiness, too, and anticipation, that the long slow journey to fulfillment was a plane's flight from its end. I could hardly fail to react to that hope. Some of my father's courage and personal anguish had rubbed off on me.

But of course there was, for me, also a sad, almost nostalgic side to this farewell. I was aware that a huge chain of continuity, of which Jan and I were only two small links, was being knocked out of joint. Superficially I was losing a father, saying good-bye to the physical attributes that had given me birth and had shaped my genes. A fundamental part of my origin was going to disappear, while its originator was not. I had a sense of fatherhood being handed down the generations, and of the nature of that descent being irrevocably altered. I was being parted from those generations, like Gerontius' soul being sent forth on his journey.

If my mother or the two elder children had objected to Jan changing sex, I'm sure she would not have done so, whatever the personal cost. But we had no such objections, for we understood the anguish of the dilemma, and its causes seemed to me then, as they do now, not only unresolved, but totally irrelevant to the realities of day-to-day existence. Similarly, we were all agreed on Jan writing about her experiences. She was well known as a writer, and what she had to say would be listened to; she had the advantage of a supportive family and a circle of friends who, for the most part, would be liberal about such matters. It seemed to her a duty to relate her story. Doing so might help chip away at the myths and ignorance surrounding the subject, and help dispell the unthinking attitude of society. She would also show others in the same position that someone who had much to lose not only shared the same feelings, but was prepared to put them to the test.

The enduring consequence of the publicity about Jan is the constant curiosity. Its most annoying feature (and one that other children of well-known figures must have experienced) is that some people are only interested in me because I *am* the son.

I was recently asked, for example, after writing the words for a new piece of music, whether I would mind the promotion for it mentioning that I was Jan Morris's son. The suggestion got short shrift, since my parentage had no bearing on the words, the music, or the performance. Such requests are a knock not so much to one's pride as to one's sense of individuality—fame at one remove being regarded as more important than one's own contribution.

Nothing has otherwise changed to upset those values of love and respect that continue to bind our family together. For me personally the change only had two major consequences. The first was short-lived: after Jan had actually changed sex, I was haunted not by thoughts of what had been cut off, but of the vagina that replaced it. It symbolised the break in continuity I had already experienced, and it was but a short step to transfer that symbolism to the women with whom I had relationships. The result was failure, even though sexually excited, to achieve erection.

But such situations are often less embarrassing than might be expected. My girl-friends were concerned, sometimes amused (always a good tonic) and patience brought its rewards and happy conclusions — the image died away.

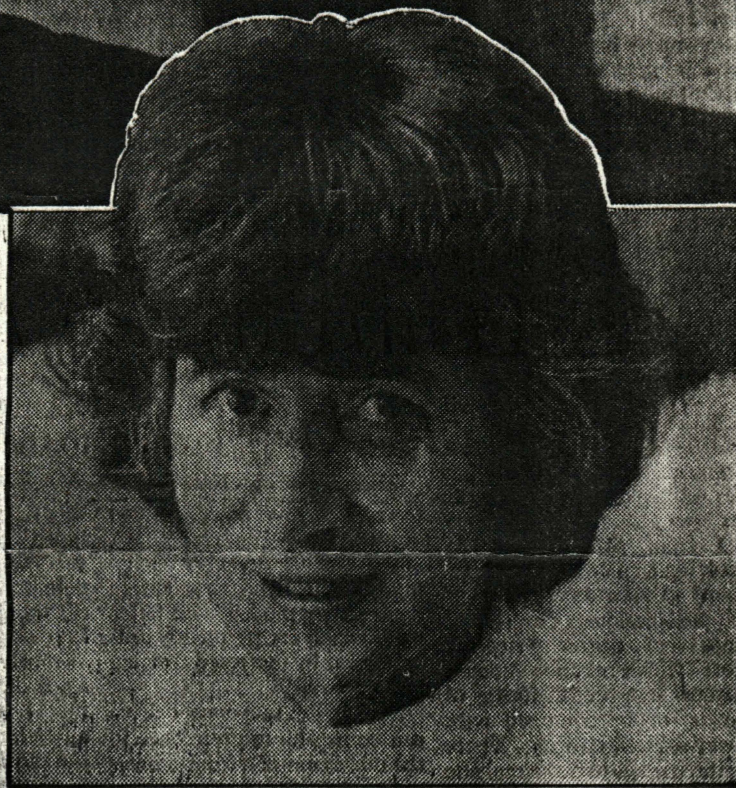
Doubtless psychiatrists would recognise a fear of rejection, and that has perhaps been the second consequence.

Mark Morris : ' Constant curiosity ' BEN GIBSON

Competition between father and son, particularly if the father is successful, is common enough. But in my case the target—the male figure—had evaporated away, and left my competitive urge in a limbo. At the same time there was a definite sense in which my subconscious suggested, like a malicious jester, that Jan's adoption of the feminine role was a denial of fatherhood, and that this denial of fatherhood was a rejection of me, the son and eldest child.

Yet such reactions could have come from a whole host of circumstances other than having a parent who changed sex. As a family, the change has not altered the enjoyment we have in each other's company, or the support that we give each other, though I sometimes get the strong impression that some people would have liked our family to disintegrate, and to have set the children against the parents.

As children, we were brought up to believe that individuals should be allowed to do what they want, as long as they don't harm others. My father's sex-change has, to the best of my knowledge, harmed no-one. On the contrary, it has brought peace to a troubled individual, and that, perhaps, is as important to the happiness of the family as anything else.



Jan Morris :' Journey to fulfilment.'