Body Parts
By Loree Cook-Daniels

Marcelle keeps showing me pictures. "What do you think of this one?" she¹ asks. "Or this one?"

"I don't care," I answer. "Whatever you want." She is disappointed; she wants me to get excited, to say, "THIS is the penis I want you to have!" It is important to her that I be as enthusiastic about her new body as she is. She wants me turned on, flushed with anticipation of what her new body will do for me.

I can't fake it. It irks me, frankly, that some of this change is, for her, sexual. Men, I think, obsess about penises, not women. I've always liked the fact that Marcelle didn't have a penis, because penises tend to distract men. They start getting excited at what they're feeling, and quit paying attention to what I'm feeling. I much prefer dildos or the flexible fingers of an attentive butch. I'm not thrilled about the competition that a sensate penis will bring. I don't trust Marcelle to not get carried away.

And so it begins: the transformation of Marcelle from caring butch to uncaring male. Were we to have this conversation, she would be incensed. Why do you think I'd ignore you, she'd demand. Even my mousiest voice probably couldn't bring itself to whisper, because that's what men do.

The power of our internal images, of the prejudices we hold in our mind's eye, is incredible. Marcelle is angry that some of the women in our couples' support group, to whom she was a fine member for over a year, now see her as alien, not to be trusted or even admitted into their presence. What has changed about me, she demands, except that they now know my gender identity?

She's right, of course, but I am also beginning to understand the terrible potency of our internal categories. They can, I'm learning, overrule everything we actually know. It matters not that I've lived with this person for twelve years, that we've shared more than 4,000 days together. If I let down my guard but for a second, the Marcelle I know is replaced by a man who carries her name and nothing else. Instead of displaying all of Marcelle's characteristics with just a slightly altered appearance and new pronoun, this man bears no resemblance to Marcelle. Instead, he is a mosaic of 37 years' worth of prejudice. My prejudice.

It is painful living with a mirror. The two hardest things about this transition is facing the fact of my stubborn, decade-long refusal to accept my lover and facing the fact that I have way more prejudice than I can possibly own up to. I thought I wasn't prejudiced about men. I thought, having taught an early and controversial University class in bisexuality, having been the men's advocate in my Women's Studies program, having dated a man and taken the flack when I was "Lesbian Co-Chair" of a highly-visible group, that I had bested all such bias. I thought I was "over" gender, that I had grown past the need to categorize people by their genitals and attribute psychological traits on that basis.

I was wrong.

I am amazed at the beliefs this transition is bringing to light, laying out before me to own or disown. I am amazed that a behavior I breezed over one day is magically transformed into something sinister the next, based simply on whether I am seeing Marcelle as Marcelle, or as the composite of my fears.

¹ When this essay was written, Marcelle was still going by "she."
The intensity and number of assumptions and biases this transition keeps flushing out of my deep, dark interior frightens and weakens me. If I have all these prejudices, I think -- I who have worked so hard at being unbiased, who understands that no one can be summed up by a single attribute, who preaches regularly that we must see people as individuals and not as representatives of some artificial category we've constructed -- if I can think these fantastical images apply to the person I've loved for twelve years, then what am I asking of others? How can I possibly ask them to see Marcelle as Marcelle, and not as some mythical Man?

And so I know that although Marcelle is right -- next to nothing has changed about her, so why are people so upset? -- I also know that the issue is nowhere near that simple. We are not talking penises here, or pronouns, or the rejection of femaleness, or a desire for male or heterosexual privilege. We are talking about people facing themselves. We are not, it turns out, asking them to see Marcelle a certain way; we are asking them to look at themselves in a certain way. We are asking them to take a good, long look in the mirror of Marcelle to recognize and own their heretofore invisible assumptions about women and men.

That any of us, at all, rise to this challenge is a miracle.

As for those penises, dear, try me later. It seems I'm a little too caught up in head trips right now to deal with flesh and blood.

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