

# ONCE UPON A TIME...

...when I was a little girl, I would play dress up and dream of the day when I would marry my Prince Charming and live happily ever after. Growing up as a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and especially during the years I attended the Young Women's program, I was frequently taught to prepare to choose a worthy companion. However in my late teens, my life veered off track. I became faced with the reality that being sealed in the temple to my Prince Charming wasn't going to happen unless I made some significant changes in my life.

The needed changes began with my choice to move to Utah on my own and to search out my testimony for myself. I spent countless nights on my knees praying for insight and direction for my life. I received my patriarchal blessing and searched every word for clarity on what steps to take, but I felt my blessing was vague. The only clear message, which stood out to me, was that I had the *right* to receive a loving and righteous companion. I had never prayed with a desire to meet anyone while I was in Utah, since I had fully planned to return home to California. I had not been looking for love, and was confused as to why this line continually came to mind. Now I can see that it was the message that I needed, which I didn't realize I was looking for.

## Crossing paths with my Prince Charming

Not long before I planned to go home, I met Ryan. That very first day I realized there was something different about him; he had the most sincere, humble heart. I still can't put into words how I knew immediately that he was someone I wanted to spend my life with. He saw the imperfections in me, yet (though I never understood why) he never judged me. I simply knew he was someone who I was drawn to. My interest in our relationship soon deepened and I decided to extend my stay in Utah. Things moved quickly, and much to my own surprise we were engaged within just a few months.

Following our engagement, Ryan began to open up to me about his urges to dress in women's clothing. Neither of us understood why he felt those desires; we believed that they would go away once we were married. Looking back, I realize how naive we were to think that way, but at the time we were just so 'in love.' I prayed that the Lord would take away the trial facing Ryan and bless him for his sincere desires. He was in fact one of the most righteous people I had ever met. He

wanted to do what was right and everyone noticed that he followed the Church faithfully without question.

Being convinced those feelings would just go away, we rarely spoke about them as our wedding drew near. I had the clear feeling at this time that I had done as the Lord had asked, and had found a righteous companion who was worthy to take me to the temple. We had stayed faithful and followed the guidance of our leaders. I had found my Prince Charming and was about to realize my happily ever after! But as with so many people, my happily ever after didn't turn out quite as I had expected. I never imagined that my Prince Charming might someday be wearing high heels and lipstick!

### Not the fairy tale I dreamt of...

Soon after we married, we became well aware that those feelings had not disappeared. Ryan tried desperately to hide the pain he was feeling, but it manifested in other facets of our marriage. We fought constantly about things of no relevance and didn't understand why we couldn't see eye to eye.

During the second year of our marriage, my appendix ruptured resulting in an extended hospital stay. Each day after work Ryan would faithfully come visit me and leave just before bedtime. Although an extended hospital stay could be a strain on a marriage, those weeks while I was in the hospital were the best our marriage had ever had. I didn't understand why things had improved so dramatically. Only recently I learned that each night when Ryan returned home, he would dress in my clothes and then sleep in peace.

During that time, he never told me that he was dressing in female clothes. He had so much shame and guilt about those desires that he didn't dare speak of them. As time passed though, I became increasingly aware of Ryan's growing need to dress as a woman. Not because he told me, but because I would stumble onto woman's clothes that didn't belong to me. We fought about the clothing non-stop.

### The life of a princess can be painful...

Because of complications relating to my appendix, we also learned that we were unable to bear children. I began to pour myself into researching fertility treatments. Infertility became a way for me to escape the growing distrust and frustration I had in my marriage. On the other hand, Ryan became more distant and began his own research into why he had those desires for women's clothes. We rarely talked much and soon found ourselves living in the same house, but living separate lives.

Each week as I sat in church and listened to lessons or talks about my eternal calling to bear children, the hurt began to grow inside of me. I was alone. I spent hours on my knees asking the Lord why I was not able to conceive. Was I not worthy enough? Was I not woman enough? I was told so many stories of women who had simply turned to the Lord and were blessed with a child, what was wrong with me?

I felt my testimony begin to crack and I couldn't bear the thought of sitting in church with the constant reminder that I was a failure. Sitting in Relief Society meetings surrounded by pregnant women felt as though my heart was being torn from chest each week and it brought on more pain and suffering each time. Slowly I would miss a week here or there and eventually stopped attending any church meetings. When I stopped attending church it gave Ryan an excuse to stop as well, and for nearly two years we rarely attended.

In early 2004 I finally realized that I wasn't getting any better. My testimony was fractured and my marriage was strained. I felt responsible; as if I was the reason my husband stopped attending church. I knew that the only way I could change our circumstances was for me to have a change of heart. I began attending church again and begged for the strength to walk away when conversations turned towards bearing children. In time Ryan began attending church with me too.

As we began attending church I could tell that something was different for Ryan. He went through the motions of church, but he seemed to be putting in minimal efforts. I didn't know until many years later that Ryan was struggling so severely with his dysphoria. Each time he walked through the church doors feelings of gender dysphoria would overcome him. He would sit in the church pew with his eyes closed and tell me that he felt he could barely breathe. I now understand that this is a very typical experience of the dysphoria caused by gender identity incongruence.

### **My fairy godmother had arrived...**

Later that same year, a neighbor asked me to speak with a woman, named Mary, who had just learned she was pregnant. Mary had learned of her pregnancy in the hospital and was still unsure if she would abort the baby or place for adoption. The neighbor asked me to discuss adoption with Mary since my sister had placed a baby for adoption 6 years earlier and I knew the pain a birth family experiences. I met with Mary and showed her adoption profiles of many friends who were looking to adopt. Since Ryan and I only just begun to speak of adoption, I never spoke of the possibility of us adopting her baby.

The day after I met Mary for the first time, Ryan and I attended a temple sealing in the Salt Lake Temple. Shortly after the temple sealer began the ceremony, he paused for what seemed like an eternity. Then he stated that he wasn't sure why he

felt inspired to say so, but that an essential part of the reason we come to the Earth is to bring children to the world. He continued to say that the Lord brings children into our lives in many ways but that through adoption families will be greatly blessed. And those children who are given through adoption are no different than a child who is conceived naturally. The blood of an adopted child is as if it ran through the veins of their parents.

The room was silent and I could feel the eyes of everyone in the room upon me. I knew the Lord was preparing both Ryan and I for the next blessing in our lives. Over the next month I spent time with Mary to help her choose a wonderful home for her baby. One evening Ryan and I took Mary out bowling and were surprised when she opened up the night and told us that she knew from our first visit that we were supposed to adopt her baby girl. Our minds were racing but I could not believe the blessing that was being placed in my life. We knew we only had three months to prepare for such a change. Then only two weeks later, Mary's water broke and Alyssa was born a week later. Being ten weeks early, Alyssa had to stay in the NICU for a month. This month gave us time to prepare a nursery, buy a stroller and shop for the essentials.

I could not believe that I was finally going to be a mother. I had been dreaming of this day for so long. I was mesmerized by Alyssa, but Ryan was terrified. I assumed that Ryan was simply being a nervous first-time parent. But I later learned that he was afraid to become a father to a child when he didn't even want to be a man. He didn't feel that was fair to this precious bundle of joy. While the month Alyssa was in the NICU gave us time to physically prepare, we both knew it wasn't able to erase some of the problems we had in our marriage.

Fairly quickly, Ryan calmed his initial fears and was able to see what a blessing she was to us. Alyssa was a daddy's girl from day one. Since my job required longer hours and some travel, Alyssa and Ryan spent a lot of time together. He was so tender and gentle with her and it was glorious to watch. I know that she could sense the sincere heart that her daddy has.

### Searching for the magic wand...

The cycle of finding Ryan's hidden stashes of women's clothes continued, and the shame and guilt continued to grow within him as he was spiraling out of control. We met with countless counsellors trying to figure out why he could not stop cross-dressing. I desperately wanted to believe that it was nothing more than cross-dressing because I was terrified of the possibility that my Prince Charming could be transgender. I had been told by many people that being transgender was an end to everything: there wasn't any hope of remaining in the Church, there was no hope for our marriage, and therefore no hope that Ryan could continue to be Alyssa's dad.

Plus, I could not fathom the idea that this humble heart, who wanted so very much to do what was right, was simply a 'lost soul' because of his gender feelings. Ryan had prayed and prayed to receive relief from those feelings but they had only intensified. He never gave up or stopped fighting those urges; he had continued to pray and plead with the Lord for relief. I had witnessed the desires of his heart and knew that this trial was greater than anything I could begin to imagine.

We began to search for the support of faithful Latter-day Saints who experienced gender dysphoria, but could not find any. We looked everywhere and were each devastated when we came up empty handed. Had it not been for our bishop at the time, we would never have believed that we had a place in the Church at all. Our bishop often said that the Lord doesn't have gatekeepers at the doors of the church; in fact, he is searching you out to invite you into his presence. The Lord wanted us to attend church however and whenever we were able. I relied on my calling as a Primary teacher as the reason to go to church each week, but as time passed it became increasingly difficult for Ryan to attend. I didn't know why at first, I just assumed it was due to his feelings of past guilt and shame.

Whenever I mentioned anything spiritual, he would burst out with an anger that seemed to come from out of nowhere. Then at one counsellor visit I discovered the source of his anger. Ryan told the counsellor that he believed in the LDS Church and wanted it for his family. He just didn't believe that *he* deserved it. I was shocked by that statement. How could anyone ever believe they aren't worthy of our Savior's love? I had never questioned this and yet here was the person that I loved admitting that he felt unworthy of this pure love.

I listened for nearly an hour while Ryan explained all of the reasons why he didn't deserve our Heavenly Father's love. His reasons really came down to one simple thing: upon returning from serving a faithful mission, his dad told him that if he prayed with a pure heart the Lord would carry this burden for him when he couldn't. He prayed more mightily than anyone he had known and begged the Lord to remove those thoughts from his mind. He begged to no longer experience the dysphoria. He begged to simply be the same as his peers. Yet to his dismay, those thoughts remained. The burden was still his to carry. The conclusion he drew from this was that the Lord would help those around him, but that he was just not worthy of such help.

I have retold this story so many times and yet just typing these words I am still brought to tears at what it must have felt like to feel unworthy of the unconditional love you were promised since childhood; to feel abandoned by your Heavenly Father. How could anyone bear such a cross and still return daily to their knees and pray again and again for even momentary relief? I slowly realized that I had seen him all wrong. During those early years of our marriage, as my loving husband

prayed beside me, he wasn't praying for his own pain to be relieved, he had lost any hope of that ever happening. He was praying for my pain to be lifted.

### Realizing my happily ever had to change...

Then I realized how selfish I had been all those years. I had been so angry about his shortcomings and about the struggles in our marriage. Never once did I think he was praying so that I could have the joy I deserved with no thought for himself. I realized that things had to change and I was fully aware that the change had to come from within me. I learned that the years of pain in our marriage had been caused by the overwhelming fear Ryan had carried that he didn't deserve my love either. He had one foot out the door at all times, certain that he deserved nothing more than to be pushed out the rest of the way.

The summer of 2014 was the turning point for both of us. It was the first time I can recall sitting together without any walls or guards up, prepared to face reality together. We only knew a few things for certain: that Ryan was transgender; that we both believed in eternal marriage; and that our daughter was the greatest gift in our lives. We couldn't even add to the list that we were both convinced that the Lord loves us because at that time Ryan didn't believe that. He couldn't. He had heard too many stories of faithful members of the church who were outcast from their ward families when they admitted their inner battle with gender dysphoria.

Once again I scoured the internet for any hope that there were others like us, righteous members of the Church who despite their gender struggles wanted to follow the Lord's commandments and return to his presence. More importantly to me, I wanted to find other eternal partners who were willing to stand next to their transgender spouse in this life. I stumbled onto the North Star website and found that there were other LGB members, but didn't see many that identified as transgender. Still I took the plunge and posted an introduction to my story. Gradually I noticed a growing voice of those willing to step forward and be pillars of light to those who have gone through the darkness and despair. Ryan began to use my login to scrutinize the posts and comments looking for others who really understood. This was a pivotal moment for Ryan, as he slowly opened his heart to attending church again after a 6 year absence.

### The story isn't over yet...

The past year has been one of healing for our marriage in so many ways. I have been asked countless times when the change happened. The only thing I can come up with is that we are finally being completely honest with one another. We call it being "brutally honest," which means there are no more secrets meant to protect the other's feelings. We are no longer making judgements on what we feel the other

person should choose to do. Let's face it; we really don't understand the exact difficulties found in each other's trials.

Looking back at that little girl dreaming of her Prince Charming, I still know that I found him. My marriage is very different than I imagined it would be, but it is just as fulfilling! I have a partner who loves me unconditionally. Each day we grow closer together and gain more understanding and respect for each other. I can proudly say that I have a happier marriage than I ever dreamt possible!

We are still sorting out the details of what Ryan's true identity looks like moving forward. I am still trying to understand what it feels like to experience gender dysphoria. I have witnessed the intense dysphoria that Ryan experiences, but only from an outsider's view. I have seen the emotion, the heartbreak, the shortness of breath, and many more reactions that I never would have imagined if I had not seen them. I know that being transgender is not a choice, nor is it something to ever be ashamed of. The faithful journeys we take on this earth are all part of an Eternal Plan. The Lord knew that some of his faithful children would have a gendered mind that wouldn't match the body it possessed. I don't know why this happens, but I know that the Lord is fully aware and that He will make it right.

### Sharing our fairy tale...

To begin the process of relinquishing our shame and guilt, my eternal companion, Ryan, and I have decided to no longer hide in the shadows. Putting our story out to the world is a way for us to continue the healing process together. It's scary because I don't want there to be any backlash for our daughter. Alyssa is aware of Ryan's gender dysphoria, and we are creating boundaries to help her feel safe.

Ryan has accepted that he is transgender, and therefore identifies as Ann. In a perfect world Ann would prefer to be addressed using only female pronouns, which I am still working on. This doesn't change the fact that I am sealed for time and all eternity to a person who regardless of their outward appearance is that same person I knelt with at the altar in the temple 15 years ago. If there is anything which has changed, my eternal partner has returned to me and is shedding the shackles of shame.

It is my hope that you will read this story with compassion and understanding for the journey. Everyone has the right to their own personal views, and we need to respect and love each other. The Lord would not have given us the ability to come to the earth if it was not to be humbled and realize that through Him all things are possible. I know that *only* He has the answers to why someone could feel this way. I recognize that I have been blessed with the answer to my prayers, but there are so many blessings yet to come!