

UNEXPECTED TWISTS

Uncharted Territory

It was late evening in the spring of my freshman year of college, and I was sitting in my apartment with my boyfriend, Jared. We had been talking about our day and enjoying a few minutes together before I had to get back to studying, and he suddenly started acting nervous and said that there was something really important we needed to talk about. Jared and I had been dating since we were in high school, and although I was only 19, we had been discussing marriage recently. I didn't know what to expect, as I assumed we had covered most of the serious conversations in the previous few weeks as we had discussed marriage in more detail and spent time discussing details about an engagement. I tried not to look too concerned, but urged him to go on. Jared looked so nervous I thought he would throw up, but finally he blurted out "Sometimes I like to wear women's clothing." I stared at him, not sure whether this was a joke or whether this was serious, while he went on explaining. "I needed you to know before we decide to get engaged officially, so if it's a problem, you need to let me know sooner rather than later."

I was stunned, but still unsure of what exactly he was trying to say. In my mind I mostly just had a flurry of questions come up: Was he an actual cross dresser? Did he mean that he wore women's clothing often, or just sporadically? Was this a behavior that was mostly in his past, or did he still engage in this behavior currently? Was this a behavior that he would get over completely at some point? While I did have questions that were unanswered, and questions that I should have raised, I was in the stage of a relationship where it seems that nothing could possibly diminish the love you feel for someone else.

Looking back, he probably could have told me just about anything and I would have brushed it off as something that wasn't worth disrupting the relationship over. We were in love—that's all that mattered in my mind. We were strong enough to get past this issue, and any other problem that came our way. I quickly responded that I was glad that he told me and that it didn't affect how I felt about him. In my own mind, I figured that his cross dressing would gradually lessen as we were married. I assumed, incorrectly, that this was just a passing phase that he was experiencing because he had no other outlets for his sexual frustration. It truly did not occur to me that this would be a lasting behavior that would be part of our marriage long-term. It certainly did not occur to me that the behavior would become more extreme, or that it would push him to the brink of suicide, and our marriage to the brink of failure.

Shortly after we were married, Jared approached me one afternoon after a stressful day at school and asked if I would mind if he tried on one of my skirts. I was taken aback at first, but I had never forgotten our conversation about his cross dressing, so I hesitantly agreed. Jared could sense I was reticent and a bit unsure of what was going on, but he assured me that this was just something he did to help him relax when he felt anxious. He tried on the skirt, hung around the apartment for a couple of hours, and then took it off and went back to his normal routine. I was baffled by this behavior and how an article of my clothing possibly be a stress relief. Was this something he planned to do regularly? Should I be concerned or have further discussion about this behavior? I should have taken the time to discuss the cross dressing with him now that I experienced how it was impacting our lives, learn more about what it entailed, and how it made him feel. I should have asked questions and had a conversation about what we both felt concerning his cross dressing. I should certainly have discussed whether he would be willing to set boundaries that helped us both feel comfortable. But, like before, I dismissed the issue and hoped it would just disappear.

Struggles Escalate

Over the next few years of our marriage, Jared would sporadically ask to dress up, and he gradually bought more and more items related to his cross dressing. While I was never interested or excited about Jared cross dressing, when it was related to simply trying on an item of clothing, it didn't seem too harmful. However, when he started buying wigs and trying to look more like an actual woman, it was almost repulsive. I had no desire to see him fully dressed up, which was frustrating to him. To me, it seemed perfectly obvious why Jared cross dressing wasn't interesting to me. Not only did he look unfamiliar, but he also looked very strange trying to look like something he clearly wasn't. I was not sexually attracted to women, so having my husband take on an identity that was foreign to my own sexual orientation made me feel distant and discouraged.

At the same time, we had started a family, and within a few years had 2 young children. The stresses of parenthood, as well as the other impactful events in life such as buying a home and starting new jobs, created further distance between us. Jared gradually became depressed and withdrawn, and I was so exhausted and overwhelmed with a young family that I didn't know how to help him. So much of our life became consumed with meeting the basic needs of a growing family—grocery shopping, cooking meals, doing laundry, completing yard work. While we did make small efforts to spend time together, our intimacy certainly suffered, and Jared's cross dressing and any needs associated with it was one of the furthest things from my mind.

When our third child was born, things seemed to slide downhill quickly. We had recently bought a new home, and Jared's job was pressuring him to make a cross-

country move. We had a newborn baby, as well as 2 other small children to care for. Jared had also suffered a series of medical issues that had required surgery and recovery, and at times we barely felt like we were keeping everything together. Jared had found a therapist to help him cope with some of the stresses we were facing, and I assumed things were improving until one day Jared purposely overdosed on Valium in an attempt to kill himself.

At the time, I didn't realize the overdose was intentional, and thought he was simply being absent minded and even perhaps a bit dramatic. While I was on the phone with Poison Control, I kept thinking about how angry I was that he couldn't pull himself together. Didn't he realize that I was facing all the same stresses he was? Did he think it was easy for me to have a new baby while also working outside the home and managing a household? Was being irresponsible and dramatic really the way to improve our situation? As Jared recovered from the overdose and I learned that he had intentionally taken the medicine to attempt suicide, I was completely taken aback. Not only had I not known Jared was that depressed, I had no idea what specific event had preempted the suicide attempt. Where were the signs and what had I missed?

The next 24 hours passed in a blur. We had an emergency meeting with Jared's therapist and arranged for 24-hour supervision with an adult until the immediate threat had passed. The first step was to stabilize Jared, and from there, we could discuss motive and choices to be made. We had family come in town to help with the children while I could supervise Jared and make sure that he started to improve. As the situation calmed down over the next few days, I learned that the suicide attempt had been driven by his fear that if his family knew he was a cross dresser, they would ostracize and disown him. Suddenly, the pieces came together to form a clear, distinct picture. Jared had recently had siblings leave the Church, and as a result, his parents had struggled deeply with questions about whether they had done something wrong in their parenting.

Sadly, this questioning even extended to whether their children were still good people and the same amazing individuals they had raised. Jared watched this from a distance and was incredibly distressed, which I thought could be attributed simply to the pain that both his siblings and his parents were facing. What I didn't realize is that Jared saw his parents' reaction and transposed that onto his own situation. What if his parents knew that he engaged in behavior that was seen as taboo and abnormal? If this behavior jeopardized his own standing in the Church, would they also question his value as a person? Even worse, would they reach a point where they would simply not love him anymore or be disgusted by who he was as a person?

While hypothetical, these questions were pressing and disturbing to Jared, who could not see any potential solution to how he could reconcile who he felt he was

as a person with the possibility of hurting people that he loved dearly with the knowledge of his feelings and behavior. While he watched the reactions and negative emotions within his own family escalate, his own anxiety followed suit until he could literally not distinguish between their situation and his imagined situation. It was at this point that he took the Valium in an attempt to find the only escape he felt existed.

A New Start

With this new information, we realized that it was important for Jared's parents to understand the situation completely, so they were filled in on the background of the suicide attempt, as well as the volatile nature of the situation. Fortunately, they were understanding and supportive, while at the same time not openly addressing the cross dressing or discussing it directly. As Jared improved and began to speak to his parents on the phone, the conversations were mostly geared towards neutral topics, and even if the cross dressing was brought up, it was not discussed at length. Once he at least could see that they knew about the cross dressing and were doing their best to be supportive, he was able to feel some relief and his anxiety eased. As we discussed ways that we could help stabilize him further, he suggested that we finally make the cross-country move that I had been avoiding for so long, and because I felt we were out of options, I agreed. At the time, I was dreading even the thought of moving, but I simply did not see I had much choice in the matter. If Jared needed a new environment and a fresh start, moving seemed like the most logical solution.

In the back of my mind, I secretly hoped that we could put this whole thing behind us. Maybe Jared would see that his cross dressing was really not that important, and now that his parents knew about the behavior, we could simply move on. If there was any silver lining in uprooting our family and moving thousands of miles away, this might be it.

However, soon after moving, I realized if anything, that Jared's cross dressing was becoming more intense. Shortly after we settled into our new home, he started buying more and more things to help him cross dress in a more convincing manner. He spent hours researching online about how to apply make-up, pad his body to appear more feminine, and even create false-looking cleavage through manipulating his own chest muscles and buying realistic looking silicone breast inserts. To add to this, he started telling some of his co-workers about his cross dressing, which seemed completely absurd from my perspective.

I did not understand what could possibly be gained from telling even more people about his behavior. Did he not realize that in some ways he could potentially be jeopardizing both his safety and ours as he told other people about a taboo behavior that people faced discrimination and sometimes even violence because

of? I simply could not understand his perspective. When I expressed concern, he said I simply did not understand how much support was necessary for him to be emotionally stable, and every person that supported and accepted him was invaluable. I could only assume that each person who expressed support or acceptance was standing proxy for his own self-acceptance, which I was not quite sure he had ever extended to himself.

At the same time, I could simply not grasp why my support and the acceptance from his own family was not sufficient. Even more questions presented themselves. Would he just keep telling more and more people until everyone knew and we had no privacy at all? Was he allowing himself to be defined by only one aspect of who he was, and would this eventually lead to him deciding that those other areas didn't matter at all? I didn't know what to do or say, afraid that my questioning of his actions would somehow be construed as being non-accepting.

At the same time, Jared wanted to cross dress more often and push the boundaries further with how he wanted me to be involved. While at first this was a behavior that he engaged in on his own, he now wanted me to see him dressed up, hang out with him while he was dressed like a woman, and even have me dress up like a man so I could role play with him. In my mind all I could think of is that "This is not what I signed up for!" I did not want to be involved in his cross dressing, and if it were up to me, I would rid him of the behavior completely.

Part of me knew that Jared had done his best to explain his cross dressing to me before we were married; in all fairness he had held nothing back. I knew I was partly to blame for not asking questions and doing my best to understand how this might impact our future marriage. At the same time, the cross dressings seemed to be escalating out of control and I wasn't sure if or how I could even convince Jared that he needed to set some boundaries. I felt particularly concerned because it felt like this was the only aspect of Jared's identity that he focused on. It was like one small aspect that made up who he was as a person was overshadowing everything else and drowning out the other parts of him that I loved.

Breaking Point

Finally, one evening Jared said he wanted to invite some of his work colleagues over to our home while he was dressed up so they could play video games together and I completely snapped. We began shouting at each other. He accused me of being non-supportive and close-minded. I accused him of letting his behavior get out of control and crossing the line of what I was willing to put up with. We had decided to not tell our children, and as they became older, I was afraid that they would see him dressed up and be confused and frightened. Having his pseudo-identity spill over into our family life seemed just too much. Because cross dressing often has a sexual component as well, I was horrified that he wanted people that I

had never met to be involved in something that seemed so intimate to me. The argument left me bitter and angry, as well as frightened that there would never be any boundaries. What if Jared was transgender and wanted to transition into living as a woman? What if these were just the first few steps in a lifetime of Jared spiraling further out of control?

I felt desperate and discouraged, and didn't know who to call for advice. I didn't know anyone else who even knew about cross dressing, let alone someone who had a spouse that also cross dressed. I wasn't even sure I had the whole picture about Jared's own feelings about cross dressing, and whether he would also consider himself a transgender. Finally, I had no information on how this fit into our own involvement, and particularly Jared's standing in the Church, which was something we mutually valued.

A few days after our argument, Jared seemed to be more calm and reasonable. I approached him in the most caring way I could, explaining that I loved and supported him, and accepted that cross dressing was a part of who he was. I was not asking him to stop the behavior, I was only asking that we set some reasonable boundaries that we could both agree on. Essentially, I had the conversation with him that I should have had almost a decade earlier when we were thinking of becoming engaged to be married.

Through the conversation, we decided together that cross dressing should be a private activity in our own home where only the two of us were involved, but that it was also important for him to seek outside support and acceptance through a community support group for cross dressers. This would allow him to share that part of himself with other people, while also not involving me or our children with his cross dressing in a public way. I also asked him difficult questions about whether he felt he was a transgender, to which he emphatically replied that he was happy as a man, and simply liked having another side of him that he could develop. Cross dressing allowed him a way to forget about his own problems for a while as he took on the identity of someone completely new.

Finally, I asked him whether he took on every aspect of a new identity when he was dressed as a woman. If he wanted to look, talk, and act like a woman, did he also want to be perceived as a woman by other men? Was he sexually drawn to other men while he was dressed as a woman? Through our conversation and listening to his answered, I realized he was also bi-sexual. I think this was a realization as much to him as it was to me. I don't think he had considered up to this point the implications of what this meant. I also do not think he realized this until he had started to dress more convincingly as a woman and go out in public for his meetings with his other identity.

Changing Viewpoints

With this new information, we had a completely new set of questions and issues to discuss. Jared assured me that he was 100% sure about intending to stay faithfully married in our heterosexual relationship. He also assured me he had no inclination or desire to make the transition from a male to female. I trusted him implicitly that he meant what he said, but there was still a part of my mind that knew people change. My own viewpoints and desires had changed in just the 10 years we had been married, so there was no guarantee that through this natural process of learning and gaining new experiences Jared wouldn't suddenly decide that he wanted different things out of life. For example, I had absolutely wanted a large family before we had children. I felt that raising a large family was exciting and challenging and that I was completely up for the task.

As we had children and I confronted my own desires to continue with my career, my viewpoints changed. I no longer wanted the large family that I had once dreamed of, but instead was satisfied and content with having a smaller family. I was the same person with the same goals and ideals, but I had changed my feelings on something I once felt was indisputable. This was one example of many that had shown me how life can change the way we perceive things, and the idea that Jared might change his own perception of his gender and our marriage as he gained new experiences was very unsettling. I also knew there was no way for me to get a complete reassurance that things would work out the way I hoped—just like there is no way to ensure that a spouse will never be unfaithful or become addicted to a harmful substance. Some things are simply unknown.

After our in-depth talk, things did improve between me and Jared. It became easier for us to communicate about the cross dressing and make sure that we were both comfortable with the boundaries we had set. Jared started attending a support group and remained in therapy, which helped him make significant strides towards self acceptance. Part of the benefit of attending a support group came from meeting other people dealing with the same issues he was, as well as seeing how they were able to maintain a healthy self-image in spite of being a cross dresser. Additionally, the therapy was a useful way for Jared to articulate his struggles and have an objective person help him identify areas in his life where he could focus his energy towards improvement.

Along with attending a support group and seeking therapy, Jared kept his cross dressing more private and didn't focus on involving other people as much. In turn, I felt more comfortable with the behavior. Even though I didn't like that he cross dressed and had bisexual feelings, it didn't seem to be an insurmountable issue within our marriage. I had learned that I could show acceptance of him and be loving and supportive without actually liking the behavior myself. It was freeing to realize that I didn't need to like cross dressing. I didn't need to find it fun, exciting, interesting, or enjoyable. I could, however, find my spouse fun, exciting, interesting, and enjoyable, even though there were aspects of his sexuality that were foreign to

me. It was an important step for me to realize that I could support Jared most by showing him that I was accepting of him, which in turn made him more willing to compromise and be honest with me.

In the few years since our marriage reached its most volatile point, I have ruminated often on the implications of being married to someone who is bisexual and a cross dresser. Part of me wishes that the only thing we had to address with intimacy in our marriage was the sexuality of two typical, average people. I wish intimacy was always as easy and simple as I had once imagined it would be, an intimacy where I didn't have to analyze every glance, comment, or action within the context of Jared's challenges. I have found that when I am struggling to feel validated and needed, it's so tempting to look around at the marriages of everyone else around us and assume they are perfect. While every marriage has its own difficulties, on the surface many can appear so much easier and happier than our own.

I have to stop myself from comparing my husband to the spouses of some of my friends. While many men we know spend hours on the weekend playing or watching sports, my husband spends hours applying make-up and dressing like a woman. What would it be like if Jared were like these other men? What if when he looked at me I knew I was all he had ever wanted? Would I be happier? While I know that Jared's sexuality and his inclinations existed long before we met, sometimes I feel like if I were just a better wife, I would be enough. When your spouse is attracted to individuals other than you (particularly if they belong to your opposite gender), it can cause you to question whether there is something inherently distasteful about who you are, how you act, and how you look.

It has taken a lot of introspection to realize that I am enough just as I am—both for myself and for Jared. Even though Jared is not typical or average in what I perceive other men to be like, it doesn't mean that we can't be happy together or have a rewarding, fulfilling relationship. Our situation is certainly unique, but our challenges (particularly after this many years of marriage) are familiar to us. In spite of what we have faced, I have found much happiness and fulfillment in being married to Jared. It is this realization that helps me keep perspective when I feel burdened by Jared's needs and desires.

As I have gained this perspective, I have also spent much time focusing on how Jared and I can address the challenge of his bisexuality and cross dressing in the context of our religious faith. When things get extremely difficult, I have found it tempting to be angry that the Lord has allowed Jared to experience desires and inclinations that are so atypical. Did God make Jared this way on purpose, and if so, why? Was this something that God was just allowing to happen, or was there a larger purpose than we just weren't seeing with our limited perspective? It was difficult to accept that while the usual solutions that are offered to us as Church

members when we are facing problems, such as prayer, temple attendance, and scripture reading are important, that these faith-building activities wouldn't single-handedly take away our challenges. I could read my scriptures every single day and Jared would still be bisexual. I could attend the temple with Jared weekly, but he would still feel the desire to cross dress. If these behaviors wouldn't change, then what was the purpose of my faith? I finally realized that my faith was misplaced.

Instead of having faith that Jared would magically be freed from the behaviors that were such a heavy burden to us both, I had to have faith the Lord would strengthen us to carry the burdens together and work through the problems one step at a time. By shifting my focus, I found hope—hope that we would be able to work through our challenges with intimacy, hope that we would eventually overcome the obstacles we faced in loving each other fully and completely, hope that we could use the encompassing love of Christ's atonement to heal our marriage.

Like everything in life, our marriage has evolved and continued to change. Along with this, Jared's cross dressing has changed as well, but it has become easier each year to work through issues and concerns that come up. We don't always agree, and it would be false to say that cross dressing and Jared's bisexuality has not caused any additional stress and strain on our marriage. However, we have both compromised and sacrificed to help our relationship from spiraling out of control. For his part, Jared has been willing to pull back from cross dressing for weeks at a time when he sees that I am overwhelmed or struggling. In this way, he is acknowledging that my support of his behavior requires patience that I often am not able to give when other aspects of my life leave me exhausted and frustrated. This sacrifice on Jared's part, as well as my willingness to ask for his help, demonstrates a maturity that neither of us possessed earlier in our marriage.

Additionally, in looking at our past, I clearly see how my own boundaries and comfort levels with Jared's cross dressing and sexuality have shifted, and it seems likely that this will continue. Knowing that our current situation and the state of our relationship is not static is both liberating and frightening—it means that anything is possible, either good or bad. In looking back to that conversation so many years ago, I wish I could give advice to my younger self. I don't know that I would have made different decisions in terms of getting married, but I wish I had made the road easier on myself by asking questions, expressing my own thoughts and desires, and discussing ways we could manage expectations.

While I certainly could not have anticipated many of the struggles we have faced, I do think it would have been helpful to enter a marriage with more transparency and clearer expectations. At this point, I have learned many lessons the hard way, but above all else, I have learned to love Jared completely, without trying to minimize or downplay aspects of his sexuality that at first seemed so strange and

unappealing. In turn, our love has deepened in ways that will hopefully give us strength to face the many unexpected twists in the story that lie ahead.