

# Shame and champagne. April Ashley's life was worth celebrating

*The Economist's* obituary of Britain's first transgender activist. She died on December 27th, aged 86.

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IN THE LOBBY of a hotel in Casablanca in May 1960, a new guest checked in. Blue-black hair, rakish fedora: George Jamieson, as his passport declared him, made quite an impression on the concierge. He frankly astonished him when he appeared later, shimmering and graceful, in a Givenchy dress.

Only the face was the same, and it was beautiful. The eyes were like a fawn's, and the smoothly glowing skin had clearly never felt a razor. Yet that face had been mocked by schoolboys who beat up the delicate classmate they could not understand, and convulsed with electric shocks by psychiatrists until the eyeballs bled. That head had been banged on the floor in fury by a mother from the Liverpool slums who detested her strange child, and punched by a father who thought boxing lessons might help. They did not help when a crowd of blind-drunk Scotsmen, fellow crew-members in the Merchant Navy, tried to drag everything off the sweet cabin-boy to see what was underneath. Nothing helped, or possibly could, as long as the name on the birth certificate was George Jamieson and the equipment below George's waist proclaimed that this was a man.

Now, in Casablanca, surgery would be done to complete the woman. It cost thousands of pounds, every penny saved up from working as a drag dancer called Toni at Le Carrousel in Paris. The doctor had warned that the chances of survival were 50/50, but Toni did not hesitate for a minute. If the surgery failed, there was no point to life anyway.

She had felt she was female from the moment she started to think. Kneeling beside her bed at night, she had prayed to wake up as a girl. The prayer went unheard, and there was no one else to ask. The family were ashamed of her, so she became ashamed of herself, trying to fit into the rough world of men. It was hard. Twice in the Merchant Navy she took too many pills, but still not enough; once she was fished from the mucky Mersey. The psychiatrists told her to go away and be gay, but she insisted she was not: she was a heterosexual woman. Nor was she trapped in a man's body, because she felt that her body, save that one part, was a woman's too. She had made it rounder and softer by taking black-market oestrogen in Paris; her breasts grew with nipples of pale, pale pink, which she then flattened brutally against her chest by wearing vests that were too small.

Now, after the operation, she could be who she always felt she was. She woke to hear the words "Bonjour, Mademoiselle", and as soon as recovery allowed she plunged into life as a lovely, fascinating woman. Already at Le Carrousel she had drawn celebrity fans, from Picasso and Dalí, who were too lecherous, to Elvis, who could not stop dancing with her. Now, secure in her gender as she thought, with April Ashley on her passport and driving licence, her face was photographed by David Bailey and Lord Lichfield and on the pages of *Vogue*. Omar Sharif slept with her, and Peter O'Toole certainly thought about it. The

champagne started to flow then, and she seldom appeared in the tabloids, which also loved her, without a flute in her hand and triumph on her face.

Yet now she was hiding in a different way; hiding that she had ever been a man. To her this was not a lie, since she never had been. To Britons at that time, it was a scandal. In less than a year a supposed friend sold her story for £5 to the *Sunday People*, and her modelling career was finished. She was now a celebrity freak, a persona as strange as that place between genders where she had lived before. With friends she sparkled, but perfect strangers would pull her hair and poke her breasts to see if they were real. In well-mannered Sloane Square a woman slapped her, and the fingermarks stayed for days. Her marriage in 1963 to the transvestite son of a peer lasted a fortnight, but dragged on for seven years before they divorced. The judge's ruling was utterly humiliating: her marriage was null and void because she was "a person of the male sex", and someone born that way could never change.

On one level, she was devastated. She eventually fled London for quiet Herefordshire, then for California. There were breakdowns and bankruptcy, and for a while the drinking became an obsession. On another level, trauma turned her into a fighter. Not long after the judge's verdict she defended herself passionately across three pages of the *SundayMirror*. She was not a monster, but a flesh and blood woman. She always had been. And, to satisfy the prurient, she made love like a woman too. She had lost her virginity on Bastille Day high above the Place Pigalle, while the cars wildly tooted their horns. When she fled from her husband it was with the heir to the Duque del Infantado to his palace in Seville, where they made love under the Velázquezes. Both occasions were wonderful; so there. She was simply a human being living her life; but now she was publicly declared an illegal creature, again without an identity and without the protection of the law.

She did not have it until 2005, and the passing of the Gender Recognition Act. At that point, her birth certificate at last confirmed who she felt she was. In the meantime she became an impeccably elegant agony aunt and public spokeswoman for thousands of despairing people. She did not proselytise for trans life, or for the operation; she knew too many people for whom surgery had been a terrible mistake. Instead she focused her energy on winning the right to correct legal documents after transitioning: to become one's true self in the eyes of the state.

Beyond that she counselled kindness, not that she had seen much of it herself. She advised courage, "because you're bloody well going to need it". And she counselled beauty inside, which would lead to beauty outside, no matter how disconcerting some people might think it was.

All along she delighted in champagne, and not, she would tell sommeliers, a normal glass of it; an *April Ashley* glass of it. She had woken up from the operation happier than she had ever been, and had sensed a tingle of joy on waking every single day since. Despite all the pain, hers was a life worth celebrating. ■

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