

## AMAZON TRAIL

## Walking lessons

*Inability to stride in her accustomed butch style leads this writer to ponder the expression of identity*

by Lee Lynch

**I**t never occurred to me that disability could steal my butchy walk.

Before my hair got gray and I became another invisible middle-aged woman, I was always being mistaken for a boy. I came to be proud of my androgyny and tried to pinpoint just what it was that confused and scared the non-gay folk.

It wasn't my hair, since the longer I wore it the more flack I got. "What is it, a boy or a girl?" I'd hear passersby ask. It wasn't just my clothes, because once it happened back in the bad old days when skirts were required to make a living. It wasn't lack of makeup, because I lived through the beatnik and hippie and back-to-the-land eras when many women spurned face decoration.

What made this even more puzzling was the fact that my friends and acquaintances all swore that I wasn't the least bit masculine, that they'd never made the gender mistake about me. So what was it that made me a marked woman, that emptied ladies' rooms and inspired mean comments on the street?

Remember the song "Walk Like a Man"? Originally a hit in 1963, three years after I came out, everywhere I went teenagers and little kids used it to taunt me. It wasn't even a good song, with its repetitive melody, simplistic words and macho content. Despite its deficiencies, that musical instrument of torture made the Top 10 again in 1974. I got the message when kids serenaded me again—it was my walk, the butch stance, more than anything else, that defined my androgyny.

Later, when my novel *The Swashbuckler* was published, readers everywhere would ask me to demonstrate the main character's "diddy-bop" walk. Each wanted to learn to walk like a butch—not like a man. Through them I finally learned to be proud of my shocking manner of ambulation, to flaunt it when I passed local anti-gay activists, to revel in it among other queers, and never disguise it.

Then I developed arthritis in my feet. I'd had intermittent arch problems since childhood, but now, my big toes began to hurt when I walked and cramp when I sat or laid down. My walk wasn't affected until I fell across a muddy ditch this winter and bent back those toes to the point where, were I not stubbornly butch, I would have screamed loudly enough to flush every wild creature from the woods.

Of course, again like a good butch, I continued to ignore the pain. As the weeks went by I hobbled more and more. This began to get old. I tried chiropractic and acupuncture. Finally, I submitted to medical help. Surgery was recommended to remove bone spurs and to stimulate growth of scar

tissue since my cartilage had worn away where it mattered most. So much for my jock youth.

I have to admit that the surgery was pretty interesting. I had a great anesthesiologist who knew just how much I could take of listening to that construction crew down at my feet before knocking me out again.

It's the recovery that's been the real eye-opener. I was on my feet as of day one, in post-op shoes and thick bandages. Walking isn't a pleasant experience, but part of my therapy. I learned how it felt to be too disabled to drive, but only for a week. I'm learning how it feels to creep down the street, absolutely incapable of walking fast, to climb stairs sideways clutching handrails, to watch

curious pedestrians slide their eyes down to my feet and away, embarrassed.

For the first time in my life, I can't walk butch. Can't express myself through anything near a diddy-bop, swagger or stride. And I realize that some permanently disabled people can never walk butch. What a privilege I've enjoyed all these years. What freedom to express myself! That awful song, "Walk Like a Man," no matter how many times it was twisted to condemn me, could not quell the defiant spirit of my personal and perennial gay pride march.

What if my foot problems don't resolve? The physician said that the procedure might be successful for a year, five years, forever. He couldn't promise anything. What will I do, wear a tie when I begin to use a walker? Festoon the back of my wheelchair with a huge rainbow triangle? Will I still be me?

Even now, as I recover, unable to balance or handle more than one physical task at a time, I let Lover open doors and carry things for me.

I certainly haven't changed inside, but being unable to express myself in accustomed ways takes its toll on my identity.

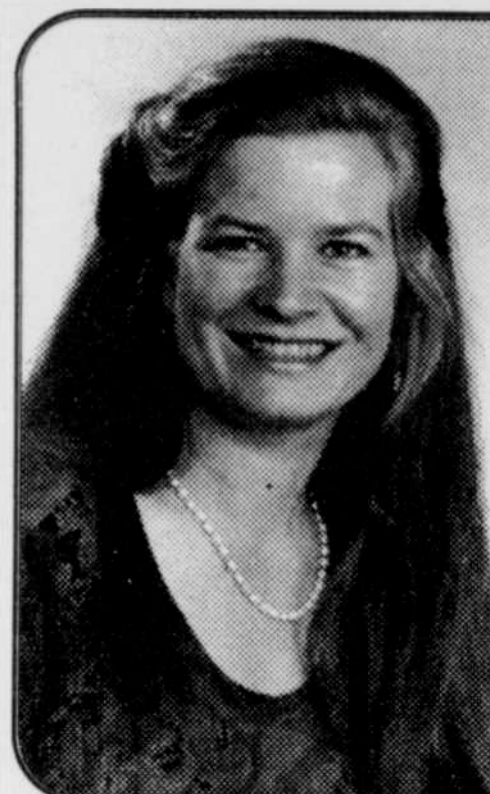
I'm watching an old butch friend with pulmonary problems go through something similar. She's become dependent on her more able-bodied friends for so many of the things she once proudly, gladly did for herself and for others. She's graciously learning to accept her declined abilities, keeping her gruff sense of humor and, as she says, "giving it hell."

And, hey, she's not one whit less butch.

As I began to get some perspective on my situation I was able to joke about it with a femme e-mail pal.

I posted, "Never thought about how hard it is to walk butch with a walking disability."

She replied in that subtle all-knowing femme way, "Suspect it is just as hard to walk femme with hurt feet. Humph."



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