

Gender Mercies

Adore him or abhor him, Boy George's effect
on the public psyche cannot be ignored.
He and his myriad gender chameleons
are the newest wave
in the ebb and flow between the sexes.
An essay by JAN MORRIS, who has reason to know

Years ago, when I was, so to speak, shifting my place on the scale of sex, from the male toward the female, I realized that I had reached a point almost exactly in the middle. I was neither one nor the other, or alternatively I was both. I was like a figure of fable—or freak show, if you prefer.

But at the same time I made a more unexpected discovery; namely, that nobody seemed to mind. On the contrary, I found myself occupying an arcane and rarefied position of privilege. There were, of course, the world's louts to mock me, the world's cowards to shy away from me as they shy away from anything they do not understand; but the vast majority of strangers, wherever I wandered to ambiguously in the world of the late 1960s, seemed to treat me with a curious sort of concern, as though I were something of fragile public interest. New York customs officials, security ladies in Pakistan, African headmen, London clubmen—all surprised me by their gentle mixture of kindness, curiosity, and something approaching complicity.

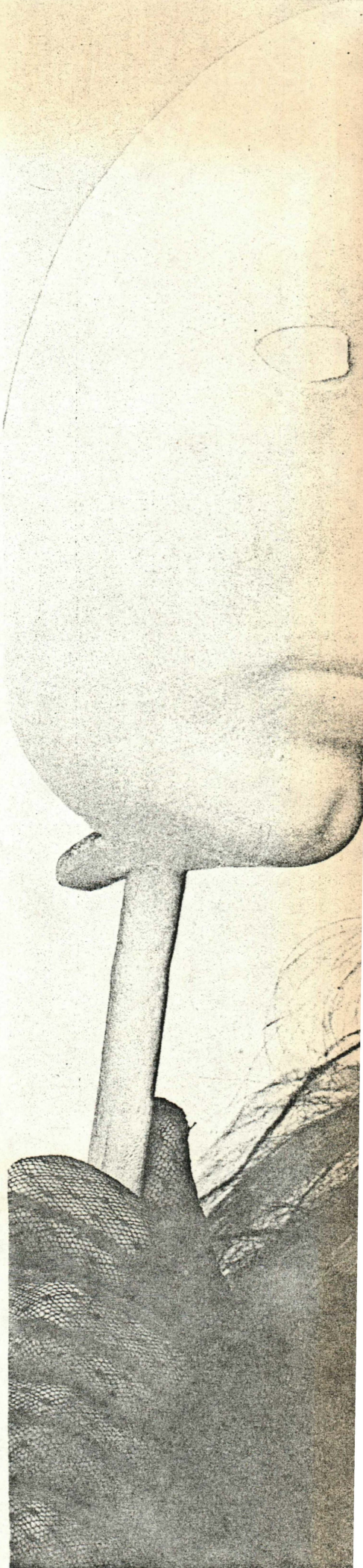
Nearly two decades have passed, and as I have traveled further along that gauge I have become rather more ordinary; but the phenomenon of intersex seems to beguile people even more now than it did then. A succession of androgynous celebrities has not, it seems,

dulled the enthrallment, and today there is scarcely a corner of the earth, politics and communications permitting, where you will not find, strolling pigtailed along tropical boulevards or black-hatted in steamy northern cafés, remote but enthusiastic derivatives of Boy George.

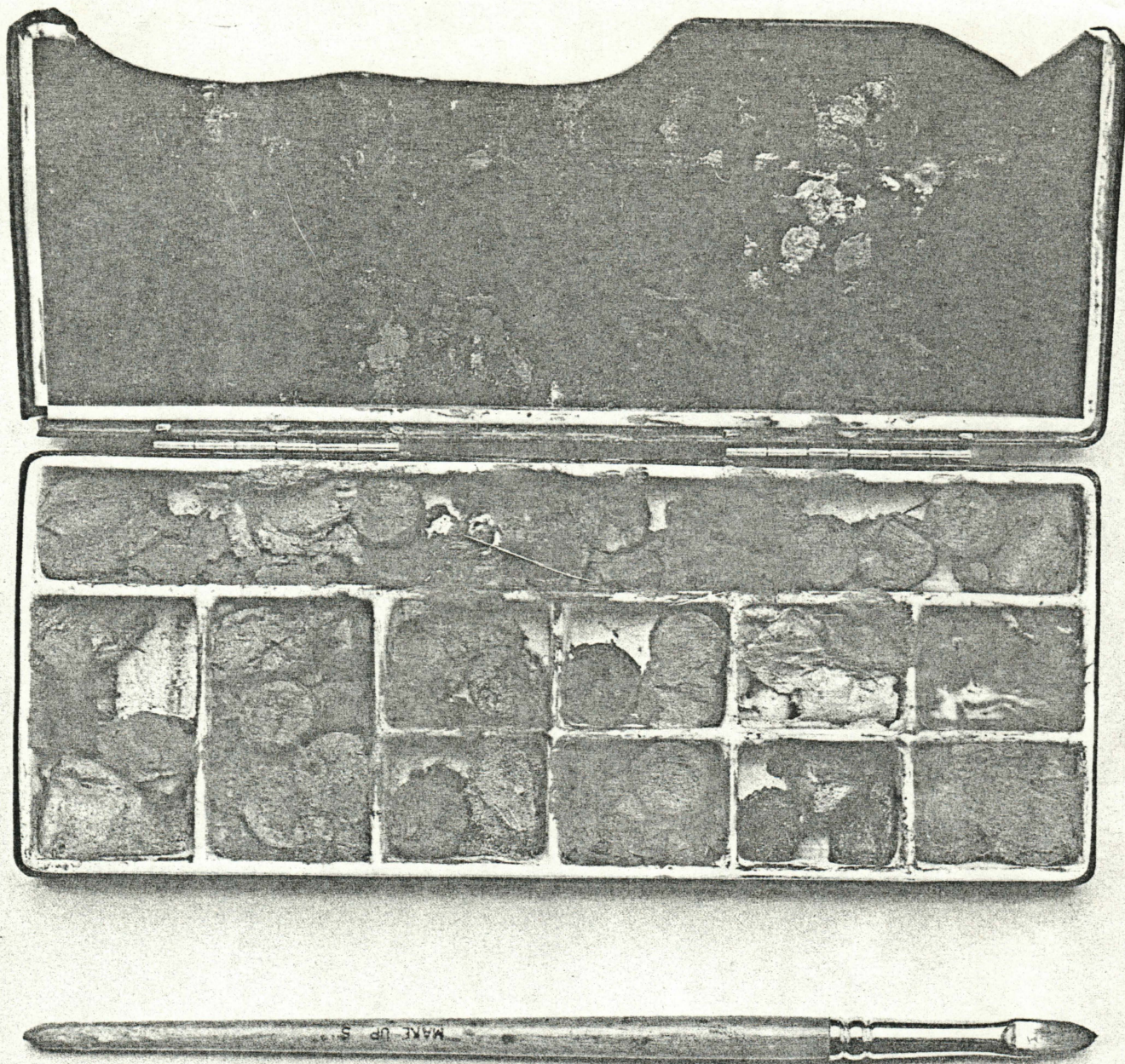
I read in the newspapers that when the Boy went to France once, the police demanded evidence of his sex. Across the continents the millions chuckled—not at the star, waiting with patient ambivalence at the frontier post, attending to his makeup perhaps, but at the dull and heavy-handed *flics*.

What's going on? Why do those of us who seem to straddle, blend, defy, or ignore the differences between the sexes find ourselves not ostracized, but courted? Why do old ladies and strong men alike dote on Boy George, and what particular chord in the human psyche does his confusing personality strike?

Part of the fascination is, of course, as old as the imagination. It is the spell of the ultimate chimera, the creature that bridges in its own being that most obvious and unbridgeable of gulfs, the gulf between M. and F. Of all the arrangements that the gods are assumed to have made, in all civilizations, in all ages until our own, this was the most intractable. Male and female made He them (and homosexual too, for homosexuality is not what I am writing







Color by numbers: Boy George's makeup box

about): if there was one fact of life that could never be reversed, that stood at the very foundation of reality, it was the physical disparity between men and women, the only means of procreation.

Alluring indeed in ancient times, for good or for evil, must have seemed the person who appeared to have defied the decrees of destiny itself, and presented male and female in one. What heady rites of hermaphroditism we may imagine, among the oaks and sacred rivers of antiquity! What forbidden sensations were evoked! I know something of them myself, for when I was in that transitory halfway condition, perhaps the oddest circumstance a human being can experience, I used sometimes to bathe, all alone and naked, in a mountain lake

above my home in Wales; and then as I stepped into the cold dark water, high in those empty hills, I used to feel distinctly cultlike myself (though the sheep, as it happens, were my only acolytes).

We read that in some polytheistic cultures intersexuality was regarded with reverence, and I still get letters from readers in the East who appear to approach the matter with a satisfying mixture of awe and prurience. Monotheism regarded it with less favor. Boy George and I might go well with pagan springs and forest rituals, but Jehovah would probably have turned us into pillars of salt, and the Christian ethos too, though devoted to ecumenical missions in other ways, has certainly not dedicated itself to the unifying of the sexes. As its dog-

matists might say, what God hath sundered let no man put together!

Just a generation ago most people in the Western world undoubtedly regarded intersexuality with horror, not merely as something unnatural, but more seriously as something un-Godly—the beginning of the End, perhaps. Only those who could see the allegory in it, the mystery or perhaps the poetry, allowed themselves to view it with sympathy.

For me at least, sexuality is a poor second to sensuality, being no more than an ingenious device for the perpetuation of mankind, whose pleasures are undeniable, but inferior to several others.

One of these days, I feel sure, it is going to dawn on the world that the joys

of the sexual act have been ludicrously overrated. Boy George says he prefers a good cup of tea, and many more might say the same if they had not been ineluctably brainwashed down the eons. It is really a very unimaginative pleasure, no more than an inducement to the archaic mind to keep the species going—dear God, birds do it, bees do it!—and I strongly suspect that it will presently be past its prime.

Well, it is a bit dated, isn't it? Can we really suppose that a couple of thousand years from now human beings will still depend upon the messy and graceless business of coupling to produce their children or provide their physical satisfactions? Can we seriously envisage them writhing around in bed as we do, protecting ourselves with dangerous pills or distasteful apparatus against the primitive hazards of the practice? An unnoticeable implant, an untasteful tablet—such will be their means of procreation, and the clumsy indulgences of coitus will have long lost their purpose.

How intriguing will seem, in the far, far future, the discredited organs of human intercourse! They will join the appendix and the prehensile toe as evidence of humanity's quaint crude origins. And if biology students are entertained by such corporal reminders, just think what recondite amusement young anthropologists will get from the *Kamasutra*! Those manipulations! Those contortions! Funnier than smoking, even!

I think it conceivable that adaptation toward these distant ends is already beginning to show. The sexes are recognizably becoming more like each other. We have perhaps a million years to go, but not just the likes of Boy George and me; men and women of all kinds seem to be converging upon some physical median. Among males, there seem to be fewer of the bulky beefsteak kind; among females the tough athletic look is everywhere, and even the women's liberation movement can be interpreted as an intuitive facet of the same process—evolutionary rather than sociological.

So there, perhaps we are all on the road to intersex; perhaps the world of today, by some inexplicable perception, sees characters like Boy George and me as examples of its own sexual future, and so greets us diplomatically.

Or perhaps it sees us as Messengers. I have been talking of sex, but beyond

sex is gender, something much more evasive, mysterious, and to my mind important. Sex is the physical state, gender the inner consciousness—abstraction, not anatomy. Science can grapple with male and female, hormonically, surgically, and before long no doubt with genetic engineering or other prenatal mechanics. Masculine and feminine, though, have always seemed to me less organic than occult.

Yet in our time the genders too seem to be meeting—males less masculine, females less feminine, whatever the state of their bodies—and here in my view something spiritual may be occurring. Boy George may not seem, on the face of things, a very likely instrument of Providence, but then God does tend to move in gimmicky ways. Could it not be that in bringing the genders together in such people, by overlapping masculine and feminine in this revelatory, almost ostentatious way, the Great Unknown is giving notice at last of some more general reconciliation?

I don't want to sound smug or sanctimonious, still less crazy (I have to earn a living), but I have sometimes felt, generally in moments of unexplained euphoria, that my own life has been arranged for some transcendental but unfortunately unspecified purpose: that I am supposed indeed to bear some message, or illustrate some cosmic point or other. The philosopher Teilhard de Chardin forecast that the world would be progressively united by a process he called "infoling," the spasmodic and generally imperceptible fusion of its separate and so often hostile parts. I believe him. We see one symptom of the process, perhaps, in the ever more intimate knowledge the nations have of each other, however asininely they still squabble and posture; and perhaps another is a slow, fitful movement toward a meeting of the genders.

There is nothing absurd, or even especially visionary, in such a notion. Masculine and feminine are not the inalienable prerogatives of male and female—I long ago came to recognize gender not as a balance but as a continuum, into which sex can be allotted at various points. Yin and yang, as the Chinese long ago demonstrated, are poles not of sexuality but of humanity in toto—categories of soul, you might say, rather than definitions of sex. The species needs both qualities, and one of our tragedies is that they are so often in op-

position—the macho against the maidenly, active against passive, tough against tender, yang versus yin. Could it not be that in Boy George and his kind, or more properly in the dazed, wondering, but strangely affectionate response that they get from humanity at large, we are seeing early signs of a treaty?

I hear rude laughter! It is a long way, I know, from Boy George to Teilhard de Chardin, and one does not expect essays that begin with sex-change disclosures to end with jejune theology. Besides, there are countless chauvinists of both camps still wedded to the notion that sex is what makes the world go round, and that gender is its handmaiden. Bombarded by propagandists from Freud to Mae West, from marriage counselors to cosmetics advertisers, citizens of the capitalist West in particular have come to suppose that the contest of sex, and no less the clash of gender, is essential to human fulfillment.

To such poor dupes I would say, Throw off your chains! Sex is not compulsory! It is only a device anyway, a kindly confidence trick perpetrated by Nature for purely functional ends. You can take it or leave it without betraying your taste, your judgment, or even your sophistication. Boy George would rather have tea; I would not go so far as that, but I certainly regard the pleasures of bed and body as commonplace, like a bottle of good wine, say, or duck à l'orange, beside the infinitely more tremendous satisfactions of love, art, or mysticism.

And I speak from experience, having enjoyed sex, I suppose, more variously than most. I am not arguing for its abrogation, or even prophesying its imminent decline: I am only suggesting that the phenomenon of intergender perhaps offers some hope of emancipation from its impositions. For there is to the puzzled welcome which the world gives to its Boy Georges some element of yearning. Improbably delineated, it seems, in rock star, epicene athlete, or sex-changed litterateur, some remote ideal is represented, as if humanity glimpses in that blending of ancient opposites, that challenging rebuttal of un rebuttable truths, not the end of things at all, but the start, as a songwriter said long ago in quite another context, of something new. □