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## My Life as an Intersexual

By Max Beck | Posted 10.30.01 | NOVA

When I was born, the doctors couldn't tell my parents what I was: They couldn't tell if I was a boy or a girl. Between my legs they found "a rudimentary phallus" and "fused labio-scrotal folds." They ran their tests, they poked and prodded, and they cut open my belly, removed my gonads, and sent them off to Pathology. My parents sat in the hospital cafeteria, numb, their hearts as cold as the Manhattan February outside.



Max Beck today (in tuxedo) and as he appeared in college, when he was known as Judy.  
[Enlarge](#)

Photo credit: Courtesy of Max Beck

All they had wanted was a healthy baby. That's all anybody who is pregnant or trying to get pregnant wants, right?

*"Are you hoping for a boy or a girl?"*

*"It doesn't matter, so long as it's healthy."*

My parents had struggled for years to have children—my mother had suffered through three miscarriages and a stillbirth—and all that time, through all those tears, they prayed and prayed for a healthy baby. Too late, they realized they'd meant normal.

I was healthy. Medical records from that grim period describe me as "a well-developed, well-nourished infant in no acute distress." Every mother's dream.

After five weeks of study and surgery, they weren't any closer to the truth; mine was a fuzzy picture. Not even the almighty gene provided any clear answers, since it was discovered that I was a mosaic, with some cells in my body having the XY genotype and others having XO. The decision was made to raise me female.

Judy at two years [Enlarge](#)

Photo credit: Courtesy of Max Beck



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Could my parents do that? Could they ever hope, after all they had been through, to "raise me female?" What sort of instruction is that anyway?

*"Feed the baby every two hours, burp well after feeding, and raise it female."*

Who gives a thought to such things? You have a son, you have a daughter, you take him or her home, and you get on with your life, period. Consciously, deliberately "raising me female"—it's like consciously, deliberately breathing.

So they took me home, named me Judy, and did whatever it was they did, whatever it was they knew how. I grew into a rough-and-tumble tomboy, a precocious, insecure, tree-climbing, dress-hating show-off with a Prince Valiant haircut and razor-sharp wit who was constantly being called "little boy" and "young man."

I never gave a thought to what went through my mother's heart and mind every time this happened, this common misperception-that-wasn't. What did she see every time she looked at me? Did she watch my entire childhood, every developmental milestone, every triumph, every tear, through a darkening lens of gender? I imagine memories of me, all those special Kodak moments, all captured in my mother's mind in eerie photonegative. I don't know how my father felt or feels about it; he has never spoken about it except to reinterpret my mother's feelings.



Judy at 13 years, with her father [Enlarge](#)

Photo credit: Courtesy of Max Beck

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I quickly came to understand that that tomboy—the gender identity with which I had escaped childhood—was less acceptable in adolescence. Yearly visits to endocrinologists and pediatric urologists, lots of genital poking and prodding, and my mother's unspoken guilt and shame had all served to distance me considerably from my body: I was a walking head. In retrospect, it seems odd that a tomboy should have been so removed from her body. But instead of a daily, muddy, physical celebration of life, my tomboyhood was marked by a reckless disregard for the body and a strong desire to be annihilated.

So I reached adolescence with no physical sense of self, and no desire to make that connection. All around me, my peers and former playmates were dating, fooling around, giving and getting hickeyes, while I, whose puberty came in pill form, watched aghast from the sidelines.

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### ***I began to experience myself as a sort of sexual Frankenstein's monster.***

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What was I? The doctors and surgeons assured me I was a girl, that I just wasn't yet "finished." I don't think they gave a thought to what that statement would mean to me and my developing gender identity, my developing sense of self. The doctors who told me I was an "unfinished girl" were so focused on the lie—so invested in selling me "girl"—that I doubt they ever considered the effect a word like "unfinished" would have on me.

I knew I was incomplete. I could see that compared to—well, compared to everyone!—I was numb from the neck down. When would I be finished?

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Judy in high school [Enlarge](#)



Photo credit: Courtesy of Max Beck

The "finishing" the doctors talked about occurred during my teen years—hormone replacement therapy and a vaginoplasty. Still, the only thing that felt complete was my isolation. Now the numbness below my neck was real—a maze of unfeeling scar tissue.

I wandered through that labyrinth for another ten years, with a gender identity and desires born of those medical procedures. I began to experience myself as a sort of sexual Frankenstein's monster. Not that I was having much sex. I was incredibly inhibited about my body, the scars, the mysterious medical condition and history that I—the patient!—knew next to nothing about.



Judy in college [Enlarge](#)

Photo credit: Courtesy of Max Beck

Sexual experiences were few and far between. At 21 I found myself, a college dropout and a runaway, in bed with an older woman, my second sexual partner and the first naked woman I had ever seen or touched. The differences between our bodies were staggering. Too numb and shaken to even be embarrassed or shy, I showed her what worked, how much pressure to use, what to touch, what not to touch. She listened and learned, and gave me similar lessons in her anatomy. And then, one night in bed, she whispered playfully in my ear: "Boy, Jude, you sure are weird."

Exactly.

When I boarded the plane that would take me back to the East Coast, back to the angry family and the patient university I had fled via Greyhound bus weeks earlier, I carried the knowledge that I was a lesbian. No single thing I had ever learned about myself could feel as important, carry such weight, or offer such healing. Everything that didn't make sense in my tortured world—even the scars—blossomed into perfect clarity when viewed through that lens: I am a lesbian! My nerves sang.

### **ANOTHER TRUTH**

But I also carried another truth, a terrible corollary to the first secret: I cannot be with women. For being with a woman revealed what I wasn't—"finished," a girl, normal—and (so much worse) revealed what I was—a freak, a monster, an anomaly.

While my single male partner had been relatively nonplussed about my manmade parts, my single female partner couldn't help but notice and comment on the fact that I was different. I used these ridiculously inadequate sample sizes to draw the painfully obvious, jaded, bitter conclusion: Men wouldn't care or comment on my scars; focused only on having someplace to "stick it," they would barely notice any difference between me and other women they might have had sex with, since they simply wouldn't be paying that kind of attention. Women, on the other hand, would notice immediately the dreadful gulf between normal and me and run the other way.

Not surprisingly, I tried to kill myself.

In the days before Prozac and HMOs, recovery from a suicide attempt meant three months in a community mental health center, time I used to resign myself to a meaningless life with a man I couldn't love. Once released, I continued to take my self-loathing to therapy, bedding down with (and eventually marrying) the next guy to come along.

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***Looking in the mirror every morning, I am reminded of just how outward outward appearances are.***

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At this time, during a routine check of my immunization records for a job I was applying for at a hospital, I obtained some old medical records and learned things my parents and doctors had never intended me to know. Desperately confused, my therapist and I had sent for and received the neonatal surgical records that outlined the medical history described above. What had been an embarrassingly large clitoris was suddenly revealed to have been a hideously deformed penis, and the possibility of ever being with a woman became even more remote; the wondrous, wonderful identity that had lasted all of a plane flight from LAX to JFK—lesbian—was robbed again, seemingly forever.

Now fully convinced I was a monster, I stayed with my husband, certain no one else could ever love or want me. Until, thankfully, I met Tamara. With all the force and subtlety of a tsunami, she flooded my senses, roared through my heart and my bed. I found myself swept into divorce, scandal, debt, and—such unimagined bliss—her.



Judy (right) and Tamara in Philadelphia, October 1994 [Enlarge](#)

Photo credit: Courtesy of Max Beck

Coming out as a lesbian was the single most powerful act I had ever undertaken. Despite social and family pressures, despite a mountain of shame surrounding my queered genitals, I did it, and my liberation—I thought—was complete. I wasn't an "unfinished girl"—I was butch!

But a proud butch identity and a powerful femme at my side weren't enough; Frankenstein's monster would not be propitiated. After the "honeymoon" period of our relationship, the old self-loathing returned, self-loathing and self-destructiveness. How could I be a butch if I was "really" a man? How could I call myself "lesbian" when I wasn't even a woman? I felt like an imposter, a fraud, and now more than ever, a freak.

Another hospitalization for depression—a shorter stay this time, thanks to the advent of antidepressants and HMOs. A dark chrysalis period, focused on another, deeper coming out: coming out as intersexed.



Max in 1997 [Enlarge](#)

Photo credit: Courtesy of Max Beck

Tomboy, unfinished girl, walking head, Frankenstein, butch—these were all just so many wonderful/terrible, sharp/ill-fitting suits; the body wearing them was and is transgendered, hermaphroditic, queer. And an important, even essential element of that queerness was the trauma that accompanied it, the medicalization, the scars, the secrecy, the shame. I was born a tiny, helpless almost-boy, but the way my world responded to me is what made and makes me intersexed.

### THE TRANSITION

In March of 1998, after over a decade of therapy, I decided to switch to testosterone and transition to male. Since 1996, I had been an active part of the intersex community, and by deciding to transition, I thought I was copping out. I felt like a deserter, a coward, fleeing the frontlines of the gender war. As a politically aware intersexual, I felt it was my duty to be as brazenly androgynous, as visibly hermaphroditic as possible. But to return to the body/suit metaphor, I was starting to feel very naked and very cold. My "naked" body was scaring little old ladies out of public restrooms, making seemingly simple tasks, such as shopping, surprisingly difficult:

*"Is this your mother's credit card, young man?"*

So I've found a new suit—a different name, the "other" hormone, a different letter on my driver's license—that fits better, that's tailored to me.



Max and Tamara on their wedding day, February 12, 2000 [Enlarge](#)

Photo credit: Courtesy of Max Beck

Tamara and I have been together for seven years now, despite my—now "our"—continued struggle with my issues of shame and anger, my muddled, muddied, fuzzy gender. We married in February 2000 and now have a baby girl, Alder, whom we conceived using Tamara's egg and a donor's sperm. We both still identify as lesbians, so "becoming" heterosexual is not without its challenges. Tamara constantly feels she is masquerading and must explain and challenge those assumptions. In fact, my change of clothes has forced her to re-examine her entire wardrobe—both literally and figuratively.

Looking in the mirror every morning, I am reminded of just how outward outward appearances are. Moving through the world, I'm just a guy: a husband, a father, a computer geek, a manager, looking forward to becoming a grandfather and a sage. Does the Y chromosome in (only) some of my cells and the facial hair I'm growing make me any less a girl, a tomboy, a lesbian, a butch, a woman? I have worn all of these identities, so surely they are mine, even if they no longer fit, even if they were never my birthright, never mine to wear. I cannot undo my history, and I am sick to death of regretting it, so those hard-won honorifics will have to stand. When I look in a mirror, I see all of them.

This feature originally appeared on the site for the NOVA program [Sex: Unknown](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/gender/) (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/gender/>).

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Max Beck is a self-described computer wonk who lives in Atlanta, Georgia, with his wife and baby daughter, and strives to stay true to his curving path in a linear world.

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#### Further Reading

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