



Reluctant Press presents:

Dress Circle

Charlotte Mayo



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALEXANDERSSON

A 'HER TV' E-BOOK

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My Life

DRESS CIRCLE

By Charlotte Mayo

CHAPTER ONE - 1971

Picture this. Two girls standing in front of a dressing table mirror in a suburban, semi-detached house in Surrey. It's early afternoon and the small bedroom is bathed in sunlight. The two girls are dressed as if they're going off to a children's birthday party. Both are wearing pretty pink frocks, with skirts layered with stiff net. The net pushes the skirts up and out so the fabric hangs away from the legs of the girls, the skirt of the younger girl is particularly voluminous. The stiff net underskirt tickles her bare legs. The bodice is tight.

The girls are holding hands and by the protective way in which the older girl holds the hand of the younger it is clear that they're sisters. The older of the two girls is considerably taller than the younger, for there is a five-year age gap.

The younger girl's dress is silky and pink and she's wearing little white socks and her face has been powdered and ruby, red lipstick has been applied, very neatly - far too patiently for a seven year old child.

It's warm in the room and the younger girl's face feels a little constricted and prickly under the thick powder she is wearing. A bow has been tied into hair and it makes her head hurt, it all feels a bit uncomfortable and strange but then again it's the first time she's worn make-up or had a bow in her hair or, for that matter, worn a party dress.

Pots, brushes and lipsticks are strewn on the dressing table. Clearly, there have been many attempts at getting the make-up just right; but now both girls seem satisfied with the result. Very satisfied. It appears that the older girl is just getting into make-up and she's enjoyed this opportunity to dress her younger sibling and practise painting her face. Now, like an artist who has completed a canvas, she stares into the mirror and admires her creation. She's smiling; the result is beyond her wildest, playful dreams.

The younger girl isn't smiling, she's entranced by the mirror's reflection as well, not her sister's, in fact she hardly notices her, it is her own appearance that entrals her. Her eyes move up and down her mirror image, from her little white socks up her bare legs to the edge of her skirt. The dress that makes her feel, well so funny, so alien, so awkward, *so exposed*. She studies the broad, red ribbon around her waist. It is tied into a bow behind; the tight bodice lifts up and down with her staccato breaths. Finally, her eyes reach her made-up face whereupon she peers deep into her reflection. *Is this me?* She can't quite comprehend this image of herself. She's confused. This pretty, pretty girl that stands before the dressing table mirror on this sunny, August day, isn't really her, is it?

Her sister squeezes her hand tighter. Neither speaks, the younger child is still bathing in the narcissistic enjoyment of her reflection, and yes, she is enjoying what she sees, just as the older girl is admiring her handiwork. The smile on the older girl's face grows broader ...she has done a fantastic job. Her grip grows tighter on the younger girl's hand. At last she says,

"What do you think?"

The younger girl's voice is dry; she can't seem to articulate her emotions, she feels nervous. "Good," she says shyly.

The older girl laughs, she's always wanted to turn her cheeky, pain in the neck kid brother into a pretty little girl!

CHAPTER TWO

To this day I'm not completely sure how I came to be standing in my sister's sunlit bedroom, dressed in a pretty, pink party frock, holding my sister's hand and staring, all agog, at my reflection. That is, I'm not sure whether it was my idea or hers. All I know is that my sister took on the role of dressing me with some relish and went to great pains to ensure the make-up looked right before zipping me into that dress. When she had finished we stood before the mirror – for all the world like big sister and little sister off to a birthday party. That image is one of my clearest early childhood memories. I was seven years old.

Though I don't remember how I came to be wearing the dress I do recall exactly how we came to have it. All three of us – that is my sister, my older brother and myself were members of the Cub, Scout and Guide movements and my Mum used to help out at fund raising jumble sales. The Saturday before the dressing incident we had been to my Auntie's who had given my Mum a big bag of clothes for the next sale.

It was the school holidays and, with time on our hands, naturally my sister and I rummaged through the bag. As I said I can't be sure who found the dresses and who decided that the smaller one would fit me – but some how I found myself in my sister's bedroom being made up and dressed as a little girl.

My sister was so pleased with the result that when my Mum came upstairs she showed me off to her. Mum cuddled and kissed me and, in fact, she made quite a fuss of me.

It was a glorious summer. I loved that dress. If it had been my sister's idea to dress me the first time, in the days that followed it was very much my idea to get the dress out of

the jumble sale bag and wear it. I climbed trees in it, ran around the house in it and wore it whilst I rode my bike around the back garden. No one seemed to mind.

Until, that is, the day I bumped into my Dad whilst dressed. My brother and sister had walked off up the road – leaving me behind in the house – wearing the dress. Feeling left out I ran after them. Out the front door and down the street. I didn't go far. They were too far ahead and anyway, I felt a bit strange in the dress, I suppose I sort of knew by then I shouldn't be wearing it. Anyway, I turned and went home.

I had no key to the front door so I had to walk around the side of the house. My Dad had taken a day off work and was sawing wood by the shed. I ambled slowly through the side entrance and passed the garage.

He stopped sawing and looked up. There must have been several thoughts running through his head. *He's in a dress! He's been outside! What the Hell's he up to?* I walked forward. My Dad laid down his saw. I could almost make a dash for the back door... a hand grabbed me.

"Where have you been?"

"After Rob and Claire,"

"Up the road?"

"Yes."

At this point the finger wagging started. "Listen, you don't wear frocks, you're too old for playing those games, do you hear me?"

I nodded like an oil donkey.

"And you certainly don't go out of the house in a frock, understand?" This was said with real feeling and underlying menace.

I nodded again; I was already close to tears.

"If I catch you dressing in your sister's clothes again, I'll give you a good hiding. Is that clear?"

I started crying. Suddenly I was free. I rushed inside the house and stomped up to my room. I couldn't wait to take the dress off; I threw it on the floor. Stupid dress, stupid, stupid, stupid dress, I would never wear it again.

And I didn't. When I rummaged through the jumble sale bag the following day the dress was gone. My poor, little pink party dress. I never did find out what happened to it – the jumble sale was still some weeks away when the dress disappeared. No one said anything more about me 'dressing'. It was put down to childish games. Though, I've got a feeling that a neighbour up the road had seen me in the dress and when she came around to collect my brother for his piano lesson she mentioned it to my Mum.

"I saw your James in a dress the other day, Mrs Marchmont, I don't like to ... you know... pry.... but other people... along the street... people talk."

It's not entirely my sister's fault, though, for I must have had a feminine side to my nature before the dressing incident. The mid-wife was convinced I'd be a girl.

"In over thirty years experience I've never been wrong. It's a girl, Mrs. Marchmont."

She was wrong, partly at least. Nature or Nurture? It's impossible to say. Certainly, my mother was over-protective and had a deep maternal instinct for all three of us children. And I was the youngest and there had been an older baby girl who had died before my sister was born which possibly made my mother even more protective. My brother, Rob, who's a 'normal' heterosexual male, has told me that he has quite a feminine, caring side and girlfriends have commented on it. Still, the mid-wife believed I'd be a girl...

The family I was born into was fairly conventional. Thrifty, honest, hardworking. Mum worked as a dinner lady in a school kitchen and my Dad as a draughtsman. We didn't, as a family, have a lot of money. Dad drove old cars and patched them up and Mum would shop at the jumble sales she helped at. Both Mum and Dad cycled to work – Dad to save the car and Mum because she couldn't drive. The house we lived in was a three-bedroom semi with an extensive rear garden where my brother and I would play football or my sister would teach me to ride a bike. I shared a bedroom with my brother whilst my sister had the box room. Mum and Dad were in the main bedroom at the front of the house.

Dad loved his garden and at weekends we would tend to stay in, making our own enjoyment in the house – writing stories, playing with toy soldiers or making up fantasy games. I played a football game with a marble on the living room floor for years, using the pattern on the carpet as a pitch I would flick the marble with my fingers and use the chair legs as goal posts. My brother and I also made Airfix models and I fantasised about being a pilot in a bi-plane or a captain of a sea galleon in the days of Drake. I always loved fantasy games and daydreaming that I was somewhere or someone else, be it a wartime pilot, a footballer or captain of an old sea galleon. We had a swing down the bottom of the garden and sometimes I would swing on it wishing I could fly away. I never wanted to be me.

Saturday evenings were reserved for visits to my Grandma and Granddad. Every week Dad drove us over to their small council house in Mitcham. The three of us children would go and watch the old black and white television in the front room whilst the grown-ups talked. The room was crowded with old books and antiques and souvenirs from my Granddad's travels in the marines during the First World War. Sometimes, Granddad would tell us stories whilst we drank Nan's strong tea and tucked into her cakes.

As children we were very much at the centre of our parents' lives. On Sundays we would go swimming as a family and afterwards sit in the car drinking coffee from a flask. At other times we would go to London museums, but no matter where we went Mum would always cut sandwiches and at some point in the day we would find a bench or a grassy patch and have what was always a fairly elaborate lunch. Our holidays tended to be camping holidays in Britain.

My parents often told us tales over our evening meal or whilst on holiday or on day trips to London. My Dad had had a chequered employment career and would say,

“Never forget, whoever your employer is, you always work for yourself.”

But the biggest thing I learnt from my Dad was to have an utter indifference towards authority. He didn't much care for the capitalist system or the rat race and kept himself aloof from the materialistic society. My Dad and grand parents both had strong streaks of the loner in them. All three liked their own company – something, again, that I inherited.

Quite often on a Saturday, we, as a family would go shopping in Croydon. I can remember trawling around the market stalls on Surrey Street market with Mum and Dad whilst the radios that each stallholder seemed to have wedged against his produce, poured forth fuzzy, out of tune football commentaries.

“And over to Selhurst Park,” Crackle, crackle. “Where the Eagles are one down.” Crackle, crackle.

“How’s the Palace doing, mate?” a customer would ask.

“Losing again. Four for a pound, four for a pound.” The traders would call.

We did everything as a family as my parents preferred to keep themselves to themselves. Mum and Dad shared conventional views; men should be men, women should be attractive. The division of labour was very traditional and, despite my mother’s protestations about the amount of work she had to do, she felt women should be the main carers of children and do all the housework. Both of them lacked confidence, something that Claire, Rob and I inherited, though, ironically, I became the most confident member of the Marchment family and that was in no small measure due to my delving into the world of transvestitism with a recklessness and abandon that seemed to be at odds with my parents’ timidity, caution and working class conservatism.

At school I was painfully shy and sensitive. I was also slightly agoraphobic, dyslexic, as skinny as a rake and naïve and innocent to boot – in fact, I was the original ugly duckling – but in my case I grew up to be an ugly duck. My physical and social ineptness made me prone to bullying throughout my school days and that was just by the teachers!

The fact that I liked the softer, feminine side of life didn’t mean I didn’t fight for I had an awful temper when I was young and got into one or two playground scrapes. Nor did it mean I hated sport and rough and tumble games. No, in fact from an early age I loved football and really enjoyed a ‘bundle’ with my friends or a game of British Bulldogs when I graduated to Scouts. Even so, the girls’ world seemed softer and simpler and I looked in on it from across the Grand Canyon of the great sex divide, not with a longing to join the other side but with a curiosity. I was curious about the anoraks girls wore that seemed so shiny. Curious about the dolls they brought to school and the things they said. There was never any desire to be a girl, just a less than idle curiosity about what it must be like to be a member of the fairer sex.

Sometimes, when young, I would play fantasy games where I was ‘forced’ to wear girls’ clothes as a punishment for some misdemeanour or other – though I never actually wore them. In reality, I did get into trouble on more than one occasion at my primary and junior schools. I was turned over the Headmaster’s desk and soundly spanked for throwing stones at front doors, regularly given lines for talking in class or sent outside the room or down to the Head’s office for misbehaviour in the classroom. And once I received a painful smack on the back of my legs from my class teacher, Mrs Allen, after I had brought some alum crystals to school and told her I had found her in a jar! Despite this I enjoyed my childhood – children, growing up in the Seventies had far more freedom than children of today who have to cope with the spectre of paedophilia and massively increased road traffic. Even though my Mum was protective she thought nothing of letting me go out all day to play in the woods at the back of the house or to the park with my friends or, from

the age of eleven, go across to North London with some friends to watch Arsenal Football Club play from the vantage point of the North Bank terracing.

I had one or two brushes with femininity when I was young but I don't recall any major incidents during those early years after that pretty pink party dress went AWOL. However, I do recall that my rather agitated mother came into the bedroom I shared with my brother once at night-time and said,

"Who's hidden Claire's slip?"

No one owned up.

She went away but my sister's slip was still missing so, when she returned to the room, she pulled down my bedclothes to expose me wearing a silky white slip. I tried to laugh it off – with great difficulty.

I also remember feeling insanely jealous of a girl named Mandy when our class auditioned for the pantomime, *Sleeping Beauty*, for Mandy landed the lead role and on the day of the play she was led around the hall by two helpers - dressed in a glorious pink evening dress.

There were other clashes with femininity too – occasionally induced by my Mum. Like the time we were on a family holiday and I stepped in a puddle. When we returned to the car I was given a pair of white, girls' socks to wear because they were all my Mum had.

Then there was Annabel. Annabel was a shy, rather plain girl whose Mum happened to be friendly with mine. Every year, without fail, up to the age of eleven, I was invited to Annabel's birthday party. I was always the only boy who was invited and I was delivered to Mrs Predstone's door wearing a flowery shirt and unfashionable trousers and sent inside holding a wrapped present. Annabel's friends played girly games and I was treated as one of 'the gang'.

But the one incident that stands out in my memory occurred when I was ten or eleven years old. Dad had driven to Oxford to see our Aunt and Uncle. They had four children but only one, the youngest, Rachel, was living at home. It was a hot day and someone decided that it would make a pleasant change to spend it on the beach – which happened to be an area of sand on the banks of the Thames. Problem. We had not packed swimming costumes. Claire was easy to sort out; she just borrowed one of Rachel's. My brother and I were more problematic. Mum suggested we both wear one of Rachel's full frontal costumes. My brother was not amused. He moaned and said he wouldn't go. After a while a compromise was reached - Rob would wear a pair of Rachel's navy blue knickers. He danced off, happy to have achieved an amicable settlement. I was next in line. I edged into Rachel's bedroom. My Aunt stood with the top drawer of the chest of drawers open.

"What about James?" she asked my Mum.

"Oh, he'll wear one of Rachel's costumes; he's not such a fuss-pot as Rob."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes," my harassed mother said.

Aunt smiled as she handed me an old fashioned, deep red, ruched swimming costume.

I was too shy to speak. Dutifully, I went away and pulled it on, putting my clothes on over the top. We arrived at the beach area and gingerly I undressed. It was a warm day and Rob and Claire were soon in the river, splashing around with Rachel. I stood around, conscious or so it seemed, of many eyes upon me. However, looking back, I'm sure this must have been the first time I passed in public *en femme* for I was in my anti-barber stage at the time and my hair had begun to grow, added to which I was very skinny; ingredients which would have made me look girlish. I spent most of my time on the beach – close to my Mum. I felt awkward and self-conscious all day.

Yet, despite these incidents, I don't remember 'borrowing' my sister's clothes for a long while after 'that dress' – I really don't think I did it for a while but that's not to say I wasn't interested in dressing. I loved looking at skirts and boots and ballgowns, and, from an early age, had a sense of the enormous variety of different fashions women wore. I developed my own particular likes (femininity) and dislikes (frumpy, utilitarian clothes). Pictures of dresses in magazines and books or on television would attract my attention; I loved those nylon jackets with elasticised wristbands, which were so popular in the Seventies – also A line skirts and silky puff sleeve blouses. When I watched *Charlie's Angels* it was the clothes rather than Farrah Fawcett which fascinated me and, when I read Janet and John books, it was Janet in her full, white dress with whom I empathised, not John. I also liked looking at pictures of nineteenth century women with their huge bustles and I liked the pictures of Lulu advertising Freeman's catalogues. She was always attired in a tasteful dress. I would cut out the pictures and keep them in my drawer. I was an avid reader of James Bond and I would imagine myself as the secret agent... only James had to wear drag... as I read the books I would look at pictures of Lulu in her glorious dresses and imagine that was how poor old James was attired. And then there was Miss World – I've always liked Miss World. The eveningwear section was pure paradise for me. How I wished I could be a beauty queen in a lovely, floaty dress dabbing a finger to her eye as the crown is placed upon her head. Years later, when Miss World returned to our screens I would record it and then fast forward to the 'evening wear section' – bugger the bathing beauties!

As a teenager, one of my favourite TV programmes was a weekly game show called *Gambit*. The hostess, who I think was called Michelle, used to wear a glorious evening dress for each programme and, as she lifted the enlarged playing cards she would often be the victim of the compere's barbed wit. Such blatant sexism wouldn't be allowed now but through it I formed one of my earliest ambitions – to be a game show hostess.

That was at about the time I realised the truth. I was at secondary school by then and just starting to become aware of my sexuality. It wasn't long before I heard the word, though, in reality, I didn't know what it meant, even though I knew it applied to me. There was no doubt about it, for better or worse, I, James Marchmont was a transvestite.

CHAPTER THREE

It was their skirts that first caught my attention. Though they were uniform black cotton they came in all sorts of designs and styles - long, tight, knee length, ankle length,

pleated, plain. I was eleven years old and at a comprehensive school close to where I lived. The uniform was white shirts and black trousers for the boys and black skirts and white blouses for the girls – and blazers for everyone. In fact, the girls were not allowed to wear trousers which proved quite controversial. At one point our class debated the issue,

“Can’t we at least wear trousers in the winter, Miss?” one girl pleaded.

“If the girls are allowed to wear trousers in the winter can’t the boys wear skirts in the summer!” one wag interjected (not me!). Imagine having that debate now? Boy, how things have changed!

I loved the skirts, and I, for one, was delighted that the school rules banned girls from wearing trousers. I especially loved the way the skirts creased over pert bums that had begun to wobble into puberty – and how different all the skirts were.

My sister had a similar skirt to the most popular school uniform skirt – a plain, pencil skirt which was brown cotton. I saw her wearing it one day, traced it to her wardrobe, eased it off the hanger and slipped into it when no one was about. The skirt was too big on my bony frame so I took the loop for hanging it on a hanger and hooked it over the button – yes, it really was that big!

There was something else in my sister’s wardrobe that caught my attention. A powder yellow, seventies-style, puff sleeve blouse. I slipped that off the hanger too and tried it on. It felt so soft against my skin and I loved those puff sleeves. I used to wear it under my T-shirts and jumpers and take great delight in withdrawing the sleeves of the blouse from underneath my jumper as if some magician drawing silk scarves from a hat.

I got in to tights too, they felt a bit awkward and restrictive but I found a strange pleasure in wearing them – especially when accompanied by a pair of knickers. Although they irritated my skin I persisted with them and wore them under trousers, sometimes even when out with my friends – if ever I needed the loo it was always the cubicle.

By this time I was planning ‘dressing days’. I was still not familiar with what the word ‘transvestite’ actually meant and associated what I was doing with some kind of homosexuality which I found at odds with my sexual drives and my longing to have a girlfriend. For, from the age of eleven, there was always a girl at school I fancied although I was always too shy to act upon my lust.

Soon, though, the ‘dressing days’ became a regular part of my routine. These were days I would take off school claiming to be sick and then dress in my sister’s clothes. The ‘dressing days’ were planned weeks in advance. Before the event I would fantasise about what I would wear. Then, when the day came, I would pretend to be too ill to go to school. Usually, I would have prepared the ground beforehand by claiming to be ill the night before and retiring to bed early (not a great hardship for me as I’ve always liked my bed). The next day I would insist that I had a headache or stomach ache and act as if I was ill. Sometimes, Mum took a lot of persuading but she usually relented. One time, I nearly gave the game away by smiling broadly from my ‘sick bed’ when my Mum had said the magic words,

“All right, you can stay off school today, James.”

Once she had gone to work I was out of bed in a trice and into my sister's room. I would open her white wardrobe doors and look at the clothes on the hangers, pulling them out, smelling their strange, musty scent and finally trying them on. Unfortunately, my sister was something of a frump and she didn't have an extensive wardrobe and certainly few feminine garments. That meant I had to make do with the brown skirt and blouse – and a long frilly seventies style dress until, that is, I discovered a glorious pink evening dress hanging on her bedroom door, concealed by a quilted dressing gown.

I can never remember my sister wearing it and haven't got a clue where it came from, but as soon as I saw the skirts protruding from beneath the quilted dressing gown I knew I was onto something. I carefully slid the dress off the hanger and took it back to my room – laying it flat on the bed.

The dress was divine: a nylon affair with a tight bodice and a long flowing skirt that reached down to the ground. The sleeves were long and puffy and the whole dress enveloped my small frame leaving only my hands and head uncovered. The nylon felt fantastic against my skin, even though the silver braiding was woven onto the bodice made my skin itch and I could never do up the hooks on the tight, round collar; I simply adored that dress.

What I needed were some shoes. I knew my Mum had some evening shoes and so, although we were always given strict instructions not to go into our parents' bedroom, I went in. Worse still, I started rummaging in my mother's wardrobe and through her box of shoes. I found a silver pair of evening sandals – and, more to my taste, a pair of black, zip-up boots. Though too tight, I loved wearing them under my sister's dress. The evening dress and boots became my number one ensemble of choice on my dressing days.

Once, I was off school for two weeks with flu. It had been a particular cold winter and I really went down badly with the bug. I was bedridden the first week but during the second week I was well enough to get up. That meant wearing the dress and boots every day. After my mother had gone to work I would dress, and, as it was cold, zip my tracksuit top over the bodice - an odd combination if ever there was one! I would then go downstairs and watch TV, sitting, all cosy and snug in my glorious dress by the gas fire. I remember the Winter Olympics were on television so it must have been Innsbruck in 1976, which would have meant I was twelve years old. I loved just sitting there watching the TV, eating the plate of sandwiches and crisps that my Mum had left out for me and feeling as if I was in heaven. I didn't want go back to school but I had to. Back to the bullies and the noise and the shouting teachers – the only compensation was looking at the girls in their tight skirts.

Not that it was much compensation for from the very first day to the last I hated school. The first secondary school I went to was mixed but the second was an all boys affair so that ruled out looking at girls and what they wore. Most of the time at school I would daydream. In fact, I was so much in a world of my own I would leave the lesson not knowing if I had been in an English or Maths lesson - the teachers didn't seem to have much of a clue either.

That's how I spent my time - in a never-never land of day-dreams and fantasies. I used to do a paper-round and one time I was called into the back of the shop by the newsagent.

There had been complaints about papers being put through the wrong doors. I stood by the newsagent's desk as he went over the house numbers.

"And what happened to number 42's paper?" he asked.

I didn't have a clue. I used to love reading the papers though. I recall an article about a glamorous transsexual called Romy Haag (I think) – anyway, I remember her photo in the paper. As the newsagent went through the list of 'missing presumed lost' papers the kettle boiled.

"Shall I turn it off?" I asked.

"No, leave it. What happened to number 69?"

Little did I know that this was to be a familiar pattern throughout my working life: called into the bosses 'office' and told off for not paying attention.

"Shall I turn the kettle off?" I asked again as it started to boil. That was me, always with my mind on something else, never on the immediate issue.

"No, it'll flick off when it boils. What happened to number 84, son?"

A favourite fantasy of mine during my school days was about a girl I fancied called Melanie. Melanie was blonde and lively and sat next to me in English. I fancied her like crazy but she was way out of my league, though she thought I was cute. My fantasy? Well, Melanie would ask me if I wanted to go to a party one Saturday. I would of course say, "Yes, yes, yes..." Melanie would then ask me to come to her house during the afternoon. When I arrived there would be no one else in the house and Melanie would show me up to her bedroom. As I walked through the door I would then be set upon by a gaggle of girls who would strip me and tie me to the bed. Then they would dress me in Melanie's clothes, panties, tights, blouse, skirt – once I was subdued they would add make-up and do my hair. Result? I would go the party, only as a *girl*.

My 'dressing days' led me to discover a great British institution – the old black and white film. During the seventies and early eighties there was no such thing as daytime television and the schedules were filled with old 'B' movies. Sundays were the same. Soon, preparation for a 'dressing day' meant scanning the *Radio Times*, which my Mum bought religiously every Wednesday, and deciding what film appealed to me. The essential elements of a good thirties, forties or fifties film, to my young mind, were glorious gowns, attractive females and another element, for I soon discovered something that occasionally happened in old films that fascinated me, sometimes the temperamental leading ladies got their just desserts by being spanked by the wholesome heroes. The first film I ever saw with such a scene was a very old twenties or thirties film. The hero is sitting on the veranda talking to the heroine at a party. She is wearing a slinky, silvery evening dress; slowly he removes his gloves, tells her he will do something to her that her father should have done years ago, turns her over his knee and spanks her. I still don't know the name of the film. Later, I would write them down, *The Iron Maiden*; *Donavan's Reef*; *The Romantic Age*... I noticed that John Wayne cropped up in one or two films where females were spanked. Always the hunky, macho hero he would quite often drape his leading lady over his knee. Clearly, that was the way to win a woman's heart.

I started to develop an infatuation with all things Fifties, particularly the clothes and the films and this in turn led me to become an avid fan of Marilyn Monroe and Sophia Loren. Scenes would stay in mind: Monroe when she walks into the cloakroom in *How to Marry a Millionaire* in that glorious figure-hugging scarlet dress and Loren in that scrumptious gold dress when she played the housekeeper in *Houseboat*. She also had her butt slapped in that film. I went to the library and took out biographies of both. Loren and Monroe are still my favourite actresses.

One of the best films I ever saw for a New Look dress, however, was an obscure Fifties film called '*The Broken Horseshoe*'. The white floaty, New Look dress, worn by the leading lady, in one scene is simply divine.

Having dressed, I would sit downstairs in my pink gown, my legs crossed, my black booted foot kicking out nervously, absorbed by the screen, waiting and hoping that the heroine wore some gorgeous dress and that, ultimately, she was turned over her lover's knees and soundly spanked. Whether this was a psychological transference I don't know, for one thing is certain, if my Dad had ever caught me in a dress at that age I would have felt the warmth of his slipper on my backside.

Never-the-less, as I grew older my 'dressing days' became more adventurous. I would sort through the drawers beneath my mother's dressing table and discover.... slips and suspender belts and knickers and, open both doors of my Mum's large brown wardrobe where I discovered my Mum's lacy wedding-dress and a pink, silk bridesmaid's dress. Over the years I damaged them both. The lace on the wedding dress was very stiff and tore like paper. The straps on the bridesmaid's dress parted company with the bodice on the first wear. That meant urgent repair with a needle and cotton.

My Mum's wedding dress, when lifted with stacks of half-slips to give it, quite literally, a 'New Look' and finished off with her silver, high-heeled evening sandals, would eventually become my favourite outfit but for years it was my sister's pink, evening gown.

By this time I hadn't had a haircut for some time and had a wedge of blonde hair which earned me the nickname at school of 'Purdy', after Joanna Lumley in the New Avengers. It was a nickname I secretly liked.

Friday nights were Scout and Guide night for my brother and sister and that meant I had the upstairs of the house to myself – Mum and Dad being downstairs. I would go to bed early and then slip out along the landing in my pyjamas. I had a phrase for it,

"Out of the darkness and into the light,"

It didn't mean anything profound, just a way of saying I was moving from my dark bedroom into the lit hall.

I planned my raids into my sister's bedroom like a military operation, listening for every crack, every loose floorboard. Eventually, I'd reached the comparative safety of my sister's bedroom, where I would hole up for a while whilst listening for sounds downstairs, like 007 on a spying mission. For the funny thing was that from a young age I adored war and adventure books; I read all the James Bond novels and books by the greatest children's adventure writer of all time, Robert Louis Stevenson, as well as stories about Biggles and RAF Biggin Hill. True escape stories and tales of derring-do from the two world wars absolutely captivated me. *The Tunnel* and *The Wooden Horse* were for a long

time my favourite books. Every week I would invest in the Commando comic books along with the football magazines, *Shoot* and *Goal*. It was hardly the stuff of femininity but I worked the subterfuge of dressing into fantasy games. Often, when on a 'dressing mission', I would imagine I'd been sent on a special, highly secretive task, and part of the pleasure would be in pitting my wits against 'the enemy'. History is littered with tales of men escaping their captors by donning female garb: Bonnie Prince Charlie escaped the English dressed as a woman and there have been escapes from the Tower of London by men dressed in stays and skirts. Then there was the time I inadvertently read a Dorothy L. Sayers story at school: Lord Peter Whimsy discovers that the maid who stole a dowager's diamonds is in fact a man! Even one or two Allied POW's escaped from the clutches of the Nazi's in female disguise. I absolutely wallowed in such tales. For me they combined everything I could possibly wish for: adventure, danger, recklessness and, most of all, dressing. Even so, on the odd occasions when my Mum and Dad came upstairs to use the toilet and I was trapped in my sister's room, I would cower behind my sister's bedroom door, frightened and praying I wouldn't get caught. It was all a long way away from the hero (or should that be heroine?) of my imagination.

When the coast was clear, I would carefully unzip the pretty, pink nylon evening dress and remove it from the hanger, a difficult job as there were many items of clothing on the door and the dress was right at the back. Rolling it into a ball, I would make my way to my bedroom, where, in the dark, I would try on the dress and zip it up. Often, I would put my pyjama jacket on over the top and get back into bed.

Once I was nearly caught. Ironically, I'd gone for a change and it was the brown skirt I'd taken from my sister's wardrobe. I was back in my bedroom when my Mum came upstairs very quietly. My bedroom door edged open and, in a mad rush, I took the skirt off and threw it under the bed – all in the time it takes to open a door!

I was quivering like a jelly. My Mum came in and asked me what I was doing. I sat down on the bed, stark naked. I tried to explain that I thought Claire and Rob were back and that a noise had awoken me.

God knows if she believed it. I doubt it. Both my sister and Mum knew I wore their clothes even though, at the time I thought that my planned forages were foolproof and I could remember exactly where every item of clothing was kept. Of course, I couldn't and I know I put things back in the wrong place: even in the wrong room on occasions. Transvestitism is an illicit business that requires a degree of deception and cunning that would not be out of place in the SAS.

There were more obvious slip-ups. The time I had a day off school and dressed in my sister's evening dress, only for my Dad to return at lunchtime, with a work colleague. Fortunately, I was still upstairs and Dad didn't know I was off sick. I got undressed and back into bed, which is where Dad found me when he left after his lunch.

On another occasion, the rest of the family had gone out for the day. I said I didn't feel well and stayed at home to dress, again in the pink dress and boots.

My family returned sooner than I expected and my brother came running upstairs shouting my name! I grabbed my male attire from the bedroom and ran for the bathroom, locking myself in. Turning on the shower, I quickly dressed in my male clothes. I then

bundled all the female clothes up into towels and threw them into the top of the airing cupboard, put my head under the water and said I had just got up and had a shower. However, during the rest of the evening I had to relocate my sister's dress, my mother's boots, my mother's slippers, my sister's knickers all into the appropriate wardrobes and drawers - and with my sister, brother, father and mother in the house.

I graduated from my middle school to an all-boys' school that was marginally better despite the absence of girls. I became more confident and, as I was as skinny as a whippet, I joined the school cross-country team. I was a good runner because I was so thin but, like everything else in life, I failed to show a great deal of commitment to running and was half-hearted in my training and in competitions. Even so, I ran reasonably regularly until I was nineteen and, at one point, joined Croydon Harriers. Serious runners, it came to my attention, shaved their legs. Unfortunately, I didn't take up the opportunity, despite my growing despair at the length and thickness of my developing body hair.

I was still dressing and eventually, of course, I was bound to get caught - especially as I was increasingly reckless with my dressing escapades and would wear my sister's brown skirt under my trousers and, at opportune moments, remove my jeans to my ankles so I could feel the air circulating around my legs and the freedom that only a skirt gives.

It happened when I was about fourteen. I was sitting in the dining-room doing my homework, trousers to ankles, brown skirt so revealed. My Mum and sister were cooking Sunday dinner in the kitchen next door. (I told you I was reckless!) My sister walked into the dining room to collect some wine glasses. I jumped up, made a desperate bid for my trousers, made some feeble, feeble excuse that the skirt



I was wearing was in fact a T –shirt, pulled my trousers up and legged it.

My sister told my Mum but no one else. This time the skirt didn't go AWOL but I did notice a strange coincidence: every time I was off school, if my sister was around she'd wear that skirt to work. Selfish, I call it. One time when she was so attired we were having our evening meal in the kitchen when my Dad issued a brief tirade about 'gays' and said he wouldn't tolerate one in his house. My sister, who was sitting opposite me, squeezed my leg with her knees and said quietly,

"Nor anything else, James."

There were times she tried to talk to me about my dressing, bringing up odd subjects like the story of a man who came to London, couldn't find a job and so ended up dressing as a woman so he could work as a barmaid. I didn't like to listen. I was confused and embarrassed by other people knowing of my habit and couldn't talk about it.

On another occasion, I was in Marks and Spencer with my Mum and sister; it was the school holidays and we were shopping. My Mum had a basket and as we walked through the lingerie section my Mum stopped and turned to Claire,

"James likes women's clothes. What about us getting these for him?" she said.

She held up a pair of frilly women's knickers.

My sister laughed and said Mum should buy them for me. My Mum promptly placed them in the basket. Both my mother and sister were clearly enjoying the pantomime.

Not me though. I was fifteen, maybe sixteen, and I hated such ridicule, I stormed out of the store and walked home. It was the only time my mother ever made a direct comment on the 'dressing' to me.

For the truth was I still wasn't sure what the dressing meant. I remember one time going on a visit to the British Museum with my parents and seeing a display on the Chevalier De Eon Beaumont, the French spy in the court of Louis XIV who dressed as a woman and spied on Catherine the Great of Russia, pretending to be a courtier. I was fascinated and looked him up in encyclopaedias when I got home. This was long before I'd heard of the Beaumont Society – the transvestite support group that took its name from the honourable De Eon Beaumont. So there were other people who dressed, too, and some of them buried in the annals of history. I thought about boys at school. One always seemed to take the female part in school plays – perhaps he was a 'dresser'? Then, there was a conversation I overheard about one of the tough lads in the school called Neil: another lad said that he was around Neil's house when he had taken him to his sister's wardrobe and said,

"Look at these clothes. Aren't they great?"

Sometimes, I would test friends out to see if they dressed – whilst giving nothing away myself. No one confessed. I felt quite alone.

As time went on I became more adventurous and experimented with make-up, which left me with the awful prospect of how to remove nail varnish and mascara without the appropriate wipes and fluids. The latter was removed by soap and water, which didn't work, and the former was removed with a razor blade, which was crude and painstaking.