



Reluctant Press presents:

The Trans Interviews



E. B. Stevenson

A 'NEW WOMAN' E-BOOK

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“THE TRANS-INTERVIEWS”

by E.B. Stevenson

One

Things were rather quiet around the offices of the magazine I worked for in the summer of 2010. I had been with Magruder's, a socially conscious monthly magazine, since the summer of 2001. Unlike most magazines, which call New York home, this magazine was based in Toledo, Ohio. This is because the owner of the magazine, a billionaire philanthropist named Zachary Magruder, wanted to stay close to his home in Temperance, Michigan. I was forty-three years old, six feet, one inch tall, heavy-set with a crew cut, and a bachelor who moved around frequently in my previous career before

settling in Toledo. The editor I worked for was Melanie Davis, a young woman who had shoulder-length strawberry blonde hair and checking in at five-eleven. Since the spring of 2006, I have been working closely with a young photographer named Ian Ashford. He's a young man of twenty-four, five-ten, average build with shoulder-length, light brown hair. On the side, he played in a punk rock band; his group was a Sex Pistols tribute band. While I was living in a one-bedroom apartment near downtown Toledo, Ian was living with his girlfriend, Vicki Tomlinson, twenty-four, five-five with long black hair and a slender build, a writer for sister publication *The Romantic Bride*, and their eighteen-month-old daughter, Renée, in a small three-bedroom house in a middle-class part of town.

I had won several awards for my exposé of the radio broadcasting industry in the United States, which *Magruder's* published in the fall of 2009. I had worked in radio for sixteen years in the Midwest prior to joining the magazine's staff in New York; I moved with the magazine to Toledo the following year. Although my series of articles ruffled numerous feathers in my former profession, Zach and the editors stood by the story. I was researching another article, this one on emergency preparedness, with Ian at the office in downtown Toledo. Melanie had another idea.

I was sitting at my desk, wearing nothing but a camouflage T-shirt, a pair of tan slacks, and a pair of white sneakers, reviewing articles I was planning to cite for the emergency preparedness article. Ian was in a blue polo shirt, a pair of blue jeans and a pair of brown loafers. Ian and I were also listening to *The Talking Heads* on his laptop. I was in a gray polo shirt, a pair of slacks and a pair of athletic shoes, while Ian was in a blue T-shirt, a pair of blue jeans and a pair of

brown loafers. It was ten o'clock in the morning on June 28 when the phone in my cubicle rang. "Hello?" I answered.

"Would you and Ian like to come into my office?" Melanie asked.

"I'll be right there," I replied.

"Melanie?" Ian asked me.

"She wants to see us," I replied before I got up off my chair, and briskly walked to her office. Ian followed close behind. Melanie was in a mauve pantsuit that day.

"Bill, Ian, put the emergency preparedness article on hold for a while. I have another assignment for you," Melanie informed us as soon as I shut the door to her office behind me.

"What is it?" Ian asked her.

"It is one of the most groundbreaking assignments you will be going on. I have also assigned four other writers and their photographers on this one," she replied.

"We're not exactly Woodward and Bernstein, but we'll be more than happy to accept this assignment," I added.

"This is actually a series of articles we're planning for our October issue. This is Mr. Magruder's idea. The reason he came up with this idea is that his second son, Keith, is in the process of becoming a woman named Kara. She's a photographer for our sister publication, *The Romantic Bride*. We're sending five reporters and their photographers to profile ten transsexual women who are successful in their chosen fields. Two of our teams are going to Europe, one to Asia and one to Aus-

tralia and Brazil. You'll be staying in the United States for this one. For part one of the assignment, I'm sending you to St. Louis to interview Stephanie Thomas, one of the top bridal consultants in the country. After you're finished there, part two of your assignment will take you to Los Angeles, where you'll interview Dr. Erica Bentley, a psychologist who's one of the top specialists in the area of gender identity. I already have made your train reservations to St. Louis. You leave tomorrow morning; you'll have a four-hour layover in Chicago en route," she explained.

Melanie handed us the information packets on Mrs. Thomas and Dr. Bentley. When we got back to my cubicle, I was looking over the packet on Stephanie Thomas while Ian was checking his camera.

"They are very interesting ladies. Could we discuss this over a hot dog?" Ian asked me.

"Sure thing, Ian," I replied.

Around noon, Ian and I took a walk over to Tony Packo's. I ordered four hot dogs with just mustard, while Ian had his usual foot long hot dog, packed with chili and onions. We sat down at a table, where we discussed our assignment.

"As I recall, Mrs. Thomas has dealt with us before. Her bridal shop is one of the advertisers in *The Romantic Bride*," Ian told me.

"Who does the photography for the bridal magazine ads?" I asked him.

"Her brother-in-law, Paul Thomas; he's not only one of the top fashion photographers in the Midwest, but fancies himself quite the ladies' man. I did my internship with him in St. Louis."

“When I was working in radio, I had the privilege of interviewing her husband, E.S. Thomas. It was in 1996, when his third novel came out.”

“I saw the pictures of their wedding in *The Romantic Bride*. My girlfriend wrote the article.”

When he finished that sentence, Ian’s cell phone rang. While he was talking on his cell phone, I started in on my second hot dog. When he got off the phone, I asked him: “Who was it?”

“It’s Vicki. She asked if you could come over for dinner tonight, and I thought it was okay,” he replied.

“I’m especially looking forward to Renée climbing on my lap,” I added.

It was around seven o’clock that I arrived at Ian’s residence via taxicab. My car, a 2002 Ford Police Interceptor I bought at a police auction in Fort Wayne, was in the shop for routine maintenance. Vicki opened the door. She was in a pair of faded blue jeans, a red T-shirt and a pair of sandals. “Glad you could make it, Bill,” she said as I walked in the door.

“Thank you, Vicki,” I added.

“I hear your boss has the two of you on a groundbreaking assignment. This is going to be very interesting when it comes out in print,” she said as I was sitting down in one of their twin recliners.

Ian walked into the living room as soon as I sat down. “I had the hardest time putting that kid to sleep,” he said as if exhausted.

“Did Renée have trouble falling asleep again?” I asked him.

“She got scared stiff when she heard a popping sound an hour ago. Vicki walked out in our back yard,

and discovered a car had backfired before breaking down on the next street. I had to calm her down; she finally fell asleep a minute ago," he replied.

Vicki and Ian had prepared barbecued chicken, corn on the cob and garden salad for dinner. "Ian tells me you're going to interview two very successful transsexual women," Vicki said to me.

"That's true. Melanie has taken us off the emergency preparedness article for now. Mr. Magruder wants us to profile ten successful transsexual women; Melanie is sending five writers and photographers to different parts of the world. We drew the domestic assignment," I added.

"I wrote the story on the wedding of Stephanie and E.S. Thomas for *The Romantic Bride*. She's quite an interesting person," Vicki told me.

"We've been looking over the information packets on our subjects all day. We're not only going to interview Mrs. Thomas, but also Dr. Erica Bentley, who is one of the leading psychologists who specializes in gender identity disorders," Ian added.

After dinner, a courier had arrived with our train tickets. I signed for them. "Who was it?" Vicki asked.

"A courier came by to deliver our train tickets. We leave tomorrow morning; we need to be at the station at six o'clock," I replied.

After I left their house around nine o'clock, I went back to my apartment to pack my suitcase for a two-week trip. I even made sure I packed my laptop computer. Before I went to sleep, I put a red golf shirt, a pair of khaki slacks and a clean pair of socks on the chair. While I was away, I decided to let my cousin Caroline and her friend, Emily, use my apartment

while they were in Toledo for their internships. Caroline was interning at The Romantic Bride, while Emily was interning at Magruder's. The magazine only paid for the final three weeks of their internship. I was asked to provide them my apartment while I was on assignment.

It was five-thirty in the morning that Vicki and Ian arrived at my apartment building. They were driving a 2000 Cadillac Seville. Caroline and Emily were in the back seat. I gave the ladies the keys to my apartment; they carried their bags into the lobby, taking the elevator to my eighth floor apartment. I put my bags in the trunk. "Good morning, Bill," Ian said just before he yawned.

"Good morning, Ian. I'm pumped for this assignment; how about you?" I asked.

"I'm so amped for this assignment," he replied.

"We had to get a sitter for Renée; it's hard to get someone to come over and keep an eye on the kid at five o'clock in the morning. My sister Vanessa volunteered to watch over her," Vicki added.

"Isn't she the sister who attends Notre Dame?" I asked her.

"No, she attends Bowling Green. It's my kid sister, Tanya, who's one of the Fighting Irish," Vicki corrected.

When we arrived at the railroad station at six o'clock, I immediately got out of the back seat, and walked toward the trunk. Vicki pushed the button on the driver's side door to open the trunk. She gave Ian a smooch before he stepped out of their car. As soon as he opened the door, I had already taken the luggage

out of the trunk. "Have a safe trip, honey," Vicki told him as he was stepping out of the car.

"We will, dear," he assured her.

It was just before seven o'clock that the train arrived in Toledo. Most of the passengers were none the worse for wear. During the layover in Chicago, Ian and I discussed the story further, and walked over to a restaurant near Union Station to have lunch. We were back in time to catch the connecting train to St. Louis, which left at quarter over two in the afternoon. We would arrive in St. Louis just after seven o'clock in the evening.

Two

When we arrived at the Gateway Transportation Center in downtown St. Louis, we hauled our luggage through the terminal, past lines of passengers preparing to board busses to different parts of the country. I suddenly spotted a young man in a chauffeur's uniform, holding a placard with our last names on it. "Are you Mr. Stevenson and Mr. Ashford?" he asked us.

"I'm Bill Stevenson, and this is the photographer, Ian Ashford," I replied.

"Mr. and Mrs. E.S. Thomas personally sent me to pick you up, and take you to your hotel. My name is Jay; Mrs. Thomas is looking forward to meeting you," he informed us.

"Riding in a limo; that sounds like fun," Ian added.

We were driven to a hotel in the Italian part of town known as The Hill. Ian and I were given adjacent rooms at the hotel when we checked in. A bit tired after the eleven-hour journey from Toledo, I decided to get

some sleep. Ian checked out his cameras in his hotel room before turning in for the night.

Our interview appointment with Stephanie wasn't until July 1 at one o'clock in the afternoon. That gave me the opportunity to catch up on reading the information packet provided by Dr. Erica Bentley. That morning, Jay drove us to pick up our rental cars. I wound up with a 2010 Chevrolet Camaro, while Ian was able to get a 2010 Honda Fit. Ian decided to make an advance to Stephanie's Brides and Belles. Taking one of his cameras, he left the hotel around ten o'clock; it only took him ten minutes to get to the establishment, located in St. Louis' Central West End.

He walked into the shop with his Minolta camera on a strap around his neck, and immediately began to study the surroundings. One of the consultants emerged from the back room, wearing a white blouse, pink skirt, white stockings and pink high heels. "May I help you?" she asked.

"I'm just browsing, thank you," he replied.

"Do I remember you from somewhere?" she then asked.

"I'm Ian Ashford. I interned with Paul a few years back," he replied.

"I remember you. You set up the lighting on one of the shoots. You may remember me, I'm Melissa Horton," she added.

"Your hair was a lot longer when I interned with Paul."

"I got a new style after Haleigh got married last year."

"Do you remember Vicki Tomlinson?"

“Yes, I remember her. She wrote the article on Stephanie’s wedding.”

“We’re living together in Toledo now. We have a four-month-old daughter named Renée. She still writes for *The Romantic Bride*.”

“I heard that you were assigned to take the photos for an article Magruder’s is doing on Stephanie. She picked the perfect time to take off. Haleigh, Stephanie’s assistant, has given you permission to take pictures in the shop.”

“Thank you for telling me, Melissa.”

While he was taking pictures of Stephanie’s bridal shop, Melissa asked him: “Whose idea was this?”

“This is entirely the idea of our magazine’s owner, Zachary Magruder. His daughter, Kara, is transitioning from man to woman,” Ian replied.

“Who’s doing the interview with Stephanie?”

“Bill Stevenson is doing the interview. He interviewed her husband when he was still in radio.”

“Eric has wondered what’s become of him. It was a shame when he was forced out due to his station being sold twelve years ago.”

After spending an hour and a half taking photos of Stephanie’s *Brides and Belles*, including one of Melissa helping a prospective bride with her fitting, Ian returned to his hotel room to look over the pictures he took. In the meantime, I was meeting with Paul Thomas, who was going over the details.

“Bill, Stephanie has asked that you conduct the interview in the living room. We have already told Ian that we want some pictures of her with her husband, and a few pictures of her working with a prospective

bride. She will expect both of you to be wearing a suit and tie for the interview. I'm sure you and Ian packed a suit or two for the interview," Paul explained.

"We've packed two suits for this assignment," I added.

"Stephanie will be looking her best for this interview. The interview is scheduled for one o'clock tomorrow afternoon. She is requesting that you be there ten minutes before the interview is to start; you are to wait in the living room. I've already gone over the questions with your editor; I'm sure you have a copy of the questions."

"I have a copy of the questions I'm going to ask her. That was included in the packet you sent the magazine."

"I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, Bill"

"Ian is looking forward to it as well."

"Ian Ashford is with you on this assignment?"

"You taught him well, Paul."

That evening, Ian and I were at an Italian restaurant, splitting a pizza and having linguine in meat sauce. "I'd take it Paul covered all the bases this afternoon," he said.

"He did. I take it you took some fantastic pictures at the bridal shop," I added.

"When we get back to the hotel, I'll have to get you to look at the pictures I took. I even got a few of one of her consultants fitting a prospective bride for her gown."

"Stephanie wants you to take a few pictures of her helping another prospective bride for her fitting."

“The picture she’s requested is to show our readers how good she’s become in her profession. I heard that when I talked to Paul this afternoon.”

“Is there anything that I forgot to read in our packets?”

“There’s just one other thing; I don’t know if you have this in your packet. Two other consultants, besides Stephanie, are also post-operative, male-to-female transsexuals. I talked to one of them, Melissa Horton, while I was at the shop. She had her sex-change operation in 2001. Patricia McGillicuddy is the other transsexual consultant; she had her sex-change operation last year. Haleigh Smith and Stephanie Kenton are the only genetic female consultants at the shop; Mrs. Kenton works part-time, while Mrs. Smith is Stephanie’s assistant.”

“Here’s something else I found. She’s six feet tall, checking in at 230 pounds and wearing a size 22W dress. She’s quite a stunner.”

After dinner, Ian and I returned to the hotel to finish our preparations for the next day’s interview. Around ten-thirty, I decided to turn in for the night. Ian continued to practice with his cameras until midnight, when he turned in. I must admit I had my fair share of nervous moments as the next day got closer.

Three

When I woke up at eight-thirty on the morning of July 1, I immediately called Room Service to order steak and scrambled eggs for myself, along with a large glass of orange juice. While I was waiting for my breakfast to be delivered, I got my navy blue pinstripe suit out of my suitcase. I chose a maroon tie to go with it,

along with a white button-down shirt and pair of my best brown shoes. I had a nice, leisurely breakfast before taking a shower. I had just finished putting my tie on when a knock came at the door around ten o'clock.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"It's Ian," he replied.

I opened the door, and let him in. He was in a black suit with a red tie. "You look really sharp today," he complimented.

"You look very dapper, yourself," I added.

"Since Mrs. Thomas wanted us to look our best, I thought I'd better do a Park Avenue on this one."

"That's exactly what I was thinking, Ian."

Ian and I walked next door to his room, where he had all of his camera equipment together. "What time do we have to be at the Thomas residence?" he asked me.

"We have to be there at twelve-thirty to set up. So, if we're to grab some lunch, we have to be on our way no later than eleven o'clock," Ian replied before I picked up his tripod, in a carrying case, and his lens bag.

After loading Ian's camera equipment into his rental car, we walked back up to get our laptop computers. We had to make sure the batteries were fully charged before we left. As the batteries on our laptops were fully charged, we departed the hotel around ten minutes of eleven. We decided to have lunch at a restaurant in Clayton that Stephanie and her husband frequents. Ian ordered baked cod with a side of rice and a garden salad, while I ordered a Caesar salad and a twelve-ounce steak with baked potato. While waiting

for our meal, Ian asked me: "Who discovered this restaurant?"

"This place was a favorite of E.S. Thomas long before he met Stephanie. In fact, I had dinner with him at this restaurant when I interviewed him fourteen years ago. She didn't set foot in this place for the first time until their third date," I replied.

"Vicki told me that this was the restaurant they took their parents to after they became engaged," Ian added.

It wasn't until noon that we finished our lunch, and headed for the street. I checked the parking meter before getting into the rental car, and discovered there was only a minute left. "We're getting out just in time; there's only one minute left on the meter," I informed him.

"A cop is two cars down from us, and just ticketed the Jaguar that's parked in front of that meter. One or two more minutes, and we would have been looking at a parking citation," Ian added.

I reached into my briefcase, which I had set in the back seat, and fished out the directions to the Thomas residence in the Central West End. It's in one of the more exclusive areas of that part of town. Ian pulled out into traffic on Forsyth Boulevard, and proceeded to the Thomas residence. On the way over, we had to deal with heavy traffic at Big Bend due to a fender-bender. Despite the accident, which involved two sport-utility vehicles, we pulled into the driveway of a large, two-story house at twenty minutes after noon. I helped Ian unload his camera equipment. Carrying Ian's tripod and my briefcase, both in one hand, I rang the doorbell. A blonde-haired woman in a white top, a pair

of blue jeans and a pair of white flats answered the door.

"Mr. Stevenson? Mr. Ashford?" she asked in a strong Russian accent.

"This is Ian Ashford; I'm Bill Stevenson," I replied.

"I'm Raisa Chekhova. Mrs. Thomas is expecting you," she replied.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Raisa," I added, before Ian asked her: "What part of the world do you come from?"

"I'm from Kaliningrad. My husband, Yuri Chekhov, is from St. Petersburg. We took over in January for their previous domestic workers, Mr. and Mrs. Ramirez, who left to open their own restaurant in Cleveland with their children," she replied.

"I hear that one of her brothers-in-law has connections in the local Russian community," I added.

"That's how Yuri and I came to work for Stephanie and Eric. We were referred to him by Eric's sister-in-law." Yuri then walked into the living room, wearing a Tampa Bay Lightning T-shirt, a pair of khaki slacks and a pair of tennis shoes. "I understand that Stephanie doesn't want us to start on mowing the back lawn for a while," he said to her.

"Yuri, she's going to be interviewed at one o'clock, so we shouldn't be starting on the back lawn until after they're done," she informed him.

Raisa then took his hand in hers, and they walked toward us. "Mr. Stevenson, Mr. Ashford, this is my husband, Yuri Chekhov," she informed us.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Yuri," I told him before I shook his hand.

“My pleasure,” Yuri said in a strong Russian accent before I shook his hand.

“How did you two meet?” Ian asked them.

“We met in Moscow. We were both gymnastics coaches at the time we met about ten years ago. She was coaching a group of girls between six and nine years old; I was coaching teenage boys. We soon fell in love; before I asked her to be my wife, I asked her where she wanted to live, and she told me: ‘America’. We married in Kaliningrad, got our visas at the American embassy in Moscow, and first came to New York, where we coached mainly the children of Russian immigrants. When our contracts weren’t renewed, we came to St. Louis. Mr. Thomas’ sister-in-law is Russian, so it was through her that we found our jobs,” Yuri replied.

Just as he finished his reply, Paul walked into the living room. “We’d better be getting into the kitchen; Stephanie wants it cleaned from top to bottom,” Raisa informed us.

“It was nice meeting you,” Yuri added.

Ian was setting up the lighting for the interview. “Mr. Stevenson, you’ll be sitting in Eric’s rocking chair. Stephanie will be sitting on the couch next to the end table; Raisa has made sure that bridal magazines will be on that table. You have your list of questions; Stephanie has a habit of being a bit long-winded at times,” Paul explained.

While I was getting my notebook out of my briefcase, Yuri came into the living room, and asked us what we’d like to drink. “I’ll have iced tea,” I replied.

“Orange spice, mint, Earl Grey or plain?” he then asked.

“Earl Grey,” I replied.

“I’ll have orange spice,” Ian added.

Raisa came back out with two pitchers of iced tea; a pitcher of Earl Grey for me, and a pitcher of orange spice for Ian. Yuri came out with three glasses. Raisa set Ian’s pitcher on the coffee table in front of the love seat he was sitting in; Yuri set two glasses on coasters on the table next to the couch before giving Ian the third glass to pour his tea into. When Raisa set the pitcher on the end table next to the couch, I moved the rocking chair closer to the end table, where I poured myself a glass of iced tea and one for Stephanie. Raisa and Yuri returned to the kitchen as Paul, Ian and I finished setting up for the interview.

At five minutes to one, Paul informed us: “I have to go upstairs to check on Stephanie. She insisted on looking her best for this interview. Eric is in his den, graduating compositions from the English class he’s teaching this summer. He’s been working on two novels as of late. He won’t join us until the latter part of the interview.”

I sat calmly for five minutes, rocking back and forth in the chair. Ian was continuing to practice focusing his lens before he sat down on the love seat. He noticed one picture on the end table to the left of the love seat; I didn’t notice that it was a picture of Stephanie and Eric from their wedding day. At the stroke of one o’clock, a tall, heavy-set woman with huge breasts, wide hips and shoulder-length light brown hair came down from upstairs. She was in a fuchsia skirt, matching jacket and a white blouse, with a pair of white stockings and a pair of fuchsia pumps. She also had a pearl necklace around her neck, a pair of diamond stud earrings, and a pearl bracelet around her right wrist. Her left wrist

had a woman's watch with a gold band on it. She looked a lot younger than her forty-four years would testify. The one feature that caught my eye was her engagement and wedding rings. "I've been expecting you, Mr. Stevenson," she said as she walked past the door to her husband's den.



I got up to shake her hand. "I've been looking forward to this, Mrs. Thomas," I said as I was shaking her hand lightly.

"Please call me Stephanie," she corrected.

"I'm sure you remember Ian Ashford; he interned with your brother-in-law," I added.

"It's nice to see you again, Stephanie. You haven't changed a bit," Ian complimented.

"Why thank you, Ian!" she said with a huge smile, before she asked me: "Won't you sit down?"

I sat down on the rocking chair, while Stephanie took her place at the edge of the couch. I gently took the list of questions out of my notebook, grabbed a pen out of the pocket of my shirt, and grabbed a digital voice recorder from my briefcase before I read the first question. "When did you first realize that you wanted to be in the bridal business?" I asked her.

Stephanie sighed for a moment, before answering: "I wanted to be in the bridal business long before I became a woman. When I was in elementary school, I read every bridal magazine I could get my hands on. You would think that would be an unusual activity for a ten-year-old boy. Stephanie Kenton, who started this shop, has been a very good friend of my mother's since they were little girls. I was so fascinated by wedding gowns and the other details involved with the bride's special day. Before I was thirteen years old, I modeled my mother's wedding gown, as well as my aunt's. I had a passing interest in wedding planning when I was working as an accountant for the family business. I wasn't interested in what my father or my brothers did; I wanted to be my own person."

The next question was: “When did you finally realize that you had to pursue your dream of being in the bridal business?”

“Even though I had been through two failed marriages in my former life as a man, I still showed an interest in helping brides plan for their special days. When I began my transition from man to woman, I studied to become a bridal consultant. While I was preparing for the exam, I had my name legally changed from Eric to Stephanie. I passed the exam on the first try; when I began living full-time as a woman in the spring of 1994, I asked my mother to look for a business opportunity that would be more feminine than the job I was in at the time. Stephanie Kenton was getting ready to retire, and was looking for a buyer for her bridal salon, Stephanie’s Brides and Belles. I had to sell the house in Chesterfield I shared with the second wife in my male life, and move into a much smaller condominium close to the shop. I left my job as an accountant for the family business, and bought the shop. When I took over the shop at the beginning of 1995, my dream had come true. I’ve been enjoying every minute of it.”

“I’d take it you found the bridal business more appropriate for you than working for a more man-type business.”

“Definitely; I mean, I felt that being an accountant for the family’s cabinet making business didn’t appeal to me. I was in that job when I began to live full-time as a woman. While my co-workers were supportive of my becoming Stephanie, I wanted to be in a more feminine occupation. For some of the men employed by the family business, my being a woman took some getting used to. I was looking to get out of the home furnishing business, and making the move into the bridal busi-

ness. When I took over the bridal salon, I was very happy to have two co-workers who were totally supportive of my transition to a woman. My assistant, Haleigh Jones Smith, who's a genetic female, is totally understanding of the needs of women like me. She built a reputation within the local transgender community even before I bought the salon."

"How has your being a transsexual influenced you as a bridal consultant?"

"It has influenced me considerably. I'm one of the few bridal consultants in the country who has been through life both as a man and as a woman. I have worked very hard to strengthen the relationship between the bridal industry and the transgender community here in St. Louis. It has influenced the decision I made in hiring Melissa Horton and Patti McGillicuddy as bridal consultants. They have also worked toward strengthening the relationship between the local transgender community and the bridal industry. We not only fit brides for their wedding gowns. We also fit high school girls for the prom and Homecoming, girls and women for their party dresses, evening and formal gowns, and we've also fitted numerous local female impersonators for their dresses and gowns for pageants and performances. When a transgender girl asks where she should get a gown or dress for any occasion, everyone in this town will tell them to go to Stephanie's Brides and Belles."

"Do you think transgender women are becoming more accepted in your industry?"

"We're getting there, slowly but surely. I own one of the few shops in the world that employ primarily transsexual women as consultants. When I took over the salon from Stephanie Kenton, I was the first trans-

sexual to work at the shop. When it became time to hire a third consultant after my sex-change operation, I noted that I was mainly looking for a newcomer to the business that Haleigh and I could develop into one of the top women in the bridal industry. We felt that Melissa had the smarts we felt it took to become successful in this business. The fact that she was a pre-op transsexual at the time we hired her was secondary to us. We had the same reasoning when we hired Patti just before I met my husband. In my business, I am more concerned with the ability of a consultant to do her job right than the birth sex of that particular consultant.”

“What advice would you give to bridal shop owners who are looking to reach out to the transgender community?”

“The advice I would give is that before your bridal shop starts serving the transgender community, make contacts in the community first. There are a lot of resources available on the Internet for bridal salons to become better acquainted with the local transgender community. If you feel it best serves your relationship between your salon and the transgender community, I would suggest hiring at least one transsexual bridal consultant, regardless of whether she’s transitioning or has completed her transition from man to woman.”

“Your brother-in-law does the photography for your bridal salon’s newspaper and magazine advertisements. Did you hire him before or after you bought the shop?”

“Stephanie Kenton hired Paul right out of college. He was looking for a big break as a photographer; he won numerous photography competitions while he was in college. She gave him that break; his career took off after that. When I bought the shop, Paul stayed

aboard. He still does our photography for the ads today, even though he has his own photography studio nearby."

"He introduced you to his brother's novels."

"In fact, I became a fan of E.S. Thomas' novels long before I met him. When I took over Stephanie's Brides and Belles in January 1995, Paul gave me a copy of his first novel. Every girl that starts at the shop gets a copy of an E.S. Thomas romance from Paul. Haleigh and I read them with interest. Every time he released a new novel, I'm among the first to get a copy. I got to know a man with an unparalleled sense of romantic adventure through those novels."

"How did you meet your husband?"

"Paul was able to secure invitations to a book signing for me and Haleigh in January 2002. He was releasing his latest novel. We went on a cool January night, and stood in line with several other women who were fans of his period-driven romance novels. When Haleigh and I got to the table where he was autographing his latest novel, we exchanged business cards. The next thing I knew, he asked me for a date."

"The fact you were born a boy didn't stop him from falling in love with you?"

"Nor did the fact that he was romantically frustrated keep me from falling in love with him. Before I met him, he had not been in a relationship for thirteen years. I had not been in a relationship with anyone since before my sex-change operation. He used writing as a way of expressing his romantic dreams. He let out his frustrations by writing about men who fell in love in the most difficult of circumstances. Before we both knew it, we had fallen in love. I told him about my sex

change; he was very understanding. As our relationship grew, I got to know a different E.S. Thomas; an E.S. Thomas who had always dreamed of meeting the woman of his dreams. I was very happy to make his dreams come true."

At that moment, her husband came into the room and sat down next to her. "How's the interview going, sweetheart?" he asked her.

"It's going quite well, honey," she replied before they shared a kiss.

"I'm now at the point where I'm about to ask you a few questions. You're a romance novelist, and your wife owns a bridal salon. Has that influenced your writing in recent years, especially now that you're married?" I asked him.

"Stephanie has been an enormous influence on my writing ever since we started dating eight years ago. She's been especially influential in my writing since we got married two years ago. In my first eight novels, the relationships established in the story lines never got to the point of marriage. I always ended it with either the couple becoming engaged or going their separate ways. After I met Stephanie, the end result of the relationships in the story lines had gotten to the point of getting married, even having children. My latest novel, which came out two months ago, has a transsexual woman as the female lead character. It's set in the early 1980s in New York. I'm working on another novel, which is due out around Christmas," he replied.

"The level of inspiration for writing his novels has heightened since we met. In a lot of the novels he wrote before we met, I had felt sorry for the protagonists who had to break up with the women they loved. Since we've been together, he seems more inspired to write

novels in which the protagonists have more success in their relationships. He hasn't had the habit of leaving his readers wondering what happened to the lovers in recent years, especially since we got married," she added.

"Do you find inspiration every time you visit your wife at the salon?" I then asked.

"Of course, I do. When I pop in during a fitting for a prospective bride, I often find the bride they're fitting for her gown an inspiration for a female character in a story I'm planning to work on. The same is true when I pop in during a fitting for a high school girl's prom or Homecoming," he replied.

"In one of the fittings he popped in on, Melissa and I were fitting one of her transsexual friends for her wedding gown. She became the inspiration for the female lead character in his latest novel," she added.

"I have just one more question for you, Mr. Thomas. Did you ever think, for one moment, that you would marry a transsexual before you met Stephanie?"

"I had kept my mind open to that possibility for many years before I met her. To me, the fact she was born a boy was secondary. The only thing that mattered to me was the woman she had become. When I asked her to become my girlfriend, she reminded me that there was something I should know before we committed to a steady relationship. That something was the fact that she had been through a sex change. I prepared myself for this possibility for years before we met," he replied.

"To this day, I'm very grateful that he understood the fact that I was born a boy, I had been through two divorces in my former male life, and that I had been

through a sex change. He was prepared for what I told him, and he was a gentleman about it. He saw past what I used to be, fell in love with and married the woman I had become," she added before sharing a kiss with her husband.

"I have to get back to work, darling. I'll see you later," he whispered before sharing another kiss with Stephanie and returning to his den.

"Are there any more questions?" she asked me.

"There is one more question. What are your future plans?" I asked her.

"We've been keeping it from everyone, but now is the time to tell you. My husband and I are planning to adopt a child. We hope to do so before the end of the year or early next year," she replied.

At that point, I had Ian take several more pictures of Stephanie at her home before Ian packed up his camera equipment, and I packed up my briefcase, and left for Stephanie's Brides and Belles. We followed Stephanie in her 2010 Lincoln MKZ to the shop, ten minutes from their house. Upon our arrival, we got our equipment out of the car, and walked to the front door of the shop, where Stephanie was waiting for us. "Shall we go in?" she asked us.

I held the door open for her as she walked in. Ian followed her, carrying his camera equipment. When I walked in, Stephanie asked Ian to set up his camera in the shop. I was then introduced to the girls in the shop.

"Bill Stevenson, I'd like to introduce my consultants. The one on the left in the white blouse and maroon skirt is Haleigh Jones; the one next to her, in the pink dress, is Melissa Horton," she said in an introductory manner.