

**JAW-DROPPER**

Jessica Cummings, 39, tells *Bella* about her unique relationship...

# We swapped sex... now we're swapping wedding rings!



Jessica aged 15



Mark as a child

**P**acking my shopping at the supermarket checkout, the cashier started talking to the customer at the next till.

'As I was telling him,' she said, nodding towards me. 'There are some great offers in-store today.'

My heart sank. 'Excuse me,' I said. 'But I'm not a "him". My name is Jessica.'

'I'm so sorry, Ma'am,' she replied, blushing.

This wasn't the first time a stranger had got my gender wrong.

It was February 2011 and I'd just started my hormone replacement therapy to become a woman.

Thirty seven years ago I was born a boy called Shawn but I'd always felt I was trapped in the wrong body.

As a child, I preferred playing with dolls to cars.

My mum and grandmother – who'd brought me up after my dad left – didn't mind but the bullies at school taunted me.

'You're not a girl,' they'd say, pushing me around.

But I felt I was and from the age of seven I'd dream about being a girl. I even chose a name – Jessica.

As I got older I started to put make-up on at home and wear

Mum's dresses when she was out. It was the only time I felt truly happy.

But when I was a teen, instead of following my heart, it was easier to conform to social norms.

So I threw myself into masculine activities such as football and dating girls, even though kissing them felt weird.

When I left school I got a place of my own in Florida, USA, before starting a job as a security guard.

Only in private did I let myself wear women's clothes.

I spent my 20s and 30s in utter confusion and I started suffering panic attacks.

Then, in 2008, I hit a low point. I was 34 and in such turmoil, I tried to kill myself. I took an overdose of tablets, washed down with alcohol.

But it didn't work. It made me violently sick, then I passed out.

The next morning I woke up feeling like a train wreck.

'What have I done?' I thought. I went to see my doctor who suggested I saw a therapist.

At my first meeting we talked about my symptoms and feelings.

'Have you heard about gender dysphoria?' she asked. 'It's a condition where a person feels there's a mismatch between their

biological sex and their gender identity. It sounds like your anxiety symptoms might be linked to that.'

She started a course of psychotherapy with me.

'You must be true to yourself,' she explained. 'Instead of acting in a way you *think* you should act.'

By now I was working as a service manager for fire alarm systems and started dropping subtle hints to my colleagues.

'We need to feed you up, you're too skinny!' my boss said one day.

'But then I wouldn't fit into my little black dress,' I laughed.

He laughed back, not knowing if I was serious.

Gradually, I began wearing make-up, I grew my hair and painted my nails.

Noticing the change in me, my managers called me into a meeting and I told them everything.

'We'll support you all we can,' my boss said.

I was so relieved.

In October 2010 I started hormone

replacement therapy and by January 2011, I was living as Jessica. I had long hair and dressed in women's clothes.

It took a while for the hormones to kick in but after six months I noticed a difference in my body.

My breasts filled out, my skin softened and I held on to fat more, which went to my bum and hips.

It was liberating and everyone at work was brilliant.

I only wish I could've said the same about my mum.

At first she seemed fine. But it soon became clear that she couldn't handle me being Jessica.

It really hurt and we had a huge

argument. We never spoke again. Fortunately, my grandmother was more understanding.

'I love you no matter what,' she told me.

The following year I got a job working in a bar. For the first time life was looking good – and it was about to get much better...

One evening in May, I spotted a cute guy who'd come in for a drink – he had a muscular frame, shaved head and lots of stubble.

I made eye contact as I pulled pints, and soon we were flirting. 'I'm Mark,' he smiled.

'Jessica,' I said.

Though this pub was popular with transgenders, I was sure Mark was biologically male. But I was wrong!

I transitioned in 2003,' he said. 'My name was Maritza but I had a hysterectomy

and double mastectomy years ago. I've been on hormone replacement therapy ever since.'

'You look incredible,' I told him. I was so attracted to him, and I was thrilled when he asked for my number at the end of the evening.

'I can't get you out of my mind,' he texted me the next day.

A week later we went out for a drink and then we met for dinner. He was 10 years older than me

and the perfect gent. I felt I could tell him anything.

'When I was little I used to colour in my nails with crayons to look like nail polish,' I said.

'Growing up was hard for me,' he confessed. 'I was ridiculed because I wanted to be a man.'

After our food, we went for a walk along the beach. Then, at sunset, Mark leant in to kiss me. It felt as if I was in a film.

The following weekend, we went clubbing, ending the night at his place. I knew this would be the night we'd take our relationship to the next level.

'I'm not sure how it's going to work,' Mark whispered as we started to undress.

'I still have a vagina,' he said. 'Well I still have my bits too,' I replied.

So we let nature take over. Making love to Mark was electrifying. It felt so right. From then on, we were



Mark has enjoyed body building for some years



Jessica with her mum in 1981

Showing off their love tattoos



inseparable and after just a month, I moved in with him.

To the outside world we were like any normal heterosexual couple.

Then, one evening two months later, Mark got hold of my hand.

'I love you Jessica and I can't imagine my life without you,' he said. 'What would you say if I asked you to marry me?'

'I'd love to!' I beamed.

'I'll get you a ring and do it properly,' he said. 'I promise.'

'Why don't we do something different?' I suggested.

So the following week, Mark had my name tattooed on his forearm and I had Mark's inked on my lower back. It was the perfect way to show our commitment.

I felt so happy, but there was one thing I still needed to do to feel complete – have surgery.

So in April 2013 I went under the knife to have my testicles removed. I was terrified but I knew the pain would be worth it,

and Mark was there when I came round from the general anaesthetic.

'Hello you,' he said when I woke, giving me a huge smile.

Thankfully, the operation was a success and after three weeks I was up and about again.

I'd kept my penis and I was still able to have sex with Mark, but we rarely did, preferring to cuddle and kiss instead.

Now that my transition was complete I could focus on our wedding, which we hope to have on Valentine's Day next year.

A few months ago, I started trying on dresses and found a strapless, floor-length gown. I looked like Cinderella!

It's taken 39 years to get to where I am today. Sometimes I get frustrated that I was born the wrong sex, but if things had been different I may never have met Mark – and that's unthinkable.

I love him to pieces and I can't wait to be his wife. ■