I want to tell you the story of a crossing from fifty-two-year-old man to fifty-five-year-old woman, Donald to Deirdre.

"A strange story," you say.

Yes, it's strange, statistically. All the instruments agree that what's usually called "transsexuality," permanently crossing the gender boundary, is rare. (The Latin in "transsexuality" makes it sound sexual, which is mistaken; or medical, which is misleading; or scientific, which is silly. I'll use plain English "crossing.") Only three in ten thousand want to cross the boundary of gender, a few of them in your own city neighborhood or small town. Gender crossing is no threat to male/female sex ratios or the role of women or the stability of the dollar. Most people are content with their birth gender.

But people do after all cross various boundaries. I've been a foreigner a little, in England and Holland and on shorter visits elsewhere. If you've been a foreigner you can understand somewhat, because gender crossing is a good deal like foreign travel. Most people would like to go to Venice on vacation. Most people, if they could magically do it, would like to try out the other gender for a day or a week or a month. The Venice visitors as a group can be thought of as all the "crossgendered," from stone butch dykes to postoperative male-to-female gender crossers, all the traversers, permanent or temporary,
somber or ironic. A few people go to Venice regularly, and you can think of them as the crossdressers among these, wearing the clothing of the opposite gender once in a while. But only a tiny fraction of the crossgendered are permanent gender crossers, wanting to become Venetians. Most people are content to stay mainly at home. A tiny minority are not. They want to cross and stay.

On a trip to New York to see a friend after my own crossing I stood in the hall of photographs at Ellis Island and wept at the courage. Crossing cultures from male to female is big; it highlights some of the differences between men and women, and some of the similarities too. That's interesting. My crossing was costly and opposed, which is too bad. But my crossing has been dull, easy, comfortable compared with Suyuan's or Giuseppi's outer migrations.

Or compared with some people's inner migrations. Some people cross this or that inner boundary so radically that it would look bizarre, a slippage in the normal order of the universe, Stephen King material, if it were not so common. The most radical one is the crossing from child to adult, a crossing similar to mine that we all experience. I once saw a spoof scientific paper titled "Short Stature Syndrome: A Nationwide Problem." The strange little people, whose thoughts and actions were so different from normal, requiring the compulsory intervention of psychiatrists, and lots more money for the National Institute of Mental Health, were...children.

The word "education" means just "leading out." People are always leading themselves out of one life and into another, such as out of childhood and into each new version of adulthood. Not everyone likes to keep doing it, but the women I most admire have. My mother educated herself to earning her income and writing poetry after my father died. My roomer for a year in Iowa educated herself as a hospital chaplain after a third of a century teaching elementary school. My sister got a second degree in psychology, my former wife made herself into a distinguished professor. May Sarton, so glad to become by forced crossing an American rather than a Belgian woman, an English rather than a French poet and novelist and memoirist, kept crossing, crossing and looked forward at age seventy to "what is ahead—to clear my desk, sow the annuals, plant perennials, get back to the novel...like a game of solitaire that is coming out."

It's strange to have been a man and now to be a woman. But it's no stranger perhaps than having once been a West African and now being an American, or once a priest and now a businessman. Free people keep deciding to make strange crossings, from storekeeper to
monk or from civilian to soldier or from man to woman. Crossing boundaries is a minority interest, but human.

My crossing—change, migration, growing up, self-discovery—took place from 1994 to 1997, beginning in my home in Iowa, then a year in Holland, then back in Iowa, with travels in between. As Donald and then as Deirdre I was and am a professor of economics and of history at the University of Iowa. From age eleven I had been a secret cross-dresser, a few times a week. Otherwise I was normal, just a guy. My wife had known about the crossdressing since the first year of our marriage, when we were twenty-two. No big deal, we decided. Lots of men have this or that sexual peculiarity. Relax, we said. By 1994, age fifty-two, I had been married those three decades, had two grown children, and thought I might crossdress a little more. Visit Venice more too.

I visited womanhood and stayed. It was not for the pleasures, though I discovered many I had not imagined, and many pains too. But calculating pleasures and pains was not the point. The point was who I am. Here the analogy with migration breaks down. One moves permanently from Sicily to New York because one imagines the streets of New York are paved with gold, or at least better paved than the streets at home, not mainly because back in Catania since age eleven one had dreamed of being an American. Migration can be modeled as a matter of cost and benefit, and it has been by economic historians. But I did not change gender because I liked colorful clothing (Donald did not) or womanly grace (Donald viewed it as sentimentality). The “decision” was not utilitarian. In our culture the rhetoric of the very word “decision” suggests cost and benefit. My gender crossing was motivated by identity, not by a balance sheet of utility.

Of course you can ask what psychological reasons explain my desire to cross and reply with, say, a version of Freud. Some researchers think there is a biological explanation for gender crossing, because parts of the brains of formerly male gender crossers in postmortems are notably female. But a demand for an answer to why carries with it in our medicalized culture an agenda of treatment. If a gender crosser is “just” a guy who gets pleasure from it, that’s one thing (laugh at him, jail him, murder him). If it’s brain chemistry, that’s another (commit him to a madhouse and try to “cure” him).

I say in response to your question Why? “Can’t I just be?” You, dear reader, are. No one gets indignant if you have no answer to why you are an optimist or why you like peach ice cream. These days most
people will grant you an exemption from the why question if you are gay: in 1960 they would not and were therefore eager to do things to you, many of them nasty. I want the courtesy and the safety of a why-less treatment extended to gender crossers. I want the medical models of gender crossing (and of twenty other things) to fall. That’s the politics. I am ashamed that from the 1960s to the 1990s, in the political movements for black civil rights, women’s liberation, gay rights, and opposition to the war in Vietnam, I had sound opinions but never really took a chance on them. Telling you my story is my last chance to be counted.

And incidentally, Why do you think you are the gender you were officially assigned to at birth? Prove it. How odd.

Ah. I think you need some treatment.

After a year of hesitation, and two years from well beginning, I found to my delight that I had crossed. Look by look, smile by smile, I was accepted. That doesn’t make me a 100 percent, essential woman—I’ll never have XX chromosomes, never have had the life of a girl and woman up to age fifty-two. But the world does not demand 100 percents and essences. thank God. An agnostic since adolescence, in my second year of crossing I came tentatively to religion and then could thank God in person, who made me inside in my comfort a woman.

I get weepy sometimes as I walk to the office, pick up my dry cleaning, shop at Prairie Lights bookstore, so pleased to Be. It’s like someone who thought herself more French than American and one day was able to be French; or someone who always hoped to be a professional athlete and finally became one; or someone who felt herself a businesswoman and at last was seen as one. My game of solitaire came out.

I apologize for romanticizing sometimes the goodness of women and criticizing sometimes the badness of men. It’s how I felt at the time. Forgive me, new to this place and starry-eyed. Perhaps my stories of Donald and then Dee and then Deirdre show enough bad women and good men to offset my romantic theories. In contrasting how men and women “are” I do not mean to recruit stereotypes or essentialisms that have been used to the disadvantage of other women. Women are not always more loving, or less interested in career. And certainly they are what in detail they “are” not on account of some eternal Platonic ideal or the imperatives of genetics. I am reporting how the difference in social practice seemed to me, admitting
always that the difference might be, as the professors say, “socially constructed.” Gender is not in every way “natural.” “Feminine” gestures, for example, are not God’s own creation. This of course I know. The social construction of gender is, after all, something a gender crosser comes to know with unusual vividness. She does it for a living.

I apologize, too, for any inaccuracies that remain despite my earnest attempts to get them out. I have tried to tell a true story. Yet none of the conversations and descriptions in the book are court transcripts. Each is something I believe I remember, ordered in the sequence I believe I remember, and intended to show how I heard and saw and thought at the time—my recollections, my ardent opinions, how I felt as I remember how I felt. I have been as careful as I can and have offered to show the manuscript to the main parties, some of whom could help.

The world does not tell stories. Men and women do, and I am merely a woman telling. It would be impossible to recount every single thing about your hour just passed, tiny things that illustrate character or position, much less to tell every single thing about three crowded years, or one side of a tangled life. Whether the result is God’s own truth I don’t know. Telling any story, from physics to fiction, is like placing stepping-stones through a garden, choosing what spots to miss in showing the path.

After the crossing I was eating lunch in Iowa City with a woman friend, another academic, and we spoke about how talk normalizes. She said, “This is the age of the candid memoir.” So it seems. It’s a good thing, we agreed, because talking to each other about who we are can make us mutually all human. Demonicizing Others is the first stop on the railway to the gas chambers. Nowadays there are many books about the crossgendered. Movies and television have stopped portraying them as dangerous lunatics in the mold of Anthony Perkins in Psycho. Since the 1960s, detested by those who value order above freedom, many kinds of people have spoken up: the raped women who kept their secrets, the unmarried mothers who kept theirs. In the 1950s a lot of people were keeping secrets, personal and state: the obedient wives, the hidden handicapped, the closeted homosexuals, the silenced socialists, the blacks under Jim Crow. After the liberation and the talk that followed they are no longer disgraceful Others or pathetic victims, or merely invisibles—“We don’t have any
homosexuals in Oklahoma"—but people whose stories are heard and talked about and might even be imagined as one's own. It's the difference between shame and life.

For this age of openness I praise the Lord, blessed be her holy name. I began to see that Christianity resembles the secular stoicism circa the 1930s in which I was raised, A. E. Housman to Hemingway, in that it promises no bed of roses. The world is mysterious from a human point of view, as both the stoic Housman and the Christian Gerard Manley Hopkins would say, and it contains bad news as well as good. I found Christianity in this way grown up, admitting sin. That is God's own truth.

And slowly as the story ended I began to hear the good news of forgiveness, the duty to offer it and the grace to receive.