

you have the base knowledge that something's not right. Eventually, it eats away at you like a cancer. But it's not eating away at your body, it's eating away at your soul."

The reverberation in her "Pop's" garage is squint-worthy. A lit Marlboro dangling from one corner of her mouth and mirror Raybans pushed back on the top of her head, Misty smiles through the windshield of her vintage Camero and gives it another rev.

"It's an original SS," she screams over the roar, rattling off a list of bits and pieces that apparently make it faster and louder. Under the white-striped ebony hood, the engine screams.

She jumps out to show off some of the original components underneath the hood, struggling with one hand to release the latch. The other hand rests idly at her side like an inflated surgical glove, swollen with a staph infection that won't seem to go away, despite the daily trips to Casper for antibiotics.

She slammed her hand under the hood of her truck last week. This is where Misty and Mark begin to diverge. Despite the long hair and frosty pink eye shadow, her hands still belong to Mark. Thick-knuckled with half moons of grease under the nails, these are hands used to doing dirty work.

This has always been her passion. She's a certified mechanic and, as Mark, had worked for years in the trade, even owning her own shop.

Now, as Misty, it's much harder to find work. People aren't exactly clamoring to hire a former man who now identifies as a female. The trouble is that though her gender's changed, her skills haven't.

Doors don't exactly open to a man wearing make up and pink shoelaces and introducing herself with a girl's name. Usually, the employer says that she doesn't fit their company image or says there are no openings. Sometimes she's just met with abject stares and smirks.

"It's funny people will hire ex-cons no problem," Misty says, flicking an ash on the ground after a deep inhale, "but forget about hiring a transgender."

Unfortunately for Misty, she falls into both categories. Worse, she bears the label of a registered sex offender given that she went to jail after a lusty night of heavy petting with a 14 year old — an encounter that landed her two years in prison and another year of probation. She's been out for less than 10 months.

Misty is stoic when it comes to defending that charge. She screwed up, plain and simple. The girl lied about her age, Misty says, and she didn't think to check her ID.

"That's completely on me and I've served my time."

Misty shrugs. "Shit happens."

"I may have a shitty reputation as a person," she says, squinting as she tightens a bolt, "but I'm a damned good mechanic."

Smart, too, she adds, not afraid to admit she has an IQ of 142. She loves working on cars and would prefer spending her days in a garage away from people. Cars make sense to her, people don't.

That includes herself.

All her life she felt that something wasn't quite right but it took her years to realize that it was her gender.

She'd always felt more comfortable as a female, beginning with her earliest memory of her sister and cousin dressing her up in their clothing, but how, as a boy, do you admit that out loud? Especially when it's clear your parents disapprove. Misty remembers being confused when her father beat the hell out of her after finding Mark wearing a dress, berating his sisters for trying to turn him into some kind of sissy.

Clothing plays a big part in Mark's gender identity, both as a haven and a form of torture. She prefers feminine clothing and always has. Misty's worst childhood memories revolve around holidays and being forced to wear suits and ties. She had no idea why it made her miserable.

Her confusion, too, was compounded as a teenager, when she went to see the doctor about a bladder infection, and according to Misty, found out she also had a uterus and was therefore considered intersex, the term for a person born with the sexual or reproductive anatomy of both a female and male. Oddly, intersex births are more common than one might think. According to the Intersex Society of North America, it occurs in nearly one in every 2,000 births.

The fact that she had a uterus didn't exactly make the situation any better.

"How do you approach a person with that statement," Misty laughs, bitterly. She didn't have anyone to talk to about this when she was younger, so she just tried to live with it and do her best to fit in.

"Trying to do anything outside of the social norm as a teenager is hard enough," she says. "It doesn't matter what it is. It's not met well."

This grin-and-bear-it strategy didn't work, however, and after two suicide attempts in her early twenties, she realized she only had one choice: Become a woman or die.

There's no way to explain how it feels to be born with the wrong body. You either get it or you don't. What Misty can tell you, however, is that the day she buried Mark and became Misty was the moment she realized what it felt like to breathe.

First the name change, then came breast implants, hormone replacement therapy, make up and female clothing.

It's hard to explain, Misty says, but when you start to transform physically, the mental follows. These thoughts and feelings have always been inside her but up until now she's worked hard to hide it. With every step toward transition, she feels a weight being lifted.

"It's kinda like being on deadline," Misty pauses. "Like there's so much stress and pressure trying to get the work done, but the second that you meet that deadline, you instantly feel a sense of relief."

There are a lot of people who don't get what it means to be transgender, she adds. People think it's some kind of fetish, guys who like to put on make up and dresses and pretend to be a girl.

For Misty, it means living in a body where she feels she finally belongs. It's real. The make up and clothing reinforce her sense of femininity. She's not doing this for attention.

Believe her. There's nothing fun about being stared at or having obscenities yelled at you or otherwise being treated like some kind of freak, especially here.

"Look around you," she shrugs. "Let's face it, Wyoming hasn't exactly evolved a lot. If you want to experience the old West, just go outside."

Regardless of geography, Misty chooses to live as a woman with the goal of saving enough money to have gender reassignment surgery, a procedure that involves turning her penis into a vagina. The hefty price tag — \$22,000 just for the surgery alone — keeps it a faraway dream, but she's determined to make it happen. She's met the criteria, talked to several doctors and has done the research. Now, it's just a matter of when.

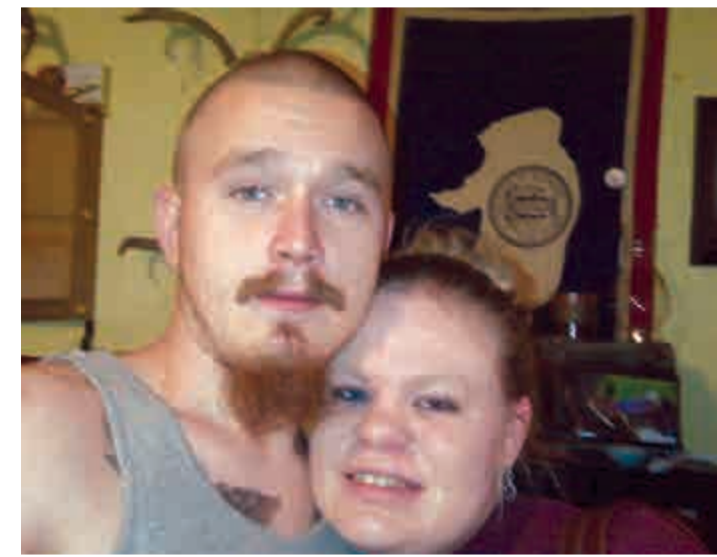
"I'm not going to cave," Misty says, slamming the hood as she reaches into her back pocket for another smoke. "It's not in my nature. I'd be more afraid of meeting my maker and telling him why I didn't have the courage to do what I needed to do."

There's an official process involved when it comes to switching genders. In order to officially become a woman, surgically speaking, Misty had to first prove she has lived in a female role for over a year and had to do so many months of hormone therapy replacement treatment. She also had to have a psychological evaluation that validated, that yes, she identified as a female.

That part, logistically speaking, was easy.

The harder part comes now as she leaves Mark's world behind

FROM MARK TO MISTY



Mark was once a roughneck with a bad attitude (above with friend), finding himself in constant trouble with authorities. Now, as Misty, she stays out of the bars and keeps a low profile, spending most of her time with fiance Maria (at left) as the couple makes a new life together in Douglas. Released from prison nearly year ago, it's a day-to-day process for the 29 year old.



This is a common refrain in Misty's life: people who have wronged her or dislike her leaving unseen emotional scars.

Nonetheless, Misty makes it clear that she doesn't put up with anyone's crap or abuse.

She tells a story about an elderly woman who lived in a trailer park near her years ago and how this woman would always complain about Misty's truck being too loud. So Misty checked the local noise ordinance and set her engine to two decibels below the max. When she worked on her truck, it sounded like a drag strip. The woman called the police who came out to test the decibel levels, which were always within the legal range. The woman finally sold her trailer and moved, Misty says, smiling.

The lesson is clear: hurt me, and I'll hurt you. Leave me alone, and I'll be cool to you.

She's still dealing with a lot of anger, Misty confesses. It's going to take some time.

Maria needs a cigarette.

"They're in my purse, babe," Misty says, twisting in her chair to grab a small glittery bag off the floor near Maria's feet.

The door shuts behind Maria and soon a cloud of smoke fills the

window behind Misty's head.

They are in her grandfather Gale Lane, or Pop's, kitchen, the one home where Misty's always been welcome. For the past decade, Pops has been slowly declining with Alzheimer's and at present has little recollection of his earlier life.

Pops and Bonnie, Mark's step-grandmother, have been the only people in her life who have half-way understood, or at least accepted Misty, no matter what. For that, she loves them deeply.

There's a lot of pain in Misty's past, starting with Mark's relationship with his dad, which deteriorated even more when he began dressing in his sister's clothes.

"Picture a six-foot something man's man," Misty describes her father. The fact that Misty mainly takes after her mother—who left the family when Mark was 9 — was another sore point for her father.

"Basically, my dad had a lot of reasons for beating the shit out of me." It was just the start of Mark's problems, which culminated in him getting into lots of trouble at school, and, finally, for reasons Misty refuses to disclose, eventually landed Mark in a juvenile facility at age 13.

After shuffling throughout several facilities throughout the state, he ended up in a group home in Douglas, which left some good memories. The woman who ran the place was kind, Misty says. Life there wasn't too bad.

Eventually, Mark graduated from high school, enrolled in college, then headed to the oil field. Misty got a commercial drivers' license and went to mechanic school.

The door opens and Maria is back. She wants to clear the air about Mark's violent past. Mark was dealing with a lot of anger because he couldn't be the person he needed to become, she insists.

Maria likens it to being in an abusive relationship. Her voice gets soft as she describes how that life becomes your reality and when you're stuck in the middle of it, you know that anything you do can never be right because you'll never be able to please that person. You become somebody you're not.

"That's how Misty felt," she says. "She couldn't find any glimmer of happiness in herself, so how on earth could she find happiness anywhere else?"

The waitress at the Village Inn does a double take when Misty, in a male voice, orders a double cheeseburger and a Coke with fries. Up until that point, Misty and Maria had been just two more attractive blonde women in a morning when she already seen plenty. Now, the waitress takes a closer look at the woman with the male voice.

Sometimes, Misty softens her voice to blend in, but only when she wants to.

A couple of middle-aged cowboys at a nearby table swivel in their seats to eyeball Misty with prolonged stares. Blondes always turn a few heads, but there's something about her face that doesn't quite fit. Much like a face can either look 20 or 50, gender too is revealed in the bones. The men smirk.

This is typical of the range of reactions Misty gets in public: stares, smirks, double takes, name calling, or, conversely, the conscious effort to pretend that she's not transgender.

The waitress immediately falls into the latter, overdoing the pronouns with too many self-conscious references to "ladies" and "girls," even joking with Maria about Misty's ability to eat like a man without putting on weight.

"She's a skinny bitch," Maria laughs, playfully slapping Misty.

"Right?" the waitress answers, joking at how just looking at Misty's lunch makes her fat.

Misty smiles indulgently before lifting her burger in both hands and taking a big bite. She can't control the way people react to her, nor does she care. She doesn't expect people to understand.

And though people in Wyoming are less open to diversity, they tend to be pretty laid back when it comes to minding their own business. And while in the urban circles of the hyper-politically correct, transgenders are fighting for pronoun equality — preferring to be referred to in the third-person as "them" and "they" in effort to embrace both sides of their sex — Misty isn't carrying any flags.

That said, she's less sympathetic to the name-calling and blatant attempts to pick a fight. She will — and has — fought back.

"I always tell them that I may look silly but they're going to look even sillier when they get their ass kicked by a tranny."

Misty, unlike Mark, stays out of the bars. That helps avoid fights, though not entirely.

Misty doesn't exactly mince words. Social skills in general can be a problem for her, she concedes. She blames her Asperger's Syndrome for being too blunt. She sees things as strictly black or white, very little gray; success or failure, nothing in-between.

Misty drops a pen on the table, then lifts it in the air. You either have the ability to pick up or not, she says.

Maria covers her face and shakes her head. "Trying means nothing?"

"Nope."

Maria gives up. Misty rubs her thumb over a clump of mascara that's fallen under Maria's left eye. She holds her chin and rubs gently.

"She's had to teach me to become a girl," Maria laughs. Misty spent a lot of time researching how to shop for a bra and put on eyeliner. Maria just throws on makeup randomly and doesn't even know

her bra size, let alone how to shop for one.

In many ways, Misty has forced Maria out of her comfort zone. Dating Misty means that Maria is technically gay, though she's always self-identified as bi-sexual.

Still, coming out as Misty's girlfriend has put a wedge between some of her friends and family, who, to Maria's chagrin, seem to see it as one more crazy stage.

Maria is uncomfortable with the idea that people don't take their relationship seriously.

What they do share in common, however, is the inability to accept a compliment. Maria is both smile uncomfortably. Maria asks when Misty's going to stop picking apart every compliment she gives her.

Misty says she'll stop when Maria stops. They laugh.

They've made a pact, but they're still struggling.

'I'm not going to cave ... It's not in my nature. I'd be more afraid of meeting my maker and telling him why I didn't have the courage to do what I needed to do.'

From the highway, Misty's 120-acre spread doesn't look like much. An 8' in-bed camper resting on bricks. A few outbuildings, including an aluminum Quonset for her two horses, Rebel, an ancient gelding with cancer in one eye, and a spastic miniature horse named Snickerdoodle. It's a ghost of what this ranch used to be in the early days when Pops ran dozens of horses.

Inside the camper, Misty can almost touch all four walls from one spot, and at night, the unrelenting wind whistles through the seams and rocks it like a cradle. A tiny fold-down bench and mini table serve as kitchen, office, living room and part-time closet to hold her gray hoodie and handful of shirts and jeans.

She has everything she needs. A small stove for cooking and a handful of electric lights, and, overhead, a sleeping nook that can comfortably hold one — maybe even Tough the dog, but definitely not Tough and Maria, who kicks the dog out on the nights she sleeps over, which isn't often because she refuses to step into the tiny two-foot-wide trailer bathroom, and instead will hold it until it's time to make the 10-mile trek to town.

Misty digs at a square of dirt beneath her thumbnail and shrugs. The bathroom works just fine for her, and, unless the septic tank has frozen up, it's not too bad.

Maria scrunches up her nose. Misty doesn't yet have to sit down on the seat, Maria reminds her, laughing.

"Plus, she can still squeeze her skinny ass in."

Misty points to the rickety wooden stairs leading up to the trailer that she purposely built for Maria, who isn't exactly what you might call an outdoorsy girl.

"She'd kill herself if it wasn't for those," Misty says. The pair laugh.

Right now money is tight, and Maria is working three jobs until Misty can find some work.

For now, the couple is taking it one day at a time. It's a temporary haven. It's a pause between her past life as Mark and her future as Misty as she continues her transition as a woman and celebrates a new life with Maria, who she hopes to marry this summer.

But first things first. Today, on this unseasonably warm early April morning, Misty's content to just let the first hit of tobacco fill her lungs and listen to the distant hum of tires marking the morning commute to Douglas as the pair squints into the first pink glimmer of the morning sun.

It's the dawning of a new day in Douglas and a new life for Mark.