

At 8 am on Thursday, 27 September, 1990, my lawyer telephoned to tell me that the European Court had made its decision. By ten votes to eight it had found against my right to change my birth certificate. By fourteen votes to four it had found against my right to marry.

"I'm so sorry," said Henri.

Numb with shock, I replaced the receiver. On the television the newscaster was just telling early-morning Britain the same news that I had just heard. To most viewers the decision was a matter of small interest, but for me and other transsexuals it was a shattering blow. Legally it left us at a dead end. There was no higher court or authority who could review the case. Any transsexual wishing to marry would find their case thrown out by the European Court and their lawyer referred to Cossey versus the United Kingdom.

What, I wondered, were the other implications of the ruling? Does it mean that I will not receive a pension until I am sixty-five—the retirement age for men—even though male-to-female transsexuals pay a female insurance stamp? Perhaps I should get myself arrested to see how the courts deal with my being sent to a penitentiary crammed with men detained at Her Majesty's pleasure.

Perhaps a change of government, or else the Europeanization of the UK, will bring this backward-looking country into line with its more progressive neighbours. I believe that one day governments all over the world will recognize the rights that transsexuals should possess in their new sex. And I shall not give up the struggle, however long it takes. However long.

— Caroline Cossey, *My Story*, Epilogue

## An Interview With Caroline Cossey

by Dallas Denny & Margaux Schaffer

Caroline Cossey, also known as "Tula," is an international model and celebrity who happens to be transsexual. You may have seen her in the September 1992 issue of *Playboy* magazine, or on *Entertainment Tonight*, or on *Donahue*, or on *The Joan Rivers Show*, or on the cover of a tabloid in the supermarket, or maybe briefly in the James Bond film, *For Your Eyes Only*. But chances are that you've seen her, whether you know it or not.

Caroline had no choice about her public status. She had worked undiscovered for six years as a showgirl and dancer before being brutally exposed by the British tabloid *News of the World*. The article turned her life into a circus. In response, she hastily wrote her first autobiography, a paperback called *Tula: I Am A Woman*.

Caroline has written a new book, a good seller. It's called *My Story*, and it tells of her painful childhood and her painful relationships with men. *My Story* also tells of Caroline's unsuccessful struggle with a government which offered her free reassignment surgery, but which has consistently denied personhood to her and thousands of other English transsexual men and women. It is this fight that makes Caroline significant for the gender community, for her battle is everyone's battle. She has vowed to make things better for everyone. And she is likely to, for she is in the public's eye, and so has an unmatched ability to reach the masses.

For someone who is basically an innocent, Caroline has certainly had her share of hard knocks and detractors. Because she makes her living with her beauty, she has been criticized by feminists, who accuse her (and all models) of perpetuating sexist and stereotyped notions of womanhood. Some of them seem to think it's somehow worse because Caroline was once a boy named Barry.

In September, 1991, Caroline was insulted by Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, who made a public statement denouncing (but not renouncing) the honorary citizenship his office had just given her. He claimed that he had had no knowledge that she was to be given the award, and made the statement that he did not think that anyone whose "main claim to fame was having had a sex change operation" deserved the honor.

Mayor Jackson was far out of line. Unlike Christine Jorgensen, Caroline was well-known and successful before the facts of her gender reassignment were made public— besides, she had made a point of informing his office of her transsexual status.

Caroline has dealt maturely and wisely with a burden that generally only those who do not pass well have to face— identity as a “known transsexual.” To show our support, we hosted a reception for her at Atlanta’s Petrus night club (the same place where she was given Mayor Jackson’s award) in September. We presented her with a nonrescindable award for service to the gender community and welcomed her to our advisory board.

We interviewed Caroline in October, 1991, in the lobby of the Wyndham Hotel in the fashionable Buckhead section of Atlanta. The first thing she told us was that the hotel had thrown away all of her messages and tried to charge her a hundred dollars for a bottle of vodka. “I called Petrus and had them send over some Stoli.”

**CQ:** Do you consider yourself a feminist? What would you define as a woman of the ‘90s?

**Tula:** A good strong woman who could stand up for her rights, but at the same time, I like women to be feminine, and I hate to feel that women must become so manly and aggressive that we lose the respect of a man. You feel vulnerable with a man. I mean, they’re stronger than women— although they’re not smarter, in most cases.

**CQ:** Some individuals in what we call the gender community might think you are a mannikin for the male sexist establishment. Would you comment on that?

**Tula:** I’ve been interviewed by a few feminists, and I always say, “Maybe you take for granted things I wasn’t able to— that I hadn’t been able to— that I wasn’t born with.” I was lucky enough to be given a chance to travel the world, to be paid good money for someone to take pictures of my body, which— I felt very insecure about going through gender reassignment. For someone to actually want to pay you money and take your picture, that’s the biggest ego boost that you can have. And we know what being transsexual is all about, so, you know, people, say, are you trying to prove your femininity by being a model? No, it’s a job, and it’s nice to have had a choice of what job.

**CQ:** Please explain for us the laws of Britain as they pertain to transsexual

people, and how these rulings came to be.

**Tula:** Well, we have no rights at all. In the last few years, we got our passports changed, and they actually have “Miss” on it, now. It used to be plain Caroline Cossey; now it’s Miss Caroline Cossey. Driver’s license is female. We pay a female insurance stamp and get a pension at age 65, the male age, as opposed to getting it at 60, as for females. You know, if we get in trouble with the law, we’re thrown in men’s prisons, which is appalling. We can’t marry— well, we could

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*I won't be silent. I won't be humble. I won't be grateful. I did not choose to be born the way I was, and I refuse to be punished for something over which I had no control. And so I have written this book not only for transsexuals but also for the many men and women who have no understanding of what it means to be trapped in the wrong gender, who have no idea of the persecution that transsexuals suffer. I hope that it will teach them to show a little compassion, tolerance and understanding. For, in the words of barrister David Pannick, "The way in which our society deals with minorities is a guide to our civilization." (My Story, page xiii)*

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marry a female legally, but we couldn’t consummate it, and can’t marry a man, although we can consummate it. We have no legal rights.

Mark Rees, a female-to-male transsexual, tried to change things and failed because he didn’t have a partner. I won before the Commission, but the British government appealed, and I lost. So after a long six year battle to get to the Commission, and getting so close with ten votes to six, and then losing on appeal with ten votes to eight, it was pretty close. That’s what kept me going. Next year, when we join Europe, I’m going to lobby the Home Office and put the idea of getting a pressure group in a couple of magazines. You know, a pressure group, as opposed to one individual taking a case to Strasbourg. It’s costly. It cost me twelve thousand pounds, which is about thirty thousand dollars.

**CQ:** You’ve spend a great deal of time and money on this.

**Tula:** Sure. It would have been great to have had an organization. We would have had a fund to do it. Having a pressure group is easier, as opposed to just one individual.

So that is the legal situation, which I think is quite pathetic, considering the state allows the operation to be done for free.

**CQ:** The same state that subsidizes the

surgery makes it impossible to live as a female.

**Tula:** There are actually four good hospitals. Charing Cross has a good gender clinic. You see the psychiatrist for a year— I think it’s two now— then you live and work as a woman, and then you get on a waiting list. Just at the moment there is a problem with the National Health Service. The waiting list is much longer than before for any operation— not just the transsexual surgery. They used to do 25 a year. Now because of the cuts, our National Health is up the creek.

I don’t know how many they’re doing. The fact is, though, that they actually do them on the state, and then we’re stuck in legal limbo.

**CQ:** Is the treatment on the National Health Plan as good as what you can get privately?

**Tula:** They’re the same surgery. I was working, and because I was on tour as a dancer, I didn’t go back to my psychiatrist regularly. Once I had got the money, which I got by working for three years, I went back to see the psychiatrist and said, “Look, if you don’t think this is okay, I’m going to go to Casablanca.” There you didn’t have to go through all the red tape. I saw him twice, and he gave me the letter of referral, and I didn’t have to wait for the two years.

Once you get to the surgeon, you then get to wait, which can be up to two years on a list. I had the money, so I had it done within a month of seeing him. So to answer your question, the same surgeon.

The surgery is very simple now. In my day it was a five-hour operation. Now it’s two hours. Mark would be able to help me with this. Mark is a female to male. Their surgery is not that wonderful. I don’t know how it is here.

**CQ:** How can the government justify making you legally a man, and yet give you medical treatment to make you physically a woman?

## Talking Transie With Tula

### Snatches of Post-Interview Conversation

#### On Family

**Dallas:** Your mother is marvelous, by the way.

**Tula:** She's a darling. She's very nervous on shows that have an audience, but she's done an awful lot of documentaries in England. She had quite a few letters from one organization, the Beaumont Society, which is transvestites. She was talking on different shows about being a mum, and the last thing you should ever do is, you know, kick them out. You've got to love and support your child and stand by them, whatever.

**Dallas:** I was telling her that I admired her the more, because I lost my parents when I told them. And yet they knew, because they caught me crossdressing when I was young.

**Tula:** And you've not spoken to them since?

**Dallas:** No. I told my mother about two years ago. Actually, she guessed. I told her I was coming to Atlanta to work with transsexual people. She asked me point-blank, and I told her. She said "I didn't have a little girl; I had a little boy." And then my sister called and said that my parents didn't want any contact. I wrote letters for a year and a half, and then I stopped because I knew it was painful for them to hear from me. So you're very lucky.

**Tula:** That's what I say on shows, that what has kept me more balanced than anything is the fact that I—I think it's bad having to fight society, let alone your own flesh and blood, your family, so— that's why I'm stronger about everything, because I don't care what Joe Blow is saying. I mean I do, but as long as my family and friends love and support me—

#### On "Outing"

**Margaux:** I've been in situations where I've have some friends, because they've known me before, feel inclined to tell people about me because they think they can get away with it. Everyone was called together by one of my clients and told what I was, and one day I was taken aside and told, "You know, you've really got to watch Bob." I said "What?" and she goes, "God, he's really spreading some shit about you. He said you used to be a man, and no way! He actually said that about you. Can you believe that?"

**Dallas:** I work a civil service job, being like a staff psychologist in a workshop for

adults with mental retardation. I've been there for nearly three years, ever since I went full time, and at any time it takes only one person, and suddenly the word is out. I've been just another woman for a year and a half, and it's wonderful, but I'm afraid that my AEGIS activities will cause me to be recognized. I don't want that to happen, but I'm prepared to deal with it if it does.

**Tula:** I've got nothing that I'm worried about. There's not one newspaper that can write anything about me that is going to bother me now. I just figure, if people don't like my gate, they don't have to swing on it. I get invites to premieres, parties. I know half the time I'm treated like a party piece, because they find me intriguing, but at least I'm not paranoid that Oh my God, they're going to find out.

#### On Unwanted Hair

**Margaux:** When I used to wait in the waiting room at the electrologist, I saw some women that looked more scary than me.

**Tula:** There was one woman that used to come into my room for room service and she had this beard, and I thought Luv, and I wanted to say something.

**Margaux:** Sounds like a hormone problem.

**Tula:** And we all have those.

#### On Growing Up Transsexual

**Margaux:** I feel it's better to be called transsexual than faggot, and that's what I used to have to go through when I was growing up.

**Tula:** Me too. Sissy. Mommie's boy. Faggot. Oh, God!

**Margaux:** They used to call me Michael/Michelle all the time.

**Tula:** I used to get beaten up, and now they're all coming on to me.

**Margaux:** I actually had a specific person who once beat me up try to pick me up not that long ago. It was real vindication. I thought, "I could really wreck this man's world by telling him who I used to be."

**Tula:** You could have gone home with him, and then afterwards, told him, "Oh, by the way..."

#### On Silicone

**Dallas:** We're very concerned about the injection of liquid silicone to shape body contours. Can we talk about that?

**Tula:** It freaks me out, the loose silicone injections. I'm doing two television shows tonight. I don't know how the conversation will go, but if they

can get onto— sometimes people say, what advice do you have for transsexuals, and I normally say, make sure you go to the right specialist, 'cause there's so many back street guys that are willing to cut it off, and then you're stuck with nothing that functions. So if I can cover that, I can bring in the silicone. I should say I keep meeting these people. It's bothering me, freaking me, 'cause they're having all this loose silicone injected in, which is very unsafe.

**Margaux:** That would be wonderful, because we recently had a conference here in Atlanta, and we were distributing our public service ad, the Dangerous Curves Ahead ad, and it met with a lot of dissent. A lot of people are making money from silicone. There's a lot of blood money attached to it, and we feel a lot of transsexual people are being victimized. Unfortunately, no one cares if a she-male dies of a globule of silicone in the lung.

**Tula:** Exactly. I think this thing they do with fat now is quite safe. They can take your fat out and inject small areas, but as far as having silicone, and the type of silicone that is used—

**Margaux:** Industrial grade silicone. Not medical grade. Industrial grade.

**Tula:** Appalling.

**Dallas:** A lot of people are looking for the quick-and-easy way.

**Margaux:** They want it yesterday.

**Dallas:** And it ends up costing them more just for the silicone than they would have spent at a plastic surgeon.

#### On Prostitution

**Tula:** And I get questions like, why do the majority of transsexuals turn to prostitution? That's been one that comes across an awful lot. I think it exists more in the countries where transsexuality is not as legitimate as it is here. That's why I like the idea of getting a fund together for the ones who are very desperate. And you can check them out and they should be able to have the surgery done, and the fund can pay for that.

There's so many of them in Singapore and Bangkok. Because surgery is so expensive, and the state doesn't do it, it's a quick way of making the money for it.

#### On Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson

**Tula:** Well, the next time I'm over, we're gonna have a little drag party, and I hope we'll have him an invite.

**Margaux:** I think when your club opens, we'll definitely need to.

**Dallas:** You can ask him to show up for the club's opening.

**Tula:** He can be there on the opening night, but he's gotta come in drag.

**Tula:** That's my argument. I mean, that's what is stuck in my blood. I mean, why help me? If this is a psychological condition only, why not say, "Go abroad, because we don't recognize you people here." Then I would accept it and say, "Well, I'll take my choice of giving up my citizenship and taking it up elsewhere in Europe, because all of Europe is much better." Italy changed eight years ago, and with the Pope and all, you would have thought it would have been one of the last countries to change. In Denmark, two men can marry. But not in England. It's crazy to have this double standard, where you can be helped medically, but not in any legal situation. My husband was allowed to walk away from the marriage, and me not have a penny of compensation because I didn't have the law on my side.

**CQ:** You've spent a lot of time in America lately. What is your appraisal of the legal situation here, as compared to England? And what of the other countries you've visited?

**Tula:** I've met a lot of transsexuals on my last two visits, because I've gone places like the Limelight, a club in New York, and they turn out to meet me. Generally, I write whoever writes to me, and I pick up the phone and what have you, but I've not been here for any length of time. I know that there are states here where things are bad, legally, but maybe it's been because no one has challenged the law.

**CQ:** In Italy, they have more rights?

**Tula:** In Italy, they have total rights as a female to marry, sue— what have you.

**CQ:** But then Belgium is a different matter, and Holland is a different matter. Have you found that there is a transsexual Mecca, where it seems to be easiest?

**Tula:** If you mean anyplace in the world, then I should imagine Denmark and San Francisco. They are liberated places.

**CQ:** Are there places that you think might be worse than England?

**Tula:** Someone who goes over to Turkey and India was telling me that they have what they call eunuchs. They literally tie the things up for a couple of days and then snip it off and then get married, and what have you.

**CQ:** They're like a third sex. They call them Hijras. You've been to the European Court of Human Rights and lost.

**Tula:** It was the Commission first. It's like a filter for the cases that go to the High Court of Human Rights. I won at the Commission. In England, if you have a grievance with the law, you have to exhaust all domestic remedies. So I was referred first to my local M.P. (*Member of Parliament— Ed.*), then to the registrar of births, deaths, and marriages, and then to the local court, but my case was rejected because of the situation not being accepted. I had to exhaust all that before I could take up with the High Court of Human Rights, which is the place that can change laws. So that's what I had to go through with.

So I went to the registrar of births, deaths, and marriages, and then to my local M.P., and then got to the Commission of Human Rights. Then, winning that, 10 votes to 6, the British government appealed. I won on the 9th of May, and I got married on the 21st of May. And then the appeal came. So then the ruling wasn't through, so we had to go to the High Court. And then because I lost, the marriage was annulled.

**CQ:** Do you plan to go back to court?

**Tula:** I couldn't appeal against the High Court. What I hope to do when we join Europe next year, is to push the home office into letting me slide through. But with a pressure group, we're going to have a go, and get a petition, and make as much noise as possible, and film documentaries. This is reinforcing. It's happening now. They're making a film about April Ashley, who is the one that screwed it up. Before April Ashley, all transsexuals had their birth certificates changed, and had full rights in their new gender. After April Ashley— the ruling was in 1960— it's all been changed. The criteria for determining sex in Britain is the genitalia, gonads, and chromosomes. Did I mention the book *Brain Sex*? Ten years of research has just come out to the effect that the brain is sexed within six weeks of the embryonic formation. That's the sort of thing I could have used in my case with the Commission. It would have helped. The judges that I lost with— there was a Canadian, an Irish, and two English, which was very unfair. Obviously, the ones that would have gone in my favor were the ones that were from a country that treated transsexuals fairly— I sat there flashing my eyelashes, at you know, the Italians and Portuguese. It was a heavy day. There were

like eighteen judges, and the court was full. Have you seen any footage? It was very impressive on film. It was a full courtroom, and they— what was so stupid, all these judges walked in. Half of them looked like they were in drag, anyway. There's me trying to get recognition— and there's them, in gowns, and everything, floating around.

**CQ:** When you visited Atlanta recently, you were given an honorary citizenship by the mayor's office. Mayor Maynard Jackson later made a statement saying that anyone whose primary claim to fame was having had a sex change operation didn't deserve the award. Do you have anything to say to Mayor Jackson?

**Tula:** That offended me terribly, because my claim to fame— I mean, I don't have any one claim to fame. I was a model before I was forced into the open, and I just dealt with it. I deal with rights and issues, and that's all I've been dealing with since I was exposed. How would he say what he did without obviously looking into my situation? I was very offended and hurt by that.

But I did phone the office and ask them if they wanted me to send the award back, and they said no, and so it's on my bedroom wall. I've been here now for three days, and I was hoping he would phone me and ask me for tea and apologize, but he hasn't.

**CQ:** We'll be sure he gets a copy of the magazine this interview is in.

When you were on the Joan Rivers Show, you mentioned that you were considering moving to the U.S. Do you still think that might come about?

**Tula:** Yes. I'm coming over in the spring, and I've been spending a lot more time here. I'm rounding up my affairs financially. I'm going to open up a club here in Atlanta.

**CQ:** How much contact have you had with the American gender community?

**Tula:** Well, you're the closest I've had with any of them. I mean, in New York, I had quite a few turn up say hello. In Australia a magazine wrote, and the ones in Britain, Germans. But nothing in America. But yours is the classiest magazine I've ever seen on the subject. So I just felt that I wanted to take part in it, and that your hopes of getting it all international will be great.

*Since the interview, Caroline has moved to Atlanta and become involved with the American transgender community—and a British "Pressure Group" has been formed.— Ed. ♀♂*