



BARRY COSSEY, 1971



TULA, 1982

THE LATE BARRY COSSEY

● I told the psychiatrist I didn't feel 100 per cent. a woman and that I thought only an operation could solve my problems. He explained that surgery could not make me truly a woman, that I could never make a legal marriage, my birth certificate as a male could not be altered. "I do realise that," I said, "but I think it will make me 99 per cent. a woman - and I'd be very happy with that." ●

Thus Barry Cossey rationalised his decision to have his male body made over in a spectacular sex-change operation. Elizabeth Jane Howard talks overleaf to the woman he then became - and asks just how much that is female actually resides in that new persona, the top model Tula

had arranged to meet Tula for lunch at a smart West End restaurant. I was delayed, but I managed to arrive first. I had been told that Tula's appearance caused heads to turn wherever she went, and people like that usually make some sort of entrance.

I had not been very impressed with the glamour and beauty shots in her book*, and was half expecting exhibitionist behaviour associated with the lower echelons of show business. I was also grappling with the problem of trying to imagine what it must feel like to want so much to change one's sex that one could endure the frustration, the loneliness, the deceits, the humiliations, and last, but not least, the hideous pain that I had just read about in her book. But every now and then, one has to admit defeat: I couldn't imagine it.

Like many small girls, I had briefly wanted to be a boy, but this was largely because I wanted to join my brother at his school, rather than be separated from him. Since then, like nearly everyone, I have never wanted to change my sexual lot. Failure of the imagination makes most of us either full of censure or irritable: the book was full of how good-looking everybody thought Tula was; perhaps the whole business was simply narcissism carried to a bizarre extreme.

Quite suddenly, she had arrived - had slipped into the restaurant and occurred at my table; had greeted me, sat down and accepted a Campari-soda.



Barry Cossey (front) with parents and sister Pam: his new life was still undreamt of



If the double-take of passers-by is a measure of female success, Tula's transformation is strikingly complete

The pictures of her had given no warning at all of her live appearance. She had the fresh, simple, radiant look of the young well-heeled girl - good at tennis and swimming and riding; able to dance all night and arrive at breakfast looking as though she had had nine hours sleep - a kind of contemporary Betjeman girl, but with the mysterious added ingredient of beauty. She was perfectly groomed - to be expected with a successful model:

heavy, long bronze hair, a light tan, eyebrows in artfully natural disarray, an unobtrusive minimum of make-up. She wore a thin white cotton top with short, split sleeves, small diamond studs in her ears and a diamond heart slung on a white gold chain round her neck. She looked more like an American model than an English one - Margaux Hemingway came to mind.

The menu arrived: she admired it politely, but she did not eat very much at lunch time, she said. We settled for melon and a seafood salad: no wine. Perrier water? That would do fine. Having read that she'd had an operation on her throat to remove her Adam's

apple, I had wondered what her voice would be like. It was low and faintly husky, with traces of East Anglia in the background.

Did she have to be careful about what she ate because of modelling, I asked? Well, she ate mostly in the evenings: "At the moment, I'm worried that I may have an ulcer." She clutched her midriff: "You know: pains here." She was going to a doctor next day.

Her manner was gentle, almost confiding, but every time the marvellous grey eyes met mine, I felt she was a touch wary. It was being harassed by journalists, and the publication of the story of her sex change in spite of her refusing to tell them anything, that led her to doing her book - a kind of final coming-out, as it were. After it, nobody could accuse her of conning them, although she has never felt that she was doing that; she has always felt that she *was* a woman who most unfortunately happened to be born a boy. Anybody who had frequently been treated as an alien or a freak would incline to wariness, I thought: most of them would probably resort to bitterness, resentment and some spiteful urges to get their own back somehow. Tula seemed quite without any of that, and even the wariness dissolved when we talked about her family.

Her father is a coachbuilder for

a bus company in Norwich and she was brought up in a small village. She has a brother and sister, and a mother to whom she is devoted. I said how remarkable her parents seemed to be in their imaginative love and support. "We've always had a lot of love for one another. It was my fault when I was 17 and kept away from them. I thought they wouldn't understand. You know: I was just - young." A good many people's parents *wouldn't* have understood, I suggested. The idea seemed to surprise her.

During lunch, she told me that she expected to go on modelling for another two years (she is now 27) and that then she wanted to start a little business: a beauty salon, perhaps, or a boutique selling good clothes - mostly Italian - for tall women (she is 6ft.); or she might start a model agency. She shares a flat with her sister who is also a model, but on the whole they lead separate lives - different friends and all that.

What did she like doing when she wasn't working? Well, she used to like discos, clubs, all that - but now she preferred a quiet candlelit dinner in some restaurant (her eyes lit up with touching enthusiasm at the very idea), or she potted about the flat - played music. What kind?