

CROSSING SEXUAL BORDERS

An Interview With
Three Male Transsexuals

By Tommi Avicolti

A male transsexual is a person who believes himself to be a woman and wishes to undergo a sex change operation in order to become that sex. Transsexualism differs from transvestism in that one essential fact --transsexuals want to be biological women; transvestites merely dress as women (or in women's clothes) and may for periods of time live as women. The transvestite is more turned on by the idea of donning women's clothes and acting as a woman for a period of time (which may be as short as a night.)

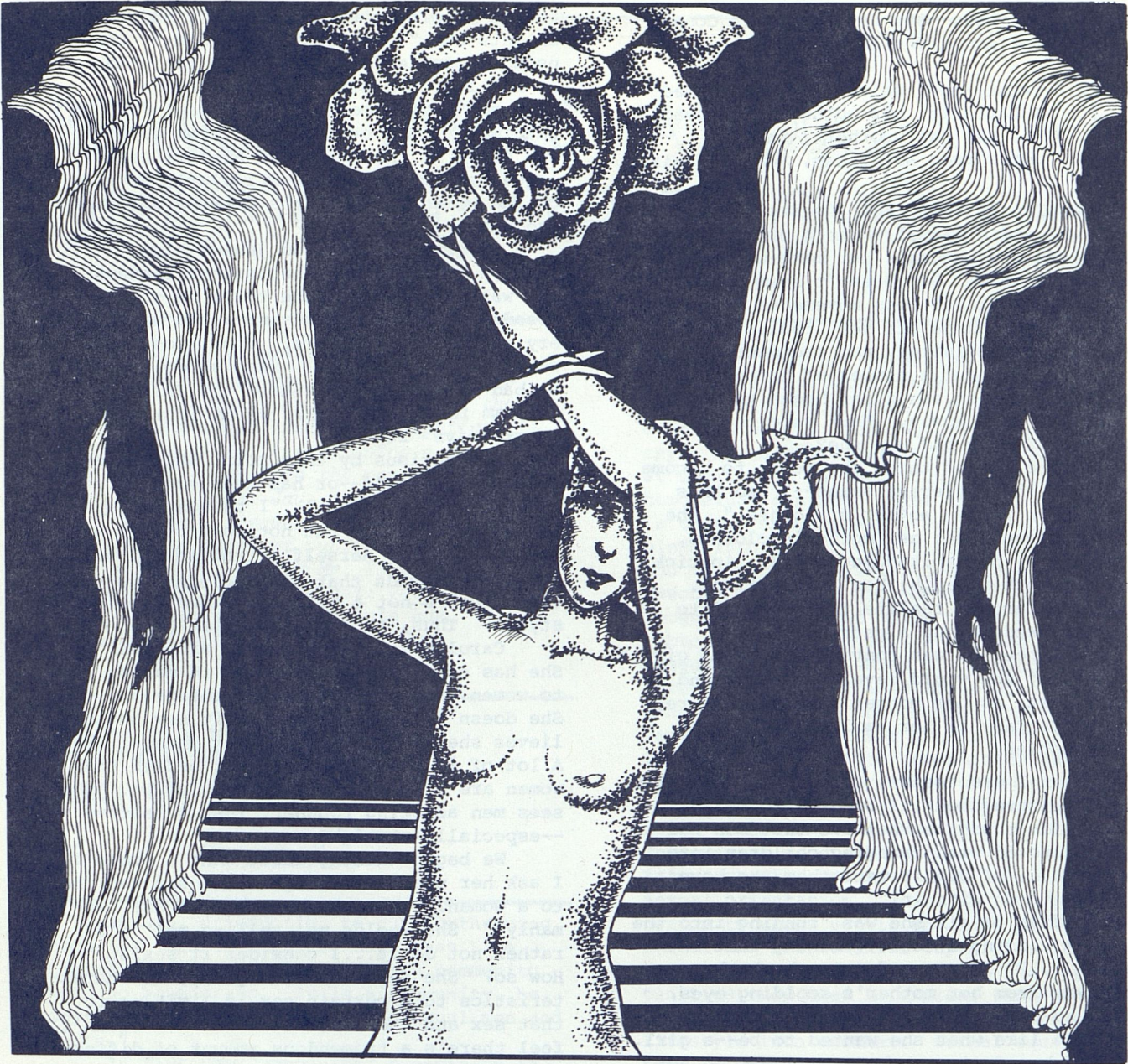
For the male transsexual, there is no doubt that he is not, in fact, a woman. Any attempt to deny this essential fact denies the very definition of transsexualism.

Looking at the lives of three transsexuals whom I have had the opportunity to interview, I want, above all else, to probe

into what being a woman means to them--not so much becoming a woman, as that frame of mind and body which, for the male transsexual, is the woman he believes himself to be (and which by virtue of this fact he is.)

Psychological research on transsexualism often involves two basic ideas. First, psychologists always seem to assume that all transsexuals are alike, a prejudice to be avoided. This is not to say generalizations are not possible, only that they must be made with extreme caution. Second, whole schools of psychology deal with the causes of transsexualism. There is nothing wrong with searching for causes. However, the idea that transsexualism is a "deviation" is behind a lot of the probing.

My own opinion in the matter is that transsexualism is as healthy and normal as



any other sexual preference--for example, as heterosexuality or homosexuality. Psychologists usually attribute transsexualism to dominant or overbearing mothers, or a mother who approves of her son's early cross-dressing or effeminacy. This same argument has been used as an explanation of homosexuality in the male. I think it is a simplistic argument, to say the least. It doesn't hold up, especially in those cases in which the child's effeminacy was discouraged or punished severely, and yet he still shows transsexual leanings.

I do not particularly wish to explore causes at this time. My main objective is to let the three transsexuals speak for themselves on what they are all about. I have decided from speaking with them that what they are mainly about is being women.

The people I have interviewed are:

Carolyn: Nineteen, black, she fares from a non-churchgoing middle class Baptist family in which strict roles were enforced. She has two brothers, aged thirty-eight and twenty-two. She has always lived in Philadelphia.

Heather: Twenty-two, white, also from a Baptist background, her parents were divorced when she was fourteen. She has one brother and a half-

brother. She is from Bucks County but now lives in New York.

Sandy: Twenty-two, white, she was raised a Catholic, her mother is widowed. She has one brother. She comes from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Carolyn is tall, thin, wears a light brown wig and a casual woman's outfit. Her mannerisms are natural; her make-up light and comfortable. She doesn't seem very self-conscious about her body movements, even when in drag. She comes off very realistically "feminine." Definitely not overdone.

We talk about a number of things. I want to know when she first began to think of herself as a woman. What were the circumstances? How old was she?

At the age of three she began to become "aware of the different sexes--I had this fascination for my mother's clothes." She used to "jump" into her mother's clothes, particularly her spiked heels and lipstick. Once her mother caught her and beat her. This made Carolyn realize that she had to keep her dressing up a secret.

At three, "I was convinced I was a girl." She thought she would develop breasts and have babies, as her mother had done. A recurring fantasy in her early life was of having babies.

"When I was twelve, I found out the male role in procreation...I refused to believe it...I didn't want to believe that men had anything to do with bringing children into the world.... I didn't want them to have anything to do with it."

At five or six she was "running into the bathroom...using a towel...making that into a skirt...." It was safer in the bathroom, too, away from her mother's scolding eyes. She found comfort in the towel, it made her feel more like what she wanted to be--a girl. She says her desire to be a girl was on her mind all the time.

I ask her: "Have you ever identified with boys?" She pauses. "Never," she asserts quite definitely. "Not with anything boyish at all?" I wonder. She pauses again. "At eight I knew I had to play the role," she says and proceeds to recount how she once "learned" from television that little boys were supposed to hate little girls. For a while after that she went around telling everyone she hated little girls, when actually she didn't hate them at all. She preferred their company. She resented being forced to be with boys. In junior high school, however, she sat with the girls. She says she just couldn't identify with the "rough and tough super butch boys."

"What kind of toys did she play with as a child?" I ask next. "I played with dump trucks and stuff," she recalls. She

wanted to play with Barbie dolls and kitchen sets but "I couldn't have them." She used to create toys to satisfy the need in her life for more feminine things. Once she took some rope and made a wig by cutting it into strips. She used to stare for hours at the Sears and Roebuck catalogue her mother had, particularly envious of the women's items, the dresses and shoes and hats.

In grade school and junior high, Carolyn suffered much harassment because she was effeminate. She tells me she dreaded going to school and would use every excuse to stay home. Sometimes she would invent ailments. High school wasn't as bad because she attended the Parkway program in Philadelphia, which is a more progressive school.

I'm curious by this point whether she considers herself--or has ever considered herself--a homosexual? "I thought of myself as gay for a while but not comfortable with it." She calls herself a transsexual now. Yet she contends that gay includes everything that's not a "straight-identified life style." Thus, in a way, she is "gay."

Carolyn has had sex only with men. She has expressed an interest in making love to women, but only after her change. She doesn't feel inclined to it now but believes she might after her sex change. Why? A lot of it has to do with her belief that women are more sensitive, more loving. She sees men as being rougher, less sensitive--especially straight men.

We begin talking about what a woman is. I ask her what attributes would she ascribe to a woman? What characteristics are "womanly?" She scolds me, telling me: "I'd rather not do it...I consider it sexist." How so? She feels ascribing certain characteristics to a certain sex is limiting to that sex and therefore sexist. She doesn't feel there's a tremendous amount of difference between the sexes. For her own personal life, the main difference, in appearance anyway, lies in wanting to have longer hair and to wear women's shoes because "I can't stand men's shoes." She says she feels comfortable in dungarees; and she doesn't mind wearing men's pants.

"Carolyn, how important is beauty to being a woman?" I ask. She reflects for a moment; then, "Not as important as I used to think." She doesn't feel it important to dress up just to please some guy. She dresses for her own pleasure. It's important to look "comfortable, not put on, important to feel good about yourself.... Beauty often means competition which equals being the best object you can make yourself into. It's important to feel comfortable with the way you look."

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Well, then, what is essential to being a "woman?" She rambles a bit on this one; she pauses a lot; she's not really sure how to answer it. "...being willing to be sincere and loving and being able to just... give a great deal...(and) get it back, too...(to) care for somebody...(and) put together a nice home...."

From her point of view women are more caring and feeling; they're sensual rather than sexy. (She defines sexy as something "naughty and bad," at least in the eyes of society.) Carolyn considers herself a feminist. She has been active in both women's and gay activities. She resents being called a "girl" and prefers to be thought of as a woman. Whenever someone says girl to her, she corrects them, because it's important to let them understand the difference. Her stand on feminism is perhaps surprising because most people assume (due to the prejudice of the media and popular lore) that all transsexuals are into a very traditional feminine role. I have not found this to be true, although a good deal of transsexuals dress and seem to convey traditional images of women.

Heather is tall, white, has light brown hair just touching her shoulders. She carries herself more elegantly than Carolyn, yet her mannerisms are not exaggerated. She wears a tied-up blouse and dungarees; she is wearing heavy brown eye shadow and blush.

Heather's history is similar to Carolyn's. She, too, identified with the opposite sex early in life. At four, she claims she already considered herself a girl. "I never hung around with boys. I never related to them. I always wanted girls' stuff." Like Carolyn, she got into her mother's things. But not all of her mother's things--mostly jewelry and shoes. While Carolyn's mother disapproved of her behavior, Heather's was indifferent. She once bought her a doll to play with.

Despite the growing awareness of male-ness, Heather never identified with boys. However, whereas Carolyn mentioned that she was bothered in school for being effeminate, Heather never was. No one seemed to notice that she was "different." At fourteen, she read about Christine Jorgensen and was "fascinated by it." She then "tried to find out more about it."

She does not consider herself a homosexual. She says she once did--back before she knew for sure she wanted a sex change. She was once vice president of Gay Activists Alliance/Philadelphia and quite active in gay activities.

She has never had sex with a woman.

She said she fought her transsexual urges for years. She thought she could live as a gay male, but time soon revealed the impossibility of such a prospect.

Being a woman for Heather means living fantasies she had as a child. It also means "being myself." Being a woman does not mean any real drastic personality change; she still "talks and acts the way I did before." No personality change, but a change in clothing, in physiology--the release of a lot of pent-up emotions. It's a very natural thing for Heather to be a woman, as natural perhaps as breathing. She can't conceive of herself as ever being--or wanting to be--anything else.

We talk about how she perceives women in general. A woman should do "whatever's right for that person." Women should "dress as they feel." As for herself, she wants to "look a certain way...I wanna look as good as I can."

Beauty is more important to Heather than to Carolyn, but it's not essential. The most important thing for her right now is to be accepted as a woman--"not to be doubted." She says she still has a basic insecurity about whether or not she is passing as a woman. Many transsexuals and even more transvestites are concerned with this problem. Passing as a woman can often be an anxiety-ridden task--especially if the transsexual doubts her femininity and sees herself as having a lot of masculine qualities, which are considered undesirable. Transsexuals tend to overcompensate in order to come off "feminine." It is only after they become convinced that they are "passing" that they feel comfortable dressing more casual. One can frequently tell a beginning transvestite or transsexual by the way they are dressed--often in outdated styles, and with too much makeup on.

Heather is confident now. Her walk is often arrogant. It's strong, defiant. She carries herself like she owns the street. "In public places I won't worry. I have confidence in myself that I do look like a woman."

She doesn't always feel the need for makeup either. Once she used tons of it. But that was before the hormones, and before she attempted living as a woman. She's just returned from New York for a visit where she sometimes hustles to make the rent.

Heather considers herself a feminist. She resents being cast into a strict role--for her, womanhood is fluid. It's what she wants to make it. It can be the super glamor trip one day and the shy coy bit the next. She doesn't necessarily resent being called a girl--yet she doesn't like the implications of the word, the fact that it makes her an eternal child. She's anything but a child. She emphasizes she wants to be a woman. "The people I hang with are

not into liberation, but when I'm with more intelligent people it does bother me (being called a girl.) I'm not a girl, but want to be a woman."

Heather, like a lot of transsexuals and transvestites, knows the difference between the street world and the world of the intellectual liberationist. Street queens (gay transvestites) and transsexuals often cannot afford it. It's their business to be sex objects, sometimes to reduce themselves to commodities in order to meet the rent or to survive the often rough ghettos in which they are forced to live. Frequently they cannot get jobs as women, or cannot keep them; the street becomes breadwinner, and principal place of social contact. Heather has seen both worlds--she has mingled with the liberation crowd and the street people. She understands that neither is better than the other, just that the liberationists have the convenience and the ability to work for change. It is curious that in New York during the famed Stone-wall riots of 1969 when gays fought back against the police raiding one of their bars, it was mainly the drag queens who started and carried out most of the violence. Street people have more reason to be angry, they're the first to be harassed by the police. They have no jobs to lose, no prestige to worry about. They're on the bottom of the social ladder, so to speak.

Heather's views on men are similar to Carolyn's. "I would prefer to go out with a less butch man." She dislikes machismo in men and thus prefers the company of gay males. She describes herself as "outwardly aggressive and very independent."

Carolyn and Heather also differ from other transsexuals in their insistence in not being treated the way women have been traditionally treated by men. Harlow, the famous Philadelphia transsexual, once said she enjoyed having men open doors for her. "I've waited too long to have doors opened for me and cigarettes lit for me." Heather, on the other hand, feels that whoever is nearest the door should open it, for politeness sake only.

Heather identifies with the more glamorous types of women: Marilyn Monroe and Cybil Shepherd. She once went through a period where she bleached her hair and tried to imitate Marilyn Monroe. Now she says she wants merely to be herself. Carolyn's heroes are mostly feminists, or women who have contributed to the women's cause, such as singer Helen Reddy. I think many transsexuals imitate famous movie stars because it's simply more exciting and more prestigious to do so. There's more status in looking like Marilyn Monroe than there is in looking like the average woman on the street, although one will probably "pass" better if one looks average. The movie star

phase is short lived, however. Most above all else want to be individualistic.

Sandy is tall, white, and has a quiet feminine manner about her. She has not yet developed physically into a woman as totally as Heather has. She smiles a lot--a gentle smile that reassures. She is an extremely warm person.

Sandy has had a slightly different background than either Carolyn or Heather. She fares from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. At four she got into her mother's clothes. Not just part way, as Heather did, but "the whole thing"--dresses, shoes, lipstick, etc. She never had girls' toys though she wanted to have some dolls and a doll house. She did, however, compensate by playing games with herself and spending a lot of time enjoying the beauty of nature. She especially loved the willow trees.

At twelve or thirteen she identified herself as a transvestite, having discovered what the word meant. At twelve; "I wished I could be (a girl.)" There was this strange thing happening to her--she was developing a male body and not a female one --so she resolved herself to the fact that she would never be female. She tried to fit into the role of being a boy. However, "I felt myself to be different in one sense --inadequate in that role."

At eighteen or nineteen, she questioned her motives for dressing in women's clothes. It wasn't just that she was turned on to women's clothes; it went beyond that.

Sandy was never bothered in school. She wasn't overly effeminate. She has never defined herself as a homosexual. She is attracted to both women and men, but on different levels--to women because of their softness and to men because sometimes she "likes to be dominated." She says after her operation she "wouldn't be uptight about having sex with women."

Her concept of being a woman does not differ much from Heather's or Carolyn's. She does, however, have definite ideas about what a woman is. "Being in tune to somebody's feelings--caring more about people than things." She feels the socialization process has produced differences in women and men. "If more men thought like women, it'd be a better world," she says to me with a smile. She is optimistic about the changes taking place in society. She says being a woman also means being "the things I wanted to identify with, refecting the machismo thing....It wasn't me." It's "being in tune with my own feelings and others' feelings." She rejects the traditional role, the "ultra feminine" thing. A woman should be "comfortable, clean." She should "not be over made-up. Clothes don't make a difference."

Beauty isn't terribly important to her. However, "a woman should ascribe to being as

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beautiful as she can." Most important of all to Sandy is "that people take me seriously as a woman, as a person." And she clarifies this--"being accepted as a person who happens to be female."

According to Sandy, a woman is "a more sexual animal... (she) expresses herself more fully." A man hurries through sex, a woman enjoys it. After her change, Sandy expects to lead the same lifestyle she does now. "I don't expect that much to happen." Which reminds me of a statement of Dr. Burou, who performs transsexual operations: "I don't change men into women. I transform male genitals into genitals that have a female aspect. All the rest is in the patient's mind."

It has usually been theorized that transsexual males result from overbearing mothers or mothers who approve of the boy's cross dressing. It may be true in some cases that an approving mother contributes to or encourages transsexual behavior, but I don't see how one could conclude that it causes it. According to a pamphlet, Information For the Family of the Transsexual, put out by the Erickson Educational Foundation (which does a lot of work with transsexuals), "The transsexual condition establishes itself early, before the child is capable of elective choice in the matter, probably in the first two years of life." Thus the overprotective mother could not cause transsexualism. Besides, if one accepts the theory that such a mother could cause a son to become transsexual, how does one explain those cases, such as Carolyn's, where the mother does not encourage--in fact punishes--any instance of effeminacy? Carolyn's father also always has tried to make his "son" more masculine. He strongly disapproves of Carolyn's plans for a sex change.

The transsexuals I have interviewed do not have a romantic view of women. They don't interpret being a woman as all sugar and spice. They are aware of society's definition of males and females and have made some very daring decisions to ignore these definitions. The old emphasis on beauty, on passivity is not there; yet, there is a concern for looking good, perhaps as a narcissistic experience, not merely for the purpose of being attractive to men. I would say being beautiful is more a self-satisfying experience to them than anything else. Having grown up with an image of woman as beautiful, of woman as loving, the transsexual seeks to imitate this--perhaps in an attempt to be like the woman Carolyn once saw in that Sears and Roebuck catalogue. However, it's not just an image--not anymore. Once it may have been. As with Heather--once it was to look like Marilyn Monroe, now it's important being Heather, just

Heather, who is basically the same person she was as when she was a "he." I can remember once being in drag and not wanting to be touched by anyone, not the best looking man in the world, because I looked so good and I felt so good that I didn't want anyone missing one hair on my body. It was like my body was perfected.

I'm not supposing that this is how all transsexuals feel, but I do feel there is some degree of narcissism in the transsexual's need to be beautiful. Not that there's anything wrong with narcissism. Nor with wanting to be beautiful.

There is a quiet contradiction in some of what the three transsexuals have said--Sandy's rejection of machismo men does not jibe with her desire to be dominated by them in bed. Or is it just a case of keeping politics out of the bedroom? Heather, on the other hand, must live with the contradiction of being a street person and an intellect. But then maybe it's not so much a contradiction as an unusual occurrence. One does not generally conceive of street people as being intellectual. Carolyn seems to be the only one of the three who lives without contradictions--she has no overwhelming concern for beauty, though she also does not neglect her appearance. She will not allow men to dominate her, and she feels no sexual restrictions will ever hold her back from what she wants to do.

There is also some contradiction in their claim to be against sex role stereotyping and yet their turning around and mentioning stereotypes. Sandy mentions that men hurry through sex, a popular stereotype. They all imply that women are softer, gentler, and more loving than men--another stereotype. Of course all these stereotypes do exist and are probably more true than not--because of a rigid socialization process. However, if you are liberated, doesn't that mean freeing oneself from all presuppositions about male and female behavior? It's a picky point, but one I feel compelled to make.

Though transsexuals are not necessarily totally free of sex role stereotyping, I think they are at least aware of the options to strict sex role conformity. They know everything isn't black and white, masculine and feminine. They were once pressured to be masculine; they understand the limitations of a sex role. However, some of them have grown up with a romantic concept of the woman they'd like to be--someone enchanting, glamorous, someone who has status, sex appeal, beauty. But I would contend this type of sexual stereotype is not as harmful--for it has been more freely chosen than most people's sexual roles. Most people have never had to question their sex role. Thus they conform blindly. Transsexuals have had to question and to choose to define for themselves a new role--that of BEING A WOMAN.