



Trans surgeon **Marci Bowers** makes dreams come true in a small Colorado town known as America's gender reassignment capital.

Dr B. and th

BY T COOPER PHOTOGRAPHY BY OFER WOLBERGER



e Women

called a metoidioplasty—but the vast majority of trans patients come to Bowers for her trademark one-stage MTF vaginoplasty.)

And let me tell you—since we cannot show you in these pages—the vaginas she builds look *good*. Bowers is a maestro with the scalpel. “They didn’t really design a woman’s vulva with efficiency in mind—or aesthetics for that matter,” she tells me, chuckling, when asked to compare Mother Nature’s handiwork to her own. “I get feedback all the time from natal women. They go, ‘Wow, that looks better than mine. That’s better than the real thing!’”

Bowers should know—because she’s seen a hell of a lot of them, even if she doesn’t have one of her own. Natal vaginas, that is. Because before she started performing gender reassignment surgeries, Bowers was a conventional OB/GYN, fielding standard-issue lady health concerns like pregnancies, deliveries, C-sections, hysterectomies, ovarian cysts, UTIs, family planning, and so on. Only back then, Dr. Marci Bowers was Dr. *Mark* Bowers, a married man with three children and a thriving medical career in Seattle.

“My friends ask me, ‘Did Marci do hers?’ And I say, ‘Yeah, dumb fuck!’” Cometto cracks herself up, pouring more Coke and waiting for the caramel head to fizzle before taking a monster sip. A basket of fake grapes, a polar bear coffee mug, and well-thumbed issues of *Elle*, *Redbook*, and *Marie Claire* sit on the kitchen table beside her. “Of course Marci didn’t do her own surgery.”

Not that Cometto has always been so blasé about “changers,” the term she uses for transpeople. When she first met Bowers, Cometto nursed a major crush and started flirting right off the bat, but had no inkling that Bowers had not been born female. It was only when a good friend suggested as much that Cometto’s suspicions were aroused. Bowers and Cometto occasionally played golf together, and it was during an afternoon on the links that Cometto admits to clumsily attempting to peer down Bowers’s shirt every time she teed off—to see if her breasts were real. (No verdict based on the boobs.) Later, that same friend’s father, who was on the hospital board and thus knew what Bowers’s practice involved, showed Cometto a video on the Internet in which Bowers comes out as trans. Cometto says, “I was like, ‘This is fucked up. I’m out.’”

“It just took me a long time to be with Marci, because I was so scared. I’d never *seen* one,” Cometto adds sheepishly, referring to a surgically constructed vagina. Cometto, a lifer lesbian who drives around her native Trinidad in a dusty Jeep Cherokee with a huge VAGINATARIAN sticker on the back, “was like *wha*—what the fuck do I do? Where’s the switch on this bad boy?”

It’s not something Bowers seems to like to talk about much. “That’s just ancient history,” she insists. “I’m not a transgender person. I’m a woman, and I just have a regular life like anybody else.” Which is a little like Brad Pitt insisting he’s “just a dad.” But in the prodigious media coverage of her, much is made of Bowers’s MTF status, which is frequently featured front and center. And she will, when pressed, admit that her personal life trajectory might help bring a little more empathy to her practice than that of earlier, non-trans practitioners of vaginoplasty. Most telling, it is her trans status that many of Bowers’s patients claim is a deal sealer with regard to choosing a gender reassignment surgery (GRS) doctor. But it’s clear the instant you meet Bowers that she is first and foremost a surgeon, one who takes her practice seriously and is not satisfied with resting on her laurels. She even drives like a surgeon, rolling through stop signs and cutting a precise, though deliberately circuitous, route through Trinidad’s back roads in her red Infiniti sedan, almost as though she’s being pursued. Only after *surgeon* on the Bowers hierarchy of identities is she a *woman*. Then, perhaps, *parent*, which is probably on par with being a partner to Cometto,

IT’S ALMOST SUMMER, but it looks a little bit like Christmas at Dr. Marci Bowers’s house. Who has time to take down a stray strand of silver tinsel when you’re one of the busiest genital reassignment surgeons in the world, responsible for constructing more vaginas every year in this country than any other doctor? That can mean as many as two per day, three or four days a week, out of a tiny regional hospital in small-town Trinidad, Colo.: a virtual pussy factory smack in the middle of our heartland.

There’s that old joke, not entirely undeserved, that doctors—and surgeons in particular—believe they do the work of God. But in the case of the 51-year-old Dr. Bowers, one might forgive such grandiosity. When she comes home after a long day in the operating room, Bowers, a willowy, blonde, bombshell-nerd hybrid, sometimes says to her partner of six years, “Carol, I changed a man into a woman, a woman into a man, and the dog into a cat today. What did *you* do?”

Carol Cometto, 48, loves telling that story, which she does, twice to me and a couple more times to others, punctuating each retelling with a husky smoker’s laugh. A barrel-chested, sun-flogged, old-school butch who used to work on the railroad and is missing a couple fingers from an unrelated accident, the dark- and curly-haired Cometto is immediately infinitely more accessible than her partner. Where Bowers is at first reserved and impenetrable, visibly sussing me out before deciding how much to offer, Cometto happily shares to the point where I start to wonder, *Does Marci know she’s telling me all this shit?*

IDON’T WANT to be like [Oprah’s beau] Stedman,” Cometto insists, as she guzzles a Coke at the kitchen table of the Morning After, the home she maintains and operates in Trinidad as a recovery facility for Bowers’s surgical patients. These days they’re mostly male-to-female (MTF) transsexuals who have paid about \$22,000 and patiently spent up to a year on the waiting list before making the trek to rural, off-the-grid Trinidad in order to take advantage of Bowers’s considerable talents. (She does a small but growing number of female-to-male surgeries—not phalloplasty, which is a still somewhat imperfect procedure Bowers doesn’t care for, but a clitoral-release technique

followed by decent golfer, good cook, vegetarian, avid reader, and so on—until maybe, finally, if you press her, a transgender person.

Bowers grows perturbed when I inquire about the differences between the surgery she had 11 years ago and those she performs now, whether it's difficult to be working her magic daily for others, when she cannot do the same for herself. "It's unrelated, doesn't even cross my consciousness," she says. "Sure, if I had my druthers, I'd have the surgery I do now. Particularly from a visual standpoint. Functionally, they got it, though—the second generation surgeons," she says of doctors like Pierre Brassard and Toby Meltzer, who used to do the surgery in two stages, while Bowers famously does hers in one. "The thing is, there was a lot more scarring than we see now, and it doesn't look as good. But I have a partner who's happy with me the way I am."

"You know these documentaries?" Cometto asks me, referring to the video of a pre-op Marci. "I'll leave. I don't want to know about that. I don't know that person, because that person I wouldn't have looked twice at, and that person wouldn't have given two cents about me. But Marci—I'm in love with the soul of that person. So when I see the guy, it just really freaks me out."

"It was months before we were ever really intimate," Cometto adds, quieter now. "I was just nervous. And it takes a lot longer for them to—*you know.*"

But they do. Come, that is. In fact, more than 90% of Bowers's patients report being able to achieve orgasm postsurgery. Which keeps them coming and coming—to Trinidad, for the form-plus-function that the good doctor is able to deliver (and has delivered more than 600 times, with only 20 patients returning for a second surgery to address minor complications or concerns). "Sometimes surgeons reach a level of comfort where it's very difficult to make fundamental changes to a procedure. They can be done, but there's always that learning curve," Bowers says. "But I really did. It's 180 degrees different from what it was just five years ago."

Note to the fellas who were born with penises and would like to keep them: You may want to cross your legs about now, because here's how Dr. Bowers lays down a vagina where a penis was merely hours before. First, the patient is asked to undergo multiple sessions of presurgery laser hair removal or electrolysis to clear follicles from the region (skin from both the penis and the scrotum will end up inside the neo-vagina, so for obvious reasons, you



FEMALE AT LAST

One of Bowers's patients recovers at the Morning After, Trinidad, Colo.

don't want hair growing there). Once in the operating room with the patient under general anesthesia, scrotal skin is harvested and the testicles are amputated and discarded with the rest of the hospital's biomedical waste. The urethra is catheterized and the penile shaft divided in two (think string cheese), with the erectile portions of it removed, again for obvious reasons. Then, retaining constant blood flow, the clitoris is created from the glans of the penis and a bit of skin from the shaft, and securely stitched into place.

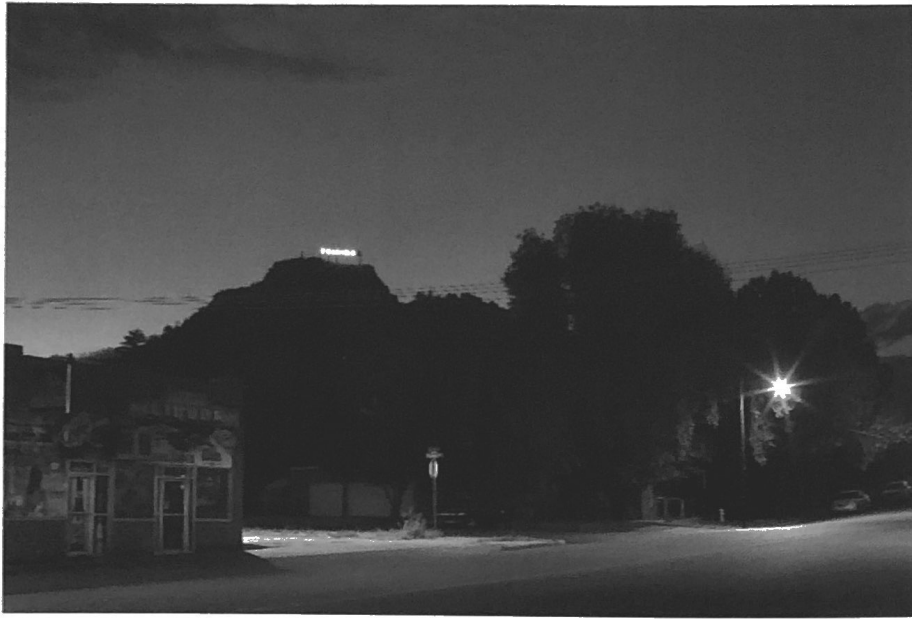
Bowers herself seems most incredulous about the next stage of the surgery, in which a pretty sizable cavity must be created where there wasn't one before. Essentially, the doctor makes room for the vaginal canal by boring a hole into the area between the anus and the neo-clitoris by cutting and cauterizing. "There's this potential space we open up—it's amazing we can do it. It's very tedious, but we do it day in and day out, so it works," she explains.

And the skin that creates the lining of that new pocket? It comes from turning the penis inside out (yes, exactly like a sock) and then grafting it to the harvested scrotal skin, which meanwhile, at a separate work station, has been wrapped around a dildo-like stent and sewn together (with any remaining hair follicles removed). The whole graft—penile and scrotal skin sewn around the stent—is then placed inside the cavity to create the neo-vaginal canal, which in Bowers's surgeries generally ends up providing about six inches of depth for her patients (not to mention her patients' future sexual partners) to enjoy.

Before wrapping up the three- to four-hour procedure, a new urethra is created, the inner labia is sculpted and lined with uri-

"NOT A DAY GOES BY WHERE I DON'T WISH I WAS OUT OF HERE," DR. BOWERS SAYS OF HER ADOPTED HOMETOWN.

"I MEAN, YOU GOTTA BUY YOUR COSMETICS AT WAL-MART."



BIG BUSINESS IN A SMALL TOWN

A Wal-Mart, a few dozen churches, and 200-plus sex changes performed each year

nary mucosa (to give it the pinkish, moist attributes of a natal vagina), and a protective hood is sculpted over the clitoris. The labia majora is closed up in a large but tidy “V” shape, which will be completely concealed when pubic hair grows back. Four days in the hospital plus a few more under Cometto’s tutelage at the Morning After, and patients are good to go. They are asked to refrain from heavy lifting and activity and instructed to dilate their vaginal canals with increasingly larger dilators over the next weeks and months. Sexual activity is specifically discouraged for at least six weeks (though three months is suggested), but some patients report experiencing what they believe is an orgasm from the dilation process. Remarkably, the vast majority of Bowers’s patients do not experience much pain at any time during the process—just a bit of persistent discomfort from the catheter and vaginal packing, both of which are removed about a week after surgery.

BOWERS HAS BEEN performing her revolutionary vaginoplasties solo for six years, having taken over the practice of Dr. Stanley Biber, an early pioneer of sexual reassignment surgery who established his practice in Trinidad in the late 1960s, after his death. Trinidad, population 9,000, is a gritty old mining town along the Santa Fe Trail, halfway between Santa Fe and Denver on Interstate 25. “Not a day goes by where I don’t wish I was out of here,” Bowers says of her adopted hometown—she spends a good deal of time in Seattle, where her children live with their mother (whom Bowers still calls her spouse even though they are no longer intimate). “I mean, you gotta buy your cosmetics at Wal-Mart. But I’ve come to realize that L’Oréal mascara is just as good as Chanel.”

In addition to the lure of the Wal-Mart Supercenter just south of town, Trinidad proudly boasts some pretty righteous New Mexican and Mexican cuisine, a quaint, authentic Western-storefronted downtown vaguely expectant of another showdown at the O.K. Corral, a few dozen churches—and a “down-home friendly atmosphere” touted on the official Trinidad Chamber of Commerce website. But what’s *not* mentioned on the town’s promotional websites or in any of the myriad tourist brochures proffered at local businesses is what Trinidad—as evidenced on *Oprah*,

Tyra, *CBS Sunday Morning*, BBC, NPR, MSNBC, We TV, the Discovery Channel, and so on—is best known for: being the “sex change capital of the world.” Well before Bowers arrived to work with Biber in early 2003, Trinidad had earned its unofficial official moniker. According to Wikipedia, as far back as the ’60s the saying “taking a trip to Trinidad” was a euphemism for having an MTF sex-change operation.

Bookended by two prominent red-rock peaks, palpably low-key Trinidad is nestled into a small southern Colorado valley that gets its name from the sleepy river that runs through it, the Purgatoire. From there it’s an easy symbolic leap to that other state of purgatory: a place of limbo between heaven and hell, torturous and unsettling, where you’re stuck until somebody back in the real world can

cobble together enough cash for your indulgences to spring you into heaven.

While not all transpeople opt for surgical transition—many simply cannot afford the luxury; some prefer solely hormonal transition; and still others are comfortable with no hormones or surgery at all—a lot of transfolk who do want to alter their genitals will describe feeling “stuck” in between sexes. Hedwig and that angry inch. “So many MTF patients figure it’s all about the vagina. Build it and they will come,” Bowers riffs, laughing. “But that’s simply not true. Not only will they not come, but they won’t even get it up for you.”

“And that’s one of the tragedies of transition,” she continues, more soberly. “There are a lot of people who get left behind. Because the fact is, the rules are different for women, and society judges very harshly if you don’t meet a female standard, if you’re not beautiful in some way. And some people who transition—they were the star football player with shoulders you could eat lunch on. Then you transition over and you want to be, you know—you’re not going to be Twiggy.”

Each year, Bowers’s practice pumps hundreds of thousands of dollars into Trinidad’s somewhat shaky economy and generates millions in revenues for Mount San Rafael Hospital, where she performs her surgeries. And yet, the hospital board recently presented her with new requirements that would have made most of her procedures so expensive that few patients would be able to afford them any longer, essentially pricing her out of town.

It was apparently the multipart television documentary *Sex Change Hospital* that whipped one particularly intolerant member of the hospital administration into a bitter froth, which raised some warning flags for the hospital’s board of directors, whom Bowers describes as “good old boys who don’t have any malice toward what I do and know it’s been going on here forever.” But the board’s already tepid and religion-tinged predisposition was buffeted by this very squeaky wheel, and then, according to Bowers, in addition to untenable price hikes, “they put what I think are unhealthy restrictions on the media, basically charging them, to keep the sensationalism away. No other hospital in the state charges the media.”

Biber was no stranger to fights with the town about his prac-

tice either. Cometto, who grew up around the doctor and his family, explains, "I ate at Dr. Biber's table more often than not. And this man fought, every day, to get where he was. I told Marci, 'You have to fight. Just because you're this big-shot surgeon, [doesn't mean you don't] have to fight. You can't let this man down and just pack up your bag and leave.'"

In fact, Bowers has been considering two very tempting offers, to take her practice to either Seattle or San Francisco. But when some members of the Trinidad community got wind of the hospital's hostile maneuvering, Bowers recalls, "People were like, 'Oh, she's gonna leave? Oh, wait, Maybe that's not a good idea.' And then the town's ready to march with picks and shovels and burning torches like they did in *Frankenstein*. It's the history. It's the people. But you're also literally supporting a community. There would be a sucking sound as things left here—it would really change the fabric of the community." And so ultimately, the board backed down and accepted Bowers's pricing proposal, just a slight increase akin to those issued every year to adjust for costs. For now, the rock star of the transgender surgery world has decided to stay in Trinidad.

"Listen, you're going to fight it no matter where you go. Somebody always pops up who's going to have an issue with what you're doing," Bowers says. "Of course, there's a little resentment like, 'Why couldn't we be known as the mining capital of the West, have everyone from all over the world coming to look at our mining museum?' Little towns struggle without a niche, but we *have* a niche. If Trinidad would really get it, they'd put in T-shirt shops, make it a curiosity. THE SEX CHANGE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD! They'd have a lingerie shop, tattoos, coffee cups, and souvenirs. Carol said we need blow-up dolls; blow 'em up and the dick pops out!"

BEHIND EVERY WOMAN...

Bowers's girlfriend, Carol Cometto



A T BOWERS'S OFFICE, which doubles as the Planned Parenthood outpost in town (a detailed poster by the phone on the wall reads *MANAGING A SUSPICIOUS OR OFFENSIVE CALL*), I meet Amy Chastity West, a painfully shy 23-year-old MTF who's traveled to Trinidad with her parents from rural upstate New York. Her GRS is scheduled for the next afternoon with Bowers. West, sultry, slim-hipped, heavily eyelined, and sporting beat-up combat boots, definitely does *not* fall into the camp Bowers has described as potential "tragedies of transition."

Bowers glides into the examination room dressed in a turquoise blouse, pink eyeglasses, and her requisite white doctor's coat. She sits on a short stool and threads her long legs around one another, West's chart resting on her thigh. Bowers is the consummate professional, with an impeccable bedside manner, asking all the right questions to ensure that West is physically and psychologically ready for surgery and that she and her folks know the attendant risks. West tells her visibly anxious parents to leave the room when Bowers asks to examine her genitals as part of the pre-surgical checkup. West says she'd like me to stay in the room for the examination—perhaps because I'm trans or maybe because she figures it'll all be gone tomorrow anyway. Bowers and her intern, Allison, handle West's testicles and penis, assessing the raw materials they'll be working with the next day. "You've got a lot of hair. What are you, French? Or Italian?" Bowers asks jocularly.

Later that day at the Morning After, I meet 69-year-old Erikka Elisabeth deBornac, who's finishing her recovery from surgery the week before. Almost immediately she asks if I want to see her "results." She invites me into her bedroom and proceeds to undress completely, lying on the bed and spreading her legs, one hand behind her head. It's a vagina all right. But there are the sizable pink "V"-shaped incisions, with yellowish-green and reddish-purple bruising spreading across her thighs and up her abdomen. There is a swollen, painful-looking, stitch-encircled clitoris with a dark red and still somewhat bloody inner labia and entrance to the vaginal canal. After pulling up her compression underwear and long skirt, deBornac opens the top dresser drawer and produces her three specially shaped dilators—pink, powder blue, and aqua-green.

DeBornac seems positively giddy about the new plumbing with which Dr. Bowers has equipped her. "The first time I'd seen a vagina was my own, in the hospital," she marvels. "I've been married twice, but I always had sex in the dark."

Later that night there's a small gathering at the Morning After—nothing fancy, just a barbecue thrown by Cometto for Bowers, some of her patients and staff, and a smattering of friends from Trinidad. MTV's in town too, following another patient: 24-year-old Elle Stice, who's going to be the subject of the show *True Life: I'm Changing My Gender*. Stice's mother had died unexpectedly just weeks before, and she's accompanied by her stepfather, Gino. Despite a pall of sadness, there is also relief and elation on both of their parts about the surgery. Bowers is solicitous of the decidedly attractive Stice, and in the kitchen she jokingly suggests she consider going into adult entertainment because her surgery turned out so beautifully. "I'm getting the Maserati of vaginas," Stice deadpans later, "now I just have to

"DR. B AND THE WOMEN" CONTINUED ON PAGE 102

the house of Versace in many a season."

It was a critical moment for Donatella, who earlier that month had parted ways with her CEO and poached a new one, Gian Giacomo Ferraris, from the German fashion house Jil Sander. She knows that it pays to be nimble in a recession as brutal as this one. Expansion in China and a new 6,480-square-foot store in Dubai—complete with black granite floors, white leather-paneled walls, and a crystal curtain drop chandelier—reflect an inevitable shift away from America. Aesthetically, too, the label has been working hard to relinquish the baroque and Grecian theatricality with which Versace was once synonymous, while being careful to respect the groundbreaking legacy it represents.

"I think it's very important for our brand to keep the same DNA, but to update," says Donatella. "To do the same things from the '80s today would be ridiculous, even though so many brands are doing the '80s right now. You can't look back. So I'm very careful of what's going on in the world—I want as much information as I can get, and that includes music, movies, everything. It's always about updating and evolving the style, but not to change. You have to be loyal to your brand."

For a long time that seemed like a difficult balancing act, complicated for Donatella by the exhausting emotional demands imposed by her public profile. In his memoir, *Life With My Sister Madonna*, Christopher Ciccone recalls doing cocaine with Donatella "24/7 for three days," and though

"THE WOMAN USED TO BE CONSIDERED CHIC IF SHE WORE SAFE CLOTHES, AND GIANNI PUT THE SEX IN YOUR FACE."

the subject is off limits, she has spoken in the past about her on-off-on again cocaine use as a way of cauterizing her unresolved grief. An intervention staged by Elton John and her children in 2004 may have saved her life; it certainly appears to have saved the company. After emerging from rehab, she set about restructuring Versace. It's been on an upward trajectory ever since, influenced and inspired by Gianni's legacy, but not trapped by it. "He was a very controversial designer because he put sexy in

the face of people," she says. "The woman used to be considered chic if she wore safe clothes, and Gianni put the sex in your face. Sexy woman. That was ingenious when he did that. After him, she no longer had to be afraid of her sexuality, to look sexy and confident."

Briefly in New York City for a charity event at the Whitney Museum of American Art (Versace provides art supplies to disadvantaged children in the United States and China; the drawings are then turned into canvas totes to be sold at its boutiques), Donatella received a call from Janet Jackson, who wanted her to dress the family for Michael's funeral. It was a poignant reminder of Gianni's groundbreaking synthesis of fashion, sex, and rock in the '80s. Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, Cher, David Bowie, Elton John, and Michael Jackson were all styled by Versace long before other labels learned to appreciate the power of celebrity. "Celebrities—the cult—they don't exist before Versace," says Donatella. "This kind of thing, to go and dress a rock band—nobody did that before Gianni did." More often, in fact, talent scouting was Donatella's contribution, a role she now delegates to her children. "Being with children is not really about relaxing, it's about learning," she says. "They give you so much information: 'Did you see that? Did you hear this?'" Who does she admire today? She thinks for a moment. "Kate Bosworth is very interesting," she says.

If it's hard to get a sense of Donatella's personal life, if her interior world remains so elusive, that's because so much of it is invested in the company and what it represents. "She is so much more focused than when I met her 15 years ago," says documentary filmmaker David Furnish, who is married to Elton John. "She takes her position at Versace very seriously." Does she define the label, or does the label define her? Both, perhaps, since one without the other is impossible to imagine. The lives of the famous, as Maya Rudolph so amply demonstrates, are easily distorted, flattened, or ludicrously embellished, but they are not often understood. "*Happiness* is a word I do not believe exists," Donatella said in her interview with *The New Yorker* two years ago. I'm not sure she would say that today, but she knows that, ultimately, she must rely on her own resources, tenacity, and instincts to survive. What's the best advice anyone has ever given her? "The best advice is the advice you ask for," she says, taking a long, final puff on her cigarette and fixing me with a smile. "I didn't ask for any—yet." ■

learn how to use it."

Stice is miked and the MTV producer totes her video camera from room to room, filming people talking and laughing at the party, Cometto guffawing as she pours ketchup on an open-faced veggie burger and hands it to somebody, Gino getting another scoop of Bowers's legendary potato salad. One post-surgical MTF patient absconds to her room because she isn't out

"THE FIRST TIME I'D SEEN A VAGINA WAS MY OWN—IN THE HOSPITAL."

as trans to friends and family and doesn't want to risk being on camera or included in this story. Cometto fixes a plate and taps on her door to deliver it. "Can you say that again?" the producer asks somebody as she films around the table on the front porch. It was something about the quicksilver nature of gender, and the sun sinks behind a pink cloud.

After dinner I ask Bowers if she thinks the media circus around her and her practice is good or bad for the trannies?

"Oh, totally, it's revolutionized the tolerance and acceptance," she answers without hesitation. "As they say in Hollywood, there's no such thing as bad publicity, and I think that's true of this. Each of these little programs has done a lot to normalize. I'm not sure it's ever going to be quite *normalized* in some people's minds, but at least there's some empathy for what we're all about."

In the meantime, the tranny parade through Trinidad keeps rolling, as Bowers's profile continues to rise. And for Cometto, all that "normalization" can't come soon enough: "It don't matter where we go—New York, Atlanta, Costa Rica—somebody knows Marci. It's scary, and I'll tell you why," she says, dead serious. "I watched a movie the other night about these men, these haters who just want to beat you up. I don't know what I would do if someone did that to Marci, you know, like a plot to get rid of the [GRS] doctor? I would go to prison, because I would take the rest of my life to find that person, and I would kill him." ■

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