

## **The Slimming Effect**

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In early 1999, a few months after I came out as a male-to-female transsexual, I was asked to write a fashion column for a goth webzine. The high concept, which tickled the editor several shades of pink, was this: *Sherilyn...writing a fashion column!* Nobody thought to ask if I actually *knew* anything about the topic. It was accepted as a given that the most approachable transsexual (transvestite, drag queen, female impersonator, whatever it was I called myself, they weren't going to split hairs about a boy in a dress) in the San Francisco goth scene would have plenty to say. Weren't people like me always talking trash about other peoples' clothes and style?

Being reduced to a catty-queen stereotype was more than a little offensive, and in terms of practical knowledge, being asked to write on fashion made as much sense as asking me to write about quantum physics. Hell, after a few hours at the library I could probably fake the physics thing, but I had not a damn thing to say on the subject of fashion.

I agreed to do the column, since it got me an email address I'd been coveting, any reason to write was a good thing, and who knew? Maybe I'd actually learn something about fashion in the process. I had pretty cool name for it, too: The Slimming Effect. (It's the answer to the unasked question, "Why does Sherilyn always dress in black?") I managed to pound out a column and a half before the 'zine imploded in a cloud of conflicting egos. This was a relief, since my creative well had run dry after thinking up

the title. Best of all, I got to keep the email address. But fashion, also known to my estrogenating brain as "how to dress on the outside like the girl I was on the inside," remained a great mystery.

Being born in 1973 didn't help. By the time I realized that the male thing wasn't quite right for me and I started paying attention to how women looked, the Reagan Era was in full swing. The order of the day was *excess*. What was the point of consuming if you weren't going to be conspicuous about it? The fashion influence of *Dynasty* alone caused more damage to the culture than *Beavis and Butt-Head* or *South Park* could have hoped to in later years: big makeup, heavy on the scary rouge. Big permy hair. Big fugly jewelry. Big floppy bow ties made from scarves. *Shoulder Pads*. Shoulder pads were confusing and frightening, making me want to run deeper into the closet like a spooked tabby cat. I couldn't figure out why a girl would wear something that made her look like a football player. I still don't get it.

I knew what I liked when I came out, but as much as I appreciated how Shirley Manson looked on the cover of the June 1997 issue of *Spin* (beautifully pale and scrawny, her eyes dark and her hair tousled, a strung-out kewpie doll), that was a million miles from the monochrome jigsaw that was my face and body. I had no idea what to do beyond attempt to find clothes which fit and weren't overtly male. Those rare moments when something actually clicked (usually the occasional top) were revelatory, pieces suddenly if briefly coming together. Whatever it was, I would buy as many as I could.

Aside from those fleeting moments of victory, shopping was a miserable experience. It felt like a snipe hunt. Lots of trannies claimed it was their most favorite thing to do, since, well, girls like to shop, right? Many an online profile of a new girl

contained lines to that effect: “HOBBIES: *shopping, of course \*giggle\**.” Not me. It was a necessary evil, but I could achieve the same emotional effect by staying home and jabbing a fork into my eye.

It's not that I didn't want to be fashionable, to wear stylish clothes, to look good. I did, very much. While some trannies were focused on surgery as the answer to all their problems, I knew that my immediate appearance was going to determine whether I was parsed as female. I'd even managed to acquire a few simple black velvet dresses from places like Ross, affectionately known in some circles as Cross-Dress For Less. I was fine for clubbing, but daily wear remained an issue. (Years would pass before I felt comfortable wearing clubwear on a daily basis.)

I had recently dropped down to one hundred and sixty pounds from a peak of three hundred, but I was six feet tall and had only been on hormones for a few months, with no breast growth to speak of. Even though I was relatively skinny, mine was not a body shape which existed to manufacturers of women's clothing. The few companies which made larger sizes logically assumed that their customers were genetic females, and would thus be contoured like genetic females. It's possible to fake such things, but in my obstinance, I would no sooner wear breast or hip padding than I would wear a wig. My long, thick hair was one of my few natural assets, and I was proud of it. Of course, since irony is the motivating factor of my universe, people often complimented me on what they assumed to be a wig.

It would have been different if I had been about eight inches shorter, or even six-- but as long as I'm fantasizing, why not go nuts and drop my height down to 5'4"? If I could have walked into Forever 21 and said, *i'll take it*, there's no doubt in my mind that I

would have been a shopping fiend, the clotheshorse to end all clotheshorses. I would have been a goddamned clothes stampede. As it was, I towered over the average customer at the stores with the clothes I liked. I couldn't shop off the same rack as them, but I could tell when their roots were starting to show. Shopping was too frustrating and painful to pretend that I got all giggly about it just because of the stereotype.

When something fit, it was by accident, not design. "To fit" was a relative verb. Even if something wasn't overly snug in the shoulders, if I could raise my arms without fear of the seams ripping--and I've destroyed a number of nice jackets prematurely due to shoulder erosion--the sleeves would never be quite long enough. Cold wrists were something I'd have to learn to live with if I wanted to wear women's jackets.

Shoulder and arm issues are also why I developed an affinity for tank tops and sleeveless blouses (*blouses, not shirts anymore, blouses*): they didn't draw attention to the fact that my arms were so long I could scratch my ankles without bending over. Okay, not really, but that was the impression I felt was created by sleeves which barely made it past my elbows. I was the inverse of the Rockwellian image of the small girl playing dressup in front of a full-length mirror, barely visible under her mother's clothing and requisite large floppy hat.

What were designed as knee-length hems on genetic girls went considerably higher on me, and a complex about my height kept me from enjoying the miniskirt effect. I didn't *want* to be leggy, to have what I felt were my disproportionately long gams emphasized. I wasn't auditioning for *Dreamgirls* anytime soon. Tall boots eventually helped me achieve the illusion of proportion. Flats, of course. I never wore heels, because I was plenty tall already, thank you very much. What's more, women's shoes in

my size (lucky number thirteen, women's) that weren't fugly lunchlady shoes were almost always extra-high heels, since it was assumed that only genetic males would need fashionable women's shoes in that size, and strictly for fetish/drag stuff.

The editor and I went thrifting a few times, and she got frustrated because I didn't try on as many things as she did. I tried to explain that thrift stores tended to have far less decent clothing in my size than regular retail stores since they were governed by the law of the secondhand jungle. As usual, the law was slanted heavily towards the bias of the enforcers, in this case the (inevitably) tiny girls working the purchasing counter.

She accused me of being "negative," as though the reason a Petite Size 2 skirt which looked barely larger than my hand didn't fit was because I didn't have enough faith. After all, *she* could wear plenty of stuff, right? So what the hell was *my* excuse for not trying? Out of necessity, this admonishment was often delivered with her head craning upwards so she could see my face.

Being a head taller on average than the girls around me was a *good* thing, she insisted, because I was "like a supermodel." Ugh. The fucking "S" word, the bane, the copout, the extreme condescension. This is not to say I had a problem with supermodels in general. I had a crush on Christy Turlington, and I thought the controversy around them was a bit absurd. Critics made it sound like teenage girls didn't have eating orders before that Calvin Klein ad campaign. Then again, I never thought Kate Moss looked *too* skinny. She looked the way I wanted to look, but I had neither the willpower not to eat nor the intestinal fortitude to stick a finger down my throat and yak said intestines out. And even if I *did* make it down to skin and bones, my bones were not small.

The popular if anecdotal belief that supermodels were tall didn't do me any favors. For starters, weren't their clothes *custom-made* for them? Sure, what they wore while grocery shopping was probably a bit more modest in origin, but they were still genetic females and I wasn't. Even if Kate was taller than the average girl (which I doubted), it's unlikely that she was ever called "barrel-chested," as I had been ego-shatteringly described a few years earlier.

I quickly learned there was no point in bringing up the genetic issue, since the preordained response was a smirk, an eyebrow raised in victory and: "How do you KNOW none of them were born male?"

The short answer: "Because I'm a goddamned psychic. Bite me."

The long answer: "Ever heard of Caroline Cossey, also known as Tula? Beautiful, highly successful model whose career was destroyed when the tabloids discovered that she was transsexual. She was very passable, had had surgery, was undetectable clothed or naked, but it didn't matter—suddenly, nobody could see past the fact that she quote-used-to-be-a-guy-unquote. Besides, even in the unlikely event that a tranny has become successful in today's climate without her past being discovered and made public knowledge, I seriously doubt she would be built like me, so the speculative possibility of a tranny supermodel doesn't do me much good. Besides, I'm a goddamned psychic. Bite me."

As an overall style, going goth felt natural. It appealed to my existing sense of aesthetics—I was aware of the slimming effect long before I'd ever heard the word

“goth”--and the scene itself was open to gender fluidity, the confusion over the difference between me and the boys in skirts and eyeliner notwithstanding.

For as unkind as genetics had been in terms of skeletal structure and metabolism, I got fairly lucky with my face, which was never especially masculine to begin with. I had my hair cut and colored in the standard-issue Bettie Page style several months before I came out as transsexual--causing no small amount of strife with my mother, who was deeply troubled to see her youngest son wearing such a blatantly feminine haircut--and electrolysis was slowly eliminating my facial hair.

My conscious role model was my friend Rudha, a tiny goth girl. Though she'd long since moved away, the few pictures I had of her were my aesthetic inspiration. I wanted to be her when I grew up. That she was about ten inches shorter than me and actually knew what the hell she was doing was irrelevant. I mean, I was conscious of the disparity between us, damnit, but if Rudha could do it, so could I, damnit. I was like a dog who thinks it's a person.

Though the occasional girl (such as the editor) would develop a momentary fascination with me and promise to take me shopping for clothes and makeup, their interest would burn out as quickly as it had flared up, leaving me in the same vacuum as always. Growing up, I didn't have any sisters or local female cousins or even casual female friends beyond the second grade. My first girlfriend, though supportive of my transitioning even after we broke up, was not necessarily the most fashion-literate creature on the planet, and couldn't offer much help.

So I was more or less on my own, trying to figure out how I could somehow manage something sorta kinda close to how I wanted to look, even if you had to squint

and use your imagination some. Like any other special effect, it was smoke and mirrors, the success of which depended on the spectator's willful suspension of disbelief. Nothing ever quite worked, though. It was always...false, as special effects are by definition.

*I* was false, an approximation, an attempt to be something I wasn't. Yet the something which genetics and most forms of logic suggested I *was*--a boy—wasn't me at all. In spite of how much simpler it was to dress as a boy (easy to find clothes that fit, no pressure whatsoever, I could look as schlumpy as I please and nobody gave a shit), I was absolutely not going back in *that* direction.

For all the frustration, I tried to be conscious of it as a period of experimentation and discovery, to enjoy the adventure as best as I could. Since Rudha was elsewhere, the closest thing I had to a makeup guru--and the *only* person to fulfill a promise of assistance--was an enigmatic little goth boy who called himself c0g. He lived out of town and I didn't see him often, but one trip to Rite Aid to stock up on supplies (I still have the receipt dated January 24, 1999) and an hour of patient instruction was enough to get started, and I'll be forever grateful.

c0g said he envied me for starting out, that he missed the sense of excitement from his early days. He was not a tranny girl and he understood better than most that I did not identify as male in any way, but the sentiment still rang true. For as much as attempting to find my style sucked at times, that I had the opportunity to do so at all was pretty wonderful. It felt like I was exploring uncharted territory and could fall off the edge of the world at any moment, but that was part of the thrill. If I wasn't going to take risks, I may as well have remained a boy.

As 1999 progressed and I continued to stick out like the sore thumb I was, I began to care less and less about how I looked in terms of fitting in. I *didn't* fit in, I *couldn't*, so why bother?

One of my favorite pictures of myself is from Shrine of Lilith, my preferred goth club. It was August, by which point I was bored with the few black velvet dresses I owned. Instead, I was jarringly resplendent in red and black stripey tights, sheer black knee-high stockings (which were calf-high on me), gray bicycle shorts, a *Mystery Science Theater 3000* t-shirt, a leather jacket, my long black hair under a black beret I'd unintentionally inherited from Rudha, dark glasses, white makeup and thick black eyeliner as lipstick. Sitting next to me is my friend Serena, a goth girl who looks the part.

In contrast to Serena's luminescence, I appear neither fish nor fowl, not necessarily goth or girl, not following any known standards yet improbably beautiful. Most people are embarrassed by old pictures of themselves attempting to look contemporary, though in this case, the sheer *wrongness* of my look transcends time. After all, there's never been an epoch in which wearing stripeys and bicycle shorts qualifies as fashionable. Far from embarrassed, I'm rather proud of it. I remember being in a good mood that night, and even though I'm wearing sunglasses--non-prescription sunglasses, inside a goth club, after midnight--it shows. Rather than being tortured by my alienness and evident inability to wear clothes that match, I'm rolling with it.

The only cringeworthy aspect is that I couldn't blend makeup for shit: the stark white ends abruptly halfway down my neck. I got better at it with practice, as I did that look a lot.

Along with the clothes (most of the time), I'd happily embraced the gothling makeup aesthetic, though my faux-chiaroscuro interpretation was a few years out of style: the most unnaturally pale skin I could manage with the darkest lips and eyes. I used Manic Panic Dreamtone Foundation (Violet) for the former and the late, lamented Street Wear Tar eyeliner for the latter two. The foundation was intended for use on skin of the opposite tone, which for violet was sallow and yellowish. My skin was already pale and light, not especially sallow at all, and the foundation gave my face a slight purplish hue. We're not talking Violet Beauregarde levels, but it was there. I. Looked. *Weird*. I know it now, I certainly knew it then, and I did it anyway, because I wanted to. I liked what I saw when I looked in the mirror, and that was only the barometer I could trust. Some friends fretted politely, and let out not-so-secret sighs of relief when I evolved to a more natural look, but their approval (or lack thereof) didn't matter.

Paradoxically, there was something comforting about the extremeness of my appearance. It was a mask I hid behind, even though the anonymity of a mask is arguably compromised when nobody else is wearing one.

Seven years later and the mask has gone away, though I occasionally trot it out for nostalgia's sake. c0g was right; I do miss the heady sense of experimentation and exploration of those days, and tend to remember that more than the frustration. Even the frustration served a higher purpose, though, as it was a necessary step in figuring out not just who I was, but how I would look.

I'm not a fashion expert and never will be, but I continue to know what I like, and I can actually write about it when asked.

Shopping still sucks, though.



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