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# Stories ...

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by

[Andy Hollis](#)

A light-hearted romp describing what it's really like to grow up furry.

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by

# Ellie Dauber

From the TG-Fiction List, a scientist and a lawyer take a two week vacation for a friendly fishing competition -- and to test a new miracle drug. The drug works ...

**CAUTION: This story contains graphic depictions of sexual activity.**

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE



by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

The romantic tragedy of the birth of a superhero.

This is the third and final series of chapters.  
This segment includes parts seven through nine.

NOTE:

The author offers this as an open universe now that the initial story is ended and TSAT will offer prizes for the best stories submitted. Check out next issue's contest page for details -- and don't forget to submit to this month's story contest.

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# SKIN DEEP

by

[Mark McDonald](#)

In a future world, where the United States of America is no longer a world power, college students still find ways to entertain themselves. In this case, it's breaking into a warehouse to steal some "skins," hi-tech bodysuits that re-write the genetic structure.

**CAUTION:** This story contains graphic language.



# Thanks for All the Memories



by

# Charles M. Bonanno

An accountant cooks the books until he gets cancer. His employers decide to introduce him to the scientific genius who will cure him before he gets religion and rats them out. Conveniently, this helps everyone, just not in the way anyone wanted or expected, except maybe good old doc Merit.

This too is a serialized story and part three of four is offered here.

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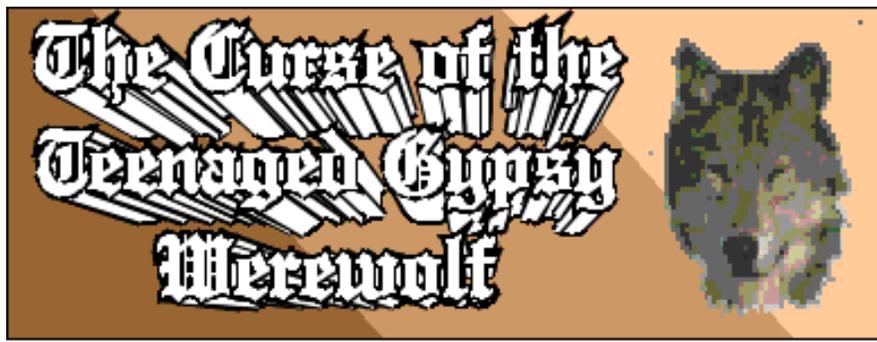
We're waiting for you to submit it.

Click on the above to check out the rules and the image for our latest story contest, then write a story about it.

P.S. The typo in the title is intentional.

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by  
[Andy Hollis](#)



None of this would have happened if it hadn't been for Danny Conroy and his stupid book. Because of that book he stood up in the middle of Mrs. Gutierrez's math class and hollered out, "I know what Trevor is, he's a werewolf." The red flush on his cheeks matched his bright orange hair.

I didn't say anything, I didn't have to, the whole class broke up. All things considered, being called a werewolf was a lot better than some of the insults thrown my way.

"Mr. Conroy, whether or not Trevor is a werewolf is not a concern of ours. The problem is fractions not mythology."

"But it says so in my book. Werewolves have eyebrows that meet in the middle of their foreheads, and just look at him. His do. And they also have fourth fingers that are longer than the third. See?"

At that point I held up my hand and spread out my fingers. My ring finger wasn't longer than the third, but it was the same length, and my first finger was shorter almost as short as the pinky.

"Danny, I said to leave Trevor alone. This is not the time to pick on anyone because of his looks. Since you have solved one problem, there are three more on the board that are waiting for your attention."

"But the full moon is next week, and what if he kills someone? 'Werewolves have yellow or green eyes....' See? Look how green Trevor's eyes are."

That did it. I turned in my chair, flashed Danny my best grin, made sure he noticed my canines and said, "You know I'm gonna start with you if you don't shut up."

"I'm not scared of you, Williams."

"Boys, Danny, you have a choice. Anything else on the subject of werewolves you have to say will wait until the end of class or you can tell Principal Anderson. The problems on the board - now," she insisted pointing.

Of course Danny wasn't scared of me. I've always been the shortest kid in class ever since I can remember. I'm twelve years old, in the seventh grade and I'm still four foot nothing and fifty pounds in my hiking boots.

The problem is no one can pin me down; I don't fit in anywhere, and they don't like that - not the teachers, not the administrators and definitely not the other kids. On cards and attendance charts for school my race is listed as "other". So my skin is a bit dark - a permanent sun tan, right? My hair is black, thick as wool and curls on a moment's notice -- and my eyebrows do meet in the middle. I'm not bad looking, but I'm not white although my Mom is, and I'm not black. I am ignored by everyone, except for a few idiots like Danny.

Four years ago, when I was in the third grade, a caravan of Gypsies pulled through town in their brightly painted wagons. They were having a celebration of the old ways and customs, and my class went to see the exhibit. I loved it. I thought the clothes were great, and I really wondered about my Dad, whoever he was, because if someone had put a gold ring through

my ear and a bandana on my head I would have blended right in the with Roma kids.

During the show a couple of the kids started talking to me in their own language. I just shook my head. "Sorry?"

We talked for a while in English. They were asking me a lot more questions than I asked them, but it was only for a moment before their mother rushed them away from me. She turned and glared at me with such hatred I will never forget it. I was scared, and I had no idea what I had done to make her feel that way.

Of course my class noticed the same thing that I did, and for the rest of the year if anything turned up missing they always blamed me, because I was a Gypsy and Gypsies steal. That night, after I bugged her enough, Mom did tell me that my dad was from some East European county but he was not a Rom. I made it a game anyway and I remember getting mad when she wouldn't let me get a big gold earring.

Danny kept his mouth shut the rest of the day, but no one else did. By last period, I was starting to hear the werewolf bit from everyone, at least in the seventh grade. I tried to make it a joke, and I growled a bit when someone yelled out, "Hey, Wolfman."

That grew old, quick.



"But it's true. It says so right here," Danny said and read from his book. "See? It's not just me that says it. Trevor Williams is a werewolf and he could kill someone."

In a way I almost admired the way Danny had taken this to be his mission in life, protecting the world from werewolves, but I just wished he had picked on someone else. I had no friends as it was, and this only made matters worse because it seemed that a lot of the kids believed him.

Even though I had learned from long experience to keep my mouth shut, there were times it got to me. "Give it a rest, Conroy," I told him. "If I'm that dangerous how many people have I killed?"

The whole school yard turned silent. Danny looked around, and swallowed. "I don't know."

"So why can't I be a cool werewolf like in the movies? Remember Teen Wolf?" Maybe I could get on the basketball team or track. I'd be a natural. You know how fast wolves can run? We'd be State Champions for sure."

"Werewolves are killers - monsters! It says so in my book."

"So? When was that book written? Eighteen hundred? Things change you know, and so do werewolves."

"No, it's not that old," he said flipping through to the title page. "Nineteen twenty-two."

"It's still an antique and you believe that stuff? I know a book that says the world is flat. Do you believe that? It was in a book." I did hear a couple of the kids laughing and with me for a change.

"It's not funny," Danny said. "He's a killer."

"Yeah, right. How can I kill people when everyone's bigger than me? Okay, maybe I won't be a star runner, but if nothing else, I bet I'd make a great school mascot."

Everyone at recess cracked up. Danny's face flushed a bright red. "The full moon is next Thursday and if we don't do something someone will die."

"So what should we do?" Johnny Adams, class president and definitely the coolest kid in the seventh grade spoke up. "Get a gun and shoot him with a silver bullet because of some book?"

"No," Danny answered quietly.

"Okay, does anyone here really believe Trev is a werewolf?"

About half the kids raised their hands. "Danny's book is right about him, John," someone said. "Look at his eyebrows."

"Maybe the book is right," Johnny said and glanced around the playground. The other kids only shrugged. "Maybe werewolves are real. But this mess is getting out of hand, here. The next full moon is Thursday? Then let's see how real this book is. Trev, what if we go out to the park Thursday night and watch the moon rise? You, me and Danny."

"Fine with me," I said with a shrug. "But when I don't turn into a wolf I want Danny to apologize to the whole school about me."

"That's fair enough. But if you do?"

"We'll bring a picnic so I won't get hungry," I said. "I promise I won't bite even if I do change."

"I'm not going out to the park - at night with him. I don't want to get killed."

"Chicken!" a lot of the kids called out. More clucked and flapped their arms.

"I am not."

"Then it's settled. You come with us Thursday to settle this once and for all, or shut up about the whole thing."

"Okay, but I'm gonna bring protection."

"You're not that pretty," Johnny said. Danny turned a brighter red as everyone laughed at that, too.

That was Friday morning. Even with Johnny's help things only got worse Friday afternoon.

Danny had another bunch of kids with him, mostly younger kids now, but he glared at me from behind his book. "That's him. That's the werewolf."

"Trevor?" one of the kids asked, and several started to laugh. "Get real, Conroy, that kid is so small even if he did turn into a wolf he couldn't hurt a mouse."

"Yeah, we'd be in more danger from him peeing on our legs than biting us."

Danny held up his book. "But it says right here that...."

"Forget the book, geek boy, you could have had us going if you'd said it was the Langdon twins, but not Trev." All of us looked around to make sure those two monsters from the eighth graders weren't in sight.

"Hey, Trevor, you want to play kickball?"

"Yeah," I said and flashed Danny another grin. "Get lost, geek boy."

At least playing with the fifth graders was fun, and I wasn't hopelessly outmatched because of my size. I started to relax when I heard Ted Smith shouting. He was a grade ahead of me, in eighth grade, and big.

"Hey, Williams, who gave you permission to get near my little brother?"

"Leave him alone, Ted. We asked him to play."

"Listen, you little punk, you stay away from these kids, got that? Stick with your own kind, oh, yeah, I forgot, you're the only Gypsy werewolf in school."

I backed away from him, but I had seen that expression on too many faces lately. "It was just a game, Ted."

"Ted," Bobby Smith said. "Leave him alone."

"You'd better watch where you walk, kids, he may have left a mess on the playground. Did you, punk? Did you make a mess on the playground? I'll make a mess out of you if I ever see you within ten yards of my brother again." To emphasize his point, he threw a punch right at my face.

I had no choice but to step aside. I grabbed his arm, spun around and sent Ted flying to the ground. "Oops, I think you missed. Want to stand up and try again?"

"Whoa, can you teach me that?" one of the kids asked as Ted groaned.

"You'd better get lost," Bobby whispered at me before he bent over to help his brother sit up.

"Great game, guys," I said and took off.



Even though I walked to school early Monday morning, kids crowded the playground like so many leaves on the ground. No one said anything to me as I tried to get through the crowd to the door, but Ted and two bigger kids from the eighth grade blocked the way.

"This is it, wolf boy. We don't want you here so you'd better tell your mom to find you another school and quick."

I shook my head. "Man, you're really scared of me, aren't you. It's gonna take three of you to beat me up? What's the matter, Teddy? Too chicken to fight me by yourself? You need them to make you feel big and strong, huh?"

"You gonna take that trash from this little punk, Ted?" One of the others asked.

"Not Ted," said the other. "When you said you wanted us to help you take care of some kid that was bothering you we didn't know it was a third grader. What's the matter, Ted? You some kind of wus?"

Ted's cheeks flushed bright red at that. He stepped forward, and I saw the blow coming long before he threw it. He hit the ground five seconds later.

"You just don't learn, do you?" I asked him then hopped over him to face the others.

"Hey, it's the Karate Kid. You think you can take us, shrimp?"

I shrugged. "One of you, maybe but not both. You're gonna kill me, but one of you is gonna hurt."

They laughed and shook their heads. "You've got guts, kid. I'll give you that. Come back when you grow up."

Teddy stood up with his face a darker red and his fists clenched. "Come on, Josh, Larry, you said you'd take care of him."

"Give it a rest, Teddy boy, we ain't gonna ruin our reps by fighting with babies. Next time you get mad at someone you'd better pick someone in kindergarten. Maybe you could beat up a four year old."

"I don't need you guys to kill him," Ted announced and turned back to face me again.

"Don't do it," Danny yelled from somewhere in the crowd. "You can't hurt him and if he bites you, you'll be a werewolf, too."

"Oh, don't be gross, Conroy. I'd never bite him cause I'd never get the taste of dirt out of my mouth. This is all your fault, you and that stupid book. You're the one that declared open season on me, and I swear if I could turn into a wolf I'd rip you to shreds.

"What about it, Teddy? You're gonna kill me or what?"

Teddy looked around the yard, then shook his head. "Not gonna waste my time on you either." Everyone laughed at that, but I headed for the door as quickly as I could.



I don't know who started it, but at recess, the second I walked outside, someone tried to howl like a wolf. A couple others took it up, and by the end of school I was hearing it everywhere. For the next couple of days I couldn't go anywhere without

a chorus of shrill howls following me.

Thursday afternoon I told Mom that I was going out with some friends for the evening, which surprised her. This was a first for me. I never had friends before, and I didn't want to say that one of them might not live to see the morning.

In self-defense class, they did teach us that these moves, karate, judo, thi chi were just that, for self-defense, but if I could, I wanted more from Danny Conroy than an apology, I wanted blood.

Johnny Adams rang the doorbell at five-thirty on the dot. Mom answered the door before I could and let him in. "It's so good to meet you," she said. "Trevor hasn't had friends over before.

He shrugged, "That's going to change. Isn't it, Trev?"

"Uh, yeah," I said. "Where's Danny?"

"He's going to meet us there. He had some stuff to bring."

"I've got ham and cheese sandwiches packed for you guys, and sodas," Mom said and handed me the basket. "Have a good time."

"We will," Johnny assured her.

The evening was perfect, no clouds, a slight breeze, but it was warm for May. We had less than a month until summer vacation, and I couldn't believe I was really doing this.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked Johnny once had walked down the block. "Do you really believe that stuff about werewolves?"

"That book's got you pegged, Trev, but you know why everyone's doing this?"

I shrugged. "Yeah, they can pick on me now without coming out and saying it's cause I'm different."

"I think it stinks. How long have you been taking judo?"

"Four years, I talked mom into it when they figured out I was Rom. I don't know anything about Gypsies, never wanted to learn either, but I figured someone my size and color had better learn to fight."

Ten minutes later, we crossed over to the city park. Not many people were there, but a few kids were sailing wooden boats on the pond. Johnny skipped a few stones across the water before leading me off the path, to a large circle of trees. I set the basket down on a picnic table.

"Ham and cheese," I told Danny. "You want a sandwich?"

"No, I don't."

"I do," Johnny said and opened the basket. He passed a sandwich to me, then opened the sodas. "What's that stuff?" he asked Danny and pointed to a large grocery bag on the table.

"I'm ready for tonight. See?" He started pulling stuff out of his bag. "I got a silver crucifix and garlic. Lots of garlic."

"And?" I asked him. "You mean that's it?"

"It's enough to keep you in line, wolf boy."

"Don't you watch the movies? Man, that stuff is for vampires, not werewolves. Did you bring a wooden stake for my heart, too? This is rich. There's nothing in that stuff that would stop me from turning you into Purina® Wolf Chow. After all, you brought the flavoring," I said and picked up a garlic clove.

"He's right," Johnny said and punched Danny on the arm. "That book had better be wrong, Conroy or I'll kill you before Trevor does."

"That's okay, I don't think wolves are that picky about who kills the prey animal just as long as they get to eat it."

"But my book says that garlic and silver are good against werewolves, too. The only part I couldn't figure out is the blood-ring. It says a blood-ring will control a werewolf, but it doesn't say how to make one."

I picked up the cross, and shook my head. "Does your Mom know you took this out of the house? I'd toss that book if I were you, Danny boy. That is, if you live to see it again." I looked at his face and bared my canines again. I didn't have to have a wolf's nose to smell Danny's fear. "What's the matter, Danny? It's okay for you to turn the whole school against me cause I'm a *werewolf*, but you can't take this? Why don't you just come out and say it. You're doing this cause I'm not white. I'm different. That's it, isn't it?"

"I don't care what you are as a human, Williams. You're a killer - a monster."

I checked my watch and glanced up at the darkening sky. "We'll find out in a second, won't we?" I said and pointed at the first glimmer of the full moon. I sighed and wished once more that the werewolf thing was real.

Johnny walked over and grabbed Danny's arm. "Don't even think about running away, Conroy. We're gonna watch this together."

I sat down at the table, ate my second sandwich and finished my bottle of Pepsi. "Want a last meal, Danny boy?"

"You sure you want to eat him, Trev? There isn't much meat on these bones," Johnny said and shook Danny's arm.

"Will you two stop it?" Danny demanded.

In due course the moon rose over the trees. True dark wouldn't come for another couple of hours, but the moonlight seemed really intense. "There it is, Danny, and look, I didn't turn into a wolf. Big surprise. You want to tell me what this is really about now?"

Danny shook off Johnny's hold on his arm, and stared at me. "But the book said.... I was so sure."

I opened the basket and reached for another sandwich when the first cramp hit my stomach. I doubled over. "You put something in the sandwiches?"

"No," Danny protested as I held my stomach against another cramp.

"I ate them, too," Johnny said. "What did you do?"

"Nothing. I swear it," Danny said.

I fell back off the bench and rolled on the ground for a second as wave after wave of burning then itching hit my skin. I tried to sit up and Danny screamed as we all saw the fur covering my hands. "What did you do to me?" I tried to ask but it sounded more like growls than words. Another wave of cramps hit me, and I had no choice but to roll over again from the pain.

"He's changing," Danny said. "He's turning into a werewolf! I told you so. He's gonna kill us."

"Trevor? Are you okay?"

I growled at him through a mouth filled with fangs. I looked up and both of them blanched a pale white. I could smell the fear and then the urine as Danny wet his pants. Two second later, the boys ran from the table as fast as they could.

My mouth and body kept stretching and pulling, but the whole thing lasted no more than five minutes. I took in a deep breath, and my brain seemed to explode with a whole new universe of smells and scents. I stood up on four legs, and glanced down at the fur that covered my body and then back to see a long, tail wagging behind me.

It really happened. But.... I felt completely normal. I shook off the remnants of my clothes. Mom was going to kill me for that, but that was later. Here I was, a wolf, and it didn't feel any different from being a human. I couldn't see as well as I could before but my nose made up the difference.

I could still hear Johnny and Danny running down the path, but I had no desire at all to go after them. All the anger and hurt I had felt toward Danny drained away as I took a better look at my new self.

I couldn't stay here. I picked the basket up in my teeth, packed my clothes and sneakers, and Danny's crucifix. I left the

garlic on the table only because there was no more room for it. I sat down on my haunches, and sighed. That stupid book had been right after all. I was a werewolf.

I carried the basket down to the pond, bent over to lap up some water, and spent another moment studying my reflection. Man, I was a handsome wolf, but just that -- a wolf, with a wolf's muzzle and body and not some creature out of the movies. I wasn't that big an animal, but my paws looked huge and I thought I'd grow into the shape eventually.

Although I was small for a wolf, I was still large for a dog, and I didn't want to attract attention just then. I took my stuff into the undergrowth and headed for the park entrance. I trotted a for a while, then had to stop as I caught Danny's scent and not too far away.

Johnny and Danny crouched behind a large set of bushes peering through the thick branches back down toward the pond. I left the basket, and trotted up behind them, and sat down.

People don't have just one scent, they have hundreds that make up the picture my brain was telling me. I could smell everything, their emotions, even the cereal Danny had for breakfast that morning. Both were scared silly.

"Where is he?" Johnny asked.

"How should I know? Maybe he's not coming this way but going after someone else?"

"As mad as Trevor was about you I don't think so. I bet he can follow us with his nose just like a regular wolf."

"No, he can't, Johnny. He's a werewolf, not a wolf with four legs and a tail. He can't smell us."

"No, but I can. What did you do, Conroy? Oh, man, you wet your pants?"

"Shhhhh. He can hear you." Danny said and peered out again. "At least now you believe me. We saw him change."

"Yeah, we did, but where is he?" I saw Johnny stiffen up and he grabbed Danny's arm. "We've been had."

"What are you talking about?" Danny complained as he pulled his arm free.

"He got us and he got us good. What did we see?"

"We saw him turn into a werewolf. You saw how his hands and face got all hairy. He was rolling on the ground so much I couldn't see that much, but you heard him barking."

"I'm going to kill you, Conroy. Think about it. How long have you known Trevor?"

"Since I moved here in fourth grade."

"And he's been a werewolf all that time?"

"Yeah, but I never noticed it until I read that book."

Johnny shook his head. "He turns into a wolf every full moon for five years at least and have you ever heard of any people or kids being attacked by an animal in all that time?"

"No, but maybe he eats them and they just turn up missing."

"Come on, he's not that big a kid, and he can't be that big a werewolf to eat a whole person bones and all."

"Yeah, but what about all those missing dogs and cats?"

"No, they say people are doing that, and still they haven't found any half eaten dog bodies either.... So, what did we see? I'll tell you what happened. Just before he started changing he got something from that basket of his, right? I thought it was another sandwich, but I'm not so sure. I think it was gloves."

"Gloves? What for?"

Johnny siped. "Furry gloves. You said it. He was rolling on the ground so much we couldn't see anything, so he sticks his hands into a pair of furry gloves then puts some fur or something on his cheeks, and we see him *changing* into a wolf. He

set up us like an expert and we both fell for it. He's probably still back there laughing his guts out about this, and tomorrow we are so dead at school."

Danny crumpled to the ground. "I'm gonna kill him. I fell for the whole thing. We both did."

"You aren't going to touch him, got that?"

"But he got both of us."

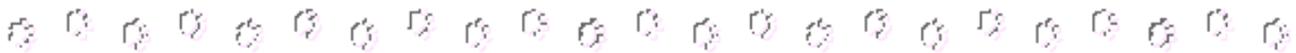
"Yeah, and we both deserved it. If you ever say one word about that book again, I am going to make you eat it, page by page. Got that? Come on, you'd better get home and get out of those wet pants. I'll go back and check the picnic table...." Johnny said then stopped as he turned and saw me.

My tail thumped on the ground behind me, and I whined for attention. Here I was a real live werewolf, and all I really wanted was for someone to scratch my ears.

"It's him," Danny said. "Trevor? He's gonna kill me!"

"Chill, Conroy, it's just a puppy," Johnny said and held out his hand for me to sniff. "Looks like he wants to play with someone. There, that's the puppy," he said and rubbed my head, and scratched my ears for a bit.

After the others had left, I retrieved my basket and headed for home.



Dogs howled, growled and barked their fool heads off every step of my way home. I skulked home, tail between my legs, trying not to be seen by anyone. People did come out to shut up their pets, but there were enough large bushes and trees around to give me cover.

Our house sort of rambles over the lot, and for the first time in my life I was grateful for the row of hedges and bushes that surrounded the house for Mom's privacy. At least, I didn't have to trim the things yet. I ducked back to the back yard, and I would have blushed if I could have when I automatically left my mark on one of the trees.

I sniffed a couple of times at the back of the house, then dug down into the dirt to expose a problem I'd have to tell Mom about in the morning - termites. I climbed the back steps and found the infestation was just starting, but we did have mice nesting in the kitchen walls. I dropped the picnic basket off in the porch by the washing machine, and pushed my way inside the back door.

But the question was what do I do now? If all the movies were right, I would turn back to myself in the morning and I didn't want to be too far away from home, but I didn't want Mom seeing me like this either. If she did catch me, I just hoped she would wait until the human me got home to ask me about the dog, rather than just calling animal control.

A real wolf, I figured, would be out hunting dinner, but I hadn't the slightest idea how to go about hunting, and I didn't want to. I did have the ham and cheese earlier. So, besides scaring every dog in town, what was there for me to do?

The doorbell rang. I heard Mom get up from the TV to answer it. A moment later, I heard Johnny asking, "Hi, Mrs. Williams? Is Trevor home, yet?"

"No, he isn't. I thought he was with you?"

"Uh, yeah, he was, but we kind of split apart. I really need to ask him something so could you ask him to call me when he gets home?"

"Does he have your phone number?" Mom said and I heard her rummaging around for a piece of paper.

I took the chance, and slipped down the back hallway to my bedroom while Mom was busy at the front of the house. I jumped up on my bed to look around the room for something I could take with me that might keep me busy the rest of the night. I nosed around on my desk, tried to grab a baseball but only succeeded in knocking over a stack of books.

The door opened, and Mom stood in the hallway staring at me. I tried to look as friendly as I could and I wagged my tail, hard.

"Trevor?" she asked. If I had thought this through at the time, I never would have nodded my head over and over again. "Oh, Trev, I'm so sorry," she said and walked right up to me. She threw her arms around my neck, and hugged. "You really are a beautiful wolf, but.... Oh, dear Lord, did your friends see you change?"

I shrugged and shook my head. "They saw it but they didn't believe it," I said but still in growls and yips.

"Sorry, sweetie. Okay, in the morning we have to have a long talk about this, but at least, for now, I will try to ask you just yes and no questions, okay?"

How in the world did she figure out it was me? I stared at her. She seemed awfully calm for a Mom who just found out her son was a werewolf.

She must have seen the puzzled expression on my face. "Trev, this isn't the first time you've changed. I had prayed that it would never happen again, but.... I bet you're starved."

I nodded as hard as I could.

"Okay, I'll get something in a sec. What about your clothes? Are they still out in the park where someone could find them?"

This time I shook my head. I lead the way back down the hallway and retrieved the picnic basket from the back room.

"Good thinking. Okay, dinner time." She pulled a package of ground beef from the fridge, opened it, and put half in a cereal bowl on the floor for me. I stared at her, and whined.

"You want me to eat that, raw?"

"What's the matter, sweetie?"

I picked up the bowl and carried it over to the stove. I pulled open the bottom drawer and snagged a skillet.

"You want hamburgers? You're a wolf."

"So?" I whined again. I pulled open the fridge door and retrieved the ketchup and mustard.

"You always liked raw hamburger with a little salt," she said and dipped into the package. She tossed me a ball of raw meat, I snapped it down, then shrugged. That was too good to wait. I buried my nose in the rest of the meat, and gulped. A minute later, I looked up and whined for the rest of the package.

"Not a chance, Trevor. That was pound and a half of ground beef, and I can't afford to feed you like this every night. The full moon will last for three more nights and I'm stocking up on dog food."

I rolled on the floor, gagging until she laughed. "I'll get the good stuff, I promise."



The next morning, I woke up lying curled at the foot of my bed. I yawned a couple of times, and remembered being a wolf. I hoped it was just a dream, but I was in bed without any clothes on, which never happens, and I still smelled like wolf. In fact, I thought, my nose was at least a hundred times sharper than it had been before the change. It was still not as sensitive as it was as a wolf, but this was weird.

My clock read: six AM, and I knew I'd never get back to sleep now. I got up, grabbed my bathrobe and headed for the shower to wash off the animal smell.

After I dressed, I wandered out to the kitchen but found Mom out in the living room waiting for me. She patted the seat on the sofa next to her so I took it.

She picked up a large metal box from the floor and put it on her lap. "Trevor, I know I should have told you this before now,

but I never could think of anyway to begin. This is a picture of your father."

I snatched the portrait from her hand and stared. The man in the picture was tall, had dark brown almost black hair and steely blue eyes. He smiled for the camera, and I saw no trace of Rom or anything exotic in his face at all. His eyebrows didn't meet in the middle, and his hands were normal. "But...."

"I have no idea why you look the way you do, sweetie. There must be some Gypsy in his background, but I never would have guessed. If it is Gypsy and not something else all together.

"I was a political science major just getting out into the work force when I met him. I was young, and he was dashing. He was an ambassador's aide for the Russian Embassy. The cold war was just ending, and it was an exiting time for all of us. I fell head over heels for him. He stayed with me a month. It was an grand romantic affair but over before I knew it. He never knew I was pregnant when he left. I tried to find him when the doctor told me the news, but the name he gave me, which to me sounded so mysterious and almost dangerous is about as common as John Smith is here.

"This is something I should have done a long time ago, Trev, but I kept hoping the issue would never come up again." She opened the box and pulled out an oversized photo album. "For what it's worth, this is our family."

"We have a family?" I asked, stunned. A few seconds later, I found out I had grandparents, two uncles, an aunt and five cousins. Judging from the pictures I bet there wasn't a werewolf among them. They all lived back East - Boston High Society, no less, and I could just picture the expression on their faces if they ever saw me.

Mom agreed with that guess, and flipped through the pages. "This is the one I wanted you to see, sweetie. This is your first baby picture."

I must have stared at the picture, with my mouth wide open for an hour. I didn't want to believe it, but I couldn't see how the picture had been faked. There was a baby boy, lying on his back in a hospital crib, wearing a diaper only, and covered from head to toe with hair - thick, brown hair that was matted at places enough to resemble fur. The baby had teeth, not sharp but there, and the beginnings of claws on his fingers and toes.

"You were born a puppy," she said and placed a hand on my shoulder. "The hospital staff was very good about keeping this quiet, but it was an effort getting you home without having the doctors turn you into a test subject first."

That's me, I thought, and the realization finally hit home. "But?"

"My mother and father both agreed that you were an abomination - their word, sent by the Lord of punish me for the affair I had with the Russian spy. I took you and moved out here shortly after that, and I never spoke to them again.

"It was hard, baby, really hard. I was cut off from the family finances, I did have the education and the experience to get a good job, but I had to listen to everyone dear to me insist that I give you up for adoption. That was not an option. You were my son, no matter what you looked like, and I wasn't buying it."

She turned the page. The pictures now showed me growing to be more and more a puppy. I saw my face start to stretch into a full muzzle, and I even saw the beginnings of a tail on my backside. By the time I turned one I was a puppy, no getting around it - four legs, tail and fangs that would make any wolf mother proud.

"In some ways, I thought this would be easier for you. You were so fun to have as a puppy, very affectionate and always wanting a cuddle. You followed me everywhere and I no longer had to worry about explanations to the neighbors about your 'condition'. But, on your second birthday I noticed that you were getting a little less furry and a few weeks later you actually had a bald patch. It took six months, but look, you were a baby again."

Sure enough, I saw myself as a baby boy, no hair, no teeth, and tan skin. "I was a baby twice?"

"Yes, you were, and you have been growing, sort of, but that's one reason why you are so much shorter than your school mates. You were newborn sized at two and a half, but the school system wouldn't wait for you to catch up."

She looked at me, and stroked my cheek. "How are you doing with all of this?"

"It's a lot to take in, Mom. Give me a break? It's weird. I mean, I always thought being a werewolf would be different -- you know, special like having an adventure. But last night, I changed into a wolf, came home, had dinner and watched TV until

bedtime. I do that every night. I didn't need to be a wolf."

"No, but this isn't the movies, Trev. The last thing I would permit is adventures."

"Why?"

She smiled. "How do all the werewolf movies and stories end?"

"With the werewolf being shot with a silver bullet."

"Yes, precisely. The problem is that this is real life. What can we trust to be accurate about those stories? You and I both know that you aren't dangerous, but suppose you go wandering and a hunter spots you, or a farmer who thinks you're after his livestock? Suppose we find out the hard way that regular bullets will kill you not just silver as in the stories."

"I didn't think of that."

"That's what mother's are for. You aren't going outside without a collar and I will take you to the vet tonight to get a rabies shot and tag."

"Mom," I said. "I don't need a shot."

"No, but Duke the wolf dog, does. What do you want for breakfast?"

"Not dog food, that's for sure or raw hamburger. Oh, by the way, save the money for the vet, we've got termites in the back porch and two nests of mice in the kitchen. I hope having my scent around will scare them off, but I'm not a cat, and I won't eat them."

She laughed, "Why am I not surprised? Only you would turn into a wolf that's a picky eater."



Kids from every class in the middle school waited for me, leaving no room in the playground to get through. As soon as I did get show up, Johnny Adams led a huge round of applause for me. I blushed, then took a bow.

"And the Oscar for best actor goes to -- Trevor Williams for his role in...."

"Curse of the Teenaged Gypsy Werewolf," I filled in.

"Right," he said with a laugh. "You were great. I mean, I have never been set up and had like that before and I hope I never am again." He went on to describe the scene to a rapt audience. I spotted Danny hiding away at the back of the crowd.

"... I didn't look in that basket of his to see if he brought anything with the food. But he did. He had a pair of gloves, and something for his face. He took them out and started getting stomach cramps. He said he thought Danny had poisoned him, or something and then he went into convulsions. He was perfect, rolling around on the ground and moaning in pain, he slipped the gloves on his hands. We see them and think his hands turned into paws, then he seemed to be growing fur on his face. Finally, he started growling and both of us freaked. Danny pissed his pants, and we ran like frightened rabbits since we *saw* Trev turning into a wolf. We hid behind these bushes for half an hour or so, but he never came after us."

"I was laughing too hard to chase you guys, and if you got a good look at my 'fur' you would have seen how lame it was."

"Danny really wet his pants?" Someone asked and most of the kids started clapping for me again.

"Yeah," I said. "I heard him do it."

"I had to stay next to him behind those bushes and I smelled it," Johnny added.

I saw the glances everyone threw at Danny, and realized that the role of victim had just been passed on. "I didn't want to get you, John, but it was the only way to get Danny and that stupid book. Hey, Conroy, boo. I'm a werewolf!"

"Hope you're wearing diapers, Conroy, cause I don't want to smell you in math class."

Now that the great werewolf adventure was over, as far as everyone at the school was concerned, I found myself falling back into my usual anonymity quickly. When I was called to Principal Anderson's office in the middle of the last period, I thought it had to be a mistake.

Danny sat at one chair in the office, and Mr. Anderson waved me to another. "Come in, Trevor. It seems that Danny has been in several fights today and he says that you are to blame. I wanted to hear your side of the story."

"Danny's got this book on werewolves...."

"Oh really? Which one? I've always studied the supernatural," Anderson interrupted me. Danny told him. "That's a good one. Not as much detail as Sommers or Sabine-Gold but good. And?"

"Right in the middle of math class, Danny told the whole world I was a werewolf."

"I can see that," he said and stared at me. "Your eyebrows really do meet in the middle. I've never seen that before. Let me see your hands? Your teeth? Your eyes are green enough and your ears are slightly pointed. How long have you been here?"

I could smell the man's growing excitement. This could be a problem. "Since the fifth grade, and I've always looked like this."

"The signs are so clear, I'm surprised I never noticed them before. Then what happened?"

"The whole school turned against me, except for Johnny Adams." I told him the rest of the story.

"So, you say you didn't change into a werewolf just used gloves and fake fur?"

"It was lame but it worked, and I wasn't the one that spilled the news about your accident, Danny."

"I know but now the whole school is picking on me."

"How old are you, Trevor?" Mr. Anderson cut in.

"I'll be thirteen in August, why?"

"Because this is just that time that you would start changing. This is incredible."

"Come on, Mr. Anderson, you don't believe all that stuff, do you?"

"I'm not sure what to believe. Did you change into a wolf last night?"

"Of course I did. I'm a werewolf - right, Danny?"

"Okay, I get the point. I started this whole mess, and I'm getting it back doubled. I'm really sorry about this Trevor, and it's like really hard to say this." He stuck out his hand and I shook it.

"Okay, since that is settled, what are you doing tonight, Trevor?" Mr. Anderson asked me.

"Like when the moon rises? I'll be out hunting for fresh meat."

"I'd like to see that."

I shrugged. "Only if you don't mind getting torn into bite sized pieces. Can we go now?"



"Here," Mom said the second I walked through the kitchen door. "Put these on."

She handed me a medium sized dog collar and a separate flea collar to go with it. I slipped them over my head without a

comment, and started to adjust the fit. She stopped me and asked to wait until after the change for that.

"The moon is due to rise at 5:45 tonight. You want a snack?"

"Yeah, but no doggy biscuits until later, okay?" She flashed a grin and I knew I had caught her.

At five thirty, I wandered back to my room, stripped off my clothes and stretched out on my bed to wait. I reached for my stereo to put on a CD when the doorbell rang. I padded over to the door to my room and poked my head out as Mom answered the bell. Then, I closed the door, gently and cursed as I caught Mr. Anderson's scent.

I opened the window to the back yard, climbed out on the sill and closed the window behind me before jumping down to the grass. I would never complain about trimming those hedges again, I thought as I ran for cover. I froze half way there when I realized that Danny Conroy was hiding in the bushes, watching me. I veered over there, dove for cover in spite of the stickers on my bare skin and came up crouching beside him.

"What are you doing here?"

He reached over and fingered my collar. "You're out here with nothing but a flea collar on, and you're asking me what I'm doing?"

"Anderson's inside, and I can't let him catch me. Look," I said with a long sigh since I felt the first twitch in my tummy. "Your book was half right."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not a were - wolf, okay? I'm a were - puppy dog. That was me last night, the puppy that Johnny played with? If I wanted to hurt you I could have done it then, but that was the first time I ever changed in my life and I just wanted my ears scratched."

"But that's impossible. My book says that people don't turn into real animals like that."

"I told you it was half right. That means it's half wrong in real life. I'm gonna start changing in a minute and you can see for yourself, but please - please don't freak out. The worst thing I'd do to you is lick you to death."

The twitching grew worse as the moon rose, but I didn't get the cramps I had from the night before. I leaned forward, pressed my hands into the ground and let my body flow into a different shape. It took maybe thirty seconds.

"Oh, Trevor, you are so cute," Danny said and rubbed my head. I licked his face for a moment before he pushed me away. "Now what?"

"We've got to get out of here," I said. "Take me for a walk."

"What for?" he asked back.

"Haven't you ever had a dog? Guess what for, or do you think I can use the boy's room like this?"

"I guess not, but you're gonna go out in front of everyone?"

"I'm a dog, why not? No one's gonna notice except you. Danny?"

"Yeah?"

"This is so weird. Mom couldn't understand me at all last night when I tried to talk to her, but you can?"

"You sound like you usually do. I mean, yeah, I can hear you growling and barking too, but I can understand you."

"This is great. Now you can tell mom not to take me to the vet tonight. Come on."

Mr. Anderson had a small, convertible, parked in front of our house. I led Danny down the block and around a few corners. Once out of sight, in spite of the dogs carrying on, I relaxed and did what I had to do.

As a wolf cub, I stood about as tall as Danny's waist. He walked beside and kept a hand on my collar when people walked close enough to see us. After a while, I found I didn't mind the "good boy" and "sit" routine he put me through, either.

We walked around the block a few times until we saw the convertible pull away from the curb and head the other way. "That was close," I said.

Danny walked me up to the door, and rang the bell. Mom answered the door a second later, took one look at me and threw her arms around my neck.

"Thank heavens you found him. I was so worried. He must have got out from the yard."

"It's okay, Mrs. Williams. Trev asked me to take him for a walk so Mr. Anderson didn't see him. Hi, I'm Danny Conroy. I guess he told you what I did?"

"You were one of the boys with him in the park last night?"

"Yeah, Johnny and me. We saw him start to change last night, and we ran, but Johnny decided what we saw wasn't real."

"Trevor told me about that. Won't you come in?"

"This afternoon, we were both in Mr. Anderson's office," Danny said as she closed the door behind us. "He seemed convinced that Trevor really would change too, so I sort of hid in the back yard to see if I could see anything. Trevor ducked out the window and changed again right in front of me, and he's asking me to tell you that I can understand him when he talks as a puppy."

She looked at me, and I nodded hard.

"He thinks it's a bad idea to go to the vet, tonight."

"That's because he doesn't want a rabies shot. You have to have a license, son, so we can go now or after dinner."

"After dinner. Can Danny go with us?" I asked. Danny translated.

"I guess. You want to call your mom and tell her where you are?"



Mom picked me up and put me on the exam table as the doctor walked into the room. "Hi, I'm Dr. Russell. That is a handsome puppy."

"His name is Duke, and we just picked him up at the breeders, yesterday. I'm sure he needs his puppy shots and a license."

Danny moved aside as the doctor ran his hands along my spine, then my tail and over my head. He stuck a thermometer up my butt, and pulled my lips open to take a quick look at my teeth. After he checked my temperature, he said. "Duke is in excellent health, Mrs. Williams. But may I ask if you are aware of not only the legalities but the problems in owning a timber wolf?"

"Wolf dog, Dr. Russell. His father was a shepherd but his mother was three quarters wolf."

"That maybe what they told you, but there isn't any dog in this one. He's a magnificent animal, and friendly as a puppy, but my best recommendation to you would be to get your money back. There are several good wolf rehabilitation programs to introduce this guy back into the wild, or there are hundreds of zoos that would be willing to take him in."

"It's not illegal to own a wolf in this state, or a wolf dog either, Dr. Russell. I appreciate your concern, but all we really need is his shots and license."

"Okay, champ, I tried. Think he'd let me look in his mouth? Open up, Duke."

I did so to let him get a good look at my teeth. I heard a sharp intake of breath, and at one point he reached inside my mouth, wiggled a tooth and stood back. I looked at Danny. "I hope I don't need fillings as well as shots."

"Something wrong with his teeth, Dr. Russell?" Danny asked.

"Mrs. Williams, what is going on here? This is impossible. Duke has one very small and very human molar growing out of his jaw, and it has a gold filling."

"I had forgotten about that. Do you know how hard it was for me to get him to brush regularly?" Danny laughed. "That happened two years ago, but he hasn't had any cavities since."

"Two years ago? This puppy can't be more than six months old."

"He's twelve, well with a physical age of nine and half, but...." Mom visibly collapsed. "Duke isn't a wolf, or a wolf-dog. I shouldn't have tried to slip that by you, Dr. Russell, but I had to do something. He's my son, Trevor and a werewolf."

"With that tooth I believe you, Mrs. Williams, but...."

"I don't want anyone mistaking him for a dangerous dog, or taking him to the pound. He's not a danger to anyone, you can see that, but he needs to be legal as a dog."

I pulled a pen out of Dr. Russell's pocket. "You got any paper?" Danny translated. A moment later, I wrote out in squiggly letters, "Hi. I'm Trevor."

The vet watched me, read the note then sort of collapsed into a chair. "Okay, okay fine. Now I have seen everything, and I can die a happy man. Trevor?"

I nodded my head.

"Anything else but that could have been faked or taught, I guess, but.... Okay, young man, I can see your Mom's point. You get puppy shots, a rabies certificate and a dog license."



As soon as Mom parked in our driveway, Danny volunteered to take me for another walk.

"That's right, Danny," I told him "A boy's best friend is his werewolf."

He groaned. "That's bad, Trev." He told Mom what I said.

She groaned too and said, "Trevor's always been a sick puppy but now he's got the fur to prove it."

We strolled over to the park, and I found myself acting like any other dog on a leash. I tugged, and sniffed at everything and left my mark on every other bush. Not that I was feeling territorial but there were a lot of people out walking and I didn't want to attract too much attention.

Once on the grass, Danny unhooked the leash and let me run. I took off running for all I was worth just to stretch my legs, and then to explore with my nose. I loped down to the pond to get a drink and to let Danny catch up. Just my luck, I thought as I lapped the water, Mr. Anderson was heading this way as well. I didn't see him too clearly but I did see the silver cross he hung around his neck.

Danny clipped the leash back as I told him about Anderson. He nodded, and we both turned to watch the moonlight on the water.

"Hello, Danny. Good looking dog you have there," Mr. Anderson said and held out his hand for me to sniff. "Have you seen Trevor?"

"Sure, he's right here."

"Cute, but you and I both know that people don't turn into real wolves or little boys turn into puppies. Nor do they get rabies shots."

"But that's to protect him against any rabid were-foxes or were-squirrels we might run into. His name's Duke and I haven't seen Trevor and that cross is great for vampires but not for werewolves."

"And who told you that?"

"Trevor did, and he's the expert," Danny said. I edged closer to Mr. Anderson. "If you see Trev, would you tell him to call me? He's got my number."

I sniffed at Anderson's shoe for a moment before I lifted my leg. With great presence of mind, Danny yanked on my leash and said, "Duke! Bad dog! Bad dog."

Mr. Anderson danced away as he realized what I was about to do.

"I'd better get him back on his walk. Bye, Mr. Anderson," Danny said and quickly pulled me away from the man.

I looked up at him and stuck out my tongue. "And how often am I gonna get the chance to do that and get away with it?"

"You'd get away with it, but I'd be the one in trouble for not controlling my dog. Come on, Rover, we'd better get home." At that point, Danny broke up laughing. "Damn, I wish there was someone else I could tell about this. The look on Anderson's face was so great. Don't worry, I won't tell. I know what people would think."



Saturday morning, I woke cold and cramped from sleeping on the kitchen floor with nothing on but a blanket. I remembered walking out to drink from my water bowl before I went to bed, but I didn't remember much else. After a long stretch I hurried back to my room for some clothes. A guy could catch pneumonia from doing things like that without fur.

Back in the kitchen I poured myself a bowl of cereal, put the water on for Mom's coffee, and opened the fridge for the milk. I looked up then at the side door. Something wonderful was walking down the side path. I was ready and opened the door the second I heard the knock.

A tall man, holding an open can of dog food, stood there, staring down at me and into the house. "Uh, is your Mom home?"

"What is that? It smells great," I said trying not to drool.

"It's a new type of dog food we're trying out. You have a dog?"

"Yeah, but he's at the vet's," I said since I was sure the man could see the water and food bowl on the floor. If there was a dog in the house I'd bet that he'd be at the door trying to get the food. In fact, I thought if I still had my tail it would be wagging. I bent down, took a healthy sniff from the can and frowned.

"You know," I said, "that's mostly juice, bread, corn filler and veggies but very little meat. It smells great, but what is it? Junk food for dogs?"

"It's the latest thing in a healthy diet for dogs large and small...."

I shook my head. "Not even close, mister. I might let Duke have a little of that as a treat, but that's it. Mom won't let me eat chips or things and that's just as bad.... What's wrong with it?" I asked as I noticed a very subtle but distinct chemical odor.

"What are you trying to do? Poison my dog?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with it."

I could smell the change in his emotions and knew he lied to me. He knew what was going on. "You got another can of that? Throw this one away."

"Yes, I have plenty but are you going to buy some?"

"Buy what?" Mom asked from behind me.

"This guy's got dog food, but the can he was showing me is bad."

"I can't smell anything wrong with it," the man said.

"My son has an extremely sensitive nose, and if he says it's bad, it's bad. Is it just that can or all they all bad?"

I took the can in question and put it on the counter trying not to touch it too much. The man opened another can, and I took in another long sniff. "This one's bad too. You'd better get some fresh cans, mister before you start hurting dogs around here."

"Okay, I will." He shook his head, and turned around probably to go next door.

"Don't touch that," I told Mom who was about to throw the can on the counter away. I picked up the phone and dialed the police department. "Hi" I said and gave the lady that answered my name and address. "There's this guy handing out doped cans of dog food here." I told her what happened, and that the guy was probably still in the neighborhood. She said she'd send a car around right away.

"What's going on?" Mom asked as she fixed her coffee.

"That guy knew the can was bad, I could tell, Mom. It's not poison, but I think it's dope. Suppose we had a real dog, and he went after that can of junk food. We'd go out, the dog would conk out and that guy would rip off the house while the dog slept."

"Or the dog," she said and stared at the can. "There have been a lot of missing animals lately."

"The worst thing about it, is I still want some. Man, that smells good. I'm taking my breakfast into the living room."

Two policemen came to the house about ten minutes later. They actually listened to my story and didn't laugh at me. They both tried sniffing the can. One shook his head, but the other frowned. "I think the kid's right. There is something off about this food. We'll get it checked out immediately," the guy said and wrapped up the can.

A little later, the phone rang, and I was almost shocked to hear that it was for me. "Hello?"

"Hi, it's me," Danny said. "You want to come over? My dad's getting some movies for today."

"I'd love to. Just no werewolf movies, okay?"

"You got it."

I didn't know if the moon would be full enough to make me change that evening, but I didn't want to stay too late at Danny's. He walked back with me, in case he would be needed to take me out later.

We found a strange car in the driveway. I checked my watch, at least there was plenty of time before the moon rose to get rid of whoever was visiting Mom. I walked in the kitchen door with Danny right behind me.

"Hi, Mom, Danny's with me," I called out. "Do I need more shots?"

Mom and Dr. Russell from the night before wandered into the kitchen. "No, you don't."

"Then what's he doing here?" I asked, bluntly.

"After last night, you owe this to me, young man," he said and held out his hand. "Glad to meet the - well human version so to speak. It's really true about the eyebrows, isn't it."

"Yeah," I said.

"I could pluck them," Mom offered.

"No way. They can stay like that, thanks." I grabbed a soda for myself and Danny from the fridge.

"What's it like, Trevor. This is too incredible for words, but to actually experience it must be something."

I followed Mom and Dr. Russell out to the living room and sat down on the floor next to Danny. "That's the weirdest thing about this, sir. When I'm a wolf it feels normal for me to be a wolf, just the same as it feels normal for me to be a kid. I like being a wolf, but it's hard not being able to talk to Mom when I need to."

"Can you understand dogs? What they are saying?"

"In a way," I said. "It's not like all of a sudden I hear them talking in English, but I've got a better idea of what the barks mean. Mostly it's 'get lost, you stinking wolf'."

The doorbell rang. I didn't need Mom's announcement to recognize Mr. Anderson's scent. She showed him into the living room with everyone else.

"Good, you're home, Trevor. I missed you last night," he said quietly.

"Danny and Mom had to take me to the vet for my puppy shots. Isn't that right, Dr. Russell?"

"Yes, he's as up to date as a puppy can get."

"This isn't a joke, Trevor," Mr. Anderson said. "Sorry, Steven Anderson, I'm the principal at Eastside Middle."

"Tom Russell, Trevor's vet."

"Mrs. Anderson, the reason I'm here is a very serious issue. As I told you last night, if the old stories are true and Trevor is a werewolf the whole town could be in for some rough times."

"Other than the fact that he might chew on something he shouldn't, he was very well behaved for me last night. I don't see that his changing shapes will present a problem to anyone else."

"He wasn't well behaved for me last night, but I'm just his best friend, not his doctor," Danny complained.

Mom cut in, "Mr. Anderson, I do appreciate your concern in this, but the only problem we are having at the moment is deciding which brand of dog food he prefers. But then he's always been finicky."

"The way he should start growing as a wolf will take care of that issue. He will be eating you out of house and home soon, good thing it's only for three or four days a month."

Mr. Anderson's face flushed red, and I could see his blood pressure rising. "Mr. Anderson," I said. "I know what you've read in those books of yours, and I wanted to tell you they don't mean anything in real life. When I change, I change into a wolf cub, just that, with four legs, a tail, a long nose, and great big teeth. The first time I changed I was so mad at Danny for starting this mess that I wanted to rip him into shreds. After I changed all I wanted to do was be friends with him. It worked out, and he's gotta be a good friend if he's willing to walk me at nights. But when I'm a puppy, I don't want to bite people, or even hunt anything.... Well," I admitted, "okay, I ate a mouse last night, but there's still lots more in the kitchen, but that's about it."

"You ate a mouse?" Danny asked me.

"Yeah, I didn't mean to, it just happened. But wolves do that. They don't attack people."

"For now," Mr. Anderson said. "When you're older and larger as a wolf, what then?"

"I don't lose myself when I change, Mr. Anderson. It's still me under the fur. Danny can understand me when I talk, too." I felt the first twinges in my stomach and glanced at my watch. "I'll be right back and you can see for yourself I'm not a threat."

I stood up and so did everyone else. They followed me to my room and watched as I took off my watch then kicked off my shoes and socks. "Can't a guy get a little privacy around here?"

"Not tonight, kiddo," Dr. Russell answered. "We're not here to look at your skinny self either but to see the change."

He was right, even Mom wouldn't leave and I had no choice but to get out of the rest of my clothes. I bent over, touched the carpet with my hands and felt my self flow back into wolf shape. With my tail wagging, I trotted over to Danny and stuck my muzzle in his hand for a petting.

Dr. Russell took in a deep breath. "I saw it, but I still don't believe it. I wish we had more information on how this is done, but even still...."

"Mrs. Williams," Mr. Anderson interrupted the other man. "Until this is resolved, Trevor will be a potential threat to

everyone in this town. We can't count on his good nature to last for ever, and I would hate to see anyone killed because of him, but that is a chance we cannot afford to take.

"There is a way to cure him. It won't be easy, but it can be done. If you are willing...."

"And you have this cure from the same books that say werewolves are by nature killers?"

"Yes, but the instructions are clear and...."

"I won't hear of it. I appreciate your concern for my son, and your student, Mr. Anderson, but I don't see Trevor's being a werewolf as something that needs to be cured. He seems to enjoy it, and he isn't hurting anyone. The only reason I let you into my home this evening is that keeping this a secret from you any longer would not be productive. You would persist until you found out the truth anyway. We have nothing to hide here, and I will not risk my son's health or life to a 'cure' proposed by people that were half right about everything else."

"You will regret this, and I hope that no innocent bystanders will pay the price for this decision, Mrs. Williams." With that, he turned and walked out by the front door.

Dr. Russell wrote out a list of things I would need, including the type of dog food he thought would be best for me. The cans that Mom had picked up weren't bad, they didn't smell nearly as good as the junk food that guy had tried to give me that morning, but they were - okay.

After my walk for the night, Danny and I just returned to our house when I heard a sound that sent chills down my spine. Someone, and not far away I heard a wolf howl. I sat down on my haunches, threw my head back and answered in a high pitched puppy howl. The other wolf howled again, and I heard two more voices, also young added to the chorus. I answered again, and tried to tug the leash right out of Danny's hand to go find the others.

I howled again a couple of times, but that was it from the others. I realized there was no point in trying to find them now, and let Danny lead me up to the door.

"What was that about?"

"I'm not the only werewolf in town," I said. "Don't know what happened to the other wolves but I will find them."

"Oh, good, glad you two are home," Mom said as we walked inside. "Come over here and quickly. You need to hear this, Trev."

"What?" I asked, but she only pointed to the TV.

After a few commercials, a newsman came on. "Repeating our top story today, thanks to quick thinking and an incredibly sharp nose, a twelve year old boy gave police the evidence they needed to break apart a major dog-napping ring here and in other parts of the state. This morning, Trevor Williams, a seventh grader at Eastside Middle School, noticed something wrong with a sample can of dog food being given out by the alleged dog-nappers. He turned the can over to police who found the food had been laced with a powerful sedative. Fingerprints on the can led the police to one of the gang members and according to police spokesmen, from there it was easy to trace the rest of the operation."

"Wow, you're a hero, Trev." Danny said.

"... So far twenty dogs that have been reported missing have been rescued and returned to their frantic owners. Searches are still underway for the rest."

"I'm proud of you, too, sweetie. In fact, I'll even buy you a squeaky toy as a treat."

"Thanks Mom. How about a new bike instead?" I said and Danny translated.

The next morning I woke to find myself curled up in a doggy bed on the kitchen floor. I stretched, and wagged my tail. Confused, I shook my head and stared at my behind, but couldn't see anything. Standing up, I peered over my shoulder and down my back. Still no tail, but I could swear it was there despite appearances.

At least, the phantom tail didn't get in the way of my clothes. I dressed, had breakfast and fixed Mom's coffee. Just as she came out to the kitchen, the front doorbell rang. I volunteered to get it, this time, and I hurried down the hallway.

Outside I found the three wolves that I had heard last night. One man, an older teenaged boy and a younger girl waited to greet me. I took in their scents, noticed they were doing the same for me, and I threw my arms around the man's waist and hugged.

All three of them looked like me. We had the same skin tone, hair and oddly shaped hands, but I was the only one who's eyebrows met. I could smell the wolf on them so I knew that they were changers too.

"Trevor," the man said in a deep, gravelly voice. "I am Anton Kallinovich, your uncle, and may I present your brother, Randy and your sister, Tatiana?"

The boy touched his fist to mine. "Hey, little bro, good to meet you."

The girl only smiled. "Hello."

"Won't you come in? There's coffee and stuff. Mom," I called back to the kitchen, "Mom, my family is here. Family," I said slowly. "I never dreamed that I had any brothers or sisters. I mean this is even more amazing than -- well -- you know changing."

"You have sixteen in all, brothers and sisters that is. As for cousins, nephews and nieces, uncles and aunts, your family is quite large."

"Are we Roma?" I blurted out.

Uncle Anton shook his head and smiled. "We are kin to the Romany peoples but they would never admit that. We are shunned by the Rom everywhere for being what we are. But please, sit, there is time for us to answer all your questions and then some."

"Trevor's father never knew about him," Mom said. "How did you know to find us?"

Anton shook his head. "Believe me, my dear lady, he knew. My brother has been called many things, and all of them accurate, but he knew exactly what he had done. Let me explain.

"We, the Clan of the Wolf as we call ourselves, have been around for as long as there have been humans. It is said that we descended from wolves that had learned to be men, instead of the other way around. If that is so, I can believe it, but here we are. We have been called many names, been hunted and persecuted to the point of extinction and yet there has never been an actual recorded incident of any werewolf killing a human. We have fought amongst ourselves, sure enough, but so have humans.

"Trevor's father, my brother Vassily, has been on a one wolf campaign to increase the number of active werewolves in the world, and he has succeeded. He has always been able to spot suitable mothers and because our noses are so sensitive he can tell when the mother is ready and if it was successful.

"I can assure you that the rest of our family does not condone this behavior on his part, but I have tried for my part to make it up to the many children my brother has left behind."

"Uncle Anton, why is it that my father doesn't look like we do?"

"My brother was born a cub."

"So was I but...."

"I thought so, with your eyebrows that is almost always a giveaway. You see it is very rare for one of us to be born with fur. For those that are it means the potential for great power besides the change in shapes. My brother has a blood-ring which allows him to change his human appearance at will, among other things. But that, too, is better left for later discussions.

"Trevor, do you still feel that you have a tail?"

I nodded. "Yeah, it's been bothering me, too."

"I know it is, and it will. You, my boy, will have a difficult summer. In fact, you will spend most of it as a wolf, and the rest

of it you will be learning to control your changes which will start happening at odd times not just with the moon. Actually, moonlight has nothing to do with our changes. The only thing that really matters is actual belief or desire to change."

"I know I wanted to change that first time. You mean if Danny had never said anything about his book on werewolves I might not have changed?"

"You would have, eventually, probably when you were a bit older...."

The doorbell rang. I jumped up to get it, hoping that it was Danny, but I found Mr. Anderson waiting for me.

"Trevor, I am sorry to do this, but you're coming with me." He let me see a small revolver in his hand. My breath caught in my throat, and I could smell my own fear. Just as every member of my family in the house.

"The gun is real, and it is loaded -- not with silver bullets, but those are not necessary now. Don't say a word, and no one will get hurt."

Both Mom and Uncle Anton had approached the door, but I could tell he was holding her back. "What are you going to do to me?"

"There is a cure, and whether or not your mother approves, I will end this, now. I cannot be responsible for letting you start killing people."

"What do you have to do?" I asked since I heard someone on the phone to the police.

"Just go, get in the car and not another word. Move it."

He followed me down the walkway to his car. I saw Danny about half a block away. He stopped and stared at us. I shook my head and tried to signal him to stay away as I climbed into the convertible.

"Nice car," I said as he turned the engine over.

We drove, in silence for several hours into the mountains. At one point, we turned off the road and drove for another hour back into the hills. He finally stopped at a small wood cabin built in a lonely stretch of wood that crested a large hill. I hopped out of the car and ran to the nearest tree not caring about anything just then except to leave my mark.

As he ushered me to the cabin, I heard the sound of another car engine in the distance, getting closer. If Anderson heard it, he didn't show it. "Inside, Trevor, if you cooperate I can get you home by tonight, and all this will be over. Okay, I need you to take off your clothes, and sit in that chair by the fireplace."

"My clothes? What are you gonna do to me? Look, Mr. Anderson, you can get plenty of boys back home. You don't need to hurt me."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Trevor, I'm not going to rape you. I'm not into little boys. But I need access to your skin, or would you rather I burned the clothes off and took you home in that open car naked?"

I took my clothes off and sat down. He tied my hands and feet to the chair. He measured my upper arms with a piece of string, then went over to the fireplace to stir the tinder and set it burning. After a while, he did have a good blaze going. He left the cabin and brought back a large trunk from the back of the car.

Opening in the lid, Anderson took out two bands of silver. I watched as he warmed them in the fire then pressed them into large rings. He measured each against the string, then slipped them, one at a time, over my wrists and shut them around my upper arms.

"Don't you think gold would look better on me?"

"These aren't for decoration, Trevor. These will help cure you. If they don't we will try something stronger." Anderson started to chant a long poem about wolves and things but I got bored quickly with it. When he finished, he looked at me. "I command you to change to your wolf form."

"Huh?" I asked him. "It's not nighttime yet, and I don't think the moon is going to be full enough to tonight to do the trick anyway."

"Those bands are attuned to you now, and they are pure silver. They should now have the power to change you without the moon. Change into wolf."

"Nope," I said and tried to shrug. "Now there's a waste of good silver if you ask me. I told you to use gold, but would you listen?"

Anderson rummaged in the trunk and pulled out a jewelry box. He removed two silver earrings. "These will give a much better contact."

"No way, Mr. Anderson. Mom said I couldn't have an earring."

He looked at me and shook his head. "These are self piercing, so they will take a moment." He clipped both of them to my ears. I felt a pinch but nothing else. He read his poem again, tried to make me change with the same result, then pressed each of the earrings squeezing the studs until both my ears were pierced. He tried again.

"Sorry," I said. "I'd change if I could. I really would. What do you do after I change?"

Anderson didn't reply as he retrieved a long bar of silver from the trunk and stuck it into the fire. He built the fire up as the bar began to melt. He let the silver drip into a mold that created a large, quartered circle. He took the circle out with a pair of tongs and held it in the flames again.

"I know this will make a permanent brand, but it can't be helped since nothing else has worked."

I screamed. "You can't be serious. Did you ever think that maybe the reason it doesn't work is because those stupid books are wrong? Silver doesn't hurt me, or control me. I told you, gold has more of an effect on me than that."

He took the circle out of the flames and held it up.

I struggled against the ropes. "You had better kill me, Mr. Anderson, because if you don't you're dead. I won't kill you, but I will tell the cops what you did."

"You'd admit to the police that you were a werewolf? I don't think you're that stupid, Trevor."

"I'll tell them the exact truth. Mr. Anderson told me I was a werewolf and he was going to cure me. He took me to a cabin in the woods, made me take off my clothes and made me wear jewelry. Will anyone that hears that story think that you really believe I'm a werewolf?"

"They'd have me up on child sexual abuse in no time flat. But, by the time you do leave this cabin, Trevor, this will be over, and you will be under my control completely so it doesn't matter. You will tell the police exactly what I tell you to say."

I could smell people outside the cabin now. I screamed again as he brought the hot circle over to my chair. "Don't hurt me."

In spite of all my struggling, he pressed the hot metal onto the left side of my chest just above my heart. I screamed until I was too hoarse to scream any more as the silver seared into my skin. Anderson chanted the same poem again.

"Police. Freeze," said a voice from the window. "Good God, what are you doing to that kid? Drop that brand and get away from the boy now. Move it!" the cop yelled.

"I'm doing this for his own good," Anderson said and pressed the brand harder against me. "Stay back until this is finished. I don't know what will happen if you don't. We could all be in danger here."

The door opened, and two officers stood there, with rifles leveled at Anderson's chest. "Get away from the kid, and put your hands in the air or I'll shoot."

Anderson dropped the brand. "Now, Trevor. Change to wolf and kill those people for me."

"God, you're really sick," I managed to croak out. "Get away from me you bastard."

"I command you to change," he half screamed at me.

"I told you it wouldn't work, but you didn't listen to me. It was all for nothing." I turned and looked at the cops. "Help me. He tried to hurt me."

"I said get away from the kid, now."

Anderson looked at the expression on the cop's face, raised his arms over his head and backed away. "I didn't touch him like that."

"Are you okay, son?" one of the men said as another started to untie me.

I shook my head, "That brand hurts like anything," I said. "I'm just glad you stopped him before he did anything else."

"You little punk," Anderson said and broke away from the policemen. "You aren't doing this to me." He came at me too quickly for the cops to stop. I turned to my good side, grabbed his arm and sent him spinning down to the floor. He lay on his back, moaning as I screamed again from the pain. I saw two of the men get handcuffs on Anderson before they dragged him to his feet.

I blanked out from the pain, and the next thing I knew I woke up in a hospital room. Besides the white sheets and walls, I saw a bag of fluid attached to my hand, then Mom and Tatiana sitting by the bedside.

"Trev? How are you feeling?"

"It hurts," I complained, still feeling the burning in my chest from the brand.

"I know it does," Tatiana said. "Uncle Anton has gone to get more help with that."

A few minutes later, Anton and Randy joined us. Anton closed the door. "I talked to a dear old friend, and I have what I need to do this. Trevor, you have been through much, and for that I am sorry. We tried our best to get to that cabin before Anderson had a chance to do anything, but.... Enough of that. This will heal that wound."

Gently, he moved the dressing on my chest until I could see the raw burn on the skin. He said one word, not a stupid poem, and we all watched as a ring of solid silver pushed its way through my skin. "Take it, Trevor, it's yours."

I touched the ring then picked it up. As soon as I did so, the silver began to glow with a bright red light. I looked up at Anton.

"That is your blood-ring. It is a powerful talisman, my boy, and with it you can do much. It will take a master to teach you how to use it, but until then guard it well."

The skin on my chest healed up leaving only a slight white scar in the shape of a quartered circle. The pain drained from my nerves, and I relaxed. "Then what he did was for real?"

"In a way, but no. Over the centuries, there have been so many myths, tales and half-truths told about us, that no matter how contradictory the stories are people still believe them. The few actual words of power are so carefully guarded that your Mr. Anderson had no chance of actually making this work."

"What about it, bro, are you gonna change your face like our father did?" Randy asked.

"Are you kidding. Man, there is nothing cooler than being the town's only Gypsy werewolf. I just have to convince the rest of the town of that, that's all. This is who I am and if they have a problem with it too bad."

"Don't worry. Mr. Anderson is going to be put away for a long time. Trev," Mom said quietly. "You are a hero twice over now. You will be getting a huge reward check for solving the problem with the dogs, and you stopped Anderson by yourself."

"Not by myself, Mom. They helped, but you know," I said. "This has to be the first time ever that the cops saved the werewolf from the hero with the silver bullets at the end of the movie."

"Trevor," Mom said trying not to laugh.

"Now that I've got my ears done, you think I could like change these for gold rings? I still think they would look so cool. Maybe one ear, not two, but...."

"He's right, Mrs. W," Tatiana added. "They would look good, and two are better for you, Trev."

"No, we aren't discussing this now. Wait until you are home for that. Anton, you said Trevor would be a wolf for most of the summer?"

"It goes with the changes and everything else. You see...."

"I don't need an explanation. I just need some peace and quiet and I can do without his sense of humor for a while, too."

I just flashed her a toothy grin. "But just think Mom, now when there's a wolf at the door, it will be me."



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by

[Ellie Dauber](#)

"You know, people only use fifteen percent of their brain capacity," Andy said.

"Speak for yourself, Andy," Phil replied.

"No, I'm serious." We can test for brain activity with EEGs, positron emission systems and the like; never seems to be more than about fifteen percent. It's like there's blocks to keep us from using more."

"So?"

"So! Phil, you're a fairly smart guy; partner in that big law firm within a couple years."

"Junior partner."

"Even so, that's pretty good from what you tell me. That's with only fifteen percent of your brain working. Imagine if you were able to work with your entire brain capacity."

"Ha! I'd rule the world." He laughed good-naturedly at the joke, and Andy joined him.

The two men were an odd pair. Andy was Dr. Andrew Hoffmann, M.D., Ph.D., professor of psychology at Whitmere University. He was a tall, slender man with thinning sandy color hair worn long. He was dressed, as usual, in a sweater over a work shirt and tie and a pair of faded jeans. His hands were in constant, expressive motion as he spoke. Phil was Philip J. McNierney, junior partner at Chase, Allen and Rice, one of the most prestigious law firms in the city. He was a handsome man of average height, wearing a three-piece suit and tie that made him look as if a *GQ*<sup>®</sup> ad had come to life. His wavy black hair was cut in the short, conservative style favored by his firm's managing partner.

The two men had met in high school and surprised themselves as much as everyone else by becoming best friends, even though they came from entirely different backgrounds. Andy's father worked on the docks and his mother waited tables. Phil's father had turned the small manufacturing company he had inherited into a multi-million dollar corporation with interests across the U.S. Both boys were top students, though, and among the best athletes in their school, but even when they had been rivals for the same sports trophy, the same academic honor, even for the same girl, they had never let it interfere with their friendship. Phil once joked that they even competed to see who had the best explanation for why they remained friends. Both men claimed to have come up with the answer that they usually gave, "Being able to compete against him makes me look good."

They even had a joke worked out. If they were together when some one asked, one of them (they kept track and took turns) would give the answer. Then they would say "Besides, I usually win." in perfect unison and glare at each other until somebody got the joke. Now they were in *The Legal Eagle*, a bar near Phil's office, to celebrate. Phil had just won a major civil case with a settlement of close to \$20 million the day before. Andy's research grant was being renewed for another two years at a substantial increase in funding.

"Tell me again what this big grant of yours is for," Phil asked.

"Okay, if we didn't need all that extra capacity for something, I don't think we'd have it. I'm trying to find out what we actually use it for."

"Makes sense. But if you can't track it with any of those fancy gadgets, how do you even know that it's being used?"

"That's what I'm trying to find out. I have a hunch that it gets used -- some of it, at least -- at the subconscious level."

"Doing what?"

"Running all those things we need to keep living but never think about; keeping our hearts beating, remembering to breathe, stuff like that. I think I can use this new drug that I've been working on to tell it

to do something else."

"Make somebody's heart stop beating or make him or her forget to breathe? The Law takes a dim view of that, Andy."

"No. Look! Suppose I could give my stuff to somebody who lost his hand in an accident and tell him that it was going to grow back. His brain believes it, and it tells the stump to grow a new hand. Would that be useful?"

"Your stuff can do that? Tell me, you did incorporate last year, didn't you?"

"C'mon, you did the papers. In fact, you're one of the officers in the corporation, you, my Dad, and me."

"I know. I just wanted to remember how it happened that I got to be so rich so young."

"You're not rich yet. I haven't proved that it works yet. All my test subjects to date have been animals. I can show that it doesn't do any harm and that it seems to activate some sections of the brain that we've never seen working before, but you can't tell a wounded dog to grow a paw back. You can, but it won't understand."

"So you need a human subject?"

"Yeah, and the paperwork to get approval for human experimentation is frightening. The application must be a good thousand pages, and it needs to be done in quintuplicate. It'll take me the rest of this grant period just to get the thing filled out and approved."

"What if somebody filed a waiver stating that they were fully aware of all the risks, taking full responsibility on themselves, and absolving you or the university of any possible blame or fault?"

"Maybe, if it was absolutely airtight -- wait a minute, what exactly are you saying?"

"I'll take the stuff."

"No way am I going to do that! You're crazy."

"No, I'm perfectly sane. I'll toss in a statement to that effect from the psychiatrist my firm keeps on retainer. Look, you need a human subject. Despite everything you may have heard about lawyers, we are human and I trust you. More to the point, I trust your judgment. If you think it'll work, then I do, too. And, if I'm willing to get filthy rich from the profits off this drug, then I should be willing to take some of the risk to prove that it works."

"I need a test subject, but I don't want to risk my best friend. Look, we were supposed to go away for that two-week fishing trip next month; that lodge your firm owns on Lake Cody. There's a good hospital, Frazier General, about ten minutes from there. They can transfer to the University Medical Center, if we need that. I'll bring the drug, plus some equipment up with me. If you're still willing then, we'll do it. I'll do it."

"Fine. I'll start on the paperwork tomorrow. Drop a copy of that federal application off at my office. I'll probably want to crib some language."

"Don't get too caught up in this. I want you to spend some of the time thinking about what you're getting yourself into."

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A rather nervous grad student brought the application to the firm the next afternoon. "Dr. Hoffmann asked me to drop this off," he said fidgeting back and forth in Phil's office, feeling out of place in the rich surroundings. "He said to tell you he couldn't get out of some faculty meeting, and you should call him after you read it."

Phil took the papers and gave the student ten dollars for his trouble; the kid looked like he could use it. After a quick read, Phil could see that the forms were as bad as Andy had said they were. "I never saw a government form that didn't take six paragraphs to say what it could say in one," he thought.

Still, it did ask -- and answer -- a lot of very specific questions about possible risks the subjects would face -- he would face; safeguards that would be in place, ways of finding out as early as possible if anything had gone wrong and what might be done about it. Andy was right. It was serious reading and a lot to think about.

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Andy came by Phil's office the next day with another form. "More reading?" Phil asked.

"Not much, just a standard medical release form from Doug Reilly. By the way, you have an appointment with him the day after tomorrow. Your secretary set it up."

"Why, and what do you need the form for?" Doug Reilly had been doctor to both men since he'd taken over his father's practice, when the pair was in high school.

"If I'm going to change your body, I need baseline data. I need to know what I'm changing it from. This form gets me access to all your records, so I can chart your health for the last couple of years. In addition, I need to know if there's anything that the drug might react to -- or with. Maybe even find something else that I want to change."

"There's nothing wrong with me that needs fixing. If there was, Doc Reilly would have told me as soon as he found it."

"Sometimes you don't worry a patient. A man with, say, a high risk for cancer doesn't *have* cancer. A doctor will just note the higher risk and check the indicators from time to time to see if anything's happened."

"Okay, but do I understand that you don't know yet what you're going to do to me?"

"I could make it simple. Cut off a few fingers, or even a hand, and tell it to grow back. However, I'm not certain that the drug will work. If it didn't, well, I've known you too long to start calling you "Lefty."

"Gee, thanks."

"I could make you grow a tail, but that would interfere with the cut of your suits. No, I'm looking for a change that's showy enough to be dramatic, but shouldn't be a problem if the stuff doesn't work. By the way, can I get a spare key to the lodge? I want to take some equipment up there to set up part of a lab in one of the rooms so I can monitor and record what happens if it does work."

"We are going to have time to fish, aren't we?"

"We better, but I'll need time each day to do some tests. Relax, you get to just sit there while I do a 'poke and probe'. Then you can read, nap, drink --whatever you want. I'll be the one stuck in the lab doing the analysis."

"Better you than me, pal." He signed the form and handed it back to Phil.

"By the way, you can pull out of this, no questions asked and no blame given, up to the moment I inject. You do understand that, don't you?"

"Crystal clear, Dr. Frankenstein. I understand the risks and am -- at this moment -- ready to take them. Now get going. My partners won't let me go, if I don't finish my notes on this appeal."

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A week later, Phil's "beemer" pulled up on the gravel drive next to the lodge. Andy was already there, unloading his fishing gear from the back of his old station wagon. It looked like an old clunker, but it was a classic. The two friends had spent the summer between their junior and senior years of college restoring the car.

Phil carried his own suitcases into the lodge, and then came back out for his fishing gear. The lodge was an old stone farmhouse and barn with a beautiful view of the lake. Phil's firm had gotten it a few years before as part of a settlement. The previous owner had restored it as an investment, but it had been entangled in the inheritance battle when he died unexpectedly. The firm used it as a retreat twice a year for planning sessions. The rest of the time, it was available to some favored clients and to members of the firm -- including senior clerical staff -- on a basis that was part "first come, first served" and part "rank hath its privileges." Phil got it for two weeks by bringing in a settlement that netted the firm almost eight million dollars in fees and expenses.

The caretaker worked a farm about ten minutes away. His wife doubled as cook if needed. They were a pleasant couple in their sixties. The husband wasn't a bad fishing guide, and, if the wife's cooking wasn't inspired, it was good basic farm food -- tasty and filling. Andy had suggested that neither one should be around. They really didn't want anybody to know what they really would be doing. Nevertheless, Mrs. Casey had stocked the refrigerator and fixed up two of the six bedrooms in the lodge before she'd left.

"So what's the plan?" Phil asked once both men were unpacked. "Can we get some fishing in, or do we go straight to the 'Twilight Zone' stuff?"

Andy looked at his watch. "It's about 6 PM, too late for fishing, really. I thought we'd nuke some pizza for supper. I could do some quick tests and then give you the stuff."

"Just your average afternoon in the country. Why do you need more tests?"

"Baseline readings. Nothing fancy: blood pressure, heart rate and a urine sample. Did you bring the forms?"

"Here they are. I signed them and had them notarized at my office before I left."

"So your office knows what you're up to, then?"

"No. All they know is that I drew up some papers and had them notarized after I signed them. Relax; the notary didn't get a chance to read them. She just saw me sign. It's standard procedure on confidential cases, so Mary, our notary, is used to it. Here." He handed a sealed envelop to Andy, who put it in his jacket pocket.

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They cooked and ate the pizza in silence, washing it down with a couple of sodas. Andy didn't want any alcohol in Phil's system. He also didn't want to talk because he was afraid of giving away his plans to his friend. Phil was nervous about what was going to happen.

"Okay," Andy said, handing him a small plastic vial. "Strip down to your shorts and fill this up for me while I set up the equipment."

"Equipment?"

"Yeah, some medical monitoring gear and a video camera. I want a working record of whatever happens. The monitor works with these tiny radio-sensors that stick to your skin. You'll hardly know they're attached. The camera gives me a visual record. It also can pick up my voice, so I can talk while I'm shooting -- get a 'play-by-play' if you want."

"Makes sense." Phil carried his bags -- and the vial -- up to his room. A few minutes later, he was in the bathroom listening to the water run and thinking of Niagara Falls."

Andy was just finishing a quick test of the camera when Phil came back downstairs, in his boxers and carrying a capped vial full of amber liquid. Andy had moved a couple chairs to set up a "stage" area in front of one darkly paneled wall. The monitor was plugged in next to the CD player with a tray holding what looked like nine black peas on a white cloth next to it. There was a small jar of salve next to the tray.

Andy wrote something on a white label and attached it to the vial. He put the vial in a slotted hole within a small plastic carrying case. Then he walked into a small storage room just off the main room. Andy had set this up as a lab the day before with the help of a couple of grad students. The sample case went into a small mini-fridge that was sitting in a corner.

When he returned, he had his medical bag with him. He did the usual "insurance exam" procedures: took Phil's blood pressure, listened to his heart, shined a light in his eyes and ears, and banged Phil's knee with a rubber hammer. After each procedure, he made notes on a yellow tablet.

"Drop your shorts, friend," Andy finally said.

"Then do I turn my head and cough?"

"It's a thought. Later maybe. Right now I want to attach the sensors."

"Attach what and to where?"

Andy held up one of the little "peas" and the jar of salve. "These," he said, "are the sensors. The 'goop' in this jar holds them to your skin. It's a little oily, but it's a lot better than the pins we used to use. Here, tell me how this feels."

Andy took the "pea," smeared some of the salve on it, and tucked it gently to the side of Phil's neck. It stayed in place when he took his hand away. It felt a little oily, but that sensation went away in a minute or two. Phil stretched and twisted his neck. The "pea" stayed in place, but he could barely feel it.

"Seems okay, I guess," Phil said. "Where are you going to stick those things, anyway?"

"One on each side of your neck -- the carotid arteries; one at the top center of your forehead; one in each armpit; two on your chest, one for your heart, one for your breathing and one by the femoral artery -- right here -- in each leg." As he spoke, Andy attached the "peas" at each point he mentioned. Then, he entered some codes on a small keypad attached to the monitor. "The little buggers are color coded. I just told the machine where each one was so I can better understand the data."

"When do you take them off?"

"The salve hardens into a permanent seal. Don't panic. I have a solvent in the lab that'll melt the stuff without leaving a mark. In the meantime, they send an automatic set of readings to the monitor system for thirty seconds every hour."

Andy took a small bottle of greenish liquid and a fresh syringe from his bag. "Last chance to back out."

"No, let's do it."

"Are you ready for the shot, then?"

"I guess. Do you stick me in the arm, or do I get to drop my shorts?"

"The arm is fine. I'll inject it into a vein so it gets moving faster. Here, let me turn on the camera." He flipped a switch. The camera was perched on a tripod and focused on the spot where Phil was standing.

Andy stepped in front of the camera for a moment. "I am Andrew Hoffmann of Whitmere University. The date is May 4, 1999 at 6:35 PM. I am about to administer 30 cc. of drug BR-397 to this test subject. Based on his weight, age, and medical history this should be sufficient to create the desired psychological and neurological effects."

Phil stopped Andy just as he was about to administer the drug. "Just a moment, doctor." He looked straight at the camera and said, "I am Philip J. McNierney of this City. I want to state, for the record, that I am doing this of my own free will, having been fully appraised of the risks. I absolve Dr. Andrew Hoffmann, Whitmere University, and any other affected parties of any blame or responsibility for the results." Then he turned to Andy and added, "Once a lawyer, always a lawyer."

Andy tied a thin piece of rubber around Phil's arm and told him to make a fist. A quick dab of antiseptic, a pinch as the needle went in, and it was over. Andy brought over a folding chair and had Phil sit down.

"How long does this stuff take to work?"

"I should see something in about five minutes. You may feel a little dizzy." The two men made small talk, mostly about going fishing the next day. Phil was bragging about a new lure he'd bought, when he suddenly shook his head.

"I think your stuff is getting to me."

Andy looked deeply into Phil's eyes. They were visibly dilated. "Time to begin," he said. He pulled a small light on a chain from his pocket and began twirling it before Phil's eyes while he spoke in a low tone. In a moment, the man was in a deep hypnotic state.

Andy got a glass of water from the nearby table. Turning to the camera, he said, "this is ordinary water from the kitchen tap. I'm going to use it as a cue to the brain control functions being tested."

He turned to face Phil. "Phil can you hear me? Nod if you can." Phil nodded. "Phil, I'm now going to give you a second drug. You can just drink this one because it's so powerful. Here, take the glass." He handed Phil the glass, and Phil drank the water almost immediately.

"Now listen closely, Phil. What you just drank is a very powerful biogenetic drug. Even now, it's penetrating every cell of your body, getting into your DNA. In a very little while, your body is going to begin to change. You're going to change your sex. You're going to become a woman."

Phil's expression changed. He looked terrified and began to shake his head "No." Andy had expected this. He put his hand on Phil's shoulder. "You will relax. You will not try to fight these changes. You trust me, and you know that I can reverse the change once it's over. You will accept the fact that you're changing because you know that I can change you back."

Phil grew calmer as Andy spoke. He slumped back in the chair and seemed to relax, but Andy could still see the fear in his friend's eyes, and he wondered if he hadn't gone too far. His reasons for saying what he had said still seemed good. Besides, there was no way he could take back what he's said and done.

Phil immediately calmed down. He sat motionless in the chair, staring of into space. Andy decided to bring him out of it.

"Can you hear me, Phil?" When Phil nodded his head, Andy continued. "I'm going to start counting down from ten to one. As I do, you'll begin to wake up. You'll feel fine, but with no conscious memory of being in the trance or of what was said to you. The potion, though, will continue to work on your body in the way I've described.

"When I tell you to go to bed, you'll become very sleepy. You'll go straight up to bed and have a sound night's sleep. In the morning, you'll wake up naturally and feel very good. Okay, ten, you're beginning to wake up; nine, your eyelids feel less heavy...."

Andy counted slowly down to one, repeating his suggestions as he did. Phil's eyes slowly opened. He shook his head and looked at Andy. "Did it work? Did I go under okay?"

"You did fine. Look at the clock. You were out for almost an hour."

"Then you did it. Hey, I never asked. What did you tell my body to do? Do I get a sixth finger, or am I going to grow horns?"

"Why don't you just go to bed now. We'll talk about it in the morning. I want you to have a good night's sleep."

Phil yawned. He had to admit that he was suddenly very tired. He said goodnight and headed up to his bedroom. He was asleep in five minutes and didn't wake up until after 9 AM the next morning.

Andy stayed up a while listening to CDs. His conscience was bothering him about what he had done. He'd been so caught up in the excitement of getting a human subject to test the drug on that, maybe, he hadn't given as much thought as he should have to what he was going to do to that subject.

The drug needed a dramatic result that couldn't be easily faked, and changing Phil's sex had seemed to be the perfect choice -- but dammit -- Phil was his best friend. Phil trusted him, and this was certainly not what he'd expecting. Andy just hoped that Phil would eventually forgive him.

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Andy had been up for over an hour by the time Phil came down. He would have liked to gotten in some early morning fishing, but he didn't want to go alone, and he didn't want to wake Phil. If the drug was working, it would draw off the body's energy. Phil would need all the sleep he could get.

Phil came staggering downstairs, still a little groggy from sleep.

Andy poured him some coffee. They normally took turns cooking on their fishing trips. He noticed that Phil's arm looked a little thinner as the man took the coffee cup, and.... Good grief! His arm was hairless. He watched Phil drink the coffee. His arms, his whole body did look a bit thinner. Phil had slept in just his t-shirt and shorts. His body hair, which had been thick, was just about gone; only a fine down remained. His facial hair was just about gone as well, except for his eyebrows. The hair atop his head seemed a little longer though, as if he'd gone about six weeks without a haircut.

Phil saw Andy looking at him. "What?" he asked.

"I was just about to ask what you wanted for breakfast. How are you feeling this morning?"

"Toast and eggs -- scrambled, please. I'm still tired, even if I did sleep almost twelve hours. If your stuff doesn't work, maybe you can sell it as a sleep aid." Andy handed him three slices of toast, previously made and waiting. Phil buttered a slice and took a bite. "So, you didn't tell me last night. What did you tell my brain to do to me?"

Andy was at the stove working on Phil's eggs. "Finish your breakfast first. There'll be plenty of time to talk later."

"Yes, Mother. I've got to tell you, though. You're getting me very curious. Can we talk about fishing, at least?"

"Yeah, why don't you tell me about this miracle lure that's going to empty the lake of bass."

Phil repeated what he'd said about the lure, embellishing his story with a couple of successes from a solo trip about two weeks before to a river both men knew. That turned the talk to the subject of different sites and a comparison of fishing rivers and lakes. By the time they began arguing over the best places to fish there at Lake Cody, Phil had finished his eggs.

"Good breakfast," he said carrying his dirty plate to the dishwasher. "It'll be hours before I'm ready to make, let alone eat, lunch. Now, what's going to happen to me from your damned drug."

"Let's go sit in the living room," Andy said. They both knew he was stalling. Much longer and Phil was going to get nervous, not that he'd be happy when he was told.

When the two were seated, Andy said, "There's no way to soften it, so I won't try. I had you drink a glass of water, and told you that it was a second drug; one that was going to turn you into a woman."

"What! Why you son of a bitch. Is this your idea of a joke?"

"No. Now think for a minute. The effect had to be dramatic and hard to fake. That meant I couldn't go for anything silly like those horns you mentioned last night. Can you think of anything that fits that better than a sex change? Unless, you wanted me to cut off a finger, and then tell it to grow back."

Phil sat and thought about what Andy had said. Rational thinking and knowing how people -- how juries -- reacted to different kinds of evidence was a big part of what he did for a living. Finally, he asked in as calm a voice as he could manage, "If it works, can you change me back?"

"As far as I can tell, yes. We couldn't create any physical changes from the drug in our animal tests, but they were as physiologically susceptible to it the fifth time we administered it as they were the first time. It should work on you a second time."

"Is it working? Can you tell yet?"

"Yes, it is. Look at your arms and chest. That mat of hair you used to brag about is just about gone. You don't need a shave either."

Phil looked at his arms, and his eyes widened in surprise. He rubbed his chin. "No shaving. Well, that, at least, is a bright spot." Then he absentmindedly scratched his chest. "I guess that's why my chest's been feeling funny all morning. I'm not used to feeling the shirt against bare skin."

"It may be something else," Andy said. "Take off your shirt."

Phil pulled his shirt off over his head. Andy saw that he had not only lost most of his body hair but was actually a bit thinner. His nipples, though, were bigger. They were the size of pencil erasers, and the aureoles around them had gotten darker. Andy gently touched one with a fingertip.

"Hey," Phil yelled, pulling away. "Those things are tender."

"Breasts generally are."

"Breasts! I can't have breasts. I'm a guy."

"I'm not too sure any more. Tenderness like that is typical for a young girl whose breasts are starting to grow."

"So, I -- I'm really turning into a woman?"

"Yeah, come on over to the camera. I want to get this on film." Phil walked over and stood where he had the night before. Andy started the camera and began to talk.

"Subject at -- at about roughly 14 hours, 30 minutes after administering of the drug and the subsequent hypnotic suggestion. There is a degradation of muscle mass and a loss of almost all body hair. There is a -- hold still for a close-up -- a tenderness and darkening of the nipples comparable with a young female at the onset of puberty." He clicked off the mike. "Now, drop your shorts."

"What!"

"Drop them. I want to see if anything's happened down -- well, down there." Phil pulled his shorts down past his hips and let them fall to the floor. Did they seem a little wider? He stood still for the camera, but he was looking down, trying to see if there was any change.

Andy panned the camera down. Since he didn't want to give any hint of what he was going to do, he hadn't taken any measurements of Phil's genitals. It seemed now that he hadn't needed to; the difference would be obvious on the video. Last night, Phil had the sexual equipment of a grown man. Now they were much smaller. They looked like they belonged on a ten year old, and they were nested in the only visible hair on Phil's body, a triangular patch growing in the familiar -- and female -- pattern of an inverted triangle.

Phil spoke again into the small microphone attached to the camera. "A simple visual comparison of the subject's genitals reveals an obvious reduction in size. They are now the size of those more properly found on a pre-pubescent male. Moreover, pubic hair has assumed a female growth pattern. Following this recording session, we will determine if the subject is still able to ejaculate." He clicked off the camera.

"What! Are you asking me to jack off for you? Or do you want to do give me a hand job, doctor?"

"You can do yourself, thank you, but ten bucks says you can't."

"You're on!" Phil reached down and pulled up his shorts.

"Wait a minute, and drop the shorts again. I'm not done yet." When Phil was again ready, Andy turned the mike back on. "Overall changes to the frame are quite apparent, as well. Measurements will be taken for comparison with the original."

He clicked off the mike. "Turn around once, so I can get a record of how you look from behind," Andy requested. When Phil did, Andy said, "Nice butt, thanks."

"Thank you, kind sir. What did you mean by 'comparison with the original'?"

"I talked to somebody at Mantero's, where you get your suits made. I showed him that release you signed, and he gave me your measurements.

Tailors keep records, so a customer won't have to be checked every time he orders a pair of pants."

Andy quickly took Phil's new measurements, hips, waist, and chest, width of shoulders, circumference of upper arm and upper leg, and instep. Then he handed Phil another empty vial. "Here. You have half an hour to jack off. Fill this, then get dressed, so we can go fishing."

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Phil came back downstairs about forty minutes later with a disgusted look on his face. He was wearing an old sweatshirt and pair of jeans that looked a little baggy on him. He handed Andy the vial. It had about a quarter of an inch of clear fluid inside.

"You and your damned drug. First, I could barely hold on, I'd gotten so small. Then, I went through every fantasy I have and most of my real experiences before I even got this much. Now I get to pay you ten bucks for the privilege."

"No, I'll pay. I didn't even think you'd get this much." Andy made some notes on another label, stuck it on the vial, then placed the vial in the holder in the lab fridge. "For changes on the level we're seeing, your whole endocrine system has to have accepted the suggestion. This is absolutely incredible."

"You'll excuse me if I don't join in the celebration."

"You should. You're going to be as rich as I will. Richer, considering how much money you've already got."

"What? Oh, of course. I've proven that the damned stuff works."

"Not yet you haven't, but what we've seen so far is a good start. If you make anywhere near a complete transition to female, we'll have indisputable proof; proof that can get me all the funding I need to fully develop the stuff. This is one major breakthrough."

"How complete a 'transition'? I'm not going to grow a -- a vagina am I? Can I?"

"I honestly don't know. The structures of the male and female reproductive systems are very similar, despite the obvious visual differences. I told your mind that you were going to become female. You're a big boy; you know how boys and girls are different. We'll just see what happens."

"Swell. Let's go fishing. I need something to take my mind off this." Andy insisted on taking another blood sample first, and Phil still had to pack them a lunch, but they eventually did get out to the lake to fish.

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By the time the two returned from fishing that evening, the changes were even more visible. Phil's face had become somewhat thinner, and his cheekbones seemed to have lifted higher on his face. His hair was well down over his ears, and he could feel it against his neck when he moved his head. His hands were thinner and more delicate, with long tapering fingers. Two small lumps pushed out from beneath his sweatshirt, and his pants seemed definitely tighter around the hips.

They'd talked quietly until mid-afternoon, when Phil's voice had cracked. He glowered at Andy for several minutes and refused to say anything that wasn't absolutely necessary for over an hour. Now, he

was talking again, but his voice, formally, a rich baritone, was well into the alto range.

"Well," Andy said, holding up the string of fish the two men had caught. "How about these for supper?"

"Sounds good. Do you mind if I lay down while you fix them? I've been feeling tired all day." It was only too true. Phil was as good an angler as Andy was, but most of the fish on the line were Andy's.

"No. Go ahead. I'm not surprised that you're tired. Your body is using a lot of energy to fuel the changes. After dinner, I'd like to take some more readings. Take some blood, too."

"Swell. I was wondering what I'd do this evening to keep busy." He yawned and turned for the stairs. See you later." He waved over his shoulder and headed up to his bedroom.

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Two hours later, they had finished dinner and were back in the living room. Andy had Phil roll up his sleeve and took a blood sample. "Why don't you strip down to your shorts while I put this away."

Phil did. His body was slender and feminine. His chest now sported a pair of A-cup breasts. His waist was a bit higher and much narrower. His hips and butt swelled outward above a pair of long delicately curved legs. He had always been considered a good-looking man, and now he was well on his way to becoming a very beautiful woman.

Andy was surprised at the extent of the changes in his friend. His first impulse was to make a joke, but Andy realized how upset Phil must be with what was happening to him. He put on his best professional persona and walked over to the camera.

"Okay," Andy said. "I'm ready. Drop your shorts so we can get started."

"Now there's a straight line." Phil bent down, conscious of the new weight on his chest. He yanked his shorts down passed his hips. Don't look; he thought, trying hard not to even glance at his groin. You don't want to see how little they've gotten.

Andy looked at his watch and started the camera, speaking into the attached microphone as soon as it was ready. It is now about twenty-five hours since subject was injected with the drum. Female characteristics are noticeable. Breasts have begun to develop, and his waist and hips now conform to the aesthetic standards for that sex.

Now he focused the camera for another close-up of Phil's groin. "There is further shrinkage of the subject's genitals. The penis now appears to be the size of a five-year old's, and the scrotal sack seems even smaller. There is no obvious evidence of testicles within them."

He clicked off the mike again and walked over to Phil, squatting down next to him. "Now don't move. This shouldn't hurt, but it will feel strange." He placed his hand under Phil's genitals and gently lifted them up, so they were more visible to the camera. "Don't talk either. The mike's back on."

"The scrotal sack, as can be seen, is smaller in relationship to the size of the penis. Testicles are still present, but they appear to be withdrawing into the subject's body. Ejaculation and even tumescence would seem unlikely."

Andy looked closely at Phil's penis for a minute, and then lifted it to show the underside to the camera. "The urethra also appears to be migrating downward. Considering the arrangement of the female analogs that the subject's body are acquiring, this is to be expected." He shut off the mike and gently released Phil's genitals."

"What was all that double talk just now," Phil asked.

"Your 'pee hole' isn't at the end of your penis any more. It's moved about halfway down on the underside. You'll have to sit down to urinate for a while."

"What! Oh, I get it. If I'm going to be a girl, then my penis becomes a clitoris, and the urine comes out someplace else."

"Exactly." He shut off the camera. He took the same set of physical measurements that he'd taken in the morning. He also checked Phil's new breasts, which were almost an A-cup. Once he had entered the new data, he put the notebook down and said, "Now get dressed, while I get a fresh syringe. Time to feed the vampire."

As Phil got dressed, he noticed that even his feet were changing, getting smaller. He had a little trouble getting his jeans passed his wider hips, and he had to use the very last loop on his belt. Even so, his pants were loose at the waist. His nipples weren't as tender as they had been that morning, but the coarse material of his cotton undershirt wasn't exactly comfortable when it rubbed against them.

Andy took another blood sample. When he came back from putting it in the store room/lab refrigerator, Phil said, "It's a good thing I won't be a girl very long."

"Why do you say that?"

"My clothes. I haven't a thing to wear." He laughed at the joke and at the stunned expression on Andy's face. "Seriously, though. The way I'm changing, my clothes aren't likely to fit me. I could barely get my pants on, and I'll need to put on two pairs of socks tomorrow, or I'll walk right out of my shoes."

"I'm sorry, Phil. I'll need you to stay a girl for at least two days. Now don't get upset. I need to make sure that the changes have stabilized and that the original dose of the drug has washed completely out of your body before I give you another one."

"Terrific. Are you this slow at giving the details out to all of your test subjects?"

"Can I get by if I say that you never asked? Look, two days to change, two as a girl and two to change back. We'll have a whole week to fish afterwards and you get to relax those two days as a girl, while I get to do lab work. I'll probably have to do more from the samples that I take while you're changing back."

"Okay, I'm convinced. You're suffering, too. Nevertheless, I'm still going to need stuff to wear while I'm a girl. I can't walk around naked. I'm not that kind of girl." He started to laugh, but it became a high-pitched and very feminine giggle. He stopped in surprise and embarrassment. "Or maybe I am." Then he laughed again, and Andy joined him.

"Okay, okay. My best guess is that the change should be just about finished by tomorrow afternoon. We'll drive over to Easterbridge Mall and get you some appropriate clothes. My treat."

"Oh, goody! Shopping," Phil said mimicking the stereotypical female response. Then he yawned. "Damn, I'm sleepy again, and it's barely 9 PM. See you in the morning."

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Andy was up well ahead of Phil again the next morning, even though he'd stayed up several hours after his friend went to bed. He had wanted to make certain that he had all the equipment that he'd intended to bring and he wanted to plan out the specific tests he wanted to do.

He was sitting at the worktable testing a circuit when he heard a noise behind him. He turned to look. Phil, or, rather, the person Phil had become, was standing in the doorway wearing only a t-shirt and shorts.

The figure in the doorway gave no hint of ever having been male. His hair hung down almost to his shoulders. His eyes seemed bigger; his lashes certainly were. His lips were full and pouty. His figure was a series of female curves with large breasts that tented out the t-shirt, lifting it high to reveal his flat stomach, and a narrow waist. The shorts were tight against a wide pair of hips and his legs were long and slender. They'd look fabulous in heels, he thought.

"I think I'm done, now." Phil said. He was a soprano now, his voice high and clear, though not high enough to sound childish. "I went to the can when I got up. The equipment's all girl as far as I can tell."

Andy swallowed, feeling his own penis stiffen. Phil was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen and Andy didn't want to embarrass either of them by showing the sexual attraction that he was feeling. "Let's check you out then," he said.

As he followed Phil into the living room, Andy noted that Phil's walk had also become much more feminine. Part of that would have been the changes to his body, but Andy suspected that part of it might also be psychological.

Andy also noticed the delightful curves of Phil's reshaped ass as it moved beneath his shorts while he walked. Phil sat in the chair, waiting while Andy readied the camera. Andy saw that he had sat in a feminine manner, one leg crossed over the other above the knee. The scientist decided that he'd ask about these new behaviors once he had the new pictures.

"Okay, I'm ready to start. Please take off your clothes." Both of them noticed the "please," but neither said anything. Phil smiled a small smile. Andy told himself that it was the natural reaction to an attractive woman.

Phil stood up and pulled the t-shirt off slowly over his head, not wanting to accidentally injure his new breasts. They were lovely; perfectly formed pale melons with dark nipples in the middle of areolas the size of half dollars -- a C-cup at least. He pulled the shorts past his wide hips and simply let them fall to the ground. Then he stood naked in the classic feminine pose, one knee slightly bent, his left hand resting on his hip.

"Well, what do you think?" Phil asked. "Am I a girl?"

"You look like one to me. Now be quiet, while I do the narration." Andy looked at his watch and clicked on the mike. "At roughly thirty-five hours since the injection, the transformation appears to be complete. The subject, as is readily apparent, now exhibits all of the secondary sexual characteristics of an adult female. There is also some apparent change in motor behavior, which will be discussed on audio tapes."

Andy zoomed the camera in on Phil's breasts. He clicked off the mike. "I'm going to have to touch you in

some places. It's necessary as part of the exam. Try not to squirm, please."

He turned the mike back on and walked over to Phil while continuing to talk. "The nipples are well formed." He touched Phil's breast in several places, gently pushing with his fingers. Then he rubbed the nipple with a finger. Phil shivered slightly but tried not to move. Andy noticed that the nipple seemed to react, moving just a bit. Growing more erect, he wondered? He also noticed that his touch had raised tiny goose bumps in Phil's skin.

"There appear to be no nodes or malformations within the breast tissue. The nipples also appear normal, albeit sensitive to the touch." He clicked off the mike and went back to the camera. "Now, spread your legs. I want to do a quick genital exam."

"Not unless you buy me dinner first."

"Cute. Just be glad that I don't have a set of stirrups and a speculum. Now legs apart. Here comes Mr. Camera." He took the camera carefully off its tripod and walked over to where Phil was sitting. Phil glowered at him for a moment. Then, he moved his knees wide apart.

Andy moved in close. This time, he put on a pair of rubber gloves before he actually touched Phil. It was all there, labia, vagina, even a hymen. "Believe it or not," Andy said. "You're a virgin."

"And I'm going to stay one, thank you. So watch those hands!"

"You sure?" Andy smiled and gently touched Phil's clitoris, then rubbed it slowly back and forth.

Phil's eyes grew wide. His head tilted back, his mouth open. His breathing began to get heavy. Then he suddenly realized what was happening and pushed Andy away. "You bastard!" he yelled. "If you did that to one of your other patients, you'd lose your license."

"I'm sorry, man -- uh, Phil. I only meant it as a joke. I hadn't expected near as strong a reaction. You seem to be a lot more sensitive than most women down there. I think it's because the structures are newly reformed. Anyway, you're right. It was totally unfair and unprofessional. I sincerely apologize. Am I forgiven?"

"I'll think about it. Just finish the damned exam and let me get dressed."

"Okay." Andy finished describing Phil's new, female genitals. He had him stand and quickly took another set of measurements. He let Phil hold the tape when he measured Phil's breasts. Phil was a 38-C, actually almost a D-cup.

Phil put his t-shirt and shorts back on and sat down, while Andy took the blood sample. When Andy came back from putting the sample away, Phil said, "So what am I going to wear? My clothes don't exactly fit any more."

"I told you, we'll go shopping. Did you bring a sweat suit?"

"Yeah, for that mini-gym in the basement."

"Okay, that should do to get us to the mall. Put on two pairs of sox, like you said yesterday."

"What about sizes? I can't very well ask a salesgirl what size I am."

"I've got that figured. Here." He tossed Phil a mail-order catalog. The order form had a conversion chart next to it. They compared Phil's new measurements to the woman's size chart and soon had a complete list of his new sizes.

"Okay," Andy said, "let's go get dressed."

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Fifteen minutes later, the two were in Andy's car. He wore a pair of jeans, a Whitmere sweatshirt and a pair of sneakers. Phil wore an anonymous gray sweatshirt, but he'd discovered, to his chagrin, that he'd brought gym shorts, rather than sweat pants. They were loose at the waist but rather tight against his wide hips and round butt. They also showed his slender legs off to their best advantage.

As a courtesy to its guests, the lodge stocked some gym outfits and swimsuits in an upstairs closet. There were no long pants among the male gym clothes, and Phil had refused to wear any of the women's spandex, but he had found a pair of low sandals that fit fairly well, and he was wearing those.

"Do you mind if I ask you a question," Andy said while he drove.

"No, go ahead."

"I've noticed that you're moving in a more feminine manner this morning, the way you walk and how you sat in the chair, for instance. Are you doing it consciously?"

"Some. But it seems natural to me. It's like, well, sometimes I have to think about it to act in a feminine manner and sometimes, I have to think about it to act like a man."

"I guess your mind decided that my suggestion to turn into a woman included your behavior as well as your anatomy."

"Suggestion! That's a helluva way to describe it. You owe me big for this."

"Ask me about it six months from now when we're both millionaires, and I'm a Nobel Laureate."

"You sure that will happen?"

"Pretty sure. If I can turn you into a woman, growing a new limb on an amputee should be easy. What I'm wondering is if I can tell somebody that his cancer is going away or that his kidneys work again; tell them and have that happen."

"You figure out how to do that, and you'll deserve all the money they're going to throw at you." Phil saw the mall just ahead. "Hey, we're here."

Phil pulled into the mall. It was early enough that there was still good parking. Andy found a spot near the Sears?, and the two went in. Andy held the doors as Phil, smiling, walked through. Andy caught himself looking at Phil's long slender legs and watching his ass sway as he walked. Stop that, he thought to himself. He may look like a girl, but there's a man inside that body, your oldest friend. You don't want to screw things -- oh, hell, why had he thought 'screw' -- you don't want to mess things up by getting crazy with him.

Andy handed Phil the list of his new sizes. Phil looked at the list. Andy had put a list under it on the sheet: three pair of bras and panties, three blouses, three pairs of women's jeans, three pair of socks, sneakers and a nightgown.

"Why three," he said. "I thought that I was only going to have to be a girl for two days. You pulling a fast one?"

"No, I figured that you'd need some of it for the transition day back. In addition, you might want a change of clothes during the day. I'm paying for it; so don't worry about it. Just don't go crazy and buy the most expensive stuff you can find. I'm a poor academic, not a rich lawyer."

"We'll both be rich, when the word gets out on your stuff, but I promise. Don't worry, you'll be there to watch me shop."

"The heck I will. Have you ever gone into a ladies' wear department with any of your women friends?" By now, the pair were at the edge of what Phil had always thought of as 'No Man's Land,' the women's clothing department.

"No, but I'm not a -- oh, hell, I guess I am. Okay, coward, where will you be while I'm buying out the store?"

"Looking at the fishing gear, of course." He pointed to a large clock on the wall nearby. There were a number of them all over the store. "It's 10:15. I'll meet you back here in an hour."

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Andy almost didn't get back in time. There was a demonstration of a new composite pole that he stayed to watch. At the last minute, he looked at his watch and hurried away to meet Phil.

Phil was waiting, but it was a much different Phil. Andy watched in amazement as he walked towards him, smiling and hips swaying. His sweats were in a bag, and he was decked out in a pair of light blue designer jeans that hugged every delicious curve and a matching cotton top with scalloped sleeves and a neckline that was cut low enough in front to show quite a bit of rounded bosom. His hair was tied in a ponytail with a pale blue scarf that seemed like a flag in his long silky black hair.

Phil flashed Andy a smile, and Andy noticed that Phil was wearing lipstick, too. "There you are, cousin," Phil said. "Hurry up. I've been waiting for you to pay for all this stuff." Then he whispered, "Just play along, Andy."

Phil took Andy by the hand and led him to a nearby counter piled high with boxes. A woman clerk, a plump, rather pleasant looking woman in her forties was standing behind it. "Here's my cousin, at last. Pay the nice lady for my stuff, please." Andy handed his credit card to the clerk. Phil kept talking. "I was so worried when the airline lost all my luggage. It was sweet of you, Cousin Andy, to offer to buy me this new stuff. I promise I'll pay you back when I get home."

Andy signed for the clothes. He took two bags, Phil took the other and they walked towards the exit. "What was all that 'cousin' stuff back there?"

"Sorry about that. I needed some sort of explanation why you were buying my clothes, and I wasn't gonna say you were my boyfriend."

"So you had to gush at me like that. I felt like an idiot."

Phil giggled. "I didn't like it either, but it was the easiest way to tell you my -- you should excuse the expression -- cover story. I had to get her to trust me, so I could change out of those sweats." She stopped. "You haven't told me how I look." She stepped back and posed, arms raised and one knee bent.

"Very nice. You look very nice. But I'm beginning to wonder just how much your mind's been affected by this?"

"I don't know, and I'd worry about it, too, but I'm confident that you can change me back." Andy remembered that part of his suggestion had also been that Phil would trust him. He hoped the trust was justified.

"In the meantime," Phil continued, "something else is affecting me."

"What? What's the matter?"

"I'm hungry. We never did have breakfast and that pizza smells good. How about an early lunch, 'Cousin Andy'?"

Andy groaned a little at the joke, but they went in. It was still a bit early, and the place was mostly empty. They took a booth in the corner for privacy. There were menus on the table, and they looked at them for a minute or two. A waitress, a tall, thin brunette who looked like she might still be in high school came over. "Are you ready to order," she asked Andy.

"Yes, thanks," Andy said. "We'll have a medium pizza, half extra cheese, half ground beef, and two sodas each, one now, one when you bring the food. Coke<sup>®</sup> for me and a Diet Coke<sup>®</sup> for the lady." Only then did he turn to Phil. "That okay with you?"

Phil was so surprised he could only nod his head. The meal was what they probably would have ordered, but Andy hadn't bothered to ask. He'd just taken the lead, as if they were a couple on a date. What surprised Phil even more was that he'd gone along with it and that it had felt comfortable to do so.

Phil realized that his trust in Andy wasn't natural, though he wasn't sure exactly what it was. Whatever it was, it was very strong -- maybe too strong. Any worrisome thought went away as soon as he thought of Andy. Phil actually found himself feeling better being around Andy, seeking him for just that reason. He didn't like it, but even as Phil thought about it, he realized that Andy was there with him. He felt his concerns fading away. Why worry when Andy had told him that he could fix things?

The waitress brought the Cokes®. Phil realized that his mouth was very dry and took a long drink. Licking his lips, he tasted the lipstick he had bought on an impulse.

"What's the matter, um, say, what do I call you?"

"How about we stick with 'Phil'? Anybody asks, we can say it's short for 'Phyllis'."

"Okay. What's the matter, um, Phil?"

"The whole change is getting me down. You messed with my head, I think, as much as you messed with my body, but I can't seem to get worried about it. I'm a lawyer. Worrying about -- planning for - the possibilities of a situation is what I do."

"I'm sorry. I told you not to worry about what was going to happen. I didn't want your conscious and your unconscious minds fighting each other. Is it really that big a deal?"

"I'm not sure. Every time I begin to think about what's happened to me, I seem to think of you and get distracted. It just bothers me. That's all."

"You seem to be adjusting well enough. I'd say just go with the flow and use this as a chance to see how the other half lives. I'll be giving you the injection to change back tomorrow night, so whatever happens, it'll only be for the next day or so."

"Then we go fishing?"

"Then we go fishing."

The waitress brought the pizza, and they stopped talking for a few minutes. Normally, each would have eaten half the pie, but Phil discovered that his stomach had changed along with everything else. A slice and a half and he couldn't eat any more. Andy had only eaten a couple of slices, too, not wanting to pig out when Phil couldn't.

"Don't worry about it," Andy said. He had the extra slices put in a 'doggy bag' and they headed out to the car. On the way back he asked, "So, what are you going to be doing this afternoon?"

"What do you mean?"

"I have to go play 'mad scientist' and start the analysis of those samples I took. Some of the tests I want to do take hours to set up and run."

"Gee, I don't know. I still feel a little tired, so I may take a nap. Then maybe some fishing to get a leg up on you in trying out my new fishing gear."

"Okay, just remember that your upper arm strength is only about thirty percent of normal. You'll have a harder time pulling in big ones or even smaller ones that put up a fight."

"I hadn't thought of that. Maybe I'll just read. I spend so much work time reading legal documents that I don't get a chance to read for pleasure much anymore."

"Whatever. I'll set a timer in the lab, so I remember to come out to fix dinner. Hey, here we are."

Andy headed for the small lab that he'd set up and Phil went upstairs. He napped for about an hour, sleeping in his new clothes. When he woke up, he felt more like doing something active than reading. There was an indoor pool set in what had been the barn. It was connected to the house by a tunnel in the basement, so it could be gotten to in the colder weather.

Phil took one of the women's swimsuits from the storage closet, a shimmering green one piece that looked like it would fit. He couldn't help admire himself in the bedroom mirror once he'd changed. The suit was cut high to show leg and it did. Phil's were long and had just the right curve. The suit itself hugged his narrow waist and wide hips. It was a little small in the chest. Not enough to be uncomfortable, but enough to push his breasts up, making them look even bigger. As he posed in the mirror, he felt his nipples tingling. Phil realized that he was still male enough mentally to be turned on by his new body, even if the physical reaction was a female one.

Phil walked over to the barn through the tunnel, since it was a little cool to go outside in just a swimsuit. The pool was heated by a timer that the caretaker had turned on the day before the two friends had arrived. Phil found a white swim cap and put it on. Then he dove in and swam laps for about forty minutes. His arms weren't as strong, but his body seemed lighter. It was an even enough swap for a man who normally tried to swim at least once a week.

He climbed out and found robes and towels in the lockers by the pool. He put on one of the robes and wrapped a towel in a turban over his wet hair. Somebody had left a Tom Clancy novel on a previous visit and it was on a shelf in the same locker. Phil liked Clancy. This was one he hadn't read yet. He curled up on a deck chair and read for a good part of the afternoon. Just before 5 PM, he stopped and swam another set of laps, partly to work the kinks out and partly to try to work up more of an appetite for the supper he knew Andy was fixing.

Coming back up from the basement Phil could smell dinner cooking. Both he and Andy had learned to cook while they were in college, but Andy was the better of the two. Phil's mouth began to water at the smells. He decided to stay downstairs and read until supper was ready. Sitting on the couch, he continued reading Clancy.

Supper was almost ready, so Andy went in to set the table. He saw Phil on the couch. "Hey, lazybones," he said. "How about helping out by setting the table. We're having baked chicken and veggies. Get some beer out, too." He went back into the kitchen without waiting for an answer.

Phil put the book down and got dishes, napkins and silverware from a sideboard. The table was set a few minutes later. He also took four cans of beer from the refrigerator, putting in a fresh six-pack for later and brought the cans to the table. "Ready when you are, Andy," he called.

Andy came in a few minutes later carrying a dish full of chicken. He then brought in vegetables while Phil carried in the salad. They sat down and began serving themselves.

"Why so fancy," Phil asked. "I half expected you to heat up the pizza from lunch, or maybe make a couple burgers."

"I don't know. I haven't cooked in a while, so I thought I'd do something more than just 'nuke' a quick meal in the microwave." Andy knew that Phil was something of a gourmet, and he thought Phil deserved some extra effort for what he was going through, but sitting there watching, it was hard to remember that this gorgeous woman sitting across from him was his old friend. Her voice, her mannerisms seemed to be totally female.

After the meal, they went into the living room, taking more beer in with them. The house had cable and they channel surfed looking for a good movie. They settled on an old movie about Paul Newman as a broken down lawyer. Phil had seen it before and enjoyed the courtroom scenes and the way the actors gotten the life of a lawyer right, but this time, though, he found himself noticing the love story a lot more.

What he didn't notice was the way he and Andy were gradually moving closer together on the couch. By the middle of the movie, Phil was leaning against Andy's chest, and he had his arm around Phil. Towards the end, when Newman's case seems lost, and he discovers that the woman he's been attracted to works for the opposing lawyer, Phil found himself sniffing.

Andy pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and daubed at Phil's eyes. It's okay, man. You know how the movie ends. Without thinking, he leaned over slightly and touched Phil's cheek. Phil turned his head. They were only inches apart. New feminine instincts took over. Phil's arm reached up to pull Andy's head closer -- and they kissed.

Phil felt his nipples beginning to tingle. He'd never realized Andy was such a good kisser.

Andy! He was kissing Andy!

Phil broke the kiss and leapt from the couch. "What -- what's the matter," Andy said.

"What's the matter? We were kissing. And you were enjoying it, you perverted SOB!"

"I guess I was. Dammit, Phil. I know you're a man, but right now, you're a girl -- a damned attractive one who gave in to the movie, the mood and the beer for a minute. Don't let it spook you."

"Don't let it '*spook*' me?" Yet, even as Phil said it, he felt the hypnotic suggestion beginning to take effect. Sure, it was scary to be reacting as a woman, but Andy said that it was okay. He trusted Andy, trusted him completely. "I'm -- I'm okay, but I think that I need to go up to bed now. I'll see you in the morning." He turned and tried to calmly walk to the stairs, when every instinct was telling him to run.

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Andy turned off the TV. Damn! He hadn't meant to do that. What he said about the beer was as true for him as it was for Phil. He just hoped that he hadn't destroyed the friendship between the two of them - and why did Phil have to be such an attractive woman?

Upstairs, Phil had slammed the door behind him and thrown himself on the bed. He was crying again. What was happening to him? Even now, he was acting like a female and he didn't like it. He was used to being more in control of himself. It was the beer, but it was him, too. He and Andy had been friends for almost half their lives, but this change -- it added a whole new dimension to the friendship and it was a dimension that part of him, at least, was curious to explore.

He wiped his eyes and decided to get ready for bed. Besides, the swimsuit was beginning to feel a little clammy. He peeled it off and hung it over the shower rod in the bathroom. Turning around, he caught a glimpse of himself in the large mirror above the sink.

It was the first time that he'd really seen himself since the change. Lord, but he was beautiful. He saw breasts, firm and high, well more than a handful with nipples that begged to be touched, a narrow waist that flared out to a pair of hips that were made for bearing babies and long slender legs with just the right amount of curve. He turned and looked back over his shoulder at the mirror. The ass wasn't bad either.

The face, well, he looked a lot like his cute cousin, Joanie, only -- he hated to even think it -- a lot prettier. His eyes had never been that big, had they? And his lips. What was with that pout?

Phil stopped staring and walked back into the bedroom, conscious of the extra weight on his chest and the way his hips swayed as he walked. Do women get this turned on every time they walk, he wondered? No, they must get used to it in time.

He sat on the bed and absentmindedly touched his left nipple. A jolt of pleasure shot through his body. He touched it again, this time deliberately. Phil had years of experience at arousing women and he applied it to his own body, cupping his breasts, running a nail along the sensitive flesh, tweaking at the nipples.

The sensations were incredible. His head tilted back, mouth open, unable to speak. He wanted more. One hand had left his breast, and he felt his fingers sliding gently along his labia. One finger slipped within to find his clitoris, while another moved into his vagina. He began to move his hand back and forth.

Phil fell back onto the bed, no longer able to sit upright. His head rocked back and forth and he began to moan. Pleasure was shooting out from his breasts and his groin to every part of his body. His hips began to move, matching the movements of his hand and his groin felt very warm and very, very wet.

The feelings grew stronger and stronger. He was frantic. Suddenly a great bolt of sexual energy exploded throughout his body. Surprised by its intensity, he stopped moving and just enjoyed the thrill of his first female orgasm.

As the edge of pleasure began to fade, the remnants of his masculine ego asserted itself. He forced himself to stop, even though his body was crying out for more. As a sort of compromise, he gently massaged his breasts, carefully avoiding the nipples. It was like the "cool-down" exercises at the end of a heavy workout.

Satisfied now, he thought, groaning at the inadvertent pun. You've just proven beyond a reasonable doubt that you are a woman -- or maybe you'd like to go downstairs and rape Andy. Part of him actually liked the idea. Andy was probably a gentle and patient lover. He certainly was a good kisser.

No! Phil caught himself just as he began to play with his nipples again. He jumped from the bed and ran into the bathroom. He turned on the shower, setting it for cold water and stepped in.

It helped. Some.

A few minutes later, Phil was in bed wearing the long flannel nightgown he'd bought that afternoon and a

pair of panties. His responses were definitely those of a woman, but as long as he limited himself to himself, it was harmless. He'd always loved Andy like a brother, but now he was starting to think of him in a very different way. Still, he trusted Andy. He wouldn't betray their friendship, and he was too ethical to take advantage of a research subject. Phil's last thought before he fell asleep was that he was due to get another shot and start changing back the next evening. He smiled and dozed off.

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Phil woke up about nine. It was raining steadily, so it looked like fishing was out for the day. Besides, he'd come to go fishing with his old buddy, Andy, not to fish alone. Andy had said that he expected to spend the day in that lab of his, doing more analysis of the samples he'd taken and the telemetry data from those little "peas."

Phil wondered if they were still attached so he took off the nightgown and checked. Yes, they were there, hardly noticeable like little band aides. He went in the bathroom and washed up.

Now to get dressed, he thought. He hadn't bothered to put his new clothes away, just left everything in boxes or bags on the dresser. He took out a matching bra and panty set, pink with a pink lace trim full of tiny flowers. He stepped into the panties and pulled them up around his hips. It was amazing how good the material felt against his skin. It was soft and cool, very different from the feel of the cotton shorts he usually wore.

He put the bra on backwards. He looked down past his breasts to hook the strap. Then he carefully twisted it around and inched it up until the cups were just below his breasts. He maneuvered his arms through the bra straps and, as he moved the straps up onto his shoulders, the cups lifted up and around his breasts. A couple of minor adjustments and the bra was in place. The material felt as good against his skin as the panties had below, and there was a sense of relief from the support that they gave to his breasts.

He thought about trying a pair of panty hose. The clerk had seemed insistent, and there was no good reason that he could think of for the woman he was pretending to be not to buy a pair. He'd bought two pair, along with the socks he actually planned to wear. Now he was feeling a little adventurous.

He took an egg-shaped container from the bag and cracked it open. He'd watched enough women getting dressed to know roughly how to put them on. He put one foot in, being careful not to snag it on his toenails. Then, he slowly pulled it part way up his leg. He repeated the process with the other leg, then inched them slowly the rest of the way up to his hips. He stood and pulled the top up to his waist.

His legs felt slightly constricted by the material, but he got used to that in a moment. He found that he could barely feel it when he stood still, but when he moved, he felt a soft caress the length of both legs. It wasn't sexual, but it was sensual. He liked it and decided that it had been a good idea to wear the hose.

Phil put on a pair of pink jeans -- no skirts for him. There was a long series of tiny electric tingles as the jeans slid past the hose. These jeans weren't like the sort he'd normally worn. Not just the color. They were cut to his new figure, cut tight on his lush hips and much narrower in the waist. They were also tight enough to show off his legs to good advantage.

He pulled a matching short sleeve sweater blouse from another bag and put it on. Phil still wasn't used to the buttons being on the "wrong" side. He decided to leave the top two buttons open, revealing a bit of breast. It'll blow Andy's mind, he thought and giggled. The giggle startled him a little. He brushed his hair and went down to breakfast.

Andy was waiting for him downstairs. "Good morning, sleepy head," he said. I've been up for over an hour, so I already had breakfast and started working. I left the stuff out for you."

Andy had decided not to mention the incident the night before unless Phil did. He was, frankly, very embarrassed to have taken advantage of his old friend. "There's coffee, too, but first, I'd like to take another blood sample."

"What a great way to start the day," Phil grumped. "Is that all?"

"Have you noticed any physical changes since yesterday? You don't seem any different, but you're dressed and I can't tell."

"No, and the clothes that I bought -- you bought -- yesterday still fit." Phil noticed that Andy was looking at him carefully, having come to the same conclusion. He also noticed that Andy was making a deliberate effort not to look at the way his breasts were displayed by the open buttons on the blouse.

"Okay, just blood then. In that shirt, you don't have to roll up your sleeve." He had Phil sit down and drew another blood sample. When he was done, he handed Phil a glass of orange juice. Phil drank it while Andy cleaned up his equipment, putting the used needle in a red disposal box. "See you for lunch," he said and went into the lab.

Phil scrambled himself an egg. He finished the juice and then had the egg and some coffee. Normally, he ate more, but he'd discovered yesterday that it took less to fill him. Smaller stomach, I guess, he thought. He rinsed the dirty dishes and put them in the dishwasher. Then he went into the living room and found his book. He spent the rest of the morning reading how Jack Ryan saved the world this time.

Andy came out of his lab about 12:30. They finished off the leftover pizza, washing it down with soda. Mostly they made small talk. Andy was in what Phil called his "mad scientist" mode, totally caught up in his work. The conversation did drift into fishing at one point and the two upped their standing bet on who would catch the most fish over the course of the trip. Joking over the riches they were expecting from Andy's drug, they raised the \$10 bet to \$100 per day of fishing plus \$500 for the whole trip.

After lunch, Andy went back into the lab, promising to be out for dinner. Phil had finished the Clancy book just before lunch. There were some other books in the house, even a few law journals, but he didn't feel like reading. He didn't want to swim either.

Phil was thinking about Andy. He hadn't mentioned what had happened the night before. Andy was obviously attracted to Phil's new body and just as obviously embarrassed about it. He's feeling guilty about it, Phil thought and I'm going to have some fun at his expense, maybe get him back a little for doing this to me.

Phil had bought a small purse the day before. Again, there was no way to explain why a woman, who claimed to have lost all of her clothes, wouldn't want to buy one. He put his wallet in it and headed out to his car. He was at the mall in twenty minutes.

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Andy came out of the lab at about 5 PM. There was no sign of Phil, but he did find a note. "Supper's on me tonight. Dress nice, and we'll hit Tony Harris'." Tony Harris' was a steak house over near the Easterbridge Mall. They were known for the quality of the food and served up three or four good micro-brewed beers as well. Andy and Phil had been planning to eat there at least once during the trip, probably on the last night. Now, for some reason, they'd be hitting it a little earlier than he'd figured.

Andy decided to humor Phil, so he went upstairs to shower and change. He hadn't brought a suit, but he had clean shirts and jeans in his room and he always kept one "emergency" tie in a pocket in his suitcase. He was just coming down the stairs when he heard somebody coming through the door.

"That you, Phil," he said.

"Yeah," said a voice behind him. "You look nice."

He turned, and his jaw dropped in surprise. It was Phil, but he was wearing a sleeveless navy dress cut low enough in front to show lots of creamy bosom and short enough to show quite a bit of leg. He had dark gray hose on those legs and was perched on two or three in heels. A bracelet adorned one wrist and earrings dangled from his ears -- did he get them pierced? His make-up was flawless; ripe red lips,

blusher, mascara and shadow that made his eyes seem larger.

"What..." Andy asked, "What did you do to yourself? Are you okay?"

"I feel great. Don't I look okay?" She spun around slowly, raising the skirt to show even more leg. Andy thought he even got a quick glimpse of thigh above the top of stockings. Stockings?

"You look great, but how -- why'd you do it? I thought you hated being turned into a woman."

"I figured that you'd be turning me back soon, so I might as well see what it was really like. As to how, well, that's a pretty good sized mall over there at Easterbridge, and the 'P.J.' on my credit card can stand for 'Phyllis Joan' as easily as 'Phillip John'."

"What was it like?"

"It was weird. I'll admit that, but the look on your face when you saw me standing there was worth it," Phil giggled. "Damn, I hate it when I do that. It just --"

"Sounds so feminine?" Andy asked, trying to get back at his friend.

"Yeah," Phil sighed and shrugged. When he did, his breasts rose in a display that Andy couldn't help but enjoy watching. Andy smiled. Phil might just be playing dress-up as a gag, but he couldn't realize how feminine his body language had become. Tonight could be very interesting.

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They got to the restaurant about six. It was mostly empty as might be expected on a Monday. The mater d' seated them at a table, handed each a menu, and hurried off. A tall man in his forties came by a few minutes later. "Hello," he said, "I'm Jack, your waiter. Would you like anything to drink while you're deciding what to order?"

"A bottle of house red," Andy said. The waiter nodded and went to get the wine.

"Why wine?" Phil asked. "I thought we'd get a pitcher of Brady's Malt." The malt was a dark micro-brewed beer that both had tried and enjoyed on previous visits to the restaurant.

"Please," Andy said. "Brady's is good for a couple of guys on a fishing trip. I'm here with a beautiful lady, and wine is so much more romantic." He grinned, almost leered, at Phil for a moment.

"Okay, I guess I deserved that. Besides, if this is a date, you're paying, and there's a lot of good, expensive stuff on this menu." He picked up the menu as if trying to figure out what would be the most expensive meal to order.

The waiter came back with the wine and poured a little for Andy to taste. When Andy drank and nodded, he filled both glasses. "Are you ready to order, now?"

"Yes," Phil said, but before he could order, Andy interrupted. "Salad, Russian dressing on the side for her, blue cheese for me; chateaubriand for two -- medium; baked potatoes, sour cream on both." This time, he didn't even ask Phil. He just ordered and handed the waiter his menu. Then he took the menu from Phil's hands and gave it to the waiter as well. Dismissed, the man left to place the order.

"Well, that was nice," Phil remarked. "I can order for myself, you know."

"You said that you wanted expensive. We've eaten here enough that I know what you like, so I just did what the man expected and ordered for us both."

"Yeah, but a gentleman at least asks a lady if she likes what he's ordered?"

"A gentleman asks a *what*?" Andy was grinning broadly now. Gotcha, he thought. Now we're even for the clothes.

"Oh, hell," Phil said. "I wasn't thinking. This whole thing is really getting to me. I'll be glad to get that shot and change back."

"Okay. I'm sorry. Look, let's just enjoy the meal." He lifted his glass. "Here's to Phil and Andy, two guys who're going to catch a lot of fish over the next week and a half."

Phil clinked his glass with Andy's and both drank some of their wine. In a few minutes, they were lost in talk of where the most likely spots out on the lake near the house were and what lures or bait to use. They chatted like the old friends they were, pausing occasionally to drink more wine.

The waiter brought their salads. He was a little surprised to hear such a pretty woman talking so knowledgeably about fishing, but he just shrugged as he walked away. Many women fished these days; his wife was almost as good at it as he was.

Talk continued through the salad, not stopping when the waiter brought the steak. Much as it galled Phil

to admit it, Andy had ordered pretty well. The steak was perfect. It cut like butter and all but melted in his mouth. The two friends kept talking, eating and drinking. About halfway through the meal, they finished the bottle of wine. The waiter noticed and brought a second bottle.

By the end of the meal, both Phil and Andy were beginning to feel the wine. Phil had tried to keep pace with Andy, forgetting that his body might have a smaller capacity. He was made only too aware of his smaller stomach when he wasn't able to finish the steak. He giggled a little when he asked the waiter for a "doggy bag" to take home the meat and about half his potato.

"You'll be changing back by lunchtime tomorrow," Andy said. "That will hardly make a complete lunch."

"But it's so good," Phil said. "Maybe I'll wait till after lunch to get that shot. Then I can have my steak -- and eat it, too." He giggled again at the joke.

"I thought you were in a hurry to turn back."

"I am, silly." Phil started, surprised at how feminine that statement was. "I am, but I'm also definitely beginning to feel the wine, and I'm not sure I can be hypnotized while I'm drunk. I'm willing to wait 'til morning to make sure that the stuff works."

"You may be right about the wine. To tell the truth, I'm feeling it a little, too. Okay, we'll wait till morning."

"Can you drive us home okay?"

"Yeah. I'm not as drunk as you think I am. Oh, don't look at me like that. I was joking. There shouldn't be much traffic on the road. I'll drive slowly, and we should be fine."

"Just the same, let's both have a cup of coffee with desert."

The waiter came back with the "Doggy Bag" and their desert orders. Both ordered a cup of coffee, "strong and black." While they were waiting, a young man in a sheriff's uniform came over to the table.

"Excuse me," he said. "I'm Deputy Ron Taylor. Are you the folks staying at the Hendricks' Lodge?"

"No, we're just down the road from it at the old Riley house," Andy said. "A -- um -- a friend of mine is a partner at the law firm that owns it. I'm Andy Hoffmann, and this is Phil-iss McNierney"

"Pleased to meet you. I wanted to warn you. We've had some break-ins in a few of the houses near that end of the lake -- a little robbery, a little vandalism. Nobody's been hurt, yet, though. Just make sure that you lock your doors and turn on any alarm system you may have."

"Thank you, Deputy Taylor," Phil said.

The deputy gave the pair a good professional appraisal. "Are you folks sure you can get home all right? Be a shame to see a nice couple like you in an accident, or to have to pull you in for drunk driving. I'll be glad to give you a lift. I can even give you a taxi pass, so it won't cost you anything to come back here for your car tomorrow."

Drunk or not, Andy knew better than to argue with a policeman. Especially one who knew that he was about to try something that was both dangerous and illegal. "Thank you, Deputy. We're not quite ready to go. Can I buy you a cup of coffee while you wait for us to finish?"

"No, that's all right. Mr. Harris, the owner here, is on the town council. We eat here free when we're on duty. Thank you, though. I'll just be over at the counter."

The deputy walked away to finish his burger. The waiter came a few moments later with the coffee. "Good thing you agreed," he said. "Ron lost a buddy to a drunk driver a couple years ago and he can come down hard on one. I've known him to follow somebody for miles, pull them over and write a citation. He'll still take them home, rather than put them in jail. But there's a \$100 fine for drunk driving and you can get your license pulled."

"To tell the truth, I'm a little relieved," Phil said. "I know I'm too drunk to try and drive. I trust Andy, but he's had more than me. He is bigger, though." Phil giggled at that, knowing the sexual connotation the statement had. "I wasn't quite sure that he could manage to get us back to the house."

The waiter left and Andy gave Phil a nasty look. "'He is bigger.' You are definitely drunk, my friend."

"I know, and it feels good. Drink your coffee and let's get going. We can't keep the good deputy waiting all night."

They drank the coffee slowly, savoring its richness. Every so often, Andy would look over to where the deputy was sitting. Phil asked for the check when the waiter came back with a pot offering refills. The waiter looked at Andy. "Give it to her. She's a liberated woman of the '90s." With a noncommittal shrug, the waiter refilled the cups and took Phil's credit card.

The deputy was just finishing when the waiter brought back the receipt for Phil to sign. Phil signed, remembering to write "P.J.," rather than "Phillip J. McNierney" and adding a good tip for the waiter. Andy finished the last of his coffee. They were standing by the table when the deputy reached them. "You two ready to go?" he asked.

Phil and Andy got up and started for the door. Andy noticed that Phil seemed to be weaving more than a little. The wine had definitely been too much for him in his new body. He was feeling it a bit, too. He'd enjoyed the meal, but he had a feeling that tomorrow's hangover was not going to be nearly as much fun.

When they got outside, the officer led them to his patrol car. "You folks will have to ride in back. Don't worry, I won't lock the door." He opened the door and Phil got in. He slid over on the seat and Andy joined him. The officer shut the door and got in the driver's seat. "So, what brings you two up here to the Lake?"

"Fish. We were due some time off and we've been fishing together since we were kids. I've heard it's pretty good around here, so I wangled the use of the house and here we are."

"If you say so," the deputy said. Phil recognized the tone of voice. He could almost hear the man's thoughts. Good-looking guy, pretty girl -- and all they came to do was fish? Right! He decided to have a little fun with the deputy and with Andy.

"Well, that's not all," Phil said. He snuggled up close to Andy and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He giggled watching his friend's reaction and decided to go just a little further. "No, definitely not all. Is it, lover?" He turned suddenly in the seat and put an arm up and around Andy's head. Then he kissed Andy full on the lips.

Andy's mouth opened in surprise and Phil stuck his tongue in just a little. It felt nice, surprisingly nice. He could feel his nipples getting taut in his bra. His crotch felt warm, wet and just a little empty.

"Phil -- Phyllis, please. Not here in front of the deputy." Andy broke away. He pushed Phil back and moved as far away as he could in the limited space of the back seat.

Phil giggled. "I'm sorry, Andy. I was just showing the nice deputy what he expected to see."

"Don't need to give me a show, ma'am," the deputy said. "I'm not here to judge. I just want to get you folks home in one piece. What you do once you get there is your business."

"You're right and I'm sorry," Phil acceded. "It was the wine, not me. Andy and I are just friends." Somehow, he felt sorry saying it. He'd enjoyed the kiss. Phil saw Andy trying to adjust his pants without

being obvious about it. He must have enjoyed it at least a little, too. Phil smiled at that thought, feeling his nipples beginning to tingle again.

The deputy dropped them at the door and drove off. They went in, switching the house alarm to external mode. Phil stopped at the bottom of the steps. "Andy, I'm feeling a little too wobbly. Could you help me up to my room?"

"Okay, but no tricks."

"No tricks. I promise. Now, please give me a hand. If I don't get some help, I'm gonna have to sleep down here."

Andy came over and put his arm around Phil's narrow waist. He grabbed the railing with his other hand. "Just lean on me and step when I step." He went up one step. Phil stepped with him. Andy continued slowly up the stairs. He tried very hard not to notice how nice Phil's body felt against him, how good he smelled.

Phil was having very similar thoughts. The sensations in his breasts and groin were back, made stronger by the wine he had drunk.

They reached the top and walked down to Phil's bedroom. Phil started to open the door, but then he turned and put his arms around Andy's neck.

He pulled Andy's head down and kissed him. Hard. Andy opened his mouth in surprise, and Phil's tongue snaked in. He pressed himself up close. Andy felt Phil's breasts pressing against him, felt Phil rubbing against his groin. Despite his best efforts to resist, Andy kissed Phil back and felt himself growing hard.

No! Andy thought. This is wrong. He pushed Phil away. "You promised. No tricks."

Phil smiled demurely. "That wasn't a trick. It was a treat." Phil reached down and caressed Andy's groin. "And you seemed to enjoy it." Phil grabbed Andy by his belt and led him into the room. "Let's see what other treats we can think of."

Phil shut the door behind them, turned and kissed Andy again. Then he broke the kiss and loosed Andy's tie. He pulled it off over Andy's head and began unbuttoning his shirt. "Phil, do -- do you know what you're doing?"

"Gee, I hope so, lover." Phil's voice was low and husky. "Why? Am I doing it wrong?" She stopped and kissed him again. "Don't you like it?"

"Yeah, but -- but you're a guy."

"Do I look like a guy?" Phil asked. He stepped back and reached behind himself with both hands. His arms moved up and down his back. Then, he brought them back around and dropped them to his sides. His dress fell down past his hips to form a pool of silk at his feet. He bent one knee slightly and put a hand on his hip, the classic female position.

Andy's jaw dropped. Phil was wearing a violet demi-bra that pushed his pillowy breasts up and out. His panties were the same shade. They were cut high and trimmed with white lace and clung to his narrow waist and wide hips. His pale gray stockings were held up by a matching garter belt that pulled them tight on his delicately curved legs and showed plenty of creamy thigh. "I said, 'Do I look like a guy?'"

Andy's penis came to immediate attention. It felt like he could drive nails with it -- into steel girders. "Uh -- uh, no, but tomorrow..."

"Will be tomorrow." Phil stepped out of the pool that was his dress and walked back to Andy. It was a stripper's walk, hips cocking with each step. He took Andy's head in his hands and kissed him again. This time Andy kissed him back.

Phil finished unbuttoning Andy's shirt and pulled it off. Then he bent down and loosened Andy's belt. He undid the pants and pulled them down to Andy's ankles. Phil found himself staring straight at the very large bulge in Andy's shorts. On impulse, he leaned forward and kissed it through the fabric. It pulsed at the touch.

Andy reached down and pulled Phil up. They kissed again, and Andy's hands reached behind Phil to undo his bra. It slid off, and he tossed it away. His arms pulled Phil close. Andy felt Phil's nipples, hard as his own erection, as his breasts squashed up against Andy's own hairy chest.

Phil felt his nipples tingling. His groin was hot, wet and empty. When his body touched Andy, or Andy touched him, he felt jolts of pleasure shoot through his body. It was a wonderful new world of sensation, but in the back of his mind he could hear the voice of Philip J. McNierney. It was a very male voice and it was screaming for him to stop. Push him away, the voice said. Push him out. Then, lock the door and stay in until he comes to give you the shot in the morning.

However, there was another voice, his own female voice. No, it said. You trust Andy. You love him. You always have. This is just a different way of showing him that love.

In addition, there was a third voice -- if it could be called a voice. His body, his oh-so-female body, was screaming, too; screaming a need to feel Andy touching him, kissing him -- to feel Andy within him. Stop thinking, it said. Do! Just do!

Phil tried to resolve the voices, but Andy was licking at his one breast, tickling the nipple with his tongue. His fingers matched the motions of his tongue on the other nipple, tweaking it. The jolts of pleasure drowned out everything but the third voice. Phil moaned and threw his head back. His knees grew weak and then he felt them begin to buckle. As he sank backward, he felt himself being lifted up. Andy carried him over to the unmade bed and gently laid him down on it. A few moments later, Phil felt Andy lie down beside him on the bed and begin to suckle at his other breast.

Phil's hand reached down. Andy had taken off his shorts. Phil's fingers circled around Andy's penis. It jumped slightly at his touch and felt hard and warm. Phil rubbed it gently feeling it pulse slightly as he did. Somehow, he felt that was reassuring. It wanted him just as he wanted it.

Now Andy's hand moved down. His finger found the folds of Phil's sexual lips beneath the thin fabric of the panties. A finger traced their shape. It was Phil's turn to tremble as the panties became moist to the touch. Andy's hand reached into the panties and caressed Phil's labia directly. Two fingers snaked inside and began moving in and out. Phil moaned again. His hips began to move in rhythm with Andy's fingers.

Suddenly Phil's grasp on Andy's penis tightened. "Now," he demanded. "Put it in me now."

Andy stopped the motion and pulled out his hand. He grasped the top of Phil's panties and began pulling them down. Phil lifted his ass off the bed to help. Once the panties were off, Andy moved over on top of Phil, supporting his weight with his arms and legs. Phil was still holding Andy's penis. He gently guided it to his crotch and didn't release it until he felt it brushing against his labia, pushing them apart.

Phil felt the penis enter him. It was something he had never felt -- never expected to feel. He had always been the one entering. It was his hardness going into the softness of the woman, but now, that yielding softness was his. It was wrong. He knew it was wrong, but how could anything that felt this good be wrong?

His arms went around Andy, pulling him towards him. His hips rose and fell matching Andy's motion. His legs lifted up and wrapped themselves around Andy's hips.

Andy could feel Phil's stockings against hips. He felt Phil's spiked heels on his butt, spurring him to pump harder. Their levels of pleasure rose as more and more sexual energy shot out from their loins to every part of their bodies.

In the end, they climaxed together. Phil screamed in delight and raked his nails across Andy's back. Then, Andy stopped moving and Phil felt more of Andy's weight pressing down on him. Not enough to hurt, though, but more like a thick blanket shielding him.

Andy kissed Phil gently on the mouth. He lifted one arm and began to caress Phil's body. Phil sighed as

the jolts of sexual energy settled down into the warm afterglow of sex. He smiled and kissed Phil, little pecks on his lips and cheeks.

Andy rolled over and off Phil. They both sighed; still savoring the pleasure that each had given to, and gotten from, the other. Andy put his arm out across the pillows. Phil rested his head on it and snuggled up against Andy's side. Then, Andy reached over and pulled the covers over the pair of them. In a few minutes, they were both asleep.

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The sunlight streaming through the open window woke Andy. He glanced at the bedside clock. Almost 10 AM. Well, he thought, between the wine and the -- um - "extracurriculars," he shouldn't be surprised at sleeping so late. He looked down. Phil was still lying against him, her head resting on his chest.

"Her" head? This was Phil McNierney, one of his oldest friends. They'd played basketball together, gotten drunk together, chased women together. Now -- now, they had had sex together. What the hell was going to happen to their friendship now? Would things be the same after Phil changed back?

Phil's head turned to look at him. "Finally awake, sleepyhead?"

"I guess so. Look about last night, I'm sorry --"

"Ummm, I'm not. It was great."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, but don't forget, you're due to get your shot today to change back."

"Do I have to? I'd like to stay this way a little longer." Phil's hand reached down, and Andy felt a finger run down the length of his penis. "Is there anything I can do to talk you into giving me some more time?"

Andy felt himself beginning to get hard again. "Stop that, Phil. What's going on here? I thought you were in such a hurry to change back."

"Well, now I'm not. Let's just say that last night I found a good reason for wanting to stay female a while longer."

"But ..."

"Look, Andy. Let's get serious for a moment. You need my consent to give me the shot, and you know that you can't hypnotize an unwilling subject. Well, I'm withholding my consent for the moment. Accept the fact. Okay?"

"Okay, but I'm not sure that I like it."

"Maybe this will help." Phil rolled over on top of him, sitting on his stomach. She -- there was no way to think of him as a "he" -- took his head in her hands and kissed him. He felt her breasts pressed against his chest. He felt himself grow hard. His penis rose up to touch her rounded ass as he gave in to the inevitable of what was about to happen.

She felt it, too. She lifted herself up on her knees and grasped his penis. "Well, you're certainly ready," she said with a throaty giggle. She was ready, too, very ready.

He raised his hips suddenly, pushing himself up and into her. Her eyes opened wide with delight. She moaned and pushed back. In a moment, they were matching each other, rhythm for rhythm. She leaned back and his arms reached up; his hands began to massage her breasts.

Phil wasn't sure that she had wanted to have sex again with Andy when she started flirting with him. (Phil had decided to think of herself as a "she" until changing back.) She was just teasing him. She knew how much she'd enjoyed the sex last night and she wanted to think about things before she let herself be changed back. This had seemed to be the only way to convince him, but both their bodies had reacted so very fast and things just happened.

Not that she wasn't enjoying it. She was. It was wonderful feeling him inside her. A woman's orgasm wasn't just different than a man's; she was beginning to think it was better. It certainly was longer. No sudden spurt and it was over. No, each peak led to another peak and then another -- and even when it was over, the long slide back down was such a warm, pleasant experience.

She felt Andy pulse within her. He screamed and his hips and butt froze in mid air for a moment before sinking back down onto the bed. She leaned forward and gave him a long kiss on the mouth. Then she moved her head down, arching her back as she kissed his face, his chin, down to his chest.

She didn't want to go any lower. She would have to shift her body to do that. Andy already felt softer and smaller within her and she wanted to keep him within her as long as she could. Any movement and he might slip out. She stopped kissing him and leaned forward again, resting her head on his chest and listening to his heartbeat.

She sighed, feeling her body slowly calm down, even as his did. "Well, Andy, are you convinced that it might be a good idea for me to stay female a while longer?"

"That's not a fair argument."

"I'm a lawyer. We don't play fair. We play to win."

"Well, you have. No shot until you're willing to change back. Agreed?"

"Agreed. There's just one thing."

"What now?"

"Well, much as I like staying here -- you make a great mattress - there are a lot of fish in that lake. Let's go see how many we can take out."

"Do we have to? You make a great blanket."

"Yes -- if only because we made a bet. You're ahead after the first day. Are you afraid to give me a chance to catch up?"

"Argument taken, but I think I want to shower first. Care to join me?" He was smiling, almost leering.

"It's tempting, but I'll pass -- this time." She gave him the same leer back and reluctantly climbed off. She did need a shower, though, and she'd have to figure out how to clean herself out. She could feel something wet sliding down her leg. A horrible thought came to her. They'd had unprotected sex twice. She wasn't worried about disease, but could she get pregnant?

"Andy," she said hesitantly. "Um, this, um, this body is a totally working female body. Is there any chance of it getting, well, of it getting pregnant?"

"I don't think so. I'll do a pregnancy test, if you want, but I figure that your body changed into a female one at the equivalent of the start of its cycle, as if you'd just finished menstruating. You shouldn't ovulate for over a week." He sat up and threw his legs over the side of the bed. As he rose, he gave her butt a friendly slap. "Now get dressed you lusty wench and I'll show you the proper way to catch fish."

"Who'll show whom?"

"Okay, we'll see. Oh, and I'm going to want to take another blood sample, so don't eat anything if you get

downstairs first."

"Why?"

"I want to keep a constant baseline of your body chemistry until you change back. Don't worry. It won't take long."

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They were on the lake less than forty minutes later. Where they spent most of the day in silence, listening to tapes on their "walkmen." This time Phil had a much better day than Andy. She was feeling relaxed and confident in her decision to stay female for a while. He was trying to figure out just what he had done to his best friend and how he could fix it.

About 4:30 they headed back in. It was a little early, but it had been a long day for them. Andy tied the boat to the dock, while Phil unloaded their gear. Then he jumped out and extended his hand. Phil grabbed it and pulled herself up and onto the dock. Andy was amazed again at how much lighter she was as a female.

Phil took the poles and headed back towards the house. Andy grabbed the line and the tackle boxes and started after her. It was a pleasure to be following her as he watched her ass sway in the tight jeans she was wearing. Andy felt himself getting hard. Damn, he thought, not again.

Phil stopped and turned to see if he was following. She saw the look of embarrassment on his face. Her eyes glanced down his body, stopping at the bulge in his jeans. She dropped the poles and walked slowly towards him. She had a wicked smile on her face and she was doing that "bump and grind" walk of hers.

Stopping directly in front of him, one hand reached down and her finger traced the bulge of his penis through his pants. "Andy, you know the nicest things to say to a girl." Then she grabbed his head in her hands and pulled him to her. Their mouths met in a long passionate kiss, their tongues darting back and forth playing with each other.

Eventually they pulled apart. Andy looked around quickly for a comfortable place. The side of the hill was gravel and low grass. It might have worked with a blanket, but they had none. Besides, it was only early May and still a little cold to be taking your clothes off outside, no matter how good the reason was.

Phil must have been thinking the same thoughts. "There's a nice warm house just up the hill. It has a thick carpet, wide couches and a whole bunch of beds for us to choose from." She picked up the poles and headed back for the house with Andy following.

The problem was that he had time to think about what he was planning to do. That was still Phil inside that body. Eventually, the original, the male Phil would be back and they'd have to face everything that had happened. How do two heterosexual men stay friends after they've made love as a man and woman? He decided not to add to the problem by doing anything more.

Again, Phil could tell what was going on just by looking at Andy's face. She pouted and went into the kitchen to fix supper while he went upstairs and took a very long and very cold shower.

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By the time Andy came down, dinner was ready. He sat down at the table and Phil put a plate of roast fish in front of him. Then, she served herself and sat down to eat without saying a word. He tried a few feints to get a reaction out of her, talking about the day's fishing, old friends, anything he could think of. Nothing worked.

Finally, he just blurted it out. "Look, Phil, I'm sorry. You're a damned attractive woman -- sexy as hell -- and because of who you are, you know more about pleasing a man than any other woman could."

"So why did you refuse me? I know you like them hot and willing.

That's what I've been playing at."

"Because of who you are -- or rather, who you were -- and who you will be -- Phil McNierney, my best friend, a guy I've known over half my life."

"So? I'm still Phil McNierney."

"No, you're not. He's gone away, and there's this hot babe trying to take his place. When he comes back, I'm going to have to explain to him how I behaved with that babe and if he doesn't like what I did, even if it's as much the babe's fault as my own, I may lose my best friend." He stopped for a minute and looked directly at Phil. "Now do you understand?"

"I -- I think I do." She was trying to hold back the tears as she spoke. "I didn't realize what I -- what I was doing. Oh, Andy, I'm so, so sorry." The tears began to flow. She jumped from the table and ran upstairs. He heard the door of her room slam behind her.

"I hope so, old buddy," Andy said in relief. "I sure hope so."

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There was a knock on Andy's door the next morning. He threw a robe on over his pajamas and opened the door. Phil was standing there in a woman's robe -- from the courtesy storage closet, Andy guessed -- looking down shyly. "May I come in?"

"I guess." He motioned her to sit in a chair and sat in another himself. No sense asking for trouble by sitting on the bed with her, he thought. "How are you doing this morning?"

"Okay. Look, I'm sorry for the way I've been acting. I didn't realize that you felt that it was putting our friendship in jeopardy."

"I know, and I'm sorry that I had to put it so bluntly. If it makes you feel any better, it wasn't all one sided. I was a more than willing participant and thoroughly enjoyed our, um, times together."

"You did?" She was smiling now.

Andy saw where that line of conversation might lead -- his bed. "Yeah, that was part of the problem. I was enjoying it too much and I was afraid that I was screwing up our friendship. Literally as well as figuratively."

Phil stopped smiling. She had been thinking about the bed, too. "Well, I think I've got a solution. I want to stay female, to never change back."

"What! Are you out of your mind?"

"No. I -- I love you Andy. I always have, but now I've fallen *in love* with you. I want to be with you."

"And what do you do when the vacation's over? How are they going to act at your firm when you come walking in wearing a woman's suit, heels, and stockings and tell them that you got in touch with your female side?"

She giggled at the thought, then began to laugh. "Vic Chase would have kittens."

It was sexy the way her whole body seemed to shake when she laughed, her breasts moving under her robe. Do not go there, Andy warned himself. "And then they'd let you just pick up your caseload and get to work?"

"Probably not. They'd think it was some sort of trick and not let me into my office. Even after I proved who I was -- and I could, unless my fingerprints have changed...."

"They haven't. At least, I can't think any reason why they should have. We can check if you want."

"That's okay. There's other ways to prove it if they have. Anyway, they'd make me keep a very low profile for a while. Probably give a lot of my work to somebody else till people had time to adjust."

"And that wouldn't bother you? You once told me that half the fun of getting up in the morning was knowing that you were going to go in to the office and -- what did you say -- oh, yeah, to go in and 'wrestle with the law.' What happens to that, Ms. McNierney?"

"There are other ways to do law. Other ways to wrestle, too." She looked at him hopefully, trying for a smile, maybe even to change the tone of this conversation a little. It didn't work.

"Okay, I'll miss that some -- I admit it -- but corporate law's been getting a little dry, lately. I've been thinking about cutting down my caseload for a while and doing some writing. The most fun that I ever had with the law was when I was on the law journal while I was in school."

"But will it be enough?"

"It would be if I was with you." She stood and began to undo her robe. Andy wasn't sure what, if anything, was under it.

"No, Phil. That's not a fair argument." He scowled and she stopped tugging at the knot in the robe's sash. "Look, if you want to stay a woman for a while longer, okay. But think about it."

"Let me make you an offer. Based on how long it took you to change, the last night to give you the shot and have you turn back before the end of our stay here is a week from today. If you can give me a good reason to let you stay a woman, then you will -- and we'll see what happens to our relationship. Otherwise, you take the shot and turn back. Agreed?"

She thought about it for a moment. There really wasn't any other way. Besides, there was always the chance that she could get him to admit how he felt about her. That would be the best argument. "Okay." She paused a moment and watched him relax a bit. She began undoing her robe. "Now that we've settled the matter...."

"No, Phil. Not till the matter's really settled."

Damn! She turned and walked out of the room. As she walked towards the door, she undid the robe. She stopped at the doorway and turned her head back to look where he was sitting. "Andy?" He looked up. She dropped the robe and let it fall to the ground. She had worn nothing underneath. She posed for a moment. "Your loss." Then she walked out the door with as sexy a strut as she could manage.

She was about halfway back to her room when something hit her in the back of the head. She turned and looked down. The robe, bunched up in a ball, lay at her feet. Andy's door was shut. Gotcha!

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Andy was waiting for her when Phil came downstairs. She was dressed in a pair of light blue jeans that hugged every curve and one of her male work shirts. The shirt was knotted at her midriff; the top two buttons were undone to show lots of breast. She smiled at him until she noticed the syringe on the table next to him.

"No! You promised. We had a deal." She turned to run upstairs.

"I know -- and I intend to honor it." He held up the syringe. "I want your blood," he said in his best Dracula voice.

"I'm sorry. I forgot about that baseline thingie of yours."

"'Baseline thingie.' Now there's a term I haven't heard since med school." He took a sample and headed for the lab. "Your breakfast's on the table. If you're going to be a girl for another week, I want to reconfigure some of the equipment for a longer test. How about we do lunch at the mall again, maybe take in a movie. I'll have a cab drive me over to Tom Harris' to pick up my car. You may want to do a little shopping, too. I don't think you've got a week worth of girl's clothes."

"Oh, thank you, Andy. You're too sweet," s he pretended to blow him a kiss. "Have fun in the lab."

"Wait a minute. What time do we meet and where?"

"How about the food court at Easterbridge Mall at one? That'll give me time to do some serious shopping and you can finish up whatever you need to finish up."

"Done. See you later." He disappeared into the lab. Phil grabbed the purse from where she'd left it earlier and walked out to her car.

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Andy walked into the mall about 12:50. The food court was on the second floor, and he got to it with a couple minutes to spare. There was no sign of Phil. He glanced around and started to make some kind of "just like a woman" comment to himself, when he remembered what a lousy sense of time the male Phil had. He decided to wait ten minutes and then, if she hadn't come, see about having her paged.

About five minutes later, Andy thought he heard his name. He turned to see a gorgeous woman walking towards him. Her walk was half strut, half stalk -- and sexy as hell. Andy stopped looking for Phil. Like most of the other men, and not a few of the women in the area, he just watched her walk towards him.

Her black hair was a mass of ringlets that framed her face. She was smiling at him, her lips a dark vibrant red. Her eyes were perfect, long thick lashes with a smoky gray eye shadow that made them seem even bigger than they were.

Her dress was a navy silk confection that hugged her curves. It was cut low enough to show lots of creamy breast. The dress was short, reaching no more than half the distance from hips to knee. It swung freely as she walked, revealing the feminine curve of her leg and even an occasional flash of thigh. Her shoes were the same color as her dress, with a three-inch heel.

She kept walking towards him. Then, as she got close, he began to recognize her. "Phil?" She smiled and ran to him. She put her arms around him and kissed him. He could smell perfume, rich and exotic. He put his arms up around her neck. One arm brushed against an earring.

The effect was total female and he reacted to her. He kissed her back, pulling her close. He felt her breasts pushing against his chest. His penis was growing hard.

The crowd broke into applause. Phil and Andy both realized that they were the center of attention and pushed apart in embarrassment. Phil took Andy by the hand and they ducked into the crowd that had gathered around them. Looking back, Andy saw Phil bowing and throwing kisses to the appreciative crowd.

"What got into you, Phil?"

"The works. I decided that if I'm going to be a girl, I'm going to be a girl! How'd I do?"

"On a scale of one to ten, I'd give you, oh, maybe a six -- ouch! Why'd you kick me? I was going to say a sixteen. Sixteen, honest."

"That's better and I'm sorry that I kicked you." She looked around. "Hey, that crowd's pretty much

stopped staring at us. How about we get some lunch?"

They went to two different counters and returned to their table. Andy had a grilled chicken sandwich, fries and a coke. Phil brought back a tossed salad and diet coke. "To quote the old joke," she said. "If I don't watch my figure, nobody else will."

"They will when you look like that."

"Thank you, kind sir." She leaned over and kissed his forehead. "How'd it go in the lab this morning, Dr. Frankenstein?"

"Pretty well. The PC's reprogrammed. The analyzer is set for additional samples -- it's doing this morning's blood work right now. From what I've looked at from the past samples, your body's well within healthy female parameters. You'll also be glad to know that there's no sign that you're anywhere near ovulating."

"Then it's okay to have sex?" She smiled at him hopefully and batted her eyelashes.

"Not with me it isn't, so stop racing your engine and eat your lunch."

"Pooh!" She giggled and took a bite of salad. "Can't blame a girl for trying, can you?"

"I guess not, but I'd really like you to stop trying." Her face darkened, so he tried to change the subject. "What do you want to do after we eat?"

"You mentioned a movie, but I'd kind of like to do some more shopping. I spent the whole morning working on this outfit and how I'd look in it."

"Don't get your hopes up, but I'll be the first to admit that it was time well spent."

"Thank you, again. I'll take it as a general compliment. Do you want to come along, or are you going to chicken out and head back to the house?"

"Might as well stay here. The equipment runs just as well without me and I can't fish unless you're there to compete. I intend to win our bet fair and square." They finished with their lunches, tossed the trash in a bin near their table and headed out into the mall.

Their first stop was a Jean King. Phil bought three more pair of jeans. She tried on one pair, coming out to ask Andy what he thought. The jeans were a pale green, cut tight to show off the wearer's curves. It certainly worked. Andy thought they almost looked painted on. Phil also bought a pair of cut-offs cut so high that the clerk advised her to make sure her panties didn't show when she wore it. Phil winked at Andy and said that she just might not wear panties under them.

They stopped at the storage locker where Phil had stashed the clothes that she'd worn to the mall. The new purchases joined the others and they headed to the next store.

Andy began shaking his head as soon as he saw where they were going. "No way, Phil," he said. "I am not going into a Victoria's Secret."

"What's the matter, old buddy? Chicken? Just think of me in all that sexy underwear." Phil saw Andy scowl. "Okay, just think of all those other women in that sexy underwear. Hey, if I'm going to be a girl for a week, I'll need more than just three bra and panty sets. I might as well see what the good stuff feels like."

"What about that little bra, panty, and garter set you had on the other night. Wasn't that good stuff?"

"How sweet. You remembered. I got them at Sears® along with the dress that first day. You weren't paying attention to what all I bought that day. I got the salesgirl to pick them out for me, so everything would match. I told her I wanted to impress my boyfriend."

"Okay, but do I still have to go in?"

"Yes!" She pulled him into the store. Andy tried to look at ease. He couldn't. There were too many things to stare at. He decided that the best bet was to just watch Phil.

That only worked for a while. Phil came over carrying a wad of black material. "What do you think of this?" she asked. It was one of those 'merry widows,' two almost transparent brassiere cups with a drape of cloth that came down almost to the waist. Four garters trimmed with black roses dangled down below. "And it comes with a matching thong panty, too."

She held it up in front of her. It was easy to imagine her wearing it. He sighed a little at the mental image. Then he shook his head. "That, Phil was unfair. I'm going to go look at the fishing gear." He started to walk out of the store.

She dropped the garment on a counter and ran after him. "Andy, I'm sorry. I was just kidding."

"Like hell. I told you, no matter how attractive you are, I don't want to do anything like what you're suggesting unless and until the matter of your gender is decided."

"All right -- and I am sorry. I guess I'm only just realizing how serious you are about this. How about we do our own shopping and meet back at the food court about six for supper? My treat."

"Okay," he said smiling lamely. After all, it wasn't entirely her fault. He'd been the one who told his friend to become a woman. "But then that movie I promised. My treat. Deal?"

"Deal. I'll even let you pick the movie." They shook hands and separated. Phil went back in to Victoria's Secret® and promptly bought the 'merry widow.' Just in case, she thought.

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They met at the food court and then walked over to the pizza place where they had eaten a few days before. Phil was hungry from an afternoon of shopping and managed three slices this time.

They took their packages out and locked them in the trunks of their cars. Phil had about six boxes and bags of clothes, enough for a month, Andy thought. He'd bought a new tackle and a couple shirts, so there was room for what couldn't fit in Phil's "beemer." Then they headed back in towards the movieplex.

"How about *Shakespeare in Love*?" Phil said. "It won all those Oscars, and I've been too busy to see it."

The prospect of sitting in the dark watching a romantic movie with Phil was not one Andy wanted to face. It would be too easy for her to start something. Too easy for him to forget and let her start something.

"Have you seen *Private Ryan*? It won a bunch of Oscars, too."

"No, but..." Phil let her voice trail off. She looked very disappointed. "I wanted to see *Shakespeare* with you."

"I think I know what you wanted, but you did say that you'd let me pick the movie. I thought you were a man of your word."

She flinched at the word "man," but she had promised. "Okay, *Private Ryan* and I'll buy the munchies."

The movie was as good as everybody said and they were soon both lost in the plot. Phil took Andy's hand

at one point. She held it for much of the rest of the movie, squeezing it occasionally when the action got fierce. At the end of the movie, she leaned her head against his shoulder. He thought he could hear her crying a little, but he'd been affected, too. It was a powerful movie.

"That's one advantage of being female," Phil said as they walked back to their cars. "I get to cry about things like that."

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As they got near the house, Andy saw a lot of flashing lights ahead of him over the hill. He stepped on the gas, leaving Phil's car behind. Something was very wrong.

The house was a smoldering ruin. The flashing lights were from the two fire trucks and the police cars parked nearby. He pulled up next to one of the police cars, recognizing Taylor, the cop that had driven him home the day before. "What happened?"

"Mr. Hoffmann? Yes, it is you. We don't know. The alarm came in about 4:30. The firemen did the best they could, but the house went up pretty fast. These old ones often do. I hope you didn't have anything valuable in there. It's just about a total loss."

Nothing much, Andy thought. Just about \$60,000 worth of medical equipment that he was going to have to explain to the university and all of his medical samples. Thank heavens, he'd backed up his notes on disk and put the copies in his trunk. Still, about six months of work was gone.

Phil had driven up by now. She parked her car and ran over. One of the other sheriffs tried to stop her, thinking she was just a gawker. "It's okay," Deputy Taylor said. "She's with him."

Phil looked in horror at the ruins. Her partners were going to blame her for this. Life had just gotten even more difficult.

Taylor looked at the two of them and his voice dropped a notch. "I hate to ask this, but was there anybody else in the house with you. We, um, we found a body."

"Can we see it," Phil asked, an idea suddenly coming to her.

The deputy led them over to an ambulance. There was a body covered with a sheet on a gurney next to it. He drew back the sheet. "We found him in a room with some electrical equipment. Best we can tell

without an investigation, that's where the fire started. We think he was trying to put it out when something exploded."

Phil gasped and began to cry. "It -- it's my cousin, Phil. The house belongs to his law firm. Andy and I went to the mall for the day, but he wanted to fish. Oh, Phil. If only we'd been there to help." She collapsed in tears over the body.

Andy just stared. Phil had once told him that half of the skill of a good lawyer was acting. Phil was certainly a good lawyer. He could hardly contradict her -- at least right now -- without stirring up more trouble than they were already in. He put his arm around her and led her gently back to her car. Leaving her sitting on the seat, still sobbing, he went back to talk to Deputy Taylor.

"Do you know where the township office is, Mr. Hoffmann?"

"I think so. Over on Meecham Road, isn't it?"

"That's right, sir. Can you and the lady come in some time tomorrow. We'll need her to sign the death certificate as the deceased's cousin."

"Um, okay." Andy hoped he could come up with a solution to this before they got into more trouble. "Is there a motel or something nearby? We're going to need a place to sleep tonight."

"You're welcome to my spare room, Dr. Hoffmann." It was Ira Casey, the caretaker, come over from where he'd been examining the ruins. He was afraid that he'd just lost a very good job and was trying for any 'brownie points' he could get.

Andy decided to help. Whatever had happened probably wasn't Casey's fault. From the sound of it, something had gone wrong with his equipment. "Thank you, Mr. Casey," he said. "But I'm with, um, there's somebody, um, do you have two rooms?"

"Please, call me Ira. No, I'm afraid not. My wife can fix up our old sofa in the back room. I've slept there more than once in forty-odd years of married life."

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Casey -- Ira." It was Phil come back over from her car. She hugged Andy's arm. "Andy was just trying to protect my reputation. We can share that room you offered."

Casey looked at Phil. "Do I know you, ma'am?"

"No, but you knew my cousin -- my late cousin, Phil McNierney. He described me to you more than once. When I saw Andy talking to you, I recognized you from his description."

"Mr. McNierney. Oh, dear, that wasn't him, was it? Fine man, good angler, too. I enjoyed talking with him when he came up here. I'm very sorry for your loss, ma'am."

Phil took his hand. "Thank you, Ira." She turned to Andy. "If we're not needed for anything, I'd like to go lie down."

They both looked at Deputy Taylor. "No, you can go. Just remember to come in tomorrow to sign the papers."

"Okay, but I think I'd better ride with Andy. I'm a little preoccupied to be following somebody down a road I don't know."

"I guess I'd better go, too, Ron," Ira said to the deputy. "Don't want these people showing up on my doorstep unannounced. Ethel'd have a fit."

"If you want, Ira, I'll have somebody call her for you. She can have that spare room of yours ready by the time you get home with these folks." The deputy reached into his squad car for the radio.

"That'd be right nice of you, Ron. She knows about the fire -- saw the flames from the house before I did. You just tell her we got company for the night and I'll give her the whole story when I get there."

The deputy nodded and began talking into the hand mike. Ira turned to Andy. "My truck's over there. You and the lady can just follow me. We'll be at my house in about ten minutes"

"Can you wait just a minute, Ira," Phil asked. "I've got some clothes in the trunk of my car, and I'd like to take them with me."

"Sure, ma'am. Lucky thing for you. Any clothes in that house are just ashes now and my wife, well, you and her aren't exactly the same size." He was being diplomatic. Ethel Casey was only about five foot tall, but she easily outweighed Phil by thirty or forty pounds.

Phil and Andy transferred the packages from the back of Phil's car to Andy's wagon. They signaled Ira, who had been waiting in his car. He started the engine as they got in and both cars were soon heading down the back road to the Casey farm.

"What was all that 'Cousin Phil' stuff back at the house?" Andy asked as he drove.

"I couldn't very well tell them the truth, could I?"

"Yeah, but who was that guy? Did you recognize him?"

"I don't think so. Taylor said that there'd been some break-ins. It was probably him. He poked around your equipment, maybe tried to take it apart, and something went wrong."

"You're probably right. I can't think of any other reason anybody would be in the house, but why not tell them that? Why claim he was you?"

"He might as well do something useful. He's my reason."

"What do you mean?"

"You said that if I could come up with a good reason for not changing back, you'd agree not to give me the shot. Right?"

"Right, but what reason does that dead crook give you?"

"Dead crook? Let's have some respect for the late Philip J. McNierney, prominent attorney at law."

"What!"

"That's my reason. I certainly can't go back to being Mr. McNierney if he's legally dead. Can I?"

"No, but you -- he -- Phil won't be legally dead until you sign those papers tomorrow. And it still won't be legal, since you aren't really his -- your cousin."

"Does the late, great, Phil McNierney have any closer member of his family than me? If you want, you can think of me as his twin sister. We were both born to the same parents at the same time, after all."

"But you are Phil McNierney!"

"Yes, but you aren't going to tell them that, are you?" She leaned over and kissed his cheek.

"Let me think about it, okay? We're here." He turned off the road they were on and followed Casey up a narrow pebble driveway to a farmhouse.

Mrs. Casey was standing in the doorway. She came over and gave Phil a hug as they got out of the car. "You poor dear. Losing your cousin like that. It's a good thing you have your friend here to take care of you."

Andy went around to the back of the car and began unloading the packages. Phil started back to help, but Mrs. Casey stopped her. "You let the men do that, dear. Ira, you help him with those things." She put her arm around Phil's waist and led her away from the car. "You come into the house with me and have a nice cup of tea."

Andy and Ira took the packages. Ira led him into the farmhouse and up to a room on the second floor. It was a small room decorated in a rather feminine manner with ruffled curtains and a powder blue comforter on the oversized bed. They put the packages down on a dressing table near the bed. It was decorated in a ruffled pattern that matched the curtains.

"This is my daughter Hannah's room," Ira said. "She don't use it much these days seeing as she's in the Army over in Europe someplace -- just made sergeant, in fact. There's a bathroom through that door by the table where we put that stuff from your car. There's a closet over there," he pointed to a door near the bed, "where you can hang stuff."

"Thanks, say, um, all these clothes are, um, Ms. McNierney's. You wouldn't have a spare robe or some pajamas for me would you." Ira was about his size, if a fair bit heavier. His clothes wouldn't fit Andy that well, but they'd be better than none at all.

"You let me see what I can drum up. I think I've got me some PJs near your size. A present Hannah sent me last Christmas, but she got the size wrong. Been meaning to send them back to her, but you're welcome to them." He left to go get the pajamas.

There was a knock behind him. Andy turned. Phil was standing in the doorway. She looked a little tired. "Mrs. Casey -- Ethel -- wanted to know if we wanted anything to eat. I told her we were pretty tired after everything that had happened and just wanted to hit the sack. That okay with you?"

"Yeah, truth to tell, I am kind of tired. Are you okay?"

"A little tired. Does it really bother you -- I mean, what I said back at the house -- does it bother you?" She looked small and helpless, and Andy felt himself wanting to take her in his arms, to comfort her.

"Let me think about it a while." He stopped, seeing Ira come to the door.

"Sorry to interrupt," Ira said. He handed Andy a thick red box tied in with a gold and purple cord. "These are the PJs I mentioned. There's a robe in there, too. They should fit."

"Thanks, Ira."

"No problem. Keep 'em if you like." He patted his large belly. "They don't fit me and they aren't likely to any time soon. Besides, I'm sure that Hannah would want me to offer them to a guest. She learned hospitality from the best, her Mom."

He saw the expression on Phil's face and felt the tension in the room. "Well, you two look like you got something to talk about. Ethel said you was going to bed anyway, so I'll just wish you a 'Good Night.'" He left before either of them could answer, pulling the door shut behind him.

"He's a sweet old man," Phil said. "They both are."

"Yeah, I hope he doesn't get into any trouble because of the fire."

"I doubt that he will. The firm had the place fully insured. I heard Mike Rice -- he's the firm's managing partner, remember -- say that he was planning some major renovations this Fall. This fire will pay for rebuilding, probably with some money left over."

"But," she continued, "we still need to get things settled. How long do you want to think about it? I'm supposed to go in to sign those papers tomorrow. And what do we say to the Caseys?"

"I'd like a week, a month maybe, but I'll have to settle for overnight."

"Can I offer a bribe to influence your decision?"

"You do, and I'll go sleep on the couch."

"Not that. You should know that you're the chief beneficiary in Phil McNierney's will."

"What! Why me?"

"Why not you? My Dad's a lot richer than I am. Mom's dead. I've no close relatives, not even my new 'cousin' Phyllis. There's some charitable contributions, a few bequests to some other friends - Jack Dalton, Ted Slawitzki -- and a couple of things to cut down on inheritance taxes and make life easier for Mike Rice. He's the executor, but the rest of the money goes to you. I said you should use some for your research; let you stop having to chase grants all the time."

"They're not going to think I killed you for the money, are they?"

"I thought you didn't watch that much bad TV. There're over a dozen salesclerks that can place us both as being in the mall since yesterday at lunchtime. Taylor said the fire didn't start until late afternoon. Any good coroner can find the time of death, even for somebody burned as badly as 'Phil,' whoever he really was."

"You're probably right. This has not been one of my best days." He yawned. "Let's get ready for bed." He saw her smile. "To sleep. I'll go change in the bathroom. You change out here. Knock on the door when you're ready."

He took the box and went into the bathroom shutting the door behind him. He opened the box and took out a pair of gray pajamas. A red, yellow and green plaid robe was folded under them. He put the box on the counter by the sink and stripped off his clothes, folding them carefully. They were all he had to wear until he could get to the mall.

He put on the pajama bottoms. They were a little large, but not too bad a fit. Then, he washed up and put on the top. There were two toothbrushes, still in their plastic, near the sink. He brushed his teeth and sat down on the toilet to wait for Phil's knock. Ethel Casey was a very good hostess. There were a couple of recent magazines on a wide window ledge next to the toilet.

He tried to figure out just what he was going to do. Phil really couldn't explain who she was. The dead man was a thief and who knew what else and wasn't likely to be missed. Still, somebody might miss him. Besides, Phil was asking him to lie on a formal death certificate. That was something that Andy, as a doctor, took very seriously. Besides, was he really ready to let her give up her old life? It all came back to that. He'd probably be up all night thinking about what to do.

Phil knocked on the bathroom door. "You fall in," she called from the bedroom. Andy stood up and opened the door.

The room was dark except for a ring of candles burning near the bed. Phil stood by the bed looking down shyly. She was wearing a baby doll nightie -- when the hell had she bought that? The panty was cut high,

showing miles of leg and accenting her lush hips. The top was sleeveless and cut very low to show lots of breast. It was so sheer that he could see her nipples through the material.

"I thought maybe I could offer you that other bribe. Please don't be mad." In a very low voice she added, "I really do love you, Andy."

Andy sighed and took her in his arms, giving in to the inevitable. He knew what he was going to do in the morning, but he also knew that he'd probably still be awake for quite a while yet.

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

**CHAPTER SEVEN:  
Descending Spiral**

I'm skipping portions of the next two weeks, mostly because major portions of it were unbearably boring. Paul and I spoke often by telephone, but didn't see each other, which is just as well as I was spending about twenty hours a day at the lab with just two goals in mind. The first was to find out more about my newfound ability and the second was to stop the human testing project.

With respect to the first, I accomplished little as I could only work on my personal research project when Felix and Jos, were not around. On a positive note, I kept "practicing" new forms and my body somehow accommodated to the process so that the pain was barely evident and the time to change was now a mere five minutes. Additionally, I was now at the point where I only needed a couple of "energy bars" to recover from the energy drain. Aside from becoming male, I really do have a broad range of options, so broad I am still testing the limits. I suppose I could come close to becoming myself again, at least in terms of everything but genitals. I'd always have some small growth of breast and a void where I'd be scratching if I were a ball player. Having never wanted to be a Pushmepullyou, I had early on resolved that if I had to be female, I would be female.

With respect to my efforts regarding human testing, they were little more than exercises in bureaucratic frustration as I tried to stop, or at least postpone, further testing. Felix and Jos, almost quit as I kept pushing them to review and re-review the animal results looking for something, anything, I could use to justify my goals without letting them realize that my intentions were other than to be extremely cautious.

Interestingly, once I had finally decided to try to be female and put my mind to it, it was relatively easy to control them. Instead of trying to shout them down and having a temper tantrum when they ignored me, I expanded a bit on my makeup use, broadened my attire to include some above the knee skirts and asked them to do little things for me, the "helpless" woman. The first time Felix got me a cup of coffee and stood attentively in front of me waiting to see if it was satisfactory, I knew I had it down. I also nearly bit my tongue off trying not to laugh and spoil all that work. It is interesting to note that the reason why most women feel they can change a man is because they can.

Patrice did quit once yes the same Patrice who had been my nurse during my initial recovery. She was tired of dealing with Dr. Maldonado's rudeness, but I talked her into coming back before her paperwork could be processed. Carlton was being difficult; more difficult than usual, if that was possible. I swear he still had it in for me because of that ancient mishap with Paul in the college chem. lab. It was his position that testing needed to proceed apace and everyone from project director to cleaner was responsible for insuring that it did. Furthermore, he felt it was his responsibility to remind each and every one of us of our responsibilities, as he saw them, and insure that we complied. It's not a good idea to insist that a secretary explain why a project is behind schedule and harangue her to get it back onto its appropriate place on his projected timeline.

One of the reasons Patrice came back was that I told her that I'd convinced Carlton that his constant telephone calls were taking us all away from necessary final preparations and that he should cut back on them. Of course, I also told Patrice to get the phone company to install the "Caller ID" feature and use it. From then on, Carlton always seemed to catch us when we were all away from the phone working busily to finalize the next phase of the project. I suspect Carlton was so frustrated he would have fired us, if he had just been able to reach us. He actually did at one point, but he did not realize it as Patrice recognized his voice and quickly repeated the answering machine message and then beeped at him. Smart girl, that Patrice.

It was late Friday evening, just four days after the start of operation Caller ID, and I had already changed. Now I was a rather plain looking middle aged woman with short graying hair, average height, and a tendency to enjoy chocolates just a bit too much read stocky. Everyone else had gone home for a well-deserved weekend and I was back to the old drawing board. My latest theory regarding how I could control the changes had just gone down the drain when the MRI and C-scan showed absolutely no

abnormalities in the brain. I'd gotten the idea from an episode of the "X-Files " where a brain tumor had caused new mental powers to manifest, which also demonstrated how far afield I had been searching for research hypotheses. Anyway, Carlton had actually left his ivory tower at the administrative offices of BioLogicInc and come a visiting, thousand dollar designer suits and all.

"You! What's your name?"

"Ulp!" He shocked me. I thought I was alone and I had not realized that I had left the door unlocked. Careless.

"I asked you your name. You do have a name, don't you?" You would think he could be a bit ruder and more abrupt, but I guess he reserved that for people he really disliked.

"Umm, yes sir," I almost gave him my real name, which would have blown my secret out of the water, especially given Carlton's inability to sniff out a profit. "Virginia, sir. May I ask what you're doing here?"

"I run this lab. Where is everybody?"

"It's after eight on a Friday night and everyone's gone home. Now I'm going to have to ask you to leave too sir, I know Dr. LaPierre and you're not him - or her so you can't be who you say you are." I began moving toward him, as much to keep him from coming to me where he might peer over my shoulder and see my research on the computer monitor as to get him out of the lab. It was interesting to note that he was my height, and I was only 5'2 at the time. I wondered if all small men acted as pompous as he did.

"I am Dr. Carlton Maldonado, Ph.D., Executive Director of BioLogicInc and Dr. LaPierre's boss." He puffed out so nicely, like a bantam cock. I knew then and there, I was going to have some fun with him.

"And I am responsible for insuring the security of this lab until I can finish getting it cleaned and locked up for the weekend," I huffed. "Like I said, I know Dr. Pierre and I don't know you. Do you have some identification?"

Did you ever meet one of those people, usually new doctors Ph.D.s or M.D.s, it does not matter which, who are so full of themselves they introduce themselves with their degree and insist on being called by the title as if it were their first name? Most seem to be able to move beyond it within a year or two, but Carlton had been doing this for the past quarter century, which is why I took every opportunity to call him Carlton instead of Dr. Maldonado. As a result, I was only surprised with the intensity of his response until I remembered that I was not his peer and needed researcher at the moment. I was just some faceless underling to be lorded over, not to be challenged by. He immediately went from his usual pallid color to a ruddy hue, but he didn't stop there. Even before he could start talking read shouting at the top of his lungs he moved on to a mottled, reddish purple. I was actually wondering if he was going to burst some of the small blood vessels in his scalp and was reviewing the medical procedures for dealing with apoplexy when the dam finally broke.

"You ignorant little pissant," he stormed. "How dare you. What is your full name? I will have your hide for a wall hanging by the morning. You'll never work for BioLogInc or any related company again."

"I told you my name sir. It's Virginia, Virginia Hyde." I know, it was not very original, but I was betting he would fail to get the hint. "Now if you're going to be rude, we can forget about any ID check and you can leave right now." I took him by the shoulder and squeezed, hard.

Did I mention that I had been working on unusual features? I would long ago run the gamut of extra sensory perception and had found that abilities like telepathy and telekinesis did not really exist, at least not in any of the genes I possessed. The closest I would come there was the occasional hunch, like woman's intuition or "spider sense" I you prefer. I had liked that ability so much, I had kept it and I will bet you can guess what it had been telling me about Carlton.

Tonight I was also working on enhanced musculature. Just prior to Carlton's arrival, I had been experimenting by lifting the slate-top lab tables with one hand. So, while I looked like a slightly dowdy forty plus year old, I was strong almost as strong as the Great Muldoon, but that's another story. Carlton's yelp reminded me how strong and I felt a twinge of guilt for hurting him. Despite that, it felt great to have the upper hand and I quickly turned the surprised man, grabbed his belt with my other hand and quick marched him out the door to the lab. Coming back inside, I locked the door, leaned back against it and, sad to say, laughed hysterically. I do not know what it was about the situation, maybe the look of shock on Carlton's face, but in hindsight, it was not really that funny.

When he spent the next few minutes pounding on the door, it became even less funny. With Carlton making all that racket, the MPs would be around shortly. Then I would have "some 'splainin' to do," and my name was not even Lucy. Worse, it was not even Virginia as I had told Carlton. I could just imagine what the MPs, and Carlton, would think when they were introduced to someone in a research lab who did not have a legal existence.

That is what I got for letting my hair down and having fun. I felt the quiver that presaged another change and quickly reasserted my current image before I was in a position to do the Lady Godiva routine although a good chocolate or two did sound nice.

Those were two of the problems that I was discovering with respect to these changes. First, it was getting too easy to initiate a change and second, if I was not careful it could get really annoying dealing with the various drives and urges of whatever body I was wearing. Besides liking chocolates, this body was not the smartest M&M in the bunch, which was not making things easier at the moment. I almost changed back into my Dr. LaPierre form and let Carlton in, but then I would have to listen to him rant and I really did not want that if I could help it.

A few judiciously expended brain cells later, I decided it was time to leave. The front door was out as Carlton was there and he would make a terrible doorman. Besides, my name was not Rhoda Morgenstern. The back door was also out as it was for emergencies only and would set off an alarm that would guarantee the MPs came running. That left a window. Unfortunately, the windows were of the style that cranked out, far too narrow for my current robust form. I reached into my memory for one of the super-thin actresses currently on television, but quickly reconsidered as that would make me too recognizable and cause other problems. Instead, I reached back into my formative years and a lady from the "Laugh-In" series called Twiggy. Then, just to be certain, I made her even thinner. I think I ended up so thin, my internal organs were stacked one on top of the other, but I was thin enough to fit through the window and tall enough to easily reach the ground. Good thing this was a one story building.

Grabbing a copy of the Bernoulli with my research on it, I tossed the lab coat in a corner, grabbed my purse and slid feet first out the window furthest from the front door. Once out, I quickly changed back into my Dr. LaPierre persona and began slinking around the building toward the parking lot and my car. If I could get back to my quarters, I could come back to the lab for some late evening research and find Carlton there. I would still have to listen to his tirade, but it was becoming evident that I was going to

have to face him sooner or later.

The parking lot was well lit and only had two cars in it, Carlton's and mine. Additionally, the front door was offset so that unless Carlton was blind, he would definitely see me if I tried making a run for it. The choices, face Carlton or make a break for it, were not great ones and they rapidly became even less appealing as a jeep pulled into the parking lot and two huge MPs got out.

I am not sure if it is natural selection or a planned breeding program, but I have never seen an MP less than six foot two and two hundred pounds with more muscle than any of the actors in Pro Wrestling. One went up to Carlton and suggested in a deep rumble that he stop pounding on the door and explain himself while the other one checked out the license plates on the two cars.

The two-car dash was now out so it looked like it was time to face the music, or rather the Maldonado. Maybe I could pretend I'd been out for an evening constitutional and then let Carlton dress me down figuratively, please the thought of him laying a hand on me in any literal sense caused me to shudder. With that in mind, I began changing back into Dr. Georgette LaPierre.

That is when the unthinkable happened. Like a little lap dog that barely stood tall enough to stare at the MP's chest, Carlton had been yammering away at the MP nearest him. The soldier had been stoically ignoring Dr. Maldonado's dance of death, repeatedly advising him to calm down and explain the problem when, without warning and in mid rant, the damn fool pushed the MP.

There I was, watching the end of my career. There was no way that Maldonado would ever settle for less than my head on a platinum, forget silver, platter. I told you he was not the best manager I had ever met and vindictive was just one of the few words acceptable in polite conversation his subordinates used to describe his administrative skills. I should have been panicking, and yet, I was nearly buckled over double struggling not to laugh aloud. He had not even budged the soldier.

Carlton just kept right on screaming and gesticulating. In his fury, I doubt he even realized what he had done, but the MP did. The soldier's voice got loud and curt, with an undertone that suggested he should be listened to but hoped he would not be, and told Carlton to shut up and step back against the wall immediately.

It is sad to see an intelligent man with the cortex, or at least the frontal lobes, completely disconnected from the body. That was Carlton. Instead of meekly complying like any sane person, he pushed the soldier again.

I was watching when it happened, yet I have no idea how it happened. One moment Carlton was pushing the MP, the next he was face down on the ground being handcuffed. In the words of a wise and learned professor of mine during grad school, "the fit had shit the fan." There was little more I could do but watch them cart Dr. Maldonado off to their jeep and then to the stockade.

I had no clue what to do now. As I said, I had just watched my career and possibly my research go down the tubes. I could take my car and go around to the stockade to try to bail Carlton out, but the damage was done, and the last thing I wanted to do was be the target for his anger just then. I knew he could get himself bailed out in short order without my intervention. It would be a small change, but even waiting the few days until Monday to see him would help him cool off a bit. I became Dr. Georgette LaPierre. Stopping off at my quarters, I packed lightly and headed up to the cabin, making a call to Paul from a gas station along the way. I asked him Paul to join me there, telling him I needed to talk to him and get some

advice.

It is so easy to see things after the fact. The lab accident in college was the first and biggest mistake of my life. It brought me to the attention of Carlton Maldonado's in the worse way possible. It set the tone for our relationship through out the years to the point that I was surprised when he hired me for the cancer research project. In hindsight, this was probably the second biggest mistake of my life.

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

CHAPTER ONE:  
**Beginnings**

I still remember my thoughts when I awoke. My first thought, as it had been everyday for the last year and a half, was thankfulness that I was still alive. My second thought -- one that had been happening less and less frequently over the last couple of months -- was that this was a good day because the pain was not totally debilitating today. From then on, things began to get confusing.

Maybe I should explain a bit. For that matter, maybe I should apologize in advance if this narrative seems to jump about. My name is ... no, my name was George LaPierre. I was a research scientist with a specialty in genetics and oncology. You see, all four of my grandparents had died of cancer at an early age and so had my parents -- heck, I barely got to know my mother; she died when I was just six. I figured that my body was a ticking time bomb, just waiting to go off -- and I was damned if I was going to "go quiet into that dark night" or however the quote goes. Selfish? Certainly. In my shoes, I expect you would be too.

It was at my mother's funeral that I first announced that I was going to cure cancer. As you can guess, my father and my relatives humored me. After all, who takes a six-year-old boy seriously when he says he is going to change the world?

After the funeral I was quieter, less apt to play with my friends and more likely to spend hours on end in my bedroom. It became very common, whenever my father would check in on me, to find me on my stomach with my feet up in the air and my elbows propping up my head as I stared at one of a collection of books about the human body. One of my presents for my seventh birthday was a new children's book of anatomy. It was to replace the book I had worn out with my constant perusal.

At first, my father was concerned by the abrupt change in me, but one of the psychologists where he worked -- he was a nuclear physicist, and the government wanted to be sure that everyone working around "da bomb," as they called it, was as stable as possible -- advised him that I was just going through a particularly intense grieving process and that if I didn't get over it in a while, my father should bring me in to talk to him. Luckily for me, Dad became caught up in his work as his own way of grieving and soon considered my behavior normal.

Do not get me wrong. I still did all -- well most -- of the things kids do. I played ball, climbed trees, debated the merits of various comic superheroes and went to school. I was a Boy Scout and still am, at heart, if you believe my best friend Paul. I developed an interest in girls at an early age -- like I had a choice living on an army base -- and I went to college, joined a fraternity and graduated summa cum laude. It might have been magna cum laude were it not for that unfortunate incident at the lab where Professor Carlson was splashed with semi-permanent skin coloring meant for my lab partner in response to his attempt to substitute alcohol for water during one of my experiments. Paul thought it was hilarious. The unfortunate part was that Carlton, Professor Carlton Waldorf Maldonado, did not, and tried to fail me. Luckily, I was good enough that he couldn't make an "F" stick, but he did only give me a "C" -- thus, summa instead of magna. Oh well, I still ended up getting a better job than the girl who was magna cum laude.

Back to when I woke up. Once the initial joy of surviving to live another day passed, I examined my surroundings; pale green walls, fluorescent lighting and medical equipment everywhere. This was not my bedroom. It was not even Kansas -- and if I had a little dog named Toto the dog would not be around either. Perhaps I should explain that morphine makes thinking very difficult. It is like you are wading

through a swamp and making the simplest connections is a major effort. That is probably why it took me so long to realize that I was in the same hospital room that I had been in for the last month and a half.

It is also probably why it took me so long to notice that the pain was gone, but then it is always harder to recognize the absence of something. My best friend Paul Goldblum - the same Paul from the Chem. Lab incident - is a trial lawyer and he would always complain that it was harder to defend the innocent ones than the guilty ones. For the guilty ones, Paul invariably found that they were playing pinochle or poker with their best buddies at the time of the crime. For the innocent ones he had to prove that they were at home, in bed, alone, with no witnesses. It must be my Boy Scout training, but I always silently cheered when Paul told me he really had an innocent one.

I think the same thing applies to pain. First, you have to realize it has gone -- that absence thing. Then, and only then, you can begin to recognize the extent of its absence. Is it just the morphine dulling your senses so you cannot feel it? Are you still dreaming; imagining what it would be like to be pain-free again? Are you dead and feeling no pain at all? Given the excruciating pain I had been in, believe me, I had been wondering about death a lot lately.

It was not until I actually moved that I began to truly appreciate the absence of pain. I had cancer of the bones, one of the rarer forms of cancer, even for my family. Notice I did not say leukemia, which is effectively cancer of the bone marrow. They are both phenomenally painful, but there are treatments for leukemia, treatments to extend your life -- sometimes a significant length of time. No such luck for cancer of the bones, especially once it had metastasized and spread throughout my body making surgical removal an impossibility.

As I said, the movement brought home the absence of pain. My joints did not ache. The muscles did not rub agonizingly against mutated bone. I did not feel the sharp pain of snapping bone, weakened as the cancer leeched away the calcium so vital to healthy bones in milk commercials.

If I am depressing you, my apologies. That is not my intent. Did you hear the joke about the lawyer's opening remarks in behalf of a client accused of breaking a valuable vase from the Ming Dynasty? Remind me at the end of this story and I will tell it -- and in case you are wondering, I collect lawyer jokes. It is a defense mechanism, my way of getting back at Paul. As I've mentioned, Paul's a lawyer and he's always got another mad scientist joke to tease me with so, in self-defense, I'd zinged him back with lawyer jokes.

Actually, I think I have it easier. Have you noticed how many lawyer jokes there are out there? If there is a grain of truth in most humor, it does not speak well of the legal profession; although Paul has never, ever, given me reason to believe he was anything other than a hundred and ten percent honest. Why I remember once he found a satchel filled with money and he ... well, that is a different story.

Thinking of Paul reminded me of why I was not in my own bed -- or actually, our last talk together as he

witnessed me signing the papers that got me here....

"George, are you absolutely certain you want to do this?" Paul stood worriedly looking down at me from beside this very same bed. "You know that there are always new procedures being developed, procedures that are not as radical as this one. You also know how much can go wrong between animal trials and human trials. I strongly encourage you to think carefully before signing these papers."

I took the papers from his hand -- or at least I tried. It only took me four attempts and I was too weak afterwards to reach for the pen. "Look at me Paul. I am dying -- I have days, maybe weeks to live. There's no time for a new cure," I stopped to catch my breath, even breathing was getting to be a strain, "and even if I had the time, I'm not sure how much longer I'm willing to live with this pain."

Paul nodded sadly. I knew he understood. We had had variations of this conversation for over a year. He was just being a good friend and trying to make certain I was making a considered decision. Rather than make me suffer the agony of further speech, he carefully placed the pen in my hand and guided it to the proper place on the paper. Once I was done signing and initialing, he took it all from me and notarized the document -- I was hopeful, but neither one of us knew whether this was my salvation or just a quicker way to attain the inevitable. He walked out of the room without another word, but I heard his ragged sobbing before the pneumatic door closer finished its task.

One of the interesting things about cancer cells, and I will try not to lecture here, is that they are really your own cells. Cancer is your own body, your own DNA, turning against you. Sure, there are pre-viral strands of DNA that enter the cell and live on the helix, but they seem to be segments of DNA, in effect part of the human genetic matrix. It is just recently that we discovered that the cell changes result from the waste products interacting with selected segments of the gene strands on a number of different chromosomes. In effect, the little bastards shit all over us, causing mutation.

The problem has always been that we can't seem to kill the pre-viral strands without killing, or mortally wounding, the gene; and efforts to just eliminate the specific cells using lasers and surgery haven't always worked because it doesn't always get all the pre-viral strands. They are still in the body searching for a likely cell to make into home sweet home.

The goal of my research was to develop a pre-pre-viral strand. In effect, we wanted to build a critter that would attack the pre-viral strand. It is like the limerick -- sorry, you would think I would have remembered the exact quote, but things have been a bit difficult lately. The part I can remember goes something like this:

The bears had bugs,

And the bugs had bugs,

Each smaller ad infinitum.

Well, we accomplished that. We built an even smaller strand of DNA, really just a clump of the four proteins from which DNA is comprised, and designed it to only attack partial strands of DNA. AND IT WORKED! It actually worked. Our protein clumps would only attack partial strands of DNA and destroy them. In the process, it also eliminated the mutagens in the cell nucleus and allowed the body to gradually replace the damaged cells with healthy new ones.

However, that was only half the battle. The other half was to speed the healing and cell replacement process so that the body regenerated itself before it died from the double insult of cancer and the war of viruses as the protein clump killed the pre-viral strand. For that, we turned to the research of Dr. Chen-Liu and his colleagues. You have probably heard of him, or at least the line of topical skin rejuvenation formulas the cosmetics companies have created based upon his discoveries. Not as well known but, in my opinion, much more important are the injectable "scrubber viruses," as he calls them, that clean up the waste material in the cell and dispose of it in the kidneys and intestines. For some still unknown reason, it also served to increase the rate of cell regeneration -- sometimes logarithmically depending upon the strength and purity of the viruses injected.

We were able use this as part of a one-two punch to cure cancer. The first step was injection of our protein clumps to kill the pre-viral strands and the second step was to flush the clumps, the strands and the damaged cells from the body. We used the completely undiluted version given the tremendous amount of cell repair needed.

That brings me back to waking up pain-free for the first time in recent memory. Paul was there, looking haggard. He had not shaved in several days and given his tendency to forget to eat when he's concentrating on something, I was betting he hadn't done much of that either. I stretched and groaned as I used muscles that had been dormant for a while and he was instantly awake and by my bedside.

"How," I croaked, "long?"

"A week and a half. How are you feeling?"

"Probably better than you, if looks can tell anything," I smiled up at him to show that the croak was not a problem. "How long have you been here?"

"Since you were injected. Last night, the doctors said it is too early to tell for sure, but that you seem to be fully recovered. Everything went exactly as predicted. They removed the IVs with the morphine drip late last night."

"Everything?" It was great news to hear that the cancer was gone, that I would be able to live, and that I would live without excruciating pain, but the procedure had a down side too, one I had been unwilling to consider seriously until now.

"Everything," Paul answered quietly, searching my face for any indication of how I was going to take the news. He looked strange, almost wistful, which didn't seem quite the right emotion for a best friend, but I brushed it off as the last traces of the morphine still playing havoc with my thought processes. Besides, I had "more important things to consider."

With a tentative movement, my right hand -- did I tell you I was right handed -- moved slowly up my body. I felt it move across my stomach, past my ribs, and finally to rest on my chest. They were small, but they were there. Two of them. Fleshy masses. Breasts.

I did not realize I had been holding my breath until I released it with a hiss. Paul nodded, "That's correct. Breasts. The doctors tell me that they will grow larger as you regain some of the mass you lost to the cancer. They tell me the rest is anatomically correct too."

Turning for a moment, he reached to the nightstand and picked something up. The same man who had shouted down prosecutors, who had won our college fraternity's Dollars for Decibels contest by shouting louder than anyone else, spoke so softly that I could barely hear him. "Would you like to see yourself?"

The answer was a no-brainer, but still I hesitated as all sorts of thoughts ran through my mind. The one side effect of this treatment, the treatment I had helped create, was that it destroyed all partial DNA strands. While this meant that some cells in the process of mitosis were erroneously destroyed, that was a small consideration in my decision to volunteer. After all, the scrubbers used in the second half of the process would just clean them out along with the rest of the waste. The bigger problem was the "Y" chromosome.

Have you ever looked at images of the human gene structure? Sure, most people know about the forty-six chromosomes, but fewer people consider how the "Y" chromosome looks like the "X" chromosome with one leg missing. That is right the protein clusters considered the "Y" chromosome a strip of partial DNA and eliminated it. The "scrubbers" got the body to repair each helix, but had no "Y" chromosome to build on, so it duplicated the "X." In effect, I was now genetically and physically female.

Now the thought of being female did not bother me. That is not why I hesitated. If someone were to ask me which sex was the better one, I would probably just look at them like they were crazy and offer a quasi-witty response like, "The one not paying the restaurant bill." What bothered me was that I would have two identical "X" chromosomes. Do you have any idea how many "X"-related genetic disorders there are? I will make this easy. We already know of more than a hundred and more are being found every day. I was deathly afraid that I had done little more than exchange my cancer for some genetic death sentence. That is why I hesitated. I was scared, so scared that I just nodded my head rather than speak.

Paul took the hand mirror he had picked up from the nightstand and held it before me. My face was very

much like my mother's, and as my father had reminded me often before his death, it was a beautiful face with gray-blue eyes, a pert nose, and eminently kissable lips, but that is not what I was looking for. I looked for the telltale signs of genetic disorder; eyes too far apart that might indicate Fragile-X, the enlarged epicanthic fold over the eyelid suggestive of Downs, or the Strawberry marks suggestive of Cornelia DeLange. "What about the blood work?"

"Not all back yet, but so far the doctors say there are no signs of any identifiable genetic disorder."

Not bad for a lawyer, I thought. He had really been listening when I described the risks and benefits of the procedure. Of course, he would have had to since he was the one who would have had to defend my decision in a court of law had anyone challenged it. Thank god that did not happen or I would have been long dead before it was agreed that I could do what I wanted with my body. Actually, I was lucky. The fact that the research was done on a military base meant that there was sufficient security to prevent too many people from finding out and sticking their fingers into my life ... or death.

"So can I get out of bed?"

"I don't know. Let me ring for the doctor and we'll see."

It was seconds after Paul rang that the doctor entered. It was as if they were monitoring the room, just waiting to be called; it made me feel important until I reminded myself that this was not a general hospital. There are reasons for adages like "Don't volunteer." At a military base, too much attention is rarely good.

He did the basics, blood pressure, listening to my heart, thumping my back, and checking my ears, nose, and throat, and incidentally driving me crazy as he refused to answer any of my questions. Finally, he looked at the medical chart, "uh-hummed" a couple of times and looked at me; my eyes not my still growing breasts - at least until he spoke. "Well George. It looks like you may want to start thinking about a new name. Of course, with experimental treatments such as this, we can't be certain, and you understand that we will not pronounce you cancer free until you've gone five years with no new symptoms, but all indications are that the treatment was a complete success."

"What about the genetic studies? Do I have a clean bill of health there too?"

"The nurse handed me a bunch that should include the last of them just before I came in here," he took several lab slips from the pocket of his hospital greens and sorted through them. "Yes, here it is. Uh-hum. Yes. You test clean for all known, diagnosable genetic conditions."

"So when can I get out of here? I'd like to walk around a bit."

"As soon as you're able. We have nothing to compare your experience to, so we will work at your speed. If you think you can do it, we will try it. Shall I call a nurse to assist you?"

"Yes please." With that he left, leaving me smiling like an idiot and Paul shuffling his feet uncomfortably.

"What?"

"I um, I guess I should go now," he stuttered and actually blushed.

It took me a moment to figure out what the problem was -- remember I said I was still a bit slowed down by the last vestiges of morphine. "Oh." The nurse's arrival interrupted our mutual discomfort session and Paul slipped out the door without another word.

Do you remember that book, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*? My biological training tells me that this is not really true, but in terms of clothes, rituals and general body maintenance, it may well be accurate. Some parts are familiar but other parts are quite different.

For example, pants go on the same way, one leg at a time, regardless of gender, so do tee shirts and robes. The thing about reversed buttons takes all of one trial to figure out. Admittedly, the bra is a bit strange, but mostly because of its novelty ... and the fact that it can be a pain to put on. The only other issue is the irregularity of women's clothes. Much more selection than in clothing for men, women's clothes seem designed to push the eye in one direction or the other with sweeping necklines, off the shoulder fashions and slit skirts.

The biggest difference in terms of rituals is the fine art of applying war paint, as I like to call it. So many different options in terms of color, style and purpose, so many ways to apply it. I have often wondered if it was not some sort of defense mechanism. You know, smaller creature uses larger creature to protect it, much like those birds that perch safe from predators atop hippopotami and peck the bugs out of the skins of the hippos before they can cause irritation or even infection. If it is, I can tell you that it is a damn shame that any woman would feel so weak or in need of protection that she would feel the need to seek a protector.

Even bodily maintenance is similar, albeit more intense. Hair washing remains the same, there is just more to wash. Soaping down a body is soaping down a body, regardless of gender. It is just a bit different the way the nooks - I did NOT say nookie - and crannies are laid out. Then there is hair care, where things begin to get really different again.

Luckily, the nurse understood those differences even better than I after my weeks of intensive study. Patrice - that was her name, Patrice DeJesus - did not try to make me over into a woman right then and

there. Instead, once she had done a bed bath, she gave me clothes I could handle, panties, jeans, a tee shirt, socks and sneakers. No bra, but then again, I did not really need one yet. She brushed my hair with a part down the middle to make it look a bit more feminine. Luckily, it was still a bit too short for any special treatment, not even a scrunchie to make a ponytail. We did not even talk about makeup that first day.

Finally, I was ready to stand up, but before she would let me, she called in an aide to help me in case I fell ... and I almost did. It wasn't that anything was wrong, I just hadn't walked on my own for several weeks and physical therapy can only do so much, especially on an unconscious patient. No resistance, no muscle growth.

There I was. I was alive. I was walking. I was dressed. Life was great.

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

CHAPTER TWO:  
Fission

I had the freedom of the base. Actually, I had the freedom to go wherever I wanted, but I felt comfortable on the base, which is why I rented quarters there. With the PX for groceries and household supplies, the NCO club for the occasional libation, the base hospital to make sure I stayed healthy and work to fill any other voids left in my waking hours, my life was complete. Of course, now that I had survived, the fact that I threw myself into my research in hopes of solving the gender problem helped. I had actually

convinced myself that gender was not an issue and that life would continue as before with minimal modifications such as a change of name from George to Georgette - did I ever tell you about this bridge I keep in my back pocket. It is for sale - cheap.

There was no single event that brought reality crashing to the fore. If anything it was a remarkably average day, two days shy of three months since I awoke free of cancer ... and a few other pieces of anatomy.

It started at the lab. Felix Agutter and José Guttman were arguing again. That they were arguing was nothing new, they argued over everything from breakfast to bedding, girls to gametes. My role was to keep them on target. I remember once accusing them of arguing over so many things; all they had left to debate was how many angels could dance on the top of a pin, only to have them begin to debate exactly that. This time it was over the meaning of the latest test results showing that the protein clusters were remaining in my body long after we expected them to be gone. "The clusters cannot survive this long. In all our animal subjects they were expelled from the body within a couple of weeks," Felix insisted. "They are regenerating somehow."

"They can't regenerate," was José's immediate response. There is nothing to regenerate them. Somehow they are being reintroduced into her body."

"Not possible," Felix grabbed some papers off a nearby countertop and waved them at José. "This is a clean environment or we too would have them and our tests come back clean. Could it be that they are being reintroduced from some outside source?"

"Not a chance. No one else on this planet has these protein clusters. They do not appear naturally. Either her body is regenerating them or one of us is reintroducing them into her body."

"Well, it's not me and she has no reason to reinfect herself. You must be injecting her while she sleeps José."

"You could at least laugh when you say that. I guess we assume she's regenerating them Felix old boy." He paused for effect. "Unless she's reinfecting herself."

"But she has nothing to gain from such an action and could actually be injured should it be determined that she is contagious."

"Well, we've already ruled out contagion," he tapped the papers again. "Could she be reinfecting just herself?"

At this point, I could see they needed some redirection. "Gentlemen."

"Then maybe they are regenerating themselves. Did her last MRI show anything unusual?"

"Gentlemen!" I tried again, louder.

"I don't know," he started flipping through files. "Give me a moment."

"GENTLEMEN!"

"No coffee now. We're trying to work here," Felix grumpily waved me away without even looking up from his papers. I gaped at him a moment, shocked at his boorish behavior before I laid into him. "How dare you? Where the hell do you get off making a comment like that, especially to the man who pays your salary? I ought to fire you on the spot and I guarantee you that it is not your personality that is the reason I am holding back. Now get out of here. Take an early lunch or something - and when you get back here I expect you to behave in a totally, you hear me, totally, professional manner."

"Bye Felix," José called out cheerfully as Felix stormed out of the lab. Apparently, he thought that meant he had won their debate. It was time to clear up that misconception also.

"And you," I railed on him. "You're not much better or have you forgotten the sound of my voice too? Until now, I've never stopped your incessant arguments, but I have expected to be able to be included in them and to be able to steer them in functional directions, at least while you're in the lab."

He hung his head, but didn't quite wipe the smile off his face as he responded, "Yes, Ma'am."

I think it was the "ma'am" that stopped me in my tracks. It was not wrong, but it just caught in my brain and seemed to jam the gears. Instead of standing there with my lips moving but no words coming out, I too stormed out the door.

When I returned from an extended lunch, Felix and José were back at work - silent. I got a polite nod when I entered and that was it. Every time I had attempted to initiate a conversation, to loosen the tension, they responded with "Yes ma'am." or "No ma'am." and nothing else. Even my best lawyer jokes fell flat. I mean who does not laugh at jokes like "Why won't a shark bit a lawyer? Professional courtesy." or "What's 3000 lawyers at the bottom of the sea? A good start." Even my very best, the vase joke I mentioned earlier, fell totally flat.

I did not have to be hit on the head with an anvil to realize what was happening, they were punishing me for being their boss. By the end of the day I was in a foul mood and happy to be leaving the lab for the first time in years. In hindsight, this probably set me up for the next blow. Paul came by to visit.

We usually managed to get together at least once a week, but I hadn't seen or heard much from Paul in the last few months, just the occasional brief telephone call. Apparently, he had been tied up with an extremely complex case in another part of the state that had just been settled and he wanted to celebrate. We were to meet at the NCO Club and move on from there, so when I got back to my quarters I cleaned up and put on one of the two suit dresses I had bought in case I needed to present to some bigwigs. It was a simple navy blue and gray pinstripe that the saleslady had said looked "divine" on me. I also added the matching smoke gray pantyhose, navy patent leather shoes with the one-inch heels - she had pushed me to get three-inchers, but there was no way I was going to give up comfort for the sake of some saleslady's image of the perfect female - and a simple white silk blouse.

Oh yeah, and a brassiere as I was now a 36C, whatever that meant. I cannot say that it was more comfortable to wear one, but it seemed less annoying than not wearing it, between leering enlisted men and unwanted movement as I bent over an electron microscope or reached into a specimen freezer. Finally, out came the scrunchie that had become a permanent feature of my attire and I ran my comb through my now shoulder length hair, then I grabbed my small black, over the shoulder, utility purse. Sadly, I'd given up the wallet I usually kept in my back pants pocket prior to the change as I found it hard to put anything into the back pockets of women's clothes, even baggy pants, assuming they even had pockets, which my skirt did not.

I was expecting him to be late and had planned accordingly, heading out a full fifteen minutes after the time he was supposed to meet me. If he was actually there on time, I was betting he would insist that I was early rather than admit to timeliness. His mother once told me he was even late coming out of the womb, which he claimed had set the tone for the rest of his life.

I once tried to pull his leg by telling him I expected him to be late for his own funeral but he just smiled knowingly and said, "I have every intention of doing exactly that." It took the wind out of my sails and I had had to scrounge around for another way to tease him that night. If memory serves I ended up picking on his tie, one of those gag ties from the Warner Brothers Store with Taz<sup>®</sup> dressed in a judge's robe and one of those white powdered wigs, leaning over the bench to pound Elmer Fudd<sup>®</sup> with his gavel while Bugs Bunny<sup>®</sup> looks on laughing. As I recall, I kept asking him which one he was supposed to be and looking askance at him whenever he said he was Bugs. That tie saved the night and I hoped Phil would be as obliging again soon.

When I got to the NCO Club, I checked the bar and dining room to see if he had showed up on time for the first time ever. Once I had confirmed his ability to maintain tradition, I grabbed a stool at the bar and ordered a Seven and Seven, laying out a twenty to cover the cost of drinks and tips for myself - and for Paul when he finally arrived. After taking a long, cool, refreshing swig I set the plastic glass down and sighed. That is when I noticed the twenty was laying on the bar untouched.

"Hey Joe." All bartenders are called Joe, are they not? Someone once told me it was part of the labor-management agreement. "You forgot your money."

He looked up from the drink he was preparing and raised a finger to tell me he'd be with me in a moment, but before he could get back to me, an innocent-faced kid in fatigues tapped me on the shoulder and pointed to a nearby table with three buddy-clones grinning hard enough to be just short of drooling. "My buddies and I paid for your drink. Would you care to join us?"

Now I remembered why I did not go to the NCO Club as often as I used to. It was nearly impossible to avoid the frequent pickup attempts by flocks of sex-starved teenagers. In memory of my own clumsy attempts at his age, I decided to be gentle, "Thanks for the offer, but I'm waiting for someone."

"We don't mind. Come sit with us until he arrives. That way there won't be any more pickup attempts." He waited expectantly, but I had heard that one before.

"Good try, but no thank you. Next you'll be telling me that you have a bet with one of your buddies that you can get me to kiss you or something before the end of the night." I still felt a responsibility to be gentle with him in memory of my own experiences so I waved to Joe and told him to buy a round for innocent-face and his buddies.

Turning back to my drink, I was surprised to find a hand on my arm gently trying to pull me from my stool. "Aw please Miss. We're awfully lonely. Why don't you try to be a bit more friendly?"

My mellow mood was gone and all the grief I had received from José and Felix came crashing back. How dare he try to tell me what to do. Smoldering, I slowly removed my arm from his grasp and whispered through clenched teeth. "Soldier, I strongly suggest you slink back to your friends right now and find some other way to occupy yourselves. You do not want to get into a brawl here. All the MPs will do to me is ask me to leave, but you could find yourselves doing KP, or worse, for the next month."

He finally returned to his table and I turned back to my now unwanted drink. Pushing it aside, I turned my seat towards the Club entrance waiting impatiently for Paul to get his butt over here. My ears burned as I heard muttering from my erstwhile suitor and his friends, especially when I heard one phrase clearly, "Pukin' Lesbian."

I actually started to get up and stalk towards them, intent on the idea of cortical stimulation via sensitization of the pain receptors when I saw Paul standing by the entrance and squinting into the dimly light bar. Still angry, I considered inviting Paul to share the fun, but my self-control won the coin toss and I just stormed off to join him. When I reached him, I just kept walking, grabbing his arm and twirling him around so that I could pull him back outside while muttering angrily.

"Miss?" he sputtered from behind me. "Miss, do I know you?"

Once outside I stopped and turned back to him growling, "What's the problem Paul? Has it been that long since you saw me last?"

"George?" His eyes widened almost enough to be mistaken for an anime character. "Is that you George?"

"Of course it's me, and you're late again, as usual. Now let's get out of here before I drag you back in there and start a brawl with some snot-nosed kids."

"Well okay, but wait just a minute while I get a good look at you." He moved me under the entrance light, positioning me with his hands on my upper arms. Then he stepped back and just stared at me for a long while, long enough to make me uncomfortable.

"Enough already." I brushed his hand off my arms and stepped back to let some other folks get by us and enter the Club. "So what do you want to do tonight?"

Paul claims that being a trial lawyer has honed his wit razor sharp, although I usually claim he is only half right, but he actually paused before answering. "I I'm not sure. I was happy to get this last issue resolved and I just wanted to see my old friend and celebrate."

The corner of his mouth turned up just a bit and I knew he was about to offer a zinger. I was sure of it when he sounded so pitiful as he continued, "But here you are, and you're not even dressed for dancing."

Phil could instantly see he had made a mistake, as my face turned stormy and my fists clenched. He tried to backpedal. "Joking. I was joking. I sure got you this time, didn't I?"

"Please tell me you didn't just try to ask your best friend for a date," I asked through teeth that were getting tired of being clenched so often.

"You know, until today I didn't think there were any major differences between men and women. I figured I was alive and that was all that mattered. Boy was I wrong.

"So far today, I've had intelligent researchers, people I've worked with for almost five years, exclude me from a discussion in my own lab and then have the audacity to ask me to get them some coffee. I've had the joy of being reminded that I need to wear different clothes than I've worn for thirty plus years, just to fit in enough to avoid a scene. I have had a group of fresh from the tailors non-comms try to pick me up and then publicly claim I was a lesbian because I said no. Now, my best friend, the guy I grew up with, who got mumps with me, who helped me with the knot tying merit badge in Scouts, wants to date me. Since when am I your type, I thought you like the long legged, svelte bimbos with long wavy blonde hair and big tits."

That was when I doubled over in pain and slowly collapsed into his arms. The damn fool was so surprised by my outburst he almost did not move in time to catch me. My last thought before everything went black was, "I bet he wishes he was holding one of those blonde bimbos instead of me."

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I woke up because sunlight was flashing over my eyes as a gentle breeze made the curtains in Paul's bedroom flutter - and I was ravenous. If Paul walked in just then, I was going to start gnawing on his leg. Tossing the covers aside, I stood up and stalked toward the kitchenette, absently noting that I was wearing nothing but my briefs and an oversized tee shirt and that Paul was racked out on the couch in his living room.

Once upon a time, there was a television commercial. It was for an indigestion medication and the catch phrase was, "I can't believe I ate the whole thing." As I sat there looking at the remains of Paul's kitchenette, I couldn't believe I'd eaten everything in it, probably a week's worth of food for an adult male like Paul, and I'd eaten it all.

About half way through, Paul staggered in, saw what I was doing and gaped for a while before heading off to his bedroom to shower and dress. I think he left for a fast food breakfast because I could see the edge of a nearly empty cup of coffee Dunkin Donuts® on the end table by his hand as he sat in the living room watching television and waiting for me to finish.

Rubbing my pleasantly full belly and wondering where everything I had eaten had gone, I joined him, dropping down on the other side of the couch and comfortably crossing my legs on top of his coffee table. Paul just sat there watching me as I licked some icing off my fingers and watched CNN®, something about a sudden, nationwide flare-up of criminal activity. Finally, I asked, "So what the hell happened and how did I end up here? The last thing I remember is doubling over in pain just outside the NCO Club."

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

CHAPTER THREE:  
BABE Tails

Did I mention that Paul is a lawyer? Have you noticed that lawyers never, ever seem to be able to give a simple, straightforward answer? If there was a fire in a movie theater, you could expect anyone but a lawyer to yell, "Fire!"

A lawyer would want to interrogate the fire first to make sure that it was really responsible for the roasting flesh and burning chairs. Paul is occasionally better than that, but this was not one of those times. He stared up at the ceiling as he composed his thoughts, cleared his throat, and then answered me, “In my experience, the most difficult questions to answer are who, what, when, where, why, and how. I cannot even begin to tell you what happened leading up to your collapse, but I can tell you what I saw.

“If you remember, you were extremely angry, probably the angriest I’ve ever seen you. Again, I’m not certain why you were angry, certainly it couldn’t have been anything I said or did,” he smiled wanly, “but angry you were as evidenced by shouting, glaring, hunched shoulders, and clenched fists.”

“Paul.”

“Yes?”

“Stop being a lawyer.” Paul always hated it when I made the word sound like an expletive. “What happened already?”

He cleared his throat and tried again. “In a nutshell, you fainted and collapsed. I didn’t think you’d want to go to the base hospital where all those male orderlies would be giving you bed baths et. al., especially after you blew up about some rubes at the bar, so I brought you to my car to go to St. Joe’s. By the time you were in the car, you were mumbling about how you were okay, just very tired and how you didn’t want to go to a hospital. Thus, I brought you to my apartment and put you to bed.”

I blushed crimson as he told me he’d undressed me and put me to bed, but I wasn’t sure if that was because he’d violated some gender-related taboo that I was now supposed to conform to or because I was embarrassed by how my body had changed. For that matter, I’d known Paul long enough that I was fairly sure that he was hiding something. I’d been able to tell ever since he admitted breaking the yo-yo he was supposed to give me as a present on my eighth birthday. A terrible weakness for a lawyer, he was just lucky I hadn’t gone into the same profession.

“Thanks, I guess. But what is it you’re not telling me Paul?”

“What makes you think I’m hiding something?” he asked indignantly. “I just did you a favor and you sit there in my clothes, on my couch, in my apartment, and call me a liar?”

“Paul?” He has this small artery just below his left ear that starts pumping like crazy when he’s lying. “Don’t make me bring up the yo-yo incident again.”

He actually considered denying it, even after the “yo-yo gambit,” but finally he caved in, although I was not too sure listening to his elaboration. In America, we have an art form started in the hills of Appalachia, honed during lonely nights on the Great Plains and perfected in the land of the Lone Star. It’s called the tall tale and some of the classics involve Picos Bill or Paul Bunyon and his giant blue ox, Babe. Someone else might have guessed what he was going to tell me from the little signals I was getting from Paul and from my own body, but I was a genetic researcher and I *knew* the difference between a tale and a tail ... or at least I thought I did.

“Okay, you got me, again,” he told me with that boyish grin that helps him win over the jurors, especially the female ones. “It happened pretty much like I told you, up to and including leaving the base to go to St. Joe’s, but something happened before we got there.

“You know how Spaulding Boulevard is all lit up thanks to the Common Council’s approval of billboards?”

“Yeah.” I knew he had been opposed to that and had even spoken before the Council trying to get them to change their minds, but could not see where this was going at all.

“Well, it was a full moon, and we were passing through that stretch of Spaulding, and when we stopped at the light by Fulton Street I turned on the overhead light to see what I was doing as I reached over to check your pulse.”

I was tempted to ask him when he’d picked up a degree in nursing but figured I’d just annoy him and he’d take that much longer getting to the punch line, so I just nodded noncommittally to let him know I was still listening.

“At first I thought it was a trick of the light, but then I looked again, more carefully. Your hair was longer. I couldn’t tell how long because it was trapped behind you, but it was at least several inches longer, below your shoulder blades – and it was lighter, a platinum blonde instead of your usual dirty blonde.”

What are you talking about?” I reached for my head to show him my hair, even after three months letting it grow; it still just missed reaching my shoulders. My hand came back with a handful of platinum blonde hair extending past my shoulder blades and halfway down my back. Knowing that hair is dead material and that it does *not* grow a foot and more overnight, I quickly scrambled about for a rationale explanation – and almost missed the obvious.

"Nice gag Paul. Which one of your girl friends did you put up to this? By the way, is it a wig or are they hair extensions?" I had tugged gently and it was not coming loose. I was betting on hair extensions because it felt like I was tugging on discrete bundles of hair.

“Neither. I think it’s real.”

“Paul, you know that this much hair can’t grow overnight. It only grows at a rate of about a 32<sup>nd</sup> of an inch a day. Now come clean already.” I was so sure he was still pulling my leg; I didn’t even check that telltale artery.

“Then maybe you’d better check out another change. Look down.”

“What?”

“Look down. Don’t ask. Just do it.”

I figured I might as well humor him and looked down. “Two arms, two legs, two breasts; what’s the problem?”

But I couldn’t resist, I just couldn’t let it end there. “Wait a minute. Two breasts? That’s not right. How did that happen?”

Paul groaned so I went in for the kill. “I’m supposed to have three breasts. Where did you hide my middle breast, you thief?”

“Alright wiseass. If you don’t want to know, go get dressed and I’ll bring you home.” He turned to

watch yet another report of the country's rapidly spiraling crime rate on the television and refused to speak anymore. I made a few half-hearted attempts to get him talking again, but then gave up; it wasn't that good a prank anyway. Standing up, I headed back towards the bedroom to look for my clothes.

"Check the mirror on my inside closet door while you're there," he called out as I was almost to the bedroom, then returned to his studious examination of CNN.

"Why? Is it missing?" I retorted – an absolutely abominable line if I do say so myself – but walked over to the closet and opened the door – and saw someone else standing there. She was my height, but she was much more buxom. She oozed sensuality. Even the act of standing still with one hand resting on the doorknob seemed an invitation to unimaginably sensual delights. My mind raced, trying to rationalize it as another trick from my personal Loki, I mean lawyer, but came up blank. It was me, or rather it was the woman I had angrily described to Paul back at the NCO Club less than twelve hours ago. Dressing forgotten, I stepped back until my legs made contact with a piece of furniture and I slid slowly to the floor, my back propped against the bed as I stared at the stranger in the mirror.

A couple of minutes later, Paul came in and stood by the door. He watched me sitting there, unmoving, staring at the image in the door. Then, with a sigh, he closed the closet door, knelt beside me and held me. I never realized how much I needed a hug until that moment and I hugged him back with sufficient force to draw a surprised grunt from him.

This seems like a good time to drop back ten and punt ... er, puntificate. Having accepted with reasonable good grace the presumably more traumatic change from male to female, it might seem strange to have me break down over something as insignificant as a glamour makeover, even if it is one that might have cost a pretty penny given the breast enlargement and facial reconstruction, not to mention the lesser but still relatively astronomical price of hair extensions, dye job and perm. A lot of you men are going think it was just "wunna them thar woman things." ERNNNNT! Wrong. In fact, there were two entirely separate problems.

First, as a geneticist I was absolutely certain that this was impossible. Changes like this don't happen without some external source and there had been none. If it couldn't have happened, it must not have happened, yet it did happen so it must be possible, but it wasn't possible. See? It was cyclic logic, much like calculating pi to the last decimal place. It was the kind of logic that the heroes of cheap sci-fi adventures use to thwart the evil robot in the last reel. In effect, I just couldn't reconcile my years of study and research with the facts of what appeared to have happened.

Second, I had had years to live with and learn to accept my mortality and, more importantly, months to accept the absolute need to accept a change of gender if I wanted to continue to do the research to which I'd dedicated my life. I knew what would happen, I had even developed computer models that had predicted how I would look with surprising accuracy. In effect, I made a carefully planned transition from one me to another me. Yet here I now was, with no warning and no chance to acclimate, someone entirely different.

To be completely truthful, there might have been a third reason. I had accepted my change of gender as a necessity, much like brushing one's teeth to prevent tooth decay or wearing a seatbelt in case of an accident. Once it was over, I really did very little to acknowledge that my gender change had even occurred. I'd worn the same jeans and tee shirts as before, just a different size. I'd worked at the same lab with the same people on the same project as before. I'd lived in the same quarters on the base as

before. I'd kept the same few friends as before. You get the idea; I had done the absolute minimum necessary to accommodate the changes that had been forced upon me. Yet, here I was looking like something out of my personal fantasies, read wet dreams if it will help. The way I looked now, I couldn't possibly minimize my new gender. Life with a brassiere wasn't going to be a choice but a necessity; situations like the rather clumsy pick-up attempt at the NCO Club would be frequent and inevitable. Heck, I was jealous that I could not date myself.

Now I'm sure you understand that all this wonderful introspection and analysis came later. What actually happened next was I finally regained sufficient composure to ask Paul to release me and he did, although a bit reluctantly.

Then, I had to convince him that I would be all right for long enough to get dressed. Alone, I put my words to action and dressed. He had left me with my panties on the night before and I had nothing to change into anyway so I left them on and added a borrowed pair of sweat pants to complete my lower half.

Did you ever notice that the more important something is the shorter the word used to describe it? The bra – it was a brassiere when there was a choice – was a total loss, painfully insufficient for my new and improved bust. Realizing that, I dropped the half-baked idea that I had been formulating involving accidentally forgetting to put a top on to tease Paul for sneaking a peek last night.

Knowing that some sort of support was absolutely necessary, I searched around in Paul's drawers – that's chest of drawers for those of you with other things on your mind. You'd think a guy with as many girl friends as Paul would have some female clothing left at his apartment, but there was nothing. All I found was an old tee shirt about three sizes too small. I think elves place them there during the night just so half awake people can struggle with them each morning, trying to get them on and wondering why they do not fit until they wake up enough to check the size on the labels.

The next trick was to tie it. They always look so nice on the magazine models, but it's not that easy, try it some time. I fumbled around with the tee shirt until realized that I needed to cut it open first, which I did with Paul's permission, and got it pulled tight and knotted in front. It wasn't a lot of support, but it was definitely better than nothing.

I checked myself in the mirror to see how I looked and almost decided to leave it that way, nipples poking through the thin cotton material, but reconsidered. I was looking to get home, not inflame lust. As you may have gathered, until now I had tolerated being female and had tried to make it something other than the primary focus of my life. I *really* didn't want to start now, so I went digging through Paul's clothes again, looking for something to wear over my handy-dandy new bra.

My cover up ended up being one of Paul's old flannel shirts, also tied off, but this time at my waist. Luckily it was early fall and it was getting a bit cooler so I wouldn't roast. Unluckily, I still looked like a walking advertisement for sensuality. It would have to do. I was out of options. With a shrug of my shoulders, I headed back into the living room, returning to my same spot on the opposite side of the couch from Paul.

“Paul?”

"Yeah?" He acknowledged my question, but kept his attention on the news.

"Do you have any idea how this happened?" I surprised myself that I was so calm.

"I was hoping you'd tell me."

"And I was hoping you'd tell me. I realize this is no gag. The hair is real and so are the breasts. I want to say it's impossible, but the proof is right in front of my face." I watched his lip turn up into a leer momentarily, then his eyes studiously locked back onto the television, and realized he was thinking that the proof was in front of me, but a bit lower down than my face.

"I can't help you there, Georgie-Girl. You're the researcher, not me. I'm just a simple country lawyer." He still wouldn't look at me.

"Is there some reason why you aren't looking at me when I talk to you? And stop calling me Georgie-Girl. You know I hate it. When this happened I agreed to go by the name Kristen, in honor of the name my mother would have called me had I been born a girl."

"I prefer not to at the moment."

"What? Look at me or call me something besides 'Georgie-Girl?'"

"Both."

I was flabbergasted. "Paul! What the hell is going on here?"

He finally took his eyes off the television, but still wouldn't look at me, instead staring intently at the coffee table. "I ... you ... it's...."

Now I was doubly flabbergasted. A lawyer, especially Paul at a loss for words. The world was truly coming to an end. "I didn't quite catch that Paul. Did you say, 'You worship me for my brilliance and wish to humble yourself before me?'"

Now he added a crimson face to his stutters. This was going to be one for the annals. I'd never, ever gotten him so thoroughly flummoxed before. The only problem was I still didn't know how I was doing it. As I pondered how to press my advantage, I was shocked when he got up and stalked into the kitchen and then out the door, leaving me alone in his apartment.

Damn. What the heck just happened? This wasn't how the script was supposed to go. We were supposed to banter back and forth, sometimes one teasing the other and then the reverse. It was always gentle jabs not knockout punches. We were best friends, blood brothers. We "grokked" each other. It had to be a gambit, a feint on his part. He was going to walk back in momentarily, laughing about how he'd "gotten" me. That theory was quickly shattered by the sound of a car driving away, his car.

What had changed? How had things gone so wrong? It had to be.... It had to be ... my body. That's what was different. Not me. Not him. Not the apartment. Not our banter. My body.

I look back now and realize I was in a near panic state. I had somehow alienated my absolute best friend, my secret brother, the only person in the world I could tell anything. And it was all because my body had somehow done the impossible.

I wanted my best friend back and I wanted my old body back, more than wanted it, I needed it. I

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couldn't go through life as this overstuffed bimbo. I just couldn't.

By now I was crying so hard, I couldn't see. I just kept repeating my new mantra. My body. My old body. I want my old body back. It doesn't matter which. Even my old female body.

About that time, I felt the pain start.

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

CHAPTER FOUR:  
Morphologically Speaking

I did not faint again, although I wished I had and death even seemed desirable for a short while. The pain was excruciating. It was not the dull pain of a headache but the mind-numbing agony of the worst migraine imaginable and it did not just settle in one part of the body, it was everywhere at the same time. I survived by rolling onto the floor and into a fetal ball. Then I clenched every muscle I could, as tightly as I could for as long as I could. When I could finally open my eyes and drag myself up onto the couch, it was all over but the hunger.

I did not know when he returned, but Paul was back. He sat unmoving, paralyzed, with a horrible rictus

of a smile stamped on his face. I could guess what he was thinking, although I hoped I was wrong. "Damn that hurt." My voice did not sound any different, but I had not noticed a difference the last time either. I guess it is true, you really cannot recognize your own voice.

Reaching for my hair, I discovered it was short again, just above my shoulders and dirty blonde instead of honey blonde. The lumps on my chest were smaller too. Further investigation was going to have to be postponed pending some serious binge eating.

I staggered to the kitchen only to find I had eaten all of Paul's food after my last transformation. Either I was going to go out to get something to eat or I was calling out for a delivery. I was so hungry I was ready to just grab my money and head out. I might have, except my new clothes no longer fit and I knew it would do me no good to be arrested for vagrancy. With a tee-shirt for a bra that was so loose and oversized my breasts were flopping about, frequently on display, and pants that were so loose I would have to constantly hold them up somehow or provide a public exhibition of another portion of my anatomy, that was a highly conceivable possibility.

Showing remarkable restraint, I called out to Paul to see if he wanted anything before ordering, but got no response. The delivery boy was going to get a good tip considering I had ordered enough pizza, wings and soda for a small platoon. There was little I could do now but wait, and I had always hated wasting my time hanging around, doing nothing. Another quick shower and my old clothes were next on the agenda for the day so I headed back through the living room and on through to Paul's bedroom. Besides, doing something, anything, might help take my mind of the intense hunger I was feeling. At one point, I remember wondering if this is what a vampire in need of blood would feel.

On the way to the bedroom, I checked on Paul, who still had not moved and still did not respond to my words or gentle shakes. I was starting to worry about him, wondering about shock, yet I would have thought his legal training would have prepared him for the unexpected and this certainly fit the bill in that area.

The comb had just touched my hair when the doorbell chimed and I called out to Paul asking him to get the door. My only answer was another chime as the delivery boy started leaning on the button. With my belly growling loudly enough to drown out some of the melody, I dropped the comb, grabbed my purse and ran for the door. Shoving a wad of money into his hands, I grabbed the food and dove in before the door had completely closed on his surprised face. I suspect I would have been just as willing to severely injure him if he had failed to hand the food over.

About half way through the third large pizza, I was sated enough to wonder why Paul had not joined me. It was an afterthought, but I was also wondering how I was able to eat as much as I had without bursting at the seams. I called out a couple of times, but Paul never answered so after I polished off the third pizza, I grabbed some wings and wandered into the living room to find him - or at least that was my intent.

He was not in the living room, or the bedroom, or the bathroom, or even the balcony. There was no note, but when I remembered to look, his keys were missing from the bowl on the kitchen counter by the refrigerator where he usually tossed them, along with his change and his wallet. Actually, considering the condition of the kitchen after my two eating binges, it was almost surprising I had not eaten the bowl and its contents.

There had been times in the past when Paul had needed to think things through, like when he found out he was adopted or when my mother had died. In the first case, I had found him hiding in our favorite tree in a near catatonic state - at the time, I'd just thought he was fooling around - and had managed to break through to him by offering him my mother. That had worked and we had grown even closer, often joking about being secret brothers. In the second case, I was having my own problems and could not be much help. He had missed school for a week and his father had been on the verge of having him committed to a children's psychiatric center when he finally came round. I was so upset that I had vowed to never let someone I knew of be placed in a position of such hurt and, so far, I had kept that promise to the best of my ability.

I was betting that Paul had gone somewhere to do some serious thinking, but was unsure where as our tree had been torn down several years ago as part of a land development project. Therefore, if he was not here in his apartment, the only other place I could think of that he might have gone was to his office. A quick call there got the answering service and, like most answering services, it was not helpful. I am not sure, but I think the people that answer the phones at answering services are trained by the three monkeys.

Even if I could not find Paul to see if he needed help, I still needed to figure out what to do about my own situation. Paul's assessment of my situation was sadly on target and some fast research was essential. That left me only one viable choice. I called a cab and headed back to the base and my quarters.

The ride was not an enjoyable one. The cabbie kept staring back at me in the rear view mirror instead of at the road. There were at least three near misses as a result of his inattention and I kept checking myself to see if something was wrong with how I was dressed and feeling uncomfortable from his intense examination. It had been a while since I had taken a cab, before I got sick, but I never remembered running into any cabbies like that before and wondered if he was on drugs or something.

I probably should have explained earlier, but I am not in the military and I do not work for the military. I worked for BioLogInc, very small "n" as they preferred it written, which was a profit-making division of the state university. They paid me and they paid my research bills, including renting the space at the base. They chose the base because it was in closure mode and the space went for a pittance, not because my research was a security issue.

Back home, I left messages on Paul's answering machine at the apartment and another one with the service for his office. Then, feeling exhausted, I went to bed, even though it was only about three in the

afternoon. Unsurprisingly, I slept around the clock, not waking again until a bit after nine that Sunday morning.

I ate a thankfully normal breakfast, if you consider a grown man, ah woman, eating Frosted Flakes® normal. Then, I left yet another set of messages for Paul - I was beginning to wonder if he was intentionally avoiding me - and did some long overdue housekeeping.

It was not that I was wasting time, or putting off the inevitable. I had at least until Monday after next to decide how to stop the human testing so that was not priority one. I find that when I do routine tasks, like vacuuming or cleaning the bathtub, I can let my mind work at it's own pace on problems, wandering about unimpeded by my usual attempts to organize and channel it. In effect, I was actually developing a plan of attack for the research I would need to do to discover how I was able to change shapes and evaluate the extent to which I could do it and the housekeeping just happened to be getting done also. By the time the bathroom was clean, I had decided how to proceed with my personal testing program.

There had been multiple variables to be considered. I had needed some place secluded enough to avoid being seen, especially if I was going to be different people. It had to be near a hospital in case something went wrong. I would have much preferred to have someone I trusted, like Paul, with me, but he still had not called back. Felix and José were out of the question as it was going to be hard enough to convince them I was sane when I told them it was necessary to stop the human research studies, let alone if I told them some story about how I had become a different person a lá *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It also had to be near enough to the base that I could get there within an hour or most, assuming I still wanted time to study my new ability instead of just take a brief vacation.

When I put it all together, the obvious answer was the old family camp on the Sacajawea River at which our families, Paul's and mine, had spent summers in happier times. It was only a half hour away from the base on the other side of town, so it was less than fifteen minutes drive from the university hospital, yet the nearest neighbors were about a half-mile down the road. I almost changed my mind and began looking for another place when the memories of life in easier times, when my mother was still alive, crashed down on me, but I did not have time. This would have to be my Menlo Park.

I left a message with the lab answering machine saying I needed to get away for a few days and think about a paper I was considering. Felix and José would understand; they were part of the "publish or perish" system that exists in most colleges and research facilities. That done, I grabbed some clothes and a toothbrush. Then I was off. My only stop was the supermarket near the strip where I picked up a carload of food. I was at the cabin before I knew it.

The cabin was as I remembered it, a small three season home at best. It had framed out walls with exposed construction members rather than anything like sheetrock or plaster on the inside. All the heat was provided by a potbelly stove in the great room and, on cold nights, you opened the bedroom door and used a lot of blankets - or froze.

It was night when I got there, and I quickly fumbled in the moonlight for the key in the fake rock by the front door. Once in, I went to turn on the main circuit breaker only to be surprised to find it on. I could have sworn I had gone through the whole place shutting everything down about two years ago when my father had died and the estate had been settled. Since then, I had not been back, instead leaving the cabin as a personal shrine to my memories; pictures, clothes, toys, sporting equipment, even a small but valuable collection of comic books, all as it had been when the estate had been settled.

Next on the agenda was to bring in the groceries and do some light cleaning, just enough to make the place minimally habitable; after all, it was to be a temporary research site, not a long-term living arrangement. I had not brought a lot of food that would need to be refrigerated because it would take so long for the old refrigerator to cool down any perishables might be spoiled first, so I was even more surprised to find it plugged in, cool, and nearly full of food. The place was also a lot cleaner than I had expected it to be. The obvious explanation was that someone had been here - recently.

At this point, I had a really unpleasant thought; someone could be using the place right now. "Has someone been sleeping in your bed, little bear?" Even if I changed "bear" to "bare" the thought was NOT funny, especially when I remembered what happened to Goldilocks in the original Grimm tale. Suddenly, coming here did not seem like such a good idea.

I think it is safe to say that so far I had consistently minimized the impact of my change of gender on my life. Some clothes, the monthly purchase of sanitary care products, and slightly longer hair had been the extent of the accommodation, and even the choice had been to allow it to grow rather than enter that bastion of femininity, the beauty parlor. If it was not absolutely necessary to survive, I had ignored it. Thus, I used no makeup, did not date guys (or gals for that matter), and I had no sex, at least not with a partner. But now, a concept totally foreign to me for my entire life had forced itself to the fore. Rape. I could be raped.

Before you ask, yes I did live elbow to elbow with several thousand horny eighteen-year-olds, at the peak of their sexual arousal, on that military base. But believe it or not, a military base is actually one of the safest places imaginable for a female, especially a female who appears to have rank by virtue of being in charge of a major research operation. The manual says you don't mess with your own and there were ten youngsters who believed the credo and would be glad to help correct a straying mate should it be necessary for every one who might consider straying.

The thought of rape was a wonderful motivator. Food forgotten, I crept back into the great room, flicking off the kitchen lights on the way. Hugging the wall, I slid towards the front door and the baseball bat that was a permanent fixture behind it. It was surprising how much safer I felt with my fingers curled tightly around its stock.

Bat poised in the air before me, I turned off the rest of the lights and waited for my vision to adjust to the low level of light provided by the moon's wan glow. While I waited, I considered my choices and again

the decision was simple, if surprising, once I had clarified the problem. I was leaving. The risk of rape overrode my need for answers.

I suppose this was an inevitable choice at the time, but in hindsight - you know where you check back to confirm you have made an ass of yourself - it seems strange. I think the problem was my denial of my new gender. Women who grow up as females are forced to adjust. They learn to recognize that rape is always a possibility, but they learn, of necessity, to accept the risks, adjust their behavior to realistically minimize the risks, and move on with their lives. Additionally, and also of necessity, they are intimately aware of the risks of pregnancy associated with rape. They learn to cope. I had not. Until that moment, I had still been operating from my years of male experience. Rape was bad, but it was something that happened to others.

Back to the wall, and still tightly gripping the bat with my right hand, I slid my other hand to the doorknob. Once I had a firm grip, I prepared to bolt out to the car. A deep breath, then another, and I was off.

The door slammed open and then shut behind me from the force with which I yanked it open as I rushed through it. In an instant, I was down the steps and at the car. The bat went flying toward the passenger seat, finally coming to rest on the floor. I threw myself in after it, scrabbling to the far side of the car to lock those doors and then back to lock the driver's side doors. Forgetting my seatbelt, I dug into my pockets for the car keys - and stopped short. They were still in my purse on the kitchen counter.

Once again, the reflexes of a lifetime had betrayed me. I made a promise to myself then and there to explore and acclimate myself to every aspect of femininity as soon as possible - assuming there was an "as soon as possible" and assuming I was, for some reason, unable to reclaim my original gender.

Do you notice how, even now, I was still denying some of the realities of my gender? One of the possible outcomes of rape is murder. As a man, I trusted my physical strength and size to permit me to handle dangerous situations with the impunity of the immortal we all think we are. As a woman, I was not as strong as I had been as a man, or for that matter, as most men. Of course, I had acknowledged it in terms of cursing a difficult to open jar, but not in terms of being generally weaker than a man. Certainly, I had not acknowledged it in terms of a man being a serious threat to my life.

Now, however, I was in a very exposed position with little more than some safety glass and a baseball bat between me and a potential rapist. The situation was untenable. I had to do something. I was going to run into the cabin, grab my keys and run back to the car. Then I could get the heck out of here like I had originally planned. Another couple of deep breaths, my hand poised on the door handle, adrenaline surging thorough my body, and I was ready to go.

"TAP! TAP!" The sound was like twin rifle shots in the confined silence of the car and I jumped, my head bolting towards the front passenger side window and the source of the sound. I saw a face, a male

face - and screamed in terror.

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

CHAPTER FIVE:  
Binary Relationships?

Half way through the second scream, I changed from terror to joy. It was Paul. I did not even think about it. The baseball bat was again on the floor, the car door was open and I was hugging him like a long lost son. I was out of the car so fast, he barely missed being hit by the door and I guess he was still off balance when I lunged at him. We ended up rolling on the ground, still hugging each other.

I am not certain who started it, but he ended up on top, smiling down at me while I smiled back up at him. That is when he kissed me.

Now, everyone knows that men, real men, do not kiss each other. The thing about quiche is wrong. I know that some of them occasionally do eat quiche. Heck, I even eat it once in a blue moon or two. The kissing thing, however, was still a problem and I froze in shock.

Paul felt me go stiff and immediately stopped. He was close enough that he could see the panic in my eyes. With a muttered, "Oh, shit." He got up and helped me up. Without a word, he stalked into the cabin, leaving me standing alone and confused, by the car. Given that the keys were still in the cabin, I really did not have a choice, admittedly hesitantly, I followed him back into the cabin.

He was in the kitchen unpacking one of my bags of groceries. Still without saying a word, he opened two beers, handed me one and marched into the great room. My purse, with the car keys in it, was staring at me from the counter. It was a tough choice, but I followed him into the other room.

We sat silently drinking our beers and wondering what to say, where to start, if we even should start. I can only guess what Paul was thinking, but I know I was trying to figure out if there was any chance to recover the friendship we had had, at least that is what I was telling myself at the time.

I knew we were in trouble when he went for a second round of beers. At this rate, I would pass out drunk before he got ready to talk. It looked like it was time for me to shake him out of another major introspective spell. The only problem was that I was not sure I wanted to this time. This conversation was bound to be the weirdest we had ever had.

"Paul?" He jerked like he had been struck. Still he said nothing, but at least he was looking at me now.

"Paul, listen to me. We need to talk. I will not try to tell you this is anything less than the weirdest situation I have ever been in. It is. However, we have been best friends way to long to loose that. So, how about it, are we going to talk or are you going to try to drink me under the table?"

A soap opera moves the plot along faster than it took him to decide whether he was going to answer or not and I was getting ready to explode from the tension when he finally made up his mind.

"You're right. First, I need you to understand that I am sorry. I never meant for this to happen."

There he went again, being a lawyer and confusing rather than clarifying things. Was he talking about the kiss, surprising me, disappearing for more than a day, coming here, or something else? This was NOT the time for pranks or verbal sparing. I vowed, probably for the first time in our long relationship, to keep quiet and just listen.

"We've been best friends for more than thirty years. I have cherished and valued our friendship. There are times when I do not know what I would have done, how I would have survived, without it. I don't know how I will continue now if I have lost it."

Thank the heavens for that. Now can we keep it? That kiss was definitely weird - better than I would have expected - but still weird.

"When I found out I was adopted, the world nearly collapsed around me. That may not be what happens to most people, I do not know, but it did to me. Not that my adopted parents were bad people, you know that they were not, but I was no longer who I thought I was. I was now someone I did not know any more. My whole world turned upside down - at least for a while.

"You and your family saved me. You gave me an anchor to grasp onto until I could regain my equilibrium and realize that my adoptive parents were still there for me, still loved me, until I could "wake up and smell the coffee" as they say.

"In other words, I owe you more than you can probably imagine. The bottom line is that I will be there for you, period. No questions asked. Guaranteed."

Why did the phrase "one thousand percent" suddenly come to mind? No reason, just an errant thought. This was Paul, not some stranger.

"And I will be there for you. It's just that something's changed, something basic and it's making it extremely difficult to keep the promise you just heard me make."

Great. I knew the other shoe was going to fall. I felt the need to become small and unobtrusive, but the best I could do was bring my legs up onto the beat up old stuffed chair I was sitting on and hug them tightly to me.

"I've been lying to you and I don't want to any more."

"Bu..."

"Please," he did not move, but his eyes pleaded with me. He had beautiful, deep, innocent, trusting eyes, "let me finish before you say or do anything.

"I've been lying to you. I was not recently on a difficult case. I have been here, in this cabin, with all the wonderful memories. I needed to think, really think about us."

Yup. It was going to be that thousand percent, just like Muskie and \*\*\*. I am about to lose my best friend and I do not even know why. My eyes became moist and I surreptitiously wiped them against my knees.

"When you changed ..."

I just groaned, internally I hoped, but I was not certain. It might have slipped out as Paul was examining me strangely. First, that damn cancer was going to kill me, now it was going to kill the best friendship I had ever had or could ever hope to have.

"... it changed our relationship. I didn't want it to and I tried to ignore it, but I couldn't."

Yup. It is over. I do not know why, but it is. My knees were beginning to feel damp from the frequent efforts to dry my eyes with fabric of my jeans.

"You see. I loved you like a brother until the change ... then, I fell in love with you as a woman."

My head jerked up and my face went neutral. No tears, no curl of the lip to show happiness, sorrow, or even anger, no glow of attentiveness in the eyes. I was barely breathing. A mannequin would have seemed more alive. It was a trick I had learned from Paul, who had learned it as a way of surviving as a trial lawyer. Most people interpret this kind of facial expression and body language as a severe rebuke and start talking, sometimes unwisely, in order to repair the damage. It is the closest thing to a "Perry Mason" style trial ending that ever happened in real life as the person on the receiving end blabbered until they realized they might be saying too much. Nevertheless, that is not why I did it, I was so shocked

that I shut down in order to backpedal frantically and figure out what Paul's words meant.

Most people would smugly sit there as they read this and say something like "Jeez, what a maroon." The whole story had been leading up to this point and, in hindsight; it is obvious to me also. At the time; however, I was still making that same fatal conceptual mistake. I kept thinking of my self as a male.

Sure, it was faulty logic, and sure I had been given multiple reasons to review and revise my thinking in just the last several days, but intellectualizing something and letting it sink into you at a gut level and NOT the same thing. I liken it to the folks in Ireland, the Middle East or any of a dozen other sites around the world, who know that they would be better off with out the death and destruction, but who cannot change the way they think so that they can move on and find a path to peace. On the other hand, maybe they can, but the old emotions, the hatreds, the scars, are just too deep and they do not want to change. It was still wrong, but I can justify - or at least explain - my behavior either way, regardless, I was still blinding myself to reality. I was so wrapped up in my own thoughts; I missed some of what he said next.

"... to hurt you so I'll leave, get out of your life. I hope you can forgive me one day. Once I am settled, I will send you a forwarding address. I hope you'll keep it ... and maybe, one day ... use it."

He stood to leave, shoulders hunched, a broken man. My best friend was walking out of my life, when I needed him most, all because of some stupid gender change. I briefly marveled at how such a seemingly insignificant thing could possibly make such a tremendous different. Nevertheless, my real emotion was anger. He was making decisions about me, about us, without even giving me the chance to express an opinion - whatever my opinion was.

I snorted derisively. "That's all you can come up with - to leave? I thought lawyers were supposed to think "outside the box," to be creative, to find the solutions that elude everyone else. For that matter, what kind of fair weather friend are you that you would walk away from thirty years over anything?" I was trying to hurt him; he deserved it for running out and, from the flush that rapidly spread over his face, I had succeeded admirably.

"Damn it! There IS no other solution. I can stay here and agonize over how I need you desperately but cannot have you while second guessing every interaction, hoping, no praying, for something that is not there or I can leave. If I stay, I will not be able to function and I will destroy something I cherish, will cherish forever.

"Did you ever wonder why I never settled down? It certainly was not for lack of opportunity. It was because I never found the right woman. I was looking for someone who could be a friend first and a lover second. The problem was, I always compared those friendships to ours and none ever came close.

"When you became female, not some ersatz female via hormones and surgery, but a real, genetic female, I was ecstatic that you were alive and I helped you through the legal processes because I could.

However, the more time I spent with you, the more I realized that something very basic had changed. I was talking to a female and she was a friend, my best friend - and she was you.

"Now we've both been straight all our lives, and I knew from talking to you that you still viewed yourself as a male. As such, any relationship beyond friendship was impossible. Yet that's exactly what I began to want, to dream of, to need, more and more.

"As I told you earlier, I lied when I told you I was busy with a case for the last three months. I was here -

thinking.

"When I arranged that date ..."

For some reason that word made it through the haze in my mind. It was a "date." I was surprised to find that I liked the idea more than I expected.

"... I had planned to explain this all to you, but then you changed.

"Now, maybe I should apologize for my hormones, but the change made you into my image of the perfect woman, or at least the sex goddess of my dreams. It threw me for a loop. You had just changed the equation again and what I expected to be difficult became impossible. I had to have you. Even glancing at you made me want you, want to rape you, my best friend, on the spot."

"You mean you didn't think I had become some horrible monster?"

"What would make you think that? Didn't you see my hands in my lap? Can't you guess what I was doing?"

"I thought you were just.... No. I guess I didn't." Primarily, I was actually relieved. Secondly, I realized I was also insulted, hurt that he did not love me as I was, but as some image of perfection. Then, I realized how foolish that was. This whole issue arose only because he did love me, regardless of whether I was male or female, average or zaftig. He loved me, the inner me. The exterior was just window dressing. This was information that most people would never know and would be all the sadder for that lack of knowledge.

"Well I was. I got out of there before I did something we would both regret. Something that our friendship could never, ever, in a million years, survive. I came here again, to think, to evaluate my life, to try to figure out how I could be such a sick and perverted person."

We just glared at each other; well, he glared, I was ... bemused? It was a strange emotion for what we both knew was a major turning point in our lives, yet I knew what I had to do. No matter how this ended, I could not let him walk out of my life without talking it through. Softly, tenderly, I beckoned, "Come back and sit down. Please."

When he finally sat, on the couch, near the door and looking like a deer ready to bolt if it was spooked, I began. "Paul. You have had your say and I listened to you. Now I hope you will do the same for me, as there are several points I need to make.

"First, I love you dearly and have for many years. You are more important to me than anyone else in my life. You are like ... no you are family, "secret bothers" together.

"Just two days ago something impossible happened. I do not know how it happened or if it can or will happen again. I do not know if it means I may be able to regain my original body. Until then I would have said it was impossible, but lately it seems that word is highly over-rated. I do not know what the long- or short-term risks are. What's worse, I need to develop a really good justification for stopping or at least delaying further human testing, currently scheduled to start to two weeks, or risk having the same kinds of changes happen to other people.

"I mention this, only to explain that while some might think them important, they are secondary to other

changes in my life. Just an hour or so ago, I came to the belated conclusion that I was denying how pervasive and significant gender is in our lives. Regardless of how this turns out, I have promised myself I would embrace life again instead of denying it.

"I can't tell you that I will marry you and have your children. I know I am not ready to even consider sex with another person until I know what I am looking for in another person. Heck, right now I don't even know what gender I'm going to end up, let alone the gender of my sexual or life partners. If you can bear with me long enough to permit me to discover what's happened to me and what it means for me ... for us, we'll both be able to move on knowing that whatever happens was meant to be. It's not a lot, but it's the best I have at the moment, and I'd hate to lose what we've had for all these years without even trying to save it."

I was done and maybe we were too. I had not offered much, but I hoped and prayed it was enough. I needed his help and his support desperately. As he sat there considering my words, I bit my lip and wondered if I should offer more, if I should offer myself, to make certain he stayed.

"So you're offering me the chance to continue the pain I've been feeling for the last three months, possibly indefinitely, to torture myself looking at and being near someone who doesn't share, or even understand the meaning of, the love I feel for her. The only carrot you dangle is the possibility that your feelings will change over time, now that you know how I feel."

"What I'm offering you is the chance to keep a lifelong friendship and maybe more." I thought furiously, trying to determine what I could say that would keep our friendship intact. It was not the "guys thing" that was tearing it asunder; it was the "guy-gal thing." I had to change my perspective if I was to succeed.

"What do I need to say, that I'd appreciate it and I'll show my appreciation however you'd like?"

His face turned red and he was glaring again, but he did not leave. "I've never forced myself on anyone and I don't plan on starting now."

"Then, like I just said, your choice is to stick around and be patient while I try to work things out and maybe win it all, or walk out and possibly doom us both to unhappiness at the least. What I am telling you is that I need your help to find myself, for I truly am a "stranger in a stranger land."

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

**CHAPTER SIX:  
Relational Studies**

"What the hell does she mean, she's concerned about some of the study results?"

"I don't know. You heard the same answering machine message that I did."

"She's losing it. That is the only explanation. She's got to be losing it." Felix paced as he seethed.

"Possible, but that would support her claim that the results need to be reviewed again," José smiled.

"But we've been over and over it. She is more cautious than my maiden aunt from Dubuque. The only irregularity we found in any of the animal or human testing was the pre-viral clusters still in her body and they're not a problem."

"Maybe they are."

"Oh no you don't, I'm not going to let you sucker me in this time. I know I am right and I can prove it. Here, look at the chem. profiles."

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"No sir, Dr. LaPierre is not in today."

"No I don't know when she'll be back."

"I'm sure she new about the meeting sir. I put it into her daily calendar myself."

"Yes sir, it was sudden, but she did leave a message telling us she needed to take some time off."

"No sir, we haven't notified the authorities."

"Yes sir, if you insist."

"Have a good..." Patrice DeJesus was speaking to a dead telephone. As usual, the most distasteful part of her job was speaking to Dr. LaPierre's boss. She had once heard Calvin Coolidge described as a walking pickle. She did not know much about presidential pickles, but she often wondered if Carlton Maldonado went through life with one stuffed into a very uncomfortable bodily crevice. With a resigned sigh, she dialed the police.

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He had said, "Yes." Georgette had wanted to run over to him and hug him, but that would have sent the wrong message so she merely nodded and said "Thank you, Paul."

---

The next morning we began researching the changes. There were now two occurrences to start with and we discussed what had happened each time in minute detail. Maybe it was his lawyer's skill at reading people's emotions, but it was Paul who observed how angry I had been when I had changed.

"I have no clue how an emotional state could trigger a change of physical form, let alone control it's shape, but we've nothing else to go on so let's try it."

"Okay. What form do you want to try for Georgie-Girl?"

"I guess my old male one - and don't call me Georgie-girl."

"Fine," he agreed, but with less enthusiasm than I had expected. "Just don't change into bimbo-Georgie. I do not think I could handle that. Oh, and would you prefer I called you Shirley?"

"Shirley? Now what the heck are you talking about?"

"How quickly they forget. It was a running gag in the movie "Airplane." Someone would ask Leslie Nielson if he really meant what he said, something like "Surely, you don't mean that." and he'd response, ending his dialogue with "and don't call me Shirley."

I groaned. What else could I do?

"So now, if I need to 'Paula' joke out to calm you if you get too mad, I 'Tina' good way would be to call you 'Shirley.'"

I did not even bother to groan that time.

"What's the matter Georgie-Girl? No sense of humor?"

"That's not humor. That's a pun."

"And you're heavy and not my brother. Of course a pun is humor, possibly the highest form of humor."

"Are you crazy? How can a pun be the highest form of humor?"

"What? Where were you educated, a pig sty?"

"The same college as you, or have you forgotten?" I was getting annoyed now. He seemed to have gone off on a meaningless tangent rather than helping me study the change.

"I know that Georgie-Girl, but you must have slept through your classes. Don't you remember Professor Kensington's class in English Literature?"

"It was Professor Grisham and you took that class, not me. I took the class on Shakespeare."

"It was Kensington, Georgie-Girl, and I suppose now you're going to tell me that Shakespeare never used a pun in a single one of his stolen plays."

"What the hell is going on here? Have you lost your senses? Who the hell cares about puns? We need to get back to the business at hand."

"No, you need to admit you're wrong. Shakespeare actually wrote the first pun, something about a jester and a noose."

"Paul! Stop this instant!" I stood and all but shouted in his face, but then buckled over in pain.

Instantly Paul was by my side, helping me back to my seat on the couch. "Now focus Georgie-Girl, focus on who you want to be. Focus on George LaPierre. Do it, damn it."

I focused, but nothing happened. The pain was there, the tingling that seemed to foreshadow a change, but I was not changing.

"Damn it. Change you stupid slut." Paul slapped me.

I was shocked. Through the haze of pain, I tried to slap him back, but he just blocked the blow and laughed at me. He laughed at me like I was the stupid slut he had called me. I wanted to kill him, but then I felt the changes overwhelming me and realized what he had been doing.

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It was better than the previous time in that the pain was more bearable and I did not lose consciousness or even need to close my eyes against the pain. This time I could see the changes. I was becoming the slut I

had just envisioned.

Frantically, I tried to refocus on my male body, but it did not work. My hair again grew out, this time into a curly black mop that extended to just below my shoulder blades. My breasts grew again, causing pain from my now too tight bra. Most surprising, was my skin. It turned a light coffee color. I guess there are small pockets of prejudice in the best of us, but the thought that I had become a black person actually worried me.

As the pain began to recede, I checked my watch. The entire transformation from noted transgendered Caucasian researcher to mulatto whore had taken about half an hour. As I stood and took off my tee shirt and now too small bra, I noted that the pain seemed to be less each time I changed. That is when Paul came back into the great room with a huge stack of pancakes oozing in maple syrup and butter. All other thoughts were going to have to wait until I had finished eating.

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"Paul?" I popped the last bite of a pizza with the works into my mouth and sighed. I was sated, well at least for food I was sated.

"Yeah, Georgie-Girl?" Paul came out of the kitchen still carrying a dishtowel.

"I realize what you were doing before, trying to get me angry. I worked thank you."

"Good, now how about putting a bathrobe on or something?" he said as he turned back to the kitchen.

"Paul?" I stood and slid out of my jeans and panties.

"What?" He turned back and his eyes turned into huge saucers. "What the hell are you doing? Get dressed."

I walked towards him, making sure that my hips swayed noticeably as my left hand cupped and stroked my breast. "I'd like to thank you."

"You did," he growled. "Now get dressed damn it."

However, I was having none of that and I pulled him close to me. I had promised myself that I was going to discover my feminine side and I was damned if I was not going to do it right then and there.

Remember that hindsight we have discussed before. Here we go again. To say that my attitude at this

point was dramatically different from what it had been an hour or so ago would be an understatement. My best guess is that I had inadvertently visualized myself as a whore and my vision of a whore was someone who had a phenomenally high libido. I will skip the biochemical discussion of estrogen, progesterone and about twenty other hormones and proteins flooding through my body, the result was that I was horny as hell, with minimal self-control and no shame. I knew what I wanted and I was going to get it.

When I grabbed him, Paul stepped back, bumping into the wall and I closed the space between us before he could dodge to the side and through the door. Again, grabbing him, I threw my arms around his shoulders and planted the biggest, wettest, sexiest kiss I could imagine on his mouth, and yes, we played tonsil hockey.

By the time I let him up for a breath, I could feel him rising to the occasion and I let one hand drop to his crotch. That is when the front door shook from someone pounding on it.

"Ignore it and they'll go away," I breathed huskily into his ear.

"Police. Open the door please."

Oh, shit.

Paul pulled away from me and quickly strode to the door. "Get dressed," he hissed back at me.

Ignoring him, I sauntered up behind him as he opened the door and began playing with his ear and kissing his neck. He opened the door just a crack. I guess the little dear wanted to preserve my honor. I giggled at the thought.

"Are you George LaPierre or Paul Goldblum?" There was a very large - I think its part of the job description - state trooper outside the cabin.

"I'm Paul Goldblum. Can I help you officer?"

He saw me standing behind Paul and I smiled sexily at him. Two would be even better than one.

"And what's your name ma'am?"

"Why I'm whomever you want me to be officer," I cooed through half closed eyelids as I tried to look sultry and adjusted my position to let a bit more of my breast peek out from around Paul.

"She's my girl friend, Wanda," he poked me with the elbow still hidden behind the door. "Wanda Langowski."

I tried not to laugh at his choice of names. His reference was to a character from one of our favorite comic books. The cop's expression made it clear that he didn't think I looked like any Langowski he'd ever seen, but all he said was "Would you please step out side sir?"

"I guess so officer."

"Oh never mind." I was frustrated, but I wanted very badly to hear what he had to say. "Come in side officer. I'll get dressed." I made sure to give them both a nice show as I vamped my way to the bedroom to get dressed. Throwing on a bathrobe, I was quickly back in the great room and sitting next to Paul playing innocently with his hair.

"What can I do for you officer?"

"We're looking into the whereabouts of a Ms. Georgette LaPierre."

I'm not one of those people who get upset when people don't use proper honorifics like "doctor," but I was beginning to dislike this minion of the law, if for no other reason than he was interfering with my constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness.

"I've been out of touch with Dr. LaPierre for quite a while officer. Is something wrong?"

"We'd like to talk to her," he said with that solemn unaffected face made so popular by Joe Friday. "I understand you had a date with her about three days ago."

"Yes, we were to meet at the base NCO Club, but she never showed up. I figured she was involved in a research project that she couldn't leave unattended."

"Didn't she call you to explain that she'd be busy?"

"No. Dr. LaPierre is a wonderful woman, but when she gets an idea in her head she can be quite focused." Paul glared up at me, frowning as he gently pushed my hand away from the front of his shirt where it was slowly approaching his nipple.

"The gate records from the local military base show you left with a woman. Can you tell me who she was?"

"I'm sorry officer, I met her that night and haven't seen her since. She never gave me her name." I swatted him playfully as if I were jealous, which when I thought about it, I was, even if it was me he was talking about.

The officer sat thoughtfully watching me as I clung to Paul so I bent over a bit more to give him a better view of the merchandise. He promptly cleared his throat and stood up.

"Here's my card. If you hear from Dr. LaPierre have her call me as soon as possible." With that, he gave us both a noncommittal nod and left.

I almost laughed aloud when I noticed him walking a bit stiffly. While I resisted laughing, I could not resist a parting shot so I called out after him as innocently as I could, "Oh officer, does that leg wound hurt?"

He just glared at me as he left, which gave me the opportunity to return to my previous research topic. Unfortunately, Paul had other ideas. I knew he was interested, I could see the bulge, but instead of letting me complete my research project, he grabbed me by the shoulders and quick marched me into the bedroom.

"Go to bed. Take a cold shower if you need to. We'll continue this in the morning." He shoved me through the door and started closing it. "And don't even think of sneaking out here during the night."

Of course I did sneak out of my bedroom, about fifteen minutes later, but he had locked the door to his bedroom. Spoil sport.

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The week was nearly up and I was back in my standard issue female body. Paul and I were reviewing the findings to date as we savored the last of our morning coffee.

"Okay, we've established that the process is painful, but becoming less so with practice. It seems that I can change into just about any female shape within about thirty minutes. The transformation is triggered by anger or, more accurately, the increase in Epinephrine in the blood stream to some as yet undetermined level and the outcome is the result of focused visualization on my part. The body bathes the brain in hormones and protein complexes that can significantly effect the thought process and emotions."

Paul nodded and sipped patiently at his coffee while he waited for me to finish. He knew I would never be able to move on until I had clarified the issue for myself. "So is it my turn now?"

"I think so. As far as I can tell, I've completely summarized the status of the research to date."

"Good." Paul pulled a legal size canary notepad from the kitchen counter and began leafing through it. "Then it's time to discuss some basic issues like how to explain your disappearance, how to stop the human testing project, how, if at all, you are going to use your new ability and last but not least, how do we proceed with our personal relationship. I still think you should have called that police officer. It would have simplified things tremendously."

"You're almost certainly correct," I sighed, "but this research would never have gotten done if I had."

"Well, it's water over the bridge, but we need to explain where you were in a way that either can be verified or at least sets any possible questions of impropriety or espionage."

"Why not just tell the truth?"

"We could, but then I need to have a justification for lying to an officer of the law, that is unless you're planning to support me in the manner to which I've grown accustomed," he grinned slyly.

"Why sure honey-chile, come sit on Momma's lap."

"Right," he laughed. "But seriously, we could say we were having an intense interpersonal experience together and didn't want anyone to know it. People would interpret that to mean 'torrid affair' but I can live with that if you can."

"I suspect I would find it even more acceptable if it were true," I answered wistfully. It had not taken long for me to make up my mind about our personal relationship, now I was eagerly waiting for Paul decide I was serious and follow suit.

"To do that we need to be able to explain my night of wild abandon with the fiery Wanda. We could say it was you in heavy makeup. Of course, it would help if the cop is blind."

"I doubt he's blind, but anything else would start getting complicated. I seem to recall you telling me to keep things simple when dealing with the legal system."

"A disciple," his charming boyish grin was back. "I have a disciple. An excellent point and it is even true. If we stick together on that, it will be his word against ours and he probably will not care too much as long as you turn up and no one finds any other irregularities.

"Next we need to decide how to stop the human testing project. That one is probably more in your ballpark. Any ideas?"

"Well, there are a variety of options, but none of them are optimal. Simplest would be for me to reveal what the treatment has done to me to the rest of the team and ask for their support."

"And become a lab rat. It is your choice, but I would certainly recommend against it. Of course, one variation of that would be to go public. No, filth like the *National Enquirer*<sup>®</sup> would be the only ones likely to cover something so patently outrageous. Can you imagine a paper like the *New York Times*<sup>®</sup>

headline? 'Researcher discovers Regeneration Process'. Even if they published the article, no one would understand it enough to read it."

"I could just resign," I mused aloud. "No, that would just delay things a bit and I wouldn't be there to prevent the human testing after the short period of time it would take for the research team to come up to speed on the few pieces I've held back."

"How about an anonymous letter to the FDA with copies to a few well placed muckraking news people?"

"Tempting, and a good idea on the surface, but there are less than fifty people in the entire world who know anything about the project and maybe five who could provide sufficient technical information to make a credible presentation to the FDA et. al. Even if I were to pretend to be outraged by the disclosures, I would be top of the list as informer and would never work in the field again.

"Let's set this aside for now. It doesn't seem to be going well," I sighed in frustration. "What was the last issue again?"

"You mean 'what to do with your new ability' or 'how to proceed with our changed relationship'?"

I could not resist. He'd made it clear that he would not act until he was certain it was right for both of us, and had reaffirmed that position after we realized that different forms affected my personality differently. Even if he was not going to take advantage of me - the little dear - I knew that, if I had to go down, I was going to go down swinging. I gave him a saucy smile and went for it.

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

**CHAPTER EIGHT:  
Control Issues**

"Like the sands of an hourglass, these are the days of our lives." That thought kept running through my mind as I waited at the cottage for Paul. The quote, from the opening to a soap opera, seemed to sum up my life recently, although maybe not; no soap opera I'd ever seen was quite as bizarre as my life had been in the last year.

The gravel crunched from the sound of tires as a car pulled up to the cottage and I ran to greet Paul I as so happy to see him. I had been waiting almost two full days for him to get my message and come to me and the cabin had been lonely without his company. Throwing the door open, I reached out to hug him and stopped in my tracks. Instead of Paul, there was some huge, muscle-bound, pug-ugly.

"Where's Paul? What are you doing with his car?" I tried to look around him to see if anyone else was in the car, but couldn't really see around him. Without speaking, pug-ugly handed me a note.

Dear Georgette:

I have reviewed your research notes and I concur with your attempts to stifle further human testing. Instead, I have decided to take this project under my personal attention and make it a special project, with only a few personally selected candidates. We need to talk of many things, including Virginia and Paul.

Dr. Carlton Waldorf Maldonado requests your presence to discuss your future and the future of your research. The gentleman bearing this invitation will escort you to our rendezvous.

C.

I looked up at the man-mountain standing in front of me. He had heavy calluses on his knuckles. The only way I knew to get calluses like that was from punching something hard over and over again. Did I want to go anywhere, for any reason, with this guy? I didn't think so. "I'm waiting for a friend. Please advise Dr. Maldonado that I'll be happy to meet with him at a more convenient time."

He stood there with a mildly bemused expression on his face and then handed me a second note. I was beginning to wonder if he was mute, possibly from repeated blows to the head.

Sammy is here to assure your attendance. He will do whatever is necessary. I encourage you to allow him to make your time with him as pleasant as possible. Oh, and as an incentive, Paul is here, so waiting there for him will do little good.

C.

This was rapidly beginning to have all the makings of a bad gangster movie. I knew Carlton was not to be trusted, but this smacked of criminal intimidation, as I was willing to bet Paul would not be with Carlton, at least not willingly. I opened my mouth to tell tall, wide, and silent to get lost, but he already had something else in his hand.

A ring.

Paul's ring.

It was his law school graduation ring. Paul was very proud of that ring. In one of the few instances of self-indulgence I had ever seen from Paul, he had designed it himself to include an emblem noting that he had graduated summa cum laude. He also never removed it, even in the shower, which meant that this no longer just "smacked" of anything; it was forcible kidnap. My shoulders fell as I grasped for ways to stall until I could think of something, so I asked for a few moments to get changed into something "more appropriate." I had clearly been underestimating Maldonado and needed time to think.

Fifteen minutes later, as I slid into the back seat of the car, I wondered just how far my ex-mentor and ex-boss - there was no chance that there could now be any other than an "ex-" relationship - was willing to go to attain his goals, whatever they might be. The absence of a human finger inside the ring was a positive, but the thorough frisk, the metal and plastic protective shield between the driver's seat and the passenger compartment and the absence of door handles or locking knobs answered that question.

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I spent the ride to where ever we ended up - the windows were more than tinted, they were painted black - planning and preparing. To ensure the best chance in the event of a fight, I enhanced my hearing, vision, speed and strength to the maximum while retaining the familiar Dr. Georgette LaPierre exterior to insure that I appeared friendly, harmless - and yes, desirable too. I was hedging as many bets as I could. I modified my voice to make it as friendly and sensuous as possible, enlarged my bust to the maximum comfortable within my dress and thinned my waist a bit. I also increased pheromone production, and finally, I stretched my legs a couple of inches but shortened my spine by an equal amount in order to assure that I was not looking down at Carlton. I wanted him to feel as assured and in control as possible in hopes that he would overestimate me.

Even when the car finally stopped, I still wasn't certain where we were as it had pulled into a parking garage and the garage door closed before the car door opened, dashing any hopes I had of getting a clue to where I was by seeing the exterior of the building or the surrounding street.

Like most garages, this one was dimly light and I quickly increased the number of rods in my eyes to facilitate low-light vision to that approaching a cat's. This helped as I could see a sign reserving a parking space for Dr. Carlton W. Maldonado, Director of Research and knew I was at the main offices of BioLogInc. Somehow, I had been expecting to find I was being taken to an office with fifty-year old furniture in some rat-infested warehouse. The fact that we were in the corporate headquarters seemed to suggest that maybe Maldonado was not that much the villain and mobster I had been anticipating.

Once I had been thoroughly frisked a second time, we took the elevator directly up to the top floor and Maldonado's office. I remember commenting to Paul that it was designed to intimidate, twenty by forty

feet wide with a step up to the area around Maldonado's desk and another step up to his desk, which spoke volumes about his vanity and a few other personality characteristics. Behind his desk, with the chair back, his feet up and his hands comfortably entwined behind his head, sat Maldonado. I idly noted that his desk was completely barren of any indications of office equipment, files or even a telephone and the rather large wall hanging behind his desk that seemed at odds with the otherwise sterile environment. In the pit area nearest the entrance was a conference table covered with material that looked suspiciously like it was from my lab. Also, in the pit area, by the window wall, was a conversational grouping with some soft lounge chairs, the kind that you start sinking into and just keep sinking. In one of those chairs was Paul, flanked by Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee. They were obviously close relatives of Sammy, the man-mountain, who nodded amiably at them and then took a position directly in front of the door we had just come through. Once he had settled in there was only a small segment of door visible around his calves.

"Good evening Dr. LaPierre. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to join us. And may I note that you're looking especially radiant tonight." I knew he was a sarcastic bastard, but until that moment, I had not realized exactly how smarmy he could be. The urge to shudder was strong.

"As we both have limited amounts of time, I'll be brief." He was again the crisp businessman as he stood up and gestured for me to sit in one of the other chairs in the conversational grouping. I followed his lead, but mostly because I wanted to look at Paul. He had not really moved or said a word since I had arrived and I was worried.

"Your friend will probably be fine." In cheap detective movies, this is where they would note that the villain seemed to be reading my mind, but it was quite evident what I was thinking as I approached Paul and folded myself so my face was inches from his. "For now."

My response was, of course, "What the hell have you done to him you slime."

His response, equally well scripted, was, "Oh, nothing much. I've provided him with a moderately large dose of one of the stronger sedatives. In a few minutes we should begin to see the first symptoms of respiratory and cardiac collapse. He will shortly die, unless we can come to a deal."

"Deal?" I couldn't believe this piece of slime was talking business as he watched someone die. "I gather you tend towards the reform view of the Ten Commandments, 'It's not murder if you don't get caught.' How the hell can you expect me to make any deal I'll keep under this kind of duress?"

"Sadly," he gave me a wry grin, "along with being an annoying wiseass, you also have a rather intuitive mind. There is no guarantee I can actually expect from you. Have a seat and watch."

"I don't think so," I growled and prepared to leap.

"Oh, I do." He slid into a soft chair beside Paul and pointed to the Tweedle brother by the door. Sammy was pointing a gun at me. "He's quite a good shot, especially from less than fifteen feet like now."

"I too am armed," he noted while patting a lump in his chest, "but I'm quite sure you won't make it necessary for me to use my weapon, will you Georgette?"

"Can you stop us all before one of us kills you and/or Paul? Please. I'm actually rather interested and would like to see a demonstration."

"What kind of demonstration would you like?" I asked as I stood and slid beside Paul. I made a show of putting one hand on his shoulder and rubbing it nervously. The move also put me next to, and barely touching, the Tweedle furthest from everyone. He glanced down and leered at me while I braced myself so I would not flinch or shudder - tempted as I was - when his hand furtively moved to rub against my buttocks. I had cranked up the pheromone production as high as I dared without making the room reek for weeks to come, so I would have been even more annoyed if he hadn't made any move at all.

"I mean, are you expecting me to turn into a gorilla or something? What?" I slid behind Paul's chair and leaned down a bit to rub Paul's shoulders with both hands. This served several purposes. It allowed me to shake my hair and let it flow appealingly over my shoulders and point at my breasts. It also allowed Sammy a better view of them and the lacy bra I was wearing. Finally, it allowed the second Tweedle guarding Paul to move his hand over to my rump. With luck, it was only going to be a matter of time before one Tweedle's roving hand found the other Tweedle's and they hopefully got mad at each other.

"No, I think something simple like a change of hair color, a breast enlargement or a height change would be sufficient."

The height change would have been the most obvious way to get on Carlton's good side, assuming there was one. He'd probably love the idea of beautiful woman who was shorter than him. It would make him feel all the more a man - a big man. Unfortunately, that would have made it impossible to maintain all the hidden musculature I had created for myself on the ride over. Instead, I chose hair. I made it shorter and darker, almost a crew cut like the lady who was hawking her diet book a while back, but still styled in a feminine manner. When the fighting started, there would be less chance of getting it pulled.

The rubbing stopped. Shit. I hadn't thought they would be that observant. I cranked the pheromone levels up again, deciding it was more important than worrying about the room reeking. Actually, I was chastising myself for caring about the condition of Maldonado's office considering what I was planning. I also, added a bit more wiggle to my butt as I rubbed Paul, just enough to insure that it would make contact with their hands again. Thank god for short memories and overactive glands; they were rubbing again.

The increased pheromone production had another benefit. Sammy had wiped some drool of his chin and taken a silent, sliding step closer to us. I gave a silent cheer, as I needed him to be as close as possible for this to come off. Next, I pumped up my breasts just a bit more and moved the nipple a bit higher so that it was visible above the edge of my bra. By increasing the speed with which I rubbed Paul's back, I was able to increase the jiggle factor and he moved another two steps closer.

I had been ignoring Carlton the last few moments. Luckily, he was apparently caught up in his own thoughts, probably deciding how to make the most of my discovery. I wondered if he realized what I was trying to accomplish, but regardless, it was time for a distraction, "So what do I need to do to save Paul?"

"Why, merely walk over to the telephone by my desk and call 911, then provide CPR until they arrive."

"Since I assume you will not be allowing me to do that until you have something, why don't we stop playing these games? What do you want from me?"

"Actually, nothing any more. I have your research. I have your samples. Now I have the proof that it works thanks to you little demonstration." He stood up and strode decisively to the table with my life's work on it. He spoke with out turning back to me as he did something I could not quite make out, but the scent of lighter fluid suddenly became more overpowering then the combined body odor of three Tweedles. "I've already made copies of the relevant material and this job is no longer necessary to my plans. I will miss you LaPierre. You are a damned boy scout and you would surely interfere with my plans for a new world order, but as I have noted, you do have an intuitive mind. Oh well, "Qué sera, sera."

When he did turn around, he had a syringe in his hand. "I'm certain you can guess what this is, your wonderful formula." With that, he injected himself.

I knew I would not be getting a better chance. Carlton's hands were full and the Tweedle family was in deep lust. Feigning moral indignation for his too free hands, I screeched and spun on the middle Tweedle and yelled "Fresh!" as I slapped him - hard enough to break his jaw. Continuing my spin, I grabbed the far Tweedle and kicked him in the family jewels hard enough to fracture his coccyx before hoisting him backwards over my shoulder and sending him flying over Paul's chair into Sammy with me flying right behind him.

Broken jaw was on the floor moaning behind Paul's chair, out of the action, at least for the moment. Mr. Crushed Cojónes was a dead weight on top of Sammy, who had not dropped his gun as I had hoped, but who was struggling to move Cojónes so he could get off a clean shot. I was on top of them both before he could get off any shot, clean or dirty. With a loud crunch of broken bone, the gun was in my hand and someone below me was screaming.

A fast roll and I had the gun aimed at Carlton, or at least where Carlton had been. Instead, I was nearly blinded by the brightness of the yellow flames engulfing my life's work. I was shocked into paralysis and that is when I heard it, the soft popping sound of a bullet. Maldonado was shooting at me.

It took precious microseconds to locate him, by his desk of all places, and he was able to get off a second shot before I emptied my pistol in his direction.

It would have been nice to be able to say that I was a crack shot, but I was not. I had been hunting with Paul and our fathers as a youngster and knew enough to point the damn thing and pull the trigger, hoping the safety was off. Nevertheless, I had not shot a gun in twenty years and I had not been that good even then. Besides, even veteran cops will tell you that in the heat of a firefight, aim is the last thing you are thinking about. When I opened my eyes, I could see a cluster of bullet holes in and around the desk, but no Carlton.

A quick glance back at the conference table with my research burning like some damn Boy Scout bonfire was enough to tell me that it was a lost cause. I knocked Sammy and his clone on the head just hard enough to make sure they would be sleeping for a while and turned to Paul and the last Tweedle. That is when I saw the blood.

Knowing that there is about the same amount of blood in the human body as the oil pan of a car does *not* prepare you for the shock of bright red flowing down the side of a white shirt. I followed the red upward as I traced it back to the source. There was a steady flow of blood gushing from a small hole in Paul's left eye.

With a smothered whimper, I leaped back to Paul, only to find what I suspected but prayed would not be. There was a large, gaping hole in the back of my best friend's head. No more would we trade barbs and think up jokes to tease each other. No more would we eat, or play, or study, or be sick together. No more would we be there to help each other. No more no more no more.

I knelt beside Paul's chair and cradled my best friend in my arms as the last of his blood dribbled out, mixing with my tears. Broken jaw groaned and tried to move so I kicked him, possibly too hard as he stopped moving all together. The building's smoke detectors finally realized that something was burning and the sprinkler system released a deluge that covered us all, turning Paul's blood a pathetic pink. I do not know how long we stayed there. That is how security found us.

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FOR LOVE  
OF LIFE

by

Jeffrey M. Mahr

**CHAPTER NINE:  
Closure**

"Paul was dead, but I wasn't even allowed to attend his funeral. It seems that Dr. Maldonado had prepared a bunch of phony records framing me, describing me as unstable since the experimental cancer treatment. There were counseling memos, pleading notes to the company's Employee Assistance Program to get me into therapy, even a couple of calls to company security asking that they be present whenever I was in the building as he feared for his life.

"They never found Maldonado's body, but that didn't matter to the DA's office as they had broken jaw Tweedle's body and my confession to having kicked him. That was enough to guarantee Manslaughter and when the other two goons concocted a story about how I'd attacked them like a wild creature, breaking bones and shooting at poor Doc Maldonado, in a fit of rage as I accused him of sabotaging my work, they felt confident they had enough for Murder Two. You'd think they'd be too embarrassed to admit to have been beaten up by the little slip of a thing I was for the trial.

"The last straw was when the police went through my quarters at the base and found blue prints for BioLogInc.'s corporate office building as well as directions to a local swamp known for its quicksand deposits, a map with directions to Canada using local and back roads, and a box full of money. The fact that I had never seen any of that stuff before was absolutely irrelevant - and besides, who the hell ever escaped to Canada except a few draft dodgers? That was the proof of premeditation that gave the DA his Murder One charge.

"At the time of the trial, it amazed me that no one asked how I could have beaten those huge, muscle-bound men so badly. No one asked who had shot and killed Paul, or even why he was there.

"Do you know what my attorney's advice was? 'Look innocent.' I cannot even imagine what she meant by that. I suppose that's why she sent me the Laura Ashley® outfits to wear. I hear it helped their sales, although the only thing it did for me was get me voted best-dressed woman on death row. I am wearing one now under this orange prison issue jumpsuit. You can just see the top of the turtleneck.

"Actually, as far as I could tell, the only person in that court room who believed I was innocent, excepting the Tweedles, was Patrice. We had been friends since my initial treatment and she came every day. I understand that she has tried to visit me, but she had not my immediate family, my attorney, or someone the State wanted to see me, so we haven't been able to speak in months.

"About now, she's the only one I've got left. Would you please give her a message? Tell her 'I love her and I'll never forget her.'"

"So here I am Father, with no family, no friends, no job, and no future." I stopped him before he started the usual platitudes about how my faith will help me survive. "I know. God loves me. Well, if you were about to tell me to confess and free my soul, I've got a problem. That was my confession, I've confessed to being stupid, and naïve and innocent, but not to being guilty of the charges against me."

"My dreams of helping mankind are dead, even if I could find someone to fund me, it would be years before I could recreate my work to this still incomplete point. To put it bluntly Father - and I apologize for the language - but I've been raped and screwed in the most basic, albeit figurative, terms. Just as Dr. George LaPierre's life ended when he contracted cancer, Dr. Georgette LaPierre's life ends in a couple of minutes."

"I shall pray for your soul my daughter." He kissed his rosary and crossed himself before rising.

"Thank you Father, but pray for this country and the world. Dr. Maldonado is still out there and if he's even half as ruthless as I believe he is, we're all in deep trouble."

The sound of a key rattling against the bars made us both start. A contingent of four burly guards and the Warden was waiting just outside the cell. For some reason the joke about the King and the Jester came back to me and I realized that I heartily agreed with the punch line, "No noose is good news." Which

reminds me of the other joke I have not finished, the one about the vase. It is about an attorney making his opening address to the jury, in behalf of a client who is accused of breaking a vase. It goes something like this. "Your honor. Distinguished colleagues. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. By the end of these proceedings, I intend to prove three things beyond a shadow of a doubt. First, I shall prove that my client never received the vase in question. Second, I shall prove that when she did receive it, it was already broken. Third and finally, I shall prove that when my client returned the vase, it was intact." I almost wish my attorney had been able to match the attorney in the joke.

The Priest silently stood and backed out of my way. I had actually been waiting for this moment - or maybe it was that stupid noose joke - but I gave him a jaunty wave and said, "See you later Father."

They added handcuffs and leg chains before letting me leave the cell. Then, we all did a slow march, the Warden in front, the Priest in back and me, surrounded by the guards, in the middle. My escort was silent and grim, but the cheers from the surrounding cells was deafening and could be heard even after the heavy steel door at the end of the corridor closed behind us.

I had had many discussions with attorneys, news people, psychologists and guards over the past year and a half while the required appeals were processed against my wishes, by do-gooders trying to help. As a result, I was not surprised by the crowd seated in the bleachers in front of the gallows. But then again, I had been planning this moment for quite a while now.

We continued our slow march to the top of the scaffold. Then, I got to listen as the Warden read my list of crimes and verified that I was Dr. Georgette LaPierre in accordance with state law. Were my situation different, I might have found it funny that after being in jail for almost two years, this was when they verified my identity. Finally, in a deep stentorian voice, he completed the ritual citing of the statute under which this execution was occurring.

Then it was my turn. I was asked if I had anything more to say. Still shuffling due to the chains, I stepped up to the microphone and glared out at the audience. "I have said it from the beginning and I say it again. I did not kill Dr. Carlton W. Maldonado. He is alive and he is amongst you plotting evil of such magnitude that it will stun you at the least, and could prove the undoing of this country, even the world.

"I know that you do not believe me. I know that you consider me the evil one. It saddens me that I have not been able to convince you to join me to fight the evil that is Dr. Maldonado, but fight him I shall, to my dying breath. One last time, I implore you to release me and join me."

The silence was deafening. A guard shuffled his feet and the Warden checked his watch against the large clock mounted on the scaffold. It was almost time.

The guards escorted me back to a marked position on the trap door and offered me a hood, which I declined. Then the noose slid over my head and down my neck. Someone, one of the guards, was thoughtful enough to pull my hair through so it was not trapped between the noose and my neck. The chains stayed on; I guess they figured it would be added weight to insure that my neck snapped, then they added a sandbag attached to each foot. When I had been prepared, the Warden nodded to someone behind me, declining to look into my face although I looked into his, and the ground fell out from beneath me.

For more than six months I had been preparing for this moment. I had read of this moment and I had dreamed of this moment. I had interviewed anyone who could tell me anything about it. I had even spent

time on the Internet researching gallows construction and the medical details of hanging. I was at peace, knowing what would happen.

The first feeling was that of falling. My shoulder length hair floated up creating a golden halo in the morning sunlight.

Then, the thick hemp rope snapped taut and it was over, but for the perfunctory medical exam. I can honestly say that there was no pain.

They let me hang for several minutes. I guess no one every told the Warden that asphyxiation as the actual cause of death in hanging is an old wives' tale - or maybe he was just being cautious.

Did you know that hanging does not kill you by asphyxiating you? The actual cause of death is the landing, so to speak. The actual cause of death is the combined multiple insults to the body including the trauma to the brain as it is bounced about, the spine as it is severed, and the essential organs as they stop receiving messages to function. Trust me I speak from personal, first-hand experience.

Finally, they took me down and lay me on a gurney. The jail physician took out his stethoscope any listened for my heart, checked for a pulse, and flipped my eyes open to see if there was any pupillary dilation. There wasn't.

From then on, it was just a matter of time. I had asked for immediate cremation at the funeral home that had cared for my parents' remains, but like most bureaucracies, it took almost five hours, lying on a freezing metal slab, before my body was released for pick up.

Right about now, you're probably thinking of the ending of any of a dozen "B" horror flicks Paul and I watched on Sunday mornings as we grew up. Someone always seemed to end up intoning in a somber voice, "There are some things man was never meant to know." At least in the context of wondering how I could possibly know about things like my death and the events that occurred after it. If it will help, I could tell you that it was beautiful up here and "a far, far better place to which" I have gone. However, I can assure you that I am not a ghost, nor am I some other type of supernatural being. My personal experiences are the result of living through my own death.

I told you I had been researching executions for months. After all, I am a research scientist. I also told you how a properly administered hanging actually works. Remember I had quite a bit of time for independent study during those many months in solitary confinement on Death Row. Thus, I practiced and honed my ability to change shape until it was effectively instantaneous. In the process, I discovered that the only limitation is my ability to properly visualize the biology, to imagine the change in sufficient detail that it is able to function. This means I can even assume various animal shapes, even in between shapes like a half man half animal. For some reason, I am partial to large white furred, ape-like creatures.

As the noose went around my neck, I created a shell-like exoskeleton under my turtleneck sweater extending down my spine and under my crotch. The upper part prevented asphyxiation and a snapped neck. The lower frame served as a support so I would not snap some other portion of my vertebrae. Once the trap door opened, I just played dead, removing the lower exoskeleton first so it would not be noticed when they lowered me off the noose. Then, I just moved my heart well away from my chest so that my internal organs dampened the sound until it could not be heard by the good doctor. Finally, it was just a waiting game until the funeral home picked up my body and placed it in a casket to be cremated. When no one was looking, I just swapped another body for mine and disappeared amongst the next group of

mourners.

From there, it was a quick bus ride to Patrice's apartment to borrow some money, collect some clothes and say our tearful goodbyes. I cannot afford to lose my last true friend and I know Maldonado would kill her without a second thought if he thought she was helping me, but I am not worried. I can still call her if I finish the conversation within sixty seconds, or drop her an e-mail, even a letter to return the money she lent me. Besides, she gave me the hope that this will one day be over and I can again be with her. It will not be the same as it would have been with Paul, but no one should ever give up a friend without a fight.

Now I am free to seek out Maldonado. It will not be easy. I do not know her new name. I do not know what she looks like. I do not know where she is. I do not even know what her goals are. I just know she's out there plotting, organizing and controlling more nefarious criminal activity and she must be stopped before she does to others what she's done to me. She will also have the same ability as me and when I catch her I will have to tell her she is a lousy lawyer. I am certain she is still planning for our next encounter. She will believe I am dead as much as I believe she is dead.

I never wanted to be some kind of a hero. I never once thought to save the world. I just wanted to help my fellow man. Now, I have a mission - and I will succeed. I have to. I cannot let down Paul, or my parents, or those of you who have no way to protect yourself from Maldonado's machinations. Like in the comics still at the cabin, I need a name, but most of the good ones are already taken, so I have combined the two things that are most prominently me. I am a biomorph and, as Carlton sneeringly pointed out, I am a Boy Scout.

Prepare yourself Maldonado. I am coming for you. BioScout is coming for you.

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Choose your Chapter:

<=>?@ABCD

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# FOR LOVE OF LIFE

by

[Jeffrey M. Mahr](#)

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This Chapter Pending -- Wait For the Next Issue Please -- It's Coming

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Use Your Back Button to Return to the Chapter You've Been Reading,  
The Menu Button for More of TSAT, or  
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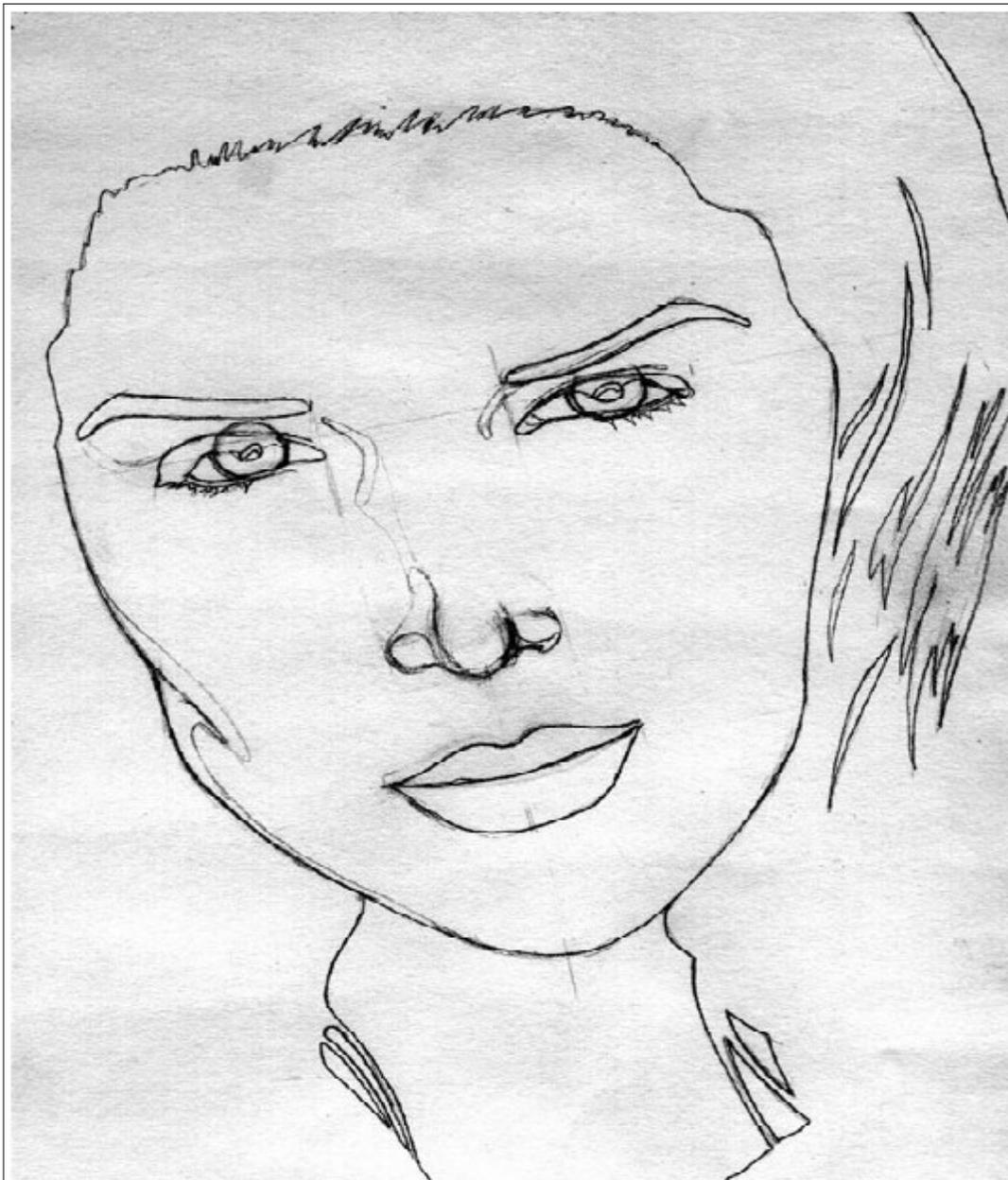
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Choose your chapter



# SKIN DEEP



## Chapter One: In The Beginning

by  
[Mark McDonald](#)

**Journal**> Journal Date:  
12/19/2081 -- 4:22 P.M.

**Journal**> Journal Empty!

**Journal**> Voice dictation  
journal editor, open.  
Proceed!

"Sigh!"

"I've been sitting here trying  
to figure out where to start,  
my journal screen just  
sitting there in front of me,  
open, like a gaping, empty



Portrait of Neve Campbell  
A Work in Progress #1 of 21  
by  
Earle Wood  
earlewood@erols.com

mouth waiting to swallow me. So where do I begin with this? How do I say what I have to say?"

**Journal**> Voice dictation journal editor, ERROR.

"What now?" Smack. Come on!"

Grrrrzzits.

**Journal**> Voice dictation journal editor, ERROR.

"Shit!" Bang.

Brrzzzt!

"Piece of garage!"

**Journal**> Voice dictation journal editor, open. Proceed.

"There!"

"Okay, let's try this. I was born Michael William Vello on November 15th, in the year 2062. Therefore, by easy addition, that means I'm 20 years old, or at least I have seen twenty years pass in my short lifetime. Ten months ago, when this whole thing started, I was still nineteen and a freshman in college."

There! That wasn't so hard! What's next? Let me see. Oh yeah! How could I forget?

I had been in school about three months at the time my little unfinished journey began, having moved out of my parents modest home, which had been made to be slightly more spacious by the death of older sister, Erin, about two years earlier. Until then, our lives had been about as normal as one can expect since the war and all the shortages and rationing started, but all that happened before I was born, so I really don't remember anything else. For me, life has always been about shortages. Others have it so much worse. I really have to remember that, especially now!

Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yeah, life was about as normal for our family as it was for most others. My Mom and Dad had grown up before the shortages and explosive population growth and remember a much different existence. From what they've told me, it must have been a very opulent time; things like beef and other meats available at anytime without any rationing, grains and bread on open shelves in the grocery store and the freedom to pick and choose what kind of cheese or bread you bought. Yeah, yeah, I know what you're going to say; those types of choices still exist, but as I'm sure you're already aware, they only exist for the very rich or privileged in our society. Most of us don't have any clue about the comfort that these choices can provide.

Normal life for our small quartet ended with the death of my sister in the summer of 2079 in a HOV accident. The driver lost control, ended up trying to hover over water and sunk like a rock. After that my parents, caught in wave after wave of grief, made life unbearable for not only themselves but for anyone who came within a thousand yards of them. Please don't get me wrong. I loved my sister very much. We

were very close and I was devastated the night she was killed. I lost my only true loving family member. Yes, Mom and Dad loved me, but Erin was the "special one," the "favorite son" -- or daughter in this case. I don't resent anyone for this. In fact, I understand it -- and on the night she died, we had shared some of the most profound moments we had ever shared as brother and sister -- but after two years, the pain of loss diminishes and one finds it's time to move on. I'm sure my sister wouldn't have minded.

My parents, on the other hand, wanted to wallow in the depths of their despair as though it were a warm bath to be enjoyed at the end of a hard day's work. I guess it's hard to betray the memory of a child, your child, by admitting that it's time to move on without them. I can see how some could view that as a sort of perverse abandonment and I don't think they ever forgave me for what I decided to do next. I left!

I had graduated from high school in that two-year period after my sister's death and was ready to make a life for myself. I felt that the best way to honor Erin's life was not to defile my own.

It was clear that my parents weren't going to help send me to school, so I self-qualified for several grants and scholarships. Then, I applied for on campus living quarters and bodda-bing, bodda-boom, I'm attending City College. I started during the winter semester and lived in a small single room in the men's dorm two blocks away from the main campus. It's sometimes hard to believe that moving out and starting school all happened less than a year and a half ago. Then, after what seemed a quantum leap later with a little poor judgment thrown in for good measure, here I am -- but I'm getting ahead of myself.

God, has it really been that long now? I guess it has. I still remember the date. How could I not? For me, it's kinda like remembering what you were doing when the first colonial ships landed on Mars or where you were and what you were doing as you watched President Houston commit suicide on a national vid broadcast. My moment of infamy was March 4th, 2081. The night before all this started, I had been hanging out at a local club where my band was currently playing sold-out shows four nights a week, Thursday through Sunday. As luck would have it, Gary knew just where I could be found that Monday night.

The place was nearly empty Monday to Wednesday since the band didn't play those nights and Marcus, the owner, didn't have anyone else playing to fill in the gap. The place held about two hundred people comfortably, but on Friday and Saturday, it was common to find as many as five hundred or more crammed in to hear the band. Monday, Marcus was lucky if forty people showed up all night let alone at one time. This made it easy to spot me at the bar. My attention was diverted from my drink to the door when it opened. In walked Gary, a huge plastic looking smile on his face. I couldn't help thinking to myself that Gary had found some new thing to fill that "Danger Niche."

"Yo!" Gary shouted from across the room. I raised my hand and smiled to him.

"Hap?" I asked.

"Nada. You?" He gripped my hand, squeezing it hard. Then, he gave it a couple of good pumps before letting it go.

"Drinkn' for free," I said and lifted my glass to him.

"Marcus. One of those for me and put it on his tab," Gary said with a smile.

"You pay for your drinks Shipley," he growled with a huge grin as he set the glass down. "Besides I know you can afford it."

"Aw, Marcus. I'm truly hurt. You know this man here wouldn't be earning you so much money if it wasn't for me."

"Bullshit!" he responded, but made no move to leave, as if expecting the rest of the explanation.

"Truly." Gary sipped his Water Ale. I raised my eyebrows and looked at Gary, also waiting for an answer.

"Why, I was the one that recognized all that talent in this tall, lanky, useless pole of flesh," he said with a grin. I rolled my eyes and went back to nursing my drink.

"I thought it was his sister that found out about this fine man's particular talent," Marcus asked and leaned in to Gary.

"Yah, that is the popular rumor, but what you don't know is that I'm the one that told her. Knowing of her immense talent in the musical field, I was led to the decision that she would be the best to handle his burgeoning career. I was merely acting in the capacity of a -- oh let's say -- a talent scout," Gary finished and took another sip of his drink.

"Talent scout," Marcus snorted, then looked at me for confirmation. I nodded ruefully and he said, "Bullshit artist, more like it. That will be six bucks, Shipley, cash or chip?"

Gary glowered at Marcus with a mock-surprised look on his face, then cracked a smile and produced a transaction chip from his wrist clip.

"Thank you Mister Shipley, your chip has been debited six dollars. Would you like to tip your server?" Marcus asked with a genuine smile.

"Sure," Gary said. Marcus was about to debit the chip again when Gary said, "Don't stroke yourself on roadside during rush hour. You'll get arrested."

Marcus' face clouded over. He turned and tossed the chip back to Gary, then stormed off to tend to more generous customers.

"Thanks asshole!" Gary muttered beneath his breath.

"You know, if you'd stop prodding him, he would probably buy you a drink from time to time, just because he knows you're my friend," I observed with my head still facing my drink.

"There's no fun in that. Besides, he likes it. We wouldn't be friends without that lively exchange. He'd think I was useless and no-account."

"Gary, he thinks that now," I laughed.

"Yeah well, fuck him if he can't take a joke."

"So what's up Gary?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" he said trying to look surprised and innocent at the same time.

You're busted I thought to myself. I turned around on my bar stool and faced the nearly empty room.

"You mean you came all the way down to the campus bar just to, " I waved my hand at the room, "enjoy

all the night life? You? Mister excitement?"

"I can't come down and see how my best bud is doing? Mikey, now I really am hurt." He had been looking at me but now turned away and acted as if he were pouting. That only made me laugh.

"Okay, Good to see you then," I said chuckling. "I was about to go get something to eat, want to join me?"

"Naw, I'm eating down at my folks' place tonight, helping out some later, but thanks."

We sat in stony silence for some time. His silence was uneasy, but I couldn't figure out a way to get the truth out of him, so I finally said, "Well, enough for me. I'm hungry. Sure you won't join me?"

"For cold pizza or fish and chips? Ah ... thanks but no thanks. You know I can't eat that crap and you shouldn't either. It will gum up your insides."

"My parents don't own a four-star restaurant and I'm poor, remember?" He blushed and I silently kicked myself for being such a jerk. Then I said, "Well, if you change your mind, it sounds like you know where to find me. See ya."

I turned and called to Marcus, waving. "Hey pal, see you Thursday, Okay?" Marcus waved and smiled in return. Then, I slapped Gary on the shoulder and made for the door, glancing behind me just a little to see when Gary got up to follow me. It took longer than I thought it would. I had just about decided that I'd been wrong about him this time. Maybe he had just wanted some company after all. I was about to turn around and head back to the bar when I heard the door crashed open and someone come running in my direction.

"Hey Mikey, wait up!"

I pulled up and waited, "You change your mind about dinner?"

Ignoring my statement he proceeded with his own question, puffing a bit as he did, "Ah ... listen ... I was ah ... wondering...."

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if maybe a few of us could meet at your dorm room tomorrow night?"

"Why my room?"

"Ah," he started looking a bit confused. "It's ... convenient," he answered smiling, obviously proud of himself.

"And what are we doing?"

"Oh no, no, NO. Not we ... everyone that's going is already on board. I just thought that it would be a good place for us to meet before we moved on to the evening's excitements."

"Oh, I see. Well then, what are you doing?" an old thorn began jabbing me in my side. I wasn't sure I really wanted to hear the rest.

"Look I can't really talk about it here. It's, kind of covert," he whispered with a sly smile. "But we're

gonna miss you on this one Mikey."

I raised my eyebrows at that. I was being excluded from one of Gary's excursions. In advance, I was being excluded.

"Am I going to get into any trouble letting you meet there?" I asked.

"Mikey, when have I ever placed you at any risk?"

I shrugged at the comment. "So, you don't want me along, is that it?" I was as surprised by the comment as he appeared to be.

"This is a one-night adventure for six people. You've never wanted to go in the past; we just all assumed that you wouldn't want to this time either. The boat's full, sorry."

I guess I was visibly surprised, because Gary continued with his apologies in rapid succession.

"Jeez. Mikey. I didn't even think you would want to come along, After all the times you just 'bowed out' as you like to say." He rubbed his blonde hair back with one hand in a fretful gesture. "Man, I don't know what to say, except I'm sorry."

Hurt, but not wanting to it to show I said, "It's Okay." I meant 'It's Okay,' but remember, I said that as if it had been one word. "We'll, you're probably right." Then, to prove I was not hurt, I consented. "Sure you guys can meet there. What time? I'll need to be there to let you in." This was the first time since I had come to know Gary that I could remember that I had been deliberately excluded from one of his "adventures." I was surprised again that I felt on top of the jealousy I usually felt at his daring, instead feeling the slightest bit of pain at having been rejected as a choice for the first time. I shivered. The winds of change were blowing in my life again. Gary, my childhood friend was moving on, and I guess so was I. With the band's popularity, or my studies in school, it would only be a matter of time before we went our separate ways, but it still made me sad to think that this chapter of my life was coming to a conclusion. That's the way it happens though isn't it? When you least expect it, your life changes forever. Rarely is there a way to ever go back.

"Right. Six sound Okay?"

"That's Polar. Class is over around three-thirty so I can be there whenever."

"Kewl" Gary said and then stopped. "Say, are you Okay?"

"Yeah, I'm great, why?"

"Okay, if you're sure?"

"Why wouldn't I be Gary?"

He waved it off and said, "Never mind. See you at around six tomorrow."

"See ya," I said. Gary turned and made his way down the street in the opposite direction from my place.

I wondered what he meant by "covert" and shivered again. I had the deepest dread that tomorrow might be the last time I ever saw Gary again. The thought put me in the doldrums as I went about the rest of the evening. That night was entirely uneventful. So much so, I don't much remember what happened

following my meeting with Gary. I do remember that fish and chips sounded rather good and I got an order on my way home.

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The next day I dressed, went to class, came home and waited. I spent the time between studying and doing my "good boy never does bad" routine of homework and checkbook balancing. I remember thinking that I had to get my latest grant installment deposited to the bank as soon as I could. It sometimes amazed me that cash was still being used, but I guess you can count on the government for a few constants.

At around five forty-five Norman and Frank, two close mutual friends of Gary and I showed up. With my schedule in the band, there hadn't been much time for all of us to get together and shoot the bull in quite a while. I was stung again by the fact that I hadn't been asked to join in. What the hell did they think I was, a coward?

"What's up gentlemen?" I asked, shaking hands as they entered. They mumbled their greetings and shook my hand in return, each one coming in and finding a place to sit in the small, overstuffed room that was my one-room dorm. I felt uncomfortable; there was no conversation from these two old friends. We sat down and stared at each other.

"Well, it's been a while hasn't it?" I started, trying to break the ice.

"Yeah!" and "Hell yeah," were the responses I got followed by "Long time ..." and "Hell yeah, too long ..." then silence. I looked from one to the other and back several times. "Damn, you boys talk too much!"

Norman laughed nervously. "Come on... what's going on tonight? Frank, what is it that Gary feels I'm not ..." someone knocked on the door and you could see the look of relief on Frank's face, the look of a boxer about to be counted out as the bell rang.

"Door's open," I shouted and I got up to greet whoever came in, then looked at Frank and added, "We're not done."

The door opened and Kit oozed into the room. I liked Kit. He always seemed so smooth. Many people around campus considered him odd. He was quiet until you got to know him. He never put himself forward for comment unless asked. When in social situations he usually just sat and quietly listened to the various conversations going on around him. He was not a dater. He had an occasional steady girl he would see for a while but so far nothing too serious. He seemed to glide when he walked.

I read an old book written some time ago by a lady named Anne Rice. It was about a vampire named Louis. This vampire could move fluidly from one place to the next, seemingly without really moving his legs or feet. The way Louis moved in that book reminded me a lot of the way Kit moved. I found Kit thoughtful. He didn't speak often, but when he did you had better listen. It was usually important. He was perhaps the best straight man I knew.

"Hey, Kit! How are you pal?" His eyes had a slight glassy look to them. "Feelin' no pain I see." He said nothing, just stuck out his hand and shook mine, grinned and moseyed off to the corner of the room to start listening.

Of the three now present, Norman the one we all most worried about. In fact, there was some question as

to whether or not he was actually mentally impaired in some way. He very often forgot where he was even when traveling with a group or in a clearly marked area or well-known place. At times like these, he seemed at a loss for where to get a clue. He quite often said things that were inappropriate, as if he had no idea who was listening or that the company he was keeping at that time might be offended by what he had just said. He had a heart of gold and would never hurt anyone. He just wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer. In fact, he was more of a spoon.

It was this one unchecked element that let me know what was going on just as Gary and Rod arrived at the dorm building. Norman said, "So does anyone know if Rod is bringing the skins here or what?"

I was absolutely floored. Skins! What the hell could Gary be thinking?

I looked around the room to gauge the reaction of the others at the news that tonight's little adventure involved what I considered something more than just risky. Most of them just looked at the floor or at the ceiling, anything but look me in the eyes. I did catch Frank roll his eyes at Norm. Everyone already knew.

I verbally leaped on Norm, "Hey, what the hell is this about skins, Norm? Gary didn't say anything about that to me!" Then to all of them I asked, "How many of you knew about this before you got here?" Yeah, yeah, yeah, I knew the answer but I needed the admission from all of them. My brow scowled at them all. They were not impressed.

One by one, they all started counting off. Kit raised his hand, then Frank. Even Norman raised his hand, looked around and realized I already knew he knew and slowly lowered it again.

"God damn, guys I know you've all heard the stories. You can't think this shit is Okay," I declared. I was incredulous, but no one said anything; they just stared at me with wide eyes and blank faces as if to say Yeah, So?

I could not believe these guys were actually thinking of going off and doing something as stupid as trying on skins. I had heard some really ugly things about these devices. I'm sure most of them were urban legends; even so, some are really scary. Like the twenty-five year old guy that programmed a four-day lockout to a skin only to find out once he got it on that it was the skin of a very old man. He had a heart attack trying to get it back off and died in the skin. Shit like that really nerved me out.

What few so-called facts I did know, I felt relatively certain were true. These were used for subversive operations by the government. Why? The reason for that was simple, they made perfect disguises.

I had learned that originally, a genetics company in New York City had developed them for commercial use. The idea was to give those of the general population who were unhappy with their looks and opportunity to change their looks without surgery. The skins genetically modified a person's own structure to reform him or her into the shape of the person the skin was designed to emulate. More to the point, you literally became the person the skin was programmed to make you. If you got a woman pregnant while wearing a skin, the baby would have the genetic traits of the person you were when you had the skin on. Surgery or operations could not detect the use of a skin nor could such a procedure be used to remove or deactivate a skin.

In fact, another one of those urban legends is of a US agent shot in the line duty while wearing a skin. In order to save his life the surgeons removed a kidney. After he had recovered, the agent in charge of his

case had him shipped home. When the time came to have the skin deactivated, they discovered that, by removing his kidney, they had changed the algorithm used to store his original information and the skin could not be deactivated.

This was some serious shit! It was just the idea of the possibility that gave me the willies.

Frank reached over, popped Norman in the back of the head with an open hand and scolded him, "Good going Norm, you limp noodle!"

"How the hell was I supposed to know Mikey didn't know? It's not like he wouldn't find out," Norman defended himself.

"Found out?" I was confused. If they had all left without saying anything, how the hell would I have found out?

Outside a van pulled up. Doors slammed and I could hear Gary and Rod laughing to each other. It was a laugh that was too loud and strong. I could tell Gary was nervous.

"Good, Gary's here," said Frank as he got up and made for the door.

I made a grab for his sleeve, "Wait a minute, what did Norman mean when ..."

"The door man, I'm gonna get the door!" Frank tried to pull away but I had a grip on his sleeve.

Don't worry about the door, I'll get it you just tell me ..."

There was a knock on the door. Before I could answer it, the door burst open and in walked Gary and Rod. Gary was holding a small cardboard box under one arm. It appeared to be damp in a few places. Steam appeared to be coming from inside. As Gary crossed the tiny room, the faces of the others in the room lit up like light bulbs. Hands were stretched out in greeting and shaken. Rod followed close behind. The scene reminded me of a politician stumping a crowd for votes, and this small crowd loved him for it.

Gary locked eyes with me and saw right away there was trouble with his plan. He glanced over his shoulder at the others, I guess to see who had betrayed him. Just past him, I saw Norm drop his head and blush.

He never skipped a beat. When he reached me, I grabbed him by the forearm and escorted him roughly to the far side of the room where my kitchenette was, smiling and making small talk the whole way. The kitchenette was the only place where we might be able to get just a little privacy. I didn't want to make him look stupid in front of everyone else. "What the fuck are you thinking Shipley? God damned skins?" I whispered, starting in on him as soon as we were both out of earshot, which was hard in my little sub-divided room.

He didn't say a word. Instead, he shoved the box he was carrying in to my arms. It was much heavier than it looked. The damp spots were in fact damp spots, but the steam coming from the box was not because the contents were hot.

"What's this?" I asked harshly. I didn't want the edge in my attitude to be dulled by his lame peace offering.

"Open it up and see," was all he said.

I peeled back the corner of the box and inside I could see the red and white markings of a six-pack of Stromsburg Beer. This was real beer, from a Pittsburgh microbrewery.

"Where did you get this?" I asked in wonderment. The edge in my voice, I wanted so desperately to preserve, was now as dull as a creek stone.

"The folks have a couple of restaurants, remember? How do you think I was able to get you those beers on your birthday?" he smiled his biggest, 'you're my best buddy' grin at me.

"But this is a whole six pack Gary, your folks are gonna' know. This shit ain't cheep, son -- and you still live at home. I can't accept it," I told him, but made no offer to hand it back.

"Yeah you can, besides if you work with us tonight, you will have earned it. So it really isn't a gift."

"Work with you?" I thought for a second and then it came to me. "Duh! It's a bribe!" I was the sixth person; I had been all along. He knew if he put me in a position where I had to back out in front of all my friends, I was less likely to do it. "Holy shit Gary, do you know what ..."

"Mikey, I'm hurt! I wouldn't do anything to you that would require bribing you. That would suggest that I would knowingly put my best bud in danger." He gave me what looked to be a genuine look of personal pain in his eyes. Ole stupid me, I fell for it!

"I'm sorry, Gary. I know you wouldn't do anything deliberately. I didn't mean that. It's just ..."

"Great, then have one of those beers and let's get back in with the rest of the guys."

I stood there wondering how the hell he had just done that. He had defused the entire issue before I could even make a single objection. I didn't even know how to approach the subject again without looking like a coward in front of everyone. Back in the other room, Rod was explaining that the skins were at the warehouse. He hadn't taken any to bring to us because the place had been crawling with people during the day, but, he said, he had an unsupervised entry code that would prevent flagging at the security station. He and his buddies programmed it to use when shipments of booze or other useful and marketable items came into the bonded area of the warehouse.

I stood listening to Rod, sipping my beer, waiting to find a mistake or a flaw in his plan. Hell, there were many I could have tried to exploit into a reason we should not do this, but I needed one that no one would or could counter with a better reason why we should do this. None presented themselves.

I offered a beer to those standing around listening. Only Norman took one, which I thought was strange. The fact that no one else took one left me feeling a bit uneasy, as though they had all been told not to tamper with Mikey's bribe. Only Norm was too stupid to remember to turn it down if he was offered one.

The shipment had come in a week ago and was now sitting unattended and unknown to others in the bonded area. An area that was supposedly protected from prying eyes and available only to special warehouse workers and government inspectors. According to Rod, there were hundreds of boxes with at least six skins per box.

Rod was saying that we would have to go now if we were going to do this. So, we silently piled into his van, which was a solid-paneled job, used mostly for deliveries. It was very utilitarian in appearance. Inside, there were discarded boxes and papers everywhere. The five of us scooted boxes and trash around

until we were able to clear a small space of van flooring to sit on and made ourselves as comfortable as possible. Rod cranked up the hover jets and we took off for the harbor.

So that was it. I had been tricked into going on one of Gary's adventures. Gary had been right. I hadn't wanted to go with them that night. I was a bit put off by not being asked to go, but, if I had been asked, I would have turned him down. So in the end, he put me in a situation he felt I wouldn't make too much of scene over and thereby be forced to go. As we sped along to the warehouse, all I could think of were the people that would most want to protect these things from popular public knowledge. Skins, according to the government, didn't exist, but neither did the ruins on Mars. The Military had landed on Mars in 2010 and from the reports, if they are to be believed, the ruins were found two years later. However, it wasn't until commercial tankers and civilians started landing there that the evidence could no longer be hidden. Until then, they had been an urban legend just like skins are now.

The government's hard line on this was due primarily to it's own involvement in the use of these devices. As I found out later, this or any government that had this technology, could program these things to emulate anyone, infiltrate the highest levels of any bureaucracy and take it over from the inside out. Not only did our government want to keep the technology with in our borders, it wanted to use it before it was used against it. They also wanted to be the ones to defeat this technology before it got away from them, as all significant technologies do eventually.

Nevertheless, others felt they had a stake in the skins as well. The mob had financial designs on these things. It was rumored that a white male skin at age 18 to 25 went on the black market for anywhere from \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 cash no questions asked.

Male and female skins were used for any number of reasons. I read in the months since that some people use skins to change their race from an undesired or oppressed one to a race that is more widely accepted. Older people had been rumored to use them as a one-time fountain of youth. Men that wanted to be women, women that wanted to be men the, the ugly that wanted to be beautiful, it seemed the combinations were as limitless as the imaginations of those who wanted to use them. Then, there were the rich who used them temporarily as elaborate costumes. Skins could be the complete and total package in escapism. Again, however, urban legends abound surrounding this group of losers.

Here's a group of people that could have, potentially, anything they wanted and they decide they want the flexibility to be someone else for a limited amount of time. Their wealth and affluence spawned a certain arrogance that falsely led them to believe that all is at the mercy of their control because of who they were and, of course, what they possess. Yet here too there are tales of poor unfortunate souls that lost their money and power because the skins failed and they could no longer prove their identities.

However, the tale that bothers me the most is the one about the couple that wanted to live for one weekend as each other. They found a genetics smith to fashion two skins with their genetic codes imbedded in the chips. When activated, they had, essentially, switched places. At the end of the weekend fantasy, however, only one skin could be removed. The husband's, now the wife-imposter's, skin stubbornly refused to be deactivated. To the horror of the couple, they found that they were now, no longer husband and wife but twin sisters, forever. They couldn't even get the genetics engineer to reproduce the husband's skin for the true wife to use because his genetic pattern was lost the minute the skin he wore failed.

He had controlled all the business ventures and money, and most of the assets were mired in extensive

partnerships. They lost everything. What's worse, they were both eventually brought under suspicion of murder. Both were too afraid of the consequences of their use of skins to admit that the husband had not died but was now trapped and living as his own wife. Devastated by what had happened to them as a couple by the loss of position, influence, money, you name it; the original wife is reported to have hung herself, leaving the former husband alone, trapped in the form of the woman he once loved. These were the thoughts that were running through my mind as we drove. I was a little more than nervous. If the boxes really contained skins, then it was reasonable to assume they were Government Issue. And if they were, then the Government would be watching. The closer we got to the warehouse the more nervous I became. The beer I had drunk was making my head buzz but not enough to dispel my fear. I remember thinking that didn't want to do this any more. Jesus Christ, I was scared!

The hover-van stopped. Outside I could hear voices. We must be at the security gate. There was an electronic buzzing and the sound of something metallic being moved out of the way -- the gate I supposed -- then we were moving again. We didn't go far. The HOV stopped again and this time, after hearing Rod and Norm crunch around on the ground, the doors of the van were thrown wide. Harsh overhead streetlights shone in on us and one by one we each popped our heads out to look around.

We were at the edge of the bay, on the opposite side of it from the college campus. A huge empty dock lay just to the right of where the van was stationed. Beyond that, the harbor curved around to the place we had just come from. The City College lights were visible in the darkness; they rippled off the water in a cascade of ever changing patterns. Beyond the college on the waterfront would be the dorm building; it would be close enough to walk to. It might take a couple of hours but it was still close enough that it could be done.

On the other side of us was the warehouse. It was an enormous thing, with two huge hanger-like doors that met in the middle, easily large enough to accommodate a sizeable commercial aircraft or shuttle. The building was devoid of windows; there was only strong metal siding everywhere I looked. The building looked very secure. I was beginning to hope that perhaps we wouldn't be able to get inside.

My hopes were dashed almost immediately as I saw Rod walk toward a small door near the right corner of the structure. There was a small keypad by the door and Rod was punching in numbers. When he was finished, there was a click and the door opened just slightly.

Gary was standing directly behind me. My nerves were practically singing, so when Gary surprised me by touching me on the arm, I farted on him.

Burrrraaaapppppp!

"God Damn Mikey," he exclaimed waving his hand in front of his face, "awwwww, shit that's nasty." Then he said, "Here, this is for you fuck face!" and he let his fist come down on the top of my head like a hammer.

BOINK.

It didn't hurt but I was in no mood to be messed with. "Fuck you! You want to get in there so quickly then move around from behind me and that won't happen again," I replied defensively.

He shoved me from behind gently and in I went. The place was filled with stuff. There were large boxes of glassware stacked up against one wall where we entered the building and other household goods

boxed up and stacked all around. Most of the stacks of boxes were too tall to see over. As we walked, our footsteps echoed off the ceiling, walls and boxes in the enormous building and the sound bounced haphazardly back to us.

We walked past racks of men's and women's clothes, high shelves of what appeared to be hover craft parts, liquids, some consumable some not and all sorts of other things. We passed an opened box of women's panties and Gary grabbed one. In the next moment, he had stretched them over my head from behind. I ripped them off, turning around and shooting Gary an angry glance. I could have kicked his ass and he knew I was capable of it. He held up his hands, ginned and said. "Okay, Okay, I'll back off. Just trying to lighten the mood Mikey ole boy, that's all." I threw the panties back at him, turned around and kept marching.

I looked up at the ceiling at one point and noticed long chains on pulleys attached to long tracks that ran the length of the building. They were the booms used for stacking all this stuff so impossibly high!

We stopped and someone suddenly said, "Here, catch!" Something slapped me in the chest and dropped into my cradled arms. It was a clear poly-bag with some black lettering on it; " Genetic Transition Device." Below that was stamped; "Type: Human."

Below that; " "Times New Roman"">XX-178847-CFA18"

Below that, the cellophane had been wrinkled but I could still make out some of what it had said. It read: "Caution! This Devi T e Used ly B er."

My assumption was that it was meant to read "This Devise To Be Used Only By Official Personal" or something to that nature. I couldn't make sense of what I guessed was the serial number. The "Type: Human" was easy enough to understand though. At least I wasn't going to end up a horse, a goat or something like that. Nevertheless, the thought that someone had to identify if the skin was human was enough to make a person wonder what those fucks were doing with this technology.

Rod had finished passing out the skins. "Okay gentlemen, now the fun begins. There are offices and restrooms for each of us to change in. No pun intended." No one laughed. "Once one of has put on a skin the rest of have to follow suite. If we don't, this thing," Rod held up what looked like a sophisticated calculator with a number of buttons and a small display screen. The "patch code transmitter will not active. That means the poor slob's that have already put their skins on will have to stay in their skins until the transmitter is turned on. Do I make myself clear?"

With that, everyone looked at me. I nodded that I got it. It meant that I now had to talk everyone out of this or I was going to have to do this.

"That's it guys. See you back here in few minutes. Don't forget to wear your name tags when you get back out or no one will recognize you." With that, they all started making their way to various points in the warehouse. I stared down at the package that Rod had just tossed to me, hating the feel of it. There was dread in my heart. All I wanted was to just run away, but I had no real way of stopping the others -- and without me, they'd be stuck, even if they were stuck because they did some dumb thing after I told them I wanted out. It would still be my fault. Therefore, I shuffled off toward the back of the warehouse.



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I found an office that was not occupied by one of the others and tested the door. It swung open easily so I went in and closed the door behind me. Opening the package, I pulled the skin out and held it up to examine it in what little light there was coming from the warehouse. It was a gauzy material that felt light and loose in my hands, although I could feel small wires and hard circuitry embedded deep inside the fabric. There were no real features save for a pair of arms, a pair of legs and a head. In addition, there was an opening in the back; at least, it looked like the back. I wondered briefly if I were to put this on backward would I wind up with a nose and eyes on the back of my head?

Out in the warehouse I heard a voice I didn't recognize. It had started. If I put this off too much longer, there would be the devil to pay so I stripped down and stepped into the outfit. There was no zipper, but I had noticed two small, flat metal disks at the base of the neck as I was pulling it over my head. Praying I wasn't making a mistake, I reached back and placed the two disks together.

The reaction was harsh and immediate. The skin contracted around me as if a vacuum had been turned on inside. It cut off all my air. I might have been all right had I thought to take a breath before the disks clipped together, but I hadn't. I fought the skin. I tried to grab it with my hands but it was already too tight. I could feel it getting tighter, compacting me down. The pain was bad but nothing like what was coming.



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I tried to scream for help, but when I did, it invaded my open mouth. Something was terribly wrong; I must have gotten a defective skin. Next, it was stretching down into my throat. That didn't hurt as much as it scared me to death. I was going to choke to death before it squashed me into a small ball of flesh.

However, that was still not the worst. There had been a tightness growing in my waist and crotch. Now it felt as though I was being ripped in half. Something was invading me where there was no substantial hole in my body. Still, I could not scream, I could not see. The gauzy, milky white material of the skin clouded my vision. I was blind; my wind was gone. I could feel myself passing out.

As I went down, my vision started to clear; I wouldn't die blind after all. I remember hitting the ground hard, my head bouncing slightly off the floor. As I passed out, I could smell old spilled coffee on the indoor/outdoor carpet by my head. I could see in the semi-darkness the patterns the coffee had made in the carpet when it landed there. Before me was a puddle of beautiful brown hair that spilled out in front of my face. My last thoughts were "Where the hell did all the pretty hair come from?"

I don't think I was out long, but it was the idea that I had passed out at all that got my eyes open and my brain working again. As though a magical hand had propped me up, I sat bolt upright. The pain in my head and body was exquisite; it made the world swim before my eyes and I had to close them to keep from passing out again. Leaning back against a desk that I had fallen next to, I remember thinking may have even hit with my head on the way down. I stayed there until the fainting spell passed.

There was something flowing over my shoulders. I reached over with one of my hands and grabbed what ever it was and examined it. When I did, my arm brushed something fleshy on my chest. I didn't even pretend not to know what it was. I paused, and then reached to touch the fleshy mound on my chest again without looking at it. It reacted to my touch, becoming just slightly tighter. I could feel the sensation of touch from both points, from the touch of my fingers and from the breast when my hand touched it.

I looked down. Yep, I'd been right, two perfectly shaped breasts with large nipples hanging from my chest. "Oh hell!" The voice was different, higher, lighter and softer. I reached up and clutched at my throat. "Testing one, two, three ..."

"Uh oh!" I whispered.

I didn't need further exploration to understand that the skin I'd gotten was female. The package, it was next to me on the floor. It snatched it up and looked again at the lettering. Yep, it said XX all right, female chromosome pattern. I should have seen that for what it was, damn it. The rest of the sequence of the serial number came into focus CFA18 meant of course, Caucasian Female - Age 18. I still couldn't make out the warning.

I reached down just to check to see if by some miracle I had been spared my penis. Both penis and scrotum were gone; they had been replaced by a smaller patch pubic hair and the soft folds of female genitalia.

Out in the warehouse I could hear voices, different from the ones that I had come here with. I tried to count the number of distinct voices and quickly came up with five. They were all male voices, which meant I alone had drawn a female skin. Okay, I thought, all bets were off; I didn't come down here to become a girl. All the skins had been put on so that transmitter thing could be activated. I should be able to take this thing off now, so I'm off the hook. I smiled at the thought. In fact, I couldn't have been happier. Since I'd been dead set against this to begin with, the idea that all this was over so quickly was really making my night -- and no one could blame me for ruining it for everyone else.

I reached behind me to undo the buttons that had activated it. Then, I paused for just a moment, wondering if it was going to hurt like it did when it activated, but I figured it was worth it to get out of this mess. My hands worked the back of the suit looking for a lump, a crease or an opening somewhere. They found nothing except smooth, continuous skin. "Skins are imperceptible, even to surgery," a small voice reminded me. It had to be there. How the hell else was I supposed to get it off? If it was gone then that meant....

I shook the thought away before it had a chance to reach its logical conclusion and panic could set in. Still, I was getting concerned so I stood up and searched again. For the first time feeling the strangeness of moving in this body, the sensation of things missing and new things where there shouldn't have been any. All that hair kept getting in my way so I grabbed it and tossed it over one shoulder. Then, I ran both hands flat over the back of my neck again. "Jesus, where is it?" I whispered as I continued to explore the back of my new body. My hand to slide further away from the base of the neck looking for an opening, a way out, but it was one continuous piece of skin.

The skin was smooth and soft -- and quite warm. With that, my heart started to pump harder. I had to get this thing off; I couldn't let anyone see me like this. Panicked, my hands raced faster over the back of my body, searching frantically for a release somewhere else on my body -- my body? I searched my scalp, my face the front of my body between my tits, down over my torso and around my ass -- nothing. The urge to cry grew as I searched the room trying to get an idea. Briefly, I thought about breaking the window to the office and using the shards to cut the thing off me, but I knew that wouldn't work. I had to get this thing off the way I had gotten it on or it wouldn't come off at all.

My lips started to tremble with panic. I was close to the edge of sheer hysteria. Then I saw my reflection in the glass of the window, because the lights were down, it made an excellent mirror. "Oh my God!" I heard myself whisper. "Look at me," whispered as I walked closer to the glass to get a better look. I was considerably shorter, with just longer than shoulder length chestnut brown hair flowing from the top of my head like a brown silk fountain. I reached up to touch it and watched as the beautiful young girl in the window did the same. When I touched my hair, she touched hers. The breasts of the girl in the window were not huge but not small either, with large brown nipples. It was dark but they appeared to be perfectly shaped. I reminded myself that they would be. They were designed to be. Her waist was narrow and hips broad but not fat.

It was perhaps the most surreal moment of my life. I could feel myself walking toward the window, drawn by the image I saw there. I could feel my legs work to move me across the room. At the same time

I could see the stranger in the reflection of the glass make the same movements in reverse. As I, or what my consciousness I perceived to be "I," approached the glass, I lifted my hand to touch it. The girl on the other side followed my movements perfectly. When I said "Oh nooooo!" her lips synced my words as if she had practiced her line for hours. Worse was that although she lip-synced the words, it was her voice that I heard. I could not reproduce what I knew as my voice.

"Okay, don't flip out man," I consoled myself in that other person's voice. "It will be alright. Just take it off. That's all you have to do."

"Hey, where's Mikey?"

That snapped me out of my daze and I ducked out of sight. Once again, I started looking for an opening to the suit. I remember I could hear myself whimpering, "Come on! Come on! Come on!" as I tugged on the hair -- hard. "Ouch!" it was real. I spread the tits on my chest apart hard looking for an opening. "Ow, shit!" Those were real too apparently.

"Miiiikeeeey, come out, come out, where ever you are." I didn't recognize the voice so I didn't know who was calling me. I couldn't figure out how to get it off. I was stuck! I was going to have to get help. Gathering my clothes, I stretched my tee shirt on over my chest. It no longer fit. The breasts lifted the bottom of my cut-off T-shirt and pushed it away from my belly like tent poles. I was used to feeling the shirt against my skin, but now, below the breasts, it made no contact with my skin at all.

Next, I stepped into my briefs. That was a joke, too tight in the hips, nothing but slack fabric in the front where my genitals would have been and loose at the waist. I didn't have a choice though; I put my jeans on. They hung off my body like my underwear had. These pants clearly weren't cut for this kind of body. The legs of the jeans seemed to stretch for miles, my feet hidden somewhere inside.

After rolling up the legs of my pants as best I could, I grabbed my shoes, slipped them on and made for the door. When I did, I immediately stepped out of them. My feet were too small to hope to wear them. In frustration, I gathered them up with my socks and stuffed them under my arm.

Opening the door, I stuck my head out.

Someone was calling me, "Hey Mike come on out man. Fuck, what an absolute pussy." I could feel my lips thin out as I pressed them together in anger. That had to be Rod. He had done this to me. Now all I wanted was to kick his ass -- but after he got me out of this body. A girl had to prioritize.

"Hey, fuck you Rod! I'll kick you're ass!" I shouted out in a distinctly feminine voice. The sound of my voice echoed off the walls of the warehouse for what seemed like forever. I knew I'd just fucked up!

Way to prioritize there, Mikey!

"Who the hell was that?" I heard someone ask.

"Alright, we've got BABE-AGE!" someone shouted.

I lowered my head into my hand and moaned, "Oh man."

"Come on out and let's have a look-see, babe," yelled another unfamiliar voice. I was getting scared. This must be what a cat feels like in kennel full of dogs.

"YEESSS!" I heard someone else cheer.

Then I heard what turned out to be Gary. "Shut up! That you Mike? What's happened? You sound, ah ... different."

"Ha! You don't know the half of it," I called back. God that voice was sexy, I hated it!

"Damn! She sounds hot as hell."

"I said to shut the fuck up Rodney, right now! That she is Mike and you'd better remember he's my best friend, asshole!" Gary sounded a little too annoyed to me.

"Fuck off man, I'm just having a little fun! And don't call me Rodney. You know I hate that," and then, "Come on out Mikey. We'll stop. Just come on out so we can get the fuck outta here!"

"A-fuckin'-men to that," I sighed and winced. That voice. I just wasn't going to get used to hearing that voice come out of my head.

I came out from around a stack of boxes that blocked the view of the office I had changed in. As I entered, my circle of friend's faces, that I could not have ever recognized, met me. We were all Caucasian by birth and I still was, but here stood two black men in their early twenties, one oriental man, perhaps in his early teens, and a really handsome Native American that stood nearly six and a half feet tall. He was perhaps twenty or twenty-one. There was one more Caucasian man in the corner sipping some clear liquid from a glass bottle.

"Whoa ..."

"Unbelievable ..."

"Gorgeous ..."

"Wow!"

"Mikey?"

I was blushing; I could feel it. I can't say why, except it was a little embarrassing listing to all those compliments, but I have to be honest, a little part of me deep down inside really enjoyed it.

"I think introductions are in order," I said, "I guess you all know who I am."

"Yeah, you must be Michelle." That got a giggle out of everyone but the Indian and me. I deduced that the Indian must be Gary. I walked over to him and looked up at his face. He looked back down and smiled.

I hadn't realized how much my change had affected my height, but it was clear that I was now the shortest one of the lot. Before, I had been the second tallest in our group, Frank had been taller than me by about an inch, but this guy was tall. It hurt my neck to look up at him.

Looking down at me the large Native American asked, "Waaasss Up?" in a very deep voice.

That was my pal. I really can't express it in words, but it was good to see a friendly face, even if I didn't recognize it as my friend's face. It gave me just the sort of comfort I was desperately in need of right at

that moment. "It looks like you are."

This time everybody laughed. The tension was broken for the time being.

Gary said, "You look great, Mike! That body suits you. You really look gorgeous!"

"Yeah well, don't get used to it. This," I gestured at myself with my hands, "isn't what I signed on for." I looked inquisitively at the other faces and asked "Rod?"

All the faces were staring at me slack jawed, but none were responding. That irritated me. "Hello, Rod? One of you is Rod, right?"

Each one was undressing me with his eyes. If the shoe had been on the other foot I would have been doing it too, but I have to say, it felt really awkward to think that the people that you thought were your friends were now trying to imagine what you looked like naked. I wondered briefly if real females felt this way around their male friends.

The oriental youth broke his trance and spoke up. "Uh yeah! That's me Michel -- ah, Mike -- sorry."

"Yeah Okay, how do I get this off?" I bent my head down and started searching the back of my neck again. "I tried getting it off back there in the office after I realized there had been a mistake, but I couldn't seem to find the catch to this thing. You said that if the transmitter was activated I could remove it, so there must a trick to it." I lifted my eyes to watch their faces and didn't like what I was seeing. They all started looking at the ground and shuffling their feet. "Aw God, this isn't happening," I groaned. "You do know how to remove these things don't you? I really need to get out of this costume. I can't leave here like this."

"Uh, Yeah, I can it off you, don't worry about that Mikey. Just not ... not right now."

I felt my heart skip a beat. I took a deep breath, forced myself to calm down and asked, "When?"

"Mmm .... Uh ... uh ..." he stuttered.

"Uuuuhhhhh ... WHEN!"

Gary walked up to me and put an arm around my shoulder to try to calm me down. It was no different than the thousands of times he had done it before, but it repulsed me for some reason and I quickly shrugged it off.

"When Rod, When! What the hell did you do Rodney?"

Gary held up a long black box that looked a lot like an old time TV remote. You know the ones, like you see in antique shops. It had what looked like a digital timer on it and it was running backward. The time was 47:33:22. I could feel my stomach turn into a small hard stone.

"There's a forty-eight hour reset time lockout." It was Gary.

"What the hell does that mean?" I was starting to shake and was badly scared.

"Well, it means that no way, no how can we get these things to disengage for the next two days," said Gary.

"WHAT! No fucking way I'm staying like this for the next two days. Fuck this, fuck that and most importantly, fuck YOU!" I was fuming. "No jokes, Okay. I'm serious!"

"Look. I can understand that you're upset," Gary said, trying to get me to calm down.

"UPSET!" I turned on him screaming. "I didn't want to do this in the first place, but if you whine and moan long enough or make a good enough excuse, ole Mike will cave in -- so I come along. I was almost killed by that fucking thing I put on back there," I screamed, pointing back at the bank of offices I had just come from. "I black out and when I come to I've just had a fucking sex change operation! Then you tell me, `Oh well, sorry Mikey, you'd better get used to it cause you're stuck for the next two days. You want to trade places with me? Lets see just how fucking upset you get. I have to say it again, 'Fuck you!' Find a way to get this off of me NOW!"

"Mike!" Gary shouted. It was enough to shock me back into some semblance of sanity. Gary continued in a slightly softer tone of voice, "We can't! Get it under control before someone hears you shouting. You never had to come along. Yes, I bribed you. I did it to sweeten the pot a bit. We needed you to come along. It wouldn't have worked with just five. Shit Mikey, I wanted you come with us, just once. I thought it'd be fun too. I was wrong. I'm sorry about all that -- especially now -- but you never had to accept. You could have always just ducked out."

All I could do was blink at him blank faced. I was stuck! I remember thinking that it couldn't get any worse than this. I was going to spend the next two days of my life as a female. I was stuck! Somewhere off in the distance Gary was still talking but I couldn't make out what he was saying. I was stuck! I kept playing that phrase over and over in my head. The sounds in the room seemed to get smaller and smaller like I was hearing them at the end of a deep tunnel. After a few seconds, I fainted.

I didn't hit the floor this time. Someone caught me and eased me down to the floor. I don't know who it was. When I came to, everyone was standing around me looking down at me. Except Rod, who was standing at my feet, bent over slightly with his head cocked sideways.

For a minute, I didn't know what he was doing.

"What the hell are looking at?" I asked. I had surprised him; he hadn't seen I'd come around, as his attention was someplace else. His head popped up and he started to blush.

"Were you trying to look me up? You were trying to look at my tits while I was out cold, weren't you? You're a real shit, you know that Rodney. A Class-A cow turd." It felt strange to have a guy, looking at you with sexual intent. That made me feel sick and, dare I say it, violated! That made me mad all over again. I reached down and tried to pull my shirt down further. I was becoming very self-conscious around these guys. Suddenly, I didn't trust them any more. "That's real nice language for a lady to use," he retorted.

"Lady?" I shot back, "I'm no lady, God damn it!"

He could see that he'd punched one of my buttons. "You'd better check again little girl! The world just became a very different place for you and you'd do well to remember that."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?" I asked him harshly. "You gonna try to rape me? Maybe try to beat me up big man?"

That last one just popped out. I was sorry the minute I said it but it was too late to pull it back and I knew

I was going to have to backup anything I said from this point forward. I was still playing the man's game and I couldn't back down now or I'd pay an even greater price, yet my mouth still kept writing checks my body couldn't cash. "I'll kick your ass any day you decide you want a piece of me. Even like this, I'm more of a man than you'll ever be and you'd do well to remember that, dick head!" I screamed at him.

Before anyone could react, he was on me. His new body was very nimble. He had a hold of my hair and was spinning around me to get a better purchase on me. I pushed with all my might to gain some advantage, but he was too big and strong. I began to feel sick. He was really going to hurt me and I couldn't do anything to stop him. He was rearing back to rearrange my new face when Gary, Frank and Kit grabbed him from behind and hoisted both him and I up until his purchase on me was broken and he was off me.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Gary shouted at him. I guess Gary couldn't resist the temptation to punch him just once in stomach. That was all it took to remove the wind from his sails and Rod was quite again. "You do that often Rodney, beat up girls?" Gary slammed him down on a stack boxes and put his face nose to nose with Rod's. "You just sit there and behave. We aren't going to start fighting among ourselves."

Rod said nothing.

"You guys watch him, keep him calm," Gary instructed Frank and Kit. "He may be strung out from the effects of being changed. We really don't know how much these damn things have really changed us."

Rod seemed to be okay now. I, on the other hand was shaking badly. That whole scene had been bad for me. I had been quickly over powered by short little guy maybe eighteen years old and I suspected that if Rod had unloaded on me, my injuries would have been much worse than they would have been in my male persona. I began to understand that in this body the skin was more delicate, the bones somewhat more fragile. I had heard that women can handle pain better than most men though. I had also heard that it was a byproduct of hundreds of thousands of years of child bearing, and quite possibly a byproduct of being beaten up by hundreds of thousands of men over the centuries.

Gary came over to where I was standing and asked, "You Okay buddy?"

Buddy! Man, I had needed to hear that. I had two impulses at that moment. My first impulse was to hug him. My second was, Yuck! Why the hell would I want to hug him?

"Yeah, I think so. I just can't stop shaking." I held out one tremor-convulsed hand to show him. Looking up at his concerned face, I asked him directly, "Gary, what the hell and I supposed to do now?"

Rod must have heard me because he shouted, "Learn to piss sitting down."

Gary flashed an angry look at Rod and Rod shut is pie hole. Gary then put his arm around my shoulders again and this time I let it stay there. It seemed to help the shakes.

Well it was out there now. The smallest of them could get an advantage over me very quickly. I would have to watch my step. I didn't know how much else had been changed by these suits. I wasn't sure I wanted to find out. Rod was right, for me the world had indeed become a very different place. The thought scared me deeply.

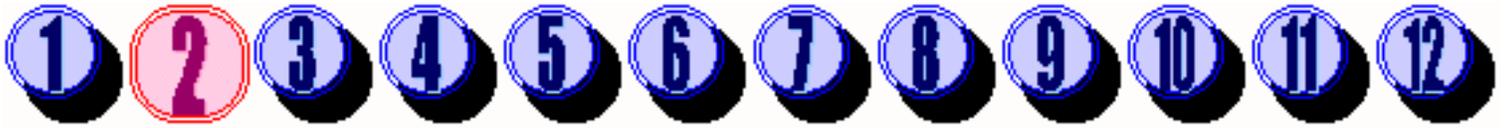


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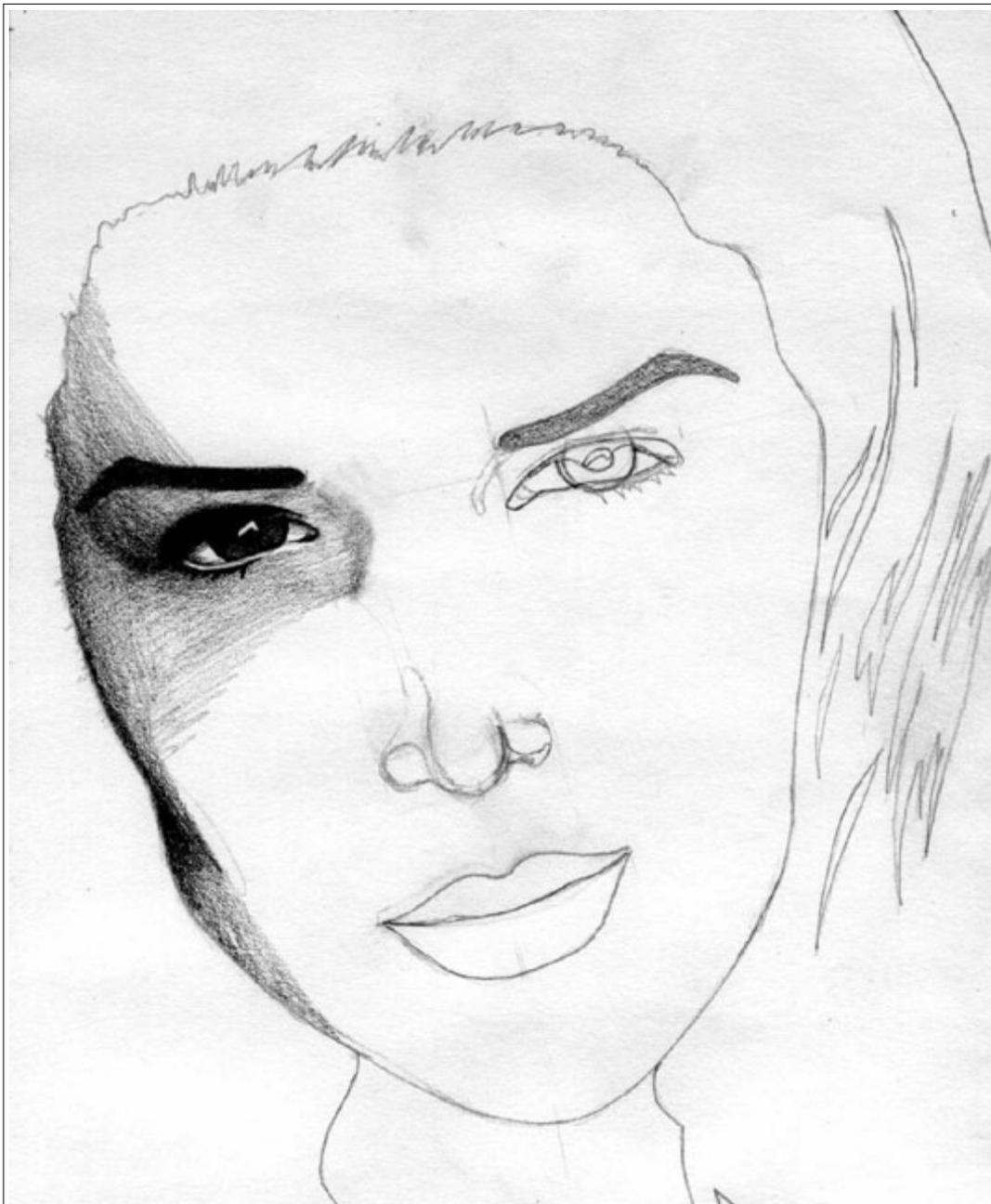
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# SKIN DEEP



## Chapter Two: Mike's Adventure Begins

by  
[Mark McDonald](#)

At some point Gary left my side. The shakes were under control but I wasn't feeling well. I was sitting on a small stack of phone directories. They still made them in limited supply for folks who couldn't use or didn't have in-house State Comp-Nets.

My clothes were very uncomfortable I had to pee



and the bathrooms were locked. I couldn't just go outside and hang it over the rail now. Life had gotten a lot more complicated in the last half an hour or so. I was miserable.

The others were standing in a group talking about leaving. I had to fix some things before I could consider leaving. I needed clothes that fit. I had to get back on Rods good side and get him to open one of the bathrooms so I could pee. Moreover, I had to figure out where I was going to go for the next two days when I left here.

I was beginning to become resolved to the idea that I was going to be female for a while. If I didn't think on the problem too hard, I could just bare it. I could go from one minute to the next and tell myself, " See you're still OK." Then the next minute " see you're still OK. And when the next minute comes you'll still be OK." That gave me some strength to go to the next time interval, because the next minute was going to come whether I wanted it to or not. The only question for me was, was I going to get to it with my sanity intact or not.

Some of the others had dressed in clothing that they had not been wearing when we arrived. I remembered seeing clothing on movable racks on the way in, girls underwear pants, shoes, and other stuff, tucked away in the cubbies created by the stacks of boxes around the warehouse. That's were they must have come up their clothes. That meant that perhaps I could find some jeans and a T-shirt that would fit me.

I spoke up. "Ahem," I said to get everyone's attention, but I was surprised at how dainty it sounded. "I don't want to be any trouble, but I really didn't anticipate this kind of an evening."

They all turned to me as I continued, "So if anyone can offer a solution to the problem of my clothing, and if someone could figure out how to open one of those bathrooms back there I'd be very appreciative." I tried to keep my tone very respectful. It made me feel sick to kowtow to these guys but like I said, I didn't know how much else had changed and I was in no position to find out.

"How appreciative, babe?" It was Rod. I guess he just couldn't help himself.

Frank backhanded him on the shoulder and pointed a finger in his face with a look that said "Remember what Gary said asshole!"

**SMACK!**

"Heeeyyyy, That hurt!" and Frank offered me a little grin. I winked back.

The rest of them looked at my plight for the first time as a problem and not as a spectacle. My clothes didn't fit me any more. My jeans were rolled up as far as they would go and still it wasn't enough to let my feet out the ends, so I had bunched them around the knees. We've already discussed the problem my shirt presented. The guys didn't know it, or need to either, but my underwear was ... well, I guess you could say my panties were in a wad. They were bunched up in places making hard tight little balls of cotton that made it very uncomfortable to sit down or walk. I needed underwear meant for this body.

Gary came around the corner with several items of clothing hanging on his arm. I was vaguely aware that he'd gone, but wasn't sure what he had been doing. Now I could see that he was practicing being a gentleman. He bowed and handed the stack of clothes to me.

"These look like they'll fit. I believe they'll temporarily solve some of your garment problems, though I have to admit, I don't know much about women's sizes."

I took items and inspected them, one skirt, two panties, a bra, a sweater and a jacket.

"And I do?" I asked. I was more than a little hesitant about wearing a skirt and panties. "No pants huh? That's about right for the way my luck is running tonight," I said sarcastically. I think Gary knew I was grateful for the effort.

"We had already gotten our clothes before you came out. After the excitement had died down, I noticed that your old clothes didn't fit so well. Hell, this place has little bit of everything.

"I'm not sure I can wear this stuff," I said holding up one of the skirts.

"Well you can go look for something else but I can tell you, I looked and didn't see anything else. You'll have to look fast though; we can't stay long.

I must have been making a face as I held up the panties in front of my face to inspect them. They were lacy, frilly little things made of satin. I just couldn't reconcile myself to the idea that these were going to go on my body!

"Look," Gary continued. "From where I'm sitting I don't think you have choice. You'd look even sillier wearing guy's clothing. You'll have to make due until we can get these skins off."

I sighed and I looked up at him hopefully and asked, "Did you happen to see any boxes marked shoes?"

"I don't think so, why?"

I looked down at my tiny feet that were parked next to my enormous shoes and looked back up again.

"Oh, they're kind 'a small aren't they?"

"Yeah. I stepped right out of them on my way out here. They didn't even follow me one step. I can't wear these." I dumped the shoes I had been holding under my arm on the floor. Down there, next to my feet they looked huge.

I slipped my feet into them. "Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus presents, Clown Girl! Tada!" I held out my arms and gave a little courtesy.

I tried to smile, but I could feel my face break apart. No matter how I tried to make light of the situation, I just wound up thinking how stuck I had become and I got scared I sat back down and cradled my head in my hands and let my eyes leak just a little bit.

I was still in shock; I could see that I was now female, but my mind hadn't resolved the issue yet and it didn't seem likely that it would. Little reminders of what I had become were all around me. The weight on my chest, my size, my voice, the noticeable lack of flesh between my legs and the long hair all served to remind me that I was a radically different person than I had been when I arrived here. I felt off center when I walked. I had a slightly higher center of gravity than I had when I was male. My skin was softer and more delicate that it had been earlier today.

Compounded with the fact that it had taken less than a minute to completely wipe out the person I had been didn't do much to help the adjustment period.

Gary saw I was becoming upset. He knelt down in front of me on one knee as I sat on the phone books.

"Look, I'm sorry!"

"For what?" I sniffed, and wiped my eyes. "You and Frank and Kit, you all helped me when Rod jumped on me, and I thank you -- even if it was a bit embarrassing to have my ass almost kicked by that half-wit. It's good to know who your friends are."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm sorry I got you into this mess. Hell, it never even occurred to me that there might be female skins in that box. This was just dumb! You're my best friend." He reached down and took my hand. I don't think he knew he was doing it. My eyes opened with surprise as I watched him take it and gently hold it in both of his.

"I never wanted to hurt you. I should have listened to you just this once. I'm really sorry man!" He looked like he was going to cry now.

I started to giggle.

"What?"

I started to laugh!

"WHAT?"

The laughter was coming in gales now.

" WHAT? WHAT? WHAT?"

"It's just ... it's just ..." I couldn't get it out. I was laughing hysterically.

Everyone else came around to see what I was laughing about. They were thunderstruck. There was Gary, down on one knee in front of a beautiful young girl, badly dressed though she was, and holding her hand. I could almost see it from their perspective.

"Oh shit, I'm gonna pee!" I fell sideways off the stack of books. I was really pressing my legs together to prevent myself from peeing in my pants, but I felt I was losing the battle. " Ah ha ha ha ha ha ah!"

"Oops, we seem to have interrupted a tender moment," Frank offered. This got Gary's attention.

"Huh?"

"What's wrong, she turn you down dude?" It was Norman, I'd almost forgotten about him.

With that, I lost the "Battle of the Bladder." "Ok damn it, I peed. Yuck!" I croaked through the laughter. I could feel the large warm spot spreading in my jeans. It was gross, but I couldn't help it. I just couldn't stop laughing or peeing.

"Huh?" Gary said again, obviously still confused. He looked around saw he was kneeling where I'd been

sitting and flushed when he realized what the situation must have looked like to the others.

"Ah hell!" he snapped as he got up and waived his hands at the whole mess. Everyone was laughing now. Flustered, Gary stalked off.

Kit walked over to me and looked down where I was lying on my side and said, "You could have let him down easy you know!" and walked off.

"Quit it! Aw God, please just quit it!"

Everybody else was wailing. I was on the floor trying desperately to stop. After some time, I don't know how long, I managed to get myself under control.

No question about it now, I was going to have change clothes. My pants were ruined. My shorts were ruined as well. I got up and hobbled bowlegged to the back of the warehouse.

I passed Frank as I made my way to the back of the warehouse to change, "Damn girl, you're a mess," he said as I passed. I turned around and flipped him off. That set them all to laughing again.

I managed to strip off the jeans and shorts, but I left the shirt on for the time being. I still remembered the feeling of Rod trying to get a peek at my ... tits! I didn't want to be too naked if one of them tried it again. I was embarrassed to be seen in this body and it was really scary.

In the corner was a small sink for shop cleanup. I found some paper towels and washed up to some extent. I tried to avoid my genital area. Touching that it seemed would just make it all seem too real, but I stunk of urine, I couldn't walk around like that. Therefore, I put some soap on a wet paper towel and started to wash up. I spread the soap up the inside of my thighs and moved to my crotch. I lathered there as I was used to doing.

I realized too late that soap can easily get inside your body when you're a girl. You know something? It doesn't feel good.

***New Girl Lesson #1:*** Take care not to wash the vaginal area too aggressively with soap. Soap burns.

I stood with my legs as far apart as I could get them and still stand, fanning myself and splashing water on my crotch, sucking air in short little sucks until the burning started to fade.

Clean, and with the pain a fading memory, I tried on the panties. I ran my hand down the front. They

were silky and tight and I felt just a bit more than uncomfortable about wearing them, but at least I was covered. That made me feel a little better.

I picked up the skirt; it was a red plaid pleated thing. Some of the girls in the private schools wear something similar as part of their uniforms, but this was much brighter and more colorful. I stepped into the skirt, pulled it up to my waist, zipped it up in back and took a look. It fit perfectly.

"Ok, I guess this shirt has got to go." I stripped off the shirt. Once again, I was amazed at these things on me. "How do girls live their whole life with these in the way?" I reached up and held them from underneath. "Man, what I would give to have these on someone else I knew." The thought made me sad. They were suck on me though and that sobering thought got me moving again.

I picked up the bra and placed my arms in the shoulder straps. I moved the cups over my breasts and tried to attach the clips in the back -- and I tried, and I tried, and I tried.

" Ohhh!" I huffed. "Gary can you help me please?"

"Oh Gary, can you help me please, I got this itch," I could hear Kit, at least I thought I was Kit, call out in a mock imitation of woman's voice.

"Very funny," I shouted out and they all cackled.

I was just turning around holding the bra in place with my hands when I bumped, head first into Gary's chest.

"Oops! Say, where the hell were you? You got here awfully fast. You weren't peeking were you?" There it was again, that modesty thing about this body was getting disturbing. What the hell did I care if Gary saw this body, in a couple of days it would be so much spent ash. The answer my mind supplied surprised me. " Because you're a girl and he's a guy!"

"Just standing guard pal."

I felt ashamed for accusing him. "Oh, uh ... thanks."

"Sure, what do ya need?"

"I can't fasten this." I turned around and showed him the clasp. He gently pulled the two halves together and clipped them for me.

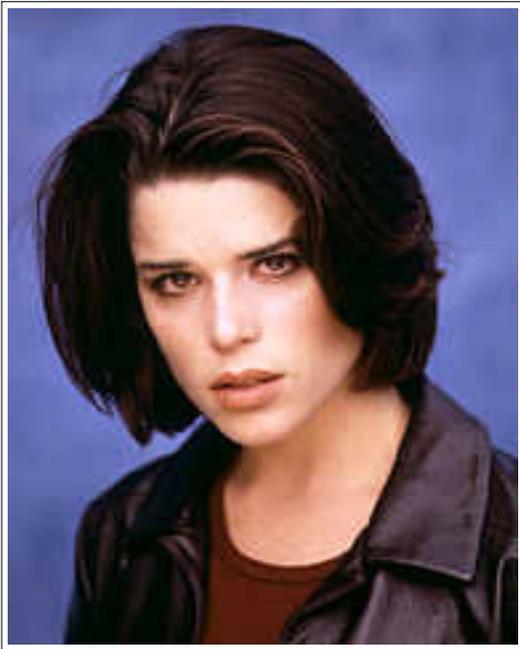
I turned around to thank him. "Thanks Ga ..." He was gone. The way he disappeared and his Indian good looks made me think of the legend of the Lone Ranger.

"Who was that masked man?" I mocked in the deepest voice I could manage and giggled. From the other side of the boxes where I was dressing came a reply.

"That's not very damn funny, Mike!"

"Oops, Sorry," I grinned a sheepish grin at having been overheard.

The bra was a bit tight, but, since it wasn't too bad, I supposed I could use it for the duration. If I didn't get any better at that clasp, I would be just as stuck in the bra as I was this body. Using it for the duration wouldn't be an issue.



I pulled the sweater over me and shrugged into a jacket as well. Then, I cautiously stepped out -and was greeted by whistles and catcalls. It made me feel very self-conscious and I begged them to stop, but then they just started applauding and whistling louder. Again, I realized I had to try to get into the spirit of the thing if I wanted them to stop, so I offered a small courtesy and the hoopla eventually ceased.

Later, Gary walked up to me and said, "You look very nice." Thankfully, he left it that.

I stretched up and squeezed his shoulder. "Thanks bud. I feel real strange in this stuff though -- and no shoes to boot."

He grinned at me and produced a pair of beach sandals, the cheap kind. My mom said they used to be called flip-flops. I took them and put them on. Good thing it was Spring.

"Well gents," Rod called out -- and added "and lady, are we ready to go?"

I scowled a mock scowl at him. He just grinned back a wide Chinese grin. Good, It seemed we seemed to be back on good terms, for now.

"Note to self; Self, remember to kick Rod's ass in forty-seven hours and six minutes."

"Well, this is it then," I said. I was shaking. I didn't want to do this but what choice did I have I could stay here and go to women's prison for breaking and entering and grand theft skin. By the time the forty-eight hours passed, I'd be so deep into the system it might be months or even years before I could get this thing off. Hell, once the government got its hands on me it just might keep me at Quantico permanently to keep its dirty little secret safe. The only thing I could do was to try to make the best of it.

I grabbed the key card to my dorm room and got my wallet out of my soiled pants pockets. Kit was standing close by and handed me a plastic bag for my soiled clothes as he took another sip of what I saw him drinking earlier

I dumped the jeans into the bag and tied it off. "Thanks. Say, what're ya drinking?

"Vodka, want some?" he handed me the small plastic flask.

"Thanks again!" I took it and measured it. The bottle was more than half full and I took a big draught from it.

It stung going down, a lot more than I remembered vodka ever stinging before in fact.

" Gack, Oh man!" I croaked. "That's rough! You sure that's vodka?" My eyes were watering.

"Yep! You gotta remember, your throat is brand new. You'll get used to it. Keep it, you need it worse than I do."

"You're all gentleman Kit. You may kiss my hand." Having a bit of fun with it, I reach out and presented him with the back of hand.

"Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!" he said and shoved my hand away.

"Ok, don't say I didn't give you a chance!" I snickered as I walked to the door and out, with just one last glance at the warehouse we were leaving.

The exit gate was at the back of the complex so we didn't have to go past the security booth again. Thank God for small miracles. Rod drove us all out and dropped Gary and I off about three blocks away from my dorm building. It was just nearing three am when we got out of the van and started making our way over the dorm building.

Gary and I now had about two and one half hours to figure out where we were going to spend the next two days. The sun would come up by then and we would be introduced to a city that didn't know us. Worse was the fact that it was now minus six young men that were not completely unknown.

I tried not to think too much about how these things. I tried not to think about how the things on my chest shook a little bit with each step or how I could feel the back of the skirt flapping against my ass as I walked along. I did try to remind myself that I had only a few hours to go, just a few more hours.

We had said nothing to each other since being dropped off. "What's it like?" Gary suddenly asked.

"What's what like?" I knew perfectly well what he meant. I was just hoping I could avoid answering.

"Being a girl, dick head!"

"Girls can't be dick heads! You, on the other hand, are being a major dick head."

"Oh, that's nice!"

"Thank you, and how the hell should I know. I've been one now for less than six hours. That's not a whole lot of time to research the subject, not that I intend to do any further research on the subject than I have to. I intend to hide -- and when my penance is done, I'll go to the parole board and beg for leniency.

"You mean you don't feel any different? That's crap; I know you do. Hell, you couldn't even fight that wuss Rod. You had to have felt something. That's all I'm talking about..."

I had stopped walking, I don't know why. Gary stopped, noticing I wasn't beside him any more.

I felt hollow, hurt, scared, angry.... I felt a whole bunch of stuff; it was like my brain had been rewired. I was getting to emotionally strung out much too quickly.

"What's wrong?"

This is bad, I thought, "'What's wrong' is what you ask your girlfriend when you see she's posturing over something you've done to upset her. Next I'm supposed to say 'nothing' and then give him the silent treatment rest of the night because there is, in fact, something wrong -- and he's just too pig headed to see it himself.

I really needed to be a man here and tell him what's bothering me. I looked him straight in the eye and said, "Nothing!" Then, I turned and walked on.

Gary caught up to me and grabbed my arm. "No, what's wrong Mike?"

"You really want to know what's wrong? Ok, let's see, question number one, what's it like? Well from my current vantage point, it sucks being a girl. I'm weaker, thanks for pointing that out again back there by the way. I've spent my entire life as a male, and so far, everyone seems to think that I can just acclimate myself to this body on demand. Well I can't. Up here," I pointed to my head, "I'm still Mike Vello, but everywhere else Mike has been wiped out and replaced with this," I gestured at my body. "I'm not this, I don't know how to be this and I can't get the fucking thing off." I pulled at my hair ignoring the pain it caused.

I was sobbing again. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" With each 'shit,' I tugged at the hem of my skirt. "It feels so strange between my legs. That's probably the scariest thing. My dick is gone. Gone Gary. My balls too. You just don't get over that easily. I realized back there at the warehouse, when I discovered that the restrooms were locked, that I couldn't just walk outside and whip it out and whiz. I had to have a toilet to sit on; I can't just stop and piss when I want to."

"I'm all confused. I'm way too emotional. I usually don't cry about anything. Now look at me; this has got to be the second or third time tonight I've broken down about something. I know women don't walk around crying all time, so my guess is that I'm just not used to the change yet.

"It's shit like that keeps getting into my head," I paused and we walked on. Then I think I surprised Gary when I suddenly grabbed my breasts and cried, "And, God damn it, won't these things keep still?"

"No really," Gary said a blank, shocked look in his face. "I want you to tell me what's bothering you -- and don't hold back."

I laughed in spite of myself. "Sorry, I'm all screwed up right now. I'll do better, really." I wiped my eyes and tried to straighten up a bit.

I froze dead in my tracks, "Oh no," I whispered. "I live in an all male dorm. I won't be able to get back to my room until this thing is deactivated. I've got no place go," I looked at Gary pleadingly.

---

"Hello, I'm home!"

**Journal>** Detected Second Input Source. Switching To Conference Scripting

"Uh oh." I glanced around for a clock and thought, "*What time is it? Six-thirty. Damn it!*"

Anybody home? We have to leave soon. The Christmas party starts in one hour!

"I'm back here Gary, getting ready to go." *Lie, lie, lie.* "Close Journal."

**Journal>** Journal Closed: 12/20/2081: 6:28 P.M.

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**Journal>** Journal Date 12/21/2081: 9:10 A.M.

**Journal>** Voice dictation journal editor, open. Proceed!

"Please review last two statements recorded."

I laughed in spite of myself. "Sorry, I'm all screwed up right now. I'll do better, really." I wiped my eyes and tried to straighten up a bit.

I froze dead in my tracks, "Oh no," I whispered. "I live in an all male dorm. I won't be able to get back to my room until this thing is deactivated. I've got no place go," I looked at Gary pleadingly.

"Good. Great. Commence recording, please."

**Journal**> Voice dictation journal editor, open. Proceed!

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I guess Gary hadn't given much of what would happen after we had the skins on, but in all fairness to Gary, he hadn't known about the lock out period so when he'd been planning this, there really had been no need to worry about where to stay. Now that he was being forced to think about it, he looked like I had punched him in the stomach.

"I can't believe I let Rod talk us into putting these fucking things on. We're on the street. Shit! This is just great. You know what? I just love being a fuck up." He turned to me. "No really I do," he confirmed enthusiastically. "It's just so interesting not knowing what I'm going to do next to screw up my life. You can't image how thrilling that is!" When he was done, all he could do was shake his head.

Gary had never said things like that before, at least not to me anyway. He was usually admonishing me for not being spontaneous enough to enjoy life. If the night could have gotten any stranger, I couldn't have foreseen what would make it any stranger than it was at this very moment.

"Gary!" I suddenly had an idea. "You can get into my room." I was inspired. "The guard won't recognize that you don't belong there. He's there to make sure the guys don't try to smuggle in girls or other contraband like that."

"Girls or contraband like that. Um, contraband. Now let me see...."

"Ok, alright, you know what I mean. Anyway, you can go in and open my window. I'll just climb in. Since my room is in the back, no one will see.

"But aren't you contraband?"

The guy next door does it all the time. Shit, he's always bangin' some babe over there. Hell you can hear their heads knocking on the wall all damn night."

"'Bangin' some babe.' You've got quite a mouth on you young lady. So I stay in your room?"

I nodded.

"And you stay in your room?"

"What's wrong with that? We've done that plenty of times."

"Yeah, you were a guy then."

"You aren't afraid of me, are you Tonto?" I asked and winked at him and ran my hand down his arm. He jerked his arm away from my touch and I giggled.

"Shit, don't do that man! No, I'm not afraid. Are you afraid?"

I paused, "Should I be?"

"I don't think so. It just seems weird, that's all."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Ok it's settled then. If we can get back in to my room, I have a place to hide and you too have a place to go. See? That was a lot easier than it looked." I felt relieved. It was going to be good to have a friend to go through this with.

Then Gary turned to me and asked, "Well, at least you won't have to explain it to the band. Good thing you were out of work this weekend, eh!"

"Yeah, but I bet if I went up dressed like this we'd get a lot more business. I was sayin' the other day that we needed some kind of gimmick for the demo we're cutting this we.... Oh shit Gary, I do have to do something with the band this weekend. Nathan got us a chance to record again at

4Shots Records. Damn it! Damn it! What the hell am I gonna do now?"

Desperation was beginning to set in. My hands went to the back of my neck in the vain hope of finding something there that would free me from this nightmare. I started grunting as I tugged at the skin at the back of my neck.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Getting off this train right now. What does it look like?"

"That won't work Mike. Stop it. You'll hurt yourself. What are you gonna do if that happens?"

"It will be worth it Gary." I stopped for a second to explain it to him. "I worked long and hard for this chance, Gary. Do you know what it means to be asked back for a second demo cut? It almost never happens. This time the president of the label wants to sit in. He liked the first set so much, I've been told, that he sent the demo's out to the local broadcast stations. I have to show up tomorrow and I can't do it as a girl. So are you gonna help me or what?"

"Or what," was all he said to me. I was shocked.

"What the hell are you up to Gary Shipley? You know how important this is to me. Why would you want to keep me like this? If you're thinking what I think you're thinking, then you'd better back off!"

"What the hell are you talking about? No wait, why don't you just tell me what I'm thinking Mike. Man, sometimes -- I have to say it -- sometimes I'm ashamed to be seen with you. Sometimes you act as if you're the only one that's having problems. I know you've had a rough time of it and all with your sister dying and your folks turning out to be jerks, but give me a break. You whine and bitch more than anyone I've ever known. You want to really know what I'm thinking, huh?"

I nodded my head, yes. I was blushing and I just knew I looked pitiful. I didn't really want to hear what he thought about it but I also didn't want to end up fending completely for myself in all of this either.

"Ok then, here goes. You must have heard that if you damage these things while they're on then they don't come off again, EVER! Right?"

I nodded again. I had forgotten that in my desperate haste to get it off.

"You're cute right now -- no, beautiful -- you're beautiful, but I guess you know that. How would you like to stay beautiful for the rest of your long life Miss Teenaged American Beauty? Huh, would you like that?"

This time I shook my head no.

Then you'd better think about the long haul Mike. Stop being so self-centered. Leave it alone. You'll get another chance sometime in the future. Life is loaded with second chances, Mike. Anything could have happened to cause you to miss that appointment. Are you going to throw away your entire life trying to fix something that, right now, can't be fixed?" He paused waiting for an answer that didn't come. "Are you crying again?"

I shook my head again, but my eyes were leaking around the edges.

Sniff. "This meant so much to all of us. I'll probably get kicked out of the band for this. SHIT!" I went and sat down on the curb of the street, burying my head in my hands. I could hear Gary walk over and sit down next to me.

"Thih is very futhed up," I moaned.

"What? I couldn't hear you."

I lifted my head so he could hear me. "I said, 'This is fucked up.'"

Gary ignored the statement; instead, he said "How come you didn't say anything about your demos being sent to the broadcasters?"

"I didn't want to jinx us. I figured that if anyone heard one of our songs we'd hear about it from them."

"Oh? Which songs did you cut?"

"'On A Mountain Top' and 'Into Your Heart.'"

"I like 'On A Mountain Top.' That's a good song, Mike."

"Yeah, did you know that Erin wrote that one?"

"No shit. That's cool. Kind of like a tribute to her, right?"

"Yeah I guess. I thought she would have liked it. Not to mention it's a hell of a good song."

I slowly began to realize that he had calmed me down. "Hey thanks for pounding some sense back into me. I almost bought a permanent stay in the hotel Fem-Fatal."

"Don't mention it, buddy, but now we'd better get over to your dorm room. The sun will be up soon and then it'll be too late."

I produced the bottle of Vodka Kip had given me from behind the plastic bag that contained my clothes

from a previous life. Unscrewing the cap, I downed a huge gulp of the oily, warm liquid.

"What's that?"

"Vodka," I rasped hoarsely and coughed "Want some?" I shoved the bottle in his face

He pushed it away. "Nope, I don't like booze. The stuff gives me a headache. I drink beer and wine only. It's better for the system."

"Whatever," I shrugged. I put the cap back on the bottle and made it disappear again, "Let's get going."

By the time we made it the few short blocks to my building, I was feeling the effects of that first blast of vodka. I unscrewed the cap again and downed a bigger swallow. It burned but not nearly as much as the first one. After a few minutes, I was feeling better -- a little light in the head, but better -- so I took one more, smaller drink and recapped the bottle.

Gary glared at me sideways as he watched me down another gulp. "You want to be careful. You're getting drunk Tammy," he warned. "That's probably not a real good idea right now."

"You bet your sweet ass I'm 'getting drunk Tammy,'" I said poking an index finger into his chest. "You would too if you were a Tammy or a Cindy or Nancy or what ever kind of freak I am."

"Ok, but you have to be a little more quite, were home." He pointed across the street to the dorm building.

"Oh good. You can carry me across the threshold. Come on, pick me up you brute." I tried to throw my arms around his neck and tried to leap into his arms, but he was too tall and wasn't having any of it. I lost my grip and landed on my ass on the sidewalk.

"OUCH! Hey, you were supposed to catch me," I said getting up and rubbing my bottom.

"Oh man, this is not good," Gary moaned, "Shusshhhh, Mike. Come on, you're going to get us popped man!"

"Ok. Shusshhhh," I whispered, holding one lean, slender finger up to my lips and giggling. "I'm shushing." Gary put one large hand over his forehead in frustration.

After he had relaxed a bit he said, "Go around to the back, where your window is. I'll go in and help you in once I get to your room. Now be quiet, or someone will call the cops.

Again I held one finger up to lips and said, "Shusshhhh."

"Give me your door card," he commanded. I pulled it out and played a quick game of keep-away. The liquor helped me to stay loose enough to keep him from getting the card right away, but he finally managed to get the card by grabbing my arm and holding my hand still.

Man, drunk women," he grumbled, shaking his head as he walked away, crossing the street.

"Why can't I ever I find any drunk women I want to go to bed with?" he wondered as he walked toward my building.

"I heard that," I called out after him.

I walked across the street and around to the back of the building where the trash compactors were kept. I found my window and waited for Gary to get there. While I waited, I polished off the last three gulps of Vodka. There was enough in me now that I nearly hacked it all back up, but somehow; I managed to keep it down.

I was feeling no pain. Even the rats scuttling around the trash bin didn't concern me. I waited for what seemed like an intolerable amount of time for the light to come on in my room. As I waited, the warmth of vodka in my belly was making its way to my bladder and I needed to get inside and pee. I looked around for an obvious alternative, but of course found none.

Light spilled out of the window behind me and I turned to see Gary opening the large window. He bent out of the window and gestured for me to take his hands. I reached up and his huge hands swallowed mine. One hoist and I was almost in, but a sandaled foot slipped on the smooth stone of the sill and I went crashing against the side of the building.

It might have worked out better if Gary had lost his grip. I would have landed on my already wounded fanny and from what I had seen so far, there seemed to be plenty of padding there to break my fall. Instead, I landed stretched out against the side of the building. I led with my chest, which drove the air out of my lungs in a hurry. It also gave me another lesson on my newfound femininity.

***New Girl Lesson #2:*** The breasts very are sensitive. Avoid crushing them when ever possible.

I couldn't breath, but what seemed worse was the pain in my breasts; it seemed to rack my entire system. When I found the strength to open my eyes, the world swam around like some weird hallucination. I had a headache and my shoulders and back hurt. My legs seemed to be tingling with pain. At the time, I remember thinking that getting kicked in the balls might have seemed better.

"Holy shit Mike, are you ok?" I heard panic in his voice. It was thin and far away.

Still, I managed to think to myself, I wonder if he would panic if I were still me. I tried to answer him but all that came out was an almost inaudible squeak.

"Oh God, I've killed her!" Mike cried and suddenly I was being hoisted up without my help. Even with the amount of pain I was feeling, the reference to me as 'her' wasn't lost on me.

My head rose above the sill as he hoisted my dead weight and I could finally see into my room. I clung to the sill for a moment while Gary put his arms around my waist and then he hauled me in. I either didn't weight much or the body Gary was in was as strong as a Brahma bull.

He set me down on my bed and again knelt down in front of me. I still couldn't breath; I was trying to gasp for air but my lungs weren't accepting any deliveries at the moment. My hands were on my chest and throat trying to help but they were at a loss for what to do.

I saw Gary looking at me and decided I must look really bad because he looked scared as hell. That scared me even more and I tried even harder to pull air into my chest. I looked back at him again and nodded no. It wasn't working. I was choking.

"Breathe! Come ON! BREATHE!" he shouted.

And I did. Slowly air started to come back into body. As it did the pain in my chest came back -- not as intense this time, but it was there -- and I was glad for it. Pain meant I was still alive.

That was the second time that evening I thought I was going to suffocate. The routine was getting just a little old.

"Yeah! Yeah! Breath baby, breath! That's it! All right baby, keep it up! Wow I thought I'd lost you there." He had me by the shoulders; we were face to face.

"Gary?" I whispered

"Yeah, what?"

"Don't call me 'baby.'"

"Right. Sure, anything you say. Shit, you're alive."

"And you're not going to jail for murder," I added.

"You betcha!" he shouted. "Damn Right! Whew!"

All I could do was smile. That's my buddy all right.

Ok, I was home again. Albeit on the floor gasping for breath, but I felt that as soon as I could breath more normally, I could start to relax a bit, so I waited for that time to arrive. Little by little, I began to feel more myself; that is, as much as I could possibly feel myself.

For now we were as safe as we could make ourselves. There were no thoughts of anyone else in our little troupe. All we could think about was getting though the next forty-four or so hours and returning to our normal selves.



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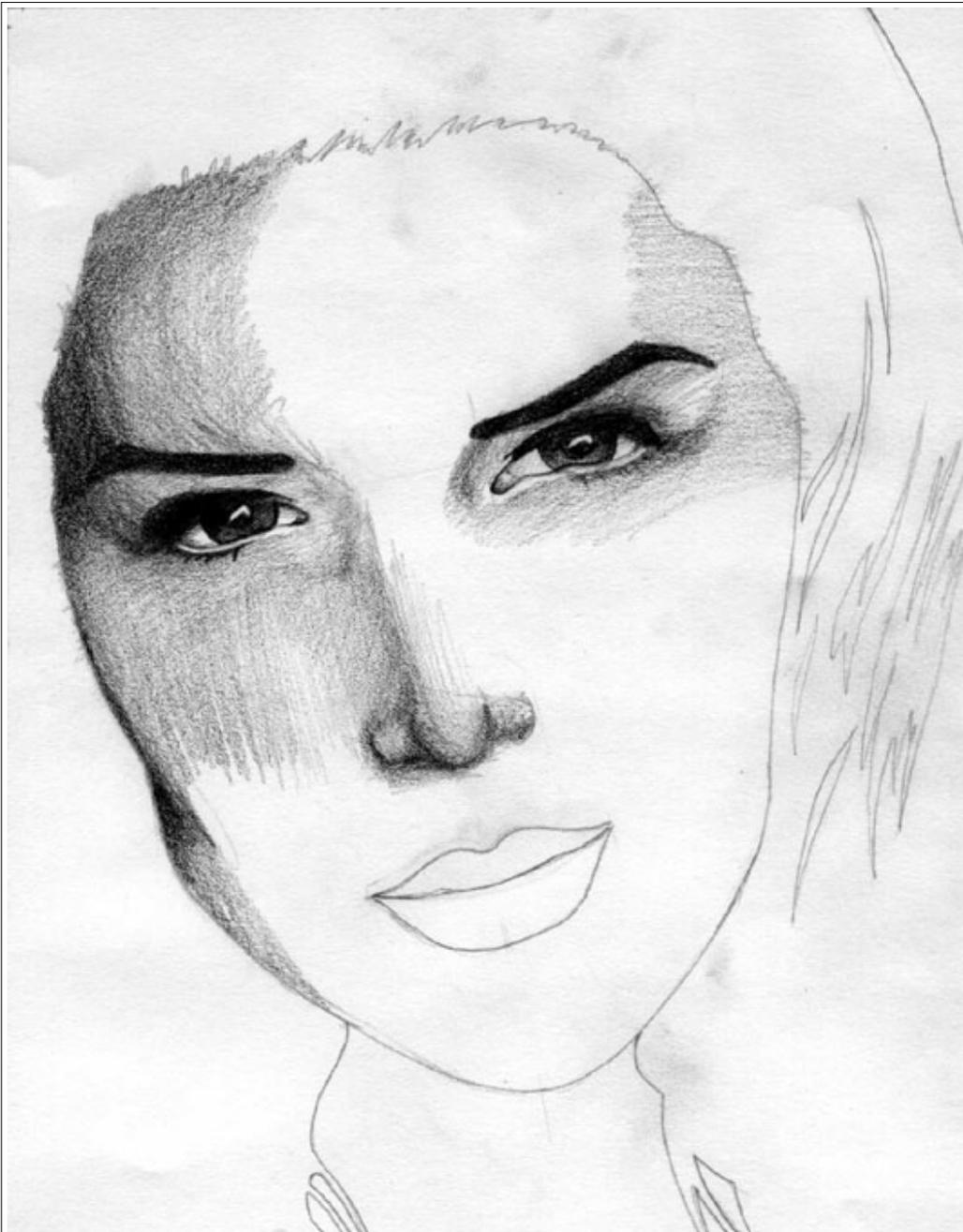
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Choose your chapter



# SKIN DEEP



## Chapter Three: Sleeping Arrangements

by  
[Mark McDonald](#)

Now that I was back in my own room, I began to feel a bit more like my old self. The pain from cushioning my fall against the brick wall with my tits was wearing off and I was able to breathe freely.

Of course, the sun was preparing to make an appearance, but both windows faced north and would not allow direct sunlight into the room. I had been able to sleep many afternoons straight through because of this feature. It had also caused me great



distress on several occasions to discover I had slept through a test, but this morning I welcomed it.

Gary was staking out a place on the floor. The buzz I had gotten

from the Vodka Kit had given me had been driven out of me by the impact against the wall, but it must have helped with the pain. Now, the alcohol was pushing its way out of my body. At least this time I had access to a toilet. It was the first real convenience that had been offered this body since this whole nightmare started. "I'll be right back Gary," I called as I got out of bed and started for the bathroom. As I did, I caught just a glimpse of my new self in the mirror at the end of the room. I stopped to look, ignoring the mounting pressure in my bladder.

Wow, I remembered thinking, she really is gorgeous. Now, I was speaking from a man's perspective. That is all I knew and it seemed appropriate at the time. I understand now I was being very superficial, but that's what first attracts a man to a woman.

My hair was not brown, as I had first thought, but dark auburn. It reflected light as though it was made of glass. My skin appeared to be lightly tanned. I could see more of myself here in the light than I had been able to in the dark of the warehouse. My hips were wide and my rear end was full, very full and round, but nicely shaped. My tummy was flat and tight. My breasts were a little bigger than they appeared from above. I was a fucking knock out.

I felt a pang of sadness. This was the girl of my dreams. Hell, she was the girl of every man's dreams. The people that had designed her genetic make up had obviously known this. Who knew what this skin had been intended for? Someone whose looks hadn't quite afforded the kind of opportunities others had perhaps? The opportunity would have been worth anything to someone like that. Now a technology had come around to give back to her what nature had cheated her out of and I had stolen that person's chance at a normal life.

I looked away from the mirror, Michelle was going to die before she even got a chance to live and I was the one destined to kill her. The idea made me sick. I suddenly just wanted this to be over, but for a very different reason.

Sighing, I went into the bathroom to relieve myself. Once the toilet was out of the wall I lifted the front of my skirt and began searching for my penis. When my hand encountered only the flat tummy of a female I remembered, with a painful twinge, what I had to do. Sliding my panties down, I turned and sat.

Back out in my room, Gary was asleep on the floor. That surprised me. Frankly, I didn't think either of us would be able to sleep and I was looking forward to talking for just a little while, so I reached down and nudged him to see just how asleep he really was.

"Gary?"

Poke. Poke.

I whispered again, "Gary, you asleep?"

Nothing. With a sigh I began undressing, keeping on my underwear and laying my skirt and sweater on top of my dresser.

I felt uncomfortable in my undergarments. Having Gary in my room didn't help even asleep as he was. I felt

exposed, so I went to closet, which was not much more than an indentation in the wall, and retrieved a robe.

It felt good to be completely covered. The robe was warm and soft with age. I yawned deeply, an encouraging sign, as I made my way over to my small single bed. I wasn't sure sleep would come, but I was going to try. I reasoned that the more I slept while trapped in this body, the less time I would have to spend getting used to it. The closer I could get to Sunday night without having to actually be her.

Lying down on my bed, my robe still tied securely around my waist, I tried several positions before finding that sleeping on my side was probably going to work best for me. With the sudden addition of breasts came the unexpected problem of finding a way to lie down without being overly sensitive to their presence. I simply didn't have the luxury of getting used to them as they grew; mine were just suddenly there. Not to mention, I had squashed them at high speed against a brick wall not an hour earlier and they were still tender.

I could see it was getting light outside; the new day had begun. With it, six new people had taken their place in the world; one most unwillingly, but like it or not, she was here and that was just the way it was.

Looking down, I saw that Gary was sleeping uncovered except for his clothes. He was using a pillow from my armchair to rest his head on. I reached to the foot of my bed for a blanket that was folded up there and draped it over him.



Getting back in bed, I pulled my own blankets up to my chin and tried to relax. I couldn't help taking one brief exploration of my new body, tracing an open hand over my chest, following the contours of my breasts that lay under the fabric of my bra. I moved my hand slowly down my stomach to my hips and then down the side of one tapered leg. It was amazing how smooth and soft my skin had become. Finally, I brought my hand back up the front of my leg and across my pubic area, over the silky smoothness of my panties.

There was nothing sexual about this exploration. In fact, it had the opposite effect on me. I was

not happy about my helpless position and the fact that the genitalia that I had grown up with were gone scared me. What was worse was the realization that I had been replaced. Not just parts of me but ME. A female form had consumed me and I was now being forced to continue my life as her. You can't spend twenty years growing used to and becoming comfortable with one body and one way of thinking, only to find that you are what you have had sexual desires for, and just come to grips with that fact. I liked being a guy very much, I hadn't understood just how much until that night, and I wanted all that back. I enjoyed being the proud home of a Y chromosome.

Sleep came for me while I was feeling sorry for myself. I don't know how long I slept before my next waking

memory, but while sleep enveloped me, I dreamed.

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I was back home, in my parent's home, and there was music coming from one of the bedrooms. I knew the song. It was one of the ones we had recorded just two weeks ago, but in an arrangement that I thought I recognized from a long time ago.

I made my way down the hall in the hazy, foggy way of most dreams. There was sheet music on the walls where the pictures of my family had once been. The hall itself seemed much longer and the ceiling stretched out of site at the end. Clouds drifted across the hall from the open door on its egress.

The music was growing louder and it was coming from what had once been Erin's bedroom. Standing in front of her door and listening, I could hear Erin's strained voice coming from behind the door.

My heart raced. Could she actually be in there? I was full of anticipation. I reached down to turn the doorknob and open the door, wondering briefly if I should knock first when the door dissolved at my touch.

Inside was Erin's room as I remembered it before her death, except there was no floor. The furniture seemed to float, stable and motionless in the air. On the bed, bent over her guitar was Erin, working out some new cord combination.

"Hey, baby brother, come on in, and let's jam some," she said without looking up. She continued to work the strings of her guitar as I approached.

"Erin? Is that you?"

She looked up puzzled. "Who did you expect to find in my room, Mikey?"

I broke into a run. As I blundered toward her, she set down her guitar and stood to receive me. We fell into each other's arms and hugged tightly for what seemed to be hours. I remember I cried hard but couldn't speak. Each time I thought of letting go I would squeeze her tighter.

Finally, we broke our embrace and I stood before her sobbing, happy to be in her presence once again; not questioning why, but just grateful that I was being given this chance. I wondered briefly if I had somehow died but could not remember anything from my life after to Erin's death. I felt that something was there, something I needed to remember desperately; but it was gone. How important could it have been? I had my sister back!

"How have you been Mikey?" she asked.

"I missed you," was all I could come up with.

"I know. I missed you too. Listen, I don't have much time."

"What? You're not leaving me again, are you?" She didn't answer, just plodded on with what she wanted to say.

"Gary is in deep trouble Mike. It's your job to help him." She looked very concerned, which I thought was very funny. Erin had never liked Gary.

"You mean the Twerp, don't you?"

She didn't respond to my words. "I have something for you. You have to take it and use it to the best of your

abilities; if you don't Gary will not survive the year."

"What the hell are you talking about?" but she wasn't listening. She had walked to her closet and pulled out some clothes. When she turned around, she was holding an outfit that she had worn all the time. It was a short dress with a flower pattern. It had a tight waist cincher attached to and a false bow in the back.

"It's my favorite. It always made me feel very feminine. I want you to take it. It might help you over the hump." She was holding it out for me to take. Suddenly I didn't want to be there anymore.

"Erin, what do you think I can do with that?"

"Put it on," she answered.

"You're crazy, Erin. Those are your clothes. I'm a guy. I can't where that."

"Put it on, Mike," she said again and this time walked toward me, the outfit still in her outstretched hands.

"Erin, get away from me," I demanded. I was getting scared and I turned to lunge through the door that I had come in through -- and smashed head first into it. It has somehow rematerialized while I had my back to it. There was pain in this dream, and blood. I could feel it dribbling down my forehead. Do people bleed in dreams?

I turned to see how much closer Erin had gotten. When I did, I heard her shout "Catch!" and I held out my hand instinctively to do just that. She tossed the dress at me, but it enveloped me. Before I could do anything about it, I was wearing her dress.

Screaming, I grabbed the front of the dress and tried to rip it off, but it stubbornly stayed intact. "What the hell? Erin, get this thing off me." It was then I noticed that the bust line had filled in rather nicely. "Oh God! What's happened to me?"

I continued to struggle with the outfit while Erin said nothing. She just stood there looking somewhat saddened by the whole thing.

Remembering that this dress had a zipper in the back, my hands went to undo it, but the zipper was gone. Then, I reached down and grabbed the hem of the dress. I was intent on pulling over my head the way you might a shirt, but there was a panty attached to the waist of the dress. It was all one piece with no opening. I couldn't get it off.

"Why Erin? Why did you do this to me?" I asked, and as I did, I looked in the mirror that was attached to her closet door. She had left it open after retrieving the dress from hell, so I could now see my reflection. At least I thought it was mine. There was Erin in the mirror and there was the reflection of a cute eighteen to twenty-year old girl wearing Erin's dress. I thought I should know who she was but couldn't quite place the face. My voice was just as it had been when I arrived in this hellish place. When I spoke, I could see the lips of the girl in mirror move in perfect unison, but the voice I heard was my own, masculine voice.

"Is that me?" I asked. I was scared and shaking.

"You have to help Gary, baby sister. There is no other way. If you shed this mantel I have given you, you will not be able to help him."

"I'm not your baby sister," I shouted at her. "You get this damned dress off of me, now!"

"I can't do that. It's yours now. Only you can make that choice."

"How then? Tell me how because it won't come off." I started struggling with the dress again.

"You'll know how when the time comes, but I think it would be a mistake to do so. Until then let this present to you be a comfort."

"NOOOOO!" I shouted. With that, I found myself outside Erin's room. I was still stuck in her clothes and I assume in that body I had seen in the mirror because my bust still filled in the cups of the dress quite nicely.

I pounded on the door and screamed to be let back in; for her to take this dress off me, but the only response I got was the strains of her guitar. As I screamed, I could hear my voice change to one that was clearly feminine. This sent fresh waves of terror washing over me and I got the idea that soon I would just pass out from fright -- but it didn't happen, though I believe it would have been a blessing at that point.

When it became clear that Erin was not going to let me back in I stood back from the door and ran my hands over the dress I was trapped in. I noticed that my bust was not the only thing that had changed. My penis was gone. I could feel the flat tummy of woman beneath dress and attached panty of the outfit. How the hell was this supposed to help Gary?

As I asked myself that question, the scene around me began to break up and I was left alone, dressed in Erin's clothes, in a dark void. The only sound was Erin's distant guitar echoing through the darkness.

By the time I woke, the dream was already fragmenting and becoming incoherent, as dreams often do upon waking. It wasn't until the last time I dreamed of her that I remembered the others completely.

I was vaguely aware at some point that two people were speaking behind me. The episode of the previous few hours was temporarily forgotten. For now, I was Mike Vello again, if only in my own sleepy recollection. One voice was very familiar, Sandy from the Dark Spot, a club where the band sometimes played.

"I didn't think women were allowed in the building." Who had said that, I wondered?

"The security guard knows me. Mike and I sometimes date," she was saying and I remembered thinking "Date?" What I remembered was more of a sparring match.

I had seen Sandy for a couple of months but found she was way too committed to commitment. She had started talking about traveling together and spending the holidays with her folks at their place in Vermont. "It would be like a real family Christmas, don't you think?" I got scared and pulled the plug on the patient. Our relationship died a peaceful death in its sleep, but she still came around check up on me when she didn't have any thing else to do. Gary called her the Klingon.

That other voice, the one I couldn't quite place, was saying I was sick, the flu or something. He also told her that he was a friend. He'd come over to help get me well.

I thought to myself, there's nothing wrong with me, but that didn't seem quite right either, did it? I was sore in my chest and I had a headache too. Maybe the voice was right. I sure was tired.

"No, no, you can't come in right now, he's resting, see?" said the voice.

"But I want to see if he's ok. I'll just look and then go," Sandy was saying, but the other voice was insistent.

"Look, you'll get it yourself, I'm already coming down with it too -- and I just got here last night." Then, seemingly to prove his point, he sneezed. "AHHHHH ... CHOOOOO!"

"Eeeewwwweuuuu!" Sandy squealed. "That's just gross! No, don't touch me. I'll clean it myself. You're just nasty, you know that?"

"I'm ... I'm sorry. Oh, don't do that. Well see, now that's clearly gonna leave a stain. You shouldn't rub it in like that.

"Ohhh! Yuck! Look, just have Mike call me when he's feeling better. My name is Sandy and he's got my vid number. I said DON'T TOUCH ME!" Then, footsteps stomped off down the hall.

"I'm sorry," I heard the voice shout down the hall. "I'm sure a dry cleaner's will be able to get that stain out!"

I heard the door close and lock. "Why lock the door?" I thought, but I was too tired to ask the question aloud. Sleep came for me again with the absence of any further noise.

When I woke up the second time, I came to slowly, lying with my eyes half open, looking into my small room. I saw a pair of legs walking back and forth from my efficiency kitchen to my cupboard. I could hear the sound of glasses and plates clinking. I could smell food cooking. It smelled wonderful and made my stomach growl.

I reached down to scratch my testicles. Well, that's funny, that kinda feels like ... "HOLY SHIT!" I screamed, threw the covers off and ripped off my robe. I was wearing girl's underwear -- and I could see why too. It fit me in ways they shouldn't be fitting. I grabbed again, where my penis should have been. Gone! I looked down and pulled the underwear away from my skin. It was tricky to see around the breasts but it was GONE!

"TITS! DEAR SWEET CHRIST, I'M WEARING A PAIR OF FUCKING TITS!" I was nearly out of control, preparing to run out into the hall of the dorm. It was the only thing I could think to do; I had to get help.

Suddenly, there were hands on my shoulders, trying to spin me around.

"Ahhhhggggg!" There was a stranger in my room. "Don't hurt me, please. What did you do to me? Please, make it go awaaaaayyyyyyyyyy," I pleaded with the stranger.

"MIKE!"

"How did you?..." I blinked in a mind-clearing moment of recognition. Oh yeah, now I remember "Gary?"

"Yeah. Shit man, you scared the piss out of me. I thought you'd flipped out."

Last night began to filter back. I told you, you just don't get used to something like this all at once. My heart was still thudding hard in my chest and the adrenaline that had been dumped into my system had brought me to my full senses.

"Wow, that was bad. I just don't think I'm gonna get used to this, guy." I was better, but I had been badly shaken. It was like having your nightmare follow you up and out of sleep. I was trembling badly.

"Food will help, it always helps me! I've made breakfast, well sort of. There wasn't much here to work with. Still, I managed to put together a respectable spread. Hope you're hungry."

As the confusion of the moment cleared, I discovered that I was hungry. In fact, I couldn't remember when I had last eaten. I started to follow Gary in to the kitchen when I became aware that I was traipsing around in just a bra and panties. I had somehow lost my robe in the panic.

I went back for my robe and returned; still threading my arms through the armholes, then tied the belt in

place. The robe was huge on me; the hem trailed just trailed the ground, where before it had come down to only mid calf on me.

"I was kind of hoping you leave that off for breakfast." He sounded a little disappointed. "I thought the view from up here was just great."

"Ha! Ha! Ogling your best friend in her underwear isn't very friendly or nice." Gary and I both noticed it at the same time. I had referred to myself as her. Thinking back, I vaguely remembered that happening last night once or twice also.

Gary dismissed it or at least he seemed to. "Oh well, I guess I can get over it in the interest of strengthening the bonds between men and women everywhere. You seem to have slept well."

"I guess. It seems there was something but ... I can't remember. You'd think that I would have been a prime candidate for at least one juicy nightmare, yet I must have slept like a babe ... ah ... er ... a baby, slept like a baby."

"Good," he said, but it seemed he had something else to add.

"Well, you're not finished are you? Spit it out."

"I think we may have trouble." His words made me feel a little sick to my stomach. I was wearing trouble and I struggled with the idea that things could possibly be getting worse, unless he had discovered that this was somehow permanent. That's all I could think Gary's news could have been.

"Oh God, Rod broke the patch code transmitter," I could feel tears welling up in my eyes. "He's done something because he's pissed about last night."

"No, that's not it, relax. The Klingon stopped by. She wanted to see you."

"Sandy?"

"Yeah, didn't you hear us?"

"Yeah, I guess I did, but just for a moment. Guess it's a good thing I didn't get up or something with her at the door. That could have been a little hard to explain, Huh?"

"I didn't think we would come so close to getting caught so soon, but we're running into all kinds of trouble along the way. I think I should leave, Mike!"

Now that scared me. "Leave? Why the hell do you want to leave? I can't do this alone, Gary. Hell, I can't go anywhere. If I do, I won't be able to get back into the building. I don't want to be alone like this. Please ... don't leave."

"I don't know...."

I began to get the impression he wanted me to beg. "Please Gary. I'm begging you. Why? Just -- just tell me that." Ok, I wasn't above a little begging now and then.

"I don't think it's a good idea that any of us be seen together. I don't know why just yet, but I get a sense that it would be better if all of us stayed away from each other until tomorrow night."

"Shit," I muttered under my breath. "Oh God, not alone. Don't make me do this alone." I thought my idea about the transmitter had been terrifying, but now I thought I was just going to puke at this juicy morsel.

"Aw, come on Mike don't cry. Christ, I hate it when you cry."

"Good!" I flashed angrily at him. "I'll stop if you'll say you won't make me do this alone. This isn't fair, Gary. You've got me at a time when I'm all screwed up in the head. I can't think about anything else except 8:30 tomorrow and then you spring this shit on me."

"Maaaaannnn," Gary moaned and rubbed his face with his hand. "This is not good. I shouldn't be here. People that know you will keep coming to the door. Eventually, they'll figure out that Mike isn't here and then I'm busted." I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He was talking about saving his ass and leaving mine out to dry.

"So I'm supposed to wait it out while people knock on my door? Gary, I'm not supposed to be in this building. I hate to state the obvious but this is a male dorm. I don't exactly meet that criterion any more. Are you suggesting that I ignore the door and vid and pretend that no one's at home. What happens if I'm walking in front of the vid when it goes off? It will sense the motion and turn on. What if the police decide they need to find out why I'm missing? Then I'm busted. If the police take me in, how will I get out of this mess?"

"That's gonna happen whether I'm here or not. You're going to have to come up with a better argument than that Mikey."

I gaped at him slack-jawed. Something BETTER? I couldn't figure out what or why he was doing this to me. Was fear his primary motivator? If it was, I felt certain I could teach him a thing about fear and abject terror. I was becoming desperate. I couldn't seem to think straight, then Gary interrupted my futile attempts to "come up with something better."

"Mike, thoughts have been going through my head. Watching you sleep while I was cooking, well -- I just don't like what I'm feeling man."

"Thoughts?" I sniffled. "Like what kind of thoughts?" I wasn't quite sure what he was getting on about.

"You're going to make me say it out loud?" Gary asked as if I already knew what the point he was trying to get to was.

"Well what can I do if you don't tell me?" I stopped dead with my mouth propped open. "Oh no," I whispered.

"Oh Yeah," he answered.

"Oh NO!" I shouted back, "You just have to get those thoughts out of your head. Right now. Besides that's ... that's GROSS!"

"I know. I know it is. That's what I've been telling myself. But you're so beautiful."

"Don't say that." I was really surprised by that. I started shaking.

"But you are."

"No, I'm not."

"You are!"

"No, God damn it, I'm not!" I shouted and slammed my open hand down on the table. "Now you just stop that."

He just stared at me with that "yeah, right" expression and I could clearly see Gary through that Indian face for the first time since we had all put these damn things on.

"Ok, none of that matters. You can't just run out on me. I need you."

"Listen to yourself, and if you don't mind would you please let go of my hand, Mike?"

I looked down at the table and sho-nuff, oh God, I'm holding his hand. How in the hell had that happened?

"Sorry ... sorry about that. Crap! I didn't know I had done that."

"You see why I have to go, something bad will happen. And I'm not just talking about s-s-s-sex." He whispered the word to me, as if to say it aloud we might both burst into flames.

"Don't you understand everything that's going on here? Mike Vello is already missed. I don't know if any of the others are missed yet or not, but if they are, then someone will put together that I'm probably involved. After that, it's only a matter of time before they put it together with you. If I can stall that process, you have a better chance of getting out of this without being caught. Being with me just puts you at greater risk, don't you see that?"

I suddenly felt bad about thinking bad about Gary. I was surprised to find out that he was his concern was for my safety, not his, not that of the other guys. It made me feel a bit uneasy.

"Ok, what the hell should I do? I shouldn't be seen around here either. Forget the part about being seen together for a moment, If I'm seen in Mike's ... my room like this, and Mike's gone, isn't that going to fuel the fires of suspicion too?"

He seemed to be thinking about that. It was good to see him think. It was truly a rare and beautiful moment. I was hoping that perhaps I had come up with that "something better."

The light seemed to come on inside his eyes. "How the hell did the Klingon get in the building, Huh?" Then, he sat back looking very proud of himself.

"Sandy can be very ... persistent. She will sit there and argue with you until she wears you down and you give in. She's done it with security before. Now the guard just let's her come down and knock on my door as long as she stays in the hall where he can see her. It's a good thing she didn't get past you in more ways than one. The guard would have been down here in a flash and the whole thing would have been up."

That seemed to deepen his concentration some. His brow furrowed and his face darkened. I started eating my breakfast while I waited for an answer.

I was a lousy cook. Gary, on the hand, was a genius at it. When I was hungry, I usually ate a box of crackers with peanut butter or opened a can of something red, but Gary could cook truly elegant meals. I always felt that if he ever settled down enough to concentrate on what he wanted for the long-term he would make a truly first class chef. I knew that he resisted job offers from his Dad at the Red Fish, the restaurant his family owned, but it seemed that he and his Dad, who was head chief had a lot in common.

He had made poached eggs on some kind of soft warm bread. It was covered with a yellow sauce that had long, narrow green leaves in it, a spice of some kind. It was strong too. I could taste it when I bit into a leaf here and there.

There were also a small portion of potatoes with bits of green peppers and little red things. These were covered with some kind of melted cheese. I guess Gary had stopped thinking and has started watching me again because he spoke up.

"You ah ... you like that, do ya?"

"Mumph," I said around a mouth full of potatoes. Gary grinned.

"Did you try the napkin dumplings?" he asked.

"Ummm, Dumplings," I replied. I didn't even know I had this stuff in my kitchen.

"Ok, Mike. I'll stay."

I looked up at him and grinned with food still in my mouth.

"Aw gross. Ok, maybe you're not that beautiful after all. Just keep eating Ok. I'll talk!"

I snickered and went back to my meal.

"I'll stay, but you have to stay out of sight and when the cops come, and I think they will now, we'll just have to make a fast retreat. Sandy thinks you're sick, but when you don't call, she'll come back -- maybe tonight, maybe tomorrow. I don't know. Hopefully, it will be tomorrow. That way we'll have only a few more hours to stall before we can get these things off. I guess well have to stay as long as we can and leave before we start feeling squirrely.

"Why do you think Sandy is going to alert the police?"

"She's expecting a call from you when you wake up. You can't really do that can you? I mean your voice and all. Who the hell would believe you were Mike."

"Right, They'd know we were using skins!"

"No they'd think we were involved in Mike's disappearance, or worse yet Mike's murder."

I stopped eating. I hadn't thought it out that far. I could feel the blood run from my face.

"It gets worse. They pick us up and put us in jail. We can't get to the patch code transmitter to get out of these bodies. Mike never shows up. Mike is in jail as you. Do you think Rod is going to sacrifice himself to save us? I'll tell you what he'll do. He'll get himself and Frank and Kit and Kit out of their skins. We'll be too far away from the transmitter for it to work on us, and the transmitters only work once. That's it. After that we stay like this, forever -- and we stand trial for not only Mike's disappearance but Gary's as well, because they will never show up alive again. Even if we fess up that we, you and I, are Mike and Gary we still go to jail. We still stay in these bodies. Different charges, same result. Sound right to you?"

Gary was a much better thinker that I would ever have suspected. Suddenly, I wasn't very hungry. I was also very aware that we had never set a time and place to meet to get these things off.

"Gary, how's Rod gonna find us when it's time?"

"We talked about that before you made your appearance as Madame Butterfly last night at the warehouse. We are going to meet back there tomorrow night just after 8:30 P.M. I mentioned the time, but I guess I forgot to mention the location in all the excitement. Sorry."

Gary stared eating.

"So you're saying that, until then, we just hope for the best?"

"No, we can do things to help the situation. We won't know exactly what all of those things are until the picture develops a bit more. We may not have to do anything. Who knows, maybe the Klingon just might forget it. I was not too optimistic about that and I suddenly found myself wishing I had been more assertive with her.

"You know, you could always just jiggle her your tits at her and hope she gets the message that it just wouldn't work out between the two of you," he laughed.

"That's not very damn funny Gary," I insisted, but that just made Gary laugh harder.

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"Well, that's a good chunk of the story. I think that will do for now. Close Journal."

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Choose your chapter

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by

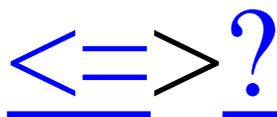
by

Mark McDonald

This chapter pending.  
Check the next issue for more of this fine story.

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Choose your Chapter:



# Thanks for All the Memories



PART THREE OF FOUR

by

[Charles M. Bonanno](#)

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As I crossed the line between Never-Never Land and consciousness, a most familiar sound made itself known: the whine of an electric drill boring through T-bone -- nothing unusual and hardly something that bothered me anymore, although why Doc would need to make another hole in my well-ventilated cranium was a bit peculiar. Even more peculiar was the fact that I couldn't feel the drill bit vibrating my entire skeleton.

Opening my eyes, I discovered I wasn't the one getting punctured this time. With its scaly body securely bound to an operating table, just an arm's length away, I watched as Doc did his "thing" on that ugly croc. Man ... was it gross. I'd never seen him working on someone else before.

With a precision that was truly breathtaking to behold, his aged hands held the tiny drill rock-steady as he bored a series of tiny holes through the sedated croc's flat skull. There was practically no blood as he swiftly filled all the openings save one with miniature golden plugs.

Just before closing the last opening, he jammed a tiny glass tube into the hole and extracted a few brain cells from the reptile's head. What happened next was no surprise. I watched with growing anxiety as he turned around and walked towards me with another empty tube in his hands.

I'd barely gotten an, "Is that really necessary, Doc?" out before I felt him yank a plug out of my head and repeat the extraction process. I'm sure glad his wacky juice made my brains cells grow back so fast; otherwise my empty skull would've only have been useful as an ashtray by then.

Damn it! Why'd I have to bring "that" up? Man, I'd kill for a smoke!

I know it's all in my head, but I still spend a good portion of each night watching the stars and dreaming about a cool, smooth, filtered, refreshing menthol. After all this time, you'd think I would've gotten over them by now.

Anyone of youse guys got a.... Oops! Sorry! My mistake! I haven't seen anyone light up since I got here. Oh well, just another one of my bad habits coming back to haunt me. I might as well keep going.

No sooner had Doc finished mucking around with us, he dumped the samples into a couple thermos bottles and he raced out of the operating room like his tail was on fire. You'd think he was working for my old HMO. If I didn't know better, I would've guessed that he was trying to beat the clock and go golfing.

The door had barely locked behind him when the croc opened its eyes and began to fight the straps. Knowing exactly how it felt, I put aside my personal dislike for its appearance and good-naturedly commented, "Don't worry, ugly. You'll get used to it after a while." The only reply I got was a deep rumbling hiss, and a thunderous clap of tooth-lined jaws.

"The same to you buddy! I hope Doc makes a brief-case out of ya!"

We must've kept this routine up for over an hour. I'd make some derogatory remark about Lyle's species, and he'd respond by flicking his tail or snapping his jaws at me. Whenever the sound of my voice was insufficient to provoke a response, I'd shake a bound hand or foot to regain his interest.

Childish? You bet! Just ask anyone who's been locked up for any significant amount of time; it's always the childish games that are the most entertaining over the long haul. I'd just made a rather witty comment about how many shoes and wallets his mother had been turned into when Doc walked in pushing an equipment cart.

"Who are you talking too?"

"Nobody. You know me, Doc. I've got this bad habit of talkin' to myself."

As he mumbled quietly to himself, I overheard Doc say, "delusional state increasing," as he penned a few sentences in his ever-present clipboard.

Delusional? Me? Brother, talk about the pot calling the kettle black.

"So what's the deal, Doc? You gonna work on me today, or can I phone out for a six pack and a pizza?"

I might've well have been talking to that smelly croc. I doubt if he heard a single word I said. Ignoring me completely, he must've spent a good half-hour examining every square inch of the croc's scaly hide and skull. You'd think he was looking for the winning lotto number. Anyone else watching him in action would've guessed he was planning to cook that repulsive swamp critter for dinner.

Feeling deeply insulted by his lack of interest in yours truly, I began to yell, "Yo, Doc. Remember me, the human flatworm? I've got rights, ya know!"

I was here first! Why don't ya play with him *after* you're finished curing me?"

Without turning around, Doc stood up and said, "That's what I intend to do, Mr. Morton."

The room began to echo with the sound of clinking metal and glass as I watched him reach inside the cart and organize its shiny contents. My curiosity was soon rewarded. After slipping an even heavier pair of insulated mittens over his suit's rubber gloves, he carefully lifted a large metal container, overflowing with white vapor, and set it atop the cart. It was easily large enough to hold the decapitated head of an unlucky young crocodile.

"Don't look now, Lyle. I think you're in trouble." I thought happily.

With past experience as my guide, I expected to see my slimy competitor for Doc's attention come to a rather grisly end. While I didn't look forward to having that disgusting looking croc's memories taking up permanent residence in my brain, I considered that stomach wrenching prospect a small price to pay to get back on the fast track for a permanent cure.

You'd think I would've known better by then.

Satisfied that my assumptions had some basis in reality, I should've just laid back and caught a few winks. As it was, I'd watched Doc in action way too many times already. Seeing yet another lab specimen, even if it was the largest one to date, bite the big one was hardly something worth writing home about. Besides, my butt was freezing.

Relieved that things were finally going my way again, I made a terrible mistake. Rather than screaming for someone to raise the thermostat before I froze solid, I gave into my growing curiosity.

"Why ya #%(@-ing around with a dumb lizard for? Are ya planning to cook 'em? Someone once told me they taste just like chicken. Besides, I thought you were into things smart enough to chase cars!"

To my surprise, he took offence. After months of endless insults, off-colored puns and name-calling, he finally got upset 'cause I'd insulted a scaly creepy crawly with the intelligence of a doorknob. One look at his military parade rest stance told me everything I needed to know.

Oh, great! Now I was gonna freeze my cojones off and get lectured to!

"I'll have you know that *Crocodylus acutus* is one of nature's greatest creations. It is not a "dumb lizard." Two hundred million years. Do you hear me? They've been around for over two hundred million years. Lyle's ancestors reached the pinnacle of evolutionary perfection long before the first dinosaur thought it was a good idea to walk on two legs. Now, sixty-five million years after the last dinosaur went extinct, they're still crawling around practically unchanged. Do you think the screwed up human species has any chance of lasting that long? Well, do you?"

"Err ... yes?"

WHAP!

Anyone else would've long ago learned to keep his big mouth shut, but not me. Just call me a glutton for punishment. Like many people whose folks did the Ellis Island routine, I had tried to check into my family history once. I kinda lost interest when I found out how many vowels and consonants some underpaid civil servant had chopped out of our name to turn it into Morton. However, I'm pretty sure about one thing: somewhere in Sicily, people are still wondering what happened to a family famous for producing village idiots.

"Ow!" Thinking fast, I decided a stab in the dark might work. Heck, it got me through high school.

"Err ... no?"

"Exactly! Lyle's kind can't be improved. In both design and complexity, their hearts are far more sophisticated than those of any other reptile, or mammal for that matter; and their immune system makes anything we have seem like a bad joke."

Call me stupid. Call me a moron. I just couldn't help myself. "Yeah, and it'll take 'em another sixty-five million years to figure out how to take a wiz on a fire hydrant."

The expression on his face finally registered in my brain and I got worried at last, "That's it. I've crossed the line. I'm toast. He's gonna pound me through the operating table."

As my entire life flashed before my eyes -- and I've got to tell ya the camera work sucked; not once did it get my good side -- I bid a fond farewell to this world and prepared myself for entry into the afterlife in the most painful, and ignoble, manner imaginable. However, Doc's reply to my mistimed joke caught me completely by surprise.

"Not anymore."

Like a third-rate magician working the pre-school birthday party circuit, he reached into the cart with an exaggerated flourish, but instead of yanking out a white bunny to delight screaming snot nosed five years olds, he grabbed a fistful of fingerprint smudged x-rays and waved 'em in front of my face.

I had no problem recognizing most of them as pictures of my own brain. Believe me, when you've been shown pictures of something that looks like road kill, there's little chance that image will fade from memory any time soon, but it was the images of someone else's innards I found most interesting. Far in the back of a set of jaws that must've contained about a zillion and one teeth, a tiny reptilian brain perfectly matched the mashed broccoli I knew my brains resembled. In fact, that tiny brain didn't seem to be all that tiny.

Looking back nearly four decades with the photographic memory Doc's "Kool-Aid" had given me, I could easily review every word my high school teacher, Mr. John "They'll Never Smell the Vodka on my Breath" Vale had ever spoken. I particularly enjoyed remembering the countless times he'd condescendingly compared inferior reptilian mental capabilities with those of the superior mammal. It's a shame his liver crapped out long before he got a chance to see what Doc had been up to. I'm sure one peek at Lyle's bulging brain case would've made him give up the sauce for good.

"Well, Mr. Morton? Don't you have anything to say?"

"I sure do. You've got more wrinkles on your face than Lyle has on his entire body!"

WHAP!

"Be serious!"

"I am!"

WHAP!

"Okay, okay, that hurts! You're right. Croc's are great."

"Very good, Mr. Morton. I'm glad we're finally seeing eye-to-eye, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't have much choice. Lyle is practically the last specimen of any significant size that I have left."

"Really? What happened to all them animals those two dip-wads carried down the stairs a couple days ago?"

"Nothing that should concern you, Mr. Morton, but we had a little -- accident -- yesterday while prepping a Doberman. A container of unrefined product leaked and it contaminated the entire specimen enclosure."

"So? Big deal. Get a mop."

"I wish it were so simple. With the exception of the bird and rodent specimens, all of the larger warm-blooded specimens are defunct. Fortunately, everything else is still doing quite well. Not a single cold-blooded animal seems to have been affected. Now don't be alarmed, there was no danger. Nothing escaped. The entire room has been sterilized, and all the bioactive remains have been destroyed in the acid tank."

"Nice stuff ya cooked up there, Doc. Ever though of opening up a restaurant?"

"Very amusing, Mr. Morton. As soon as I perfect my formula, all the tanks will be neutralized. Without the catalyst the contents of those containers will be as safe as city tap water."

"And exactly how long has it been since ya drunk any of that "safe as city" tap water, Doc?"

"Very amusing again, Mr. Morton."

At this point I should've taken my own advise and called it a day. With any luck, I might've awoken inside my cozy, and warm, cell long after Lyle had bitten the dust. As you can probably guess by now, there was little chance of that happening. Hoping to speed up the process, and clearly not thinking about the consequences of what was bound to happen -- like I'd done that even once before, I spoke three words I usually made a point of never saying in Doctor Merit's presence.

"What ya doing?"

"I've re-keyed the bipolar transference protein pair bonds to match the genetic characteristics of a specific genotype."

To which I replied, "Duh?"

"I've changed the formula. Its bio-reactive properties are limited to a specific genotype."

To which I replied in my wittiest tones, "Huh?"

"Perhaps you would prefer the layman's version?"

"Fire away, Doc."

"It only works on reptiles. To be more specific, this new formula only works on crocodilians like Lyle."

"Jeez, Doc! Don't tell me a little - accident - is stopping ya from filling your skull with doggie thoughts! I was kinda looking forward to seeing ya sniff my butt or hump my leg!"

Before he could slam the clipboard down upon my crotch with a force equal to the meteor that destroyed the dinosaurs sixty-five million years ago, the door swung aside and Smiley walked in.

Talk about being saved in the nick of time!

"Doctor! Doctor Merit!" Flea Brain screamed from behind the enormous television set he was carrying.

"Can't you see I'm working? Go away!"

"Doctor Merit no wants TV no more?"

Turning around for the first time, Doc took one look at the monster television set in Smiley's trembling arms and hung his head. I couldn't quite catch what he mumbled from within his airtight helmet, but the words "ass-something" and "mother-something" were repeated several times. After a minute or so, he finally looked up and pointed a gloved finger at Smiley.

"What. Is. That?"

"Doctor Merit no remember?"

"Remember ... what?"

"Doctor say Vincent bring portable TV down to laboratory."

"Does *that* look like a portable television set and does *this* look like the lab?"

Answering two questions at once was clearly beyond Smiley's capabilities. As he struggled to decide which to answer first, he nearly dropped the huge set as he examined it, and the room, before replying. Growing more agitated by the second; it wasn't long before Doc yelled back.

"*That's* a twenty-two inch color floor console and *this* is the operating room!"

"Oh."

"WELL?" Doc's screamed back as his fist crashed upon the operating table less than an inch from my fragile skull.

Smiley just stood there with the television set in his arms. Slowly, with the speed you'd expect to see a mildew crawl up a bathroom wall, his brow wrinkled in thought. As Doc hummed angrily, like an overloaded transformer, I watched and waited for him to explode into action. It didn't take all that long.

I'd known for some time that Doc had a sword hidden within his ever-present walking cane, and I truly expected to see Smiley get sliced n' diced into a large pile of bite-sized chunks. Just as Doc's fingers began to twist the cane's handle, Smiley's eyes flew wide open as if someone had jammed a two-twenty line into his Fruit of the Looms.

"Doctor Merit wants TV dinner?"

Frustrated to the snapping point, Doc closed the gap between them while repeatedly yanking on the cane's handle. Fortunately, for Smiley, the sword's release mechanism probably hadn't been oiled since the Hoover administration and it refused to budge. Not that it slowed Doc down one second.

WHACK!

Ouch! Even through a plastic helmet that just had to hurt!

Either advancing age had finally sapped Doc's strength below the level required to crack a skull with a blunt object, or Smiley's cranium was solid bone to the core. Take your pick. Personally, I'll cover any size bet on the latter. How about ten-to-one odds, folks? What? No takers? Man! You guys sure are a stuck-up bunch!

Looking around as if searching for where the strange sound had come from, Smiley was as oblivious to the blow as he was to the Doc's annoyed cursing as the old coot examined his cane. Bent into a bow-like shape, it was clearly ruined and Doc wasn't taking it lightly. Pressing a button upon his helmet once more, he angrily screamed a few sentences into the Walkman tape recorder clipped to his belt.

"Note to self: experiment number 2352-12 non productive! Attempting to augment the rudimentary intelligence a college football linemen is clearly a waste of time!"

After throwing the useless cane into a corner, Doc turned and aimed a finger like a gun at Smiley's face.

"You #\$\$@%-ing idiot! Take it over there," Doc yelled as he turned and pointed towards the laboratory next door. "Plug it in and spin it around so that I can see it from here. The sound won't travel through the armored glass, so turn on the radio intercom and I'll listen in on my helmet speakers. Got that?"

"Okay!" Smiley replied as he squeezed the TV set through the door again and started the short trip to the lab. Just before the door closed behind him, he lifted a hand towards the crown of his helmet-covered head and yelled, "OW!"

See! You guys should've taken that bet! It's hard to believe, but there really was a brain buried deep under all that bone. Strange but true!

Still shaking in anger, Doc turned around and stomped back to the cart. Working with his usual single-minded attention to detail, he spent the next half hour arranging and re-arranging his medical instruments as he slowly calmed down. With one eye glued to the television set, he pattered around while the air-conditioning vent directly over the operating table slowly turned me into a Popsicle. Damn was it cold! Not that I was gonna complain to Doc right then. Believe it or not, even I'm not *that* stupid.

Growing bored with the entire deal, I closed my eyes and tried to take twenty winks. Just my luck, no sooner had my eyelids slammed shut Doc decided to start yakking. Man, did that guy ever love the sound of his own voice.

"As you are aware, Mr. Morton, I haven't had much success yet with - higher order - donor subjects. For some unknown reason, only reptilians react well to my genetically enhanced prions. Any endothermic creature heavier than a few kilos tends to suffer irreversible and accumulative damage to its central nervous structures until it...

"Excuse me, Doc. But... Duh?"

"It rapidly destroys the brain of any warm-blooded animal larger than a possum!"

"Oh ... wait a second! I'm warm-blooded and my brain is larger than a possum's!"

"No, it isn't!"

"Huh?"

"It's well known that the human brain has a remarkable capacity to survive trauma."

"It does?"

"HUMOR ME!"

"Sure. Sure thing, Doc! Whatever you say! Keep going!"

"Thank you. As I was saying, popular literature is replete with anecdotal stories of people who've lost huge sections of their brains due to injury or a surgical procedure. Many of these people have gone on to lead long, and productive, lives with only a tiny fraction of the cerebral mass they had before."

"Yeah, I know," I interrupted again. "I've meet a few lawyers in my time!"

"WHERE'S MY CLIPBOARD!!!"

"Sorry! I'm sorry! Keep going! You were saying something about cerebral mass?"

With both eyes still firmly fixed upon the television screen next-door, Doc circled the operating table and grabbed my head in his gloved hands. In much the same manner that a knowledgeable shopper squeezes

a melon to check for ripeness before purchase, he absentmindedly began to thump and prod my skull.

"You must understand, Mr. Morton," he started to orate in that pensive tone people assume when they're talking mostly to themselves, "that the human brain is the most complex piece of evolutionary engineering that Mother Nature has..."

"Ow! My eye! Ah ... Doc?"

"... ever produced. Do you know that the average three-pound adult human brain has a hundred billion cells? And, what even more fantastic, that these cells or neurons are interlinked in ten trillion ways? It's hard to believe, but many parts of the human brain haven't changed much since before..."

"My Nhosh! You've got your vingers up my nose!"

"... our earliest ancestors crawled out of the water onto dry land. Layer upon layer upon layer, it's grown in power and sophistication as our species climbed the evolutionary ladder. Yet, as far as medical science can tell, only a small fraction of this incredibly complex organ is required to create human consciousness. Many a head trauma victim has awoken to discover that their seemingly irreparably damaged brain has..."

"Ugh! Geh your vingers out of my vouth!"

"... miraculously 're-wired' itself. Imagine their surprise. Despite the loss of major portions of their brains, these victims often find their pre-injury cognitive capabilities unimpaired. With less functional gray matter than it takes to fill a tea cup, they return to their former lives as if..."

"Ha! Ha! Ha! That tickles! Your fingers are in my ears!"

"... nothing had ever happened!"

"YOW!!! THAT HURTS!!! LET GO!!!"

"What? What? Did you say something, Mr. Morton?"

"You break it, you buy it! Hands off the merchandise!"

"Sorry. Ah, I'll be right back."

I'd hardly consider *that* adequate warning for what happened next.

Suddenly, he let me go and my head dropped with a dull "thud" atop the operating table. As stars and even a few galaxies flashed across my vision, I watched as he raced into the lab and squatted down in front of the television set.

Despite the transparent nature of the walls, I couldn't see the screen all that well, but I'm pretty sure from his physical gestures that he wasn't exactly thrilled about whatever the boob tube was showing.

What's that? Are you wondering how I can say that without being able to see his face? Hell, I was only a few feet away, so I didn't exactly need a pair of binoculars like those you've been screwing around with ever since I got here. Besides, it doesn't take a mind reader to figure out someone's ticked off when ya see 'em give a television set the middle finger salute -- you got me? Well? Say something! What's so damned interesting about the Statue of Liberty? Its not like it hasn't been over since forever. You could at least put down that thing and look at me when I'm talking at ya.

Damn! I hate New Yorkers sometime, rudest people on the planet. I travel all the way up here from Florida and this is the welcome I get.

Where was I? Now I remember. What happened after Doc gave the television set "the bird."

I'd barely gotten another round of - "piss off the crocodile" going before Doc raced back into the operating room. Ignoring me completely, he set about prepping Lyle for his departure from this world. At least, long, dark and extremely scaly didn't have any hairs on his head, or body for that matter. I was not so fortunate.

No doubt about it, old Doc Merit was one top-notch crackerjack surgeon. And that fact went double if you took his advanced age into account. Nonetheless, the role of barber is another kettle of fish altogether. I'm sure most guys would drop a load in their skivvies if they'd ever seen him coming at them with a straight edge in his twisted fingers.

Still itching from my last - close shave - and don't think about asking, I still don't have a clue why he decided to shave me down there, I waited impatiently for my turn at bat. If Doc followed the usual script, he'd inject that poor croc with his high-tech crap and wait for it to take effect. In a just a few hours, his super prions would Memorex Lyle's cigar shaped brain. Faster than you can say medical malpractice, his miracle juice would copy and encode every neural pathway and chemical reaction going on inside that armored skull. All that'd remain would be a careful harvesting of a minuscule sample from his frozen skull and an equally tiny injection into mine.

What could be simpler? In a matter of minutes, Doc would put us both to sleep. There would be only one difference; I'd be the only one waking up. Who knows? If Doc's new-and-improved batch worked as well as he hoped, I might re-live Lyle's entire life from the day one. Not that I'm looking forward to it mind you. As anyone who's more than a little bit claustrophobic will understand, hatching out of a reptilian egg, or any kinda egg, can be -- stressful.

Yep. Stressful. That's rich. I had screaming fits for weeks after I woke up inside that marble-size turtle egg. It took me -- my memory donor that is -- hours to cut its way out of that leathery straight jacket and dig its way out from under a couple inches of sand. If that little newborn turtle hadn't had all mental capabilities of a rock, it would've needed years of psychoanalysis to get over its traumatic birth memories.

Despite the unpleasant prospect of going through all that again, I was nearly jumping with joy. Well, I would've been jumping if I weren't strapped to a half-ton of ice-cold metal bolted to a concrete floor. Soon it would be over. Doc would perfect his concoction and I'd find a way to weasel my way into his operation.

You heard that right. I'd been dropping hints ever since I'd discovered his plans. With a few phone calls, I could have him on speaking terms with the Big Boys up town. Frankly, the goons he'd contacted so far were strictly smalltime hoods. For a nearly insignificant cut of the action, say two percent of the gross, I'd have his entire operation up and running in a matter of days. Heck, I'd even throw in his bookkeeping for free. That is, I would if he'd ever stop running around and get down to work.

I was getting a dizzy just watching him zip back and forth to that damned television set. What's worse, whenever he'd stand still long enough to grab one of his Star Trek gizmos, the dynamic duo would interrupt with some new crisis that their microscopic brains couldn't handle.

After a couple hours of this Chinese Fire Drill, I was so frustrated I would've done the job on myself if I could've gotten loose. It's not like ya had to be a rocket scientist to do it. I must've watched Doc in action only about a gazillion times by then.

Let's see. How did it go? Right! First, ya take a drop from one of the vats and inject it into anything with a pulse. It really didn't matter how it got into 'em, the stuff would wind up in the critter's brain sooner or later anyway. Doc just liked to go straight into the skull to save time.

Then you'd wait an hour or two for the stuff to percolate before decapitating the dying animal and dumping its head into a bucket filled with liquid Nitrogen. That freaky stuff's about the only thing on Earth that'll slow down Doc's revved up prions long enough to get a good sample to mix with his patent pending catalyst.

Last, but not least, **YOU SHOVE IT INTO SOMEONE'S %\$&^ING HEAD!!!**

Sorry. I'm really sorry. I know I've got a dirty mouth. It's just that I'm still a bit sensitive about that last part. Wouldn't you be? Come

On, say something! #^\$% you! #^\$% all of you! I don't need any of you. None of you'd be here if it wasn't for me. If I hadn't have come along none....

Wow! Did any of you catch the size of that fish? Man, what a beauty. I've just gotta do a little fishing before I leave. That sucker looked "dee-lish."

What was I saying? Drat! I knew I was upset about something, now I remember. I was saying something about how ticked off I was getting waiting for Doc to get this act on the road. Have any of you' all ever hear the saying that goes something like, "watch what you wish for, you might just get it?" It's true, no doubt about it, folks. I never saw it coming.

To relive the boredom, and to get in my minimum daily dose of "annoy-a-crackpot," I began to whistle the theme song of "*The Godfather*." With my prion-enhanced memory, I could belt out the film's nearly three-hour long musical score without missing a single note. Sadly, my mad-scientist boosted memory did zippo towards solving my innate inability to carry a tune. After a few minutes, even I get tired of listening to my caterwauling.

Damn, I love that flick! What a shame it's a complete pile of crap, but that still doesn't keep it from getting funnier every time I see it. Anyone in the Business can tell ya that Coppola had been taken for a ride. Only a brain-dead low-life Mobster wannabe could've fed him the garbage he put in that movie. I mean, really, dumping a horse's head in a bed, that's so #\$\$%-ing unreal it's just gotta be pure Hollywood!

Wait! Something's coming back to me now. I seem to recall something similar that went down in Vegas a couple years before that movie came out. I'd just started working for my first major Mob client, Don Mario "Crazy Eyes" Crivello, when someone whacked his favorite racehorse, Bubbles. A rival Family had put out a contract on the horse as a warning. Let me put it this way -- Don Crivello's less than subtle attempts to muscle his way into the local casino rackets had been less than well received.

The hitter unfortunately decided to be cute. Instead of just shooting the stupid thing, he'd used his small stature to sneak into the racetrack stables dressed up in a jockey's uniform. Just before they came to get her ready for the next race, he doped her with enough junk to light up the Sears building. The poor guy riding her had his spine ground into dust when her heart exploded and she dropped like a rock midway through the first turn.

Don Crivello lost a freakin' bundle! Something around a couple hundred G's I was told. Not like that bloodthirsty psycho even noticed. That dumb horse's death had hit him real hard. I know ya won't believe this, but that homicidal maniac cried like a baby for a solid week! Then he vanished without a word

before re-appearing a few days later with the biggest shit-eating grin ya can ever imagine.

Several days later, the mystery was solved. Spread across the front pages of every yellow rag on both coasts, especially those already renowned for their questionable sense of good taste, the general public got to enjoy for a quarter a handful of photographs and recorded transcripts that'd somehow disappeared from the *LA Times*' non-publishable materials vault.

The first picture was hardly newsworthy. With his back to a huge shape hidden beneath a white canvas tarp, LA's well known Chief Clinical Pathologist stood calmly as a female reporter questioned him and took down his replies on a small paper pad.

Clearly, he hadn't expected his comments to see the light of day, nor had he noticed the camera or soundmen standing outside pointing their equipment in his direction. Otherwise, it's extremely unlikely that he would've told the reporter that, in his "profession opinion," the victim had suffocated during a successful suicide attempt.

The reporter's confusion was plain to see in the next photo. How could that obviously four-legged shape have anything to do with a human suicide?

Anyone looking at that grainy newsprint photograph could tell instantly that the object concealed beneath the drop cloth wasn't a human corpse, but most likely a horse, a mule, or some other animal sharing the classic equine body design -- and a rather pregnant one to boot.

With a "Charles Manson" twisted smirk on his lips, the next photograph showed the soon-to-be unemployed ex-coroner yanking the tarp off to reveal the corpses of a large racehorse and a human being -- or should I say parts of a human being? It's a shame that colored newspaper photographs were rare in those days. There was simply no way to tell what shade of green that reporter's face had become before the next-to-last photo showed her passed out cold upon the tile floor.

Perfectly understandable, don't you think? It's not like any of her college journalism courses could've prepared her for the sight that the last photo showed in exquisite close-up detail: two small human feet sticking out of a dead horse's butt.

Hmmm. Ya know, come to think about it, Coppola made the right choice using literary license. I sure wouldn't have wanted to be the unlucky movie stuntman that had to re-enact *that* scene -- like there was much of a chance of getting that shot past the censors in those days. But that's showbiz! Now where was I? Right! There I was silently freezing solid while Doc screwed around doing nothing particularly productive.

Silently? Me? Fat chance! "Help! Quack! Someone get me a mouthpiece. I'm gonna sue."

WHAP!

"Shut up!"

"Ow!" Not exactly the response I was hoping for, but at least he wasn't ignoring me anymore.

"Come on, Doc! How about ya shut off that damned police scanner and get this show on the road? I'm turning blue."

"Really? That's not supposed to happen. Any sign of fur or scales?"

"Ha! Ha! Ya kill me, Doc. I'm #%\$%-ing freezing. How about ya turn up that bloody thermostat? I'm not gonna be much good to ya if I die from double friggin' pneumonia!"

"Oh, very well! If it'll keep you quiet!" he snapped back as he stomped across the room in his heavy plastic boots.

In a display of Yuletide generosity that would've impressed ole Scrooge himself, Doc muttered angrily as he struggled against his skinflint nature and raised the temperature about a half degree. The Christmas shoppers slogging through three feet of slush outside must've felt warmer than I did.

Just my ##-ing luck! Why couldn't I have been kidnapped and become the lab rat of some senile old wacko living in Florida? It's not like I haven't been down there a zillion times. Who ya think delivers all them "special packages" the higher ups think are too important to send via UPS?

That's it! I've just been stuck in the eye with the proverbial last straw. Its getting even time. Let's see how he likes hearing me sing the entire

**"*Sound of Music*"** soundtrack -- backwards!"

I've been told, repeatedly, and in no uncertain terms, that my singing voice is truly unforgettable -- and it's true. Could you forget something that sounds like a seasick camel upchucking its lunch into a garbage can?"

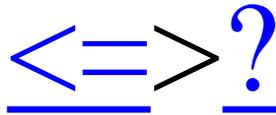
I'd just finished "music of sound the with alive are hills the," when Doc yelled something you can't repeat in sophisticated society and slapped the gas mask over my face. Overjoyed with the prospect of finally getting cured and out of his clutches, I screamed back through the plastic, "That's the stuff. I can take it. Lock n' load, Doc."

Within seconds, the gas had the ceiling tiles bouncing around like waves on the seashore, and a comfortable numbness began to sweep over my body. As the world rapidly faded away, Doc began to move my head from side to side and I felt a strong stinging sensation near my Adam's apple. I had just enough time to ask myself a single question before going completely under.

Why is he shaving me again?

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Choose your Chapter:

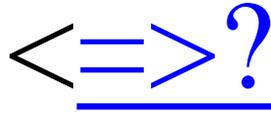


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Choose your Chapter:



PART ONE OF FOUR

by  
Charles M. Bonanno

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"Not again! I've already been a chicken." I screamed silently. Just inches away, the blurry image of a small white hen reflected back from the polished inner wall of a tiny metal cage. Yeah, there was no mistake. Doctor Merit had done it to me again. I can't tell you how sick I'd become of waking up inside these critters. Talk about uncomfortable.

Anyone with an ounce of common sense could tell that the cage was too damned small. The hen, whose body I was sharing, couldn't spread her wings without hitting a camera, a microphone, or who knows what else that psycho had managed to cram in here. And, what's worse, whatever this bird was sitting on was crushing its breast feathers something fierce. It didn't take me long to figure out that it was an egg, and it took me even less time to guess who'd laid it.

As a passenger within the bird's tiny brain, I watched through its beady eyes as it stood up and used its beak to roll the egg towards the rear of the cage. Carefully squatting down again, it fluffed its feathers and began to cluck contentedly. I'd sure like to know what she was so darn happy about! It's - our - butt hurts like bloody hell! It was obvious that this feathered moron couldn't correlate the pain in its rear with the beach ball it'd squeezed out of its ass. And, what's worse, I really didn't want to know if that thing was fertile. That would mean... OW! OW! OOOOOWWWW!!!!

Needless to say, it's rather difficult to express yourself when you're stuck in a body that doesn't really exist anymore. While birdbrain clucked up a storm in anticipation of yet another egg's arrival, I cursed silently and prepared myself for the painful event.

I sure didn't look forward to re-living a crooked bird's memories until Dr. Merit showed up. Rather than annoy him anymore than necessary, as much as I enjoyed taking every possible opportunity to do so, I followed his instructions and memorized the time displayed on the clock built into the cage.

Take it from me, pecking corn mash out of a metal bowl and dropping an egg or two each day isn't my idea for a relaxing stay at Club Med. But I did have one advantage over this feathered egg factory, I was still alive. The fact that I could see out of its eyes was proof that it'd died hours, or even days, in the past. Hardly a comforting thought, as I'd most likely be following it into the Great Beyond any day now.

"Ah ... shit. Here he comes. Less than fifteen minutes. Damn it. This is gonna hurt," I yelled within the confines of the bird's minuscule brain.

With a loud screech of dry metal hinges, the wire-mesh doors swung open and Doctor Merit reached inside. Before the bird could react to his presence, a heavy black rubber glove clamped around its neck and it was dragged outside squawking and flapping its puny wings.

As had happened so many times before, I felt the overpowering urge to imitate those drooling pinheads that scream warnings at slasher-movie victims. Fully aware how futile the gesture would be, I wanted to warn the long-dead bird about of its perilous situation. Ah, heck. I did it anyway. Not that it did any good.

I'd time-shared the bodies of dozens reptiles and birds by then. I can't remember how many times I'd woken to find the transplanted memories of frogs, snakes, frogs, salamanders, geckoes, toads, pigeons, sparrows, and who knows what else, bouncing around inside my head. Pretty much any kind of animal the Mad Doctor - I only wish you could've seen how pissed off he got when I called him that - could get his hands on cheap. Not that it really mattered. They always went out in the same way.

Whenever Doc thought his latest concoction had done its job, he'd enter the sterile specimen lab wearing his yellow contamination-proof suit. Without a word of warning, he'd grab some unlucky test animal and decapitate it with the largest scalpel I'd ever seen.

You must've heard this old wives tale. Lower-order animals don't have the capacity to feel real pain. From personal experience, I tell you that those old bags didn't know squat about what they were talking about! I use to spend hours at a time locked inside my cell fantasizing about meeting someone stupid enough to repeat that old saying to me. I would've loved to break a few of their bones to give 'em a hint of what it felt like.

Putting aside that unlikely happy prospect, I got to see my body - in this case, the poor hen's body - flopping around upon the tile floor as he carried its - our - bleeding head across the room. Man, I sure could've used some Dramamine! Since chickens have a brain the size of a small pea, the blood sloshing around inside their tiny craniums can keep 'em going long after the noodle and body have parted company. That's why - oh so fortunate Me - I got to enjoy the entire sickening ride for the minute or two it took him to carry the hen's head across the lab and drop it into a flask filled with liquid nitrogen. And I woke up screaming my guts out.

As always, I returned to consciousness strapped down on an ice-cold metal operating table. I think it's some kind of weird tradition. You know, mad scientist rule number 12: If at all possible give test subjects pneumonia by making him, or her, lie down near naked on a stainless steel slab for days at a time. Heck, I've seen napkins larger and thicker than the blanket covering my shivering body. Pneumonia. Right! I should've been so lucky!

That I could've had fixed with a couple antibiotic shots and a few restful days in a hospital watching daytime soaps on TV. What was sending me to an early grave laughed at penicillin and any other kind of medicine you'd care to mention. Otherwise Dr. Mengele - my personal and favorite pet name for 'ole Doc Merit - wouldn't have been wasting his time pouring crap down the holes he'd drilled through my skull.

Sorry, did I forget to introduce myself to my audience? Howdy, folks! I'm Oscar Morton. That's Monty or Mr. Numbers to my friends. Just one of the countless faceless middle-aged CPA's trying to make a semi-honest buck New York City.

Yo! You! How about putting down that paper? I'm talkin' here. Man, the nerve of some people.

Like I was saying, despite the great amount of time that has obviously passed, for me it still feels like it was just a couple months ago that my life went down the crapper. After running away from doctors and hospitals for decades, my luck finally ran out one bright summer morning. I'd nearly made it. I nearly had gotten the chance to die peacefully in my sleep never knowing what'd killed me. No such luck.

Without the slightest warning, the world faded to black and I awoke to find a pimple-faced intern waving a humming x-ray machine in my face. Oh, glorious day. With all the inane joy of a kid with a shiny new toy, the insensitive idiot seemed to relish pointing out the CRT image of a golf-ball sized tumor growing in the

center of my brain.

The fact that the tumor was going to destroy my mind, and ultimately end my life, didn't reduce his childish antics one iota. So help me, if I hadn't been so heavily medicated, I would've grabbed the damned thing and shoved it deep into his intestinal tract. Instead, I spent the next few days flat on my back and watched the games begin.

As you can expect, my medical insurance carrier and their HMO cronies tried to avoid paying. That was pretty much standard procedure those days. Why waste money on a terminal patient was their unspoken rule. But pay they surely did. It's not like they had much choice either. Screwing around with the guy that cooks your tax books is never a wise move. I'd long ago squirreled away enough of their shredded paperwork to keep a Federal judge and the IRS busy for decades. And I wasn't the least bit embarrassed to tell 'em about it.

After a couple weeks they finally threw in the towel and shipped me upstate for a second opinion - and a third, a fourth, a fifth and, I'm pretty sure, even a sixth. I've never been prodded and poked by so many people in my life. If I never saw another rubber-covered finger in what time I had left I would've been ever so grateful. Heck, I must have been radioactive by the time they were done. If I didn't know better, I would've bet that they were trying to microwave my carcass with all 'em Cat scanners and X-ray machines. Not that it did much good or change anything.

Getting told that the tumor is growing like wildfire, and that you've got maybe a couple months left, surely gets boring after the second, third and fourth repetitions. I was getting ready to put on a pair of those gloves and stick one of them when they advised me to go see Doc Merit.

"He's retired, Mr. Morton ... and getting a bit on in years," They said. "But he's still the best clinical neurologist on the East Coast. He's got a little lab over in Passaic and we consult with him on our more challenging cases. Just say the word and we'll have our ambulance take you there."

If you ask me, that tumor must have eaten most of my brain by then. How else could I be so dumb? There I was sitting on enough evidence to shut down half the HMO's in Manhattan, and I forget who runs them. Jeez, what a maroon. I'm lucky they didn't throw my ass into the Hudson with all the other jokers who've crossed the Mob. But say yes I surely did.

One minute I'm resting comfortably in bed watching the nurses walk by, the next I'm in an ambulance tearing across Brooklyn with the planet's ugliest orderly behind the wheel. That fact alone should have tipped me off that this was no ordinary trip. The forty-five-caliber automatic sticking out of Prince Charming's waistband was the clincher, though. Frankly I couldn't have cared less at that point. I hadn't been able to stand without help for over a week, and my left hand was shaking like a hula-hula girl's skirt. Why they would bother driving me across town to rub me out was a total mystery. Just stick a knife in my hand and I'd have gutted myself.

And you should've seen doc's place. What a dump. No self-respecting wino would've been caught dead sleeping in front of it. If I were his accountant, I'd advise him to torch the place for the insurance. Or, if he didn't care to put this rat trap out of its misery, to make a few bucks by renting it out to a movie production company. It'd make a perfect set for one of those endless teenage slasher movies Hollywood cranks out each year. That four story pile of crumbling bricks he called home could easily house a whole army of Freddie Kruggers.

As plug-ugly wheeled my gurney through the front door, the doctor in residence made his appearance. You

ever see that George Romero Night of the Living Dead movie? Remember the zombies? Take the worst looking one, wrap his skinny butt in a suit that went out of style in the forties, and you've got a good idea what Doctor William T. Merit looked like. Calling Michael Jackson! Calling Michael Jackson! One of your dancing corpses is loose!

If you ask me, this joker had his medical diploma carved on a cave wall while Woolly Mammoths still roamed the Earth. And I'll be perfectly honest; I was lucky I went to the bathroom before getting into that ambulance. Otherwise I would've emptied my bladder when he walked over and stared down at me. Instead, I froze up like a deer in a trucker's headlights. The first words I heard through his plastic choppers were far from reassuring.

"Take him back! I don't need any more cadavers!"

"Mr. Numbers', alive! See!"

With a hand that'd look just about right on a mountain gorilla, the guy who put the "ugh" in ugly jabbed me in the chest with a finger the diameter of a broomstick. The sudden impact made me exhale explosively and I began to fight the straps. Isn't blind panic wonderful? Schwarzenegger with a truckload of steroids in his veins couldn't snap one of these nylon straps, and, here I am, weak as a baby, giving it the old "Win-One-For-The-Gipper" try.

"Stop that!" Doctor Merit wheezed through ancient vocal cords as he removed a clipboard from the gurney and flipped through the pages.

Clearly not liking what he'd just read, he looked up and stared at my early Neanderthal male nurse. "What am I suppose to do with this ... thing?" Doctor Merit demanded while shaking arthritis bent fingers in my direction. "I don't need anymore fresh body parts in my research."

"Boss say bring Mr. Numbers here. Tony does what Boss say."

Holy shit! It can talk in full sentences. Will miracles never cease? I was so shocked that handsome could actually communicate without simian grunts or arm waving that I almost missed what he said next.

"Boss say he pay you. Boss wants what Mr. Numbers' hiding."

Humming lightly to himself, the old guy approached the gurney until he was just inches away. Looking down with much the same expression hungry people have when they encounter a free buffet, he scanned my body from head to toe before speaking. "Good evening, Mr. Numbers. Do you have any idea what Tony is talking about?"

At this point, I'd already returned to my corpse imitation. It's amazing how long you can hold your breath when you're scared out of your wits. Unfortunately, it appeared my acting skills were less than convincing. Faster than I thought his bony arms could move, he raised the heavy metal clipboard in both hands and slammed it down upon my body. Where you ask? Here's a clue. It starts with the letter "z" as in zipper.

With the Doc's assistance, my act had become an Oscar winning performance. Except for a single, pathetic, girlish squeal of agony, I couldn't make another sound as my lungs collapsed and refused to refill. Totally numb from top to bottom, my brain had all the time in the world to concentrate on the urgent signals coming from my middle. Where, it seemed, a rather important appendage was reporting that it had just been run over by a bus.

As patient as any vulture waiting for something to die, and rot, he continued to stare down at me until I could once more draw breath. With the clipboard held clearly in view, he repeated himself. "Good evening, Mr. Numbers. Do you have any idea what Tony is talking about?"

"Can't tell you. They'll kill me," I replied in a tone so high pitched that dogs half way across town probably ran away in agony.

Tensing my body and screwing my eyes closed in anticipation, I waited for the blow that'd permanently change my voice into the Mormon Tabernacle Boy's Choir range. To my surprise it never came. Peeking out of a single eye, I watched as he re-read the papers attached to the clipboard. What he did next was far worse than the pain he'd already inflicted upon me. He looked down and smiled.

Did you ever notice that history's worst monsters all had the same damned look in their eyes? Take your pick from Genghis Kahn to Adolph Hitler and from Charles Manson to Ted Bundy. They all seemed to be enjoying a private little joke. And guess what, your agonizing demise at their hands is the punch line.

Still smiling as if expecting me to join right in, he casually reached into his pocket and removed a long shiny object. At first I thought it as a pen. My eyes nearly pooped out of their sockets when I saw the large, super-economy-sized scalpel in his liver spotted hand. In a move too fast to follow, he swung it over my body from collar to belt and pocketed the blade.

"Just an act to scare me. I'm too old for these mind games," I thought confidently to myself. The word "wrong" doesn't even begin to cover my error as I watched his skeletal hand reach out and, one by one, pluck the loose buttons off my shirt and drop them onto the floor. As his focus shifted to my middle again, and that part of my clothing that starts with the letter 'z', I suddenly found myself all too happy to answer his question. "My office! Under the smallest filing cabinet! Loose floorboard! Metal box! It's all there!"

"Thank you, Mr. Numbers. It was nice seeing you again, Tony. You can go now."

"But Boss tell Tony!... Boss says Tony should!..." Tall, dark, and extremely gruesome struggled to communicate in something approximating human speech. Clearly exhausted by the mental effort of linking several thoughts together, Tony gave his frontal lobes the night off and began to pantomime. In a gesture far older than the pyramids, he nodded in my direction and slashed his throat with a single huge finger. I could be wrong, but I'm pretty sure Don Mike "Eye Gouger" Bastion hadn't ordered him to give me a shave after I'd confessed where all the incriminating evidence was hidden.

"No need. On second thought, I think I have a use for this body."

I've got to give Mr. Repulsive his due. The look he gave me before walking away could've only been pity. If I'd known what Methuselah had in mind for this body, I might've asked for that close shave myself.

As I watched Tony disappear through the front door, a sharp pain made me yell out-loud. Looking down and to my left, I saw the Doc's hand pushing the plunger of an antique glass syringe into my arm. Something in the back of my mind told me that it probably wasn't a vitamin shot.

Before I could say a single word in protest, the room began to spin like a top and a blinding white light filled my vision. As I walked into the glare I looked forward to seeing family members who'd preceded me into the hereafter, but, knowing my luck, I'd probably just find people I still owed money.

Some indeterminate time later, my dreams of scantily clad female Angels and Monster Trucks smashing through cotton candy clouds were interrupted by the strident whine of a high-speed drill. No matter how

hard I tried to ignore the noise, it kept rattling my teeth and drowning out Heaven's angelic choirs as they counted down the top one hundred Heavy Metal hits. You've got your idea of eternal paradise and I've got mine. Let's leave it at that. Okay?

Opening my eyes, I prepared to give the inconsiderate bastard with the drill a piece of my mind for waking me up. Just imagine my surprise when I discovered that Doctor Merit had already beaten me to the punch. Dressed in something you'd expect an astronaut to wear, he stood behind me with a small contraption in his hands. As I looked up at the mirror covered ceiling, I could only watch in stunned disbelief as he drilled another small hole into the top of my shaved head.

Don't get me wrong. You can't work for wise guys long before you learn the score. A bullet in the back of the head is the best you can expect if you screw up or cross the wrong customer. Trust me, you really don't want to know what's the 'worst.'

Take my predecessor, Kim "Four-Eyes" Mulholland. He got himself caught a couple years back feathering his retirement nest with a little extra from Don Bastion's private slush fund. As a reward for his many years of faithful service, Bastion gratefully arranged for Kim to take an extended vacation. By most accounts - you never can be too sure about these things - Kim's resting comfortably under the concrete foundations of a skyscraper somewhere in Newark.

But never ... ever ... in my wildest nightmares ... did I expect to get whacked by an old coot with a Black and Decker. So you'll please forgive me, when I tell you that I started to cry like a baby and fight the straps once more.

"Stop moving. You're distracting me," Doc Merit's amplified voice blasted out of a small speaker built into his helmet. It's at this point that I noticed the metal ring bolted around my head. Move? How? King Kong himself couldn't budge that thing, let alone the heavy straps holding my body fast to the top of a stainless steel operating table.

"Stop whining. You can't feel a thing."

To my surprise the wacko doing the This Old House number on my skull was right. Except for the pressure of the oxygen mask strapped over my face, I was completely numb from my neck to my feet. "What did you do to me?" I yelled. "I'm paralyzed."

Cursing something unintelligible in a strange sounding foreign accent, maybe it was Canadian; he slammed the drill down and stomped around the operating table until he could look directly at me. Tearing the mask off my face, he bent down until his plastic face piece was barely an inch from my nose. "If you don't keep still, I'm going to use a hammer an' chisel to get what I need. Do you want that?"

"You're boring holes in my brain... you bastard!"

Looking back, I wasn't exactly in the best position to call someone names. Blame it on my innate inability to think straight while someone's trying to kill me. As I stared back, I could almost see the gears meshing behind his eyes. What was he thinking? I couldn't tell for sure, but I'd bet it had something to do with my freshly segmented corpse and jars filled with formaldehyde.

"Mr. Morton?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you want to live, Mr. Morton?"

"Yeah."

Don't blame me. I'm never at my best for snappy repartee when I wake up with someone drilling holes through my skull. Try it yourself someday and let me know what happens.

With a flick of his fingers, Doctor Merit unhooked the leather band holding my left hand down. "Raise your arm," He ordered.

Imagine my surprise when my arm came up smoothly without the slightest bit of tremor.

"I'm cured!" I yelled in glee as I wiggled my fingers.

"No, you're not. I've only just begun work and unless you let me stop the hemorrhaging, your brain will be floating in a jar by tomorrow morning."

See? I was right. Can I read faces or what? "What did you do to me?" I asked as he clamped the leather strap around my wrist again.

"I removed a small section of the tumor that was pressing on your motor cortex."

"That's impossible! All the doctors said my tumor was inoperable!"

"They also said you'd be dead soon. Say the word and I'll make both their predictions come true."

It's at this point, my curious audience, that I must make a little confession. Like many people, I grew up from earliest childhood terrified of dying. I know what you're thinking. Boring. Not a unique phobia I must admit, but I've always made the most of it. Even the slightest passing thought concerning my inevitable demise has always been sufficient to scare me spit-less for hours. You'd think that someone with my clientele would be more blasé about the subject. It's not like mobsters and their associates have a great retirement plan, you know. Watching rival gangsters find evermore gruesome ways to kill each other had always both fascinated and repelled me.

Yet, in some perverse way, their frequently messy ends helped to keep me from dwelling upon my own mortality. In much the same way that people who are phobic about drowning purchase fancy swimming pools or take long ocean cruises, I'd never miss the opportunity to attend a Family wake for a dearly departed member.

My clients, Mob bosses for the most part, could always count on my attendance with a sorrowful expression etched upon my face. Holding a well-soaked handkerchief against my red-rimmed eyes, I'd sit through the entire church service with my lips moving silently as if in prayer. Unbeknownst to anyone but myself, I'd actually be repeating a simple mantra to sooth my private fears, "Hip-Hip Hooray! I'm not dead! Nope! Not me! Yahoo!" As you can expect, my presence practically became a Family tradition over the years.

Whereas many Capos and their lieutenants never dared attend in person for security reasons, they appreciated that I, a well-known insignificant paper-pushing nobody, could always be counted upon to stand in their stead. No one over nearly three decades, and countless repetitions, ever suspected that I was simply completing my performance as I laid a wreath upon the grave while fighting the urge to scream out my joy for not being inside that box myself.

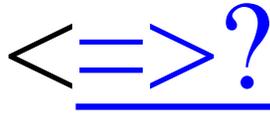
You don't need to tell me. I know I'm going to Hell. But you know what? I don't care!

After having revealed this facet of my warped personality, you should have little difficulty predicting my response to the Doc's question. "What are you standing there for? Get back to work!"

"I thought you'd see it my way," Doc Merit responded dryly as he dropped the mask over my face and a new flood of anesthetic gas returned me to my heavenly dreams. I sure hoped I'd get back before the tractor pull competition started.

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# Thanks for All the Memories



PART TWO OF FOUR

by

Charles M. Bonanno

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And I woke up inside a lizard.

One second I'm watching Gabriel beat the pants off Mephistopheles in the unlimited heavy-weight trials, the next I'm watching through a lizard's eyes as it hangs upside down on a leaf while munching the huge cricket in its mouth.

Yuck!

No doubt about it, a nice spicy plate of Fettuccini Alfredo has live bugs beaten hands down in the flavor department, not that the tiny lizard swallowing something larger than its head seemed to care. My mental gag reflex was well into overdrive before the bug's mashed remains slid down its gullet and it scurried off in search of another.

For what felt like an eternity, it jumped from leaf to leaf looking for another disgusting insect to chomp. What it did find, or should I say what found her, was something completely different. After its second or third trip around what was apparently a large terrarium, she literally climbed straight down a sheet of glass and came to rest upon a broad plastic leaf. Suddenly another lizard of the same kind dropped out of nowhere and landed beside her. That's when I learned how little interest reptiles have in sexual foreplay.

Without the slightest offering of a cheap golden trinket, or even a box of chocolates, the amorous newcomer scooted sideways until his green and yellow-scaled body was pressed against and slightly over the lizard who's body I was sharing. Seemingly satisfied with his amorous advances, her tail went up, his tail curled in, and I became an unwilling voyeur and co-participant in reptilian reproductive practices.

Needless to say ... I'VE NEVER BEEN SO HUMILIATED IN MY ENTIRE #\$\$#-ING LIFE!

Just how long she -- we -- would've remained locked in this position will never be known. Just when I thought Loverboy had died, leaving me stuck like this for all eternity, a shadow passed overhead and he disappeared under a rock dragging his unmentionables over the gravel-covered floor.

I sure hope it hurt like Hell, 'cause it felt like he'd torn my insides out when he left. That's probably why my host was too slow to escape a human hand the size of a jumbo 747 that swooped down and caught her. Crushed between fingers the relative sizes of telephone poles, it could neither comprehend the nature of, nor protect itself from, the sharp blade rushing towards its throat. I returned to consciousness atop an operating table screaming my guts out.

What? You don't believe me? Listen to this; it gets worse. Every time I'd wake up after one of Doc's treatments, and I do mean -- EVERY DAMNED TIME -- I'd find myself screaming whatever my deceased host's teeny weenie brain had been thinking just before it died. Usually it was some variation of the following: MY TAIL! FOOD! MY FEATHERS! HIDE! MY SCALES! SEX! MY FUR! TOO HOT! MY CLAWS! TOO COLD! SEX! HUNGRY! MY EGGS! SEX! MY BEAK! FIGHT! MY MATE! THIRSTY! MY BROOD! WHERE IS EVERYTHING?

The script never changed. I'd open my eyes to find myself thinking their thoughts while images of their flesh covered my body. Like an out of control merry-go-round, my mind would race around in circles until Doctor Merit brought his inimitable old-fashioned medical training to bear....

WHAP!

There's nothing like a sharp blow to the groin to bring a guy back to the here-and-now.

"Thanks, Doc!" I'd groan through clinched teeth. "I needed that!"

"My pleasure," he'd invariably reply with a straight face.

Sitting down beside the operating table, he'd spend the next few minutes giving me the third degree and taking notes.

"Let's go down the list, shall we? Please tell me how many you can remember this time. Did you get any impressions from the hamster?"

"Nope."

"How about the gold fish?"

"Fish? Gold fish? I thought ya gave up on fish."

"I still had a couple left. Well?"

"Sorry, not even a nibble."

"Quite droll, Mr. Morton. How about the groundhog?"

"Nada. Not even his shadow."

"The kangaroo rat?"

"Nothing hops to mind, Doc."

"How about the goat?"

"Too baaaaaaaad! Nothin' there!"

"The pigeon?"

"Ah ... just a few images. Nothing concrete, but I've got this powerful urge to take a crap on a statue. Does that count?"

"You're asking for it!"

"Sorry! Keep going!"

"How about the sheep?"

"Not a bleatin' thing."

"The mole-rat?"

"They're disgusting! You promised!"

"I lied! I repeat, did you get anything from the mole-rat?"

"No! And I wouldn't tell you if I did."

WHAP!

If you haven't made it clear by now, let me point out the obvious. Doc Merit's bedside manner could've used some improvement.

"Ugh! Not ... nothing ... nothing from ... the ... the ... mole-rat!"

"Damnation!"

"What's the matter, Doc? Running low on relatives?"

"AHHHH!"

"Okay! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! Put the clipboard down!"

"Lets keep going. There's only one more to go anyway. What about the anole lizard?"

"Yeah. That one worked -- again!"

"Just the reptile?"

"Sorry, that's the only one that came through clear."

"Tell me. What do you remember?"

"I'd rather not talk about it. It's too personal."

"I see," Doctor Merit said as he scribbled something on the clipboard.

"And how long would you say the total experience lasted?"

"Maybe two hours, maybe two and a half."

"Really? That long? Marvelous! That's twice as long as the first one!"

I'm ... so ... happy for ya Doc!"

"So I assume you can recall what the lizard was doing when I collected her?"

"Yeah."

"Did you experience total sensory input again?"

"Yeah."

"Did you like it?"

"\$\*#% YOU!!!"

WHAP!

Snickering quietly, he scribbled something more before putting the clipboard away. Reaching up he

touched a small button on his helmet and spoke into the miniature microphone hanging in front of his lips. A second later Smiley and Broken Nose stomped into the room. I was clearly in no condition to offer any resistance as they lifted me off the operating table and carried me to my quarters.

Did I forget to introduce Smiley and Broken Nose?

I'm still trying to figure out whether they should've been classified as belonging to the animal, mineral, or vegetable kingdoms. As to their intelligence, for lack of a better term, I'd place them both somewhere between quartz and granite. I don't have a clue where Doc found 'em, but I'd lay odds that at one time a *Dumb n' Ugly Henchman Emporium* nearby was having a two-for-one sale. Personally, the thought that I might've shared even a single chromosome with this pair of evolutionary throwbacks was too horrible a thought to contemplate. There's definitely a shortage of chlorine in the gene pool if quasi-simians like those two were still being born.

With all the tenderness you'd expect from guys who scrap their knuckles on the ground when they walk, they loosened my bonds and carried me bodily to my room. The fact that I could walk just fine, and I have been able to do so for several weeks, just never seemed to sink in.

There was one positive factor. I've never had to smell them.

Just like the good doctor, they never came anywhere near me without dressing up like space shuttle astronauts. Was it my breath? Somehow, I didn't think so. My proof? Well, just listen to this. It must've been about a week after I woke up in this Mad Scientist's Romper room. Doc was preparing to pump his latest batch of memory Drano into my skull when Smiley entered the operating room with his face piece open.

And Doc went friggin' ballistic!

Man, oh man! Let me tell you! I've had more than my fair shares of opportunities to watch the wrong kind of people get seriously ticked off -- and I'm taking body bag serious -- but I've never seen anyone's face turn that shade of purple before. A real Kodak moment I tell ya.

Before you ask, my silent and attentive audience, Smiley was the younger of my two guards slash male nurses. He's the one that had fewer teeth in his mouth than a hockey goalie. Broken Nose on the other hand looked just like the name I'd given him sounded. Someone in the distant past had gone out of his or her way to re-arrange his most prominent facial feature with something heavy. From the extent of the damage I could see through his helmet, I'd say his attacker used a sledgehammer. A really BIG sledgehammer.

But getting back to Smiley, I almost felt sorry when Doc marched him through the airtight glass doors and made him strip naked. With a nylon brush that'd take the hide off an elephant, he ordered Broken Nose to scour Smiley raw and drench him with gallons of reeking reddish muck. Just in case you're wondering, almost is the operative word.

From my usual resting spot atop the operating table, I got to watch the entire floor show from start to howling finish and I must say I would've clapped my hands like mad if I weren't tied down when it came time for the grand finale.

I doubt if it was really necessary, but Doc finished whatever he was doing to poor Smiley by having a bottle of medicinal alcohol emptied over what little skin the poor guy had left. Somehow I doubt if he'd ever make that mistake again.

So it goes without saying that they both took their revenge upon me at their earliest opportunity. As Doc left the lab that evening to do whatever it is madmen do in their spare time, Smiley and Broken Nose came to escort me to my palatial accommodations.

Yes, that's right, I'm being sarcastic. I'd like to see you keep your sense of humor after a few weeks down there. Ever since I'd woken after Doc's vitamin shot, I've been folded, spindled and mutilated by these three clowns on a daily basis.

It was a real laugh-riot wondering who'd kill me first. While Doc seemed to get most of his jollies by pouring his home-made brain soup into my skull, Twiddle Dumb and Twiddle Dumber got their chuckles by seeing how many times they could drop me onto the floor or slam me into another doorway.

Just in case you're interested, let me describe my new digs. Like all mad scientist wannabes Doc had this thing for working underground. Most likely just another union rule crackpots have got to follow in their line of work.

Anywho, it must've cost him a bundle to move the furnace somewhere outside and turn the entire basement into something that'd give the original Doctor Frankenstein a massive hard-on. Basically, the entire basement had been divided into four inter-connecting rooms. The largest was filled with animal cages. I'd only seen the insides in a virtual sense ya understand, but it was easily half the floor space of the entire basement. Trust me, it wasn't the kind of place any animal lover would care to visit.

The next two rooms were roughly the same size. The first one you'd see upon walking down the basement stairs was Doc's laboratory. It was roughly the size of two Holiday Inn® guestroom suites and filled with enough shiny scientific Tonka Toys® to reach the ceiling. I'm just glad I didn't have to pay the electric bill to keep all those doohickeys running.

The room next to the lab was the operating theatre. I spent most of my waking moments in there with every piece of shiny medical gear you'd care to imagine -- and most of it was very, very sharp. You'll all please forgive me if I leave it at that. I don't have many fond memories of that room.

And last, and definitely least, was my humble abode. Way in the back, in the darkest and dankest corner of the basement, they'd built a room roughly the size of a small closet. Its main features were a canvas cot, a chemical toilet, a radio and a box of old magazines. Home sweet home.

Like all the other rooms, its walls were made of this incredibly thick shatterproof glass and the only way in or out was through even thicker glass and steel doors. Even if by some miracle they'd left the door to my room unlocked, my palm print wouldn't open the other three electronic locks that stood between freedom and me.

Yeah, right. Like I'd really want to escape into my grave.

At his advanced age, I seriously doubted if Doc's mental elevator still climbed to the top floor anymore, but I had to give him his due. He certainly had all that wacky science fiction stuff down pat. You should've heard him bragging for hours while he worked on me. In the grand tradition of crazed megalomaniacs throughout the ages, he never seemed to get tired of listening to himself talk -- and talk -- and talk.

I'd hate to bore you all, but I can't even begin repeat what he said he was trying to do.

Before I got sick, I use to cook books for a living. Plain and safe work -- you get me? If you needed to squirrel away suitcases filled with cash, I'd personally hand carry 'em to one or more of over a hundred offshore Caribbean banks I knew. Clean, simple, and no questions asked. I'd even come back with a killer tan to show ya.

You say that Government tax agents are sniffing around your mansion? Big deal! I knew all the right palms to grease and I could guarantee that they'd never bother you again. Having trouble with mountains of dirty money? Big whoop de do! My connections could bring it back in a few weeks smelling like a rose for only a small up-front fee.

But please, don't ask me to explain all 'em big words Doc liked to throw around like dirty laundry. What the heck are DNA, RNA and Bipolar Memory Pattern Fractal Transference anyway? Just 'cause I never took them egghead biology science classes in P.S. 38 doesn't give him the right to talk down to me. As a City boy, born and bred, I don't take kindly to that kind of disrespect. I'd like to see him spout those twenty-dollar words in my neighborhood, and that goes double for my old homestead on Montgomery Street.

What? You really want me to try? Oh, all right, it's the least I can do after you've all been so kind as to listen to me bellyaching all night. There's still some time before sunup anyway. Going out in the dark to eat breakfast can be real dangerous in these parts, but I'll have to finish soon; I've got a long trip back home ahead of me.

Now, where was I? That's right -- Doc's grand plan.

If ya ask me, Doc's bag of mental marbles was more than a few short, and it'd been that way for a long, long, time. You're not going to believe this, but he'd spent most of his life searching for the fountain of youth and for ways to turn people into animals! Now the live-forever part I could understand, it's just the fur and tail bits that I never could wrap my brain around.

Oy vey! What a fruitcake! He wanted to be a dog! I fool you not, old Doc Merit wanted to turn himself into a bow-wow. Now stop laughing, I'm trying to be serious here! Once he even showed me some computer artwork he'd paid some kid on the Web to draw. Get this, he wanted to make himself look like some kind of two-legged Great Dane! Funny! From what I could see, the pictures showed him looking like a mutt after someone had shoved most of a human skeleton up its ass. He had to hit me three times before I could stop laughing.

He'd tried everything. You name it and Doc had done it: chemistry, surgery, transplants, cross-species breeding, brain swaps and on and on and on. I wouldn't have been surprised if he hadn't tried a little black magic and voodoo too. Yet, in the end, all he'd actually done was to rid the world of a couple dozen guinea pigs the Mob had been all too happy to provide.

From what I could gather, the Families paid him with human patients in exchange for his medical expertise. A little plastic surgery here, a little fingerprint alteration there, not to mention hundreds of bullet holes discretely patched up in one hour or less and the Bosses rewarded him with all the warm bodies he could ever need.

Think about it. Could any would-be Doctor Frankenstein luck into a sweeter deal? Frankly, I couldn't see Smiley or Broken Nose in the role of Mary Shelly's Igor. Neither one of those two mental giants could find their own butts with both hands and a GPS, let alone empty entire cemeteries to obtain corpses or collect live volunteers for Doc Merit to play with. In the Doc, the Mob had finally found a solution to one of its worst long-term business problems, namely, how could they safely dispose of all the dead and soon to be dead, bodies cluttering up the place? After Doc finished his little experiments there was little chance that the cops would ever trace the leftovers back to them. Like I said, it was a match made in Heaven.

While it was true that Doc had managed to create some rather spectacular looking results over the years, even his best work never lived long. Despite the most expensive cutting-edge anti-rejection drugs he could buy, or have stolen, his patients soon died after their skin was replaced with animal pelts, or a

seemingly endless variety of tails and other less mentionable animal parts, were sawn onto their butts and groins. He just never seemed to get tired of trying, though. No sooner than one guy died after a horse's muzzle was glued and screwed into his mug, he'd carve someone's feet into bird claws and make their knees bend the wrong way. What a guy! Dedication like that is ... so... hard to find.

If those two brain-dead Boopsie twins had even a single IQ point to share between them, I would've told them to picket Dr. Merit for unfair labor practices. Hauling all those bodies to the incinerator behind the building must've been damned hard work for minimum pay. Did I fail to mention that Doc was a cheap penny-pinching slave driver too? I know it sounds kinda trivial when compared to his other personality faults, but I'd hate to leave out even a single one of his sterling qualities.

Eventually, after nearly forty years of unmitigated failure, Doc decided to try a new tack. I said he was smart, I didn't say he was fast on the uptake.

In essence, since the mountain didn't want to come to Doctor Merit, Doctor Merit would go to the mountain ... and dissect it. Or to put it into other words, since everything he'd tried had failed to make people look like animals, he'd do the next best thing. He'd make people think like animals.

Did I mention that he was nuts? I did? Good. I'd really hate to under-emphasize that point.

That having been said, again, it will soon become obvious how two seeming unrelated events conspired to make his decision a roaring semi-success. It will also go a long way toward explaining how I've come to be stuck in this unfortunate predicament.

Oops! Sorry. I almost got ahead of myself. I'd hate to spill the beans before I've told you, my honored and appreciative audience, the entire story as it pertains to my current situation. Yes? Don't worry, Miss. I won't forget. Just keep that baby quiet and I promise to mention all of you. Is that all right with you? Great!

Okay, as I was saying before I rudely interrupted myself, two seemingly unrelated factors conspired to change Doc's plans and send him off on a wild tangent.

The first was the relentless march of science. Over the course of the last two decades of the twentieth century, the exponential growth in genetic and computer sciences showed absolutely no signs of stopping or even slowing down.

For ludicrously small amounts of money, any whacko with a petri dish and a grudge could buy whatever data and equipment the Human Genome project and the Intel Corporation were dumping on the market. Guess who was standing first in line with a check in his hand? Bingo! You've won a cigar.

It's kind of ironic when ya think about it. Just 'cause you might want to waste some soon-to-be-deceased jerk you've caught porking your wife -- or maybe you're feeling just a bit terminally depressed -- those cry babies in Washington make the gun shops wait a week before they'll hand ya a gun. Yet, without batting an eyelash, they'll give anyone sensitive medical information that potentially threatens the health and safety of every human on the planet for a few bucks. To think that a District Attorney once had the balls to say what I did for a living was criminal.

The second factor was far less obvious. Roughly twenty years before my face and a slab of NYC pavement became intimately acquainted, a whole bunch of cows -- and a few people too -- started dropping like flies in England. Without warning a new disease had moved into the neighborhood and was thumbing its nose at the entire medical community. So it goes without saying that Doctor Merit would read all about dying and get interested.

Normally, as any rational person would expect, doctors get all hot-and-bothered when some new bug pops up out of nowhere and starts killing. Kind of goes with the job description, don't ya think? But good old Doc Merit saw things through glasses of a different color. Blood red. He'd finally found something that affected the brains of humans *and* animals!

Soon he made plans to make money doing what he normally did for free. It must've been nice to have a hobby that pays too. Quicker than a city councilman can stick out his palm for a little campaign contribution, Doc sent in his request for funding and samples of infected tissue from the NIH. And, lo and behold, their overstuffed cornucopia tilted in his direction and he was instantly awash in germs and cold hard cash.

Guess what? Now ya know where he got most of the money to modernize his basement playroom. It's a little late to break this news to you now, but I'm sure all you former tax paying wage slaves would've loved to have known where some of your hard-earned money wound up.

Hey! Ya can't blame me. Heaven knows the government couldn't buy a single tongue depressor on what I mailed in with my 1040's. Damn! I sure loved filling out those things, but, then again, my favorite form of literature has always been science fiction.

They never did catch on to his scam. Since he never seemed to waste a cent on himself, and he never did, a government lab inspector would come around to examine his books each year and walk away happy. As much as I'd hate to say it, Doc's skill for creative writing rivaled my own tax form filing abilities. Maybe I should've felt jealous? Lucky for that inspector's peace of mind he never did find the real lab. If he'd taken just one glimpse of Doc's basement wonderland, and the crap he was cooking down there, I'm sure the poor guy would've run away gibbering like a blue assed baboon.

Nah. Enough of that. Lets get back to what he was doing with all that cash. Like I've said before, please bear with me since I never did understand all the scientific mumbo-jumbo going on. From what little I

could gather from Doc's hour-long rambling lectures, the Brit's had screwed up royally. Like Father Pastorini liked to say during Sunday school classes, "There are THINGS man was NOT meant to do!"

In addition to the usual warnings against eating meat on Fridays or marrying a close family member like a sister or a first cousin, he'd pop ya besides the head to emphasize the biblical no-no's of playing with yourself until ya went blind. Ya just had to love the guy, at least that's what a couple of the younger altar boys said during his trial.

Damn! Off track again. Okay, enough about him, lets get back to those crazy Limeys.

Somehow they'd broken an even older rule than those Father Pastorini liked to warn us about. And wouldn't ya know it, this one was written in another Good Book -- the Farmer's Almanac actually. It boiled down to something really simple, "DON'T SCREW AROUND WITH THE FOOD CHAIN!"

To make more money, always a laudable goal I'd say, them British farmers had decided to fatten their livestock with processed sheep byproducts instead of expensive hay. Oops! Sorry! Bad idea!

While it was true that their animals packed on tonnage faster than Oprah on hiatus, Mother Nature had clearly never intended for cows to eat sheep. Hell! Can you picture a cow chasing after a herd of sheep like a hungry wolf? I sure can't. So it should've come to no surprise that HER opinion mirrored the immortal words of my favorite standup comedian, Kevin Meany, "THAT'S NOT RIGHT!"

It wasn't long before the old gal turned into the Mama of all PMS'd bitches.

With nothing better to do, I spent over a couple weeks piecing the story together from Doc's senile ranting and the dog-eared AMA journals he let me read. In the end it wasn't all that had to figure out how they'd screwed up.

Don't look at me that way. It was either his magazines or listening to radio reporters droning on about the latest foreign diplomatic crisis. Frankly, I'd rather sneeze my nose off reading dusty old magazines than bleed from the ears listening to stuffed shirts on the radio. Who cared that China and Russia were threatening war over our new military protection pact with stupid Taiwan? Like the good old USA would really take a chance of getting into a fight over some island halfway around the world.

Despite all that reading, I must confess that most of what I know about Mad Cow Disease came from an old PBS video special. Every so often Doc would run the tape while getting me ready for another one of his little experiments.

If ya must know, most of Doc's reading material put me under faster than an elephant gun could drop a

charging chipmunk, but I never could take my eyes off that television screen when he played that tape. It's not often ya get to see a herd a cows dancing the Mambo 'cause something had turned their brains into Swiss cheese.

Nevertheless, I never did like watching where they filmed those sorry shits dying in a hospital beds with their brains chewed to pieces. Those images kinda hit too close to home, if ya get my drift.

Then, ya should've seen the looks on those eggheads' faces. Most of them guys in the white lab coats were so far gone into a state of denial they'd need a passport just to get home. Not a single one of 'em wanted to believe that little buggers called "pions" could give anything but a sheep a bad day -- a terminally bad day that is.

Without the smallest amount of that genetic whatever that living cells need to grow and multiply, they said it was impossible for tiny pieces of inert proteins to become brain destroyers and infect anything that had the bad luck to eat 'em. Boy, where they wrong!

By the time they contained the problem nobody would touch British beef with a ten-foot pole. Make that a twenty-foot pole. Of course, there was more than enough finger pointing and screaming going around to make ya think World War III was around the corner. Hysteria was the order of the day as England's trading partners closed their borders to foreign beef imports, and you wouldn't believe how many cows they had to destroyed just to calm everyone down.

Unfortunately, like I said before, a really bad mistake had already been set in motion.

Doc had learned a whole bunch about them screwy proteins before they finally got a handle on the problem over there. With all those fancy gizmos those dim bulbs in Washington kept giving him, he soon set about making them a whole lot better -- or worse, depending on your point of view.

You'd think those little suckers were tough enough already. Even before Doc started playing with 'em they were practically indestructible. Ya could burn them to ash or fry 'em in a nuclear reactor and they'd barely notice. Bury 'em in the ground and they'd pop up like Count Dracula years later just as good as new.

Now that I think about it, they remind me a lot of my first wife's mother. I never did manage to get rid of her either. No matter how far away I sent her, she kept coming back like a little lost kitten. Oh, well. Maybe I should've tried harder.

Hey kid! How about putting that ball away until I'm done. Didn't your folks teach ya to pay attention when people are talking at ya? I'll be done soon enough, and then, for all I care, ya can keep playing with that damned ball for all eternity.

Well? Great! Be that way! Give me the silent treatment. I hope ya bounce that thing into the damned river. I sure in Hell ain't gonna going in there to get it back for ya.

I don't believe it! I let myself get sidetracked again. Sorry folks. I've got the attention span of a mosquito sometimes. All it takes is one stray thought and I zoom off into another direction. Lets get back to the lab, okay?

Like I was saying, Doc's enthusiasm was a wonder to behold. I watched in awe as he imitated my late uncle Mario "The Lush" Morton. In just a matter of a few days he began to fill the basement to the rafters with scores of huge metal kegs. However, there was a slight difference. In the end Uncle Mario had only managed to bottle the worst tasting hooch Prohibition had ever seen, while Doc's bathtub gin was a real killer in every sense of the word.

I didn't discover until a couple weeks later why he'd felt the need to cook-up so damned much. Even on a good day, he'd never use more than a tiny super-diluted drop experimenting on me, so I suppose I could've just chalked it up to another example of his growing senility. While it was fairly common for people his age to start collection stamps and other junk in their Golden years, Doctor Merit was anything but common. He gets old ... something that must've happened while Indians were looking for a buyer for Manhattan... and he starts collecting liquid death. Go fig!

But don't ya get the idea that I'm complaining.

If it weren't for Doc's brain lemonade I would've been fertilizing the lawn at some cemetery by then. While his methods were a little to the left side of rational ... now there's the ultimate understatement of all time ... he never really needed Smiley or Broken Nose as bodyguards. I would've gladly wasted 'anyone' unlucky enough to stumble onto the lab or lay a single finger on that old quack. No doubt about it. He was gonna be number one on my Christmas card list if I survived.

Isn't it amazing how self-interest shines a new light on almost anything?

Was I crazy you ask? No? Yes? Maybe? I wasn't really sure towards the end. How do you judge yourself when most of your brain has been replaced by something else?

What am I talking about? Very well. Since we're getting towards the end anyway, I'll tell it to ya straight.

What Doc had done would've easily gotten him a whole pile of Nobel Prize's, or, at the very least, something like a half-dozen eternities in jail for crimes against humanity. Take your pick. Even now I find it hard to be impartial.

In the simplest terms, he'd finally won. He'd discovered a way to turn a brain-destroying protein inside out and create a lifesaver. And, from his warped point a view, there was a fantastic bonus. Not only could his new toy miraculously repair a damaged human brain, it could encode and transfer memories between brains with lightning speed.

That's between animals and humans if ya haven't figured it out yet.

You should've seen him. He was dancing on Cloud Nine for days after he saw the first x-rays of my brain. Believe me, it wasn't a pretty sight. I'm talking about my brain, actually. For a guy his age, Doc wasn't half bad as he pranced around the lab screeching like a banshee with the x-rays his hands.

As for me, I felt \$\*#@#ing great! No shakes, tremors, or the slightest sign of the mildest headache. Except for being as mentally hyperactive as a twelve year old without his Ritalin, I hadn't felt so sharp in decades. Without the slightest bit of effort I could recall forgotten highlights from my childhood as I easily passed every physiological or psychological test Doc cared to give me.

But my poor brain looked like hunk of meat loaf after my second wife, Mercedes, the universe's worst cook, had finished cremating it. There were so many new brain cells crowded together that I was amazed Doc didn't jam a bolt through my neck to keep my head from blowing off my shoulders.

It was at this point, as he prepared me for the final test, that I got wind of his plans. All those metal cylinders filled with toxic goop were going to make him richer than Bill Gates! Forget marijuana. Forget heroin. Forget cocaine. Forget alcohol. Doctor M's Furry Brain Pills, as I overheard him bragging to someone over the phone, were going to hit the country like a ton of bricks!

At a markup that'd embarrass Colombia's greediest drug lord, the Mob was going to sell Doc's special sleeping pills to anyone who wanted to wake up with an animal's lifetime of memories in their melon. Holy freaking shit! Can ya believe it? I never was much of a country boy myself, but having the memories of the goings-on inside a horse stud farm might've been interesting. Just how interesting is my business.

Yet, despite his best efforts, he still had two hurdles to jump before his junk could hit the streets.

From marketability standpoint the first was the most serious. Despite a couple hundred test-trials, Doc's wacky juice still hadn't managed to give me much more than the memories of a few unremarkable birds and a slew of tiny reptiles. From my long experience with the finer points of the drug trade ... don't ask ... I doubted if this limitation could be understated.

Simply put, I couldn't see a lot of repeat business. Most birds and lizards just don't have all that much going on between their ears. The lights are definitely on, but there's no one home is ya get my drift. Reliving their memories was like watching an excruciatingly long, pointless, artsy, black and white soundless movie with foreign subtitles. A real yawner.

In comparison, one of the few exceptions, a cute little white mouse, proved to be a dynamo of strong emotions and thoughts. That deceased little rodent knew fear. It knew lust. It knew hatred. It knew it was friggin' alive right up to the bloody end! Despite having a brain the size of a pencil eraser, that little sucker's memories hit me like a Brinks armored truck!

Man ... what a rush! I was wired for days! And talk about weird side effects! How'd you like to break out into a cold sweat every time Doc's pet cat walked by?

The second problem was more straightforward. He was running low on supplies.

As you can easily imagine, there isn't a single catalog company that caters to mad scientists. And, what's worse, there's no telling how many promising careers in unorthodox science have ended prematurely because a clear trail of evidence lead government agents straight to a supposedly secret laboratory.

Ah, yes. Buying tons of bio-warfare grade materials and equipment does tend to attract unwanted attention.

Doc had thought he'd solved that little problem shortly after the end of WW and two.

After providing a fairly large group of temporarily unemployed Japanese and German colleges with less recognizable mugs, he joined 'em in partnership to share the cost of obtaining supplies from several discrete exporting companies located on Mainland China and Taiwan. It's true ya know. You really do get a better deal when you buy in bulk and share it among your friends.

So happy where these exporters with this profitable arrangement that they'd deliver whatever Doc wanted for a nominal fee without bothering a single US customs or immigration agent. Just think of all the cost in paperwork they saved the American taxpaying public. Makes ya feel all warm and tingly ... don't it?

And to think that some people say only Americans understand free enterprise!

However, as the big day approached, things on the other side of the planet were going down the toilet fast. That little territorial tiff between China and Taiwan had gone from bad too much worse. And guess what country couldn't wait to stick its big nose in the middle? Bingo! That's another cigar you've won! Not that I gave a rat's ass by then.

Like a man trying to beat the clock, Doc's operation had gone into overdrive. He was gonna solve the problem of transferring the memories of higher order animals, namely warm blooded mammalian critters, into a human brain. That's my brain for those of you out there that were a bit slow.

Hey, Mack! That's right ... the guy standing next to the sign. Can ya tell me what time it is? I seem to have lost my watch. What ya mean ya don't know? You been staring at that your wristwatch ever since I got here! Won't tell me, will ya? Screw you! I don't need ya! The Sun is coming up and I'll be warm enough to take off soon anyway.

Getting back on what I was saying. I guess I must've spent a solid week lying semiconscious on that operating table. Before the end I'd been injected with so much crud that I was expecting to see it leak out of my ears. For days on end, Doc tried one formula after another. For my part, I didn't have a clue what or who I was most of the time. I'm just glad he never forgot to keep my feeding tube going or I would've starved.

Ya know, it would've been funny if this crap had been happening to someone else.

For what felt like an eternity, he blasted me with his joy juice and interrogated me afterwards to see what animal memories I'd picked up. Feeling like I was floating miles above my body, I couldn't believe the nonsense that was popping out of my mouth. The following was pretty typical.

-----  
"Mr. Morton? Are you awake, Mr. Morton?"

"Who?"

"What can you remember, Mr. Morton? Do you know who you are?"

"I'm me!"

"Lets try something else. Do you know what your house looks like?"

"My borrow? Burrow deep! Burrow warm! Burrow safe! Burrow smell like me!"

"Good! Now we're getting somewhere. Tell me... what are you?"

"Me?"

"Yes! What are you?"

"I'm me!"

"No! No! No! What kind of animal are you?"

"What is animal?"

"Forget it! Just tell me what you look like!"

"Me strong! Me jump high! Me run fast!"

"No you idiot! What do you look like?"

"Beautiful! Me beautiful! Fur shiny! Eyes bright! Ears straight! Females like me!"

"Damn it! Just tell me what you are!"

"I'm me!"

"For crying out loud! You damned Jackass!"

"Me no Jackass. Me rabbit!"

"Finally! Keep going! Tell me what you remember."

"Me...in field. Me eating grass. Grass tastes great!"

"So you like grass?"

"Yes! Yes! Grass good! Clover better! Clover better than grass when eaten again!"

"Eaten again? Please explain."

"Explain? What is explain?"

"Tell me what you mean. What does eaten again mean?"

"Eaten again means eaten again! Me eat until belly full Me empty belly. Me turn around and eat what came out of belly again. Tastes great!"

"I see...."

"What see? See dog? See cat? Me no like dog! Me no like cat! Me run into burrow! Burrow safe! Burrow deep! Run away! Run away!"

"Calm down! You don't have to run away!"

"Run away where?"

"Your burrow."

"What ya talking about, Doc?"

"Mr. Morton?"

"The one and only. Who ya expecting... Elvis?"

"Where's the rabbit?"

"What rabbit?"

"I was talking to a rabbit! Don't you remember?"

"Nope."

"What about the burrow?"

"Sorry, Doc. I may not be able afford a big place after paying all 'em alimony checks, but I wouldn't call my little townhouse a burrow. Ya should come over some time to share a brew. From my porch ya can see the World Trade Center and Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty and ..."

"Shut up!"

"Bite my head off ... why don't ya? I was just trying to be neighborly."

"What about eating grass and clover."

"I smoked grass once, but I've never tried clover. How about sharing your stash, Elmer Fudd? I'd like to talk to wabbits and pink elephants too!"

"Sonofabitch! I'll kill you! I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

WHAP! WHAP! WHAP! WHAP! WHAP! WHAP! WHAP! WHAP! WHAP!

-----  
I'm glad I never had much interest in having kids; 'cause by the time Doc calmed down and finished pounding on me I seriously doubted if I'd ever be able to father any.

It wasn't long after this incident that I woke up on the operating table and found myself nose to nose with a four-foot long crocodile. There I was dreaming about being in bed with my third and future ex-wife Lola, when I felt something cold and wet touch my nose. Assuming that she'd climb on top for a little nighttime romp, I lifted my head off the pillow and returned her what I thought was her kiss with a little tongue action.

That's odd.

As much as I moved my tongue around, I couldn't feel her lips or taste her lipstick. And I sure in heck didn't remember her teeth being so sharp or widely spaced. Still groggy from Doc's sleepy time gas, I opened my eyes and discovered that I'd been swapping spit with Godzilla.

Excuse me, my more than generous audience, there's something I've got to do.



He seemed lost in thought as he sat beside the operating table. Something was bothering him and it was sending me into a panic all my own. Was he going to give up on me? Was he planning to abandon my treatments and try something new? Was he going to let that thing inside my skull return and kill me? I had to find out soon or I'd go crazy!

"How they hanging, Doc?"

Nothing. Not even a raised eyebrow. Shit! I'm in trouble now!

"Yo, Doctor Dolittle! Don't look now, but that cat-dog thingy you stitched together is climbing up the stairs!"

"What? Where?" he replied in a preoccupied tone. He gave the staircase only the most perfunctory of glances while petting the reptile dozing upon his lap.

"Just pulling your chain, Doc! It's almost noon already. When we starting?"

His mind clearly a million miles away, Doc just kept staring down as he absentmindedly scratched the swollen bump between the reptile's eyes. As you've probably noticed by now, Steve Irwin I ain't. I never did care much for most critters unless my mama, or any one of my three ex's, had a good recipe for 'em. And that went double for those that'd like nothing better than to jump out of the water and bite my butt off. But even I could tell that something wasn't quite right with that croc's head.

It was at this point that I noticed the wire snaking into Doc's right ear. With a little effort I could hear an excited sounding voice escaping from his helmet. I couldn't understand a single word, but it was obvious that the unknown speaker was agitated about something.

Before I could ask what was going on, Broken Nose showed up dragging a huge wooden crate.

"Doctor Merit?"

"Yes?" Doc replied without lifting his head or turning around.

"Where say you want box?"

After a deep sigh, Doc replied. "For the third time! Put that box into the van!"

The sound of mental gears grinding away was almost deafening. It was really painful to watch as Broken Nose's face twisted into a look of absolute concentration. Finally, just about when I expected him to explode from the effort, his eyes snapped opened and a revelation of cosmic import escaped his lips.

"Box heavy! Can't lift!"

"Then go get Vincent!"

"He upstairs. He listening to pork radio and watching street like you said."

"For the millionth time! That's a Ham radio!"

"What difference?"

"Forget it! Just leave that box right there until Vincent comes down for dinner. Until then I want you to keep on loading the other boxes into the ambulance. I want it done before it gets dark! Understood?"

"Yes, Doctor."

I knew I forgot to mention something! Ya won't want to believe this, but Doc had his own private ambulance. I don't know where he got it, but it was one sweet set of wheels. He could drive it anywhere and the cops never gave it a second look. And there was an added bonus. If the Mob happened to be a little behind on their deliveries, he'd just show up at a highway fender bender and help himself to a few specimens. Makes ya wonder about all 'em missing persons reports every year, don't it?

Where was I? Right ... the radio! Like I said, I couldn't hear what the voice on the radio was saying, but it sure had his attention.

"What about 'em Broncos? How's the game going, Doc?"

"What you say?" he asked absently as he continued to stroke the sleeping crocodile.

"How's the game going? Lose your shirt yet?"

Without a single word in reply to my lame attempt at a joke, Doc pressed a button on his helmet and the voice was cut off in mid word. Looking up as if noticing my presence for the first time, I saw his expression change. There wasn't a single doubt in my mind, and it took none of my poker playing skills

to read his face: Here was a guy planning to go down to the mat fighting.

"It's nothing that concerns you. We're all going on a short trip upstate in a few days. I've got a small place outside the city and we should be safe there until all this blows over."

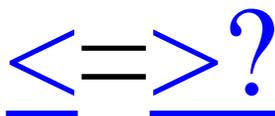
Safe? Blows over? Holy freakin' shit! Damn! Damn! Damn! Not now! Not when I'm so close! I might only be a few days from a complete cure and someone had finally caught onto him! Please God! Don't do this to me! I want to live!

It's embarrassing to say, but I pretty much lost it at this point. Screaming at the top of my lungs that I didn't want to die, I hardly noticed as Doc slapped the mask over my face and turned on the gas. As I fell into a very familiar bottomless pit, I heard his next words as if he were standing a thousand miles away.

"Don't worry, Mr. Morton. That is never going to happen."

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Choose your Chapter:



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Welcome to the second annual TSAT writing

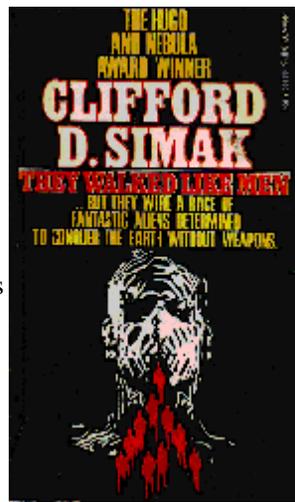
# CONTEST



Winners will be announced in the June/July issue of TSAT.

## THE PRIZES:

**First Prize** -- The classic paperback by Clifford D. Simak about "non-environmental" aliens with a plan to buy the world AND publication of the winning entry in the September/October 2001 issue of TSAT.



**Second Prize** -- A short story (1,000 to 10,000 words) written by a TSAT volunteer author to the specifications of your choice, consistent with TSAT's editorial policy. Your winning story entry AND the story written to specification would be published in the September/October issue of TSAT. The story written to specification would be published in a later issue of TSAT with a reference to you as creator of the concept for the story.

**Third Prize** -- Publication of your winning story entry in the September/October issue of TSAT.

## THE CONTEST:

Write an original story, never published or distributed anywhere, that describes both a transformation and clearly relates to the image above.

## HOW TO ENTER:

E-mail your story entry to TSAT by April 30, 2001 to the address below. Stories should be formatted as attachments in either Word Perfect or Microsoft Word format and the message header should read "TSAT Story Submission."

[tsat\\_editor@hotmail.com](mailto:tsat_editor@hotmail.com)

**THE JUDGES:** The judges will be the editorial staff of TSAT. Stories will be judged on the following criteria:

### MUST HAVE:

- At least one transformation (physical and/or mental) although more are acceptable.
- A story plot, not just a transformation vignette.

### AUTHORS GET EXTRA POINTS FOR:

- **Readability:** Yes Virginia, there is an editor, and he insists on good grammar and spelling. Please use your spelling checker, your grammar checker and have a friend read it before you submit.
- **Interest:** I once co-wrote a professional monograph on "The Use of Behavioral Techniques to Develop Nonverbal Approaches for Enhanced Participation in the Religious Process for Profoundly Mentally Retarded Individuals." It was an excellent paper and I have the reviews to prove it, but it was BORING. Tell a story that pulls at our heart strings, makes us laugh and cry, makes use relate to and care about the characters (both good and evil).

## THE SMALL PRINT:

You know there's always small print and here it is. We dare you to read it all, aloud, in one breath.

- The decisions of the judges are final.
- Current members of the volunteer staff of TSAT, including the judges or their immediate families, may not enter. This includes critters who published or assisted in the publication of TSAT during the current issue and any issue between this issue and the issue when the winners are announced.
- Submissions must be original works of the person submitting and may not have been published anywhere else or distributed to any mailing list or writers group (except TFWF or TG Writer's Forum) with more than 100 members.
- Sexual content must be limited to the equivalent of the AAMP "R" rating. Genitalia and sexual acts may be referred to and may be described, but not explicitly. The same applies to acts of extreme violence or depravity. Similarly, the use of vulgarity will be frowned upon, although it will be accepted if integral to the story plot. TSAT reserves the right to decline to accept or require re-writes of any material it deems unsuitable or inconsistent with its publishing standards prior to publication.
- TSAT will only provide editorial services to the winners and any additional entries it decides to seek permission to publish, although the judges may provide comments on their own.
- TSAT is not responsible for material lost on the Internet. We will try to provide confirmation of receipt of stories within 24 hours of their arrival at our e-mail drop. If you do not receive a confirmation of receipt, please check to make sure we have your submission.
- Physical prizes will be mailed within one week of award announcement. Materials will be mailed from the USA. TSAT assumes no responsibility for the various quirks and lapses in efficiency that may occur in any of the various mail delivery services that may be involved.
- In case of questions, please e-mail TSAT at the same address noted above for story submissions.

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# Columns ...

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## Editorial

by

[Jeffrey M. Mahr](#)

I Don't Need No Stinkin' Editor  
... and Other Famous Last Words

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## Guest Editorial

by

[Volk-Oboroten](#)

The role of science and pseudo-science in modern fiction.

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by

[Phil Guesz](#)

A continuing series of tips for writers. This time it's  
the heart wrenching guts of a good story.

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Editor?

I Don't Need No Stinkin' Editor  
... and other famous last words

by

[Jeffrey M. Mahr](#)

You know how there are always those professions that people really don't like? For example, lawyer, dentist, insurance agent and car salesman always seem low on any scale of likeability. I suspect editor is also in the running here. After all, many of you out there in electronic never-never-land must have had someone edit your work. Now be honest -- how many of you liked it?

I suspect I could be pushing it to expect even one "yes." Heck, I don't even like the thought of someone, stranger or friend, messing with my work. I'll bet the majority, possibly the *vast* majority of you feel the same. It takes a significant amount of inner strength to let someone else tell you that you need to make corrections to your work and a special type of "Zen" to accept the comments as potentially beneficial. For most of us, the basic assumption seems to be "editors stink."

Humm. It looks like I've just written myself into a corner. Maybe a good editor could help me here? Let's try this again, but this time, instead of jumping right to the "editors stink" stage, let me go through this a bit more slowly.

How many of you wonder why it takes so long to finish each issue? Two months seems an awfully long time when all that needs to happen is to put a file in html format and upload it. After all, there are tons of different programs out there that do each of these tasks just about automatically. Even allowing for a few minutes for a quick spelling check shouldn't take two months. Right?

The answer is like the line in the movie "The Graduate" where a friend of the parents of the title character tells Dustin Hoffman what is important in life, but in this case, instead of "plastics," the answer is "editing." Sure, we spend some time doing other things like the occasional site redesign, but mostly it's "editing."

I know, the obvious question, is how can it possibly take that long to edit a couple of stories? To answer that, I need to describe what actually happens when we edit a story.

Did you know that most stories published in TSAT are edited at least three times, often four, before they are even returned to the author the first time? It's true. Each edit is for a different reason and while the order in which they occur may change sometimes, the four edits are as follows.

## Spelling and Grammar

This is the easy part. Microsoft *Word* and Corel *WordPerfect* are two examples of word processors with built in spelling and grammar checkers and at least initially, we usually use one of them to get rid of the basic errors like "tjat" instead of "that." For the record, I think TSAT has only had one document submitted since its creation that did not have at least one spelling and/or grammar error.

The purpose of the spelling and grammar check is to make it easier to read. Duh, right? Well, if you've ever been reading a good book, totally enmeshed in the fantastic situations being painted by an outstanding wordsmith, only to be torn from your suspension of disbelief by a glaringly obvious mistake, you're lucky. For me, it means I'm once again an outsider, peering cautiously into someone else's world – and as an outsider I have time to wonder about why the hero did this or is this really the reasonable and logical thing to expect this character to do under the circumstances. On a couple of occasions, I've actually found myself putting down the book and not finishing it, because once I was no longer under the spell of the words, I realized that the situation was ludicrous. Clearly, good spelling and grammar will not make a bad story good, but it prevents a good story from appearing bad.

By the way, please don't assume the spelling and/or grammar checker is always right. They abso-bloomin-lootly are not. Sometimes an author will intentionally use a spelling or grammatical styling different from the norm. Sometimes, it's just trying to ask you to make sure you've used the highlighted word or phrase the way you want it or picked the right homonym (e.g., bare v. bear).

## Continuity

The second edit is for continuity. Does the main character's name change from paragraph to paragraph. Check out "No-Nac," one of my characters in *Thaumaturjekyll*. Andy and I had a heck of a time trying to insure continuity in that story, yet, despite all our efforts, I'm willing to bet there is at least once where it written as "Nac-No" instead. Much like it's simpler cousin the name change, sometimes a story starts in a one location (e.g., a bar) and ends in another (e.g., a manger) without telling the reader how it happened or the dreaded switch from first person (i.e., "I did it.") to third person (i.e., "He did it.") and back. In addition, at this time, we are checking to make sure there are no loose ends hanging about. To offer a minor, but still potentially annoying example of continuity and how the lack of it can interfere with the reader's enjoyment, how many of you noticed that *Continuity* is not underlined, like each of the other topic headings. Minor, but it dos take away from the professionalism of presentation.

# Content

The third, and usually final, edit comes when the story is read for content. We are finally asking if the story makes sense. One of the biggest problems for most authors is knowing what to include and what to not include in a story. Jack Chalker put together enough material for five books when he was creating the *Soul Rider* trilogy. Again, using my story, *Thaumaturjekyll*, as an example, Even after twelve chapters (you folks have only seen eleven) and more than 30,000 words, I've barely begun the story and have done remarkably little to flesh out the characters any where near as much as they should be fleshed out.

However, knowing what to put into a story is a small part of *content*. We once had to tell the author of a story that what he intended as a serious dramatic work, should be presented as high comedy. Sadly, you, our readers, have never seen that story as the author withdrew it after considering our comments. For the record, both Andy and I agonized over suggesting such a significant change, but felt it was more important to be honest with the author and so lost what could have been a truly fantastic story.

# The Fourth Edit

After all of the above, a story is sent back to the author. By the way, sometimes, we make changes and other times, we recommend changes.

We will NOT accept bad grammar or sloppy writing and, in those cases, we often just make the changes. Sadly, we sometimes miss things despite our attempts at vigilance.

We will suggest ways to make the story better. Sometimes, it's a change in the ending; other times, it's to reconsider a character's motivation. These are only SUGGESTIONS. Hopefully, you will agree with us (we like to be right once in a while too) and make changes as we've suggested, but I can assure you that we will NOT be upset if you don't accept them, which brings us to that fourth edit.

Once the author sends us a revised manuscript, it goes through the above process – the entire process – again. Like the old wine commercial with Orson Wells doing the voiceover, “We will publish no story before it's time.”

Jeffrey M. Mahr  
Managing Editor  
March 9, 2001

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*A short while ago, I began publishing a story entitled [For Love of Life](#), which used pseudoscience to justify the transformation. Immediately after the story was released, I started receiving a series of e-mails from the author of this guest editorial questioning some of the scientific principles in the story. He quite accurately suggested several corrections to improve the accuracy of my story and I decided that anyone who knew more than me (don't laugh I know there are a lot more of you out there, you just haven't been sending me e-mails) should be sharing that information with others. Thus, this guest editorial describing some of the more common pseudoscientific approaches. Enjoy.*

-- [Jeffrey M. Mahr](#)  
Managing Editor

# Guest Editorial

by

[Volk-Oboroten](#)

Many transformation stories involve ostensibly scientific methods of producing a metamorphosis. Sometimes, something goes awry when a mad scientist experiments on himself. More often, an evil genius uses another as a test subject, forcing his victim into another shape. What do these stories imply about the status of science in popular culture? Could any of them reflect actual changes wrought by scientific advances?

"The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde," published in 1886, was one of the earliest popular novels to present the transformation of a person in a supposedly scientific setting. In the story, a potion transforms an elderly professor into the wicked Mr. Hyde by performing age-regression, changing his appearance and setting his evil nature loose. It is interesting to consider that 20th century versions of this tale usually present the Hyde character as taller, stronger and more muscular than Jekyll. In Robert Louis Stevenson's book, Hyde was actually much shorter than Jekyll, as he reflected a less developed aspect of the scientist's persona. As Hyde started to gain control, his height increased, reflecting the growth of Jekyll's alter ego at the expense of his previously dominant personality.

The Jekyll-and-Hyde metamorphosis might be scientifically compared to a person who becomes addicted to a drug. At first, the drug only activates a previously dormant portion of his personality. Then, as the influence of the drug increases, it starts to consume the rest of his being. Like Dr. Jekyll, an addict must take ever-increasing doses in order to obtain a desired effect.

Many stories based on Stevenson's book present a character as split into two halves. However, in the original novel, Jekyll and Hyde do not appear to be polar opposites. Jekyll is actually a whole personality, with both good and evil factors, while Hyde is a destructive fragment, freed for independent action.

Some recent Jekyll-and-Hyde stories involve the metamorphosis of a mad scientist into an animal. Paddy Chayevsky's novel "Altered States" retained the drug theme from Stevenson's tale, describing the use of psychedelic drugs by a scientist to awaken his inner nature. He transforms into an ape-like proto-human after experimenting with a sensory deprivation tank. Partial changes occur later, as he experiences flashbacks from the drug, which seems to resemble LSD.

The general tone of Chayevsky's book suggests that transformation is a foolish goal. There is a clear parallel drawn between the scientist's devolution into a simian state, and his quest for an altered state of consciousness. Essentially, he seems to present a message that any person seeking such a drastic change is cutting himself off from the rest of society.

Chayevsky's book ends with a suggestion of the second type of transformation: evil scientists turning innocent victims into other forms. After the "Altered States" scientist abandons use of the psychedelic drugs, his colleagues decide to use them on local college students. After all, won't undergraduates do almost anything for a bit of extra money? It is implied that a few test subjects will be permanently turned into apes, but that does not bother the crazed experimenters.

H. G. Wells was the most prominent early promoter of certain themes common in current science fiction, such as alien invasions and time travel. In "The Island of Dr. Moreau," he presented transformations between animal and human forms in a scientific basis. In the January 19, 1895 issue of *The Saturday Review*, Wells wrote a purportedly serious article about changing animal structures by means of surgery. Was it really serious, or did it just reflect an early stage of the novel, published in 1896? In the *Review* article, entitled "The Limits of Individual Plasticity," Wells predicted that scientific investigators would soon revive the monsters of mythology, and use the artistic treatment of living beings to mold the commonplace into the beautiful or grotesque. The fictional mad scientist, Dr. Moreau, expresses similar aesthetic goals in his speeches in the book.

Dr. Moreau is more of an artist than a scientist, not so much seeking the truth, as hoping to create something beautiful. In modern terminology, he could be called a "plastic surgeon." Thus, H.G. Wells may have been partly correct in predicting the future course of science, as humans today spend vast sums of money to change their physical forms by means of surgery. Perhaps modern psychology reflects the other part of Moreau's work. Wells' fictional doctor claimed that alteration of mental structures was even easier than a physical metamorphosis. Is this really true? Recent studies indicate that some patterns of behavior may be recorded into the brain before birth, and not changed by later events, including drastic surgery.

Recent retellings of the Dr. Moreau story typically portray him a genetic engineer. Plastic surgery has become far too commonplace for people to accept it as a means for transforming an animal into a human. It just would not be realistic. Similarly, consider the B-movies of the 1950s, which often used radiation as a means for metamorphosis. This theme has faded, as concern about nuclear weapons has declined, and gamma rays are regarded as a cause of severe illness, not a form of magic.

So, what will happen in the future? I imagine most scientific-themed transformations will feature some

form of genetic change, at least until a new scientific breakthrough fills the popular imagination. A new revival of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde would be more likely to have the experiment involve DNA splicing than a quest for the nature of the human soul. A revised Incredible Hulk would probably de-emphasize gamma rays in favor of activation of atavistic genes. Thus, scientific transformation stories really reflect current concerns about science rather than anything likely to produce metamorphosis in the future. The few durable tales that accurately predict new technologies, like plastic surgery, will be drastically changed in perceived meaning. In either case, it is useful to include such themes in fiction, in order to make them both more believable and relevant to readers.

Some interesting websites:

<http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/alterstate.html>

Teaching Clinical Psychology, Fact and Fiction in "Altered States"

[http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~annaleen/Mad\\_Doctors.html](http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~annaleen/Mad_Doctors.html)

Mad Doctors, or How Professional Middle Class Labor Makes You Lose Your Mind

<http://freenet.msp.mn.us/org/mythos/mythos.www/JEKYLL.HTML>

Dr. Jekyll Hydeing in the Garden of Eden

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# The RABBIT'S HUTCH



by  
Phil Guesz

I believe, writers do not just write, not if they are any good at it, at least. *They must live as well.* Many of the grittiest and most famous writers of all time also have led very active and even dangerous lives, lives which did much to help enliven their fiction. Joseph Conrad, for example, was an accomplished professional mariner. His travels and, especially his personal high seas adventures, served to enrich his works in ways that nothing else possibly could. Arthur C. Clarke was an RAF radar man in the early days of electronics; the experience he gained very near the cutting edge of a crucial ongoing research program of vital national importance shows up again-and-again in his fiction. He knows, firsthand, exactly how scientists behave and work together when everything is on the line. Robert A. Heinlein was a professional US Navy officer and Annapolis graduate before ill health cut his military career short; both the sense of tradition with which he was imbued and exciting fleet exercises he participated in show up clearly in his work. One of my favorite bits of Heinlein prose is when he once described something as being "as subtle as a sixteen-inch naval rifle." Mr. Heinlein was able to come up with that particular turn of phrase almost certainly because of the simple reality that sixteen-inch naval rifles were an everyday fact-of-life for him over many years.

Jack London certainly thought actual adventures were vital to good writing. He wandered Alaska and the Pacific Northwest in search of good tales from real heroes. In his case, from what I have picked up over the years, the adventures came to him second-hand. One of London's great gifts was being able to absorb the essential sense of "being there" from a single chat in a dockyard bar; in getting those who had actually been places and done things but who would never dream of writing about it to open up and share the treasures they didn't even know they possessed. C.S. Forester, on the other hand, was a more genteel kind of adventurer. He was a successful-enough writer that he was able to afford long sea journeys aboard his own yacht. The imagery in his (mostly sea-related) novels is notably intense and insightful. This is because when he describes landfall in the Gulf of Fonescu, he is remembering the actual act as he types, feeling the hot sun on his face and picturing the twin volcanic peaks that mark the spot. When he spoke so eloquently of the difficulties of surviving a Caribbean hurricane in a sailing ship, he was able to do it so vividly because he had actually done it. Even one of his land-based (but most famous) novels, "The General," is filled with incredible insight and imagery. Again, this was because he served in the British Army during that conflict.

In my own writing, the few paltry adventures I have known have play leading, if not vital roles. In

"Transmutation Now!" I describe at great length a scene in which the hero is nearly run down by a barge. This is because I drove the survivor of a near miss with a barge back to her car once - she was still pale and shaking and -- quite understandably -- gibbering in fear as I did so. I also met the man who saved her and her two younger sisters lives right after the incident, as well. He very nearly died in the attempt, and was still "pretty squirrely" himself. He has since appeared as a minor character in literally dozens of my works.

My own role that day has appeared too. I did nothing to help, honestly not even being aware that there was a problem until it was over as the tugboat and the barge blocked my view of the unfolding events. To this day, I still feel a vaguely indefinable sense of guilt that I stood by and did nothing that day while a hero and three innocents nearly died. I know that I could have done nothing different, and that I was probably too far away to help even if I had known. This was not at all my fault, but it is true nonetheless and this emotion has, albeit indirectly, found its way into my works.

I cannot say that I've led a particularly exciting life, but the exciting and emotional incidents in it have provided what color and excitement my writings hold, and I don't think I could write anything at all had I not experienced at least a few adventures along the way. Let me give a few examples of how real life adventure can translate itself into fiction.

One of the few works I have ever written that I am truly proud of is "Corpus Lupus." The core inspiration for the original work was an incident that seems most unlikely upon the telling. I was wheeled into a hospital waiting room, heavily drugged and prepped for minor surgery. By the purest of chances, right alongside my bed was a child waiting for surgery, a boy about 11. All the nurses save the one actually tending me were clustered around this child, who was wailing in the most chillingly weak and unearthly voice you can possibly imagine. "I'm cold!" he would cry out, then "I want my Mommy! Where's Mommy?" Meanwhile the nurses calmed him as best they could, taking turns walking away to wipe the tears from their eyes. I found out later from my mother, who was out in the waiting room, that this little boy had been deliberately soaked in gasoline and set afire by his best friend. Even the families of the two had been close friends, and Mom described the scene in the waiting room as nigh onto incredible. First the two families would hug and comfort one another, then they would back away for a time as the true horror of what had happened and who had done what to who set in. Then they would start crying again, instinctively reach out for one another once more, and then repeat the cycle over and over and over again. By the way, I do not know if the boy lived or died; Mom said that from what she gathered he had a chance but not a good one. I frankly do not want to know.

Now, if this incident does not have the makings of the purest horror story imaginable I do not know what does. "Corpus Lupus" was quite consciously written as the result of wanting to write a story and trying to recall the most horrible thing I had ever witnessed at one and the same time. If you have actually read "Lupus," note all the details I lifted from real life. The tale was largely about several children who were tortured to death. In the key incident, the peak of horror is reached when a dying lump of mutilated flesh suddenly becomes human again for just a brief moment, far too late to survive, but just long enough to cry out for its mommy. The viewpoint the incident is seen through is twisted and distorted by a drug-like magic, with effects much like those of the actual drugs I was on at the time. Even more, the whole work is about all about the demeaning of life and what happens when it loses its sanctity. The tale was also

largely inspired by a discussion I had just had with my wife regarding the moral legitimacy and social role of the military. Anyone who knows me knows that I am very pro-military. Please do not misunderstand me here, but they kill in people a socially sanctioned manner, and, largely as a result of their very special lifestyle and obligations, live in a separate social circle. It is no accident that the necromancers in "Corpus" all wear identical clothing and that their training center is called an "academy" -- but I digress.

Another very useful adventure for me has been the result of a strange coincidence in my youth. The house where I grew up had a very memorable phone number, so much so that when the local government set up their drug hot line for teens they requested a number identical to ours with two digits reversed. Several times over the years, I listened to my mother attempting to "talk down" high and scared kids who had dialed wrong. A few times I got to talk to them myself, when I was only their age or younger. This shows up well in my "Blind Pig" stories.

Once I was confronted at work with a distraught worker who called in threatening suicide due to some work-related problems. She asked for me, as she wanted me to deliver one last angry message. Her best friend and I tried to talk her down for almost an hour before she attempted -- and thankfully failed -- to take her own life. Not only will I never forget that hour, but I will also never forget the pain and hopelessness of our failure to prevent her last, ultimate gesture of frustration and anger. I have not used this one yet, but I will.

I have also been in close proximity to two tornadoes, the memories of which show up in "Winds of Destiny." While young and foolish, I used to regularly get into police chases for purely recreational purposes and many of the escape scenes in "Transmutation Now!" come from my frantic escapes back then. I have quite a bit of experience with various firearms. I have had American Nazi Party members -- as well as moonshiners and a militarized religious cult -- try to recruit me. I have known heroes, bigots, winners and losers. I have participated in to-the-hilt political battles that have lasted for years and once I jumped a man who had a rifle aimed squarely at me; it was a friend, who was very dangerously joking around with an unloaded weapon, but I did not know that when I jumped at him. I have been roaring drunk and, more commonly, the only sober one among crowds of drunks. I have seen both hatred and love on scales that I would never have believed possible, had I not witnessed the events firsthand. All of these things, all of them and more, have made it possible for me to write with some authority about life and what it means. Without these adventures, I could not begin to write even with what little skill I have despite having read thousands of books detailing the adventures of others.

My father has led an incredibly adventurous life as well; even today I often just sit and listen to him tell of surviving helicopter crashes, working on secret military projects, doing important civilian work in exotic locales and going out hell-raising with the original astronauts during the Gemini program. Many of these tales he only feels safe telling now, long after the cold war is over and I am sure there are many more that he keeps mum about even today. Anyone familiar with my work can see where listening to these adventures has led me as well. They are perhaps the deepest essence of my work and I have tapped into them over and repeatedly.

As a point of interest, when people write to complain about something in my stories, to say that I have finally gone beyond the limits of credulity, usually what they are concerned about is an incident that actually came from real life. Reality is far more complex and fascinating than anything we can ever imagine. I consider these complaints to be the most convincing possible proof of this, and they underline the need for writers to seek out real experiences even more clearly than anything else I might say. There simply is no substitute!

Stories without a sense of adventure are, to me, much like life would be without real adventure -- pointless and unfulfilling. If you want to write, ***I strongly encourage you to get out and live***, or else at least read about other people living, fighting and struggling to survive and do right in a world gone utterly mad. Mussolini once said that war is what brings out both the best and worst in humanity. I think he was wrong. It is not war that does this, but adventure. War does so only in that oftentimes it is the most intense adventure of them all.

So, turn off your damned computer for once and go for a walk! Who knows whom you might meet or what could happen along the way? Turn off that damn silly television. Stephen King recently said that giving up TV was excellent advice for any writer, and I can but second him heartily. Go rent a boat; boats make for great adventures! Go drive in the country, and stop at the most ragged-looking truck stop you can find. Sit and drink a soda there, quietly listening to the professional drivers and how they talk among themselves. Get a friend to take you shooting. Even if you do not like guns, at least you will be able to write about them with more authority and feeling. Volunteer to work with the political group of your choice, go help sick kids, sit down next to your oldest neighbor and get him or her to tell you about how things used to be. Do not just learn facts; ***learn how things feel***.

Finally, after you have gone and done something, been somewhere and seen something, write about it! You will be amazed at how quickly your stuff gets better as a direct result. Your life will get better too -- or at least more interesting -- I promise, which is kinda the point, isn't it?

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# Artwork

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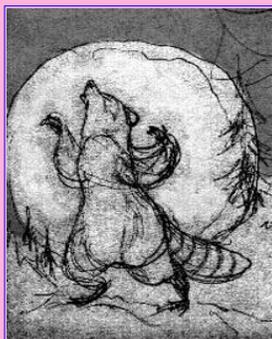


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Yes, we're looking for someone to maintain the books for the ezine.

Interested parties, please contact the [Managing Editor](#).

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## Volunteers Wanted

This is a volunteer organization and we need more of you. If you have any interest in helping to make TSAT as good as it can be, please volunteer. We need ...

### Artists

Send us your transformation-related art, or even ideas for art you would like to see.

### Authors

Send us your stories. We'll work with you to make them all that they can be.

## Columnists

Got a topic you'd like to address, we do, but we need people who can write knowledgeably in those areas to make it work. Some topics we would like to cover more thoroughly are Convention Info and Highlights, Art, Movie, and/or Story Reviews, TSA-Talk Gossip, and Best of the Transformation Ring.

## Programmers

We need people to write the ASP code to let use [1] do survey's, [2] automate our Index, [3] help us run auctions, and [4] add sound capability to our site.

## Sound Editor

We would like to expand to provide music and sound bites that reflect transformation and transformation related audio and we need someone to search out the best bits.

This isn't the army so please [click here](#) to volunteer.

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