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A Novel

By William Bowles

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Instalment One

The doctor looked at me skeptically over her half-moon glasses. I fidgeted uneasily in the chair in front of her crowded desk, covered in pharmaceutical company freebies and an enormous computer monitor.

'Are you implying that I did this to myself?' My voice cracked up half an octave.

'Now don't get excited Mister Babrovsky, I'm not implying anything. I just need to know the exact circumstances.'

'Excited! You mean I shouldn't get excited about this? My body seems to have a life of its own, doing things that I have no control over and you accuse me of doing it to myself!'

'Well, first you insist that you're almost sixty years old yet you don't look a day over thirty. You tell me that three months ago your hair was going gray, and quite short, and now it's jet black and down to your shoulders. Not exactly proof of anything at all considering that this is the first time you've been to see me. What am I meant to think?'

'But my body?' I whinged.

'What's wrong with it?'

'It's not mine that's what's wrong with it! It's changed shape. I've got tits! My -' I paused, embarrassed, 'my genitals are shrinking! My clothes don't fit me any more. Even my feet have shrunk! They bang around inside my shoes. And my teeth? What about my teeth?'

'Well you're extremely lucky to have such good teeth. I congratulate you on looking after them so well, given what age you say you are.'

'But they're new. And I am fifty eight for Christ's sake!'

'New?'

'Well look at them.'

I bared my pearly white, perfect teeth in what must have been a disgusting grimace, to the doc.

'Look, there's nothing wrong with you. Everything you've told me so far and together with your physical, point to a young man in perfect health. Admittedly, you may have some kind of hormone imbalance judging by...' she paused, 'Well, how can I put it? Your figure.'

I felt myself blushing, and embarrassed, I dug out my passport and handed it to her.

'Look, here's my passport if you don't believe me.'

I handed over my seven year-old passport. She opened it at the back and frowned.

'Are you sure this is yours?'

I got up to leave.

'Look, I've had enough. You obviously don't believe me, why I would go through this humiliating experience...'

'Mister Barovsky,' she interrupted, 'Believe me, people come to see me for all kinds of reasons, often only vaguely connected to their actual state of physical health.'

'So I'm a, what? A hypochondriac? A nutter? A transsexual whose lost it completely?'

'Well...'

I burst into tears and started shaking uncontrollably.

'Please Mister Babrovsky.'

She got up and moved around the desk and helped me to the examination table.

'I'm sorry.' I said, 'This is really embarrassing. I don't know what's happening to me. Believe me, I came to see you only after the longest while. I'm desperate.'

'I can see you're very upset Mister Babrovsky but there's nothing really for me to go on. Would you like me to recommend a therapist?'

This really got me going.

'A therapist! Look, I can prove to you that what I'm telling you is the truth! You need only talk to my friends, the people at my job, they'll all tell you the same thing.' I blurted it out between sobs. 'How could I make this all up? It's so easy to verify.'

'Okay, look, I'll make an appointment for you to have a complete medical exam, blood, urine, DNA, scan, the works. In the meantime, I'll give you a prescription for a sedative, something to calm you down.'

'I don't need calming down,' I shouted in between sobs, 'I need an answer.'

Despite my objections she handed me the prescription and looking at her watch, it was clear it was time for me to leave.

'I'm really sorry but I'm way behind. I've got surgery full of patients,' and by implication, people who were really sick.

'Come by later and pick up the letter for the hospital appointment, okay?'

She made reassuring movements and ushered me condescendingly to the door.

'I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this. Try not to worry.'

Fucking doctors, I muttered as I left the surgery.

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'Well I've got the results of your exam and, well...I don't know how to put this but...'

'But what?'

'Let's go back to the beginning shall we. When did you first notice the, the changes?'

'Well it's over three months ago now, almost four months.'

'And?'

'Well it's difficult to know where to start really but I suppose it was my hair. I normally keep it quite short and cut it about every couple of months or so. Actually it was the haircutter who mentioned it. She asked me if I was dying it. She wanted to know who had done it.'

'And had you?'

'No of course not'. Well in any case, she didn't believe me. I think she was a bit pissed off thinking that I'd gone to another hairdresser. In any case, I swore to her that I hadn't. Then, she mentioned that it was black at the roots. She gave me a really weird look. I asked her what was wrong and she just shook her head and muttered, 'Nothing'.

'No, come on, what's up?' I said.

'Well it's really long, there's no way it could have grown so long in such a short time. Are you taking anything?' she asked.

'Taking anything? Like what?'

'Well, herbs, I dunno.'

I assured her that I hadn't taken anything and the issue was dropped.

'And then what happened?'

'Well, my teeth started falling out.'

'Falling out? You mean literally falling out?'

'Yes, one by one. I was freaked out. I thought I had some kind of awful gum disease so I went to the dentist.'

'And?'

'Well unlike you,' the doctor scowled at me, 'Unlike you, the dentist was freaked out.'

'Why?'

'Well new teeth were growing out to replace the ones that had fallen out. Like I was a baby.'

The doctor looked skeptical.

'Look doctor, here's the name and phone number of my dentist, check with him if you don't believe me.'

I handed her the dentist's card.

'Okay, I believe you. Then what?'

'I couldn't get into my clothes. First my underwear wouldn't fit, it was suddenly too small across my hips and too large around my waist. Then my pants were too narrow and too long. Then my shoes were too big. Then shirts and jackets, they were all too big, and too small if you get my drift. Everything.'

'Over what period of time was this?'

'Well I suppose about six weeks or maybe two months.'

The Doctor was frantically scribbling everything down and referring to the report she'd gotten from the hospital.

'Then what?'

'Well I stopped shaving. I mean I've never had a heavy beard, I shaved maybe every couple of days, but then I realised it wasn't growing at all. And my skin got softer, smoother, I dunno. It changed. And then my boobs, I mean my breasts, I mean you've seen them. It's embarrassing, people think I'm a freak.'

'Mister Babrovsky, I have to ask you this, so please try not to get angry but have you been taking hormones?'

'Hormones? What kind of hormones? You mean female hormones, estrogen that kind of thing?'

'Well,' she seemed genuinely embarrassed, 'Only female hormones could have this effect and extremely heavy doses at that. If you are and I'm not saying you are, but if you are and you're not under the care of a physician, they can be extremely dangerous if taken without a complete analysis and then a prescription.'

'No! Never! Well I mean, not knowingly.'

'Hmmm...'

She was clearly still not convinced.

'And in any case, since when have female hormones made anyone's teeth grow back?'

'Look Mister Babrovsky, I know you think I don't believe a word you say and really, can you blame me? I don't know yet how to explain what's happening, so I'm trying to exclude all the possible causes of which a hormone imbalance is one possible cause.'

'What did the tests say?'

'Before we get to the tests.'

'No! Not before. Tell me now.'

'What do you know about chromosomes?'

'Well men have a Y and women an X, or is it YY and XX?'

'Yes, well some men are borne with an XXY chromosome but normally it's XY.'

'And I'm one of them?'

'No Mister Babrovsky, you're not. You should have XY chromosomes like most men. And you are to all intents and purposes a man, admittedly with a host of female characteristics, but a man nevertheless. We know now that the boundary between male and female is more blurred than we used to think. But your tests, well it's impossible, that's why I want you to go back for more tests, there must have been some mistake at the hospital as you test as having XX chromosomes, which is impossible I know.'

'Which means what?'

'That genetically you're a female, which of course, based on everything you've told me, is impossible.'

The specialists in the hospital were very kind to me. But it was also clear that all of them saw groundbreaking papers in all the important medical journals, with their names on them of course. Maybe even, the odd Nobel or two. They fussed around me and generally treated me with kid gloves. They ran all the tests again, X-rayed me, and took swabs from my mouth, examined every inch of my body. Weighed me, measured my height. Then they took a full body CAT scan.

They tried to get me to stay in the hospital for a couple of days. I refused. Two days later, they asked me to come back. My boss was getting pretty fed up with me taking off so much time but what could I do?

'I'm a freak then?'

The head specialist, a Doctor Friedland, ushered me into his office, asked me if I wanted a cup of tea and we sat down in comfortable armchairs. He had my file, thick with papers by now, which he set down on the coffee table in front of us.

'Look Mr. Babrovsky, I, that is, we, don't know how to explain all this to you. What's happening to you is, well frankly, it's impossible.'

'Well Dr Friedland, with all due respect, I could have told you that.'

As I spoke, my voice broke – up an octave. There was an embarrassed silence and a shuffling of papers. Dr Friedland cleared his throat.

'But there's no doubt about it, you do appear to be turning into a female. I mean from the basic level, your chromosomes, everything. At least that's what we think is happening. The process is, well, how can I put it? Incomplete?'

I sat there.

'You don't seem surprised.'

'I might be a freak doctor, but I'm not stupid. Even I can see that something very fundamental is happening to me, to my body. I can feel it, inside, aches and pains in my bones. Sometimes I feel nauseous. But worst of all is at work. My boss looks at me and shakes his head and mutters. I'm sure I'm going to get fired real soon. My work mates won't talk to me. My so-called friends shun me. I'm a fucking pariah!'

My high, soft voice made the word fucking and how I said it, sound ridiculous.

'We want you to stay here for a while.'

'What, so you can observe? Write a paper on me. Break new ground. Will you pay my mortgage when I get fired?'

'Mr. Babrovsky, believe me, there are big issues involved here. What appears to be happening to you is unprecedented. It breaks all the rules of genetics. It just shouldn't be happening. We want to know why. This is the biggest thing in biology since the double helix.'

'Is it reversible?'

'Mister Babrovsky, we don't know what causes it, yet. We don't even know what the outcome is.'

'So you're absolutely clueless. I'm going home.'

'Please, I wish you would reconsider. There could be dangers involved.'

'You mean to my health? Like what kind of dangers?'

'That's the point, we don't know. But if the process continues, there will be further, major alterations to your anatomy. I'm sure you can guess what they'll involve.'

I broke out in a cold sweat when he said that.

'You mean?'

'Well, there could be complications.'

'What sort of complications?'

'We have no idea. There's nothing to go on. As I said, this entire process is without precedent.'

'I'll take my chances doctor.'

'Well at least take my number just in case.' He handed me his card.

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The next few weeks turned into a nightmare. First, I lost my job. Too many days off plus my boss just couldn't deal with the change in my appearance but he was too embarrassed to actually raise it with me. Out of sight, out of mind I suppose. In any case, he finally called me into his office and said that he had to let me go. He barely raised his head from the papers on his desk. I felt so ill, I didn't even have the energy to fight it. In a way I was relieved, I didn't have to tolerate the strange looks and comments on the bus or in the street anymore. Going to the supermarket was worst of all. The checkout girls all knew me, I'd been going there for a couple of years. One or two made sympathetic noises, asking me if I was okay, was I ill? They giggled behind my back. On top of all the changes, I know I looked like shit. My hair was really long and straggly, none of my clothes fitted me and I hadn't washed them in weeks. I was a real mess.

I got a letter from Doctor Friedland and took it to the Job Centre. They read it with a certain amount of disbelief but in the end, they said they'd pay up and I was also able to get housing benefit so I could pay my mortgage. At least I wasn't going to end up on the street. My life was falling apart and on top of it all, my body was undergoing further rapid changes to which my reaction was total denial. I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror. I covered up the one in bathroom and took all the other ones down. It was as if my body belonged to someone else. I kept the curtains drawn and the lights off. I stopped eating and worst of all I stopped going out. I still find it difficult even to talk about it. Friedland phoned me up almost every day, imploring me to come into see him but I refused. What could they do? They didn't even know what was going on. They couldn't stop it and they didn't know where it would end. I felt as if I had a terminal disease, which in way I did when I look back on it.

All of my friends deserted me. I was thankful I was no longer married. I suppose they thought I was going through some kind of psychological breakdown and were too embarrassed to talk to me or be seen with me. My sense of isolation was complete. I ended up lying around my apartment wearing nothing but a large and dirty tee shirt and baggy sweat pants, they were the only clothes I had that fit me, in what I can only describe as a fugue state, neither conscious or unconscious, continually sweating and shivering as if I had a fever.

I woke up early in the morning. I knew something was wrong. At first I thought I'd peed myself but it didn't feel like pee. It was slippery to the touch. My stomach was churning. I broke out into a cold sweat. I was even afraid to turn on the light. I knew something was badly wrong. I finally plucked up the courage and flipped on the bedside lamp and threw back the covers.

There was blood everywhere. I panicked and fell out of the bed sideways. The sheets were soaked. Blood was dripping off me onto the carpet. I felt sick and faint. Somehow I found Friedland's card and phoned him. The ambulance arrived about twenty minutes later and it was all I could do to reach the door and buzz them in before I passed out.

End of Instalment One