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A Novel
By William Bowles
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Instalment Two

They told me I was really lucky to be alive. Another thirty minutes or so and I'd have bled to death. Doctor Friedland came into my room and sat down next to my bed.

'You're a very lucky...man,' he said.

'Oh really? How do you figure that out? You're not even sure what I am are you.'

There was a long silence during which Friedland shuffled papers and looked very embarrassed.

'Well I'm not sure if this is the right time to tell you.'

'Tell me? Tell me what?'

'We're pretty sure that the process has reached some kind of conclusion.'

The nurses were all very sympathetic but it was obvious they didn't know how to deal with me. They would come into my room and fumble over my name. They weren't sure whether to call me Mister or Miss Babrovsky. Embarrassed silences would follow. Worst of all was the fact that the press had discovered my 'dilemma' and the hospital were under siege from reporters. All kinds of rumors were circulating about me. I'd instructed Doctor Friedland not to say a word but that hadn't stopped all kinds of stories doing the rounds. According to the nurses, there had even been offers to buy my story.

I'd been 'under observation' for a couple of days, following my admission. About six specialists including Friedland surrounded my bed.

Doctor Friedland broke the silence. 'Miss Babrovsky, may I call you that?'

I shrugged. 'Whatever.'

'Well, however you view yourself, the reality is, that you now have the body of a woman and every respect, I might add.'

I felt sick.

'What do you mean, in every respect?'

'Well the night we brought you in was, well, all we know at this point is that the...hemorrhage, was in reality the onset of,' another embarrassed silence, 'Menstruation.'

A lot shuffling around followed Friedland's words.

'How can this be? You said I was hemorrhaging.'

'Well yes you were, that is, had you been a normal woman, that's what we would have called it. But in your case, it seems to have been well, frankly, we're not sure but it seems that whatever process is, that is, has been, at work, resulted in a rather traumatic change to your, internal genital structure, something that your body was obviously not equipped to deal with. So instead of a regular monthly,' another pause, 'discharge, your body was not fully equipped to handle it. Put another way, the process of menstruation kicked in, but your body couldn't turn it off. We think it kicked in before, well I suppose the best way to describe it is, having the right equipment.'

'And now?' I replied.

'Well, as I said, the process seems to have reached some kind of conclusion.'

'In other words, next month, I won't bleed to death, is that what you're saying?'

Another of the doctors, a small, attractive woman, broke in, 'Miss Babrovsky, if we knew what was going on, we'd tell you. This event, it's, well it's unprecedented.'

'And you are Doctor...?'

'I'm sorry, my name is Omar, and I'm not a doctor, I'm a geneticist. The fact is, what has happened to you, is frankly impossible yet it's happened. You've broken all the rules of genetics.'

'And you're anxious find out why, is that it?'

'Well obviously, yes.'

I was trembling and it was visible to everyone.

'Are you okay?' Friedland said.

'No! I'm not okay!' My voice was verging on the hysterical and I knew I was on the verge of breaking into sobs. The white coats around me were distinctly embarrassed by my outburst. Doctor Friedland summoned a nurse and muttered something to her and she left the room, to return moments later with a syringe.

'Perhaps we should give you some time to, get used to your situation. Nurse is going to give you something to calm you down. It's just a sedative that's all.'

I nodded and submitted to the needle. Gratefully, the room faded from view.

* * * *

'Miss Babrovsky?'

The voice reached me through a fog of sleep and I opened my eyes. The same nurse who'd administered the sedative was bending over me and shaking my shoulder gently.

'Wake up.'

I rolled over and looked up at her. I felt like shit and god knows what I looked like.

'How are you feeling?'

'Like shit.' I was suddenly very aware of the fact that what I'd just said sounded distinctly strange coming out of my mouth. My voice was high and strained. It didn't belong to me.

'Well Miss Babrovsky, it's not surprising considering what you've been through.'

'How long have I been out? Come to that, what day is it? And I'm really thirsty.'

'You've been asleep for about six hours and it's Wednesday and there's water next to you.' She gestured to the bedside table.

'Thank you. What's your name?' I tried to lever myself up with my arms but I didn't seem to have the strength. The nurse helped me and did that nurse thing with the pillows behind me, poured a glass of water and passed it to me.

'I'm Nurse Taylor.' And, as after thought, 'Christine. I can see you're feeling much better.'

'I'm not sure what I feel, Christine?' She indicated that calling her by her first name was okay.

'Frankly, I feel numb.'

'Well that's not surprising considering what you've been through, now is it.'

I think she was happy that we'd reached that neutral, nurse-patient space. She fussed around me, stuck a digital thermometer under my armpit, held my wrist gently between finger and thumb and looked at her watch.

'Okay, are we?'

I said nothing but nodded slightly. Satisfied that everything was now under control, she retrieved the thermometer, then got the chart from the end of the bed and wrote on it.

'Doctor Friedland will be in to see you shortly. If you need anything push the buzzer,' indicating the box on the end of a grey cable next to me, as she opened the door and left the room with a condescending smile on her face, which I'm sure she intended to be reassuring.

My tummy started to rumble noisily. Hesitantly, I moved my hand under the bedclothes, down toward my tummy, consciously avoiding my chest. Tentatively, I moved further down toward my genitals. The hospital gown was slightly clammy. As I expected, there was nothing there. Well, obviously something was there. A feeling of panic was rising, starting in my stomach. I broke into a cold sweat. I pulled my hand out from under the bedclothes as if I'd found a scorpion between my legs.

The door to my room opened and Doctor Friedland swept in with yet another reassuring, 'everything's under control' smile on his face, which disappeared the second he saw my face. He rushed over to me and grabbed hold of my shaking hand and held on to it firmly.

'Okay, everything's okay.' He put a cool palm on my forehead. 'You're having a panic attack. Just try and relax. Take a deep breath.'

I did as I was told.

'That's' it. Now breathe out – slowly. There, that's better isn't it.'

I nodded. The nausea in my stomach retreated somewhat.

'Look, I can't pretend that this is going to be easy. It's going to take some time for you to – adjust to, your new circumstances. But from what we can ascertain, you are healthy, in fact in prime condition aside of course from you're psychological state. Believe me, there's nothing wrong with you, physically.'

'No, I'm just falling apart mentally, is what you mean.'

He pulled up a chair; still holding on to my hand with that bedside manner they must practice at medical school. I looked away from him suddenly feeling embarrassed. Was I blushing for fuck's sake?

'This is going to take some time, you have to face that fact. I think perhaps that we were rather hasty today, for which I apologise on behalf of my associates and myself.'

I nodded without looking at him.

Eventually, I looked up and stared at him. 'Have you got any ideas yet about what happened to me?'

He shook his head. 'I wish we did believe me but all we can do is speculate. Well let me redefine that.' Taking a deep breath, 'We know what happened, but we don't how or why.'

'Tell me.'

'Well, your entire genetic structure, is, how can I put it? Flipped.'

'Flipped?' I said, not without sarcasm.

'Yes, from male to female at the most fundamental level, your genes and chromosomes and, in turn all, as far as we can tell, your internal organs as well as all your secondary sexual characteristics, hair, skin, body shape and the eh...'

'I take it the and so on bit refers to my genitals.'

'He nodded, embarrassed.'

'Like I was reborn?'

'Well I suppose that's one way of looking at it, yes. Yes, reborn that's a good description.' He said rather too cheerily.

'We can only assume at this point anyway, that when your genetic structure flipped, it set in motion the chain of events which led to all the other changes to your body, but frankly, we simply don't know enough to be sure if that's what really happened. It just seems to be the logical progression.'

'So you mean now, I'm a woman in every respect? I can get pregnant? After all, you're telling me I've already menstruated.'

'Well, under normal circumstances I'd say yes but...'

'But these are not normal circumstances are they,' interrupting him.

'Well no, obviously they're not.'

'What do you think I am doctor?'

'Well, judging by appearances and the thorough examination we made, you're a woman.'

'You mean in the legal sense?'

'You mean, if I had to go into court today and swear as to your sex? Yes, I'd have to say you're a woman by any current definition of the word.'

I nodded and sighed deeply.

'The problem is of course, I don't feel like a woman. I mean inside my head I don't.'

'Do you mind if I take some notes?' He said, getting out a small black book and a pen.

'No, I suppose not, though I assume this conversation is confidential, between you and me.'

'Well, I might want to share them with my colleagues. You okay with that?'

'I suppose so.'

'Good. Okay, please continue. I'd like to know what you mean by inside your head you feel like a man.'

'Am I in denial?'

'No- no, not at all. I'm not suggesting that, I'm not suggesting anything, I would just like to know what you are feeling about yourself. I think it's important.'

'Well, for example, I can't bring myself to touch myself much less, look at myself. That's what triggered the panic attack I think. It was like...'

'Like what?'

'Well, like I'd been invaded. That my body had been taken over by, well I know this sounds stupid, but by an alien. Not from outer space or anything, but that my mind, my head? was suddenly stuck into, onto some one else's body.'

Friedland was scribbling in his little black notebook.

'Please, continue.'

'Well, I suppose to some extent I am in denial aren't I?'

'Well you tell me.'

'What do I look like doctor?'

'Do you want a mirror?'

I shook my head, 'No, not right now thanks. I must look like shit anyway.'

'Considering everything you've been through, you look remarkably well.'

Inexplicably I said, 'Flattery will get you nowhere.'

'Well at least you've still got a sense of humor.'

He smiled and I found myself breaking into a grin.

'Look, I think I know what you're going through. The next few weeks are going to be difficult. You're under no obligation, once we're sure that you're in good health, to remain here. But...'

'But you'd like to take me apart and see what makes me tick.'

Looking embarrassed, he nodded.

'I can understand that doctor. I'm sure I'd feel the same if I was in your shoes.' I felt a joke coming on but didn't voice it, although it must have shown on my face.

'What's so funny?'

'Nothing really I...well, I was about to say that a week ago, I was in your shoes so to speak.'

'Very good, yes. Very witty.'

An uneasy silence followed.

'Look Doctor, I'm really hungry. Can I get something to eat and I need to pee real bad?'

'Do you want to go to the toilet or use a bedpan? You know you're hooked up to a catheter?'

The enormity of the question wacked me in the side of the head. I flustered and blushed and was at a complete loss for words.

'No, I didn't, I mean, I can't feel anything...down there.' Like it was a foreign country.

'You're going to have to face your new plumbing sooner or later, you know that don't you.'

'Yes, I know that, but I'm not sure I'm ready for it right now.'

'That's okay, just relax your sphincter muscles, can you do that?'

'This is really embarrassing. It's like I've got amnesia, I don't know what to do.'

'Well perhaps we should remove the catheter? Then you can use a bedpan if you don't want to use a toilet. How strong do you feel? Do you think you can walk?'

He got up and moved to the other side of the bed and held up a bottle connected to a hose that disappeared under the bedclothes, full of a dark yellow liquid.

'This is yours you know,' somewhat redundantly.

'So my plumbing works then, at least when I'm asleep or out of it?'

'Yes. Look, there's nothing wrong with you physically, everything works.'

I tried to focus on peeing, you know, letting go, but I felt embarrassed. Sensing it, Friedland got up.

'I'll leave you to it shall I. If you need me, you know what to do.'

I nodded, and with the doctor out of the way, I returned to the problem of taking a pee. I found out that it actually wasn't that difficult but for the meantime I resolved to let the catheter do the job for me.

I buzzed the nurse and got something to eat and then fell asleep without even realising.

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Nurse Taylor woke me up with a cheery 'Good morning Miss Babrovsky,' and asked me how I felt and would I like some breakfast, to which I replied that I felt okay and that a cup of good strong coffee would be great. Relieved that it didn't seem as if I was going to freak out on her, she left and returned later with a mug of awful instant crap. At least I still had a taste for decent coffee.

'This all you've got?'

'Sorry, that's it I'm afraid.'

'I'll have some tea instead then.' She looked put out but departed with the mug anyway and returned a couple minutes later with a cup of weak tea about which I said nothing. I didn't want to piss her off completely.

'The doctor's coming to see you soon. We need to examine you and change your sheets and give you bed bath.'

She checked the pee bottle and seeing that it was nearly full, she disconnected it and attached an empty one. She fussed around with the bedclothes and the pillows but seemed reluctant to go any further. Perhaps she'd been warned. I asked her for a newspaper and she said she'd have a look for one. It was so long since I'd taken any notice of the world around me; I had no idea what was going on. When she came back with a copy of the Sun, I was sorry I'd asked. There was a head on page one about me (turn to page 4). Thankfully no photos but quite a long piece mostly about how baffled the docs were about my condition but

at the end of the story, there was a reference to a man? in France who apparently had gone through the same ordeal. Were there others? I must remember to ask Friedland about it.

Friedland finally pitched and seeing the newspaper he sat down, notebook once more at the ready, and asked me what I made of the story.

'You read it I take it?'

'Yes, although not in the Sun, there's a much better one in the Guardian. Would you like to read it?'

'Yes please. But I'm more interested in the guy in France.'

'Yes, we've been trying to find out if it's true but nobody's talking.'

'Oh really? That's interesting. I wonder if there are more of us?'

'That had also occurred to us.'

'You mean an epidemic of spontaneous sex changes?'

'Yes, something like that.'

'I get the feeling that you're not squaring with me doc.'

He tried to change the subject.

'So how are you feeling this morning? Did you figure out how to pee?'

'Don't change the subject. What's going on? You know something don't you.'

'It's all speculation at this point. I'd rather not say anything until we've got a better idea of what's going on.'

'What is it? A revolt of the chromosomes? Gaaia rising?'

'Why do you say that?'

'What, a revolt?'

'No, Gaaia. What made you mention Gaaia?'

'Well Gaaia is traditionally regarded as female isn't it.'

'What are your feelings about Gaaia?'

'Well I'm not an expert on the subject but I know that the Gaaia hypothesis proposes that the earth is a single integrated organism, conscious if you like and that the biosphere, the whole thing, is a self-regulating system. You know, the oxygen and nitrogen cycles, are all interconnected, not simply accidental physical processes. That life itself is part of the regulatory process governing the entire planet.'

'And?'

'And that we're fucking the whole thing up.'

'A revolt of the female spirit?'

'Something like that.'

'Do you believe that?'

'What difference does it make what I believe?'

'Well given your condition, I'd say it had a lot to do with it.'

'Oh really? Are you saying that Gaaia has decided to get rid of men?' I laughed but it was obvious that Friedland didn't think it was at all funny.

'What do you know about the differences between men and women?'

'You mean physically, genetically, socially?' Not as much as I'd like to and maybe too much for my own good.'

'Okay, I can understand that, given your predicament. But tell me something, given a choice, what would you rather be, a man or a woman?'

'Are you implying that somehow, I have some kind of control over my own genes? What was that Soviet scientist's name from way back, who believed that by changing the environment you could change the genetic characteristics of a plant?'

'Yes, I know whom you mean. Lysenko. No, I'm not saying that, it's just that from what we can understand of what has happened to you, your genetic makeup spontaneously changed from being basically male to female. Something must have triggered it.'

'Back to Gaaia then? Look, I'm not sure if this is a philosophical discussion or a medical one.'

Friedland looked at me kinda funny.

'Do you read much science fiction?'

'I used to but not much these days, I got too discriminating.'

'Well I read a novel some time ago, I can't remember the title or the author, but essentially, the writer proposed the idea that evolutionary change or at least the catalyst for evolutionary change, leaps if you will, were built into our genes. That all the junk DNA, or at least what we call junk DNA because we don't know what it does, contains the triggers for alternative versions...'

'Of ourselves?'

'Yes. So for example, the jump from Neanderthal to Cro-Magnon or modern man was not two distinct species that coexisted, but that Cro-Magnon was encoded somewhere in the Neanderthal's genes.'

'And what triggered this change?'

'I'm not sure, some kind of biological clock, a change in the environment? Maybe some kind of random assemblage of building blocks, some work and some don't? Look I'm merely speculating.'

'It wouldn't explain what's happened to me would it?'

'Well not directly, no it wouldn't but a variation of it would.'

'What do your geneticist friends think of your ideas?'

'I haven't mentioned it to them.'

'Hmmm... And to be honest doc, it doesn't help me much either.'

'No, you're right, I'm sorry, you have more immediate and pressing needs.'

He got up and took my pulse and rather too delicately, asked me if he could give me a physical examination. My heart rate immediately shot up.

'Look, if you don't feel that your ready, we can wait awhile.'

'I suppose you'll have to do it sooner or later. I can't lie here forever can I.'

He nodded but backed off.

'Look Doctor Friedland, I suppose right now, it has more to do with my embarrassment than anything else.'

'Would you rather a woman doctor did it?'

'That hadn't actually occurred to me but now that you mention it. Would you be offended?'

'By no means. I can get one of my associates right away. And to be honest, it's not as if I haven't already done a complete physical...'

'Except I was completely out of it at the time.'

'Well yes of course.'

'Okay.' I sighed. 'Let's get it over with.'

Friedland left the room and few minutes later, one of the doctors who had been with him the previous day, entered.

'Good morning Miss Babrovsky, I'm Doctor Grayson, a colleague of Doctor Friedland.'

She was in maybe her late thirties, quite attractive, tall and slim with long dark brown hair tied up with a scrunchy. Clear skin and dark brown eyes that scanned me intensely as if trying to measure my reactions.

'Yes, I remember you from yesterday.'

'Yes, well it seems that you would feel rather more at ease being examined by a woman.'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Care to venture a reason?'

'Well I'm sure Doctor Friedland must have already told you why.'

'I'd like to hear it from you that's all.'

'Have you got a problem examining me?'

She laughed. 'Touché Miss Babrovsky. Now, shall we get on with it.'

I already felt at home with her, yet my feeling toward her was strange and I struggled to make sense of it. As she pulled back the sheets and lifted my hospital gown out of the way, I realised what it was. I was still thinking of myself as a man and I sensed that she was not sure how to relate to me either. Doc Grayson was either very perceptive, or had already sussed out our mutual dilemma.

'Okay, just relax. I wish you had a first name Miss Babrovsky, I mean...'

'A female one you mean?'

'Yes, calling you Roy just doesn't seem right does it.'

'No I suppose not. Though what's in a name?'

'Under the present circumstances, I'd hazard quite a lot.'

'Another doc with a sense of humor.'

'A good bedside manner helps an awful lot.'

I looked down at my body and jumped. I mean I had a physical reaction.

'Just try and relax. Did you not look at your body over these past weeks as it changed?'

'As little as possible believe me.'

'Well I must say, I know plenty of women who'd be real pleased to have one like yours.'

I felt myself blushing and shaking as if I was cold.

'Are you cold? You're shaking.'

'I'm just nervous and a little jumpy that's all.'

She started the examination from my neck down and talked to me constantly as she did it.

'Mmmm, interesting, there's no visible thyroid gland and your muscle tone is decidedly female.'

She felt my breasts and immediately my nipples stood up.

'Am I turning you on Miss Babrovsky?'

'Are you taking the piss?'

She laughed.

'Well they not only feel and look normal, they have all right reactions to stimulus.'

Inexplicably, I asked what size they were.

'Size? Well they're not big and they're not small.'

'You mean they're average?'

'Well for someone of your build, height and weight, yes. If you want details you'll have to get measured. Not my department, except for my own of course.'

'You're bit on the thin side but that's to be expected as I understand that you've not been eating properly for quite a while?'

'Yes.'

A large cotton pad covered my genitals, held down with surgical tape.

'Okay, I know this is the bit you're really nervous about.'

She peeled the tape off and removed the pad. It was all a bit of an anti-climax as they're really wasn't much to see except the catheter emerging from a bush of shaved, black pubic hair and more surgical tape.

'There, that wasn't too traumatic surely. Shall we get this catheter out. This might be a bit uncomfortable okay.'

I nodded.

'There, okay.'

She pressed on different parts of my groin and then parted the labia.

'Let me get some gloves.' She opened the door and called for a nurse.

With the gloves on, she asked me spread my legs.

'I really should do a proper gynecological exam you know. It's very difficult to do it on a bed.'

'Are you asking me or telling me?'

She smiled patiently.

'Miss Babrovsky, I know that for you this is an extremely traumatic experience. But for me it's part of my everyday working life. I'm trying to be as sensitive as I can. I think I know what you're going through but your health is still my primary concern and basically, we don't know what the hell happened to you, or even, to be blunt, what's going on down there.' She gestured with her green rubber gloved hand. 'Now that you've actually taken a look and you haven't fainted, I'd like to do a proper exam. Are you up for it?'

'I'm sorry, you're right.'

'You don't have to apologize. I'm not angry with you. Now let's see if you can stand up and walk eh.'

She helped me put the gown back on and I swung my legs over the side of the bed and put my weight onto them and levered my self into a standing position. My legs felt shaky and weak but I leant on the doctor and took a step.

'Try walking around a bit.'

I walked around the room and aside from a feeling that my centre of gravity had changed which made my stride feel strange, I could manage.

'There, you see. Let's find you some slippers.' She handed me a pair of green hospital issue slippers.

'Feel up to taking a walk?'

I nodded and she held the door open for me and I headed out into the corridor. The strange thing were my bouncing tits, I just couldn't get used to them, not that they were that big, it was just the feeling, how they pulled on my skin, like they'd been stuck on. I crossed my arms under them as if trying to control them. I also noticed that my legs were splayed too much, which made me walk stiff legged.

'Would you like a wheelchair?'

'No I'm fine, really I am. I'm just very stiff and a bit wobbly that's all.'

We headed down the corridor following the signs marked Ob-Gyn.

The examination was to put it mildly, a very traumatic experience for me. Legs splayed out on one of those strange contraptions, my legs in stirrups, which enabled the Doctor to get down to the business of making a very thorough examination of my newly acquired plumbing. She hummed and hahed quite a bit during the entire humiliating experience. Finally, with the examination concluded, she allowed me to get off the table and offered me a normal seat.

'Well, basically, everything's there and in the right place. Your reproductive organs look entirely normal. Of course, I'd like to do an analysis of your blood and urine again, but you're a normal woman, at least from the physical perspective. I can't quite believe it myself,

frankly I'm absolutely amazed, it just doesn't seem possible, but I'd go so far as to say that you could conceive, if you wanted to that is.'

End of Instalment Two