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A Novel

By William Bowles

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Installment 3

The rest of the day, passed in something of a blur. I didn't go back to bed though. Instead I looked up Doc Friedland for a chat. Nurse Christine found a dressing gown for me to wear.

'So you're up then,' he said. He was sitting in his office at his desk, a pile of books and articles stacked in front of him.

'Doctor Grayson examined me.'

'So I hear.'

'She said I could have a baby.'

'Yes, so it seems.'

'Are you pissed off with me?'

He looked up from whatever it was he was reading. 'No of course not, I was engrossed in...'

'I can come back if you want but I need to talk and soon.'

'I'm sorry. No look, of course, sit down.'

There was a pot of real coffee on the table behind him.

'Is that real coffee? I could really do with a cup.'

'Help yourself.'

It was stewed and not too hot but at least it was real.

'You're a coffee fundi then are you.'

'Yep. I like my coffee, preferably expresso, strong with hot milk.'

'Hmmm, well when you go home you'll be able to indulge yourself once more.'

I looked around me. The office was a mess, with piles of journals and books all over the place, on the floor, the window sill, every flat space was covered.

'You need more space.'

'Yes, well this is an NHS hospital you know.'

He got up and handed me a stack of printouts, off the Web by the look of them.

'I did some searches and found these.'

They were all stories like mine, at least judging by the descriptions and they were from all over the place. I counted them, there were over a dozen and all quite recent, within few weeks or months.

'So what's going on?'

'I wish I knew. No others in the UK though, yet.'

'Yet?'

'Well it's obvious isn't it, it's not rocket science. You're not one in a billion. You're part of a trend. We need to find out what's going on. The MRS got in touch with me today.'

‘MRS?’

‘Sorry, the Medical Research Council. Somebody high up is worried.’

‘About what exactly? Millions of men turning into women?’

‘Something like that.’

I laughed, my voice high, almost a giggle. He looked at me strangely.

‘Sorry, my voice, I... I’m not used to it, it plays tricks on me. But you can’t be serious surely. I’m just one in how many? 25-30, million?’

‘Miss Babrovsky, I’m not sure you realise just how serious this is. Things like,’ he gestured around vaguely, ‘this, just shouldn’t, don’t happen. It’s beyond comprehension. It flouts everything we know about genetics. You’re either born broadly anyway, female or male and regardless of hormones, surgery, all that gender bending stuff that’s so popular these days, if you’re born with YY chromosomes, you die with them.’

‘What about XY, only an X and all that stuff?’

‘Yes well, they’re abnormalities, and in any case, if you’re born with an XY set, you’ll still die with them. It makes no difference. It’s not like changing your clothes or getting a new paint job. I appreciate that you’ve got one hell of a lot of hurdles to jump, but assuming that you stay healthy, you’ll adjust. You could even get rich of it if you wanted to.’

‘Rich? How?’

‘Well, as you know, the tabloids are queuing up as we speak. Take a look out of the window if you don’t believe me. You could sell your story for a lot of money. It’s only because we’ve taken extraordinary steps to keep you isolated, that this hospital is not crawling with reporters.’

I got up and walked over to the window. The street was crawling with news trucks from the TV stations and news channels. Reporters milled about, tackling everyone who came into and out of the hospital.

‘Christ! There’s satellite dishes all over the place.’

‘As I said, you’re big news.’

The enormity of it was slowly sinking in. I dropped into the chair feeling overwhelmed by everything. It felt like the world was spinning out of control. I hated the feeling, not being in control. The complexity, the complications that faced me once I left the hospital threatened to push me over the edge again.

‘Miss Babrovsky, wake up.’

I felt groggy and disoriented and for a few seconds I wasn’t sure where I was.

I was in the middle of the weirdest dream, in which I was holding a new born baby girl in front of me, who was grinning at me like a Cheshire cat, holding out her hands to me. Was it mine? The rest of the dream dissolved in spite of all my efforts to hold onto it. By the time I was fully awake, all I could remember was the baby’s face that was so preternaturally aware, scarily so, as if possessed of some in-built wisdom at the point of birth. Birth? Yes, I’m sure the vision was only seconds after her birth, yet aside from her face, I could remember nothing else.

Nurse Christine was standing over me with a tray.

‘Here, you need to eat something.’

The tray held a plate of unappetising hospital food and a glass of juice. I picked over the food and drank the juice but my appetite faded.

Awhile later Friedland’s posse of doctors trooped in. They gathered round my bed armed with clipboards. Friedland opened the interrogation.

‘We have to make a decision about your future Miss Babrovsky.’

‘Oh really? And what kind of decision is that then?’

‘Well, obviously we can’t keep you here by force but we strongly advise that you consider remaining with us until...’

‘Until what? You’ve picked me apart down to the cellular level?’

‘At least until some of the fuss has died down and we’re absolutely sure that you’re completely healthy. There’s so much we don’t know about you, and your...transformation.’

I scanned the group of wise, nodding heads.

‘And if I refuse?’

‘Well obviously, the decision is yours. There’s nothing to stop you walking out right now but...’ nodding in the direction of the window.

‘Okay, I’ll be honest. Part of me wants to bolt for my apartment, lock the door and spend some time contemplating my situation and what to do next. At the same time, part of me wants to know what’s going on. My discussion with Doc Friedland earlier has got me thinking. But if I stay, have I got to live in this room and if not, where? And have I got to wander around this place in this bloody hospital gown?’

‘Well firstly, it seems that you’ve adjusted quite well to your, changed circumstances, although I suspect that some of your reactions are delayed somewhat.’

More wise nods.

‘You are a smug bunch of bastards aren’t you. You seem to forget that aside from the shattering changes I’ve been through, I seem to have lost thirty years somewhere. A few weeks ago, I was a man in my late fifties and now I’m a woman in my late twenties or so, possessed of a body which appears to be in prime condition. Frankly, I feel great, I mean physically anyway. I can’t wait to see how this new body of mine performs. I’ve been given a second chance at life, yet I still possess all my memories and experiences. The more I think about it, the more incredible it is.’

‘We are aware of this Miss Babrovsky,’ chirped in Ms Omar, the geneticist.

‘Can I suggest a compromise?’ interjected Friedland. ‘How about if we get you safely back to your apartment and you agree to visits here. We can also arrange for a regular, daily visit for checkups as well as having food and so forth, delivered to you. This way, you won’t have to brave the press, who I’m sure already know where you live anyway. Or, we could find another place for you to stay until the fuss dies down.’

Who’s going to pay for all this? I’m unemployed remember.’

‘Don’t worry about the cost, that’s already been taken care of.’

‘On the NHS?’

‘We have a research budget plus, well, interested parties.’

‘I suppose you’re going to patent me.’

The posse exchanged looks.

‘You seem to have already gotten my future figured out.’

‘Miss Babrovsky, either way, whether you stay here or not, you have to face the fact that from now on your life will never be the same again.’

Suddenly, I made my mind up. I had to get out of here and back to my apartment.

‘I need to go home. We’ll talk about the other stuff, once I’m home but I’m not making any promises. Now how can I get out here without being spotted? And I need some clothes.’

Jesus, clothes. I’d not even thought about things like clothes.

‘We’ll find something for you and don’t worry about getting you out unseen.’

* * * *

I left the hospital in an ambulance wearing a tee shirt, some jeans and a pair of sneakers and on a gurney under a sheet. Amazingly, when we reached my apartment, there was no one around. Doctor Grayson had volunteered to come with me, which was fine by me. The

ambulance didn't stop right outside my building but around the corner and we walked to the entrance.

The place was absolutely filthy and stank and I needed a new bed. Doctor Grayson was appalled by the state of the place.

'I'm sorry about the place but...'

'Please, call me Victoria and you don't have to apologize. I'll give you a hand with the cleaning.' She looked at the blood soaked bed and rug, 'And we need to get you a new bed. Do you have anything else you can sleep on in the meantime?'

'I can use the sofa in the living room.'

She checked the fridge and the cupboards in the kitchen.

'Let me go out and do some shopping okay?'

After she'd left, I went into the front room turned on the TV and crashed on the sofa.

I was woken by the noise of the vacuum cleaner. I got up and wandered into the bedroom where Victoria was busy at work trying to clean the place up. I stood there, feeling guilty and offered to take over. She shook her head.

'Why don't you make a start on the kitchen?'

'Okay.'

I looked at the mess and had trouble with deciding where to start it was such a shambles. Finally, I found a plastic garbage bag and started by throwing out the contents of the fridge and ended up by sweeping stuff off the work surfaces without even sorting anything out. It was if I wanted to remove all traces of my past in the place.

'Having fun?'

I turned around to find Victoria standing there, leaning on a broom, watching me.

'It just seems the easiest thing to do.'

We stood there with an awkward silence separating us until I suggested that a cup of real coffee was in order. She suggested that we break the back of the cleaning first to which I reluctantly agreed at first, but after a while, I got into the rhythm of it, and after about half an hour, the place looked quite presentable even if there was still an odor rotting food permeating the place. We opened some windows but I soon got quite cold, so we closed them again.

* * * *

'Real coffee. Delicious.' I sipped on the scalding hot mug and relished the taste of it. We were sitting on the sofa. It suddenly occurred to me that since going into hospital I'd had no desire for a cigarette. I looked around hoping to spot a pack and unconsciously felt for a pocket but the track bottoms didn't have any.

‘Looking for something?’

‘Yes, well no, I mean I just realised that I haven’t smoked a ciggy in ages and I don’t seem to have a desire to smoke one, although, well maybe its just habit. Something to do with my hands maybe?’

‘Perhaps this a good time not to start again.’

‘Yeah, you’re probably right but it just seems strange. It’s almost like the nicotine habit has been cleaned out along with everything else from my male past.’

‘That’s an interesting observation Miss Babrovsky. Look, it feels strange to keep on addressing you as Miss Babrovsky and Roy just doesn’t cut it does it?’

‘What do you suggest?’

‘Well it’s not for me to give you a name is it. Look, it’s not important really.’

I found it difficult to focus on the idea. Somehow, it represented an irrevocable break with my past. Eventually, I said,

‘How about Nova?’

‘New? Yes, that’s interesting. Nova? Hmm...’

She repeated the name a few times as if trying out for size.

‘And strangely, it has a feminine ring to it.’

‘Okay, Nova it is. From now on, I’m Nova.’

‘Okay Nova.’

She got up and wandered around the room, checking my books and CDs.

‘Quite an eclectic selection of books, and music.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Well I suppose I should get going. Are you going to be alright? I’ll come by in the morning, say around ten?’

‘No, I’ll be fine and yes ten is okay.’

Somewhat uncomfortably, we shook hands. She gave me her cell number, just in case, she said.

After she’d left, I kicked around the place, feeling completely lost and extremely edgy. I wandered from room to room, checking everything as if seeing it all for the first time. The feeling of wanting to empty the entire place returned but I felt drained and the burst of energy that had helped me clean up the place had been replaced by a dragging lethargy.

I went into the kitchen and checked through the rest of the bags that Victoria had left there. In one I found a pack of Tampax, normal size, deodorant, and a six-pack of white cotton panties from the supermarket. How thoughtful and tactful of you not mention them,

Victoria. I had a vision of Victoria trying to imagine my reaction when I discovered them and vowed to mention it to her in the morning when she returned.

I turned up the sound on the TV and tried to watch but I couldn't concentrate, so I dug out a couple of blankets and a pillow, turned out the lights and tried to sleep, but my mind was a turmoil of thoughts. A joint! I suddenly remembered. Leaping off the sofa I found my stash and rolled one and lit up. The first toke had me coughing uncontrollably as if it was the first one I'd ever had. I felt dizzy and still coughing, my eyes watering, I went into the kitchen and drank a couple of glasses of water. After a while, the coughing subsided, and feeling somewhat light headed, I returned to the sofa and lay down again. I relit the joint and took a very small toke. This time, my reaction was less violent.

Something was buzzing in my head. The doorbell! I came awake the way you do when aroused from a really deep sleep. Images from a dream fled as the insistent buzzing of the doorbell penetrated my consciousness. I leapt off the sofa. It was morning, and I staggered over to the intercom. It was Victoria.

I opened the front door and left it ajar for her and returned to the sofa and wrapped a blanket around me as I was naked although I had no memory of getting undressed, or even going to sleep. Then I remembered the joint I'd smoked just as Victoria shut the front door calling out to me as she did. My stash was on the floor next to the sofa but it was too late to put it away.

'Morning Nova. Are you okay, I've been buzzing for ages. I was getting concerned.'
She hadn't noticed the stash yet.

'No, I'm fine but I was deep in sleep. Completely out of it actually.'

Then she saw my stash.

'Well that might explain it,' she said, nodding in the direction of the cigar box of ganja and large Rizlas.

'I couldn't sleep and I thought it might help me.'

'Well obviously it did the trick didn't it.'

I giggled, embarrassed and stood up with the blanket wrapped around me.

'Coffee?'

'Yes, that's an excellent idea. Shouldn't you put some clothes on? I bought you some underwear yesterday, should I get it?'

Without waiting for an answer, she went into the kitchen and brought back the pack of panties and handed them to me. Feeling a bit of a twit, I took them, picked up my top and pants and headed for the bathroom.

‘Give me a couple of minutes, okay.’

‘I’ll get the coffee going then.’

‘Uh-uh, I’ll do that if you don’t mind.’ I was very possessive of my espresso coffee maker and never let anyone else near it, not even to clean it out.

She made a face and I headed for the bathroom.

I sat down on the toilet and literally peed for the first time in my life. Fuck! There was no toilet paper. I called out and Victoria handed to me a roll around the corner of the door.

‘Thanks.’

I opened the pack of panties and pulled on a pair. They were a bit on the small side but not too uncomfortable. I went to the basin and cleaned my teeth but avoided looking in the mirror, although inevitably, I caught glimpses of myself. Long tangled hair, a face still heavy with sleep. I felt really grotty and decided to wash my face. Damn, no towel either. My face still wet, I pulled the sweat top on but it smelt as did the pants but I put them on anyway, and my feet were cold too. I felt a complete mess. I had so many questions backing up in some internal, mental file that I felt confused and divided about what to do next.

Victoria was sitting on the sofa reading the Guardian.

‘Better?’

‘No, not really. In fact I feel a complete mess. My feet are cold, the panties you bought me are too small, my clothes smell, my hair is like a bramble bush. I just took a pee sitting down for the first time in my life, there was no toilet paper, no towel...’

‘Okay, okay, I get the point.’

We both started laughing, more out of embarrassment than anything else I think. She got up, grabbed my hand and led me into the kitchen.

‘Get the coffee going. I’ll wash out some mugs.’

We fought over the sink but eventually got it together. She offered to find some socks for me but then I remembered the sneakers they’d given me at the hospital.

The coffee helped, a lot. I gulped it down and immediately felt like making another one.

‘You really do like your coffee.’

‘Yeah. It seems it’s one addiction I haven’t lost. Want another one, cos I do?’

‘No thanks but go ahead.’

As I busied myself cleaning out the coffee maker and the milk pan, I realised we were both keeping each other at arms length. The tension was palpable.

When I returned to the living room, she was still reading the paper. I stood there, checking her out, really for the first time. She was quite attractive and for an instant I felt, well it's difficult to put it into words, but I suppose it came down to one part of me fancying her and the other realising that I was a woman now. Was I a lesbian? What a ridiculous thought! Somehow, she sensed my confusion, or maybe it was written all over my face?

'Nova, we really need to talk.'

'Yes you're right.'

'Look, I've got an idea. Why don't you come and stay at my place for a couple of days? I've got a spare room. I think being out of here will be good for you and I think I can help you, well, adjust better.'

'Adjust. Yes, I see what you mean.'

I looked around me and realised that she was right. Somehow, this wasn't my place anymore. Too many memories, bad memories, here. I quickly finished the coffee. I was suddenly very anxious to leave.

'Okay, let's go.'

The suddenness of my decision took her by surprise I think.

'What right now?'

'Why not? This place gives me the creeps and I think it does you too. I'll get the stuff you bought yesterday and my coffee maker – if you don't mind?'

'No, no problem. Is there anything else you need? Your dope perhaps?'

'Are you okay with that?'

She nodded. 'Sure, no problem. Let me give you a hand getting your stuff together.'

Such as it was anyway.

* * * *

Victoria had her car outside. We drove in almost complete silence. She lived in North London in a small, Edwardian terrace house. Very neat but quite cosy really. A mixture of period and modern, not extremely feminine or, for that matter, masculine. A bit like me I thought, half and half.

She showed me my room on the top floor and then said she should let the hospital know where we were.

'And I think you should have a bath, shampoo your hair, you'll feel a lot better. And then we should think about some decent clothes for you. You can't wear those funky things anymore.'

The bath sounded like a great idea but the idea of clothes frightened me somehow, as if it signaled yet another break with my past. Another acknowledgement of my new reality.

‘Don’t look so worried Nova, it’s not the end of the world.’

‘Maybe just the end of the world we know though.’

She said nothing in response to my apocalyptic statement but the look on her face spoke otherwise and the subliminal implications it contained. She fussed around for a bit and then started shoing me toward the bathroom up the stairs.

‘Come, I’ll show you where everything is.’

It struck me that she was actually enjoying this, like she’d found a long lost sister who’d been raised by apes and who had to be taught everything from scratch.

‘You’re enjoying this aren’t you? I mean, teaching me how to be a woman.’

She actually blushed and flustered, she said, ‘Don’t be silly Nova, I’m just trying to make you feel at home that’s all. I know this must be really difficult for you, I mean, making the adjustment to, well you know what I mean.’

I stood there, feeling like a lose end. She ran the bath.

‘Want some bubble?’

‘Yeah, why not.’

‘I’ll find you a robe and some slippers.’

She left me in the bathroom stirring the water and adjusting the temperature, returning with a white, terrycloth robe and a pair white, furry slippers and a fresh pair of the panties, one of the ones she’d bought for me yesterday. The robe and slippers looked like they’d been nicked from a hotel.

‘Sorry about the size.’

‘It’s not a problem. Thanks.’

‘Take your time. Have a long soak.’

After she left, I locked the door, took off my clothes and making sure the water wasn’t too hot, lowered myself slowly into the water. With an immense sigh, I lay back and closed my eyes.

‘Rap-rap. Nova? You okay in there? Hello?’

I must have fallen asleep. The water was cold and grey and the bubbles had all disappeared.

‘Yeah, I’m okay really. I fell asleep. Again.’

I got out of the bath and wrapped a towel around my waist and unlocked the door. She stepped in.

‘You might want to get into the habit of wrapping the towel around you a bit higher up.’

‘Oh yeah, I’m sorry, I just didn’t think.’

‘And you didn’t wash your hair either.’

‘I didn’t wash anything. Maybe I should take a shower instead,’ seeing the shower head and leant over to let the water out.

She pulled the shower curtain around the bath, and turned the water on, testing the water for me and satisfied everything was okay, she left me alone again. I got under the shower and let the pulsing jet play over my body. It felt fantastic. I hunted around for some shampoo and washed my hair several times and then lathered my body, until I reached that void between my legs. What should I do? Is it all right to get soap in my, I couldn’t even say the word to myself. Vagina. There, I’d said it. I compromised by washing over the surface of it. Funny though, I washed my breasts without a thought, feeling them, slippery with soap and actually not at all unpleasant. This was ridiculous! Things I’d been doing all my life like washing or taking a pee were now major obstacles, fraught with danger, loaded with premeditated meaning. I turned off the shower, got out and dried myself down, pulled on the fresh pair of panties, the robe and slippers and started rubbing my hair with the wet towel.

Victoria was on the phone when I entered the front room and gestured to me. ‘It’s Doctor Friedland, he wants to talk to you.’

‘Good day Nova,’ he said. ‘Feeling any better? I see you’ve picked a name for yourself and quite a good choice if you ask me. And I think the idea of staying with Doctor Grayson is very sensible.’

I didn’t know what to say to him, so I made conversation, bullshit, bullshit and then asked him if he wanted to talk to Victoria again. I had the feeling that the idea of staying with Victoria had been the hospital’s idea but I didn’t say anything.

‘No, I just wanted make sure you were okay. We’ll talk later. Goodbye.’

I sat down and asked Victoria if she had a hairbrush. I sat there, trying untangle my hair for quite awhile. Nothing was said. Victoria continued reading the newspaper. It was all quite domestic really, which made me chuckle.

‘What’s funny?’

‘Well this. It’s all so bloody normal. Here I am, brushing my hair, and you’re reading the newspaper.’

‘Do you want a hair dryer? It’ll speed things up a bit.’

She got up without waiting for an answer and returned with one, plugged it in and handed it to me. Then she said,

‘Want me to do it?’

‘You want to do it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, knock yourself out.’

‘You’ve got beautiful, thick hair you know.’

‘Yes, I got it from my mother.’

‘Is that another one of your jokes?’

‘One of my gender jokes.’

We both laughed and the tension ebbed a bit.

‘Well you know had you been born a girl, many of your characteristics would have been your mother’s anyway, like your hair, your body shape and so on.’

‘Is that so.’

Then she started trying to untangle my hair using her fingers instead of the brush and I closed my eyes and soaked up the feeling.

‘Umm, that feels good. Don’t stop. Nothing like a good head massage.’

‘It’s really tangled because it’s so long.’

‘Ouch!’

‘Sorry.’

This went on for some time and the ordinariness of it was, I think, a relief for both of us. Eventually, she finished and she sat down opposite me.

‘There, that’s much better don’t you think. At least it’s presentable. But maybe you should think about getting it cut soon.’

I nodded and ran my hands through it. I hadn’t realised just how long it was, way past my shoulders.

‘Well what next? Clothes perhaps?’

‘Do we have to?’

‘Well not right away no, but you can’t put it off indefinitely. What if you want to go out? You need something, even it’s a pair of jeans and a top. And winter’s coming on, you need something warm too.’

‘Yeah you’re right. But I don’t even have anything to go out in.’

‘I’ll find something of mine for you to borrow, don’t worry. We’re about the same build, I’m sure I’ve got a pair of jeans or pants that’ll fit you and a sweater.’

‘Thanks Victoria.’

‘Look, it’s not a problem you know, I want to help you. Maybe some lunch first? Want to give me a hand?’

We threw something together and sat at the small counter in her kitchen, in silence for the most part munching on scrambled eggs and toast. My hair kept getting in the eggs. I insisted on doing the washing up.

‘Okay, I’m going to find you something to wear and then we’re going to go out,’ and seeing the look on my face, added, ‘If you’re up to it of course. I don’t want to force you.’

‘No, you’re right, I’m sure once I’m dressed I’ll be okay, it’s just that I don’t feel like a woman and I’m afraid of people’s reaction to me. Before...I mean, during the change, it was hell. I stopped going out completely.’

‘I know. But it won’t be like that this time, believe me Nova. And I’ll be with you.’ She held my hands in hers reassuringly. ‘No one will notice. Believe me, not only are you a woman, you look like one too, in every respect. If you don’t believe me, take a look in a mirror.’

I knew I had to do it at some time but instead of answering her, I said,

‘Victoria, I’ve got a question. I know it’ll sound stupid to you but...’

‘What?’

‘Well, in the shower, I was washing my body and...’

She laughed. I felt myself blushing.

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh. You’re referring to washing your vagina?’

‘Well yes.’

‘I think the best thing is for the both of us to sit down later and I’ll give you guided tour of your new plumbing and how to take care of it, how’s that? Remember, I’m a doctor you know and I’ve already had quite intimate exploration of you or have you forgotten?’

Put like that, my question did sound really dumb. What the hell was I afraid of? She vanished upstairs while I finished the washing up and wandered back into the front room. She returned with an armful of clothes, which she dumped on the sofa.

‘Try these on. I’m sure something will fit. But you’re going to have get measured for a bra, I know we’re not the same size.’

I sorted through the clothes until I found something that caught my eye, a black turtle neck sweater and a pair of black pants, both of which I put on. The sweater fitted just fine but the pants were a bit short and just a little lose around the waist, but my expanded hips held them up without a problem. Some socks and a pair of flat shoes.

‘How do I look?’

‘Why don’t you take a look in the mirror?’

There was one in the hall, so feeling very self-conscious, I walked out into the hall and for the first time, checked myself out. Victoria was standing behind me. I was gob smacked! I stood there with my mouth hanging open. It was still me but like, another me, an alternate me. A me from another dimension. My face looked the same except there were subtle differences. It was softer, smoother, yes less angular, yet still me. It was the strangest experience of my life. More strange perhaps than the female face I now had was the fact that it was a face from thirty years ago! Or at least what I would have looked like had I been a girl thirty years ago. I don’t know how long I stood there. Aside from my breasts and the width of my hips and how the pants fitted me, the rest of me wasn’t such a shock, until I turned round and checked out my backside.

‘Jesus!’

‘Not a bad rear Nova. Not too big, not too small. A lot of women would love a bottom like yours, believe me I would too.’

I was shaking from the shock of it. Victoria put her arms on my shoulders and guided me back into the front room.

‘Well, if you didn’t believe it five minutes ago, I’m sure you do now.’

‘It’s incredible.’

I was speechless. The enormity of the transformation was really more than I could take in. My legs felt weak and I sat down with a thump. My pulse was racing. Victoria’s doctor instincts took over and she grabbed my wrist.

‘Take a deep breath Nova. That’s it, now breathe out. Okay, you’re fine.’

I continued taking deep breathes but eventually I had to put my head between my legs, I felt faint and lightheaded. Victoria got up and left the room and returned with a glass of water and a pill.

‘Take this.’

‘What is it?’

‘It’s just a Valium. It’ll take the edge of the shock.’

‘I don’t take drugs.’

‘But you’ll smoke a joint?’

‘Ganja’s not a drug.’ I said, self-righteously.

She tutted when I said that. I drank the glass of water.

‘It’s okay, I feel a lot better now, really I do.’

I leaned back and closed my eyes and the image I'd just seen swam up in front of my eyes. A quite attractive woman, tall, for a woman anyway, with long jet black curly hair, a long, narrow face with large green eyes, long black lashes, just like my mother's. In fact, perhaps part of the shock was just how much I looked like my mother, dead these past twelve years. A slim body, small breasts, at least I thought they were, and long legs. I felt Victoria's arms around me, hugging me.

'It's alright Nova, it's alright.'

I realised I was crying, which once the realisation set in, became a flood. The tears poured out and I sat there, shaking and sobbing uncontrollably. After what seemed like ages, the tears ran out and I was taking in great gulps of air as if I was drowning. This too, passed, and exhausted, I lay back.

'It was my mother.'

"Your mother?"

'Yes, she's been dead for twelve years now but the sight of me in the mirror, don't ask me why, it just brought it all back. I look so much like her, her hair, her eyes, it was just too much I suppose.'

We sat there in silence for quite awhile but Victoria continued to hold on to me, rocking me in her arms and eventually, I must have fallen asleep on her shoulder.

End of Installment Three