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A Novel

By William Bowles

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Installment Four

When I woke up, it was dark and Victoria was gone. I was curled up on the sofa covered with a duvet. I called out for her. She came running into the room looking alarmed.

‘Nova! Are you okay? I’m sorry I left you alone.’

‘No it’s okay, I just woke up and for a minute I didn’t know where I was. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to startle you.’

That afternoon was a watershed. It marked the point of my transition from a man to a woman. Not only for me and my coming to terms with my situation, but also for the both of us. As a man I’d read and talked about the kind of relationship that women have with each other, something that men simply don’t have, or at least not in my experience, now I know what it means, I’d experienced it myself. We never looked back from that point on. Whatever happened we were friends. No, we were more than that, it was like we were sisters, although later, when we talked about that afternoon, and how I felt about it afterwards, I admitted that I’d felt something sexual as well. Was it my male past kicking in, or perhaps the last gasp? I don’t know, I don’t think so. But from then on, we had no secrets. All the fears I had disappeared when I was with Victoria. And I was finally able to deal with my complete ignorance of myself as a woman and ask the kinds of questions that my fear had stopped me from asking. Perhaps I leant too heavily on her? Though she rarely complained and I can honestly say that whatever she needed from me, I was there to give it to her. It made the events of the following months and years, not only bearable, but as time past, understandable, comprehensible even.

We gave up on the idea of going out shopping. In any case, I was drained. Victoria proposed that she go out and get some food in and that we cook, maybe drink a bottle of wine and take it easy. We did.

Later that evening, after roast lamb, which was delicious, and two bottles of wine, we both had our feet up. The atmosphere was very laid back and I felt better than I had for the past four months.

‘So what are you going to do then?’

‘Do?’

‘Well yes, from now on? You’ve been given a new shot at life.’

‘Yeah, it’s like I’ve had a complete body transplant. Maybe even a brain transplant as well. As to what I do with it, I’ve no idea, yet. I think I’m going to have to take it one day at a time. What about you?’

‘Me? Well I have my job, the hospital.’

‘And us?’

She gave me a strange look.

‘I’m sorry, that came out all wrong didn’t it. What I meant was, what’s happened to me and why. Surely it’s still part of your job?’

‘I’m not sure. Nova, look, perhaps given all we’ve been through today, which believe me, taught me as much about myself as I’m sure it did for you, I should be completely honest with you and I think you’ve probably already figured it out for yourself anyway, but in any case...’

‘I know what you’re going to say. Friedland gave you the job of what? keeping an eye on me? Reporting your findings back to the posse. It’s not a problem. I just want to be part of it is all. Not some dumb guinea pig.’

‘The problem is, I can no longer be...’

‘Dispassionate? Objective?’

‘Yes, something like that. The point is, that it’s clear that whatever has happened to you and for whatever reasons, my original motivations were purely medical. But now, well, what you’ve become raises a host of questions that have more to do with what it is to be a man or a woman, not from the biological perspective but from, well, I’m not sure I can describe it very well. I suppose the closest I can come to it, is the nature of how, or perhaps whether or not, men and women think differently from each other. I want to be completely honest with you Nova. The person who I met in the hospital this week is dead. The person who is sitting here right now is, in every sense of the word that I can lay my hands on, a different person. I can’t pin it down, it’s not one thing, like your body, it’s something else, something so fundamental that your comment about a brain transplant is not entirely without merit.’

I sat there, almost mesmerised, such was the intensity of her voice.

‘Can I continue?’

‘Sure.’

‘You know about all the other reports that Friedland dug up about other men changing into women?’

‘Yes.’

She got up and retrieved a folder from her briefcase and spread out copies of the same Web pages I’d seen in Friedland’s office.

‘Doesn’t this strike you as weird? Okay, you’re one in a few million. By the way, I’ve heard that some of them didn’t make it.’

‘You mean they died?’

‘Yes, and from what I can tell, at pretty much the same point in the transition process that nearly killed you.’

‘You mean they bled to death?’

She nodded.

‘How awful.’

The point is, I don’t think it’s the result of hormones in the water, or some other environmental effect, pollution or whatever.’

‘The Gaaia effect. Did Friedland mention our conversation to you?’

‘Wait, before we get to that, my point is, as far as I can, all the men who have gone through this have all followed exactly same route. The same symptoms, the same rate of change and if they survived, have all ended up like you, as complete women. I mean genetically speaking.’

‘In other words, I’m not an accident, a fluke of nature, that’s what you’re saying.’

‘Precisely.’

We sat in silence for a while, sipping our wine. Eventually, she said,

‘Have you heard of Parthenogenesis?’

‘You mean a virgin birth? Yes, but you’re not suggesting that’s what happening are you?’

‘Not exactly no. Friedland mentioned a dream you had, about a baby, a baby girl right?’

‘Yes, it was weird. I’m sure it was mine, though, well you know what it is with dreams, I don’t remember giving birth to her or indeed anything else except her face and the enormous grin on it. It was scary, like she knew?’

‘Knew? Knew what?’

‘Well that she’d been born and that I was her mother. She was holding out her arms to me. There was wisdom, I don’t know, knowledge in that face. But wait up. It was just dream.’

‘Nova?’

‘What?’

‘Will you indulge me?’

‘Of course. What is it you want?’

‘I want to give you a pregnancy test.’

‘You’re crazy!’

‘Please, indulge me, you said you would. And if I’m wrong well there’s no harm is there. You’ll just test negative.’

‘What now?’

‘No not now silly. Tomorrow. In any case, I don’t have one here.’

I looked at the clock on the wall. It was past one in the morning.

‘Victoria? Do you believe in Gaaia?’

‘I’m more interested in why you raised it with Friedland. Do you believe in it?’

‘You know, I first came across the idea years ago, sometime in the sixties I think. It’s an appealing idea for someone like me.’

‘Like you?’

‘Yes, I’m an old lefty with mystical overtones. No maybe not mystical exactly, maybe I’ve read too much science fiction. But back then, I also got involved with Buckminster Fuller, you know, Spaceship Earth, geodesic domes and all that stuff. And at about the same time I came across Norbert Weiner and the idea of Cybernetics. Hey, art school was fun then. In any case, Fuller was the first person to introduce me to the fact that the biosphere was one, interconnected system, You know, the nitrogen cycle, the carbon dioxide cycle. How life seemed to regulate or least be intimately connected to the climate and how life was an intimate part of all these cycles. Feedback. Life balanced everything. Change one thing and it ripples through the system. But the Gaaia hypothesis suggests some kind of consciousness behind the process, what is it? A planetary consciousness, and a female one at that.’

‘And do you believe it?’

‘It’s a tempting idea isn’t it. As to the notion of it being conscious? Well, it’s a bit like God isn’t it? And I’m not a believer. So no. I’d have to say no.’

‘Do you know the works of Teilhard de Chardin?’

‘The Noosphere. Yes, I read his stuff back then as well. But he was a Catholic and didn’t he propose a kind of Catholic version of Gaaia if I remember correctly.’

‘Why is it only tempting to believe it?’

‘Well, in a sense it’s kind of an apocalyptic idea isn’t it.’

‘How so?’

‘Well it was the height of the cold war, nuclear Armageddon. The world spinning out of control. The so-called population explosion. Nuclear winter. The emergence of the environmental movement, Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring and all that stuff. What better than

to have some kind of super intelligence guiding things. Something we can rely on like a kind of local god in charge of things.'

'So you're saying it was simply a response to a kind of collective insecurity?'

'Well yes and no. Like I say, I'm an old lefty and I believe that as a species we're social animals, but we're still animals. So the idea of us as a species being part of some larger thing, the Biosphere if you like, is not only logical, given how close we're getting to wiping ourselves out, it also appeals to my socialist instincts. And no, because it doesn't have to have a consciousness in order to exist as a system does it?'

'So it's an accident then?'

'What is?'

'This. Us. The world.'

'An accident? Hell, I don't know. What difference does it make whether it's an accident or not or whether it's the result of some kind of outside intervention? Okay, let's assume you're right, that there's some kind of Gaaia, god or whatever at work here, then it's a retribution.'

'What is?'

'Me.'

'You mean man as in the sex?'

'Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Isn't it men who've brought us to where we are now. Isn't it men who are fucking up the world.'

'So Gaaia is getting rid of men by turning them into women?'

'Something like that. Look Victoria, I'm simply following your lead, after all why else would you want to see if I'm pregnant or not? What did you call you it? Parthenogenesis? A virgin birth, without men. But to return to the Gaaia hypothesis, even if you're right, it still doesn't need some kind of outside or supernatural intervention for it to happen. It could be built into our genes.'

'And what triggers it then?'

'Fucking up the world? May be we should call it Darwin's Revenge.'

* * * *

I slept well that night for the first time in months. Victoria lent me a nightie, and I thought she was a pajama type too. Just shows you how wrong you can be about people. She woke me up and asked me if I'd be okay by myself as she had to go to the hospital but she'd be back by midday at the latest. I mumbled something, rolled over and went back to sleep.

I got up around eleven with a hangover, and made my ritual pot of coffee and kicked around the place for the rest of the morning, in my nightie with a sweater on top. She'd left all the Web reports, so I read through them once more and then decided to do my own search. Google coughed up 2,377 pages! Half an hour later it had risen 3,207. I tried refining the search but Web search engines are just awful and I gave up. Most of them were duplicates with inane comments added and a lot of useless speculation. Then I did a search for virgin births but I kept getting Catholic web sites of one kind or another.

Then the door opened and Victoria walked in.

'Are you still in your nightie!'

I felt embarrassed, as if I'd been caught trying on her clothes. She had an armful of shopping which she took through to the kitchen and dumped on the counter with me trailing behind her.

'How do you feel?'

'Okay I suppose, except for a bit of hangover. It's months since I've drunk so much, but I'm feeling much better now. I've been doing a search on the Web and there are now thousands of pages on the men into women thing but nothing of any use on virgin births, unless you're a Catholic of course.'

'So you didn't forget?'

'No.'

'Friedland wants you to come into the hospital.'

'What, today?'

'I put him off. I told him you were still feeling very fragile.'

'Did you mention any of our conversation or about doing a pregnancy test?'

'No I didn't, why do you ask?'

'Well I just assumed you let him know. After all, isn't it your job?'

'Nova, I have to admit that I feel like piggy in middle. I do have a professional obligation to the hospital and I feel like I'm deceiving them. Yet, well...'

She tailed off and sat down at the counter.

'Any chance of a cup of that delicious coffee of yours?'

'Got you hooked?'

I started cleaning out the coffee maker, 'We need more coffee.'

'Yes I know but I wasn't sure what kind you liked or I'd have picked some up. Maybe we can get out today and do that shopping?'

'Yeah, why not.'

I was struck by how quickly we'd established a rather mundane domestic relationship, coffee, clothes, shopping, two women sharing an apartment. It was all too weird and totally out of sync with reality. Yet, what should I have expected? I had no idea really. With the coffee made, we retired to the front room.

'Nova?'

'What?'

'Have you thought about what you're going to do?'

'Do? About what?'

'Your life.'

Her question brought on a queasy feeling in my stomach.

'I'm not sure I want to think about such things right now, just dealing with the here and now is bad enough. The ordinary things, being here with you and feeling safe and protected from – out there. If I start to think about all the problems I have to deal with, I can feel a panic attack coming on.'

'I'm sorry.'

'No that's okay.' I got up and paced the room and then stood by the window watching the world go by outside on the quiet north London street.

Turning to face her, I said, 'I want to do that pregnancy test, now.'

'Are you sure you're ready for it?'

'No, I'm not ready for anything but what you said last night, it's bugging me. Gaaia.'

'Yes, Gaaia.'

She got up and went back into the kitchen and returned with a small box and handed it to me.

'You'll need to do a pee.'

I nodded and took the box from her, opened it and took out the instructions.

'It's quite simple.'

'Yes but how accurate is it?'

'Quite accurate but that depends on how far gone you are. Actually, if you are pregnant, it can't be more than a week, can it? It might be too soon.'

'No, you're right. Maybe we should wait?'

'Well it's up to you of course, but yes, if it was me I'd wait a few more weeks before using it.'

'What if I am?'

'Nova, there's no point speculating. Anybody would think you want to be pregnant.'

‘That calls for a pregnant pause.’

She groaned at my awful joke.

‘It’s that dream you had isn’t it.’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘Not much to go on you know, a dream, even if it was as vivid as you say it was.’

‘It was, believe me. It scared the living daylights out of me. That face. The smile.’

I put the kit down.

‘You know what?’ I said, ‘I think you believe I’m pregnant, after all, you suggested it in the first place.’

‘Yes I know and I’m sorry I did now. Put it down to too much wine.’

I nodded, but I didn’t believe her and I knew she felt the same. She got up and started pestering me about getting washed and dressed and once more, suggesting that we go out.

‘It’ll do you good Nova. You need to start getting some kind of a routine in your life, you can’t keep on putting it off.’

‘I know.’ I sighed but I felt secure and protected in her place. Going out there, frightened me. What if someone spotted me? All quite irrational I know, as nobody knew what I looked like, at least I was pretty sure nobody did.

‘Did you get the paper?’

She reluctantly handed me the Guardian without a word. On page one there was a piece about me, including my name and the fact that I’d left the hospital for ‘an unknown location.’ The article also included a short interview with Friedland who declined to speculate except to say that, ‘extensive tests had been performed and that they were waiting for the results’ and that, ‘they had to protect the patient’s privacy.’ The piece also included some references to the other cases (see page two) making a big play on those who had supposedly died during the transition. A sidebar included all the stuff about XX chromosomes and ‘spontaneous transformation’, by the paper’s science editor, with one sentence speculating that if, indeed it was true, it would turn modern genetics upside down. It was obvious even to me that this story wasn’t going to go away, that it would only get more play in the media, not less, especially when it finally came out that basically, it was all true. All it needed was one person, somewhere, at one hospital or other to spill the beans to the News of the World or the Sun, and I could kiss my privacy goodbye. I threw the paper down.

‘Well that’s it isn’t it.’

‘They don’t know where you are though.’

‘Yet. How long do you think it’ll be before they find out. There are too many people at the hospital who know. One of them’s bound to do a deal and sell their ‘inside story’ sooner or later. It’s just too big to ignore, you know that.’

‘All the more reason for us to go out now then isn’t it, before you do get recognised.’

I could see Victoria was getting really exasperated with my continuing reluctance to face up to the world. She was right of course, I knew that, but prevaricating was one of my weaknesses. And I also knew she was putting herself on the line for me.

‘Okay, let’s do it. I might as well get it over with.’

I leapt up and headed upstairs for the bathroom, took a quick shower, got dressed and came again.

‘It’s quite cool out, you might want to wear this.’

She gave handed me a short, down jacket and a woolly cap.

Stepping outside after all this time was a bit of a shock. I started shivering. We got into her car.

‘Where are we headed?’

‘Oh I thought we could go to a mall just north of here. Less chance of you being spotted maybe.’

The traffic was thick and it took us the best part of forty-five minutes to make the journey and then we had to find a parking spot, which took another fifteen minutes. By the time we made it into the mall proper, I was already tired and after a few minutes of walking, my legs were aching. When I suggested we find a restaurant, she got angry with me, assuming that I was still putting off the inevitable. I protested, whining that my legs really did ache and that as my doctor she had an obligation to take care of me. This broke the ice somewhat and she apologised for losing it.

‘How am I going to pay for everything? I can’t use my credit card can I.’

‘We’ll put it on mine and settle up later. Okay, look let’s go in here.’

It was a department store.

‘Let’s get the worst over first shall we.’

She headed for the underwear section and immediately started sorting through bras and panties. I hung back, feeling completely exposed as if everybody was looking at me, which of course they weren’t, nobody gave a damn. After making quite a few selections we headed for the changing rooms. I was glad Victoria was with me though, I’m not sure I could have done it alone. It transpired I was a 34B and size 8 in panties. She made me try on quite a

few different designs of bras, pointing out that it wasn't just size but shape that counted and they needed to be comfortable. We ended up with only three bras and half a dozen panties.

'I don't think you should get too many Nova.'

'Why?'

'They may not fit in a few weeks time, it might be a waste of money.'

'You mean I might still be changing?'

"I've got no idea, I'm just suggesting. Look, you can buy a whole damn wardrobe if you want!"

Victoria was almost shouting and people were looking at us. I tried to shrink into invisibility.

'This isn't working out too well is it.'

'No, you're right, it isn't. Look, I'm sorry, this is just as much a strain for me as it is for you. Let's pay for these and get out of here and grab a bite somewhere.'

We found a restaurant and ordered some food. You could cut the air with a knife. We sat in silence, eating, although I really didn't have much of an appetite. Eventually, she said,

'Look, I'm sorry Nova, I really am. This is no big deal really, we're just buying some clothes for you. Nobody gives a damn, it's just you, don't you see that?'

'Yes, I know. I'm behaving like a complete asshole. Make up?'

She nodded and suggested we leave and hit another store.

At the next one, things went a lot easier and soon, we'd picked out some jeans, pants and a few tops, sweaters and a cardigan. I wasn't sure I was ready for a skirt or a dress and she didn't push the issue. Then it was shoes. I tried on a few different styles and finally bought a really nice pair of boots and two pairs of shoes, one with a short heel and a pair of nondescript flats. Victoria suggested I needed some socks and maybe a couple of pairs of tights. By now I really was tired, my legs and my feet were aching terribly. I had to sit down so we found a bench in the main concourse where I collapsed, exhausted.

'I've had enough.' I said. 'Maybe we can come back tomorrow and finish it off?'

Victoria nodded but said nothing.

We drove home in silence. When we got to her street, it was bedlam.

'Fuck! Keep driving Victoria!'

She didn't need telling. We shot past her house, the entrance of which was crowded with reporters, lights and cameras.

'Where can we go?'

She didn't say anything, she kept on driving until we found a place to pull over. She got out her cell and after a pause, made a phone call.

'Judy? It's Victoria. Are you in? Can I come by? Now. Yes. I have a friend with me, we need a place to stay for the night. No I can't speak over the phone, I'll explain it all when we get to you. Don't tell anyone okay. Don't ask please, just don't tell anyone, not even someone you trust. Thanks. Bye.'

She pulled out into the traffic.

'Where are we going?'

'A friend of mine, out of town, we were at university together.'

An hour or so later, we turned into a gravel drive and pulled up in front of a sprawling, two story stone cottage. I didn't even know where we were, I hadn't taken in the route at all.

As we got out, the door opened, and light spilled out onto the drive silhouetting a small, slim woman who waved to Victoria as we approached.

'Shall I bring in the shopping?'

Victoria shook her head, so I followed her to the house.

Judy, was a plain, petite woman, with a small head, short mousy brown hair, maybe thirty or so, wearing a long, woolen dress, thick brown stockings and sheepskin slippers. I had the distinct image of a woman out of an Agatha Christie novel, it was weird.

'Hi Judy, thanks, you're a life saver.' They hugged.

'This is Nova.'

We shook hands and she scrutinised me intensely, from top to bottom. I felt myself blushing and I turned toward Victoria, who was watching the interaction with interest.

When Judy spoke, she had a high, soft voice with no accent.

'So, what's this all about? Why all the secrecy?' As she spoke, she ushered us into the front room, which was all chintz and high backed armchairs. An enormous log fire blazed in a large stone hearth but I could feel a chill coming off the plaster walls at my back.

'Sit down. Can I get you anything? A drink?'

'Yes please, something strong I think. Nova?'

'Yes, likewise please. Got any whisky?'

Judy nodded.

'I'll take it neat please, no ice.'

'Same for me.'

Judy went over to the sideboard, 'I've got Bells, Jack Daniels, or Glenlivet.'

I asked for a Jack and Victoria went for a Glenlivet. Judy brought the drinks over to us and we crowded around the fire. I swallowed too large a gulp and it went down the wrong way and I started to cough and choke. Victoria and Judy looked very alarmed and helped me to one of the high back chairs to the side of the fireplace.

‘You okay?’

‘Yes, thanks, it went down the wrong way,’ I gasped, my eyes watering and I sat down. ‘Phew. Maybe a glass of water?’

Judy headed out the room and came back with a jug of water and a glass, which she handed to me.

‘So, what’s this all about then?’

Victoria gave Judy a potted rundown and, as the story unrolled, Judy stared at me, her eyes getting wider by the minute, making me feel extremely uncomfortable. So much so, that eventually, I had to stand up to get away from that stare. I negotiated the furniture of the small, cluttered room, checking out the photos and prints on the walls, anything in fact to avoid having to sit and face Judy. Victoria stopped talking. Everything was happening too fast. Finally, Judy broke the ice, and noticing my empty glass,

‘Want another?’

‘Please.’

‘Victoria?’

‘Yes please.’

She got up, took my glass and Victoria’s, refilled them both, and handed me mine as she stood over me, checking me out as if to make sure of something?

‘So, Nova?’

I looked up at her. I didn’t know what to say. Was she waiting for confirmation? Or perhaps for a sign that Victoria’s tale was a complete pack of lies, as if she knew something about Victoria that I didn’t.

‘Yes Judy?’

‘I’m afraid I’m bit out of touch with events out here, so this is all new to me. So I’m sorry if I appear somewhat skeptical but, well it is a pretty fantastic tale.’

As I was about to answer her, Victoria interjected,

‘Judy, the fact is, regardless, we need a place for Nova to, well hide out, at least for a few days. I took it on myself to,’

‘Chaperone me?’ I interjected. Victoria glared at me.

‘Yes, I suppose that’s as good a description as any. Nova’s been through a nightmare and she, well she almost died four, or is it five? days ago. I’m losing track of the time.’

‘God.’ Judy looked at me with a new found compassion. ‘I’m sorry Nova I didn’t realise, please forgive me for being such a doubter.’

‘That’s okay, I’ve had the same problem, coming to terms with my, condition.’

‘Of course, you’re welcome to stay. I’d welcome the company actually. And it’s a fascinating tale.’

‘Judy’s a writer.’

‘Oh,’ I said.

‘Don’t worry, I’m not going to write a book about you. I’m not that kind of writer.’

‘What kind of writer are you then?’

‘A novelist.’

‘I’m sure that wouldn’t be an obstacle.’

Victoria checked her watch.

‘It’s late, I should get going.’

‘You’re going back?’ I said.

‘Don’t worry Nova. You’re in good hands. Judy’ll take care of you. I’ll phone you in the morning. But I have to go back and face the music. Let’s get your stuff out of the car.’

We went out to the car. It was cold, damp and misty outside. Victoria handed me the packages and we walked to the front door where I dumped them on the floor. We stood facing each other, me not quite knowing what to do. Eventually, Victoria embraced me and we hugged each other.

‘Nova, don’t worry dear, everything’s going to be okay.’

The thought of being left alone with a complete stranger was daunting, frightening even. Victoria sensed my fear and leant forward and reassuringly pecked me on the cheek, turned and walked toward the car. I stood there, watching as she drove off into the mist.

Judy came out.

‘Okay Nova, let me show you your room. Here, let me give you a hand with this.’ Between us, with her leading, we ascended the narrow creaking stairs up to the top floor.

‘Bathroom. My bedroom. My study.’ Ticking them off as we walked down the hallway.

‘Here we are.’ The room was at the end of the corridor. Quite small, with a large, four-poster bed filling most of the space. A small dresser and a dressing table occupied one wall

and on the other, a small fireplace. A deepset window looked onto the rear of the cottage and one on to the front. The room was cold. I dropped the bags on the bed.

‘Sorry the room’s a bit cold, I’ll bring in an electric heater and find you some sheets and pillow slips. Oh, and there’s small bathroom, just a shower and a toilet. I expect you’re exhausted.’

‘Spaced out might be a better description.’ I shivered.

‘How about a nightcap?’

‘What an excellent idea.’

We headed back downstairs and followed her into a spacious kitchen with a large, cluttered wooden table. One half of it was packed jars of preserves, pickled onions, jam and such. The other half held a laptop, a small inkjet printer and stacks of paper and folders. A black Aga filled a large alcove. The room was warm and cosy and as if she’d read my mind she said,

‘This is the warmest room in the house, so I tend to work in here when it’s cold. Hot chocolate do you?’

‘That’d a be perfect thanks.’

She busied herself getting the makings together while I explored the kitchen, checking out the jars on the table.

‘I’m into gardening.’

‘So I see.’

‘What do you Nova?’

‘Well, when I had a job, I was a writer for a publishing company, mainly specialist magazines for the science and engineering industries. Not very exciting I know.’

‘I assume you gave you it up, what with – everything.’

‘Actually, I got fired a few weeks ago.’

‘That’s outrageous,’ she said. ‘What for?’

‘Being a freak. Well the reason they gave was that I was taking off too much time but I know that was just an excuse. They couldn’t deal with me turning into a woman, and in front of them too.’

‘You should sue them.’

‘You’re probably right but, it’s not at the top of my to do list right now.’

She busied herself stirring the chocolate. I pulled out a chair and sat down, suddenly and inexplicably I thought, feeling quite comfortable with her. Clearly, she just thought of me

as woman, not having known me from before, or even during the past weeks or months. I felt reassured by her presence.

‘There.’ She handed me a large mug of steaming chocolate. ‘Want a shot in it?’

‘Excellent idea. Shall I get it?’

‘No, you stay put. Same again?’

‘Please.’ I shouted after her as she headed back to the front room.

She came back with the bottle of Jack Daniels and handed it to me. I put a healthy shot in the mug.

We sat in silence sipping our drinks. The third Jack was having its effect on me and what with the heat from the Arga, I was feeling drowsy and very relaxed.

‘This good.’ I said. ‘I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. For the first time in ages, I actually feel like a normal human being.’

She laughed and being a bit sleepy, it took me a while to catch on to the other meaning of what I’d said.

‘Yeah, I see what you mean.’ I giggled.

‘Nova, Victoria is a very good friend of mine. We were at uni together for four years and we shared digs. When she phoned earlier, I knew she was in a real bind. She’s normally extremely level headed and a very together person. There was no question of me not helping her, and you, out.’

She got up.

‘I’m going to get your room together.’ I got up to go with her.

‘No, you sit tight, finish your cocoa. Help yourself to another shot if you want.’ She handed me the bottle but I declined.

I couldn’t keep my eyes open, and I found myself nodding off. I don’t know how much time had passed, but the next thing I knew, Judy was shaking me gently by shoulder.

‘Nova, come on, let’s get you into bed eh.’

‘Yeah.’

We got to my room and it was already noticeably warmer.

‘Have you got a nightgown or pajamas?’

I tried to think whether we’d bought one or not.

‘Not to worry, borrow one of mine for now.’

She returned with a long fleecy nightgown and one those quilted robes and a pair of those silly, fluffy slippers.

‘Yes, I know they look naff but they’ll keep your tootsies warm. I don’t suppose you’ve got a toothbrush either.’

‘Actually, apart from the few clothes we bought, I don’t think I’ve much in the way of anything.’

‘Not to worry, I’ll stock the bathroom for you.’

She left and came back with toilet stuff and took it into the bathroom.

‘There’s a towel in there. There, I think that’s everything?’

‘Thanks Judy, I really appreciate this, y’know, all your help.’

I stood there feeling a bit lost.

She turned toward the door and said,

‘You’ll feel much better in the morning. I’ll let you sleep in. Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight.’

She closed the door and I sat on the bed, trying to gather my thoughts. Eventually, I headed for the bathroom, took a pee, cleaned my teeth, ran some water over my face, got undressed and pulled the long nightgown over my head and dived under the heavy duvet she’d put on the bed. I didn’t even turn the light out before zonking out.

End of Installment Four