

# XX

## **A Novel**

By William Bowles

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**Installment Five**

It was the damn birds that woke me. I had no idea what time it was. I felt groggy and I could feel a headache coming on. Oh god! I opened my eyes and looked around me. Where was I? Oh yeah, the previous night hove into view. I needed a pee, so very carefully, I got out of bed. No sudden movements. I could hear sounds downstairs, the radio and water running. After taking a pee, I splashed my face with cold water, found the quilted robe and ridiculous slippers and ran my fingers through my hair, trying to untangle it. There was no comb or brush. Feeling a little more awake, I headed for the door. Going down the stairs, I nearly tripped over the long nightgown! The noise brought Judy out of the kitchen.

‘God, I thought you’d fallen down the stairs!’

‘I nearly did, I’m not used this,’ gesturing to my clothes.

‘I’m sorry, the stairs are steep and uneven. You’ll get the hang of it. Just be careful and lift them up next time,’ referring to the long nightgown.

I joined her in the kitchen.

‘You have a paracetamol or an aspirin?’

‘You do look a bit hung over. Here.’ She handed me a plastic container and got me a glass of water.

‘You’re right about the slippers though.’

‘Naff or not, they do the job.’

A feeling of *deja vue* came over me. Here I was in the middle of domestic normalcy again.

I sat down at the table.

‘Coffee?’

‘Fantastic, please.’

She got down a large stove top espresso machine off a shelf.

‘Just for you Nova. Victoria phoned me earlier and told me you had to have your coffee first thing.’

‘What time is it?’

‘Nearly midday.’

She noticed my apprehension.

‘Relax dear. Take it easy. Nobody knows you’re here. Take a long bath. Put your feet up. I told Victoria to phone back much later today. Hot milk?’

‘Yes, thanks.’

We sat around the table, me drinking a massive mug of steaming coffee and Judy sipping herbal tea.

‘If you’re up to it, we could take a walk later. Lot of pretty countryside around here. I try to take one every day, weather permitting.’

‘Here? You know, I don’t even know where we are.’

‘A little village near Bedford, called Urmington. Sleepy little place, not much going on but I love it.’

We sat around engaging in small talk mostly. I got the distinct impression that Judy was deliberately avoiding any reference to my – condition, although I could sense that she was burning with curiosity. But I was enjoying the sheer normalcy of everything. Wrapped up in my warm nightie and quilted robe, wearing my fluffy slippers, sipping my coffee in a cosy kitchen, it was almost possible to forget what I’d been through. I decided that I liked Judy and that Victoria couldn’t have made a better choice for a bolt hole. Judy asked me if I was hungry and she threw a large breakfast together, eggs, bacon, tomatoes, mushrooms, toast, and more coffee. My headache didn’t mature into a blinder and I felt secure and safe in Judy’s snug little hideaway.

Around two I decided to take a bath and get dressed.

‘Use the other bathroom, you can stretch out in the tub.’

I went upstairs, ran a bath and sorted out some of the new clothes I’d bought. I washed my hair again, soaked for half an hour and got dressed. The bra I put on, pulled but I figured I just wasn’t used to it. Dressed, I came back downstairs to the kitchen.

‘Let me have a look at you.’

She stood back and checked me out.

‘A bit somber but not bad. The pants look a bit tight but otherwise they suit you fine and the sweater looks really good on you.’

‘A whole new ballgame. I’m wearing a bra for the first time and it’s pinching.’

‘You’ll get used to it, assuming it’s the right size of course and you’ve got it adjusted properly. Want me to check?’

I reluctantly took off my sweater and Judy checked to see that I’d put the bra on right.

‘You just need to adjust the straps, they’re too short that’s all.’

She lengthened the straps and told me to pull it down.

‘There. How’s that feel?’

‘Better, much better thanks.’ And it did. The discomfort disappeared. I put the sweater back on.

‘Of course, I’ve had a lifetime and a mum to teach me about these things. But you’ll get the hang of it I’m sure. Victoria said last night, that you were a, real woman, I mean a complete one. Does that mean, well everything?’

‘Are you asking me if I have periods? Well, I’ve had one, or at least I think that’s what it was, and it nearly killed me, but assuming I’m okay, I mean that I’ve got all the plumbing and that it works properly, then I can only assume in a month or whenever, I’ll find out.’

‘I hope I’m not being too nosy.’

‘You’re sweet Judy. I can tell you’re bursting to ask me all kinds of questions, probably most of which I won’t be able to answer. But it’s okay now, I really don’t mind, not anymore. I have the feeling that somehow, my brain, or is it my mind? is adjusting, making adjustments? Whatever, I’ve had several days to come to terms with all this insanity and tell you the truth, aside from the shock of having a vagina and the embarrassment of buying bras and panties, I’ve got a new body, and in apparently good working order. Not bad for a fifty-eight year old.’

Judy looked gob smacked.

‘Fifty-eight!? You’re kidding me?’

‘Didn’t Victoria mention that?’

‘No she didn’t. But how can that be?’ She looked stunned. ‘Damn! I’m jealous!’

‘How can any of this be? Jealous? Oh that I seem to have lost, is that the right word, about thirty years? I’ve no idea, but obviously the two processes are linked in some way.’

‘Have you not thought about it? I mean the reason, the cause?’

‘Of course I have.’

‘This whole thing is too fantastic for words. What a story it’d make! Didn’t Victoria mention that there were others like you and that some of them had died?’

‘Yes apparently. The poor things didn’t make it through the final phase and bled to death.’

‘How awful.’

‘Look it’s nearly three, feel like a stroll?’

‘Yes, why not. I’ve got a coat and a hat.’

‘Do you have any boots or least something stronger than those skimpy shoes you’re wearing?’

‘Yes, I bought some really nice boots, I’ll put them on.’

Dressed warm, we left the cottage and walked down the short drive to the lane. As we walked, Judy put her arm through mine. As a gesture of solidarity? I’m not sure but it gave

me a kind of strength, and we strolled down the quiet lane in silence, soaking up the surroundings. We finally arrived at the village but didn't stop. After about an hour, we turned round and headed back the way we'd come. It was getting dark and the temperature was dropping.

'What are you going to do Nova?'

'I've no idea. The hospital wants to dissect me and turn me into a Nobel prize, the newspapers want to interview me and turn me tabloid fodder. And the government is apparently petrified about the implications, especially if it turns out that there are hundreds or even thousands more like me.'

'Implications? What kind of implications?'

'Haven't you noticed, it's a man's world.'

I let the remark sink in.

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Later, back at the cottage, we put some supper together and opened a bottle of wine, then the phone rang. After a few minutes, Judy called me to the phone.

'It's Victoria.'

'How are you doing?'

'Surprisingly well as a matter of fact. I didn't get up until midday and then we sat around the kitchen for a couple of hours nattering like a couple of housewives and then Judy showed me how to adjust my bra.'

'And is it?'

'Perfectly my dear. Anyway, then we went for a long walk. I feel almost human again. We've just had supper and we're sitting around the kitchen table once more. And you?'

'I'm jealous. It's been a nightmare. When I got back to the house, even though it past one in the morning, the press were still there. They were still there when I went out this morning.'

'Did you say anything to them?'

'Of course not. I just pushed through them, slammed the door and went straight to bed. I was exhausted.'

'I bet.'

'This morning the phone never stopped ringing, both of them. I had to turn them off. There were over two hundred emails waiting for me! Have you seen the TV or listened to the radio today?'

‘No, why?’

‘Nova, this thing is big, really big. It’s like someone stirred up a hornet’s nest.’

‘Have you been into the hospital?’

‘Yes. I wouldn’t tell any of them, even Friedland, where are you. He was a bit peeved but I think he understood why. In any case, I told him I’d keep him informed.’

‘Any other developments?’

‘Yes, but I won’t tell you over the phone.’

‘When will I see you again?’

‘Hopefully tomorrow. I’ll phone you in the morning. You know tomorrow is Saturday.’

‘Is it? I’ve completely lost track.’

‘Nova, make the most of the time you’ve got with Judy.’

‘That has an ominous ring to it.’

‘Trust me. The world has changed Nova, the world has changed and it’ll never be the same again. It couldn’t be bigger if aliens had landed in Hyde Park.’

‘No, it landed in a hospital in South London instead.’

I had a sinking feeling in my stomach. What is she preparing me for?

‘Judy really likes you and she’ll be very protective of you.’

‘I like her too. And I think she’s gotten over the initial shock. In fact, if we hadn’t told her about me, I’m sure she wouldn’t have even noticed how new I am to being a woman.’

‘She’s very level headed and not easily fazed. Just try and relax and take it easy and hope nobody tracks you down. I’d hate it if Judy gets invaded, she’s very jealous of her privacy. Look, I’ve got to go. Bye.’

She hung up abruptly, leaving me holding the phone and feeling very unsettled. I went back into the kitchen.

‘You look worried dear.’

‘Yes, I am.’

She got up and came over to me and hugged me, very protectively.

‘I won’t them let them get to you I promise.’ But she looked worried too.

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I went to bed early and woke up early. Judy was still asleep so I crept around, trying to be as quiet as possible. I wanted to get on the Web but there was no connection in the kitchen, and anyway I didn’t want to use her laptop without asking her, so I turned on Radio 4.

‘the ninth confirmed death so far, this time in Atlanta, Georgia in the United States, apparently as a result of what scientists, who are still baffled by the causes, are calling, the Double X Syndrome. Meanwhile, the first case reported in the UK, Mister Roy Babrovsky, a fifty-eight year old technical writer, who, since leaving St. George’s hospital earlier this week reportedly accompanied by one of his doctor’s, Doctor Victoria Grayson, is nowhere to be found. It was thought Mister, or is it Miss, Babrovsky was staying with Doctor Grayson, but she emphatically denied it, saying that she took Miss Babrovsky to her South London flat on the day Miss Babrovsky left the hospital and she hadn’t seen or spoken to her since. When asked about Miss Babrovsky’s health and a report that she had almost died through massive loss of blood on the night she was admitted to hospital, Doctor Grayson refused to comment. All attempts at reaching the other members of the medical team who treated Miss Babrovsky have not been successful.

‘Meanwhile, an official of the Department of Health, said that nothing further was known about the syndrome other than what had already been reported. When asked if it was true that an emergency meeting of the Club of Ten, representing the ten leading industrial nations of world, had been called, the official declined to comment. The Press Office of the World Health Organisation, the W-H-O, also refused to make any comments on the rumors of hundreds of cases world-wide.

‘So there you have it. What some experts are calling the most astounding event ever to shake the world of modern genetics and nobody’s talking. We tried to reach Doctor Steve Jones, author of a recent popular work on the male chromosome, Y, The Descent of Man, earlier today for his thoughts, but he wasn’t talking either.

‘It’s now seven twenty-nine and time for a summary of the news.’

I switched off the radio and concentrated on making a pot of coffee. After cleaning out the espresso maker, I discovered there wasn’t enough coffee to make a full pot. Damn! I wonder if I can get some in the village? Should I take a walk? I made a cup of tea instead and sat at the kitchen table, ruminating. Then the phone rang and after a couple of rings, Judy must have picked up. I sat there, frozen to the spot, wondering what was in store. A couple of minutes later, Judy, still half asleep, wandered into the kitchen, yawning and rubbing her eyes.

‘That was Victoria of course. She’s going to phone back. I thought you were still in bed and I didn’t want to disturb you.’

‘I woke up early. How is she?’

‘She’s okay. At least the press are no longer camped out on her doorstep.’

‘We’re out of coffee. Can I get some in the village?’

‘No, we’ll have to go into Bedford. Can you survive that long?’

‘Yes, it’s not that much of a disaster. It’s strange, but some of my old habits have been left behind with my old, self but not others. I wonder if I can still write? Have I got new skills along with my new body and lost some?’

‘Are you interested in things like that?’

‘Like what?’

‘Well, the differences between male and female brains?’

‘Are there any? Are you?’

‘I think there are, but perhaps now you’ll find out. And yes, I am interested actually.’

Nature versus nurture. But I’m convinced my brain has already changed along with everything else, how else do you explain my losing my desire for cigarettes?’

‘But not coffee?’

‘Apparently not. I caught the last bit of a report about me – it, on Radio 4 just now.’  
And?’

‘Nine reported deaths so far, the last one in the States.’

‘God. Where’s it all headed?’

‘They’re calling it the Double X Syndrome.’

Judy busied herself with making tea.

‘Want another cup?’

‘Yeah, why not.’

We sat at the table in silence. Neither of us were early morning people.

Later, we were still hanging out in the kitchen, when the phone rang again. It was Victoria but I didn’t speak to her.

‘She’s on her way but she’s paranoid about being followed, so I suggested we meet up in Bedford. We’ll phone her when we get there and arrange a place to meet.’

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On the way to Bedford, Judy restarted our conversation of earlier that morning.

‘Nova, maybe it’s not the right time to bring this up but would you be interested in well, keeping a diary? Or at least some kind of record of your, what’s the word? Progress?’

‘Into the world of womanhood?’

‘Yes, something like that. In fact that’s a great title.’

‘What kind of writing did you say you did?’

‘Actually, I didn’t but now that you ask, I’m a novelist.’

‘Write anything I’d know?’

‘Well, I’m not sure, depends what you’re into.’

She mentioned a couple of titles but I’d not heard of them.

I write, I suppose you’d call them social dramas. I explore relationships, you know, families, men and women, women and women, children and adults, that kind of thing. I studied sociology but it was too abstract, too disconnected, striving ever so hard to be a science, or at least pass itself off as a science, so I turned to fiction. So what about it? The idea I mean?’

‘To tell you the truth, I feel so overwhelmed with thoughts and emotions, most of which I seem to be burying somewhere, in my new brain? It’s difficult for me to keep my mind focused on anything for any length of time. There seem to be so many questions, so many issues cropping up almost constantly, that I have the feeling that I’m going to need the extra thirty years I seem to have gained, in order to deal with them all.’

I debated whether to tell her about the dream and Victoria’s intuition about my being pregnant but decided against it. I had the feeling that Judy was just too quick off the mark and once I mentioned it, she would pursue it relentlessly. Maybe I was just making excuses to avoid the subject? But I’d not had the dream again since, or at least I hadn’t remembered it, so maybe I’m just being irrational. I started to think about the other men, at least those who had survived and whether they were going through the same thing? How long had this been going on? I had a vision of some poor soul in a village somewhere in the middle of India or China who we’d never even hear about, probably dying in agony, ostracised and alone. After all, it nearly happened to me in the middle of London and all because I refused to stay in hospital. Another thing I had to bring up with Victoria. So many questions!

‘A penny for your thoughts?’

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I was miles away wasn’t I. No, I was just thinking and it makes my head hurt.’

Could I trust Judy? It’s a pity I don’t know her better, yet she seems to be genuine. Same old story, never trusting people. Rely on your instincts Nova! Nova. Is that who I am now? How would I feel about trusting a man? The thought sent a shiver through me. I’d be vulnerable to a man. Or maybe they would recoil from me more likely, given how uptight men are about being masculine, whatever that is now. What would a man view me as? A man with tits and a vagina or as some freak of nature? Probably both, knowing my luck. I looked at Judy.

‘What?’

‘Just thinking.’

‘Judy?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you think of me as a woman? I mean do you relate to me as a woman?’

‘I was thinking exactly the same thing. A woman’s intuition? When you turned up the other day and I first saw you, I’d have to say that until Victoria told me, I assumed you were a woman. After all, that’s what you appeared to be. No, not appeared, it’s what I assumed you to be. You know how it is, or maybe you don’t? But if I meet a man dressed as a woman, or even a really beautiful transsexual who’s removed or hidden every trace of their male past or the male underneath, there’s invariably a giveaway, often something quite trivial, either visual or behavioral, or both. Often, it’s just a feeling that something’s ‘not quite right’? But with you, I don’t know, it’s difficult, as I know what you used to be, even though I still find it incredible, and it affects my judgement. Who am I looking at? To what degree does my knowledge determine my reactions?’ And to what degree is it in-built or learned?’

‘Now you know why my head hurts.’

‘Absolutely darling. Absolutely.’

She put her hand on mine in a gesture of reassurance and then took it away rather too quickly.

‘Is there a problem?’

‘Oh Nova I’m sorry, I’m really confused. For a moment then, I wasn’t sure of why I did that.’

‘I could be crass and ask you if you prefer women but I had exactly the same experience with Victoria, so I think I know what you mean.’

‘It wouldn’t be crass under the circumstances. And no, I’m not. Though frankly, I’m still searching for the right man, if he exists.’

We’d reached the outskirts of Bedford.

‘Time to give Victoria a bell.’

We pulled over and after a short conversation, we agreed to meet at a restaurant on the outskirts of the town.

We got to there before Victoria and found a secluded table in the back of the place and ordered a drink while we waited for her. When she finally arrived, I had to suppress an impulse to giggle, as she looked decidedly furtive, scouring the place, as if looking for anyone suspicious, before spotting our table.

Looking strained and sounding slightly breathless, she finally sat down.

‘Oh god, what a day!’

Before we could talk, the waiter approached our table and Victoria ordered a drink.

‘So how are you?’

‘Judy’s been absolutely wonderful and taken complete care of me. And you?’

She sighed.

‘It’s complete bedlam. Friedland’s going nuts. I think he’s under a lot of pressure from above. He demanded to know where you were and I had to lie, and although I know he didn’t believe me, he didn’t push the issue except to tell me that if anything happened to you, I’d have to take the responsibility.’

‘Happened? What do you mean if anything happened?’

Victoria looked at Judy and then at me debating what to say.

‘There’s been some developments.’

‘That I should know about, obviously.’

‘Well yes, but now I’m here,’ she looked around, ‘I’m not sure we should talk about it now. Why don’t we order, I’m starving, I haven’t eaten a thing today.’

Not wanting to push the issue, I acceded to Victoria’s request and we ordered food. I could only pick at my mine, my appetite had vanished. What developments I wondered.

‘Eat up Nova.’

‘I’m not really hungry.’

While Judy and Victoria exchanged small talk, I sat there, thinking, and worrying. Another premonition? There was something nagging at my mind, infuriatingly out of reach. I pushed the remains of my meal around the plate, trying to grab hold of my thoughts. I looked at Victoria and I could see she was deliberately avoiding looking at me, her voice obviously strained in the effort to talk about other things, and that Judy sensed it too although she went along with the charade. After what seemed like ages, they both finished eating. By now, I was getting really edgy and a feeling of unease washed over me.

‘I’ve got to go to the bathroom.’ I said, and looked around for the sign. A waiter pointed it out to me, and as I got up, I looked for my bag, a seemingly inconsequential act that triggered a strange look from Victoria, but which only impinged on my consciousness after I reached the toilet. The ladies had an enormous mirror on one wall over the sinks, and it was impossible for me to avoid my reflection as I left the toilet. I tried not to look as I washed my hands but the mirror was like a magnet, drawing my eye back to my reflection. Thank god there was no one else in there with me! Somehow, my face seemed to have changed. No, it

wasn't my face or even my body. It was my stance, how I held myself. Small things, the way my hands moved, even how I was standing. It was if the person looking at the reflection was somehow, inside the body, looking out through a third eye. I felt faint and grabbed hold of the edge of the sink. Resting my head on my arms, I just stood there, my legs bent feeling weak and sick. I don't know how long I stood there before the door opened and Victoria entered. I looked up and attempted a sickly smile.

'My god, you're as white as a sheet! You've been in here for ages and I got worried.'

She grabbed hold of me and looked around for somewhere for me to sit but there was nothing except a toilet. My skin was cold but I was covered in a fine sheen of sweat. Was I still changing? My body felt different somehow, heavier? No, that wasn't it, it just felt different, like, all over. When would this end?

'I'll be alright in a minute.'

'I think we should leave. Can you make it to the car?'

'Yes, I think so.'

Holding on to me, we negotiated our way back to the table. A waiter saw us and asked me if I was okay and helped me to our table, fussing over me, looking extremely concerned, probably worried that it was food that had done it. Judy asked him for the bill. My mouth was dry and I asked for a glass of water. I sat there in silence, staring at the table, sipping on the water. After a while, my senses returned somewhat and I was able to look around me. Judy, was staring at me, looking very frightened. I tried to smile, one of reassurance, that I'm really okay but I know it didn't convince her.

'I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me but I'm feeling a lot better now.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. Give me a couple more minutes and we can go.'

Judy paid the bill and got up to collect out coats.

Eventually, I got up and as I did, I started to shiver uncontrollably and Victoria wrapped my coat around my shoulders and guided me to toward the exit, with a gaggle of waiters following us, muttering assurances and hoping I would be better.

'My bag,' I said, 'I left it in the ladies.'

'Judy rushed to the toilet and came back with it and somehow, I made it to the car and got into the back seat and lay down, still shivering and I tried to bury under my coat but it wasn't big enough.

'We'll soon be home dear.'

I grunted.

Judy called out of the window to Victoria to follow us.

‘Judy? Could you turn on the heat please, I’m freezing.’

I don’t remember much of the journey home. I think I must have fallen asleep, for the next thing I remember was sitting in front of the fire in Judy’s living room wrapped in a duvet with Judy and Victoria sitting there, looking at me. I felt hot.

‘God, I don’t want to go through that again. It was awful,’ I croaked.

My mouth was dry and my tongue felt like sandpaper.

‘Tea, I need some tea, but no milk, maybe with lemon?’

‘Of course darling, maybe some herbal tea?’ Judy jumped up and went into the kitchen.

Victoria put her hand on my brow. ‘And could you bring back a thermometer?’ she called out.

‘I think you’ve got a temperature and your skin is dry and flushed.’

Dry and flushed? It triggered a memory but I couldn’t pin it down. Judy came in with the thermometer and Victoria stuck it under my tongue. After a minute or so, she took it out and looked at it.

‘I thought so, ninety-nine and a bit. We should get you into bed.’

‘Not yet please, let me sit here for a while.’

Eventually, Judy reappeared with the tea, which I gulped down, burning my tongue in the process.

Adopting the pose that only doctors and fretting mothers do, Victoria got me to my feet.

‘Okay, time to get you into bed young woman.’

Somehow, I managed to get up the stairs and into my bedroom. Victoria undressed me efficiently and got me into my nightgown, and once I was under the duvet, sat on the bed for a while, holding my hand until I drifted off into sleep.