

# XX

## **A Novel**

By William Bowles

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**Installment Six**

I don't know how long I slept but I woke up feeling extremely thirsty and hungry. The room was dark as the curtains were drawn, but it felt quite late. I put my hand to my brow and it felt cool to the touch. I turned over and curled up, feeling very secure and warm under the duvet. I heard the door open and Victoria call out, very quietly, 'Nova, are you awake?'

'Uh-huh. Just woke up.'

I turned over and poked my head out from under the duvet.

'I'm thirsty,' I said, sounding like a daughter who needed her mummy.

'I'll get you something to drink dear. But no coffee for you.'

'Uh-huh.'

Later, she returned with a large mug of tea and helped me sit up in bed. I felt quite weak and very helpless, as she plumped up the pillows.

'Here, put this on,' and she handed me a black satin, quilted bed jacket.

'Umm, that's nice and warm.'

Victoria put her hand on my brow.

'Well I think you're temperature's gone down and you definitely look much better. At least some colour has returned to your cheeks. I was quite worried about you last night and debated whether or not to call an ambulance.'

'I'm glad you didn't.'

'It's all very well for you to say that but I'm responsible for you, remember. If anything should happen to you, it'll be my head for the chop.'

'You're an angel Victoria,' I teased.

'Don't push me young lady. I want you to stay in bed today, I'm not taking any chances.'

'You will stay won't you?' I pleaded.

'Yes of course I will. Now, do you want anything else? A bite to eat maybe?'

'That's a good idea. Maybe a bacon sandwich?'

Judy entered and sat on the bed looking extremely concerned.

'How are you feeling?'

'Much better thank you. Sorry to dump this on you.'

'Now don't be silly. Are you warm enough? Can I get you anything?'

'Victoria's going to make me a bacon sandwich.'

They left the room and left me with a strange feeling that I couldn't put my finger on. I sipped my tea and looked around my room and for the first time, noted the prints of

Victorian domestic scenes on the walls and the window seat with its pile of small cushions. An elegant, Victorian style dressing table with triple mirrors graced the wall next to my bed, the top empty except for a pile of magazines and some books. I put the mug down on the bedside table, leant back against the pillows and closed my eyes. I must have dozed off, because the next thing I knew was a soft voice calling to me.

‘Nova?’

‘I must have dozed off.’

Victoria put a plate with the sandwich on the table.

‘More tea?’

‘Please.’

She felt my forehead again and sat on the bed looking at me intensely. Finally, I said, ‘Well out with it, there’s something you’re not telling me isn’t there?’

She nodded but said nothing.

‘I’m pregnant aren’t I?’

‘In all likelihood, yes.’

The strangest feeling came over me. A mixture fear and elation along with a measure of relief. The fear I could understand and the relief, but the feeling of elation?

‘But I didn’t take the test. How do you know? How can you be sure?’

‘From the results of the tests we did at the hospital. Levels of hormones in your blood and urine, but we need to do more to confirm the result. We know absolutely nothing about the process you’ve been through, so it could just be a side effect. But all the signs point to it.’

My appetite disappeared.

‘Does Judy know?’

‘Yes.’

‘I thought so. In fact, last night, when we got back here, I had the feeling that’s what it was.’

‘I think we should get you into hospital as soon as I’m sure it’s safe for you to travel.’

I nodded, reluctantly acknowledging her logic.

‘So I must have been pregnant from the time I completed the transition?’

‘In all probability, yes. There’s no other explanation except that it’s the culmination of the process.’

‘This means that any other people who’ve been through the same thing and survived, are also pregnant.’

‘That’s the other thing I wanted to tell you. There’s been another case, in Edinburgh. Yesterday.’

‘And she’s...?’

‘Yes.’

‘Christ.’

I burst into tears and buried my head in my hands. I was suddenly very afraid, afraid of the future.

I spent most of the rest of the day in bed, with Judy and Victoria fussing over me all the time. Popping in and out, sitting with me, reassuring me, bringing me drinks and snacks and magazines to read. I tried to push the face of what I could only think of now as my baby, out of my head, but the image from the dream kept returning. I was afraid to go to sleep in case the dream came back to haunt me. Finally, I couldn’t deal with it anymore and I got out of bed – over Victoria’s strenuous objections – and went downstairs and settled myself in front of the fire, wrapped up in my quilted robe and gazed into the flickering flames of the fire as the daylight faded into dusk.

Several times, I started to bring up the subject of my pregnancy but I couldn’t face it. Eventually, on my way to the toilet for what seemed the umpteenth time, I asked Victoria if she had the pregnancy test kit with her. She delved into her bag and handed me the box and I retreated to the toilet with a plastic cup to catch a measure of my pee with which to anoint, as it were, the small circular patches on the kit. I used the small syringe provided, poured the remainder of the pee down the toilet and went back downstairs, holding the kit delicately as if it would explode if I made any sudden movements. I put the kit on the mantle piece and retreated to my chair to await the outcome. Of course I tested positive. My fate was sealed.

In a way, it was a relief, to know for sure that I was up the spout. As the evening wore on, it was no longer possible for me to put off the question any longer.

‘Okay, I’m pregnant. I can’t ignore it any longer. My main concern now is the health of the...my baby.’ A thought welled up in my mind, unbidden. ‘Assuming of course, that it is a baby.’

Looks of horror passed over both their faces.

‘What else could it be?’ From Judy.

‘What on earth prompted you say to it?’ From Victoria.

‘I don’t know why I said it, it just came out.’

I started crying again.

‘Is this how it’s going to be from now on?’ I sobbed. ‘Every cliché in the book,’ between the sobs.

‘Well at least in that respect, you appear to quite normal.’

‘Is that a joke?’

Implausibly, we all started laughing, or in my case, between the sobs. Maybe it was hysteria.

‘What a mess. I suppose morning sickness is next?’

Victoria looked at me and said, ‘I hope this is not going to be a difficult pregnancy Nova. Or rather, I hope you’re not going to make it more difficult for yourself than it need be.’

I said nothing in response.

‘Okay, time for you to get to bed. Come on.’

I woke up feeling much better. No dream either. I could smell bacon frying. I got up, peed, robe on. Down the stairs, into the kitchen. Victoria and Judy were already there.

‘I feel much better this morning. What day is it?’

‘Sunday. Want some breakfast?’

‘Please, I’m famished.’

And I was too. I polished off an enormous breakfast, the biggest meal I’d had in weeks. I felt great.

‘Well if this what being pregnant feels like, I’m not complaining right now.’

Victoria took my temperature and my pulse and looked at me.

‘Go and weigh yourself.’

‘What now?’

‘Yes now.’

I ran up the stairs, taking care not to trip over my gown and robe of course and into the bathroom. Sixty-two kilos and a bit.

‘Well?’

‘Just over sixty-two kilos.’

‘How tall are you?’

‘Five ten.’

‘You look shorter. But in any case, you’re underweight for your height, for a man that is.’

‘And for a pregnant woman?’

‘It’s pointless speculating.’

‘And when should I start putting on weight as a result of the pregnancy?’

‘There should be no change for a couple weeks, assuming yours is a normal pregnancy, which obviously it’s not. But what’s normal in your case, who knows? We’re in unknown territory Nova.’

‘What about the woman in Edinburgh?’

‘We’re having as much trouble getting info on her as we are on you. The hospital she’s in is not talking either.’

‘Wearing your hospital cap now are you?’

Victoria looked a bit embarrassed by my comment and I regretted saying it even as I uttered it. We’d crossed the border between patient and friend.

‘It might be better if we find an ob-gyn for you instead.’

‘Yes, you’re probably right but I’d rather have you.’

‘Don’t worry about it now Nova. We’ll deal with when we get back to the hospital.’

Mention of return brought me right down.

‘I’d like to meet the woman in Edinburgh. If she survives that is.’

Both women looked at me, startled by my comment.

‘That was out of the blue wasn’t it?’

‘Well not really when I think about it.’

The issue wasn’t raised again.

I spent one more night at Judy’s, reluctantly leaving the following morning, amid lots of tears and hugs from all round, but I told Judy, that if she would put up with me, I’d like to return. She didn’t want me to leave.

The journey back to South London was uneventful and we sneaked into the hospital via a back door.

Tests, lots of tests. Another physical exam. I insisted that Victoria performed it over Friedland’s objections but I could see that Victoria wasn’t comfortable with the idea. Was I being selfish? Yes, I think so, but I don’t care. I felt quite at ease this time round, even with the awful table, and the stirrups, which gave me the creeps. You feel so vulnerable. How could women put up with being poked around like this, especially by men? If anything did more to propel me into the world of women it was this. Lying on the table, feeling my insides being worked over, instruments inserted somehow broke the link with my male past

completely. Whatever happened I know there was no return, not now. Eventually, Victoria finished her examination and helped me off the table. Was only a week since the first time?

‘Well, everything’s there but there are some anomalies.’

‘Anomalies? What kind of anomalies?’

‘Well perhaps that’s the wrong word. Maybe improvements would be a more accurate a description.’

Somehow, I wasn’t surprised and judging by Victoria’s reaction neither was she.

‘In order to explain things in detail, you’re going to need a course in the female reproductive system but essentially, the human body has well, I suppose design faults would be the best way of putting it. As we’re still evolving maybe. One theory is that the switch from walking on all fours to standing up, wasn’t as smooth as it could have been? Whatever the reason, things like the position of the birth canal, and a host of other things can, in some women, lead to problems, either pre-natal or during the actually birthing process. Only a complete dissection could tell of course.’

‘Oh really.’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...’

‘That’s okay, I know what you mean.’

‘I’d bet my life on one thing though, and it’s that you have a normal pregnancy and any changes I’ve been able to see, are for the better.’

‘In what sense, better?’

‘I think you’ll have an easier birth, and less chance of complications as the pregnancy progresses, assuming that is, that the fetus develops correctly and we’ll just have to wait on that one.’

A lot of women are going to be pissed off at me.’

‘You can get dressed now. And the team want to meet with you.’

We left the exam room and headed for what turned out to be a small lecture theatre. On the way I bumped into Nurse Taylor, who almost didn’t recognise me. I thanked her for her care and she looked kind of embarrassed. The same five people, plus Victoria of course, were all present. I felt extremely nervous and very self-conscious when I entered the room.

‘Welcome back Miss Simmons. May I call you Nova?’

I nodded.

‘Well where to start? As you know you’re pregnant, exactly one week pregnant. It’s clear that the night you nearly died you also conceived. We don’t know how yet, but we’ll find out. You appear to be in good health if underweight slightly, although your temperature

seems a little high, ninety-eight point eight to be exact and strangely, at least according to the information Doctor Grayson has so kindly supplied us with,' Victoria looked embarrassed by the sarcastic comment. 'You've had this temperature since Saturday morning. We're speculating that it might actually be normal for you, whether as a result of the pregnancy or of your transformation, we don't know, yet. In fact, there's so much we don't know it's embarrassing. Doctor Grayson, could you please give us an update on the examination you've just conducted.'

'Yes Doctor Friedland. But first let me say that as unorthodox as it might have been when I uh, absconded with Nova, I felt that it was in the best interests of the patient who was under immense strain at the time, and indeed was essentially in good health. There were no real grounds for detaining her, in spite of all we might have learned had we persuaded her to stay. The fact that her whereabouts was leaked to the press here at the hospital and later at my house, made it all the more imperative that she be moved, a decision I take full responsibility for making, with Nova's agreement of course. Once it was confirmed that she was indeed pregnant, Nova agreed to return here as soon as it was practical to do so and that was this morning.'

'Okay, as to the examination I've just conducted, I will of course be writing up a full report in due course but essentially, it seems that with some,' looking at me, 'Anomalies, which I will go into, Nova's pregnancy is, so far at least, normal.'

I sat there, feeling like I was in a goldfish bowl.

'As to the anomalies, well as I told Nova, they are closer to improvements than anything else.'

A gasp from the team with everybody trying to talk at once.

'Please, doctors, let Doctor Grayson continue.'

'As I was saying. Only a detailed dissection will reveal the true extent of these ah, improvements, something that I'm sure Nova is not keen to submit to, but as far as I can tell, they really are improvements in the sense that, if they work, they reduce the risk of pre-natal complications as well as any complications that could arise during the birthing process. Are they a result of the change? Well, if I were betting, I'd say yes. But we really need to see the results of the case in Edinburgh to clear up these and many other questions. As we are all aware, Nova's transformation has shattered all our pre-conceptions about a whole lot of things and we have much to learn. I will say this though, that the health of Nova and her baby must come first, and as her gynecologist, I must insist that we subject Nova to the minimum amount of intrusive examination and the resultant risk of stress on the mother and baby.'

Nods all round, but to me they looked liked ghouls waiting to pounce nevertheless.

A lot of technical stuff followed, which I blanked out on completely. Finally, somebody actually got round to asking me if I had anything to say.

‘Well firstly, I would like to thank you all for saving my life last week even though I may have seemed ungrateful at the time. Secondly, I would like to thank Victoria...Dr Grayson, for her support, without which I may have survived physically, but perhaps not with my sanity. A couple of observations, which although entirely unscientific, I think do have a bearing on this.’

I took a deep breath.

‘On the night I nearly died, or was it the following night? Whenever, I had a dream that I was giving birth to a baby girl, a rather beautiful baby girl, who grinned at me as I held her up and who reached out to me with her arms. It’s no exaggeration to say that that image is burned into my brain. Later in the week, Victoria had an intuition that I was pregnant, before the results of any tests, even inconclusive ones, were available and it didn’t surprise me to learn that the woman in Edinburgh was also pregnant, I’m assuming under exactly the same conditions. And I’m willing to bet that the tens, or is it hundreds of other men who have undergone this transformation, and who survived, will also be pregnant. I’m also willing to bet that all the babies will be female.’

Absolute silence.

‘Oh and one other thing, I’d like to meet up with the woman in Edinburgh if it’s at all possible and as soon as possible?’

The meeting broke up in uproar, with everyone wanting to question me, and Victoria but I had to get out of there. All I could think of was getting back to the peace and quiet of Judy’s hideaway and her caring and understanding ways. We headed for Friedland’s office instead.

Once there, I sank into one of his armchairs.

‘So Miss Simmons, Nova, what do you intend to do? I think it’s important that you be close to this hospital, we have no idea what could go wrong, even if Doctor Grayson is confident that your pregnancy is, to all intents and purposes, a normal one.’

‘I reluctantly agree with you Doctor Friedland but what are the chances of me getting any privacy here in London? Not very high are they?’

He nodded his agreement. ‘But I’m also worried about, how do I put it? Other constituencies?’

‘You mean the government don’t you.’

‘Yes. I’ve been approached with the offer of providing you with a secure place, round-the-clock surveillance, the best medical support money can buy, a guarantee of complete privacy, an expense account...’

‘In return for what?’

‘I’m sorry to say, that hasn’t been made clear to me as yet.’

I looked at Victoria who just shrugged.

‘Did you know about this Victoria?’

She nodded.

‘But surely, Doctor Grayson, you must have some idea as to why they’re prepared to be so generous.’

‘Well, yes. Obviously the first objective is the research aspect. You are no doubt aware of the concerns being voiced concerning, eh, your condition, by many governments around the world. How widespread is it? What are the implications if this the first expression of a general trend? Which, I might add, I find difficult to accept. But there’s no doubt now, that you are not a – one-off case. I think there are those, whose major concern is the future of our race. There are many who feel extremely threatened by this, by your very existence.

‘You mean men don’t you?’

Nova, the idea has been raised that this might be a new disease.’

‘A disease? But that’s ridiculous! I’m not ill, I’m pregnant!’

‘Remember when AIDS first appeared? There were many who felt that it was some kind of punishment, retribution for our sins.’

‘But you know that’s complete nonsense.

‘Yes, I do and so do most right thinking people.’

So I’m being punished for being a man?’

‘Of course it’s a ridiculous idea, although...’ he trailed off.

‘So we’re back to our old friend Gaaia.’

‘The idea, as you yourself were willing to concede, that it is some kind of evolutionary development or perhaps response to environmental pressures, cannot be dismissed. Whether it’s a, well, dead-end or not, it’s much too early to say.’

‘And if it isn’t?’

‘The world as we know it, will cease to exist.’

‘And not a moment too soon if you ask me.’ Interjected Victoria.

Doctor Grayson looked daggers at Victoria.

‘Yes well, that may well be Doctor Grayson. However, we are still no closer to resolving Miss Simmon’s dilemma.’

‘There’s no way that I’m going to be a guinea pig, no matter how much money they offer me, so short of kidnapping me...’ I trailed off as a chill swept over me with the thought that there maybe people considering doing such a thing.

‘I hardly think Miss Grayson, that it’ll come to that.’

‘Oh really? With the future of men at stake.’

‘Let’s not get carried away now.’

‘Really Doctor Friedland, I think you are being naïve. After all, it was you who raised the issue of men in power feeling threatened by this.’

‘I hardly think that it’ll come to you being kidnapped.’

‘If not me, then I’m sure they’ll be people who wouldn’t mind exchanging their freedom for a pile of money.’

‘Whether or not there are others, of your kind, willing to submit themselves to such scrutiny remains pure speculation.’

‘Doctor Grayson, we’re getting nowhere fast with this debate. Right now I’m concerned with the well being of my patient and how to find a solution. May I propose the following?’

Grayson nodded.

‘I’d like to take Victoria back to, well where she’s been for the past few days with the understanding that she have regular checkups here, at the hospital. In addition, I’d like to continue staying with Nova, at least for the next few weeks?’

‘How do you feel about this Miss Simmons?’

‘Yes, that’s what I’d like to do.’

‘Well, I must say that I’m not in favour but I, indeed the hospital, cannot refuse you, if this is what you really want to do. There is, after all, nothing actually wrong with you, at least at present.’

‘Yes it is.’

‘As to your request Doctor Grayson, I’ll have to consult the board. If you agree to submitting regular, detailed reports?’

‘I’ll write up a formal request for you Doctor Friedland. In the meantime, I’d like to take Nova back.’

I shook hands with Friedland and we left his office. He clearly wasn’t pleased with the outcome but as Victoria pointed out, there was nothing he could do about.

We drove back to Judy's place after Victoria had collected her laptop, written out some prescriptions and requested some equipment to take with her. Victoria wanted to stop by her place but decided it was too risky. We phoned Judy on the way.

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The drive back was uneventful. On the way, we stopped off at a department store and picked up some more clothes and basic stuff from a chemist's, toothpaste and so on. I felt bad about borrowing everything from Judy. Before we reached the cottage, Victoria suggested we stop off in Bedford for a bite to eat. We found a small coffee shop in the centre of town and ordered a light lunch. Over the lunch, it was obvious that Victoria was extremely worried about something.

'So what's eating you?'

'I don't know, it's just a feeling that's all. I don't think Friedland was telling us everything. He's definitely holding something back. And just the fact that he agreed so readily to our suggestion of you staying at Judy's, made me suspicious.'

'Are you sure you're not being, well paranoid?'

'You heard what he said!'

'Yes, but that doesn't mean he...I mean what can he do?'

'I'm not sure, that's the problem. I just think we need to be careful. Do you have a solicitor?'

'A solicitor? No, why?'

'I think you should get one, just in case.'

'In case what? I get kidnapped?'

'Nova, I'm not sure you fully appreciate your situation and the panic it's generated amongst, well Men.'

'I'm not saying that the powers that be aren't in a bit of a panic, but don't you think you're overreacting a bit?'

She shrugged and I dropped the subject.

After lunch I wanted to go to a bookshop and pick up stuff to read on having a baby. Victoria made a joke about the fact that I'd probably have to write the book myself. In any case, we found a shop and I picked up a few books on the subject including one on the basics; the changes that take place and so forth. When we reached the cottage, Judy was waiting outside the house, smiling, clearly pleased to see us and bursting with questions about my health and the baby. It was great to be back. I felt safe and secure here and the pressures of the world outside, retreated somewhat. I wanted to be able to establish some kind of normalcy, a

routine that I could rely on. If you like, some stability after the nightmare of the previous months.

I spent the rest of day getting settled in, putting my clothes away and so on. I offered to cook, an offer that was immediately accepted by Judy, but on exploring her kitchen, I realised we had very different culinary tastes and I needed spices and such, that she didn't have. We decided to walk into the village before the shops, such as they were, closed. Victoria didn't think it was a good idea, and couldn't I make do with what we had? We could take a trip in to Bedford tomorrow, as we would need to stock up anyway, there were three to feed now. So I threw together a mild vegetable curry, some raita, using Judy's home made yoghurt and cucumbers from her greenhouse, which went down extremely well. It was wonderful cooking not only with fresh veggies straight out of the garden, but also cooking for my two new friends. I felt useful instead of a burden. It restored some of my self confidence and sense of worth. Afterwards, we sat around the fire, sipping tea.

'Okay,' said Judy. 'Some ground rules.'

'I need to maintain as far as I can anyway, my routine of work and I won't pretend, that much as I love you both, I still need my private space and quiet to work in. Now I know this isn't going to be easy, least of all for me, as I can't pretend that I'm not absolutely fascinated by events, and bursting with questions of my own. However, it took me a long time to establish some self-discipline over my working habits, something that Victoria knows only too well. Hence, I am proposing the following: We have breakfast together first thing, and I'm an early riser, and then you two clear out of the kitchen and let me get on with my work, as my study is just too cold even with an electric heater. I'll allow you in to make tea, coffee or whatever, but you're not allowed to talk to me, okay?'

'Agreed.' We both said.

'I'll knock off around one and we can get lunch together and then I'm back at it, by the very latest two until five or so, depending on how things go. As to what the two of you do, well it's up to you, but not too much noise please.'

'It's fine by me.' I said. Victoria was happy. We both needed to sort out our own routines. I volunteered to keep the place clean and do the cooking, or share it at least. I like cooking, always have. Victoria had a lot of catching up to do and asked if she could use Judy's study, as the cold didn't bother her so much.

'Good. I'm glad we've got that out of the way. Now Nova, Victoria, bring me up to date on things, I'm dying to know,' with all the glee and enthusiasm of a teenage girl wanting to hear the latest gossip.

Victoria gave her a round up, first on me and the baby and then on the other developments, but avoided mentioning the offer I'd had of a place to stay, guards and all that stuff, from the government, which I thought was odd but I didn't say anything. I made a mental note to ask her later, why she'd not mentioned it.

Strangely, after a while, I started to feel extremely depressed, and sat there in silence, gazing once more, into the blazing logs. So much so that Victoria noticed.

'Are you feeling you okay?'

'I don't know. I mean I don't feel ill, physically that is, just, well depressed, that's all. Maybe it's a come down after everything. Or maybe I feel that I should be, oh I don't know,' and I started to cry, again. I sat there feeling very sorry for myself for a while and then, just as quickly as the depression had come on, it vanished and I felt fine. I offered to make tea. Victoria and Judy sat there, looking at me with concern.

Eventually, Victoria said, 'I wouldn't be surprised if this doesn't happen quite often Nova, at least for a while, so you better get used to it. It could be the result of hormonal changes or simply the result of unwinding. I'm loathe to prescribe anything at this point though. Let's see how it goes shall we.' She took out a small notebook and made some notes in it.

Then she added, 'I think the best thing for you right now, is to take it easy, put your feet up and try and relax. Don't forget, not only has your body undergone the most violent upheaval during the change, you're also pregnant which is making your body go through even more changes. We don't know anything about any of these changes or what effect they have on your system. If your pregnancy follows the normal course, you'll get morning sickness, weight gain, unusual cravings, pains in the back and sometimes, bouts of depression. Frankly, I wouldn't be surprised at anything, so you might as well get used to it.'

I nodded. I was reluctant to take drugs anyway and especially now. Who knew what effect they could have on the baby, let alone me? I spent the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, snoozing. I tried to read a couple of times but I couldn't concentrate. At some point in the evening Judy brought a plate of something to eat and drink which I nibbled at.

Eventually, I went to bed and dreamt. It was the same dream, only this time, when I woke up in the morning, I could remember the entire thing and it no longer frightened me. I felt as if I knew the baby girl intimately, her smile, the large brown eyes filled with knowledge, and those hands reaching out to me. I had the same dream almost every night for the next few weeks. The strange thing was, the dream always started after the birth, there was no pain, no fear, nothing. Just me holding up the baby at arm's length as if I had just lifted her

up after giving birth to her. I don't even remember an umbilical cord. I suppose I was on a bed, sitting up, but it's not in the dream. It's as if I was floating, disembodied in space, but then I suppose that's how dreams work. That morning, at breakfast, I related as much of it as I could describe. When I had the dream again, the following night and woke up once more remembering it, I realised that I hoped I would have it every time I went to sleep. It was somehow reassuring, telling me that everything would be alright. When I mentioned this to Victoria, she said that it might be some kind of compensatory reaction. I asked her if other pregnant women had similar experiences but she couldn't think of any offhand, but that she'd do some research.

The days settled into a kind of routine, with me napping in front of the fire, Judy clacking away at her laptop in the kitchen and Victoria clacking away at hers in the study. I even lost interest in what was happening in the world outside and neither Victoria nor Judy volunteered any news or information, content to let me rest it seems. A few days later, I had my first morning sickness, and then for a few days following, then it passed. I noticed I was starting to gain weight. Victoria recommended that I get some exercise, she was worried about my weight gain, thinking that it was too early in the pregnancy. So with great reluctance I might add, we started taking afternoon walks down the quiet, leafless lanes, me bundled up like an Eskimo, as I found the cold difficult to bear. I still had the occasional bout of depression but by and large, my life was uneventful, except for the nightly dream that was a comforting retreat for me, gazing in wonderment and it dawned on me, love, on that beatific smile.

It was time for my weekly trip to the hospital. I wasn't looking forward to it though and I tried to talk Victoria out of it, even throwing a tantrum, complete with tears and a stamping of feet, but to no avail. With something of a shock it occurred to me that I almost forgotten that five months ago, I'd been a man, it seemed like a dream, my previous life. Was it because my brain had altered too? Whatever the reason, that life had slipped away from me like an eel slithering out of my hands. It was the oddest sensation that I had great trouble describing to Victoria and Judy. I could only do it in the third person, for not only was it dimly remembered, it truly was no longer me but some other person who I had known at some point in my life. And the more time passed, the more I slipped into my current reality, life a comfortable pair of shoes that you wear every day. Eventually, Roy Simmons disappeared completely. There was no remorse for his passing, no nostalgia, no sentimental yearning. I was happy being pregnant and actually looking forward to it, not because I wanted to get it

over with but because I was impatient to meet the girl of my dreams. Strange statement that, isn't it, girl of my dreams. On the way to the hospital, I mentioned it to Victoria.

'I have a feeling that although in many ways, perhaps in most ways, you are a normal female, there are subtle differences.'

'What kind,' I asked.

'I'm not sure, but the physical differences I found lead me to suspect that there may also be differences in your brain chemistry. I want to do a brain scan. Are you willing?'

'I suppose so.'

'You've not asked me about the woman in Edinburgh at all have you. Aren't you interested in her anymore?'

'Well you've not volunteered any information either. But I suppose I am, it's just that, well frankly, I'm so wrapped up in my own pregnancy really. It seems that nothing else is important to me anymore. It's not even that I want to talk about it, you know the way lots of women do, to the point of boring everyone with tales of this and that, how clothes won't fit, of swollen feet and big breasts and aching backs.'

Victoria laughed. 'Well maybe that's one of the improvements.'

'I'm not sure really. Maybe that's just what I need, some kind of normalcy? Girl talk,' I laughed.

'You could meet her you know, if you want.'

'Could I really? When?' My interest perked up.

'Yes. She wants to meet you.'

'What's her name?'

'Janet.'

'Janet?'

'After her mother.'

'Oh.'

'Is her mother still alive?'

'I think so.'

'That must be interesting. I wonder how my mother would have reacted?'

At the hospital, I went through a battery of tests including the scan that Victoria wanted. I asked for and got a sonogram but couldn't see anything, I think it was too early, followed by a brief meeting with Friedland. Brief, because I had no desire to talk aside from pleasantries, and I made it plain in spite of his desire to engage me in a debate on what they'd learned from the other cases. He seemed surprised but didn't push the issue. He then

requested a meeting with Victoria, so I had to go and sit in the canteen for half an hour. For the first time in a week, I read a newspaper but aside from reports of new cases, and brief updates, there wasn't much of any interest. Nothing about further government reactions, nor any mention of large-scale investigations. The lack of news was more worrying than any thing else.

Victoria walked into the canteen and said we could leave. Walking back to the car, she said. 'She's in London.'

'Who? Oh, you mean Janet. What's her full name?'

'MacGregor. I've arranged a meeting for today if you want to.'

'Yes. Where to?'

'She's staying with a friend. She seems to have followed the same path as you, I mean a desire to remain out of the limelight.'

She was staying in a semi-detached house in Teddington, one of those between the wars, fake Tudor houses that the suburbs are full of. The door was opened by a rather attractive woman who turned out to be Janet's mother. She looked from me to Victoria, I think, not sure which one of us was me. We introduced ourselves and she welcomed us in and into the front room. I wasn't prepared. The girl, and that's what she looked like, a teenage girl of no more than sixteen, dressed as what I can only describe as cute and intensely feminine. A pretty girl in a short pink dress with long sleeves, platform slip-ons and flesh colored tights, got up from the sofa and we shook hands and I introduced her to Victoria. Her long, red hair had been elaborately styled and she wore large gold hoop earrings. Even her nails were painted and she wore makeup. I had the feeling that her mother picked her clothes. There was an uncomfortable silence until Janet's mother intervened and offered us tea.

Eventually, Victoria said,

'I had no idea you were so young, well looking, anyway. How old are you?'

'Well,' she said in a high, very soft voice with a strong Glaswegian accent, 'I'm thirty-five but the doctors tell me that my body not only looks like a teenager's, it actually is a teenager's. I know, it's been a shock to me and to ma.' Turning to me, 'Aren't you in your fifties?'

'Fifty-eight.'

I found it difficult to open up the kind of conversation I wanted to have, with someone who looked like a schoolgirl, it was very disconcerting. I also had the feeling that the change had affected her as well, almost as if she'd regressed to the age she appeared to be. Was it some kind of defense mechanism? And in spite of the questions I was bursting to ask her, I sat

there feeling unable to ask a single one. Eventually her mother entered with a tray, which she put down on the coffee table. We sat sipping tea in a very genteel manner, or so it seemed to me. Eventually, Victoria broke the ice, and addressing her mother,

‘So is this your house Mrs. MacGregor?’

‘No, it’s my sister’s but she’s not here right now.’

More small talk followed. Maybe it was her mother’s presence that put a damper on our meeting but I know that I needed to be alone with Janet if I was to learn anything. How could I engineer it, that was the point? Mrs. MacGregor actually appeared to treat her former son as a pregnant teenager. Every time I made an attempt to talk to her about her experiences, her mother would interrupt, talking for her or sidelining the conversation. After about half an hour of this, I indicated to Victoria that it was time to go. As we were leaving I said to Janet, ‘Maybe we can get together again? Perhaps you could pay us a visit, or maybe, after our babies are born, we could spend some time together? I would really like to get to know you better.’

The poor girl – and this is the only way I could view her – looked to her mother, who once more intervened on her behalf, ‘I try to discourage her going out too much, you know, the press and so forth.’

Back in the car and heading for Bedford I asked Victoria what she thought.

‘Amazing. Absolutely amazing.’

‘My thoughts entirely. It was if she’s become what she looks to be, and it would appear that her mother has actually encouraged it. The visit was a complete waste of time if you ask me.’

‘Well not a complete waste of time.’

‘How so?’

‘Well it seems that the change affects people depending on the age they are when they go through it. Maybe poor Janet actually is a teenage girl now.’

‘But what about her memories, her experiences?’

‘Well look at you.’

‘And?’

‘You told me yourself that you found you previous life receding and difficult to recall. It may be that it’s only because you have so many more memories that you still retain any connection at all to your past life. You’ve even lost most of your earlier interest in how or why it’s happened, at least for now anyway.’

‘I’d still like to talk to Janet without her mother around.’

‘Not much chance of that I think.’

‘What are the odds on you getting any information from her doctors?’

‘We are sharing information but I’m bound by confidentiality not to share it with you, you know that. I can tell you, that her transformation followed yours almost exactly, except she was in hospital during the final phase that almost killed you.’

‘And did it almost kill her anyway?’

‘No. Someone on the team had the foresight to realise what was going on and treated it as a hemorrhage.’

‘What did you make of Janet’s look?’

‘You mean her dress, the makeup, the platform shoes, nail polish and so on?’

‘Yes.’

‘Perhaps it’s her way of dealing with things. More likely it’s her mother’s doing. Her way of dealing with things. Maybe her mother always wanted a daughter.’

‘It’s funny, but I’ve never felt a desire to explore that side of being female.’

‘Maybe you should. Nova, you’re blushing.’