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## **A Novel**

By William Bowles

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With a nod to Steve Jones who, in part, inspired this story

**Installment 7**

Back at Judy's and back into my routine. For the next few weeks I spent a lot of time sleeping. Victoria felt it had a lot to do with my body going through continuing adjustments. I started to eat a lot more yet put on very little additional weight. We still took our daily walks however, which I enjoyed a lot although it was often quite cold and wet. And aside from my weekly trip to the hospital for checkups, my life was ordinary, boring even. But Judy and Victoria were pillars of strength and as the days passed, I started to spend more time looking after the place, even cooking and doing some of the washing and ironing. Life for me became domestic yet I drew comfort from it. Maybe it was the ordinariness of it, the regularity of the daily routine that made the entire process bearable, as if I retreated, just like Janet, into something identifiable and known. Did this prove that there was something uniquely female that emerged as I became, fully female? I don't think so. I could have simply fallen into a pattern of behavior which I inherited as it were, just as poor Janet had under the influence of her mother. Or it could be that living with two women simply reinforced pre-existing patterns of social behavior. Judy tried to tackle me on these issues, without any luck. I felt bad about it but she didn't press me. I knew the time would come when once more, I would start to take an interest in my condition and its implications. It may have been that the sheer enormity of it all, simply overwhelmed me and the best thing to do was to pretend none of the previous months had ever taken place except the reality of my pregnancy.

It still amazes me how well I adjusted to the reality of becoming a woman and I still wrestle with the idea that somehow, accepting the change was intrinsic to it. Victoria rejected the notion as totally unscientific but I can't think of any other reason. Perhaps it was also the fact that I was almost totally insulated from the real world and hence never had to deal with the world of men. How would I deal with it when the time came that I had to resume some kind of normal life, assuming that would be possible of course? I try to imagine life with my baby, of going out, doing the shopping, changing nappies, negotiating the ordinary details of life as a mother. Interestingly, I never thought of men in a sexual context and I had no sexual desires at all even if I tried to arouse myself after I overcame the fear of exploring my own body. I would lie in the bath and play with myself, my breasts, my clitoris, but the feelings of pleasure I got from my explorations had no direct sexual dimension, at least one that I could identify with. Maybe because the way a woman experiences her sexuality is so different from a man? Would I ever be attracted to a man and what would I do if I were? Had I been less inhibited, I would have dearly liked to talk to Victoria and Judy. A thousand questions, and almost no answers.

It was getting near to Christmas and I was nearing the end of the first trimester, assuming that is, that I would have a nine-month pregnancy. I had put on some weight but still not much. My checkups still didn't reveal anything out of the ordinary but I now had a printout of the sonogram, which was now identifiably a baby, my baby, with tiny arms and legs and minuscule fingers and toes. I had it framed and hung it on the wall of my bedroom. Every morning, when I woke up, I would stare at it and think of the baby girl in my dream.

My idyllic pregnancy changed one day when Victoria handed me a copy of Newsweek Magazine.

'I know you're not interested, but I really think you should read this.'

The cover showed a very pregnant woman dressed in man's clothes with the title, 'Special Issue: The Double X Syndrome.' 'Is this the Beginning of the End for Men?'

When I turned to the first page, it was divided into different sections under the headings: 'The Political', 'The Economic', 'The Social', 'The Sexual', 'The Scientific', 'The Religious' and so on, with a number of well known authors listed in the credits. The piece opened with a roundup of the statistics. Total number of known cases so far: 98,838. Number of known survivors to date: 51,370. Christ, over one third died! All survivors are pregnant and all the pregnancies are female. It seems that the proportion of men who've gone through the change is the same around the world; about point six of a percent but the survival rate isn't. So for example, there are currently two hundred and twenty eight known cases in the UK, with one hundred sixty eight survivors, the death rate being higher in the developing world, where nearly half have died. The rate of occurrences seems to be fairly constant, neither increasing nor decreasing over time, so far anyway. Only a handful survived the change without any medical intervention and nobody knows why.

I read out the bit on me. 'The first known case, Roy Simmons, who now calls herself Nova Simmons, in the United Kingdom, only just survived the change and is now in the third month of her pregnancy and, as far as we know, mother and baby are in good health.'

'You should read the section on the social implications,' said Victoria.

I read out one paragraph that caught my eye.

'Assuming the babies survive, will they be fertile and if they are, will they be able to reproduce through traditional means or, through the same method, namely Parthenogenesis?'

I thought to myself, what man would want to make love to such a woman anyway?

'If the latter is possible, it raises the possibility that over time, men could become extinct.'

It also mentioned that there are unsubstantiated reports of some of the changees (changelings?) being murdered by men.

Murdered? After reading that, I found it too hard to concentrate on the rest of the piece and I put it down.

‘Murdered? Do you think it’s true?’

‘Why not? I can see men seeing you as a threat, especially if it turns out that your daughter doesn’t need them to reproduce’

‘But there are so few of us. What kind of threat do we pose?’

‘Over time darling, over time. And remember, so far, the rate of occurrences is not falling, so that means we are going to see an increasing number. And more will survive the change. And we don’t know anything about your life expectancy or your resistance to disease. Most seem to have gained anywhere between ten and forty years depending on how old they were when the change took place. Assuming you would have survived to say eighty-five, you can easily add another thirty, making your life expectancy over one and twenty years.’

‘But it could still be thousands, or at least hundreds of years before there are enough of us to make any difference.’

‘There’s nothing rational about these kinds of reactions. Lots of men feel threatened simply by women demanding equality and independence. Just look at the amount of violence on women. It doesn’t need someone like you, you know. You’ve not been exposed to the kind of fears women experience almost everyday of their lives, yet.’

She was right of course. I’d been sheltered from the reality of life as a woman even in a so-called civilised society. God knows how men would treat me if I was recognised on the street and I really didn’t want to find out. It was all just too scary. It made me want to retreat from the world even more and now, I feared for the life of my baby to be.

‘Am I really that naïve Victoria?’

‘No, I don’t think so. It would be unfair to accuse you of that after all you’ve been through but sooner or later, you are going to have face the world as a woman, and a mother, whether you’re recognised for what you are, or not. Who knows where this is all headed or what the ultimate consequences are. But right now, you have to concentrate on your baby, nothing else matters, you know that.’

Oddly, there was no mention of the youngest man to go through the change and Victoria had no idea.

Pregnant. I still found it difficult to accept the idea even after three months. What kind of mother would I make? The thought that petrified me—even more than giving birth, which

in an odd way, the recurring dream had reassured me about, or is it me rationalising things—was the thought of actually being a mother to my baby girl? But it still struck me as odd that the dream contained nothing about the reality of giving birth. It's as if I am being reassured by my developing child, which is ridiculous mysticism of course. I asked Victoria about my feelings and she gave me a strange look.

‘What made you come to that conclusion?’

‘I don't know. I can't explain it. All I know is what I feel, call it a mother's intuition but somehow, my baby is speaking to me, telling me not to worry.’

‘Well if it makes you feel better, then it can't hurt can it.’

But I had the irrational feeling that Victoria was well, jealous?

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I thought Christmas was going to be a problem as I assumed both Judy and Victoria would be going home to their parents but it turned out that Judy nearly always spent it at the cottage, most times with friends. She'd never really mentioned her parents other than that her father was dead. Victoria invited me to her parents' home but eventually, I asked Judy if I could stay with her. Unexpectedly, she was delighted and I think Victoria was somewhat relieved by my decision. I think she needed a break from me and perhaps me from her? Judy decided that we should indulge ourselves by buying each other lots of useless presents and generally luxuriating in an orgy of conspicuous consumption. So we bought bubble bath and expensive soaps and Judy persuaded me to lash out on a really expensive, satin nightgown set that she insisted I wear on Christmas day telling me that baby would enjoy it. What, all day? I said. Victoria was horrified by the idea. In any case, once we'd decided we went all out for it. Judy asked me if I minded whether or not she had a couple of her close friends over for Christmas and Boxing Day and although I was bit nervous about being in such close proximity to strangers, oddly I was also quite excited by the idea. I suppose in part, I think it was because I now felt so much a part of Judy's life and the cottage part of mine. And maybe it was also a reflection of the fact that I felt much more comfortable with being pregnant, even proud of it? Before Victoria left, we went shopping for presents for Judy, as I had no idea what to get her. It was the first time we'd been alone together for quite a while and I was looking forward to spending the time with her. We were sitting in a tiny Indian restaurant we'd found in the centre of Bedford. But the atmosphere was very strained so eventually, I had to say something.

‘What's bothering you Victoria, please tell me?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Oh come off it, I’m not blind. Something is bugging you and I can’t bear it.’

‘Well what do you think it is?’

‘Me? You want me to tell you?’ After a pause, ‘Okay, I’ll tell you what I think it is, I think you’re jealous.’

‘Jealous of you? Don’t be ridiculous.’

‘Well okay, maybe not me directly, maybe my being pregnant?’

‘Is that what you think it is?’

‘Well you asked me, so I’m telling you what I think the problem is.’

She was silent for a while, staring into her Cobra beer.

‘Maybe you’re right. It’s silly isn’t it?’

‘Is it? I don’t know. I don’t think so. Frankly, after all we’ve been through together I still don’t really know you. I know you still try to pretend that you’re my dispassionate doctor but you know that’s not possible. You and Judy are the closest people in my life and care about you both very much. You’ve put up with all kinds of shit from me without any complaint.’

‘Maybe I need to put some distance between us for a while.’

‘Isn’t that what this Christmas is all about?’

‘Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry Nova, will you forgive me?’

‘Of course you silly thing. But I need your support, I need to know you’re there for me.’

‘I am but you’ve got Judy too.’

‘Not the way I have you, you know that.’

‘Do you really think I’m jealous of your baby?’

‘Yes, although I’m not sure why. The obvious answer would be that you want one of your own but I don’t think it’s that simple.’

‘Why not?’

‘Maybe the strange nature of it? I think it started with the dream.’

‘The dream?’

‘Yes. I wonder if any of the others have had the same dream? It was one of the things I wanted to ask Janet.’

‘Yes, that was a frustrating visit wasn’t it.’

‘Well firstly, it was your reaction to my telling you about it. Every time I’ve raised it, you’ve kind of pooh-poohed it haven’t you?’

‘Yes but I told you why. Don’t you think I was telling you the truth?’

‘Frankly, no.’

‘But how does that reveal my jealousy?’

‘I’m not sure. Maybe it’s my insistence on it being more than just a dream?’

‘But you’ve not had it for a while have you?’

‘No, but I have a feeling that I’m going to have it again. Maybe not the same one but some kind of, well, communication?’

‘Even if you’re right, I still don’t see how you can think my reaction is one of jealousy.’

‘As you’ve said before, many of our reactions to things are not rational. Maybe if I was in your situation, I’d do the same thing?’

‘Maybe. Look, I need to think about this and a lot of other things. Things I’m surprised at having thought.’

‘Such as?’

‘Well,’ looking quite embarrassed, ‘Perhaps, I’ve never really thought of you as a, well, real woman? In spite of all the physical changes I know you’ve gone through. Somehow, I felt, feel? that you still have a man’s brain.’

‘Maybe I do. How am I meant to know? How are you meant to know?’

‘Good question. I think it was meeting Janet that triggered these thoughts.’

‘What, that I wasn’t sufficiently feminine to qualify as a real woman? That I was still in some kind of denial? A man in a woman’s body? Now that’s a turn up for the books!’

‘Something like that.’

‘What is a real woman like Victoria?’

‘Another good question.’

‘Would it have made any difference if I’d have put on a pretty dress and worn high heels like Janet?’

‘I don’t know. I really don’t know. Maybe...’

‘I can if you want. It’s something I haven’t experienced.’

‘No I don’t want you to do that, not for me. And in any case, what would it prove now?’

‘Well you’re going to miss me wearing my pretty nightgown. And in any case, don’t women enjoy dressing up for each other, for the sheer joy of it? Or is that just a man’s justification for sexy lingerie and short skirts?’

‘You’ll still have it after Christmas.’

‘But will I still want to wear it?’

‘I think you will.’

‘I think I know one thing that makes men and women different.’

‘What’s that?’

‘I think we inhabit a different space, both physically and if you like, subjectively. My skin feels different for example. It’s softer. I smell different. I think I relate to my own body in a very different way from the way I did, before. When I look in the mirror in the morning, I look at myself in a different way. I look for different things?’

‘What things?’

‘I’m not really sure. It’s not something I can pin down too easily. If only I could remember more of how I felt before but I can’t.’

‘Maybe we’ve, or perhaps I, have shielded you from it? From the joy of a being a woman? I’ve never asked you this, but do you like being a woman?’

‘I’m not sure if it’s the same thing but I know now that I definitely like being pregnant. And now that I’m more confident about the future of my pregnancy, I can’t wait to have her, even though I’m petrified.’

‘Another interesting question. Is it the same thing for you? Being pregnant and being a woman I mean. Personally, I think it is. How can one separate being pregnant from being a woman?’

‘Until now, we couldn’t. But maybe in six months time, we’ll find out.’

The meal ended on an up note. Some but not all of the questions and uncertainties that faced us had been aired. We finished our shopping. I asked Victoria what she wanted and oddly, she asked me to buy her perfume, something I feel is such a personal thing, that getting someone else to choose a fragrance is too hit and miss. In any case, she insisted, so I did. Was she trying to prove something?

Judy’s friends were scheduled to arrive on Christmas Eve. I’d assumed, don’t ask me why, that they’d both be women but it transpired that they were a man and a woman and that although they knew each other, they were just friends. The thought of a man spending Christmas here shocked me more than I thought it would. Maybe it was because this was literally the first man outside of the hospital that I’d met. In any case, when I realised that one of them was a man, Judy sensed it immediately. I was still wearing a sweater and plain, black pants. She suggested that I put on something else.

‘You’ve been wearing the same kind of clothes for ever. What was the point of the shopping spree the other day if you’re not going to wear any of it?’

‘Such as?’ I asked.

‘Well, you bought a very nice top and a very pretty skirt when you were high on shopping the other day, so why aren’t you wearing them? Is it because you know a man is coming?’

‘Does he know who I am?’

‘No, I haven’t told either of them, yet. Do you want me to? And you haven’t answered my question.’

I got flustered and prevaricated but Judy wouldn’t let go.

‘Go and put on something nice Nova. You looked great in that silk skirt. And remember, in a few months time, you’re going to look like a balloon, so you might as well make the most of it. Go on, they’ll be here soon.’

‘Okay, okay. I’ll change.’

The top was actually quite simple; close fitting, with a scooped neck and short sleeves, with a straight, ankle length silver blue silk skirt, which when I’d bought it, Judy insisted that I get an underskirt as it was almost transparent. A pair of simple sling backs that looked real good when I’d tried them on in the store and for the first time, a pair of tights, my rationale being that they would keep my feet warm (which they didn’t). I tried to do something with my hair but I gave up. Maybe Judy would help me. Had I really ignored my own physical reality to such a degree? Apparently so. I went downstairs and the first thing Judy said was,

‘You’ve got to do something with your hair you know. But the outfit looks cute.’

‘I tried but I was actually going to ask you to help me.’

‘It’s about time Nova,’ and she hustled me back upstairs and sat me in front of the mirror of my dressing table and went to work on my long and totally shapeless hair.

‘Damn Nova. I wish I could have persuaded you to go to the hairdressers the other day. You’ve got beautiful, thick black hair that I’m totally jealous of and it looks like a mop.’

‘I’m sorry. You’re right. It’s a complete mess isn’t it. Can we rescue it?’

‘I’ll try dear.’

Finally, after fighting it for far too long, she brushed it all back and clipped it up with a large, spring-loaded barrette.

‘Makeup? Oh come on Nova, don’t be shy, you’ve been to hell and back, you might as well enjoy the trip. You don’t have to use a lot you know. I don’t. A little mascara, maybe some lipstick? You’re a good looking woman, why not make the most of it for Christ’s sake.’

‘Are you trying to hook me up with this friend of yours?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. And how do you know he doesn’t belong to me?’

‘No you’re right. I’m being very presumptuous and selfish aren’t I.’

‘Yes you are. There, at least you look halfway decent now. And if you do fancy him, you don’t look like something the dog dragged in.’

The lipstick felt strange, kind of slippery, and I had to suppress the urge to wipe it off, but I suppose I’d get used to it. I thought of all the women I’d known who felt naked without it. Then it struck me that perhaps this was one of those unseen differences that I’d been talking with Victoria about; how the ability to put on a mask behind which one could hide, surely must affect the way one interacts with the world, especially of men. Yet what about those cultures where men adorned themselves as much or even more, than women? Every time you thought you had it figured out, something came along to confound you.

‘Go and check yourself out in the mirror in my room.’

The overall effect wasn’t half bad, although I could see now just awful my hair looked. I really should have had it cut and shaped and Judy was right, I’d been really stupid. Too late now.

‘Maybe I could wrap it in a scarf?’

‘We’ll try later. We’ve still got stuff to do in the kitchen, remember.’

Walking in the skirt proved to be a trial, even though my gait had altered since the change, but the heels didn’t help either.

Judy laughed when she saw me trying to walk but all she would say was,

‘Practice, practice, practice, my dear. You’ll get the hang of it eventually. Try putting toe and heel down at the same time. Maybe those heels are little too high?’ she teased.

I was on my own. Once back in the kitchen Judy reminded me to put an apron on.

‘If you get grease on that skirt, it’ll be ruined forever.’

I was actually quite surprised at how soon I got used to wearing the skirt and shoes. Having my breasts so highlighted by my top was somewhat different. Most of the time they were hidden away underneath my shapeless jumper but now, they were out there for all to see. Suddenly they started to get in the way. Judy noticed my discomfort but as with the skirt and shoes, reminded me that I’d had plenty of time to get used to my new body and, ‘Just you wait ‘til they get really big.’

But her attitude, one of sarcasm tempered with sensitivity to my situation was just what I needed. She really was a pillar of strength for me and I realised all the more so just how much she’d been there for me, these past months. Getting me to dress like a normal

woman had the added benefit of actually taking my mind off of the stress of my situation. I was actually getting to be normal. I appreciated Janet's mother all the more, though I can't say I liked her daughter's style.

Then I heard a car pull up on the gravel outside and my heart started racing.

His name was Matthew and he must have been in his early thirties. Slim to the point of being skinny, and perhaps a little shorter than me, at least with my heels on. Dark short hair, and rather nondescript features, at least I thought so. The woman's name was Clare and the complete opposite. She was tall and on the buxom side, with long blonde curly hair, and attractive strong features, maybe in her late twenties. As to hiding my real identity, as soon as Judy introduced me, they knew me by my name. Both were more embarrassed than I was, which surprised me. I wondered if it was my clothes but what the hell? What difference did it make? I am who I am and the sooner I accepted it, the quicker I'd stop torturing myself. In any case, I soon realised that whatever pre-conceptions they'd brought with them meant nothing. Once he'd gotten over the shock, he started flirting with me, perhaps unconsciously, but it annoyed Judy no end. And Clare soon realised that I wasn't a guy in drag and wanted to know where I'd gotten the skirt.

When Judy got me by myself in the kitchen, she said, 'I could kill him. And you a pregnant woman too.'

'I'm sure it's not conscious. And anyway, he really doesn't turn me on at all. And what's this about me being a pregnant woman? I thought pregnant women were sexy?'

'Don't try and make me feel better. He's only been here half an hour.'

I laughed. 'Judy, you do fancy him don't you.'

'Maybe I do, maybe I don't.'

'Well go for it. Believe me, I have no intentions, honorable or otherwise.'

Thank god for our sense of humor.

After a few drinks, with Judy warning me to go easy on the alcohol, things relaxed and I was starting to enjoy meeting new people for the first time in my new life (I couldn't count Judy). For a while I tried to gage whether I interacted differently than I had in my past life but I soon gave up on what was a pointless task. People treated me like a woman, even if I couldn't pin down what the difference was and in turn, this forced me into behaviors that I discovered were beyond my control. It was actually rather depressing, for I thought I might learn something new but instead, I learned something as old as men and women. Yet what should I have expected?

The evening wore on and we left our guests to themselves while we got the food served up. Judy drank rather a lot as did our guests and all in all, I think we had a good time. Our guests, deliberately I think, avoided asking me any questions of a personal nature.

In the morning I descended the stairs — very carefully — in my new black satin nightgown with cream lace trim, matching peignoir and black, high heeled furry slippers, feeling rather grand, like a film star out of a nineteen thirties movie, the material slipping and sliding over my skin. A stroke of genius Judy! The down side was that I wasn't particularly warm in it but I wasn't going to be put off by a tiny detail like that. And in any case, the set had cost me a fortune.

They were all sitting in the kitchen when I made my entrance. Matthew's eyes nearly popped out of his head and I think Judy was having second thoughts about having encouraged me. No matter, it was too late now.

'What a beautiful nightgown Nova. I'm impressed,' was Clare's response. I was going to tell her it was cut on the bias but decided against it. Judy was still scowling a little bit.

'Good morning ladies and gentleman and a merry Christmas to you all.'

A chorus of 'Merry Christmases' came back.

Coffee. I need coffee.'

'It's ready to be cooked dear.'

'Excellent.' I turned on the fire.

'Nova has to have her charge of caffeine in the morning.'

'Old habits die hard, at least this one does.'

I sat down with a sensuous swish of satin and crossed a leg. Thankfully, it was very warm in the kitchen.

Life for once felt really good and I wanted to thank Judy but I figured I'd wait until later for a more appropriate moment.

All were suffering somewhat from a hangover, except me of course. I discovered making breakfast in a long satin nightgown and peignoir on unsteady heels wasn't easy but I stuck at it. Judy insisted that I put on my apron, even though I thought it spoiled the entire effect. I think she was afraid I was going to go up in flames. It was a delight denied to men, well most men anyway. Sheer hedonism and it was genuinely enjoyable sweeping around Judy's large, country kitchen and serving up breakfast. It was the only fun I'd had in months and I think it marked one of the major turning points in the acceptance of my new reality.

It was only at the tail end of the Christmas dinner, when the wine had loosened tongues, that Clare felt bold enough to raise the issue that had been avoided during the day's

preparation for the ensuing gluttony. She broached the subject head on, in spite of Matthew's vain attempts to head her off at the pass when he sensed which way the conversation was going.

'So Nova, I hope you don't think I'm being too inquisitive, but I'm fascinated by your experience, although frankly, I still find it fantastic, verging on science fiction really.'

'What do you want to know?'

'Well frankly, what's it like being a woman?'

'I'm not sure I know how to answer that. My first response is to say in comparison to what, having been a man for fifty-eight years?'

'I get the feeling that you're being a little evasive.'

'Oh Clare really,' interjected Matthew, who was obviously embarrassed by Clare's straight up approach.

'No that's okay, I'm not offended, and in fact this may be an opportunity to explore issues that I've done my best to avoid for the past months, so maybe I should thank you. In any case, it's not that simple a question to answer. In the first place, I had to get used to idea of what had happened to me, something I'm still not sure I have. But on top of this, I was also pregnant, so it was a double whammy. It may sound strange but I'm more comfortable being pregnant than I am about being a woman, something that sounds like a contradiction, as how can one separate the two? In addition, I'm not sure what it is to be a woman. After all, all my prior experience is second hand so to speak. So for example, am I meant to enter into the world of women in a conscious sense or allow myself to be, well carried into it by all my assumptions about what being a woman is all about? Just the simple issue of femininity is so loaded that no matter how I approach the issue, I find myself questioning my responses. Am I behaving in a particular way because that's what I feel being a woman is all about or, am I behaving according to some genetic programming that I now possess? Assuming that I actually possess it of course.'

'Fascinating. Yes, I think I see what you mean. So does that mean that your performance, is that the right word? This morning, was an attempt at coming to terms with this dilemma?'

'Did it offend you?'

'Not exactly, although my first reaction was a little ambiguous I have to admit. But what you've just said has, well, put me in my place. I think I understand your dilemma a lot better now. I suppose I was being somewhat judgmental, for which I apologise.'

‘You should have seen the agonising Nova went through when she bought the outfit, at my insistence I might add,’ interjected Judy.

I sensed a level of complexity here that I simply wasn’t aware of until now. Did Clare feel threatened by my display of ‘femininity’? Was it connected to her feelings about Matthew or that she felt I had no right to express such feelings? In other words I wasn’t a ‘real’ woman and hence had no right to behave like one. Or maybe she thought I was pre-judging what it was to be a woman? Merely acting out a male stereotype. And what about Judy’s comment that Clare and Matthew were just friends? Was Clare jealous of the effect my ‘display’ had on Matthew? I was really confused now and in a bind as to how to address the situation. Perhaps I should deal with it head on in just the same way as Clare had.

‘Well firstly, I enjoyed what I did this morning and have no apologies to make to anyone. Second, do you think I was acting out a male fantasy of what it is to be feminine? But if that’s the case, then the same would apply to a ‘real’ woman wouldn’t it. In other words, had Judy worn my nightgown this morning instead of me, would your reaction have been the same?’

‘I’m not sure. Perhaps not.’

‘Perhaps you can understand now, why I feel ambivalent about answering your question, do I enjoy being a woman?’

‘Yes, I can see your dilemma.’

‘After all, one kind of feminist might feel that any woman wearing my gown was somehow betraying her sex, whereas another might interpret it as an assertion of my femininity, something that was unique to being a woman. At the heart of the dilemma is the issue that confronts all women, namely what constitutes a real woman, or for that matter a real man? As a socialist, this is something that I’ve now wrestled with both as a man and as a woman, and frankly, I’m no closer to an answer now than I was before.’

‘Well, let me put it another way. Would you prefer to be a man or a woman now that you’ve been both?’

‘Until now, I would have considered that an academic question and I can only answer it by saying that now that I’ve gotten over the shock, I’m ecstatic about having my baby. Does that answer your question?’

‘That could be interpreted as meaning that you’re the first man to have a baby.’

‘Does that alter the reality any?’

‘I suppose not.’

‘And in any case, I’m not a man, I’m a woman no matter how you interpret the meaning of the word woman. It raises the issue beyond the purely biological, of whether being a woman in the sense that I think you mean, is a product of the head and not the vagina? Look, in the context of being blessed with the ability to have a baby, yes, I enjoy being a woman, the rest is well, window dressing, if you’ll excuse the pun. But this is my reaction to the trauma I’ve experienced. I’ve only met one other person whose been through this and frankly, my initial reaction to meeting her was I think, similar to yours.’

‘How so?’

‘Well Janet, that’s her name, appeared to be stereotypically feminine, in appearance and behavior but maybe that was her way of dealing with her dilemma and who can blame her. Should she, like me, continue to pretend that she’s still really a man with boobs and reproductive organs? That her body is not subject to the ravages of hormones once a month let alone the rest of the time? I don’t mean to sound flippant but what’s a woman to do?’

The silence was broken by Judy’s interjection. ‘Perhaps it’s time for some coffee? Clare, want to give me a hand?’

It was obvious that Clare wasn’t happy with Judy’s ambush but she went along anyway.

The two of them disappeared into the kitchen leaving me with Matthew who looked decidedly embarrassed by the exchange.

‘I’m sorry if you’ve been offended by...’

Matthew, please don’t apologise for Clare. I’m actually quite grateful to her for raising issues I’ve long put off dealing with and actually giving me the opportunity to clarify certain issues in my own mind.’

‘Well she was rather combative.’

‘Was it her approach that offended you or the subject?’

‘Possibly a bit of both.’

‘Do you have a bit of a problem in whether to deal with me as a man or a woman too.’

He looked very embarrassed. Finally he said, ‘Well actually no. I find you a very attractive woman and whatever you were, it’s obvious to me what you are now. I think you should act and dress in any way you want. Frankly,’ and he lowered his voice to a whisper, ‘I think Clare feels threatened by you.’

‘Matthew, are you flirting with me?’

The poor man blushed and I immediately regretted teasing him, if that was what I was doing. What was I saying? I was beginning to doubt my own feelings. It was as if I was

trapped between two worlds, the one I'd left behind and the one I lived in now. Nothing was reliable anymore, especially my intellect, the force that I'd relied on so heavily throughout my life. Suddenly knowledge became not only less than useless but a barrier to understanding. Thankfully, Judy and Clare entered carrying a tray and saved us any further embarrassment. But Matthew did clear up one question I had concerning Clare's attitude toward me. We sat there, drinking our coffee, with a slightly less than icy atmosphere surrounding us. Yet, I felt strangely elated perhaps because of Matthew? Judy came to my rescue, bless her soul.

'Nova has been through a great deal, and whilst I can't pretend to understand everything she has experienced, I have no doubt in my mind as to her honesty and integrity, regardless of the confusion she feels about herself and her relation to both women and men. In retrospect, I should perhaps have told you in advance that Nova would be here, and for that, I apologise. Both of you are the first people she has spent any time with since her, experience? Damn it Nova! I never know what to call it.'

'Experience sounds fine to me.'

'Okay, well anyway, I suspect that this afternoon's exchange was long overdue and I hope it doesn't spoil our time together. To be honest, I found the exchange between Nova and Clare very exhilarating but perhaps I'm being selfish.'

'Why do you say that Judy?'

'Well I've deliberately avoided instigating these kinds of conversations since you came to stay with me, preferring that you talk about these issues when you feel comfortable doing so. But that doesn't mean that I'm not dying to know how you feel. Even when I persuaded you to buy the lingerie, I wasn't altogether comfortable with the idea, as I have to admit that that there was an element of voyeurism involved, especially when you picked the black satin. An excellent choice too.'

'Oh really? That's interesting. Thank you. Well I suppose, if we're baring our souls, then I have to admit that I was dying to know how I felt wearing it even as I felt embarrassed in doing so. Even now, I still feel an element of being in drag, which is stupid I know.'

'Perhaps you had a secret desire to wear women's clothes?' ventured Clare.

'What man hasn't at some time felt that I wonder? Especially in a culture which has so many fetishes and taboos about masculinity and femininity. After all, why are drag acts so popular and mainly with women?'

Matthew, who had been following the conversation intently, suddenly said, 'But surely drag acts are more about caricaturing women, not becoming women? And then there's

the gay aspect of drag, which, in my opinion anyway, has nothing to do with what we're talking about.'

'But the implication's always there whenever a man dresses as a woman,' I said. 'After all, we don't think of it as odd when a woman wears men's clothes. In fact it's an accepted part of fashion and even erotic to some men. Even the suggestion of lesbianism panders to a male fantasy. But what woman finds a man in a dress and high heels, erotic? Very few, I'll bet. It's like there's an enormous gulf between the genders with only a one-way bridge connecting them. From women to men but never the other way.'

'That's a very interesting observation, and surely it goes to the very heart of a patriarchal society, where not only are all the rules made by men, but the context within which they operate is also determined by men, even to determining what is supposedly natural, read masculine or feminine about behavior. And surely, the very fact of your existence and society's reaction to it, proves my point?'

'So Judy, you're saying that there is no objective way of determining what I am? Then perhaps I'm a genuine third sex and I'll have to make up my own rules? If they'll let me that is.'

'Now that's something to think about,' offered Judy. 'It also implies that society will not accept you any more than it accepted gay and lesbian relationships, or any other sexual expression which doesn't conform to the dominant culture's values.'

'Not unless I conform by behaving just like any other woman.'

'Is that possible? And what about you being pregnant Nova? And even more importantly, what if it's true that your daughter won't need a man to reproduce as the article in Newsweek speculated on? What then?' interjected Matthew.

I had no answer for that, at least one that I wanted to share with them.