Problem Child

Recapping comics for the entertainment of the transgender community can be good fun, but don’t leave your work where it can be found.
*That’s right, doctor. Transgender comics.*” Laura eyed her son with obvious distaste, while Billy shrivelled deeper into the couch.

“I have, of course, seen this before, Mrs. Montague,” Doctor Beckette said. “And I can assure you: an interest in transgender fiction does not mean that young Billy here is homosexual. Although even if he were gay, that would not in itself be a problem. We psychiatrists no longer demonize sexuality.”

“What are you saying? This isn’t a problem? For goodness sake, my son is fantasizing about turning into a woman!”

“I’m not saying that at all. I’m saying that the problem lies not in his fantasies, but in how other people *perceive* and react to those fantasies. Bear in mind that it is perfectly normal for a teenager to be interested in sex.”

“Sex I could understand. But this—” She shook her head.

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. Your son deserves a chance to speak for himself. Billy, what do you think about all this?”

Billy lifted his head long enough to say, “I ain’t gay!”

“Now, now, no one is saying that you’re—”

“She is! It’s all she talks about, ever since…” He pointed at Laura. “And tell her to stop goin’ through my stuff!”

“Well, I never! I was simply looking for a way to store some—”

“Mrs. Montague, please! I’m trying to understand how this issue arose. Were you searching his belongings? Because if you suspected—”

“No, of course not. I didn’t suspect a thing. Not just then, at least. I just needed one of those USB thingies. I was giving a presentation at work and—”

“It wasn’t yours! We got plenty of USB keys around. That one was *mine.*”

“I didn’t know that, did I? They all look pretty much the same, don’t they?”

Beckette cleared his throat. “I get the picture. What happened next?”

“Well, that’s where he keeps all his—material.” Laura snorted. “I know people often remove evidence of their online activities; erasing history, clearing caches, that sort of thing. It seems he was careful to do all that.”

“Ah, but he made the mistake of leaving the files where you could find them.” Beckette chuckled. “You’d be surprised how often that happens.”

“She shouldn’t have looked,” Billy said glumly. “It’s not fair.”
Beckette updated his case notes. “Well, Billy, I understand you’ll be graduating soon. Do you have any plans for what comes next? University? College?”

“Nope.” Billy’s gaze remained fixed on the floor.

“Are you sure? Most people your age at least have some idea. For instance, do you like working with your hands? Or perhaps you’re more suited for an office job. What do you think about secretarial work?”

Billy looked confused. “You think I wanna be a secretary?”

“This comic certainly suggests the possibility.” He held up a drawing of a young woman with a glazed expression seated in front of a typewriter.

Billy buried his face in his hands. “Oh, for fuck’s sake—it’s only a story.”

“Mind your language,” Laura said sternly. “It’s a very suggestive story.”
Beckette leaned forward. “Is this what you think about? Being forced to take female hormones? Forced into a—what do you call it?—a female bodysuit. Is that an exciting fantasy? Becoming a woman?”

Billy shook his head. “It’s just for fun. I wouldn’t really…”

“Oh, come now,” Laura said. “You can’t keep saying that. I’ve seen your files. All those pictures of men dressed up like women… But nothing graphic,” she said quickly, to Beckette. “Thank goodness for that.”

“Once again, Mrs. Montague, there is nothing wrong with homosexuality, per se. Actually I’m more concerned with your reaction to the possibility.”

“You’re not listening! I told you—I’m not gay!”

“Now, Billy, you shouldn’t lie. You look at these men—”

“They’re not men!” Billy grimaced and made a fist. “I mean, they’re not— It’s not like they’re guys at all, not when they’re dressed up.” His voice caught. “I don’t like lookin’ at…” He paused. “I don’t like it when you can see it.”

“What on earth are you talking about? Of course they’re men, Billy, anyone can see that. I certainly can.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Beckette said. “What you’re interested in are photos of men who have made themselves look convincingly female. Emphasis on ‘convincingly’. That’s why you don’t like any reminder that they are, in fact, male. What matters is that they present a believable image of womanhood.”

Laura crossed her arms. “Well, if he’s interested in men dressed as women—”

“One moment, please.” Beckette turned to Billy. “You aren’t really attracted to men, are you? It’s not men dressed as women that interest you—it’s you dressed as a woman. You’re thinking about yourself, but as a woman.”

Billy said nothing. His eyes remained fixed on the opposite wall.

“Mrs. Montague,” Beckette said, “your son is a transvestite.”

Billy moaned, pulled his knees up and buried his face.

“Now don’t confuse that with ‘transsexual’; that’s a whole different deviation. No, Billy is simply a heterosexual transvestite. As such, he has little or no interest in the male as a sexual object. I believe he is firmly oriented towards females in that regard; so much so, in fact, that he takes on the female role in his fantasies. This is actually not that uncommon, particularly among introverts.”

“So Billy is a cross-dresser, is that what you’re saying?” Laura sighed. “I wish I could say I was surprised.”
“Ah. So you did suspect something.”

“Oh, yes. Dresses hung up wrong, and wrinkled. Shoes in the wrong place. Slips folded the wrong way. Makeup moved around. Wigs mussed up.”

“But it’s hard to know what to do about it, isn’t it? To confront, or not to?”

“I did ask him about it, once. I came home and found finishing powder scattered all over my vanity. He claimed he was trying to cover up a pimple. As if.” She laughed. “I guess I knew. I even asked if he wanted my help.”

“That is interesting. You knew, yet you offered to help. What does that say?”
“Oh, dear. Do you think… Did I subconsciously want him to do this?”

“No, no. There’s no need to feel guilty. All you wanted to do was help.”

“That’s all well and good, doctor, but we’re talking about my son wearing my clothes… Maybe I shouldn’t have been so ‘understanding’.”

“Nothing you could have said would have put him off. In fact, a negative reaction can do more harm than good. I’m sure he feels guilty enough as it is. Consider what he wrote here.” Beckette held up a drawing of a woman in a tight dress shrugging out of an overcoat. “Young men often cross-dress in their mother’s clothing. Here, his parents are obviously away and he’s taken the opportunity to dress up—and not for the first time; he looks too convincing for that. And clearly, he feels guilty about it. If his parents ever found out, he’s ‘screwed’.”

Laura smiled wanly. “And now I have found out.”

“And now I’m screwed,” Billy muttered.

“You most certainly are not,” Beckette said. “As I said before, it’s every bit as important to manage your mother’s reaction to your—shall we say—predilection, as it is to reduce the guilt you feel.”

“But I’m guilty too, doctor.” Laura sagged in her chair. “How do you propose to manage that?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, I caused all this, didn’t I? Isn’t the mother always to blame?”

“Not at all. That’s only one of many theories about what causes cross-dressing, but none of them are close to being proven. You shouldn’t blame yourself.”

“But I dressed him up as a girl myself! At Halloween. He was only five.”

“I see.” Beckette harumphed. “Did he ask to be dressed as a girl?”

“Of course not! That’s just it. I made him do it.” Laura twisted in her seat. “The neighbor’s little girl was the same age, and we were going out trick-or-treating together. Her mother and I got together for drinks, and the idea came up that the kids should trade costumes. Maybe it was me, I don’t know. It seemed like a hoot, though. So I dolled Billy up in the girl’s nurse costume—makeup, cute little wig, the works. He didn’t really want to, but…” She sighed heavily. “Then I dragged him around the neighborhood in a pair of the girl’s heels.”

Beckette tapped his pen on the table. “Even so, cross-dressing most likely has a strong genetic basis, as well as behavioral. Many people may be susceptible, but they aren’t exposed to the kind of stimuli that might trigger the behavior.”
Laura laughed. “Something like being forcibly dressed as a pretty little nurse, then paraded around the neighborhood? Would that do the trick?”

Beckette paused. “Well… yes. I suppose it could.”

“So how isn’t this my fault, doctor?” She gestured at Billy.

“It’s just that the trigger mechanism needn’t be as blatant as all that. It could be something as simple as touching lingerie in a pile of laundry. Or hiding in a closet with dresses. Or even something to do with the girls at school.”

“So it would have happened anyway, is that what you’re saying?”

“I am indeed. Just being raised by a single mother—”

“Well, I haven’t told you the worst of it, doctor.” Laura took a folded sheet from her purse and handed it to the doctor. “It’s not just the dressing up,” Laura said grimly. “I can handle that. It’s the fact that he seems to want to be me.”

Beckette studied the sheet of paper for a long time. “Billy? Did you write this?”

Billy shook his head. “It’s just a story.”

“But can you tell me why you wrote it?”

Billy shrugged. “The story is about a teenage boy dressing up as his mother. He does his best to look exactly like her. Is that what you want to do?”

“Nope.”

“I think that this comic suggests a different answer, don’t you?”

Billy rolled his eyes. “I wrote it, okay? Isn’t that enough? Geez…”
“Don’t badger the boy, doctor. Can you tell me why this is happening?”

Beckette looked owlish. “Well, some therapists say that all cross-dressing is an attempt to emulate the mother. This story is simply rather more blatant about it.”

Laura plucked at the fabric of her armchair. “Billy grew up with very few men in his life—after my good-for-nothing ex left. It’s just me, visits with my sister—one daughter, no husband—his teachers at school… all women, at least up until high school. Even the kids in the neighborhood were mostly girls.”

“Lack of a male role model could be a factor. But Billy grew up with a strong, independent woman as his primary role model—you. Given that he’s a shy boy with obvious self-esteem issues, it’s no wonder he fixated on you. Everything in his experience told him that being an attractive woman is the path to success.”

“I don’t know what I could do about it. I’m single, and I’m always so busy.” She shrugged. “You can’t choose your family. And there’s no reason to move.”

“It’s a bit late for any of that. His pattern is set.”

“In any case,” Laura said grimly, “there just aren’t that many good men out there. I’ve been telling Billy that for years.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

Laura took a deep breath. “So what are we going to do about this, doctor?”

“Various treatments are possible. For instance, cognitive therapy could teach him to recognize the feelings that lead to cross-dressing, and deal with them in other ways. However, I don’t think that would be enough. I’d like to speak to Billy alone, Mrs. Montague, would that be all right?”
Beckette moved his chair closer to the couch. “Your mother is quite a lady.”

Billy squirmed in his seat. “Yeah, I guess.”

“She’s not doing this to you for fun, you know. She cares about you a great deal. She wants you to be happy. She wants you to succeed in life.”

“I know. It's just…” He grimaced. “She just can’t leave it alone, you know? Nothing’s ever halfway with her. It’s all or nothing with her.”

“I know. You’d rather she just left it alone. You’d rather keep on doing what you were doing—wearing her clothes when she’s not around. Teaching yourself how to wear makeup, how to act like a woman, how to walk in heels.” Beckette shook his head. “But you can’t do that anymore, Billy.”
“Yeah? Who’s gonna stop me?”
“No one’s going to stop you. What I mean is that you can’t hide it anymore. It’s all out in the open now.”
“What’s that mean?”
“I mean, you can dress up anytime you want. When she’s home, when she’s not home. It doesn’t matter.”
“Huh? She’s okay with that?”
“She will be. I’ll speak with her.”
Billy nodded slowly. “Thanks.”
“Not at all. I believe the best way to deal with this sort of thing is to make it totally explicit. It will lose much of its mystique, but then you’ll be able to figure out where you want to go with this behavior. You might get tired of it, or you might decide to go full-time. Or anything between. It’s your choice.”
Billy sat up. “Wow. You really get this stuff. You understand.”
“Not entirely. There’s still the matter of you wanting to be your mother.”
“Can’t we just forget about that?”
“I’m afraid not. It’s not something you can sweep under the rug. Emulating your mother is perfectly understandable. Doing so by wearing her clothes is unusual, but not overly worrisome. But wanting to become her is pathological. That’s why I’ve decided to recommend a rather radical new treatment.”
Billy looked wary. “What would I hafta do?”
“Have you ever heard of ‘exposure therapy’?” Beckette opened a book from his desk. “It’s intended for anxiety disorders, but it might work here too. It involves repeated exposure to the target object—or situation in this case—until the subject becomes desensitized. For you, it would involve dressing up as your mother so often—and so convincingly—that it loses its novelty.” He shut the book. “Once this becomes a mundane part of your life, you’ll lose interest.”
“Geez, are you even a real doctor? Mom’ll never go for that.”

Beckette smiled. “She already has. Just now, when we stepped outside. With her permission, I’m prescribing an intensive programme of forced feminization.”

Billy jaw dropped. “What? Is that even legal?”

“It didn’t used to be, that’s true. Forced-fem clinics once operated on the black market, in basements and back rooms. But the Feminization Act of 1999 legalized the industry.” He laughed. “I suspect that most of our representatives believed the world was coming to an end anyway, so why the hell not?”

“Screw that noise. I won’t do it.”

“You don’t have a choice. Why do you think they call it forced-fem?”

“Look, I won’t dress up anymore—okay? You can tell Mom you cured me.”

“It’s too late for that, I’m afraid.” Beckette’s intercom light flashed; he glanced at his watch. “That was fast. The orderlies from the clinic are here.”

Billy leapt to his feet. “What the fuck? You can’t do this!”

Beckette opened the door for a pair of burly men in white coats. “I believe you’ll find that with the right signature on the right piece of paper we can do pretty much anything. Now go be your mother for awhile. There’s a good boy.”

* Beckette next saw Laura Montague and her son nearly a month later, when he stopped by their home. He was received in the garden by two women who could have been twins, wearing identical black cocktail dresses.

“You’ll have to forgive my son,” said one. “He insisted we wear the same dress.”

“Actually,” said the other, hooking a thumb at the first, “it was Billy’s idea.”

Beckette glanced from one to the other. “Which one of you is Billy?”

“He is,” the women said in unison.

“The clinic did its job a bit too well, I’m afraid,” said one woman.

“They gave him a total makeover,” said the second woman. “Breast implants, hair extensions, one of those prosthetic vaginas. Now he thinks he’s me.”

“He always did look a lot like me,” said the first, “around the face, and his build. But this! I’m not sure he really believes he’s me, but he certainly acts like it.”

“This is most unfortunate. The treatment has failed. This is precisely the opposite of what I intended.” Beckette stood up. “Billy, I must insist that you return with me to the clinic immediately. It’s not too late to undo this.”
The two women spoke at once: “No way. Billy’s not going anywhere.”
“This has worked out rather nicely for us,” one said.
The other said, “We take turns going to the office. The one at home has time to do chores, as well as help out at work.”
“We swap files back and forth. You’d be amazed how fast we get things done.”
“I used to be so busy, what with work and raising Billy by myself.”
“I’ve even been able to start dating again. Dan is a dear old friend, and a widower.”

The first woman smiled: “One of us does the things the other one can’t.”
The second woman looked coy. “And one of us does things the other one won’t.”
Beckette swallowed hard. “But what about Billy?”
One Laura pursed her lips and snorted. “That loser? Who cares?”
The other Laura waved idly. “He wasn’t doing anything with his life. What would you rather be, doctor? A useless boy or a successful woman?”
Both laughed. “I think my son has found his calling, don’t you?”
Beckette stared at the two women. “I cannot condone what you’re doing. If this goes on, Billy risks permanent psychological damage. He might never be able to lead a normal life, or sustain a relationship with a woman.”
“Billy doesn’t need a woman.”
“He is a woman.”
“But thank you, Doctor Beckette,” said Laura. “Thank you for curing my son.”
And Laura said: “Billy is no longer interested in transgender comics.”