Time, Considered as a Curl of Soft Hair

If you were offered the chance to make your dreams come true, what would you give up?
“Psst. Hey, buddy.” A hand tugged at my sleeve. Assuming the worst, I grabbed for the pocket where I kept my wallet, and spun around.

He was a scrawny little dude, nearly a foot shorter than me, and I’m only five-nine. He squinted up at me with beady, crow-like eyes. In a raspy voice, he said, “You look like a man who appreciates beautiful hair.”

“What?” I stared at him, wondering what planet he’d just beamed in from.

“Beautiful hair,” he repeated. “Long thick tresses. Luscious locks. From the tip of your crown to shoulder-length and beyond. You want it, I got it.”

I was conscious of the parade continuing its slow march past my vantage point. My wife’s float would be coming by soon and I didn’t want to miss it. “Thanks, I guess,” I muttered. “But I’ve got all the hair I need.”

He wouldn’t let me turn around. “You sure about that? I’m never wrong.”

I took a step back. “I’m not bald, dude.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’m talking about thick, gorgeous hair—the kind you can really sink your hands into… Not what you’ve got up there.”

I felt alone in the crowd. Everyone else was facing the other way, their eyes held by the spectacle of marching bands, pretty girls, and floats festooned with flowers. “My wife likes it just fine,” I told him.

“Does she?” He frowned. “It’s short, thin, no obvious style… It doesn’t even cover your ears. Would she wear it herself?” He snapped his fingers derisively. “I think not. What woman would?”

Again I tried to turn around. I didn’t want Pamela to be greeted by the back of my head when she waved at me from her position atop the Mothers of Confederation float—tastefully sculpted in the shape of a colonial sailing ship. Not to mention her sister, her friends, her bridesmaids from last year’s wedding… I’d never hear the end of it. But the little guy wouldn’t let go.

“She one of those?” He gestured at the cheerleaders decorating the football team’s float. “Their hair is okay—but for you, sir, I can do better.”

“That’s woman’s hair,” I said, growing impatient. “If that’s what you’re offering, I’m not interested. I don’t wear wigs.” That was a lie—a little white lie all dressed up in a cute ponytail with a red ribbon. But he didn’t know that.

He grinned, revealing ragged teeth. “What I offer you is a gorgeous head of hair. Nothing fake—the real deal. Just what you’ve always wanted.”
I felt dizzy. How could he know what I’ve always wanted? Suddenly, the idea that the guy might be some kind of alien didn’t seem quite so ridiculous. Maybe he could read minds. “Don’t be absurd,” I muttered.

“Oh, really?” He hopped closer. “I have a feel for this sort of thing. All I have to do is look at you. I can always tell.”

I glanced over my shoulder; the ship was coming, its sails in full view. I looked down. Strange that someone so focussed on hair should have so little of it himself. “All right, I’ll bite. What do you see?”

His eyes narrowed. “Wavy, a few inches past your shoulders, but not too thick. Some loose curls at the ends. A lovely shade of brunette. You’ll love it.”

I turned and waved. I saw Pam and she waved back; they all did. Then the float moved off down the road, and I followed the little man into an alley.

The salon was in the basement of The Sylvia, a classic old early twentieth century hotel, now in a state of some disrepair. It was still in business, though. The attendant at the front desk ignored us as we cut through the dimly-lit lobby and entered a narrow staircase next to the front door. The bulb in the ceiling was broken. Darkness swallowed us whole.

The sign on the door of Vera’s Nu-You Studio read, BY APPOINTMENT ONLY. My guide knocked once and entered. A middle-aged woman in a shapeless smock was seated in one of the padded chairs, feet propped up and reading a magazine. Her eyes never left the page. “What’cha got for me, Fredo?”

“New customer, Vee,” the little man replied.

Vera discarded the magazine and stood up. She looked me over, and smiled. “Very nice,” she murmured, cupping my face in one large hand. “Nice symmetry. Perfect cheekbones.” She took a step back. “Not too tall either. And a low BMI.”

I felt uncomfortable. I’d never been complemented on my physique before.

“An excellent candidate, my love. As always. What do you see?”


Great, terrific—but who the hell was he talking about? Certainly not me.

“Sounds familiar.” Vera slapped the back of the chair. “Plant her right here, kid.”
I sat down. “Uh… I was told something about gorgeous hair?”

“Absolutely. That’s what we do. I simply could not let you leave with anything less than a gorgeous head of hair. It’s guaranteed.”

“Okay. But it’s not a wig…?”

“Of course not. Hair extensions only.”

I was vaguely disappointed. “Oh… Fredo said it was real.”

“But it is! Real human hair.” Vera bustled into the back room, where she could be heard muttering, “Medium brown… highlights…” She returned with a sealed plastic bag full of carefully folded waves of brunette hair. “Not just any old human hair, either. It’s all from beautiful, sexy young women—models, actresses, debutantes. Babes, every last one. Guaranteed.”

I nodded. “So, how do you manage that?”

Fredo grinned. “Ever hear of Locks of Love? They save the best stuff for us, ‘cause we pay good money for it. Helps the kids more than some old wig.”

_The price._ I’d forgotten to ask. “Uh, how much…?”

Abruptly, my wallet was in Fredo’s hand. “I’ll let you know,” he said cheerfully.

I tried to stand up but Vera was there in front of me, her hand on my chest. “Now, now, you don’t want to do that. Goodness, if you can’t trust a man like Fredo then who can you trust?”

I had no answer for that. Her hand felt warm. And I no longer wanted to stand up. In fact, all I wanted to do was sit there and let her do whatever the hell she wanted.

Vera smiled. “Good… Now, let’s get you fixed up.”

Hair extensions used to involve attaching wide segments of donated hair, or wefts, to the recipient’s hair. But wefts are heavy. They damage the hair by weighing it down, which leads to breakage. That’s bad news for anyone worried about losing their hair, particularly those of us prone to male pattern baldness.

“No problem,” she assured me. “Your hair is strong, very healthy. And just long enough for the _Fusion_ technique.” She plucked at my hair and chuckled. “Let me guess—you take after your mother.”

I grunted. It was totally true, but none of her business.

The _Hair Fusion_ technique is different. It uses small, lightweight wefts that hang naturally from the original hair, producing no more drag on individual strands than would be the case if the hair was simply longer. And unlike most extensions, _fused_ hair will grow along with your own—and keep its shape.
Vera spoke of this while she washed, rinsed and tinted my hair to match the color of the extensions. She pinned most of it up, leaving only the bottom layer loose.

“Fusion is the way to go, if you want to add length and volume,” she said, holding up the first long segment of gorgeous-girl hair. “It looks completely natural.”

I fumbled for a reply. “So, no one will know?”

She smiled. “Well, dear… I would guess that they’ll all think that you have the most gorgeous head of girly hair they’ve ever seen. Guaranteed.”

Girly hair. I peered at the Hair Fusion bag on the counter. Romance Wave, it read. Texture: long loose waves, soft romantic curls. How the heck was I going to hide that from my coworkers? A ponytail wouldn’t do the trick, no matter how low I wore it. Pretty tough to put a masculine spin on ‘soft romantic curls’.

“It’s good for us hairdressers too. Doesn’t take long, and you can style it the same as you would a woman’s natural hair.” She placed the extension on the back of my neck, matched it to a similar span of my own hair—an inch out from my scalp—and crimped them together with a tool resembling a miniature waffle iron.

This, I was told, is what melted tiny beads of protein—glue by any other name—and fuses the new hairs to the old. Done properly, you can achieve the magic ratio of 1-to-1-to-1: one bead, one of your own hairs, one from the extension. The finished product can then be combed and brushed as if you’d grown it yourself.
Further extensions covered my neck in both directions, loosely draping over my collar, until the bottom layer was used up. Then she took down the next layer of hair, leaving the rest pinned atop my head. She repeated the process on this and subsequent layers, until a mass of brunette hair lay piled across my shoulders like a woodland snowfall.

I shivered. My heart was pounding. Goose bumps arose on my arms, like the outward manifestation of some terrible malaise. I needed this—badly. I needed the touch of soft hair on bare skin, the warmth of its weight on the back of my neck, the caress of stray curls at my throat. I needed to shake my head and feel thick tresses dance across my shoulders like the sea foaming over warm sand. I had no idea why I wanted this so badly, but there was no denying it.

An hour or so later, she was done. The final weft was fused into the topmost layer, and my remaining hair unpinned and brushed out. It was precisely what Fredo had promised; nothing more and nothing less.

“Don’t wash it for awhile, okay? Wait at least three days; after that, maybe once a week. Avoid products that build up on the hair. I’ll give you some samples.”

Oh joy, freebies. I figured it was the least she could do, considering what I was paying for this little fantasy. Fredo wasn’t back yet, but this kind of treatment could not come cheap. I made a mental note to burn my next credit card bill.

Suddenly, the sconce lamp over the doorway lit up, pulsing on and off three times before steadying. Pale yellow light washed over the counter where Fredo was bent over a credit card terminal.

“Crap.” Vera grabbed my hair, quickly pulling it into a loose ponytail and binding it with a fabric-covered elastic. “We have to get you out of here.”

I asked why. She frowned, as if just noticing that I was a babbling idiot. Fredo hustled over; my wallet landed in my lap. “I’ll get the mask,” he said. Vera spun my chair around. “Listen carefully. The police are upstairs; they like to raid the place every now and then.” She leaned closer. “They’ll be here in about five minutes. You do not want them to find you.”

“But… I haven’t done anything.”

“Oh, really? There’s a grow-op in the sub-basement under this room. Six hundred plants. As far as the cops are concerned, everyone down here is guilty.”

Fredo was back. “Not to mention—considering what I just charged to your card,” he said cheerfully, “you’re pretty much bankrolling the whole operation.”

My mouth went dry. “You gotta get me out of here.”
“Put this on.” Vera held up a porcelain mask, ghost-white and glaringly female; it stared at me with empty eyes. “You don’t want the cameras out there to recognize you.”

Dammit, I never should’ve listened to that little bugger. What the hell was I thinking?

The interior of the mask was burnished gold, and etched with a network of fine black lines. Vera held it against my face. The fit wasn’t quite right; it pinched around the edges and across the bridge of my nose.

She threaded the straps under my ponytail and drew the clasp tight. Then something clicked—and all of a sudden the mask fit perfectly.

I stumbled to my feet. My head felt heavy, like the worst kind of sinus cold.

As Fredo led me to the back of the shop, the warning light turned red. “We have to hurry,” he whispered fiercely. “They’re coming.”

“What about Vera?” I imagined the stout lady facing down the police, armed only with a hairbrush and a blow-dryer set to ‘vaporize’.

“She’ll be fine. No finds Vera Spellman if she doesn’t want to be found.”

We plunged through a bead curtain at the back of the store. A narrow corridor led straight into nothingness. Fredo plowed ahead and I followed, desperately trying to see what I was stepping on—or into. The walls felt like old wood, worn smooth by (just maybe) generations of transvestites fleeing the law and the cold light of public exposure. The light from the salon disappeared, and the floor sloped gently into the Earth. I fervently hoped we weren’t headed for the grow-op, as that would surely be the worst possible place to hide from a police raid.

I could hear Fredo’s hard boots scrabbling against the stonework; there were now cobblestones underfoot. I couldn’t see him. He would pause only to hiss “This way…” at me, then once more pace on ahead.

Now the corridor was turning, turning… still descending… now bending back on itself as we spiralled deep under the city. The air grew moist, thickening into an invisible fog whose tendrils plucked at my bare skin like the delicate fingers of the trannies who had preceded me here, begging me to join them here in the silence—and safety—of the tomb. I managed to resist the temptation.
We emerged on the sidewalk, through an ancient metal door that clanged when it slammed shut behind me. I blinked through watery eyes, wondering how the hell descending deep under the city could lead us straight to ground level.

Cool sunshine lit the urban corridor at a noticeable slant. People hurried past, many of them with children; staring, judging, then averting their eyes. Look, ma; that man with the pretty hair is wearing a lady-mask! But fortunately, no one gave me a second look (although the first one did tend to linger).

There was a tug on my sleeve. "No time to waste," Fredo said, a world-weary look etched into his craggy face. He led me up the block.

"I can’t get this thing off.” My fingers scrabbled at the clasp under my ponytail, but it was locked in place. I wondered if Vera had kept the key. I tried prying the mask off but the thing seemed to have cemented itself to my face.

"Leave it alone,” Fredo said. “It’ll come off when it’s finished.”

When it was finished? What the hell did that mean?

We passed The Sylvia on the far side of the street, where the raid was presumably still going on—yet there were no police cars in sight. The parade route remained blocked off, but the street was empty. It had to be pushing dinner time.

Pamela was undoubtedly out of her gown by now and headed for the restaurant, along with family and friends. I had said only that I might join them, so they wouldn’t miss me for awhile—but the short hairs on the back of my neck prickled when I thought about showing off my new ‘gorgeous head of hair’. I was never what you’d call manly, and she was okay with that (as far as I knew), but something like this might push her over the edge. I didn’t want to lose her.

Fredo stopped in front of a storefront with an attractive display of expensive ladies wear—mostly cocktail dresses and prom gowns. He glanced at his watch. "Right on time,” he said tiredly. “It just opened.”

“What are we doing here?”

“Got to get you dressed.” He pulled on the all-glass door. “In you go.”

My hair swirled in the cold wind that swept through the canyon of glassy office buildings and upscale boutiques—and I suddenly realized what was bothering me. The sun wasn’t setting in the west after all, it was rising in the east.

It was morning. The day had just begun. The day of the parade.

It was impossible. I fled into the arms of the store.
“Fredo!” A young woman stepped out from behind the counter, smartly dressed in a white silk blouse and black pencil skirt. In spiky heels, she towered over the little man. “Lovely to see you.” She bent to apply her lips to the top of his head, as waves of yellow hair rendered Fredo briefly invisible.

I stepped to one side, the better to remove myself from the view of anyone passing by outside. I certainly didn’t want to be seen in a dress store, of all things.

The woman noticed me. “Well, what have we here?”

“New client,” Fredo grunted.

“No kidding. Turn around, sweetie. Let’s see what you got.” I did so, pausing to stare at the door and wonder if I should just walk out. “My, that is a gorgeous head of hair,” she said with a giggle. “Vera does such good work.”

“This is Cassandra,” Fredo said, nodding at the blonde girl. “She is your guide to sugar and spice and all that. Ladies wear, I mean. Cass, this is—”

I waved my hands in mock panic. “No names!”

They both laughed. “Goodness, how many times have I heard that,” Cassandra said. “Let’s see… I shall call you ‘Pandora’. Because I’m quite certain you didn’t know what you were getting yourself into.”

Cassandra led me farther into the store, as Fredo settled himself in a chair behind the counter. I wondered if he was planning to nuke my credit rating again, but my wallet hadn’t gone walkabout. I tried the mask again but still it wouldn’t budge—and now my face was tingling, albeit mildly. I wondered what it meant.

I found myself surrounded by evening wear; dozens—hundreds—of dresses and gowns, long and short, in a multitude of colors. Some off the shoulder, some on; some long-sleeved and some short; some Vee-necks and some round—or scoop or jewel or sweetheart or Queen Anne. Cassandra talked about bodice size, what type of neckline I might need, what hem length would be appropriate—and I quickly became lost in a flood of what seemed like useless information.

“A round neck is good for wide shoulders,” she said. “You’re not used to wearing a dress, so you shouldn’t show too much shoulder. And the good news is that it works very well with a larger chest.”

“But I don’t have a large chest—or any chest,” I protested.

She laughed. “Don’t worry about that. Just pick something you like.”

“It’s all very nice… But I’d really rather not wear a dress.”
“Nonsense. Why else would you be here?” She showed me another gown. “I think a scoop neck might look better on you. They’re very popular, and they work equally well with straps, and short or long sleeves.”

I shook my head. What all these dresses had in common was their delicacy. They were light and airy, frilly and cut to flatter the female form. And that form, no matter how hard I might have wished in the past, was not my own. Even the sizes were all wrong. From past experience I knew I’d be lucky to find a size-14 that fit me, and nothing I’d seen here could possibly be more than size-eight.

Cassandra switched to another gown. “Perhaps something in dark blue…”

I took a step back. “No—it’s beautiful, really. But it’s not for me.”

“Are you sure?” She pulled the gown off the rack. It was long and silky, with a scoop neckline and short transparent sleeves. “I really think it would look—”

“I’m not a girl, okay?” Embarrassingly, my voice broke as I spoke.

“Oh, aren’t you?” She hung the gown on a hook, flat to the wall. “Then what’s up with that gorgeous head of hair? Is it just to keep your neck warm?”

“Well, uh…” My voice squeaked and trailed off. It really was a lovely dress.

“Oh, please! You mean to tell me that you’re just a regular guy? Who just happens to wear his hair like a sixteen-year-old schoolgirl?” She stared at me, as if daring me to contradict her. But I couldn’t. I’d always imagined what it would be like to wear—to be able to wear—a dress like that. To feel its delicate fabric hugging my body, accentuating the womanly flare of my chest, the oh-so female curve of my hips; to feel it nipping at my waist as a reminder of the womb within, of the feminine potency of my body… But that was never to be.

Cassandra followed my gaze. “Oh, boy, you’re thinking about it right now, aren’t you? Wearing that gown. You want it bad.”

My head twitched. “No. I know what you’re thinking. But it’s not true. I’m not transsexual.” For the first time I was happy to be hiding behind a mask—even though the tingling was getting painful—as it effectively concealed my mounting embarrassment.

“Goodness, don’t you get it?” She took my hand. “It simply does not matter whether you’re a real woman inside, or a starry-eyed cross-dreamer with visions of taffeta empire dresses dancing in her head. Either way, you can wear this dress and you can wear it proudly. It’s yours for the asking. Just think about it.”

I bit my lip—and hesitated. Well… maybe I—

“Time’s up,” Cassandra snapped. She grabbed the dress and off we went.
The changing room resembled a Victorian bed chamber, sans bed, albeit a fair bit smaller. The mirrors—all three of them—were trimmed with lace, and a brocaded stool sat next to a small dressing-table. Cassandra hung the gown off the side of the vanity mirror. “Lose the clothes,” she said, and waited.

I was loathe to undress. Clothing is a useful barrier between yourself and the rest of the world, a way to hide bits of yourself you might not be all that crazy about. I had no wish to come out of hiding. I edged toward the door.

Cassandra slipped behind me. “Now, now, you don’t want to do that.” She placed the flat of her hand on my chest. “It’s too late for second thoughts. Just think about dear little Fredo, sitting out there, so patiently. He’s doing this for you—to make sure you turn out right. Just remember, if you can’t trust a man like Fredo then who can you trust?”

Her hand felt warm. Yeah, Fredo… what a great guy. I no longer wanted to leave. In fact, all I wanted to do was stay there and let this girl do… anything.

Cassandra smiled. “Good boy… Let’s get you fixed up.” She rifled through a drawer in the dressing-table and produced a brassiere with noticeably thin straps. “It’s underwire,” she said, “like your basic strapless bra, but the straps give you a bit more support.” She laid it atop the counter.

I suddenly remembered what I was supposed to be doing, and removed my jacket. Cassandra made a little pile of my clothes, and when I placed my socks on top she picked it up and walked out. “Back in a minute, hun. I’ll find you a nice slip.”

In a small room with three mirrors, it’s impossible to avoid your own reflection. I was alone with my naked body, and there were more than just three of me because two of the mirrors faced one another and held multiple reflections—the kind that get smaller as they recede to infinity. Still, there wasn’t much to see. To be fair, I’ll say this: I wasn’t unpleasant to look at. But I could never go the other way and see anything positive about my appearance. Somehow, I’d always managed to split the difference right down the middle. Basically, I’ve always been invisible.

Not for the first time, I wondered if the plainness of my male self had anything to do with my affliction. If thy hair offends thee—or is boringly plain—then cut it off and replace it with a glorious mane of thick flowing tresses. If thy male figure leaves thee cold, then let it become seductively female. And if that means wearing a wig, a corset and a little black dress, when you can, in the privacy of your own home, then that’s what you do. And you learn to like it.

I closed my eyes. This was absurd. The gown wasn’t even my size. Putting it on would rip it to shreds, so what’s the point? Still, if that’s what she wanted…
I opened my eyes. Something had changed. The light had softened. Maybe it was an old-fashioned bulb, not full-spectrum. But there was something else: I wasn’t quite as plain as I had been.

It was nothing I could put my finger on. A slight inward flex of the waist, perhaps, or a subtle flare of the hips. Skin that appeared healthier, as if I’d exposed myself to some sun for a change. Limbs that seemed better-proportioned than before, less asymmetric. And looking down, in the soft light, there fell a gentle rain of dark filaments, tumbling down the slipstream of my bare skin.

The hairs of my body, like rats, deserting a sinking ship.

Cassandra bustled back into the room. “Here we go,” she said, flourishing a long black slip like a tailor showing off a particularly fine bolt of fabric. “It’s silk,” she said, sounding pleased with herself. “Same length as the dress. Well, an inch or so less; you don’t want to show. The spaghetti straps will just fit under the shoulders, and they’ll stay there as long as you don’t lift your arms too high.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said calmly, in a voice no longer quite my own.

Cassandra peered at the floor. “I see you’re shedding. Hang on a sec.” She pressed a button on the wall. From a slot at ground level, a small flat robot emerged and, humming gently, began trundling back and forth across the carpet.

I ignored it. “What should I do now?”

“Just wait for it. Things are about to get interesting.” She put on sunglasses.

I stepped aside so the robot could get at the scattered hairs and my reflections shifted, sending the room into a confusing flux of motion. Then lights went out. And the world fell into the heart of the sun. A blazing, fiery light filled the air. It penetrated my body, filling it with luminous energy. It was as though all four walls, ceiling and floor, were under simultaneous attack by the phaser banks of six powerful starships. Yet for all that there was no heat, no violence.

I screamed. The voice I heard was female, a woman in mortal fear for her life. Perhaps it was Cassandra, caught in the same vortex as I was.

The world transformed, mutated, transmogrified. The walls vanished, the floor sank into a pool of darkness. My skin rendered itself in shades of black, while my eyes glowed as though I’d been possessed by some malevolent entity bent on transformation. My face, still trapped within its porcelain mask, turned into a shadow, as though my skull was empty. Most frightening of all, my hair turned white and terribly bright, lit from the inside out, loose and spilling over my dark neck and shoulders in a restless tide of liquid light.

The woman’s voice screamed again. She was inside me!
From somewhere nearby I could hear a gentle hum and the scrape of stiff bristles on carpet. The Roomba was still at work. I clung to the welcome normalcy of that sound, when nothing else made sense.

The woman’s image was everywhere, growing smaller with distance. Her figure was modestly female, with a narrow waist, noticeable hips, mid-sized breasts and a wild mane of hair that cloaked her upper body. I could hear the quickness of her breath, but the line of her lips never moved.

Her hands rose to cup the mounds on her chest (as my hands did the same), and then her back arched (as did mine) and she trailed dark fingers through the brilliant tresses that framed her empty face. My own fingers followed her lead and I felt through her hair as if it were my own. As indeed it was.

The light disappeared; from hair, eyes and all else. There was nothing left.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. “Hello? Anyone home?”

I couldn’t find my voice. My hands fell to my sides. I could see again.

Cassandra’s voice: “My, aren’t we the pretty little thing.”

It was impossible. But it was true. I was a woman.

I would have fallen, but she was there to catch me and guide me to a seat on the brocaded stool. Cassandra retrieved my elastic from the floor, before the Roomba could suck it up, and gathered my hair back into its former ponytail.

“Would you like some tea? You probably didn’t drink it before, but things have changed, haven’t they? Ladies drink tea. We’re certainly not adverse to coffee, or a nice cocktail, or even a beer now and then, but when we’re feeling our sex—figuratively speaking—then tea’s the real deal. I’ll get you a cup.”

I stared into the mirror. The mask stared back. Same mask, different body—but it was still me inside. I was still a guy, just like always. Only now… I opened my legs. Nothing… Just a frill of coarse hairs and a fissure, a doorway into my body.

I was female. But of course that was impossible.

Cassandra returned with a mug. Then she stood by the door, eyeing me with half-concealed amusement. “You are new at this,” she remarked. “A born girl wouldn’t just sit around naked. You never know who might be watching.”

“I guess—” A new voice poured from my mouth, a voice that reminded me of summers at the beach, of listening to the pretty girls talk to one another and wondering if one would ever talk to me. It was sweet and warm and, strangely, an awful lot like my wife’s. “I guess I should get dressed.”

She laughed. “I thought you’d never ask.”
Cassandra helped with the brassiere, to close the hooks in the back and settle the straps over my shoulders. Having breasts felt more than a little odd.

The panties weren’t quite as strange, but the garter belt certainly was. Then it was nylon stockings, in nude black, that linked to the garters and made my legs look longer than they really were.

Overtop of it all, Cassandra poured the silk slip. It slithered all the way down to my ankles; a black sheath that only enhanced the female body it pretended to conceal. And finally, a pair of open-toed sandals, with a narrow two-inch heel and ankle straps.

The gown took some doing; I’d never worn anything like it before. It had a short zipper up the back and a slightly elastic waist, so I had to sit to get my legs inside. Cassandra tugged the skirt clear of my feet, so I could stand, and then we worked the fabric up over my hips. I slipped my arms through and tugged the bodice into place. I felt the zipper glide up my back, drawing the dress tight. Instinctively, I straightened up and gently arched my spine, thereby thrusting my chest forward and sliding the waist into position.

Cassandra flipped my ponytail forward and pulled the zipper all the way up.

The dress was beautiful. And for the first time in my life, so was I.

Of course, my hair was a bit of a mess and the mask was still there… Hesitant, I touched its smooth white surface. At least it didn’t hurt anymore.
Fredo needed both hands to haul me out of the store. In spite of being female, and rather nicely dressed, I still couldn’t shake the idea that people would see me as cross-dressed. A new body does not erase the habits of a lifetime.

Cassandra locked the door. “Just be yourself!” she yelled through the glass.

“Move,” Fredo ordered, urging me on from behind. “There isn’t much time.”

There were a lot more people about; not workday singles hurrying to and fro, but families and groups of friends—all moving purposely toward the street that had been cleared of traffic. The parade would soon begin.

We hastened down the block, as I reflected on which impossibility was the more mind-numbing: the fact that I was now a woman, or that it was now earlier in the day than when I’d first met Fredo. Neither made any sense.

We crossed at the light, then doubled back on the other side. I felt dizzy when I realized where we were going. The Sylvia’s neon marquee passed by overhead and I wondered if I’d meet myself arriving for my previous (but not ‘earlier’) appointment at Vera’s Nu-You Studio. But no, that wouldn’t happen until later that afternoon, with the parade well underway.

Right now, elsewhere in the city, my old self was dropping Pamela and her sister off at the parade’s staging ground to board the Mothers of Confederation float. What would she say if she could see me now? Welcome to the club?

Once more, we entered the dimly-lit lobby and the staircase beside the front door. The bulb in the ceiling was still broken, as it would be later. Darkness descended. Fredo knocked once on the glass door, and entered. Vera was seated in one of the padded chairs with her feet propped up. “What’cha got for me, Fredo?”

“Repeat customer, Vee,” the little man replied.

She stood up and smiled. “Very pretty,” she murmured. “Gorgeous hair.”

“You do good work,” Fredo said, grinning.

“So I’m told.” Vera helped me into the chair. “Does the lady have a name?”

Cassandra’s choice seemed as good as any. Pandora it was. “Good choice,” Vera said, draping a pink cape over my shoulders. She set to work on my hair.

Pandora. I’d sure as hell opened a box full of troubles; if not for the rest of the world, then certainly for myself. What could I possibly say to my wife that would help her make sense of the situation? And how was I supposed to survive as a woman who did not legally exist? Most importantly, was there a way back?
I cleared my throat. “This has been fun,” I began slowly. “But, um… How do I go about turning back into myself?”

Vera frowned, as her image in the mirror combed out the long hair of the woman in the porcelain mask. “What do you mean, dear?”

I fumbled for the right words. “Well… How do I get these extensions out? And would going back to the changing room… You know, turn me back into a guy?”

“Goodness, why would a pretty young thing like yourself ever want to be male?” She teased the curly ends of my thick mane, turning them into a jumble of loose waves tumbling across my shoulders. “As for extensions—you simply don’t need them, Pandora. Your own hair is lovely, just as it is.”

A chill spilled down my spine. My own hair? Was there no going back?

Vera spritzed my hair with a scent I recognized immediately—from this morning’s car ride.

“I’m just going to take a bit of hair from each temple,” Vera said. She used a comb to isolate two narrow tresses. “—and pull them around back.” She tied them together with a small clasp. “A feminine touch,” she said with a smile, “for a very feminine girl.” She spun the chair around and gave me a hand mirror.

She was right. I could scarcely believe it was me in there, trapped inside that feminine head of hair and that blatantly female body.

“It’s very nice,” I said softly. Vera smiled. “I believe the word you’re looking for is ‘gorgeous’.”

“Yes,” I sighed, admitting defeat. “It’s gorgeous.”

Vera took back the mirror and glanced up at the clock. “Enough chit-chat. Fredo will be back soon. I barely have time to do your makeup.”

The last word didn’t quite register. But—Fredo? What was he up to?
She waved her hand. “Off retrieving your purse, or what have you.”

My purse? I had no chance to respond. Vera’s hands were under my hair, picking at the clasp on the back of my neck. It parted, and then she peeled off the mask that had protected my face for so long that I felt nearly naked without it.

Her fingers caressed my cheeks; she grunted her approval. When I touched them myself, the skin felt softer than it had—and almost, but not quite, moist.

“You won’t need much makeup,” she said, applying foundation cream to various areas of my face. She used a small sponge to spread it evenly under my eyes, around my mouth, along my jaw and down my neck. She powdered everything, then blushed my cheeks and contoured the edges with another sponge.

I was wondering why I needed makeup at all when she approached with a pencil and told me to relax my mouth. She drew a dark ocher boundary surrounding my lips. I never did find the right moment to object. “Pucker up,” she ordered, and without complaint my mouth accepted its new color—a shade of red some marketing whiz had dubbed Sugar Shag.

“The eyes are most important,” Vera said, as she outlined mine in a faded brown-black, and tinted my eyelids a subtle shade of brown—chosen, she said, to contrast my hair and bring out the color of my irises. “Look into a woman’s eyes,” she said, “and they’ll know who you really are.” She daubed a line of black mascara onto my eyelashes, top and bottom, working the tiny brush down to the base and stroking outward. Involuntarily, my lips parted as the hairs grew larger; so long and thick that they became a permanent part of the way I viewed the world.

I knew then that it is not possible to forget that you’re a woman, when every blink is framed in a shimmering tracery of black lace.

Fredo returned just as Vera was removing my cape. He handed me a small black purse with a thin shoulder strap. “It’s not mine,” I said.

“It is now,” Fredo said tiredly. “The jewelry’s inside,” he told Vera.

I stood up, towering over the little man—who appeared to have a spatter of blood on his pants. “Put the jewelry on, dear,” Vera said, dusting me with perfume.
I opened the handbag to find loose kleenex, a wallet, keys, various cosmetics, and down at the bottom a pearl necklace and a pair of dangly earrings (not clip-ons). I fastened the necklace around my neck and adjusted its fall into the valley that lay between my breasts. Then, as I tried to find the hole in the lobe of my now-pierced ears, I turned toward the mirror—and there she was. *Pandora.*

I almost dropped the earring. “Oh, my God!” Why hadn’t I noticed it before? The name that Cassandra had given me, the name I now wore as my own, was also that of my wife’s *sister.* And it was none other than *she* staring back at me from inside the mirror, eyes wide, and her crimson lips puckered into a shocked “Oh!”

Vera tapped me on the shoulder. “Hello? Need any help?”

I watched Pandora fumble her earrings into place—which seemed odd, because she’d obviously done it often enough before. Maybe my own hands getting in the way was the problem. Fingers touched my cheek with sharp, crimson-tipped nails. I turned on my heel. “What have you done to me?”

“Beautiful hair,” Fredo said, grinning. “You wanted it, you got it.”

*We barely made it to the Mothers of Confederation float before it powered up and joined the parade. Fredo left me there and disappeared into the crowd, as quietly and mysteriously as he’d come. I made my way to the forecastle.*

“Panda! You made it!” Pamela gave me a quick hug. “Where’ve you been?”

“Um… salon,” I muttered, forcing a smile, hoping it would be enough.

“Oh. Well, I guess it was worth it—you look awesome. I mean it.”

“Thanks—” My voice caught as I realized that, in spite of all that had changed, I was to remain part of this woman’s life. The woman that I loved.

Later, when we spotted Pamela’s husband in the crowd, and waved, I noticed what a poor excuse for a man he truly was. Not really a man at all, I thought; certainly not anymore. I watched as he accepted his fate and entered the alley.

“Where the hell is that loser going?” Pamela said, annoyance coloring her voice. “I mean, really! Leaving like that when I’m still right here!”

“I guess he had something more important to do,” I said softly.

She looked me in the eye. “I know you don’t like him, Panda. I mean, he’s sweet and all, but…” Her gaze dropped. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe it’s time…” She sighed. “I know he loves me. How will I ever tell him?”

A curl of soft hair lay across my throat. “Maybe it’s better this way.”