Terror lives at the end of the lane...

Their new home was possessed of a feminine presence, as inviting as it was unsettling, but for Malcolm its seductive lure would soon prove impossible to resist.
Dedication

To H. P. Lovecraft

For “The Dreams in the Witch House”
and other fascinating arcana.
My thanks for the concept.

My apologies to Cthulhu fans
for what some may consider sacrilege,
and here’s hoping this story doesn’t leave
old H.P. spinning in his grave like a bottle rocket.

Amanda Hawkins
“Dreams in the Witch House”
by Amanda Hawkins

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The house was nothing special. Off in the burbs, at the end of a gravel cul-de-sac (some would call it a *lane*), with a meadow out back reclaimed from land that was once a quarry. The lane was a shady stretch of backyards for houses that fronted on nearby paved roads, but for us it was the only way in.

Two levels, three bedrooms, and a dormer attic loaded with junk that the old lady who used to live here never got around to clearing out. That’s only to be expected, of course; the old dear wasn’t doing terribly well by the time she left.

Like I said, the house was nothing special—but it had a presence about it. Not the astringence of tea leaves and old lace as you might expect; exactly the opposite. It seemed to possess a strength and vitality altogether out of keeping with its age and exterior appearance. Inside it was clean, structurally sound, and a serious bargain at the price they were asking. We signed off right away.

As a buddy of mine said at the time, “The Hawthornes have taken root.”

Being in the house felt like living with a woman; not the old lady, but a young woman at the height of her sexuality. (My wife Cerise came up with that one.) Even then, it took us awhile to pin down our impressions; the house felt, in some indefinable way, *feminine*. It was as if the building itself possessed an innate appreciation for womanly pursuits—like hairstyles and hemlines, distaff fashions, beauty products, and the frequent shaving of one’s legs.

None of this manifested itself physically, at least at first. Cerise herself took no interest in such trivia, and our own belongings and decor were gender-neutral. The presence was simply *there*, pervading the house like radiation. We even had the basement checked for radon gas, but none was found.

Our friends felt it as well. “I dunno how you’re gonna survive in this place, man.” That was Todd Mullins, whom I’ve known since university. Truthfully, I’d been wondering the same thing. “It’s like there’s a goddamn sorority buried in the basement,” he said, stroking the door frame, “only there’s no school here.”

Not now, there wasn’t. But after he left, I checked. A hundred years ago on these grounds stood a bordello, which had been demolished when the quarry went into operation. Locals called it the Witch House.
It didn’t take us long to settle in. I helped Cerise cart away the junk in the attic and then left her to putter along with whatever renovations she wanted. Of the two of us, she was the handy one; I couldn’t saw a straight line to save my life.

We turned the downstairs bedroom into a home office and I talked my company into letting me spend most of my time there. As long as I hauled my laptop into the main office once a week, and showed up for meetings, I lived the dream of all us desk jockeys—working in my PJs; or boxers, weather permitting. My wife’s career didn’t give her that option, but she didn’t seem to mind.

I decided to let my hair grow out, and it did so faster than I thought it would. We’d always been one of those couples where the guy has longer hair, and that slowly became much more obvious. But Cerise didn’t care so why should I?

After a few months it was halfway down my back, so I hit the salon for a trim. “I’m thinking about this style,” I told Ming, as she slipped the elastic from my ponytail. I showed her a picture neatly cut from a magazine at home.

“This is woman’s style,” she said. Well, it would be, wouldn’t it, in *Elle*.

“Don’t look at the model,” I said. “Her hair isn’t pouffy or curly; it’s just nice rolling waves. It’s more... *alive* than my hair.”

“You want more volume?” She gently untangled my tresses.

“I guess so.” The magazine was a freebie from the mail. Cerise had left it open on the coffee table. I remember flipping through it, staring at the picture—the model was gorgeous—and thinking, *Why not be more like her? What’s the harm?*

“People think you have girl’s hairstyle. You okay with that?”

I shrugged. “I get that anyway, with the length. Might as well bet the farm.”

“You want whole farm? I give you makeover too.”

My cheeks flushed. “I’ll settle for the haircut.”

“Is not just haircut,” she said, knotting a cape around my neck. “Is wash, is rollers, is light perm. Hair doesn’t keep new shape by itself, you know.”

Whatever.

Ming was right; a lot of people seemed to assume I was a woman—although at first it was only from behind and while wearing a coat. I’d hear, “May I help you, ma’am?” followed by a mumbled apology once I turned around.
Most people seem to think that gorgeous long hair, with just a hint of waviness to add movement, is something only an actual woman could want.

Go figure.

Not that I minded. Each “ma’am” gave me a secret thrill, like stealing someone’s lunch from the fridge at work and getting away with it.

My hair reminded Cerise of a girl from her home town, who had worked in the Prom Shop at Bloomingdale’s. She began calling me ‘Monique’ around the house. I took it as a joke, but she never tired of using it.

I became a self-taught expert in home hair care. For instance, it’s important to brush every day. A hundred strokes is too much, but a couple dozen stimulates blood flow to the scalp and distributes natural oils down the shafts. And when someone calls you ‘Monique’ while you’re brushing, you just know you’re doing the right thing. A woman’s hair is her crowning glory, right?

* 

The first time it happened, I was lying in bed recalling my trip to the salon, my womanly hair wrapped around a curling iron and surrounded by equipment that could be used to transform me into a passable reproduction of the real thing. And I remember thinking, What would that be like? Was it even possible?

Another evening, I was sitting on the bed—head tilted, brush in hand, working it through my tangled tresses—when Cerise emerged from the bathroom. “The way you look now,” she said, “you should be the one wearing the nightgown.”

Maybe I should! But no, that would be wrong. I swallowed the knot in my throat and laughed it off. “Uh-uh. You must have a rack this big to rock this nightie.”

“That could be arranged.” From behind, she pressed my chest together and peered into the resulting cleavage. “See? You qualify.” But she took it no further.
Hauling my laptop into the office one day, I stopped at a coffee shop on the way for a vanilla latte. The barista said she liked my hair. She smiled when she said it too, not because she was attracted to me or anything (I had no such illusions) but because her hair looked a lot like mine and she knew what I have to go through to make it look like this. She probably thought I was into all that other stuff too, like hairstyles and makeup and shaving my legs—which for the first time struck me as a rather cool idea. But what would my wife think?

I needed an excuse, so I took up swimming laps. At home I went on and on about fitness and how the water felt, and how the women seem to be so much faster than the men, and I wondered why that might be. Slimmer? Better streamlining?

Cerise shrugged. “You should shave your legs. Lots of men do it. Even guys who go swimming now and then.” She eyed me coolly. “Don’t forget your arms.”

As excuses go, I know the gold standard when I see it. Cerise showed me how to use her LadyShave Cordless and supplied the lotion for subsequent moisturizing. “It’s the magic of aloe vera,” she said, as we admired the results.

A long silence followed. “Not sure where all this is going,” I said.

“Check out the attic,” she said, stroking my ponytail.
Lunch with Todd. He refused to come by the house, even though it was on his way, so I had to meet him at the cafe. He couldn’t stop staring. “Uh… Malcolm? Didn’t you used to have arm hair?”

My shirt had a three-quarter sleeve. “I’ve been swimming.”

“In what—battery acid?” He looked nervous. “Dude, you gotta get outta there.”

“You kidding?” I reminded him that the place was a steal.

He shook his head. “How much is your dick worth? I mean, look at yourself!”

I forced myself to stop playing with the ponytail drooped over my shoulder. “It’s not so bad. You wouldn’t believe how nice my pants feel.”

“Oh, God, your legs too?” He hunched forward. “You see what’s going on here, don’t you? With the house and everything?”

I leaned back, crossing my legs at the knee. “Enlighten me.”

“It’s that cathouse you told me about.” His voice was hoarse. “Don’t you get it? They abused those poor girls and then buried them—right there in the yard.”

My fingernails tapped the table; they hadn’t been clipped in quite awhile. “I don’t believe in ghosts, Todd. If that’s what you’re getting at.”

“How much evidence do you need? You’re turning into a chick.”

“Lemme get this straight. These girls get murdered and for revenge they come back a hundred years later and turn some random guy into a woman?”

“I didn’t say it made sense. Ghosts don’t have to make sense. Their minds are all twisted by whatever made ‘em ghosts in the first place.”

“I hope you’re not calling me crazy… That wouldn’t be nice.”

His eyes got big. “Are you one of them? Like, right now?”

I laughed. “Don’t be a dickhead. If I was a lady ghost, would I be sitting here with someone like you?”

“Yeah, well…” He grinned. “Figure you could do better, huh?”

“I could do better at the dog pound.” I rubbed his leg with my foot.

He pulled away. “I still think you should get out of that house. I’d hate to see you start wearing a dress—or worse.”

And I remember thinking, *Wearing a dress, would that be so bad?*
Cerise was amused. “Monique, trust me—you can do better.”

We were in the bedroom and I was staring at her side of the closet, lost in thought. “Uh, sweetie?” She waved her fingers in front of my face. “They wouldn’t fit, you know. We’re not the same size.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I’m not blind. I’m five-three and one-fifty. Most of my clothes are size twelve. You, on the other hand—dammit—are five-foot-nine and thin as a rail. At Long Tall Sally, you’d probably be size eight.” She sighed. “I used to envy women like that. Maybe I still do.” She stared at me, her smile fading.

I turned away. “I don’t want your stuff.”

“Good, ‘cause you can’t have it.” Once more she touched my hair, as if she still couldn’t believe it was real. “Just check out the attic, okay? I’m finished up there. It’s all yours now.”

Two dozen strokes with a cushioned paddle-brush; first one side, then the other. It helps me forget all this nonsense about vengeful ghosts and the luxurious feel of silk on bare skin. Yeah… I shouldn’t have tried on those stockings. ●
I was sitting at my desk, designing a database for a major aerospace company, when I leaned forward for a reference book. My ponytail fell over my shoulder and gave me a soft tap on the nose. It was nothing that hadn’t happened a hundred times before—but something was different this time.

The room hadn’t changed; papers on the desk, books on the shelves, server on the floor. The house still exuded its invisible sense of feminine charm, which we’d long since grown used to. The change was on the inside… inside me.

I couldn’t put it off any longer. My skin craved lingerie like a fat kid craves ice cream. Five minutes later I was standing in the bedroom, rifling through my wife’s lingerie drawer. Panty hose? Check. Panties? Check. Underwire bra? Check. Camisole? Check. The next thing I knew, I was wearing the lot.

The house seemed to approve. I felt like a little girl whose parents had just patted her on the head and told her she was special, and—yes, indeed—that was the best darn crayon drawing of the Wicked Witch they’d ever seen. I stuffed the cups with a pair of balled socks, but was left wondering what else I could do. Jeans and a sweatshirt hardly seemed appropriate, but Cerise’s closet was off-limits.

I put my own clothes back on, over the lingerie. I tried to work, but just sitting at the computer soon became intolerable. I had to go somewhere, do something.

Walking to the car felt like stepping into a lion cage. What if one of the neighbors saw me? They might notice my enhanced chest, even though a baggy sweatshirt isn’t exactly revealing. Then they’d tell everyone they knew, the photos would fly onto Twitter, my wife would learn the horrible truth—and I’d be in a shitstorm the size of a cyclone. She’d warned me once already.

I ended up driving to work. It wasn’t my day to go in, so I hit the coffee shop for a vanilla latte. The girl with hair like mine was on duty and it being well after lunch the place was nearly empty. She likes it loose? No sweat.

My heart missed a few beats while I fumbled with my hair. What if she noticed my chest? What if my panties were showing? I’d never hear the end of it at the office. I yanked the elastic off, staring at it in feigned disgust, as if it had just given up the ghost. I dropped it in the trash and stepped up to the counter.
“Tall vanilla latte, please. No toppings.”

She flashed me a smile. “Nice hair. Did your binder bite the big one?”

“Uh, yeah.” Money and coffee changed hands.

“You can have one of mine if you like.”

“Really?” Words failed me. To make my hair like hers—where do I sign?

“I always carry a spare. Sorry if it’s a bit girly.”

My mouth went dry. It was a loop of lime green fabric with a tiny jewel attached; heart-shaped, like an earring. I stammered out my acceptance.

“I figured you wouldn’t mind.” She waved off my offer to pay. “It’s plastic,” she said. “Try it on.”

My fingers felt like bratwurst, but I managed to twist the elastic and pull my hair through the loop—in the process giving the girl a good look at my profile.

“Perfect. It’s like looking in a mirror,” she said.

Twin ponytails. From behind, you wouldn’t be able to tell us apart. Maybe from the front too, someday—if the damn house has its way.

On my way home, safe in the anonymous gloom of my car, I removed the binder and sent long hair spilling across my back. What might the driver behind me make of that? I imagined him saying, “Whoa, that’s one serious babe.”

No reason to disappoint the guy. I slid down in my seat so as to appear shorter and lowered my shoulders—because that’s what women look like, whether they know it or not. I stuck close to the speed limit too, which felt more ladylike.

Before getting out of the car, I switched back to a ponytail. Coward, I thought. What’s wrong with having long hair? What’s wrong with wearing it loose?

Why can’t a man be more like a woman?

*

I’d been away too long. Cerise was waiting, and one quick hug told her everything she needed to know. “Is that mine?” She poked me in the chest.

I had to admit it was; bra, panties—the whole lot.

“Get ‘em off.” She wasn’t kidding, so I did. Right there in the hallway.

She carried her lingerie upstairs, at arm’s length, leaving me hanging. I knotted my sweatshirt around my waist and followed.
“I told you to stay out of my stuff.” The clothes went straight into the laundry basket, even the hose in a little string bag. She had no interest in another apology. “I told you about the attic, didn’t I? Pretty sure I did!”

I edged towards the door, by this time clad in boring old menswear. “I better get back to work. That database ain’t gonna fix itself.”

“Neither are your gender issues, sweetie. You can’t keep doing this.”

“What issues? I’m fine. Why do you keep mentioning the attic?”

“Fine? You wear my clothes, you shave your legs, your hair looks like it could star in a shampoo commercial…” She grabbed my tail. “What on earth is that?”

“I got it from the girl at Starbucks. My elastic broke.”

“And now you’re swapping accessories with teenage girls. These are not typical male activities. Isn’t it time you owned up?”

“What’s the big deal? Lots of guys shave, you said so yourself. Lots of guys have long hair too. The elastic’s a loaner.”

“Do lots of guys drive around town in their wives’ lingerie?”

“It’s probably more common than you think. Who’s to say?”

“Sit down, Malcolm.” She rested her hand on my back, touching my ponytail. “You should know that I’m okay with this—all of it.”

“Bull cookies. Your things are off-limits, you said so yourself.”

She paused. “I never said you couldn’t be a woman.”

Silence. I stared into the closet; my mouth opened and closed. “Well, then,” I said, eventually. “I’m off to nominate you for open-minded spouse of the year. It comes with a trophy and a year’s supply of unconventional sex.”

“I might take you up on that. But first, I have a present for you.” She dug down to the bottom of her sportswear drawer and handed me a box.

It was the *Grand Illusion*—according to the label—a prosthetic vagina made of something called ‘Cyberskin’. *So real you’ll forget you were ever male.* Our eyes met. “Why would I want this?”

“Maybe you don’t. But I’m pretty sure Monique will.”

“I wish you wouldn’t call me that.”

“I wish I could squeeze into a size six. You don’t always get what you want.” She smiled. “But if you try sometimes, you just might find… You get what you need.” She tapped the box. “You need this.”
I flipped it over and read the back. Cyberskin was composed of PVC, silicone and a long list of fancy chemicals, which somehow managed to duplicate the look and feel of real skin. Porous enough to pass sweat and oils to the surface, and allow moisture to percolate through.

I stared at the box. “Todd thinks we’re living on top of an old graveyard.”

“Todd is an idiot, dear. He’s a nice man, but he’ll believe anything.”

“So you don’t think I’m possessed by the spirit of a dead call girl?”

Cerise laughed. “Of course not. You’re just trying to figure out who you are.”

“It might be easier if there were ghosts.”

“Just try it on.” She tapped the box. “It needs breaking in.”

“I’m really not up to it, luv. Not today.”

“Tomorrow, then. You know, I was gonna wait until the matching boobs arrived—they’re on back order—but this way you can get used to being a woman where it counts. Before going all the way.”

*Matching boobs? Maybe it wasn’t me who was possessed.*

As was often the case, my dreams were chock full of feminine imagery. Long hair that needs brushing, skirts that demand wearing, lipsticks that won’t stop bugging me until I press them to my lips. Men who take me in their arms and give me their full attention; unconventional sex in the back of a limo, me on the business end of a stiffy with staying power. You get used to it.

The house wore its aura like a silk housecoat that day, endowing even the walls with an inner light that I alone could see (or so I imagined). I lay in bed after Cerise left for work, imagining my body with Cyberskin boobs.

A shower, a shave and cementing myself into a prosthetic vagina with surgical adhesive. Not your typical morning in anyone’s man-cave.

I had developed a sickening aversion to facial hair, so I wore a thick layer of Nair as a mask while washing everything else. I shaved my bikini zone, my arms and legs—even though they didn’t need it—and my face, again, then rubbed Jergens into anything and everything a woman might want to moisturize.

While my hair dried, I opened the package. The *Grand Illusion* lay nestled in a plastic mould that kept its shape. I peeled it off and held it up. A shiver slid down my back. I’d never seen one up close before.
A flesh-like cleft with folds sticking out here and there. Surrounding the opening was a neat fringe of coarse hair, in my color. For that matter, the Cyberskin itself was a good match for my own skin, in both tone and consistency.

How on earth had Cerise managed that?

The instructions suggested running cold water on the body bits you’re planning to pave over, so to speak, so they shrink. I used an ice pack instead, to keep it dry.

Spray glue on the back and into the pouch, insert the catheter and tuck yourself inside. Pull the end down, then back between your legs, position the slit in the proper location, smooth out the edges, then press and hold firmly in place for ten minutes. The instructions say you can wear the *Grand Illusion* for a week at a time, before it really should be cleaned.

I wandered into the bedroom, clutching my crotch, and flipped on the TV. But it was hard to focus on anything beyond what lay between my legs. Just to be sure, I waited nearly half an hour and the end of whatever show was on. By that time the prosthesis had warmed to body temperature and had effectively merged with its surroundings.

Welcome to the opposite sex. A sigh escaped my lips.

The trouble is, once you start ‘dressing’ it can be hard to stop.

No, make that *impossible*.

Cerise would be at work all day, she need never know. And her lingerie drawer was ripe to be ransacked. But right on top was a hand-written note: *I knew you’d cave! Hands off my things, yours are in the bag. Love, C.*

*Dammit,* I thought, she was always one step ahead.

Out of the bag spilled lingerie—a cami and half-slip, bra and panties, garter belt and nylon stockings—all in basic black. And high heels. She knew me well.

I could no more stop what came next than I could stop the sun in its path. The panties neatly covered my womanhood; the garter belt rode my hips and dangled its garters; stockings slithered up my legs and locked in place. I wrapped the bra around my chest and stuffed it with socks.

Long hair tumbled over my shoulders like an eager puppy. I stroked its fur, calmed it down, flipped it onto my back. Then the shoes and I stood there for quite awhile, hands exploring my fully feminized figure. Was all this really part of figuring out who I was? How could anyone not know whether they’re male or female?

*
Oh, God... What have I done?

It feels like I'm touching a woman. A woman's body, like Cerise. How can this be me?

Dammit, why couldn't I be a regular guy, like Todd?

This is beyond cross-dressing. Am I turning into a woman?

What's so awful about inhaling a few beers and acting like God's gift to women?

What's not to like? A lot of women would kill for legs like this, and they're mine.

This has gone way too far. I should get rid of all this stuff, before it's too late.

It's nothing but PVC and silicone, so how come it feels so damn real?

Hard to believe how perfectly these heels fit. Why didn't I start wearing the things years ago?
Cerise hadn’t mentioned her robe, so I settled for a housecoat. After breakfast, I managed a few hours work on the database before restlessness set in. I had to do something—anything—and that meant going outside.

It’s a crime against nature to cover lingerie with an old sweatshirt and worn jeans, but that’s what I did. I traded high heels for sneakers and loose hair for a ponytail. Hopefully no one would check out my figure too closely.

The trouble was, I had nowhere to go. Work was out of the question, I didn’t feel like coffee, no errands needed running. I was pretty sure Cerise wouldn’t like her husband turning up at her workplace to parade around in lingerie.

I found myself near the Foresquare Mall. A wicked idea crept into my brain.

I parked the car, but as I neared the mall my steps faltered. What was I supposed to do there, march into Long Tall Sally and try on a size eight cocktail dress? That’s not something people in old sweatshirts and jeans do.

Still, I had to do something… The picture of a beautifully dressed woman stopped me dead in the water. It was a nail salon. In I went.

The girl at the desk looked me over. An eyebrow lifted. “You want manicure?”

I nodded. This was a mistake, a terrible mistake.

“We have cancellation. Wait ten minutes.”

I sat in the lobby, leafing through a back issue of Elle. Gorgeous girls everywhere; in the magazine, in the store. Why shouldn’t I be more like them?

When it was my turn, the manicurist studied my fingers and shook her head. “You haven’t been taking proper care, hon.”

“I guess not. Sorry.”

“No worries. I can fix.” She set to work cleaning the nails. “The real question is, how far do you want me to go?” When I failed to reply, she went on. “I can tidy them up, push back the cuticles, do a little basic shaping… Is that enough?”

Sure, why not?

She leaned closer. “Look, sweetie. Anyone can see you’re wearing a bra. Nylons too. You didn’t come in here to have me clip a hangnail, so let’s get serious.” She held up a set of acrylic nail-tips. “It’s nothing drastic, only a quarter-inch past the fingertip. They’re tough as nails—steel nails, I mean—and won’t come off for love or money. They can be shaped, trimmed and painted like the real thing. So, you gotta tell me—you want ‘em or not?”

I nodded.
Half an hour later I was back in the car, gripping the steering wheel with fingers that wouldn’t look out of place in your average fashion spread. I was wearing Very Cranberry nail polish from essie. What was I thinking?

*

Cerise barely glanced at my hands. “You’re a mess, you know that? Except for those nails, of course. They’re gorgeous.”

My arms dropped to my sides. “Thanks a lot.”

“All that lovely lingerie and you hide it under dumpy boy clothes.” She shook her head. “You still haven’t checked out the attic.”

“I’m saving it for a special occasion.”

“Life’s too short, Malcolm. But as usual, I have the answer. Monique is afraid to come out because I’m here.” She waved me silent. “Don’t bother denying it. Old habits die hard. You’ve been hiding this side of you for a long time. So I’ve arranged to go visit mother for a few days, starting next week. Promise me you’ll let your alter ego out of her cage.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“It’s what you want, sweetheart. Trust me.”

Once my wife gets an idea into her head, there’s no arguing with her. There’s also no arguing with the part of me that craved the embrace of nylon and silk. But the idea of turning into a woman—that was flat-out terrifying, right down to the toes of my Agent Provocateur thigh-highs. ●
“Malcolm, why the hell are you wearing white gloves?”
I stuck my hands between my legs. “No reason. They’re cold.”
“What are you, eighty years old?” My boss was standing beside his desk with a Dyson Airblade blasting into his Van Dyke. The office AC was on the fritz.
“I have a skin condition.”
“Really. On both hands at once? You must touch yourself a lot.”
“Just bad luck.”
“What’s up with you anyway?” He showed me a graph on his laptop. “You’re one of my best guys but your productivity metrics are way down. Tell me you’ve got a whole pile of updates just begging to be uploaded.”
My hands twisted in their cotton dermals. “I’ve been distracted. I can do better.”
“I know you can.” He perched on the corner of the desk. “Look, we’re not blind around here. Everyone knows you’ve been going through some serious stuff. Your hair alone… My God, can’t you see it belongs on a woman?”
“I get that a lot.”
“Yet you don’t seem to mind.” He paused. “Take the gloves off.”
“I can’t. Bad sunburn.” I hid them behind my back.
His eyes narrowed. “Take them off or you’re fired.”
You don’t say no to a man like Jonah Whickfield. I took the gloves off.
He barely glanced at my fingernails. “Okay, put ‘em back on.” He returned to his chair. “We’re an enlightened company, Malcolm. I suspect you’ve read our policy on gender transitioning.” (I hadn’t.) “If you need to become a woman, no one around here will give you any grief—and anyone who does will answer to me.”
My mouth was dry. Nothing resembling a word emerged.
“But respect is a two-way street,” Whickfield said. “You have to be straight with us too. Are you turning yourself into a woman?”
I found my voice. “I wish I knew.”

“You better figure it out fast. I’ll have your final answer in seven days or it’s strike three for your career. You understand? One week.”

*

I worked on the database through the weekend. Sunday night I used the solvent to extract myself from the Illusion, then took a long bath. Life would be so much easier if I just tossed the damn thing, but instead I washed and returned it to the mould. You can’t jump when the train’s moving this fast.

On Monday, Todd insisted on meeting for drinks. He agreed to pick me up but refused to come anywhere near the house, so I had to walk the length of the lane. The pendulum of loose flesh between my legs felt so wrong, like part of my body had come loose and might slough off at any moment.

At the pub, Todd lowered his voice. “It’s about that brothel. I checked with the city archives. Did you know that people called it the Witch House?”

“Sure.” I ordered something new, an imported golden ale called Witches Brew. He stared at me like he’d just seen a ghost. “You were pretty uptight about that whole graveyard thing,” I said. “No need to make it worse.”

“This proves my point! Witches, ghosts—whatever went on there in the past, you can see the effect it’s having now!” He gestured at me.

“I’m fine, Todd.” I curled my fingers. Their length was a lot less obvious after I’d replaced essie’s Very Cranberry with clear nail lacquer.

“You’re not. Even on the phone you sound different. Your voice is softer and you don’t mumble like you used to.” He took a long drink, then another. “It’s a bit of everything. Growing your hair long, shaving your legs… I can’t even remember the last time you showed any stubble.”

I took a sip of Witches Brew. “Maybe I just shaved.”

He pursed his lips. “Okay, I’ll bite. Did you?”

“Sure. Last night, right after my bubble bath.”

“Twenty-four hours ago. Most guys would look like Homer Simpson by then.”

“So I’m testosterone challenged. I don’t see you rocking a beard.”

“This is about you. Shit, if you don’t get out of there soon, it’ll be too late.”

I had to laugh. It was already too late.
Cerise was not amused. “How do you expect to get used to wearing the darn thing if you keep taking it off?” She dangled the *Grand Illusion* in front of my face. I reminded her about the instructions on cleaning. “Then clean it,” she said, “and put it right back on. And I mean now.”

She was a bit rough in stuffing my testicles up inside me and wiggling the catheter past my prostate, but you have to admire the way she applies herself to whatever she’s doing. As we were preparing for bed, she confiscated my PJs and tossed me a nightgown. It wasn’t one of hers.

“I dipped into your stash,” she said. “One more thing you should get used to.”

As I brushed my hair, she snuggled up and put her hand between my legs. I tried to keep brushing, but it’s not easy when someone’s trying to turn your mouth into a late-night snack. She kept rubbing. “You know, there’s lots of ways we girls can have fun; stuff that doesn’t involve trouser meat.”

“I’m not a girl.” But I wasn’t getting hard either—I checked.

“You look like one to me.” She trailed her fingers through the hair crashing over my shoulders. “Earth to Monique. Don’t waste your time. It’s hibernating.”

“What’s that mean?”

She rubbed my thigh. “Your new ladyparts are designed to secrete a drug that inhibits erections. Little willy down there is bathing in it. Pretty cool, huh?”

That wasn’t the word I would have chosen.

“Speaking of high-tech, I got you a present.” She pointed at the headboard. “Meet the PillowTalk 5000. It plays audio through speakers hidden in a pad under your pillow. Big fun.”

“So now my pillow’s gonna keep me awake?”

“Not if you keep volume down. That’s the whole point. I set it so you can barely hear it.” She paused. “It’s for subliminal learning.”

“What am I supposed to learn—speed reading?”

“Just give a try.” Cerise smiled. “You trust me, don’t you?”

*Strange dreams, they were, all saying the same thing. *Women speak more precisely than men; they enunciate their words. To speak like a woman, move your lips!*
The next day, on the phone to tech support, I found myself speaking clearly and ending most of my sentences with a question. The guy thought I was a woman and I wasn’t even dressed the part.

Cerise looked pleased. She had loaded the PillowTalk with a bunch of audio files and she let me pick. “They’re all good,” she said. But there were no titles.

As I was dozing off, a woman’s voice filtered through. You are a girl. You have always been a girl. You are a girly-girl... It continued in that vein; all night long, presumably. But I could be wrong; dreams can be misleading.

“Wake up sleepyhead. Your chesticles have arrived.”

“Huh?” I rubbed my eyes.

“Sweater meat, silly. Just in time too, thanks to FedEx. I’m about to leave.”

I tried to get up but she stopped me. “You stay there,” she said, freeing my arms and pulling the nightgown clear of my chest. “I just finished gettin’ them all warm with a towel from the dryer. Hold still.”

I shivered as Cerise applied the glue. The Divine Aphrodites were asymmetric teardrops with a tapered side flap and lifelike nipples. “It has to line up perfectly,” she said. There was a dark circle on the back, with a tiny dent in the middle. She held it clear of my body until the nipple popped inside, then carefully aligned the breast and pressed down, smoothing it out toward the edges.

“You’ll appreciate this,” she said. “There’s a touch sensor on top that connects to a haptic actuator on the back, providing tactile feedback to your boy-nipple and the area around it. Like so…” She ran her finger around the areola.

My eyes widened. “I felt that.”

“Good. It means the batteries are charged.”

She finished the second breast and held them in place, chatting about her travel plans and how her mother was doing and what they had planned while she was there. I alternated between staring up at the ceiling and down at the Cyberskin mountains now rising from my body. From this angle they looked huge, but the box claimed they were only C-cups.

“If they look familiar, it’s no accident. They’re cast from a mould of my breasts. But they might look bigger on you.” Cerise pulled my nightgown over the peaks. “Back to sleep, Monique. Be a good girl while I’m gone.”

My eyes slid shut. “Be a good girl,” I mumbled.

“And remember—no boy clothes. You promised.” I fell into dreamland.
Dreams in this house are like no other. I am a teenage girl, awkwardly tugging on my first prom dress but proud of the way it thrusts my cleavage into view. My mother is talking, only she isn’t my real Mum, she’s this girl’s mother and she’s sure that this dance is a one-way ticket to hell.

I’m so embarrassed. My friend Zack stands beside me, clutching a corsage and obviously afraid to do anything with it. “Mother, please. I’m going.” I take the corsage and pin it to my own breast.

Zack is nice about it. We’ve been friends for, like, forever and when he asked me I was totally over the moon and halfway to Mars. I didn’t even know he liked me! You know, the way a boy likes a girl—a girl like me.

Turns out, he doesn’t. At the dance, he slow-dances me to a mark painted on the floor. His face gets this funny look and he backs away and that’s when somebody dumps a bucket of some awful liquid over my head.

I think it’s blood. My dress is all red and I smell like a slaughterhouse.

I want to die. I want Zack to die, for what he did. I want everybody in the school to die. My body goes all rigid and a weird moaning sound comes out of my mouth, even though I don’t mean to, and then the curtains catch fire and everyone starts screaming and running, and part of me feels sad and part of me feels happy.

All night, every night, the same kind of thing. I wondered if Stephen King had ever visited this house and if maybe he stayed the night.

* 

Cerise was gone by the time I arose. I watched the naked woman in the mirror as she folded her nightgown and placed it under the pillow. Hard to believe she was me. And the glue was well and truly set; I couldn’t find a seam anywhere.

In a daze, I showered and strip-mined my face—twice. I freed my hair from the shower cap and there she was again: a naked lady with my face, lost in a sea of unkempt hair. I took a brush to my tresses, still fearful of what was coming.

My wife’s satin robe hung on the bathroom door. It didn’t qualify as boy clothes, so I put it on. Cerise’s wardrobe was still out of bounds.

My steps faltered at the foot of the stairs. To hell with my promise; I should just put on an old pair of sweats and get back to work. Whickfield wanted to see some progress—but he also wanted a decision: man or woman, what’s it gonna be?

I mounted the staircase like a man resigned to the gallows.
Cerise had built me a dressing room. Tastefully decorated with what appeared to be secondhand furniture and chock-full of everything a woman might… Strike that, everything I might need, to turn myself into a woman.

I sank into the chair, staring at the simple vanity spread before me. Cerise had set the table with an array of cosmetics straight from the Mary Kay catalog. What did she expect me to do with it? I’d never worn makeup before…

Dream imagery flooded through my mind. Long hair that need brushing, skirts that demand wearing, lipsticks that won’t stop bugging me…

I picked up a tube of Mary Kay’s Sunset-Red and applied it to my lips, rolling them together like Cerise did. Leaning into the mirror, I lined and shaded my eyes and fumbled mascara through flickering lashes. A few strokes of blush, blending, a dash of face powder. I didn’t want to overdo it, my first time out.

A spritz of cologne to my throat. I stood by the window, fingers trailing through my hair. I could see all the way down the lane. Elm trees lined the way, hiding the nearest houses. The city felt far away. I was alone in the Witch House.

I smiled. It was too late to stop.

The room was lined with racks of dresses, skirts and blouses. Cerise must have spent a fortune. But there wasn’t a price tag in sight and some of the items lacked washing instructions. Even the way they hung suggested they’d been worn before. She must have made the rounds of flea markets, thrift stores and consignment sales to provide Monique with a ready-to-go wardrobe.

*Skirts that demand wearing*... I pulled a long skirt from its hanger. Black velvet, gold satin lining that had once rode the hips of another woman. But it was mine now, which meant that I too must be a woman.

I opened the dresser. The lingerie, at least, appeared to be new. A stack of panties and hosiery in their original packages; a collection of slips and camis in various colors, all with price tags; various heavier items like control-top panties, body-briefers and a pair of half-girdles. Three faded corsets spoke of previous owners.

A whisper in the back of my mind: *You are a girl. You have always been a girl.*

Cerise and the house had programmed me for this moment, for what I would have to do. Terrified as I was, I had no choice in what came next.

I slid my legs into nude panty hose, drawing them up tight. Control-top panties snuggled around my hips. An underwire brassiere supported my chest, while the haptics ensured that I could feel every inch of the soft fabric now covering my breasts. An ivory camisole slithered over my head. Then the calf-length skirt with a short zipper in back, gently constraining my knees.
The shoe-rack that lined the baseboard of one wall yielded a pair of black peep-toe pumps. Somewhat surprisingly, they fit.

Heels clicking on hardwood, I rifled through a line of blouses and chose a satin half-sleeve with a high collar—in pale ivory to contrast and counterbalance my skirt and the dark hair flooding my shoulders.

Zipping up the skirt felt like closing the book on my manhood. Only a woman could perform such an act. Only Monique could stand in heels like this and smooth a black-velvet skirt over nylon-clad legs. Only Monique...

I shook back my hair and returned to my seat at the vanity. A jewelry box on one side yielded a pair of hoop earrings, and a chain bracelet for my left wrist.

I ran a brush through my hair, staring into the mirror. Monique stared back, eyes half-lidded. A sly smile crept across her lips. She was finally free—free to be the woman that had lived inside Malcolm all along.

I glided to the window, graceful in the narrow heels that gripped my feet. They felt as if I’d been wearing them my whole life. “This is who I really am,” I whispered.

My fingers pressed against the glass. The sun was up and the trees were swaying. It would be a shame to waste such a lovely day. Cerise was out there, and Todd, and the girl at Starbucks, and Mr. Whickfield who wanted me to choose. What would they think, to see me now?

It was about time I found out.
The coffee shop was crowded, as might be expected this close to lunch. Eyes were upon me as I stood in line, but this only confirmed my status as a member of the fair sex. A beautiful woman must learn to accept such attention.

“Tall vanilla latte, please. No toppings.” Money and latte changed hands, along with a lime-green elastic with a heart-shaped bangle. “Thanks for the loan,” I said. “I won’t be needing it anymore.”

Her mouth fell open. “Wow. You’re… wow.”

I shouldered my purse. “You were right. It does look better loose.” I gave my hair a shake and walked out.

Upstairs, at the reception desk, Francine had no idea who I was.

“I know it’s not my regular day,” I said, placing my laptop on the counter, “but is there an office I can use for a few hours?”

“Those are for employees,” she replied. “Are you here to see someone?”

I presented my ID. “I’m taking over for Mr. Hawthorne.”

Her eyes narrowed. “No way—Malcolm, is that you?”

“Call me Monique. Guess I should have a new photo taken.”

“Christ, I wouldn’t—” She handed me the sign-in sheet. “I heard you were going through some shit, but… You look awesome.”

“Thanks. It wasn’t easy.” I signed ‘Monique Hawthorne’ with a flourish.

“I bet. Room 1105 is empty. You can have that.” She watched me close my purse. “You know, I love trannies and gender swapping and all that stuff. I’d love to dress up my boyfriend, but for some weird reason he isn’t into it. So what made you want to become a girl? If you don’t mind my asking.”

I shouldered my laptop. “I don’t mind. But it’s complicated. Near as I can figure, it came to me in a dream.”

*
I managed to work on the database, and upload several files to the project archive, but as the afternoon wore on more and more people found some reason to pass my open door and sneak a peek. I felt like the new ‘roo at the zoo.

“You’re lucky Whickfield isn’t here.” Simon Channing, the project lead, stood in the doorway with folded arms.

“He knows.” I relaxed in my chair. “He doesn’t care one way or the other, but he does want me to pick a gender and stick to it.”

“Tough choice. But it looks like you made up your mind.”

“I never gave it much thought,” I said, stroking the ponytail folded over one shoulder like a warm tabby. “It just sort of happened.”

By the end of the day I was sick of answering questions. Have you been dressing since you were little? Are you a girl on the inside? Have you had the operation? No? Well, it’s only a matter of time, huh? Thailand or Sweden?

I gave up and went home early.

In the car, a new daydream worked its way up from my subconscious: to be a woman for someone who had never known me as anything but. I tried to shake it off, but it stuck like surgical glue. To relax into just being Monique, to be the object of male attention, to scoff at my date’s clumsy attempt at flattery, to fall into his arms at the appropriate moment, to give up my mouth to his…

At home I found myself in the parlour, phone in hand—calling Todd.

“We need to talk,” he said. “I dug up more info on that brothel. You free?”

“Not now,” I told him. “I have to leave town for a few days.”

“Good—for once you take my advice. Where ya headed?”

“Cerise is visiting her mother. She broke her hip, so I have to help out.” I took a deep breath and plowed ahead. “That’s why I called. I need you to do me a favor.”

“Sure thing. Just don’t go into the basement before you go, okay? I found an old map of the area. Might be some freaky stuff down there.”

“Yeah, whatever. Here’s the deal: my cousin is in town. She just got a job here and she’s staying with us ‘til she finds her own place.”

“That’s cool,” Todd said. “The house is only dangerous to guys.”

“How’d you like to take her out for dinner? Her name’s Monique.”

*
I am a beautiful bride. Cerise is my maid of honor. She brushes my hair and straps me into Mother’s old wedding gown, with the aid of three of Charlie’s Angels. The groom starts out as Todd Mullins, with a hint of Simon Channing for color, but during the ceremony slowly morphs into my boss. By the time I say “I do” I’m staring into the angular face and hooded eyes of Jonah Whickfield. He looks like the evil Spock. His rough lips grind into mine.

We’re alone in the bridal suite. I slip from the confines of my dress and we raise our glasses to one another. “To the man of my dreams,” I say. He smiles. “To the woman you were meant to be.” Then he takes me to bed and makes me moan like that woman, long into the night.

Dreams can be misleading. They can also be dangerous.

* 

Ming was impressed. “You clean up real nice,” she said. “No one mistake you for male anytime soon.” She grinned. “You want makeover now?”

I nodded. “But I need to see how you do it. I’m not very good yet, with makeup.”

“You want crash course in cosmetology? Lot of information, you know. This not something usually covered in one day, and we only got two hours.”

“I need to know enough to fix my own face.”

“Your face not need fixing, is already pretty.” She shook her head. “Here’s what we do. You pay up front, I give you ‘daughter’ lesson. You learn basic makeup technique, like teenage girl.”

I agreed. “It’s a start, I guess.”

“Is only place to start, at the beginning. You ever wear makeup before?”

“Yesterday,” I said, “and this morning.”

“Go wash face,” she said. “Take off dress, put on smock.”

For nearly an hour I listened to Ming talk about exfoliation and foundation, the difference between eyeliner and lip liner, how to pick the right eye shadow, why too much of any makeup is a bad thing, and the subtle art of blending.

“Make it look real,” she said, “like this your natural color and you just add a little blusher, only for emphasis. Need to make more look like less.”

When we were done, she made me scrub it all off and start over, this time on my own. She left to take care of another customer, and I painstakingly recreated what she had accomplished so effortlessly. Slowly, the real Monique emerged.
The results seemed to meet with Ming’s approval. “I think you got big date,” she said, once I was dressed and back in the chair. “You want to impress man.”

I smiled. “Men are easily impressed.”

“You listen,” she said, as she lightly curled and re-styled my hair. “You look like a woman, but you not a woman where it counts.” She touched her chest above the breast. “Not in here. So you be careful. If he know you, fine. Be with him. But if not…” Her head bowed. “Maybe bad things happen.”

I stood up and tugged on my skirt. Bad things had already happened.

* 

I took my time deciding what to wear. Even one’s choice of hosiery is important, since it might be the last thing your lover sees you strip from your body. I opted for a wonderfully dark pair of thigh highs. If Todd was willing to rummage around down there, I wanted nothing to get in his way.

French-cut panties in black satin; a push-up Wonderbra to lift and enhance the cleavage, also in black; a full slip that nearly touched my knees, in black silk. If I was to be a witch, I was determined to look the part.

Cerise had provided me an ample supply of little black dresses. I chose a floral print with short sleeves, knee-length skirt, square neckline and a zipper up the back. It settled over my body like a second skin.
This, I remember thinking at the time, *this is what womanhood is all about*. And if it wasn’t, then for God’s sake—why not?

I paced the house like a lioness in a pair of peep-toe sling-backs, trailing in my wake a cloud of Black Magic perfume, which Cerise had received from Malcolm at Valentine’s but never used. A predator hungers for its chosen prey and as a woman I was no different.

Todd introduced himself at the front door, but was unwilling to step through.

“Lovely to meet you, Mr. Mullins,” I said, in a voice as smooth as the stockings that clung to my legs. “Malcolm has told me all about you.” That right there was my Get Out of Jail Free card, in case I let slip too much knowledge of our past.

“Then you have me at a disadvantage, Monique. Malcolm told me hardly anything about you, although he was right about one thing—you are beautiful.”

*Smooth!* I retrieved the handbag I’d packed and contrived to touch his arm as I brushed past. “You flatter me, sir. I’m all yours.”

He had made reservations at a little French bistro down by the lake, Chez Chat Noir, which appealed to my sense of irony.

“Malcolm never mentioned he had a cousin like you,” Todd said. “I’d remember that.”

“We’ve been out of touch.” I sipped from a flute of the house red wine. “I was a real tomboy back then. Short hair, no figure, always out playing baseball.”

“That’s hard to imagine.”

“Me playing baseball?”
He grinned. “Short hair and no figure—I can’t see it.”

“Blame the estrogen. It’s potent stuff. Black magic, according to some.”

“Black magic…” His smile faded. “Sorry to get all serious, but I have to say this. I’m worried about Malcolm.”

I feigned innocence. “He seems fine to me.”

“You’ve seen him. He shaves his legs, gets his nails done and styles his hair like a girl.” He hunched over his vodka and cranberry. “I dunno. His wife doesn’t seem to mind either. Maybe women can’t see it.”

“Lots of guys do that these days. It’s the ‘metrosexual’ look.”

“Way beyond that,” Todd said. “Did he tell you about the Witch House?”

I tried to frown prettily. “That old bordello? What about it?”

“I found a municipal map of the neighborhood and the old quarry, from the turn of the century. Over a hundred years ago. It shows a burial ground close to where the house is now.” He looked at me. “Sorry if that freaks you out, but—”

“I’m not a little girl. Go on.”

“I better not.” He sighed. “If I told you place is haunted, you’d probably think I was nuts and that might spoil our evening.”

“No danger of that. I’m having a wonderful time.” I touched his hand.

He looked surprised, then nervous. My chest tingled.

After dinner, we took a walk along the shore. The sun was touching the lake and every bench we passed was occupied by a man and a woman in various stages of physical activity. When we found one that was empty I sat down.

“It’s beautiful,” I said in a soft voice.

“So you are.” He was next to me, his arm around my shoulders. I turned to face him—and he kissed me. I didn’t pull away, instead touching his cheek as if to coax out more of the same. It was a long kiss.

We sat, watching the gathering dark, my head on his shoulder. From across the lake came the heavy splash of a body slipping under the surface. Long hair hung half across my face. I felt the stirrings of forbidden forces, and began to shiver.

I managed to warm up in the car and by the time we got to my front door I needed more. “Won’t you come inside? There’s a wine rack in the basement…”

Again Todd refused to enter. “Don’t go into the basement,” he said, before one last kiss. Then he fled down the lane as fast as his little red Miata would take him.
I’m walking up the gravel lane, carrying an old satchel. I have nowhere else to go. The Witch House looms like a gravestone among the fields and orchards; a dead thing standing against this sea of life.

A man lets me in. I gaze up at his pinched face, explaining that I have nowhere else to go. He makes me feel like a little girl, this man; he has power and money and I have nothing. He understands. He gives me a room; he gives me a job.

I squirm and wiggle and flatter for a living. All day long and well into the evening. I lie beneath man after man and make them feel alive, while I sink closer to death with each passing client. And then one day, I die.

This makes me happy. And sad. And very, very angry.

Being Monique was easier than even talking like Malcolm. I had to practice out loud to rediscover his voice. Then I called Todd. “Dude, what the hell did you say to Monique last night? She was practically in tears just now!”

“Huh? Nothing… I thought we—”

“Well, she’s pretty upset. You better make this right.”

“You saw her? Are you home already?”

“I called to see how she’s doing. Why would you leave her standing there, after she invited you in?” And before he could reply— “Look, I told her about your pathological shyness around girls. She’s willing to give you another chance.”

“Pathological shyness? But—”

“Here’s the deal. You take her on a picnic this afternoon. Pick her up at two o’clock. I hear that Colt Park has some nice views of the bay.” My voice slipped a bit. I pulled the phone away, shook back my hair and refocused. Todd was still talking but that didn’t matter. “I don’t care what your boss says. You blow off work and maybe Monique will return the favor. Two o’clock—no excuses!”

I clicked off just in time. A girlish sigh slid from my lips. So much easier.

For once, Todd was on time. I whipped up a batch of spicy dill potato salad—in case it took skill in the kitchen to turn the guy on—and packed a small cooler with fruit, french bread and a bottle of Pinot Noir. I don’t know why the basement was such a big deal; there wasn’t much to it other than the washer/dryer, a workbench, and a wine rack full of bottles left by the previous owner.
Friday afternoon traffic meant that it took over an hour to reach the park. On the way, I’m sure Todd learned more about the ins and outs of selling prom dresses than he ever wanted to know. It was easy to talk about pleated skirts and dropped waistlines, measuring bust lines and choosing the right style, even though I had no personal experience with any of it. Then I talked about the job I was starting next week, at a local fashion house, and how it had always been my dream to design clothing for ‘real’ women—as opposed to the stick insects that passed for models these days. Where did it all come from?

As we ate, I half listened to Todd droning on about his job and watched airplanes circling the airport across the bay. Being here, dressed like this—it felt wrong.

I switched on now and then to keep him going. “I never knew you could use the stock market like that. What’s a financial derivative?”

My doubts grew. Todd was my best friend; how could I lead him on like this?

Afterward, we found a secluded spot and lay together on the moss. I let him get to second base; I could hardly object, given my actions of the previous night. The haptic actuators in my breasts ensured that I felt his touch like it was my own skin. Between kisses, I managed to coo a little.

Back in the car, the closer we got to the house, the more my reluctance turned to anticipation. My hand slipped between his thighs. His interest was all too obvious. I rested the tip of my pinky finger on the bulge in his pants. To hell with it—how could it be wrong to give a man exactly what he wants?

This time we made it all the way to the front room before his courage failed. Our mouths were pressed together and my legs entwined with his when he pulled back. “I can’t be here,” he said.

“Sure you can.” I nibbled his ear. “You’re doing so well. Let’s just get your pants down, okay? I know you want to. Just let me—”

“I’m sorry. It’s not you, it’s this house. Look what it did to Malcolm. I don’t want to end up in a dress, pimped out to a bunch of middle-aged losers who can’t get it any other way. I have to go.” He left me sprawled on the couch, with my libido approaching critical mass.

Only minutes later, the doorbell rang. Had he changed his mind? I raced to answer it, but Todd wasn’t there. I found myself gazing up at a tall man with a Van Dyke beard and a cruel smile. Evil Spock. •
“Ms. Hawthorne, I presume. May I come in?” Whickfield didn’t bother to wait for an answer. He swept past me into the house. “Is Malcolm here? He didn’t show up at work today.”

I clutched my throat, trying not to hyperventilate. “He’s not here,” I managed, thankfully in the correct voice.

“That’s too bad. He has a choice to make. Did he mention that?”

I blinked, trying to clear my head. “Yes… You gave him a week.”

“That’s today. So what’s it gonna be—man or woman?”

*Does he know? “Woman,” I said at last. “He—she’s out getting her hair done.”*

He grinned. “Good. Perfect arm candy for the right man. I suspect he was born for the role. My condolences on the loss of your husband.”

“Thank you.” I touched my throat, hoping he’d leave.

Whickfield stepped into the parlour. “We met at last year’s Christmas party, but I seem to have forgotten your name. Some French name, wasn’t it?”

“Monique.” It just slipped out. My wife’s name might have been a safer choice.

“I knew a Monique once. Years ago, in Paris; a real goer. How about a drink?”

I served him a snifter of Calvados and poured one for myself. He patted the couch next to him. I sat, sipping the brandy and trying to remember who I was.

He edged closer. “Didn’t you used to have short hair?”

“I grew it out… We had kind of a contest going, he and I.”

“I guess you won.” Whickfield drained his glass and set it aside. “No surprise there. Malcolm’s not the competitive type. More of a submissive, actually.”

I could hardly argue the point, given what had happened.

“My family used to own land in this area, did you know that?” He didn’t wait for an answer. “True story. My great-grandfather built the quarry. Too bad he had to go and tear down a perfectly good brothel to do it, but I guess he had his reasons.”
“You knew about that?”

“Sure. It was his father that built the Witch House in the first place.”

I had a ton of questions, but the power of speech had deserted me. Whickfield took my glass and polished it off. His eyes blazed into mine. “It’s time, Monique. Go upstairs and make yourself pretty. That’s my girl.”

*

I did exactly what he told me to do, all the while wondering why. Sure, he was my boss, but he didn’t know that. Did he?

Alone in my attic dressing room, I hung up my dress and traded my boring old lingerie for a thong and a semi-transparent nightgown, all in black, and a pair of satin mules. I combed my hair, adding fixative and brushing for volume. For my makeup, I switched to an evening pallette and carefully re-applied blush and eye liner, mascara and shadow, lip liner and lipstick.

*That’s my girl*… since when?

He was waiting for me at the foot of the staircase. “That’s what I’m talkin’ about,” he said, smirking. “My ticket to paradise.”

Whickfield led me into the master bedroom. The door closed behind us. He shrugged out of his jacket.

“Closing the Witch House was a mistake. Unfortunately, it was my uncle Bertie—the elder brother—who inherited the property and all he wanted to do was live there.”

My voice barely qualified as a whisper. “There was an old lady who used to live here…”
“That was Uncle Bertie.” He unbuttoned his shirt. “He changed his name to Betty, once the house got through with him.” A sneer crept across his face, looking right at home there. “Betty always claimed she was happy, but that’s bullshit.”

I watched his pants sink to the floor, my heart with it. “This is my husband’s bed. Can’t we do this in the guest room?”

“No, we can’t. I chose this room deliberately, to show you who’s in charge.” He took my hand. “You’re a sexy young hottie, and it’s about time you started acting like one.” Again his eyes blazed with hidden fire.

Dizziness flooded through my body. I found myself posing in the cheval glass, admiring my reflection. Why not be a woman? I was certainly attractive enough.

The overhead light flicked off. I heard the rustle of sheets and the creak of the bed frame as someone climbed in.

I felt myself summoned.

“You might be wondering why this property didn’t stay in the family.” Whickfield drew me to him. My fingers slid across the carpet of hair on his chest.

“Tell me,” I said.

He kissed my head. “The short answer is that it did. And it still is. I own the property, the house and most of the neighborhood.”

“We have a deed,” I said, as my hands moved of their own accord, stroking his neck, his arms, his chest…

“Fake. Estate agents are easy to bribe. The payments are being held in a registered retirement account in your wife’s name, so it’s all nice and legal.” A thick arm encircled my waist.

Eagerly, I kissed his throat, his chin, his lips… I so wanted to please him, I never stopped to question that simple phrase: your wife.
Whickfield’s voice deepened. “Cthulhu’s time is come,” he whispered into my ear. “You exist to serve his needs.”

My fingers sought the beast that rose between his legs. His mouth descended upon mine; thick hands stroked my back, my arms, my breasts. The haptics in my chest faithfully reproduced every nuance, transforming me into the instrument upon which he performed a symphony of feminine bliss. In response, my fingers played the flute of his manhood, teasing from it a song in praise of his masculinity.

“What did I tell you,” he said. “You were born for this.”

Whickfield rolled me over. I raised my hips, felt my nightgown lifted. Then mighty Cthulhu entered my body. I writhed under him, filled to the bursting with his powerful tentacle. Claws dug into my shoulders, clutched at my chest. Twin curtains of long hair hung beside my face, swaying to the rhythm of his thrusts.

“The Witch House will be reborn. I have friends on city council; zoning won’t be an issue.” His lips touched my ear. “Malcolm is gone forever. The lovely Monique will be first among my new stable of harlots.”

Whickfield finished with a violent surge. I fell to the mattress, spent.

* *

“Where are we going?” Hands shackled behind my back, I stumbled down the stairs in my satin mules. Whickfield held my arm in a grip that felt like iron. He, at least, had been allowed the time to change clothes.

“Finishing school.” He paused at the ground floor. From there we could see into the parlour, the dining room, the kitchen. “All this will have to change. It should look more like it was, back in the day. Brass fittings, hardwood floors, textured glazing on the walls. I managed to locate some of the original furnishings. Other stuff can be custom-made to match. Father would be so proud…”

That didn’t sound like the house I knew. I stood with head bowed, staring at the floor. As a woman I felt stronger than I ever had as a man; more in control of my life, more in sync with the rest of the world. The house had given me that. But in the space of an hour Whickfield had taken it all away.

“Plenty of room for a wet bar,” he said, peering into the parlour. “Three rooms for serving clients; four if you count the attic. Renovate the basement as a playroom for the bondage crowd.” He looked at me. “That’s where the real money is.”

He opened the door to the cellar and lit the bare bulb that hung from the ceiling. We stuttered down the old wooden staircase. “Please, Mister Whickfield,” I said in a little-girl voice. “I don’t want to die.”
“Who said anything about dying? You have a bright future ahead of you, my dear Monique—long and lucrative. You’ve got the kind of talent money can buy, and it will—between the sheets of the Witch House.”

To one side was the washer/dryer; to the other, an old workbench, a jumble of cardboard boxes left over from the day we moved in, and a stack of wooden crates that probably hadn’t been opened in fifty years. Ahead of us lay the wine rack. The floor was a patchwork of cobblestones and graveyard soil.

“A staff of nine should suffice,” he continued. “Six girls, two for each bedroom. A bouncer for the door, a short-order cook for room service, and a madam to run the place.” He gave my arm a shake. “Play your cards right and that could be you, when you’re a bit older.”

We moved to the far wall. “Old Betty liked her vino,” he muttered. “Happy, my ass.” He put his shoulder to the rack. Slowly it shifted sideways, rasping over the stonework like fingernails on the wall of a mausoleum.

“My great-grandfather may have torn down the Witch House,” Whickfield said, “but he didn’t get all of it.”

A doorway stood revealed, lined with hand-cut bricks. Beyond that I glimpsed the top of a staircase, carved into solid bedrock, and beyond that a sheen of darkness writhing like restless water. Whickfield lifted me by the wrists.

“Please,” I said, as soft hair swept my back. “I’ll finish the database. I’ll work hard, all night if I have to—on my own time. Please… don’t.”

His laughter was deafening. “Don’t you worry about that, darlin’. Just drain the balls of any real man who comes your way. I’ll take care of everything else.” He set me on the top step, facing that pool of darkness. “Let’s not keep the bitches waiting.” Thick hands gave me a helpful push.

I stumbled into the abyss.
Whickfield’s flashlight flung my shadow into the passage ahead. I descended the stairwell, one hesitant step after another. The mood of the house impressed itself upon my mind; as feminine as ever, but suffused now with the sickly miasma of the tomb. Womanhood, it seemed, was to be my ticket to an early grave.

“This is what the Witch House does to weak men, Monique. Men like you. Fools who couldn’t control their temper, drunks, deadbeats who refused to pay their bill. My great-great-grandfather brought them all here, to the old crypt.”

One staccato click of my satin mules after another. My shoulders scraped against jagged walls; the fabric of my nightgown snagged and tore. It felt like wading into a sinking ship. My hair was a limp mess.

“My father wanted to rebuild the business. He was wrecked when it went to his brother.” His voice boomed off the walls. “A month after Uncle Bertie moved in we found him wearing his dead wife’s crinoline evening gown. Father made him promise never to wear her clothes outside the house—so as not to embarrass the family. But the man was weak. He couldn’t stop.”

The staircase flattened onto a floor of dark rock, strewn with debris. Rough-hewn walls curved to meet one another somewhere over my head. I stopped, barely able to breathe. The chamber was filled with burial niches, broken coffins—and bones. Lots and lots of bones.

“Lucky for the rest of us, old Betty got pretty good at passing. So we managed to avoid the scandal of having a faggot in the family. A few months later he told us he was a woman.” Whickfield snorted derisively. “The dumb cunt wouldn’t even tell us how she did it. Wasn’t until she went all senile last year, she finally let me in on the secret. She actually thought I might want to follow in her footsteps. Can you believe that? Me!”

My thoughts scattered. I was ready to die, but not here… Not where my soul would surely haunt these walls until the heat death of the universe. For a prize as meager as a single breath of cool evening air, I would give anything.

“Turns out she found an old journal down here, hidden in some old strongbox. It was great-great-grandpa’s personal record of the business; everything he bought
or sold, everyone who crossed him, everything he did to the fools who crossed him. It is truly enlightening. He even used this crypt to build his labor force.”

“I don’t get it.” If the crypt was the source of the women who worked for the old bastard, then who was buried here in the first place?

“The man was in business nearly thirty years. You wouldn’t believe how many dollymops a cathouse can go through. They didn’t all drop dead, of course; most of them just moved on. But enough of ‘em did to fill this dump three times over. They’re buried all over the property. The place is a fucking graveyard.”

_They suffered so much._ A shiver pulsed through me. I could feel their anger. Plus, the room was one big heat sink; my body couldn’t make the stuff fast enough.

“From a business perspective, it was a pretty neat way to turn a loss into a gain. The deadbeats he was locking in the crypt overnight—they started turning into women. Good-looking gals too, very doable. But the skanks had nowhere to go, so the obvious solution was put ‘em to work.”

I begged him not to leave me here. Whickfield laughed. “Didn’t I make myself clear? Other than your x-chromosome, you’re in no danger. As for the ghosts—well, there ain’t no such thing, is there?”

I wasn’t so sure.
“This dump isn’t actually haunted,” he said. “I think of it as ‘distilled female rage’—assuming there is such a thing. It’s like an ‘essence of hatred’ was extracted from their bodies and used to salt the earth.”

*What a relief.* No ghosts, just hatred and distilled rage. Nothing to worry about.

Whickfield pushed me onto a raised dais at the far end of the crypt. He looped a Kryptonite bike lock around an iron pole that stretched floor to ceiling, passing the lock through the handcuffs at my back before snapping the deadbolt shut. The key slid into his pocket.

That’s when I knew. He meant to leave me here—for them. For the ghosts. I drew a breath and stood up straight. No point showing him any more weakness than I already had. My nightgown hung open, displaying my cleavage.

Whickfield smiled. “You’ll make a fine dollymop.” He was careful to avoid the funerary debris on his way out. “I’ll be back in a few hours. Trust me, you won’t get bored.” The dim glow of his flashlight disappeared up the staircase.

No longer did the house seem like such a bargain.

*  

I sank to my knees, clutching weakly at the pole behind me. Dreams in the Witch House are unlike any other, but dreams in the crypt of the Witch House are unlike anything you can imagine. In spite of my fear, I slept.

*I am on a path through a forest, buried in darkness. There is a light ahead, the cold moon rising through a tangle of branches, each etched so sharply against the sky as to appear skeletal. Behind me is the shadow world; a twilight abyss where the Old Ones sleep, awaiting the day of their return.*

*But in the meantime, they dream—and their dreams flow through me.*

*I move toward the light. There are others here too; other women, treading paths parallel to mine. They move slowly, eyes cast down. They do not see me, or seem not to. Each of us is constrained to her own track through the wood.*

*We walk alone, all of us. Divided, we fell. We are nothing less than a defeated army, retreating from battle. Alone with our anger, our rage, our bitterness.*

*Alone with our sorrow.*

*Stone tablets and raised crosses emerge from the forest; some upright, others laid flat to the earth. Granite vaults and sarcophagi lie scattered among the trees; the door to a shattered mausoleum yawns open. Graven angels stand guard.*

*Our paths end in the boneyard, as all paths must.*
Each girl moves purposely toward her own grave, and upon reaching it turns to stare blankly at me. With hair flowing and nightgown billowing in a wash of air I cannot feel, perhaps it is I who is the ghost here, not them.

Their resentment burns through me. For the crimes of men, I must suffer.

I sink to my knees. A bitter air sweeps through the cemetery; not wind, but female rage made tangible by whatever part of these women refused to sink quietly into the earth. I fall upon a stone at the base of a plinth, upon which stands an angel with raised sword. Poised to strike.

Remember me as you pass by,
As you are now, so once was I,
As I am now, so you must be,
Prepare for death and follow me.

Their anger overwhelms me, engulfs me, drowns me. My body is at once invaded, violated, transformed—and ultimately purified, of all that is or ever was male.

My eyes close. I sleep.

* 

Whickfield found me slumped at the base of the pole. He removed the padlock and hauled me to my feet. I stared up into his face, made ghastly by the beam of his flashlight. “Just think,” he said, “only a few hours ago you were male. Now? Not so much.” Thick fingers kneaded my breast. “I’m intrigued. And aroused.”

I stood on my tiptoes to touch my lips to his. “Me too. I would show you my gratitude, Mister Whickfield, if only my hands were free.”

Laughter. “With a mouth like that, you don’t need hands.” He led me through the basement and upstairs. The kitchen clock read 10 PM. Had it only been hours?

“You sure as hell don’t want to be down there all night,” he said. “The first Jonah Whickfield found that out the hard way—leave ‘em in there too long and they’re no use anymore, not like that. The guy had standards.”
I tried to flex my arms, still restrained by the handcuffs. “The first—?”

“I was named after him,” Whickfield said. “Must be fate, huh?” He pulled me into the parlour and forced me to the floor. “Let’s see how grateful you really are.”

He unzipped. Mighty Cthulhu rose from between his legs, taunting me with its single, unblinking eye. As he drew me forward, I felt the rage of my predecessors. To the lost girls of the Witch House, acts such as this were all too familiar. And the memory of their collective defeat sank through me like ice water.

I resolved, then and there, to bite down with what little strength remained. For his crimes, this man should suffer. Let my teeth be an instrument of vengeance.

Through twin curtains of swaying hair, I faced the beast that had summoned me to service. There was no avoiding it; Cthulhu’s time had come. My mouth opened. With trembling lips, I kissed that terrible head…

Again, Whickfield laughed. “Just wanted to see if you’d do it, babe. C’mon, let’s get cleaned up. Then you can make me breakfast.”

Some people are so easy to hate.

* *

Shower sex—that’s what really gets his engine revving, Whickfield informed me as we entered the bathroom. In the future, he intended to initiate all his girls into womanhood under a flood of warm water; his way of cleansing their sins.

The handcuffs disappeared, as did my nightgown. The Cyberskin fabrications of the Grand Illusion and the Divine Aphrodites had vanished, replaced by what was too obviously the real thing. I was completely, utterly, undeniably—female.

Whickfield showed his appreciation with a stiff kiss; fingers burrowing through my hair, one meaty arm welded across my lower back. Then he set me to work removing his clothes; his shirt, his pants, his underwear…

What followed is fused into my memory. I was standing in the bathtub, blinded under a waterfall of wet hair, and Whickfield was eagerly thrusting himself into my mint-condition honey pot, when my foot chanced to sweep his legs right out from under him. His head managed to bounce off the wall and hit both the sink and the toilet bowl before coming to rest in a trickle of his own blood. In the instant it happened, he might even have believed it was an accident.

But of course, it wasn’t.

Whickfield was down but still breathing, which could be a problem because if the man ever got loose he’d put me in the grave for good. I dried him off, bandaged
his wound, and dressed him as best I could. Then I tied his arms and legs with rope, wrapped the rope with duct tape, wrapped the duct tape with more duct tape, and gagged the bastard with more of the same, leaving only his nostrils clear.

What else could I do? There was no point calling the police; as a woman I had no legal existence and Whickfield was a man with influence. And it wasn’t in me to just murder him in cold blood. I wandered back to the bedroom, where the queen-size was still in disarray from our earlier lovemaking—if you could call it that.

Then I knew. There were others who could take him off my hands; others with a serious hate-on for his whole family. I got dressed, rolled up my sleeves and dragged Whickfield into the basement. He awoke as his head bumped past the wine rack, and by the time we reached the crypt he was struggling for his life. Not that he could do a whole hell of a lot about it. I rolled him over to the spot he had left me. Fixed on my face, his eyes were like wild animals.

I knew what he was thinking. You can’t do this!

“You brought this on yourself,” I told him. “You and that awful man who built the brothel in the first place.” I headed for the stairs. “You were right about one thing, though—boredom won’t be your biggest problem. See you tomorrow.”

* 

Cerise arrived the next morning, while I was lingering over breakfast. She poured herself a coffee and sat down. “You look different.”

“Yeah, being turned into a woman will do that to a guy.” I told her the whole story, from Whickfield’s arrival to my transformation in the crypt.

“Todd called me last night,” she said. “He wanted to talk to Malcolm about his hot-to-trot cousin. I was worried, so I got here as soon as I could.” She shook her head. “What a mess. This guy could have you arrested, you know.”

“Trust me, that’s not gonna happen.”

The door to the basement banged open; a little girl staggered out. She saw me and said very distinctly “fuck you,” but after that seemed not to know who I was.

Cerise nearly dropped her mug. “Who’s this?”

“This, I assume, is what happens when someone stays in the crypt overnight.”

“Goodness, she can’t be more than three years old!” Cerise went to the girl, who was crying, and pulled off the remaining duct tape. She was clad in Whickfield’s oversized polo shirt and nothing else. Her anger had faded; now she was just a frightened little girl. My wife gave her a glass of milk.
Cerise faced me, her arm around the child. “She’s ours now. We’ll raise her as our own daughter. You got a problem with that?” I knew better than to argue.

We gave the bones in the crypt a decent burial and turned the refurbished chamber into a nice little herb garden, complete with ultraviolet lighting and drip irrigation. A paternity test proved that our little Jo-Ann was Whickfield’s heir, which gave us enough leverage over his estate to gain control of our property, leaving creditors to fight over the rest. With the three of us girls living here, the house at the end of the lane still possessed a feminine presence, but according to Todd it isn’t nearly as threatening as it once was. The dead have all been put to rest.

Thankfully, no one calls it the Witch House anymore.