I’d never seen my mother this upset; beside herself, you might say. Literally and figuratively. “My God, Edwin—what were you thinking?” she cried, as her pacing threatened to wear a groove in the carpet of our living room.

I sat perched on the edge of our black leather couch, my skirt—hers, really—riding uncomfortably high on nylon-clad thighs. Truthfully, I had no idea what to say. The thinking that led me to turn myself into a carbon copy of my own mother was as much a mystery to me as it was to her. Don’t get me wrong, I know exactly what happened. I marched into that Change2U shop at the mall and told them who I was and exactly what I wanted. The Thrall on duty at the time didn’t seem surprised; they never do, from what I hear. He took the sample of Mum’s DNA I’d brought with me, programmed that ‘genetic resequencer’ of theirs and told me to get inside. Ten minutes later, bam. I’m her.

“I don’t get this.” That was Stanley, Mum’s boyfriend du jour. He’d been around for nearly a year and I was almost to the point of not disliking him. “You said that alien didn’t ask you for money? Not one lousy dollar?”

I shook my head. Mum’s long hair swept my shoulders, pressing into the back of my neck and tickling the bare skin of my chest. Mum didn’t wear her hair nearly this long anymore, but she did when she was my age—as shown in the photos I’d given the Thrall along with her DNA.

Stan looked unconvinced. “I heard they charge an arm and a leg for stuff like this. Ya know, makin’ people younger, curin’ incurable cancer. Stuff like that.”

Not to mention switching genders. He didn’t have to say it, not with exhibit-A sitting right in front of him. All I could do was shrug Mum’s twenty-five-year-old shoulders. The question of payment had never come up, that’s all I knew.

Mum stopped pacing. “Money, Stan? Is that all you care about? My son just turned himself into a woman and you’re worried about the price?”

He lifted his hands in mock surrender. “Sorry, okay? I’m just tryin’ to figure this thing out, same as you.”

“It is not the same. I’m the boy’s mother. You barely know he exists.” She resumed wearing through the carpet. “God, what are we supposed to do?”

“No do-overs, that’s for sure,” Stan said, lounging back in his chair. “Not for six months, anyway. I heard they’re pretty tough about that. And, uhm… maybe I shouldn’t say this, but unless she gets another freebie…”
“We can’t afford it,” Mum said, her eyes glinting with anger. “Yes, that’s quite enough, Stanley. You’ve made your concerns very clear.”

Six months… I felt sick. How could I have done this to myself? I was a real woman now. *Female*, right down to the genetic instructions encoded into every cell in my body. I’d never even cross-dressed before, so why this?

Mum could see I was hurting. She sat beside me and pulled my hair back over my shoulders. “It used to drive me crazy when *my* mother did that,” she said, smiling down at me. “You don’t mind, do you? Honey?”

I shook my head, staring down at my pantyhose-clad legs. “Sorry, Mum.”

Her arm slid around my shoulders. “I know you are.” My body trembled. She kissed the side of my head and sighed. “I’d best call my lawyer. We can’t have two Miranda Hawgoods running around town, can we?”

I tugged on the hem of my skirt. Mum’s skirt. I’d worn my own clothes, ill-fitting as they were, back home from Change2U and then raided her closet, targeting the stuff she hadn’t worn in years. Needless to say, everything fit me like a glove.

Mum patted my hand. “Good girl. You don’t want to let it ride up like that. Best to develop nice-girl habits right from the start, hmm?”

I took a deep breath. “Actually… they took care of that down at Change2U.”

Stan let out a snort. “Wouldn’t put it past ‘em. Just as easy to reprogram a guy’s brain as his body, right? Make him act the part. A regular twinkie.”

My eyes widened. “You think so? My name, that’s what I meant. There’s a legal center right beside the shop. A man came over with papers for me to sign. He changed my name, updated the government database, and even issued me a new driver’s license.” I opened my purse and showed them my ID.
Mum nearly choked. “Emmaline? Your name is Emmaline? You know that’s my middle name, right? Why on earth would you pick that?”

“I didn’t. The guy said I couldn’t have your name, ‘cause that would be too much like impersonating someone, which is against the rules. He said it’s common practice in situations like this to take your mother’s middle name. Then he just went and typed it in without asking.”

Stan laughed. “Common practice? Shit, how often does stuff like this happen?”

“I dunno. He didn’t say.” I looked back at Mum. “It’s okay. Emmaline’s a bit of a mouthful, but it’s nice. I know you never liked it, but I think it’s pretty.”

Another snort from Stan. “Pretty? Maybe they did muck with your mind.”

I smoothed my skirt over my knees. “You can call me ‘Emma’, or ‘Emmie’ if you want. It’s a bit old-fashioned, but I’m okay with that.”

“It was your grandmother’s name, dear. I think she’d like that.”

* 

I spent the following day explaining what had happened to everyone in the office where I worked. The papers the lawyer had provided proved who I was, so there was no problem keeping my job, but there still aren’t too many women my age working as software engineers so I kind of stood out. Everyone asked about the change. Some people said they had no idea I was trans. Join the club. I didn’t bother telling them the truth. No one would believe that I just strolled into a clinic and changed my sex on a whim. It was easier to talk about how I’d always thought of myself as a girl on the inside, and how I’d almost gone and had it done, maybe a hundred times before finally plucking up the courage.

Everyone told me how brave I was, which somehow made it worse.

I arrived home to find my body—my old male body—sitting in the living room, sobbing like a little girl. What the hell?

“Oh… Emmie,” he sobbed. “It’s me. Miranda… your mother.”

I sat down and stroked his back. “Jeez, Mum. What did you do?”

He managed to swallow his tears. “After work I went down to that Change2U shop and marched right inside. I was planning to give them a piece of my mind, okay? Like, how could they do that to my son—stuff like that. Only instead…” He took a deep breath. “Instead of that, I told them who I was and who you were—and that I wanted to take your place. As my son.”
I was confused. “Why would you want to do that?”

“I don’t know! I have no idea.” He stared at me. “But that—that awful Thrall, you know what he said? He said that you—Edwin, I mean—no longer exists. That’s why it isn’t against the rules, so he went ahead and did it.” She showed me her new driver’s license. Not surprisingly, it looked exactly like my old license.

I handed it back. “Let me get this straight—you’re me now?”

“Yes. I’m Edwin Hawgood, physically and legally. God, I can’t believe this!”

“Me neither. I mean, just being the same age as my own mother…”

He held my hand. “I hate to tell you this, sweetie, but I’m not your mother any more. She doesn’t exist. I asked the lawyer, and he said that Miranda Hawgood is officially deceased. As far as the law is concerned, I’m your brother.”

“My brother?” And there’s me thinking I was an only child.

He nodded. “Twin brother, actually, since we’re the same age. The paperwork you signed made you my… in legal terms, it made you Miranda’s daughter.”

I stared at his jeans and my skirt. “Wish I knew why this was happening.”

“Me too, doodlebug.” He paused. “Guess I can’t call you that anymore. It doesn’t all that ‘brotherly’, does it?” He stood up. “Stanley’s going to be here any minute. Can you give us some time alone?”

My eyes went wide. “You mean, like, uhm… up in your bedroom?”

He shook his head. “That’s your room now. I might as well live where the clothes that fit me hang out.” He looked sad. “It won’t work, Emmie. Not like this. He’s straight. Who knows, maybe I am too. We have to break up.”

* 

The next day was Friday. I came home after work, took a quick shower, leaving my hair dry, and opened the closet that now belonged to me. Some of the dresses were a bit on the large side for my present figure, but give it time. I knew I’d grow into them eventually. I shifted those clothes to the far end of the closet, and from the rest I chose a nice chiffon cocktail dress.

It took quite awhile to get my makeup right, because while I worked on my face I had to step through several video tutorials on my tablet. Then I brushed my hair, added a few squirts of Mum’s favorite perfume, and sashayed down to the pub where I knew Stan was in the habit of drowning his many sorrows.

“Huh? Oh, it’s you, kid. How’s it goin’?”
“It’s Emmaline,” I said, pretending to be cross. “Do I look like a child?”
He grinned. “Nope. Yer all grown up, for sure. But, ah—”
“Shhh.” My finger touched his lips. “Do you like the way I look?”
“Sure thing. You look great. Just like your mother, only—”
I leaned forward, making damn sure he got a good look at the twins. “Only better, right? Younger, prettier… sexier.” He nodded dumbly. “Well now… tall, dark and not bad looking… here I am.” I touched the stubble on his cheek. “Come get me.”
“But—your mother—”
“My mother doesn’t exist anymore, remember? Now it’s just you… and me.”
“But you, ah—”
I kissed him, full on the lips, just to shut him up. “I know what you’re thinking,” I said, when we broke for air. “But you’re wrong. I’m a woman.”
“What, really? You mean, like, down there and… everything?”
“Of course.” My hand swept the back of my neck, sending long hair spilling over one shoulder. “You were right. They changed my mind too.”
He gulped. “No kidding? So you’re, uhm… you’re a—”
“A woman. And you’re a man. Let’s do this.” I kissed him again. It didn’t take long to lure him back to the house and into Mum’s room, which of course was mine now. First her body, then her bed. Her boyfriend completed the set.
We passed Edwin on our way upstairs. He nearly fell over his own feet when he saw us. Dumb old brother. What a dweeb. I told him not to wait up.
Getting naked with Stan was, like, my best idea ever! And as soon as he got naked I found out why Miranda had kept him around. And when he slipped ‘it’ between my legs I nearly lost it right there. Of course, as a girl I could ‘lose it’ as much as I wanted, nhmf. It was such fun to just kick back and do, like, whatever. And ‘whatever’ turned out to be stroking it just enough to make him, like, harder than carbon steel, and then get him to stick it inside and, like, do me already.
So he did. Twice. And after he fell asleep with his arms wrapped around my belly, I lay there for a long time staring at the wall—and I couldn’t help wondering, Why on earth did I do that? Why did I turn myself into a woman? Why did Mum turn herself into me? What the hell was going on?

*
I read up on the Thrall. They’ve been around long enough that they don’t make the news every day, and most of the stories that mention their genetic resequencer talk about how they only let people use it who really-really need help, usually because they’re dying of some rare disease our own medicine hasn’t got around to curing yet. Changing sex is in that category, because surgery and hormones don’t always fix everything that should be fixed, like the length and thickness of your skeleton, or the size of your brain. The resequencer can change all that stuff. If the Thrall wanted to, they could turn the Incredible Hulk into Cinderella.

Not that any of that comes cheap. Even saving someone’s life costs a bundle, but governments don’t seem to mind paying because the Thrall just turn around and spend that money all over the planet. They’re big-time tourists and people are used to seeing them everywhere from the Grand Canyon to the Eiffel Tower to the recently rebuilt Hanging Gardens of Babylon. So it’s easy to justify spending the money as a subsidy for the hospitality industry.

None of the official accounts said anything about freebies. But here and there on social media were mentions of people walking into Change2U shops and not being charged. They all say the same thing: the change they got wasn’t something they’d ever thought about getting. Most often, it wasn’t even something they wanted. High on that list was a man who had his plumbing ‘down there’ re-arranged to put his package around back and the exit port in the front, which I really didn’t need to hear about. A switch in gender was by far the most common change, although most of those people did manage to make peace with their new selves. The guy with the flipped plumbing, not so much.

I was starting to think the Thrall themselves must have something to do with these changes, beyond just providing the necessary technology. Did they have a way of altering our minds at a distance? Could they somehow insert, not just thoughts but desires deep into the brain, maybe while we sleep? Is that possible?

* 

After a week of luring Stanley into my bed, I discovered—to my surprise—that I had lost interest. I’d fixed my face and was nearly done tarting myself up when it occurred to me to wonder why. Sure, the dude had a package that Hercules himself would envy, but other than that… he was kind of a loser. A serious milf such as myself could surely find a better man than him to hit the sheets with. A guy you wouldn’t mind showing off to the girls down at the spa.

While I was pondering what planet that thought had arrived from, and was busy switching from a cocktail dress to yoga pants, the doorbell rang. Had to be Stan.
It was—and yet it wasn’t. Certainly not the Stan I knew and tolerated. “Stella,” as she introduced herself, was young, blonde and trashy. Curled tresses fell halfway down her back and the dress she wore left little to the male imagination. At least she had the decency to look embarrassed as she minced inside.

“Dunno why I did this,” she whined, between chews of her pink-lemonade Double Bubble. “I wound up in that Change2U shop and told ‘em I wanted to turn into my old momma—back when she was, ya know, your age.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “Was that her name? Stella?”

“Totally. I’m her now. See?” Her new ID flashed before my eyes. “She died back in the day, so they said it was okay.”

“I know, right?” She flipped open a compact like it was a *Star Trek* communicator and inspected herself. “Can you believe this? An hour ago I was plain old Stanley, and now? Now I’m the booth babe that birthed me way back when. I’m the sexy mama, the bad kitty. Funny old life, ain’t it?”

“Tell me about it.” The fact that I was down a bed buddy meant less to me than the fact that here was yet another unplanned gender swap, courtesy of the Thrall. “Bet it didn’t cost you a dime either.”

“Nope. ‘Twas a bargoon if there ever was one.” She gave me a quick hug. “Sorry we can’t bump fuzzies no more. <chew, chew> I got different priorities.”

Edwin strolled into the room, a silly grin plastered over his stupid face, which told me he’d been listening. “I hear that, babe. Shall we renew our acquaintance?”

Stella hastened to his side, leaving a blast of cheap perfume in her wake. “Oooh, Eddie, you mean it? You’d take me back?”

“Ain’t one to hold a grudge.” He threw her a wink. “Care to check out my room? The bed’s smaller, but that shouldn’t be a problem—long as you don’t mind being rode like a filly at the Breeders’ Cup.” Stella giggled and shook her head.

After they exited the room, stage left, a curious image floated into my mind. The Thrall, I realized, had not come to this planet alone. They had brought with them a different kind of being; not bipedal and biological, like the Thrall, but incorporeal and—what? Creatures of pure thought? Was that even possible?

Such a thing, I felt sure, could not long survive without a physical shell—a body, a brain in which to shelter. Yet it could move from shell to shell, like swapping one trapeze for another in mid-air. Sort of like renting a car—or stealing one.

But what would it *feel* like, to share one’s mind with such a creature?
Probably a lot like this. Possessed of ideas that rise into your conscious mind as though they were your own. A creature that speaks with your own inner voice; a demon that makes room for itself deep within your subconscious, and expresses its will through foreign passions—longings that have no roots in your life story, in your personality, or among the desires you call your own.

In other words, you’re the horse and the creature gets to ride you like—well, like Stella. And another thought, savage and free, floated up into my head: This is what we do, earthman. Get used to it.

The Thrall didn’t know, I realized. They were as innocent as we, probably having picked up these parasites from some planet they’d visited aeons ago. Hitchhikers, travelling the galactic spaceways and messin’ with folks wherever they went.

So why tell me? But of course—they hadn’t. Not really. All this noise was the work of my own fevered imagination, stoked with too much late-night TV and too many Star Trek episodes for my own good. What else could it be?

My yoga pants hit the floor. A bad kitty like me doesn’t need fugly stuff like that. All the way upstairs I was thinking about what dress I’d choose from my closet. Edwin’s hunky boss had recently emerged from a loveless marriage and I figured he could use some female company. No time like the present either, because I had a shivery feeling that he too would soon wander into a nearby Change2U shop—and emerge as the twin of his ex-wife. What a mess. ■